
IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2008

The Year in Review

Tony Tracy (ed.)

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Irish Film and Television Review 2008

Tony Tracy

The fortunes of Irish cinema took a paradoxical turn in 2008. Years of economic boom turned to bust and with it went long-held ambitions for a sustained period of cinematic creativity and even greatness. For most of a century the emergence – and then development – of Irish cinema had seemed stymied only by financial constraints. But in spite of tax breaks, massive increases in the funding of the Irish Film Board and a proliferation of training and educational opportunities, indigenous cinema did not rise on the tide of prosperity to command the attention and admiration generated by Irish theatre and literature over the past decade and a half. Indeed Irish cinema in the past 5 years – despite noble efforts and individual successes – has seemed less promising and less sure of itself than at any time since the reconstitution of the IFB in 1993. There have been an ever-decreasing number of films being made of diminishing quality (with a few exceptions), fewer still receiving distribution and a handful attracting wider audiences and comment. The paradox is that just as we hit the most serious economic trough in decades there are renewed signs of vigor in this most intermittent of cultural forms of expressions. The reasons for such an upturn are complex, various and not always clear but there is once again a strong lead being demonstrated by the IFB who must take a large part of the credit for renewed energy in the sector.

This year's Irish Film and Television Review once again attempts to reflect the diversity of that activity in capsule form. In addition to a mix of single-title reviews of work on big and small screens, we are pleased to include a number of pieces which offer themes for broader considerations of Irish audiovisual production at this time. Barry Monahan offers us a context for

such reflections in his essay on the establishment of Ardmore Studios as it turns fifty; a longtime symbol and bellwether of the mixed fortunes of our film industry. We are also pleased to include an essay on the late Tom Jordan Murphy, whose rare acting talent, according to Michael Patrick Gillespie, often rose above the material he was able to find work in. And we make up for omissions in earlier editions by the inclusion of two short essays on genres which remain stubbornly under examined in considerations of Irish film: the short film and animation.

In 2008 an impressive twenty-five IFB-backed feature film projects started production, in addition to a number of animated features and feature-length documentaries. This makes for something of a record. Although we were surprised and delighted by the number of Irish films showing at local and international festivals, finding an audience remains a stubborn and challenging obstacle to the sector. While 2008 saw theatrical releases for *Alarm*, *A Film With Me in It*, *Kisses* and *Hunger*, only *Kisses* and *Hunger* managed to achieve any critical mass at the domestic box office. More surprising was the limited release achieved by the RTE funded *Eden* (an adaptation of Eugene O'Brien's play) in both Dublin and on the east coast of the United States, proving that quality writing will always attract an audience no matter how small the production. Feature documentaries played a small but credible part in the overall domestic cinema program with *Seaview* and *Saviors* the most notable productions. Films which have yet to be seen outside festivals include *Seer*, *Ghostwood*, *Our Wonderful Home*, *Summer of the Flying Saucer* and *Anton*.

For many, *Hunger* was the highlight of the Irish film year and while its director Steve McQueen is an English artist of international

renown its script was by Dublin-born (London resident) playwright Enda Walsh. Walsh of course is best known for his play (and screenplay) for *Disco Pigs* but his spare and compelling script for the Bobby Sands story pushed the Troubles out of a narrow narrative territory to a wider audience and set of concerns and brought the film a slew of prestigious awards. Additionally, Walsh's plays *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom* played on national and international stages throughout the year to widespread acclaim, making 2008 a breakthrough year for a really impressive talent.

Both *Hunger* and *The Walworth Farce* intersected with Ireland's long and complex relationship with the United Kingdom and both – thematically and in their respective production circumstances – can be understood as enlarging the terms of reference of a national cinema/culture in interesting ways. In addition to the success of Tommy Collins' *Kings*, it is interesting to see the Irish Diaspora in Britain now producing challenging meditations on this knotty and ongoing association. Evidence of this relationship was present in far less direct terms in *In Bruges* by the most famous representative of the English Irish Diaspora, Martin McDonagh. With this inventive, violent and often very funny film McDonagh placed two Irish hit-men on the run (Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson) in the very unlikely setting of the city of Bruges. Along with the fact that the film was a British/American production (Scienn / Focus films) questions of a national cinema become highly problematic in any schematic sense here since the hit men were clearly residents of London where their boss (played by Ralph Fiennes) had banished them. Nonetheless McDonagh did not make these misfits Irish by chance; the cadences of their speech as well as their general outlook were undeniably formed by specific cultural and social circumstances which the writer has explored repeatedly and so successfully in his stage works.

By contrast Lance Daly's *Kisses* was very much a home-grown production and generated a good deal of excitement as a successor to *Once* – a low-budget, Dublin set tale of unconventional love; this time between two working class

teenagers who embark on an overnight odyssey through Dublin. While Daly has demonstrated a distinctive and individual cinematic sensibility in earlier films (*Last Days in Dublin*, *The Halo Effect*) *Kisses* marked a maturing of style and technique and can be placed alongside both *Once* and *Adam and Paul* in particular in terms of a peripatetic structure and a more European tone and aesthetic. It received a decent domestic release and extensive marketing by its local distributor signaling an encouraging faith in less generic and more 'arty' filmmaking in a cinema marketplace largely shaped by predictable patterns of genre, star and 'cross-platform' products.

That is not to say that Irish cinema has dispensed with genre; albeit with local inflections. Horror and supernatural subjects continue to be the choice for young and experienced filmmakers, and several local productions – *Seer*, *The Daisy Chain*, *Bog Bodies*, *Ghostwood* – were seen and heard of at festivals but none have so far registered in the wider marketplace. Gerard Stembridge made a valiant, if mistimed, contribution to the uneven history of Irish thrillers with *Alarm* which combined his typically keen sense of topicality with elements of Hitchcock. But the film clearly spent too long in development; its topical edge blunted by its familiarity while its thriller plot felt arbitrary and bolted on; a generic substructure to a thin idea. Stembridge's talent as a satirist requires a fast turn around from idea to audience and the fact that he has recently published two novels in quick succession demonstrates that even writing a book can be a quicker process than making a film. A knowing tone of self-consciousness characterizes Ian Fitzgibbon's black comedy *A Film With Me in It* which played on this tension between the demands of genre and the desire for realism that Irish cinema continually and inevitably inhabits, caught in its search for an expression of the local and an international audience. The film was a slight if often very funny concoction perhaps better suited to the structures of television than the more demanding setting and audiences of the Cineplex.

On the small screen, Irish television continued to be a site of interesting and often more

achieved productions. While homegrown drama was not as conspicuous as in previous years, documentary productions were once again plentiful and engaging. Particularly notable in this regard was Pat Collin's intimate and honest portrait of actor Gabriel Byrne, *Stories from Home*. Collins has shown himself a master of this kind of film in the past with memorable portraits of John McGahern (*John McGahern: A Private World*) Michael Hartnett (*Necklace of Wrens*) and Frank O'Connor (*Frank O'Connor: The Lonely Voice*). Another ambitious documentary project – reviewed here – was TG4's three-part *Striapacha: Trí Chéad Bliain Duáilcis (Prostitutes: Three Hundred Years of Vice)*. Another three part series dealt with the second oldest profession in *Bertie*, an expansive effort to explore the most successful Irish politician of recent years who was at his most cunning even in the timing of his departure. The most talked about TV documentary of 2008 was *Fairytale of Katmandu*; a project which started off as a simple observational film of a respected Irish cultural figure and emerged as something darker and more complex. This small film became an unlikely focus of conversation, comment, accusation and defense across the Irish media and in Irish life following its broadcast. This year's review also extends its boundaries of consideration (some might say taste) to consider a reality show; *The Apprentice*, a trans-Atlantic format which extols the virtues of entrepreneurial capitalism that arrived just in time for the collapse of the economy.

We began by noting that just as the economy enters a period of prolonged crises, Irish film and television is in a surprisingly healthy state as an industry, with many projects at various stages of the production cycle. To indigenous film has been added a raft of international co-productions, which speak little, if at all, about Irishness (whatever that may mean these days) and maximize tax incentives across international boundaries. Irish film as a form of cultural expression remains uneven and fitful. Michael Patrick Gillespie argues in his recent book¹ that that Irish cinema has by and large sold its soul in an ongoing process of internationalization

and as such has become more difficult to speak of as an identifiable and discreet entity. Gillespie speaks of 'The Myth of an Irish Cinema' as applying across most genres of Irish film making with the notable exception of what he terms 'working class films'. It is abundantly clear that national identity is no longer the discreet and finite conceptual framework it once was; we live in the age of the global. Ireland has pursued a prolonged period of internationalization over the past decade and a half that formed the basis of its prosperity as well as, ultimately, the seeds of its current crisis. If so called 'working class films' seem more authentic than others, it is mostly because (as Gillespie notes) they reflected one area of Irish society that has remained largely unchanged since the 1970s; the social group which remained largely static and untroubled by the over worn Boston/Berlin identity dilemma. As this year's feature releases demonstrate, when Irish cinema attempts to go beyond the long-established mode of realism it risks saying nothing at all; seemingly incapable of finding human truth in anything but material deprivation. The only way beyond the binary of poverty or genre is better crafted, more imaginative writing that speaks of wider universal human concerns. As Enda Walsh and Eugene O'Brien (as well as Conor McPherson and others) have demonstrated, that is primarily coming from Irish theatre. Instead of endlessly attempting to shoehorn national stories into international frameworks, perhaps Irish cinema ought to pay more attention to its roots in drama where there is a repository of world class writing and acting talent. As the world economy continues to contract at an alarming rate there is an inevitable and urgent return to the local as a potential remedy to global capitalism gone awry. As we face into 2009 it seems certain that there will be far less money available from RTE and the Irish Film Board for our filmmakers. Similarly we predict an end or a strenuous curtailing of tax

1. Michael Patrick Gillespie, *The Myth of an Irish Cinema: Approaching Irish-Themed Films*, Syracuse University Press, 2008.

breaks (Section 481) – the mainstay of private investment in the industry for the past 15 years (much of it arranged by the now nationalised and discredited Anglo Irish Bank). After a decade of global ambitions when the Irish sought to speculate in real estate from Boston to Beijing it will be interesting to note the effects of such a contraction on our audiovisual storytelling in the year ahead.

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In the Beginning: Ardmore Studios Celebrates 50

Barry Monahan

2008 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of Ardmore Studios. 1958 was a year of contradictions and paradoxes in Irish culture and society; a country suspended between tradition and modernity. As the Harcourt Street railway line was being dismantled in Dublin, the Pan Am 707 touched down in Shannon airport, the world's first jetliner to land in Europe. And while Una Troy's progressive and open-minded comical novel *We are Seven* – featuring polygamous protagonist Bridget Monaghan – was adapted for screen as *She Didn't Say No!*, Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy* was officially banned by the Censorship of Publications Board. In addition, the year saw both the death of Peig Sayers, moving her Irish language autobiography one step closer to pedagogical folk literature, and the opening by Sean Lemass (on May 12th) of the country's first film studio at Bray, Co Wicklow. The facility, it was generally believed, would usher Ireland's film industry and production into the modern age.

Similar ambiguities may be also found among protagonists at the developmental phase of the Ardmore venture. Although supported financially by the economically progressive Minister for Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass, and driven by the enterprising producers Louis Elliman and Emmet Dalton, the third of the triumvirate associated with the project was Ernest Blythe, the conservative director of the board of the Abbey Theatre. It has been argued that because the plan was founded on the aspiration to adapt plays from the National Theatre repertory, an institution both financially beleaguered and culturally subdued, ideological uncertainty was present at the germination stage, which could (and in fact did) impede the progress of the project designed to establish and then modernise Irish film culture.¹

Although unnoticed by many at the time, there was also a revealing prominence of the Government's understanding of film as a cultural artefact in opening remarks made by Lemass as he cut the ribbon on the new studio facility. As Kevin Rockett has noted, the minister "emphasised the employment and export, rather than cultural, value of the studios",² a bias reiterated in the *Irish Times* commentary on the morning following the ceremony, when the writer stated that Lemass had declared that the facility "was making an important development in the economic history of the country".³ The importance placed on this materialist side of film production was perhaps inevitable. In addition, given the fact that at every phase of its existence from drafting to distribution, film is essentially a peripatetic cultural form, the significance of providing a home for a national cinema cannot be overstated. It is self-evident that the establishment of a film studio space is critical for the functioning of filmmaking and for the training of personnel who will create the national film canon, so it is not surprising to find that, in the run up to the opening of the studios, the event was frequently reported in the press with optimistic excitement declaring the value of the project. Official aspirations were summed up on

1. For a more detailed description of events surrounding this development, see my chapter "A frayed collaboration: Emmet Dalton and the Abbey Theatre adaptations at Ardmore Studios, 1957-'60" in *National Cinema and Beyond* eds. John Hill & Kevin Rockett (Four Courts Press, 2004: 52 – 60).

2. Kevin Rockett, John Hill & Luke Gibbons *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988: 99).

3. "Minister Opens First Irish Film Studio" *Irish Times*, May 13, 1958, p. 4.

the day after the facility was officially opened, when it was noted that: “The policy at Ardmore [...] was to employ as many Irishmen as possible. Expert technicians had been brought in to train Irishmen, as far as they required training in the highly-complicated business of film-making” (ibidem).

When Ian Jarvie revisits debates about the relationship between healthy cultural development and the formation of the nation, he cites Ernest Gellner who makes a connection between processes of modernisation and competent individuals’ cultural access. Jarvie situates the cinema at the centre of his discussion as a cultural form deeply rooted in technology: “Movies are part of the nuts and bolts kit of modern communication technologies, especially those for dramatising fictions, and for presenting news and information” (Jarvie 2000: 82). As he continues, Jarvie is unambiguous about the need for this national institution and, as he advances his argument, he evokes implicitly the idea of a studio:

Modernity empowers partly by mastering a technology: that is, acquiring it, training the necessary support personnel, but also creating an interface so that its mastery can be widely diffused. (Jarvie 2000: 82)

This was not to be the case at Ardmore Studios, and a series of articles by Louis Marcus, written in 1967 and subsequently published as a pamphlet, outlined in detail how the facility had failed to provide for the development of an indigenous film industry. Noting the almost £¼M invested by the exchequer, Marcus expressed outrage at the fact that the studios had become little more than a hireable piece of industrial equipment that served no training, artistic or expansion purpose in the fostering of a local film culture (Marcus 1967: 7–11). Ultimately, the leasing of the space was to benefit British production companies who employed their own technicians as had been required by union regulations, leaving room only for “casual Irish labour” limited to “carpenters, canteen

workers, clerical staff, crowd extras and the like” (Marcus 1967: 11). As far as Marcus was concerned, as Ardmore Studios approached the end of its first decade of existence, it was nothing but an “irrelevance” for the foundation of an Irish film industry, and its management had failed at every turn to assist anything but the illusion that it could support an indigenous visual culture in the making: “It was not a film production company that bought scripts, engaged actors, hired technicians and made movies” (Marcus 1967: 7).

It is perhaps an inconvenient irony of film history that, just as Ireland was seeking a place to ground a prospective industry and situate production, national cinemas across Europe were taking advantage of increasingly lighter sound and camera equipment to liberate themselves from the aesthetic restrictions of constrained studio-based work. Initially bound to studio filming with the rise of sound recording in the late 1920s, filmmakers had sought innovative ways of removing the limitations of sound stage production. Historical contingencies provided the first major development in this respect with the rise of Italian neorealist filmmaking after the Second World War, and the desire to take film into the streets would contribute to some of the most exciting developments in the medium since its inception. The aesthetic of post-war documentary work would have a direct effect on the *cinéma vérité* style, as well as on the Nouvelle Vague and early British social realist movements. The near-total absence of such innovation of policy or practice in Ireland – despite calls for an indigenous *avant garde* from Irish cineastes like Louis Marcus, Liam O’Leary, George Morrison and Peter Lennon – further highlights the ambiguous attitude toward film within official discourses at the time.

An inability to break from wholly-material conceptions of the national benefits of a studio, and wholly-materialistic evaluations of industry as generating capital, precipitated a certain creative atrophy. As a national cinema

must have both an ideological function and a material base, so too its cultural significance and commercial performance are nourished by both an ever-emerging catalogue of indigenous films and *also* by a symbolism that feeds how it is perceived nationally and internationally. This balancing of commodity-based output with a transcendental cultural identity is something which the Abbey Theatre had long been recognised for at home and abroad. Although criticism of the theatre might have inclined more towards the Bard's third possibility in describing greatness – “some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them”⁴ – its recognition further afield was not lost on numerous filmmakers who cast actors from the National Theatre in supporting roles and then included the credit title card “...and with players from Ireland's Abbey Theatre” as an indication of quality.

In the handful of films produced with the Abbey Theatre at Ardmore, Emmet Dalton followed that precedent and visibly publicised the fact that the Irish players had been cast in central roles. Nonetheless, there was no evidence of any attempt to market what Ardmore Studios might have represented in local or international consciousness, and there was no indication of plans to mobilise the facility as noteworthy in Ireland's development of a modern film culture. Of course, such a declaration might not have fit easily with the expected reflection of what an Irish film studio should or could be doing. Nor might offering Ireland as a (cinematically) modernised nation have been compatible with the image of the country as previously depicted and marketed overseas, and any attempt to do so may have been deliberately avoided by Dalton in favour of fronting the more “traditional” Abbey players. Ultimately, therefore, half a century after the beginning of the consolidation of the American film industry in Hollywood,

Ardmore faltered into existence, conflicted as to its precise function in relation to forging an Irish film culture. Beyond the small number of films produced by Emmet Dalton, the facility neither functioned in a concrete and material way in creating indigenous films or filmmakers (as was the case in national centres such as *Cinecittà*), nor did it work symbolically as an imagined entity that facilitated debates and the evolution of an identity for Irish film internationally (in the way Bollywood does). By extension, a dialectical interaction of both of these dimensions – as is the case with the finely tuned Hollywood apparatus – was not to happen for several decades and, even then, in a rather tentative and cautious way.

Fifty years on, the principles on which Ardmore Studios was founded have left a legacy relating to the national and international perception of the facility. In many ways, the facility has supported the development of indigenous filmmaking and its contribution has been, for the most part, constructive. Nevertheless its output has shown considerable fluctuation – perhaps inevitably when its establishment, history and the contemporary global film market are taken into concern. This variation has seen involvement in both Irish and overseas production, in both television and film, in a range of studio provisions from sound stage space to post-production facilities, and with an output of varying quality. Positively, it has continued to provide a worthy working environment for the likes of Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, and has offered facilities to less successful features and short film projects by up-and-coming filmmakers, both national and international. Although its most notable residents in recent times have been projects as varied as *Beckett on Film* (2000) and *The Tudors* (2007+) the studios financial survival has always been precarious, reflected in its many changes of ownership. In all of this, however, it is less likely that the studios at Ardmore will form a part of an

4. William Shakespeare *Twelfth Night* Act II, Scene V.

international film consciousness that would allow it the title “Irish Film Studio”, in the sense proposed above.

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Kisses (2008)

Ruth Barton

By the time the national run of Lance Daly's well-received third feature, *Kisses*, had wound down, it seemed that more people knew about the off-set behaviour of the two juvenile leads, Kelly O'Neill (as Kelly) and Shane Curry (Dylan) than were familiar with their on-screen personae. Given their respective ages of 12 and 13, we are not dealing with Hollywood excess, rather a disconcerting injection of reality into the demure environment of low-budget Irish cinema. As *Irish Times* journalist, Eoin Butler, described it, while he was clearing his throat for some openers, all-out war was breaking out opposite him: 'Kelly O'Neill is straddling Shane Curry and raining a series of blows down on his head. Curry is retaliating in kind, loudly accusing his leading lady of being a "doody-headed nincompoop"' (although my Dictaphone has been known to be a little bit erratic and those might not be the precise words he uses).¹ Pat Kenny, the urbane host of RTÉ's popular primetime television chat show, *The Late, Late Show* had his work cut out to coax a few warm memories about their experience from *Kisses*' two leads, who did concede that Daly's production wasn't as bad as most Irish films.²

The disjuncture between the reality of pre- and early teen behaviour, and adult investment in an ideal of childhood innocence creates a friction at the heart of Daly's film that, at its most productive, prevents it from succumbing to mawkishness. At the outset, the film appears to hark back to the tough inner-city dramas of earlier generations, such as Joe Comerford's *Down the Corner* (1977) or a less performative

Roddy Doyle. In two neighbouring homes, Dylan finds himself the object of his abusive father's rage while Kelly returns from taking the baby out in the pram to encounter her uncle, whom we shortly realise sexually abuses her, dispensing Christmas largesse. After Kelly's efforts to rescue Dylan cause mayhem, the two decide to run away from home, a decision boosted by Kelly's pocketful of ill-gained cash.

Switching from monochrome to colour, the film proceeds to guide its two leads through a series of adventures, starting with their voyage down the canal on a barge navigated by a new immigrant (Spanish actor, David Bendito). From him, they learn that Dylan has a famous namesake, a singer of whom neither had heard. And so another strand is introduced, one that will culminate in a cameo appearance by Stephen Rea as a somewhat menacing Dylan tribute artist.

It's hard to watch a cinematic barge trip without recalling Vigo's *L'Atalante* and, although the comparisons are modest, this is the film's most magical sequence and where it most clearly departs from its aesthetic of social realism. Kelly flirts with abandon with their unnamed guardian while Shane is more reluctant to let himself go. Bendito's bargee is one of several new immigrants – the next is a busker and another a warm-hearted young African woman, who act as tarnished guardian angels to the children. Here, it seems, Daly is taking a lead from a sequence in Perry Ogden's *Pavee Lackeen* (2005), where the eponymous Traveller Girl (Winnie Maughan) wanders through inner city Dublin's new ethnic streets, and encounters little of the prejudice that she might expect to meet in the old Ireland.

The new immigrants replace the children's own flawed families, briefly providing them with moments of comfort before each encounter reaches its end. Nor does Shane's older brother

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/magazine/2008/1115/1226408644869.html>

2. http://www.rte.ie/tv/latelate/av_20081121.html?2453461.null,228

ever materialise; at first they plan to bunk in on him but all they find out about his whereabouts is that he has been sleeping rough on the streets and that he has a drugs habit. The children's only significant encounter with their fellow countrymen is when a gang attempts to kidnap Kelly.

As the film takes us through the night, so our extra-diegetic knowledge of the fate of Dublin's street children warns us against trusting that the fairytale will last. According to his custom, Daly plays it out just a little too long before bringing his narrative to a hesitating conclusion.

Kisses suffered from an excess of hype (no, it wasn't the new *Once*) that reflects Irish film culture's desperate search for a hit. What is most interesting about Daly's production is how it inserts itself into a continuum of representations of Irish childhood. We could take this back as far as the street kids who haunt James Mason's dying IRA man in *Odd Man Out* (1947), and forward through the Traveller brothers at the heart of *Into the West* (1992) to Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy* (1997). In their different ways, these children represent a force that is both disruptive and creative, one that highlights the lethargy of the surrounding community.

Carol Reed, in *Odd Man Out*, cast real street children to produce the mocking gangs who taunt the RIC while celebrating Johnny (Mason)'s rebel persona. In the later two films, the children are actors (if in both cases, intense and talented) and their roles are more clearly staged. Their narrative function is less to remind us of 'real' youngsters than to function as symbolic emissaries. In this they more closely resemble another child performance in *Odd Man Out*, that of the young girl, the angel, who appears to Johnny as he hides out in the underground cellar. She is the first of a series of harbingers of his impending death, a silent reminder, through her innocence, of his guilt. In the fairytale that is *Into the West*, the significance of the two brothers is as guides to the adults so that they may complete their own psychological journey. Francie Brady, on the other hand, is the first truly traumatized child of Irish cinema. His is a psyche that is so damaged by his environment that he can neither save or be saved.

Daly's Kelly and Dylan are thus inheritors of a dual tradition, drawing from neo-realist practices of casting children off the street whose performances will imbue the film with spontaneity, and of interpolating children into the narrative as bearers of a symbolic innocence. The question then is, can they save the adult community from its own corrupted values? Or is this the story's intent?

In many ways, *Kisses* recalls *Into the West*; however in the earlier film, the two child protagonists had to abandon the derelict space of the suburbs for the Celtic magic promised by the West. In *Kisses*, the suburbs are just as compromised, though imagined more as they were in, say, Roddy Doyle/Michael Winterbottom's *Family* (1994), as low-rise, poorly maintained housing built around common spaces that mock the urban planners' ideal of the village green. Families live too close together, replacing neighbourliness with nosiness, and affection with incest. A passing gaggle of schoolgirls taunts Kelly for not having sex with Dylan, the latter hides in a cupboard when his father comes roaring after him and only escapes from him through a bathroom window when Kelly comes to his rescue with a ladder. There is little new in this representation of the city's working class outer-ring; where Daly does inject an element of novelty is in creating a sanctuary for the twosome in Dublin's shopping precincts and inner city areas. Shot while the Celtic Tiger was still the driving force in Irish culture, *Kisses* suggests that access to consumption is a valid if temporary panacea for social exclusion. The children purchase themselves new outfits, 'wheelies', and a new, 'hardman' haircut for Dylan. Inevitably, thereafter, they are forced to rob food and, finally, to sleep on the street. Before that they are granted one more magical moment, as they skate on the ice-rink in Smithfield.

This is an economy fuelled by consumption – the migrants they encounter, selling goods or busking, are reliant on it, while the African woman appears to be selling herself. This too, would, we must assume, have been the fate of Kelly, had the gang succeeded in abducting her. The fact that the film is set during the Christmas

season only serves to underline this theme.

Kisses' reluctance to critique the Celtic Tiger economy, represented here as vaguely enabling, distinguishes it from most other recent Irish film productions. It is, as I have said, warm towards the new immigrants who are seen to have displaced the local Irish as the protectors of children and guarantors of moral values. Somehow, Dylan and Kelly are victims of their own society, although Daly is apparently unwilling to spell out what he means. From the outset of the film, it is simply a given that the indigenous white Irish working class is characterized by male brutality and an ineffectual female support structure. The state remains unrepresented until the belated arrival of the Gardaí (police) at the end, as does the Church. Apparently, these people are on their own with their dysfunctional families; their living conditions are perhaps to blame (or are they to blame for their living conditions?). Even when they escape, as has Dylan's brother, Barry, they do not have the resources to survive. When Dylan and Kelly do return from Oz to their monochrome world, it is hard to determine how we are expected to view their decision – inevitable? flawed? auspicious? Will their overweight, poorly dressed mothers now step up to the mark and create the nurturing domestic environment that will allow these children to enjoy their childhoods, or will all return to its former dismal state?

Dense plotting has never been Daly's strongest card and although *Kisses* is this director's most sophisticated work to date, there is something unsatisfying in his reliance on imagery to carry the narrative. Specifically, his selection of images and his recycling of filmic references (*Variety* could name check anything from *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) to *Disco Pigs* (2001);³ creates a collage of eclectic and unanchored signifiers. The film is short (a running time of 72 mins) and this adds to a sense of flimsiness. The Bob Dylan subtheme is never adequately integrated into the main body of the narrative; as much as (Bob) Dylan's lyrics

3. <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117938042.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>

celebrate taking to the road and cutting free from settled culture, so Daly's partial subscription to an aesthetics of realism refutes this as a working model for the two children. Stephen Rea's cameo is equally under-developed and somewhat pointless.

What rescues the film are the children's performances. Kelly O'Neill and Shane Curry are fractious and edgy throughout – the opposite of those cutesy little dolls so beloved of Hollywood – and even their brief romantic interlude is executed with perfunctory attention. When they discover that they have been sharing their cardboard overnight accommodation with a dead street person, their horror is so undisguised that I wondered how much or little the director had prepared them for this narrative twist. They are very alive and very real (which is not to suggest for a moment that their own backgrounds reflect those of their fictional alter egos). Just as they burst out of the screen and into their interviewers' environments, so they force the narrative to reverberate with a stubborn Dublin working-class energy. These children do no bespeak victimhood but resilience and a contempt for middle-class complacency. Had Daly drawn his narrative more from their qualities, rather than attempting to bend them to his narrative, he might have produced a more rounded, convincing film.

[Lance Daly was awarded an IFTA in the best Director of Film category for *Kisses*]

Kisses (2008)

Directed by Lance Daly

Written by Lance Daly

Principal Cast: Kelly O'Neill, Shane Curry, Paul Roe, Neili Conroy, Stephen Rea, David Bendito

Produced by Macdara Kelleher

Ruth Barton is Lecturer in Film Studies at Trinity College Dublin. She is the author of a number of books on Irish cinema. Her forthcoming publication (as editor) is *Screening Irish-America*, to be issued by Irish Academic Press in 2009. She is currently writing a biography of Hedy Lamarr.

Hunger (2008)

Sean Crosson

In late December 2008 the British government released a new round of state papers under the 30-year rule. Among the files uncensored was a document from the office of the then British Prime Minister, James Callaghan, which revealed that the IRA had sent a message to the British government in 1978 indicating that it was willing to enter talks concerned with ending its violent campaign in the North. The offer was rejected outright by the British government with the then permanent under-secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, Sir Brian Cubbon, remarking that it was "essential that we should not say or do anything in reply that gives any hint that we have considered their message or are taking it seriously".¹ Whether this offer might have provided a realistic opportunity to begin a peace process that would take until the early 1990s to begin, and cost many thousands of lives in the interim, we will never know. However, watching Steve McQueen's *Hunger*, one is struck by two prominent features of the film – both an absence of dialogue, and a real concern to facilitate it when the opportunity arises.

More than a few eyebrows were raised when it was announced in May 2007 that the London born director of Grenadan descent's debut feature film would concern the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands. The Turner Prize winning artist seemed an unlikely candidate to tackle one of the darkest and most traumatic moments in recent Irish history when ten men voluntarily starved themselves to death to be classed as political rather than criminal prisoners. It was a

crucial moment in Irish history, and particularly for the North of this Island that would begin a move to political, rather than military means, by the Republican movement represented in McQueen's film in the election of Sands himself shortly before his death. Yet the human willingness to choose death in extraordinary circumstances had been apparent in previous work by McQueen, in particular his 2002 cinematic installation *Carib's Leap*, a work named after a cliff in Grenada where, in 1651, more than 40 indigenous Caribs chose to jump to their deaths to avoid surrender, and enslavement, to their French colonisers. The resonance of the Hunger strike with this act could not have been lost on McQueen.

The Hunger strike has appeared in several films over the past twelve years, marking partly the developing peace process and the increasing willingness of filmmakers to engage with a topic long thought too controversial to contemplate. Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996) offered a largely sanitised account that adopted the perspective of the non-aligned and sympathetic figure of the mother of one of the strikers to explore the traumatic events. However, the non-engagement and distance of Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren) from both the culture and events themselves, reflected in one extraordinary moment when she expresses absolute ignorance of the expression 'Tíocfaidh ár Lá' – and this from a schoolteacher in a nationalist school (!) –, made for a film of limited insight or resonance. Both Les Blair's *H3* (2001) and Maeve Murphy's account of female prisoners' protest in *Silent Grace* (2001) provided significant representations, though both ultimately adopted a largely conventional approach to the events. McQueen, however, approaching the topic from both outside the culture of Ireland and conventional film, offers,

1. John Bew and Deaglan De Breadun, "Britain Rejected Secret IRA Peace Talks Offer, 1978 Archives Reveal" *The Irish Times*, Tuesday, December 30, 2008, <http://www.Irishtimes.Com/News/ Frontpage/2008/1230/1230581469072.Html>

in terms of representations of the North, a distinctly novel approach. Gone are the generic imperatives that have dominated representations of the North, which have frequently attempted to apply familiar tropes of the thriller or drama genres against a Northern Irish context. Instead for McQueen it is firstly the visual and secondly the interactive possibilities of cinema that are exploited, apparent in the manner through which the film features striking visual compositions without the necessity to explain or explicate and also allows a space for the audience to engage and contemplate at recurring moments.

This is not to say that the film does not contain familiar moments reminiscent of more generic approaches to the conflict in the North. The opening evocative scene of protestors banging bin lids recalls such moments in a previous film such as Jim Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* (1993) but it is made all the more arresting by the clattering noise preceding the revelation of its source. This unsettling and disturbing opening sets the tone, and cues the audience, for the film as a whole that includes some of the most harrowing and visceral representations of the Troubles.

This viscerality is repeatedly invoked throughout the film, whether in the violence perpetrated or the detail given of the living conditions during the dirty protest. The subsequent shots of a prison officer, Ray Lohan (Stuart Graham), washing blood from his bruised hands anticipates the violent and brutal beatings by prison officers and riot police of Republican prisoners in succeeding scenes. McQueen, however, delays the violence itself until almost a third of the way into the film, suggesting it instead in shots of blood and wounds, making the moments of its appearance, including humiliating cavity searches, all the more affecting. Yet he does not diminish or deny the violence of Republicans themselves, apparent in one particularly disturbing sequence when we witness the cold-blooded killing of Lohan, presumably by the IRA, while visiting his senile mother.

Aesthetically, these moments are characterized by both their visual richness and complexity and the absence of dialogue. One is struck, for instance, by the evocative use of the colour blue,

redolent of (among many things) both coldness and misery, throughout the opening third, apparent in one early suggestive scene when Lohan takes a cigarette break in the prison yard while the snow falls. McQueen is also not afraid to dwell at length on events and their aftermath – this is particularly evident in the long take, directly after the encounter between Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) and Father Moran (Liam Cunningham), of a prison officer mopping the corridor between the cells. It is a film that is rarely rushed in its recounting of events and includes moments of rare beauty, amongst the horror and filth of violence and the dirty protest in all its nauseating detail. This includes a sequence where the young Republican prisoner Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan) contemplates a fly on his hand while pushing his arm through the bars of his cell window, savouring the feel of the world beyond, and a striking circular work created by a prisoner on the wall of his cell from his own faeces.

While allowing audiences to contemplate and consider the scenes they have just witnessed, there is a further imperative in these moments and indeed the lack of dialogue of the first third. In the space where dialogue might exist, violence predominates and understanding seems far off. Even where dialogue does occasionally take place, it is often marked by misunderstanding, as when Gillen first enters his cell and is addressed by his cell mate in Irish, a language he shows complete ignorance of, a fact underlined at several points in the film.

Yet when dialogue does enter the film at length, it is facilitated in a manner rarely seen in contemporary film. This is an almost 17 minute unedited two-shot sequence, written by Enda Walsh, from one static camera angle of Sands and the priest Father Moran, discussing the decision to go on Hunger strike. It is a sequence that required the employment of specially altered film stock (with 35mm film reels lasting normally only ten minutes) a symbolic point in terms of the new ways of thinking about identity and conflict in the North that was required to bring an end to the conflict. Such was the demands placed on the actors to do the scene, Liam Cunningham moved into Michael Fassbender's Belfast flat to rehearse for five days

from early morning to seven in the evening, “running the scene” Fassbender has recalled, “15 or 20 times a day for five days.”² In the end they managed to nail it on the fourth take.

The dialogue itself – which follows the most violent and unsettling moment in the film, Lohan’s killing – is marked by an interrogation of the reasons for the strike but it also critiques, in the comments of Father Moran, the prisoners refusal to further negotiate, their potential vanity and elevation as martyrs of the strikers themselves. For Moran, Sands’ personal crusade neglects his own immediate family’s needs, including his young son, while also leading many others to their deaths on a hunger strike with little certainty, given Thatcher’s intransigence, of any positive outcome. Furthermore, Sands own refusal to negotiate required an unlikely complete ‘surrender’, as Moran describes it, by the British, rather than a negotiated settlement. For Sands, the strike is largely motivated by a frustration with negotiations that revealed the bad-faith of the British government, evident in the film in the ‘civilian-type’ clothing (rather than their own clothing) allowed to prisoners, used primarily as a means to further humiliate them.

Humiliation, and indeed, dehumanisation, is a recurring feature of the film, though it is clear that McQueen views this as the lot of both the perpetrators and victims of violence. This is signalled from early in the film when Davey Gillen is forced to strip before prison officers after refusing to wear the clothes ‘of a criminal’. In the silence and tension evident, one is struck by McQueen’s patience to allow the scene unfold with the obvious shame and discomfort of the prisoner as he is marched naked to his cell – and contrasting animosity of the prison guards – very apparent. Yet the prison guards too are reduced by their barbaric acts. The shots of Lohan at the beginning reveal a man uneasy with his own actions. The most striking moment in this respect is the depiction of one of the riot policemen

brought in to break up a prison protest crying behind a wall as his colleagues brutally beat Republican prisoners. Yet it is the final third of the film that presents the greatest challenge to the viewer as we witness the gradual physical disintegration – and indeed at times humiliation – of Sands himself in considerable detail and explicitness. Michael Fassbender went on a supervised extreme diet to depict the scenes, losing over 50lb in the process, and his performance ranks as one of the most moving and convincing in cinema of the Troubles to date.

Through all of this, McQueen ultimately maintains his belief in the human spirit, in the transcendental possibilities of the human imagination that can move above and beyond the traumas of life. For Sands, these are marked by his childhood memories of his time as a cross-country runner, an account of which ends his dialogue with Father Moran and represents his final thoughts in the film. Despite the broken and devastated human body, there remains the hope in the ability of humans to move beyond the tarnished present and to imagine a better time, a time free from the suffering of the present. A time, maybe, when the Hunger Strike can be viewed, and reflected upon, in popular culture and film as a crucial historical moment but one that serves to remind us of how far this island has progressed over the past thirty years.

Hunger

Directed by Steve McQueen

Produced by Laura Hastings-Smith, Robin Gutch

Written by Enda Walsh, Steve McQueen

Starring Michael Fassbender, Liam Cunningham

Music by Paul Davies

Cinematography Sean Bobbitt

Dr Seán Crosson is a lecturer on Irish and World cinema with the Huston School of Film & Digital Media at NUI, Galway. His publications include *"The Given Note" Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) and the forthcoming co-edited collections *The Quiet Man...and Beyond* (Liffey Press, 2009) and *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

2. Kevin Maher, “Steve McQueen’s Hunger: featuring one of cinema’s greatest ever scenes”, *The Times*, October 9, 2008, http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/london_film_festival/article4908509.ece (accessed Jan. 14, 2009)

Staging Space: Cinema, Image, and Text in Declan Recks' *Eden* (2008)

Harvey O'Brien

The admittedly hoary old chestnut of the relationship between film and theatre in Ireland has sprouted something new with Declan Recks' *Eden*. Irish film took second billing to Irish theatre throughout most of the twentieth century, with many of its cinematic endeavours so inextricably linked to theatrical production to the point where it seemed impossible for the cinema to develop a sense of itself. Even Ardmore Studios was built to house adaptations of Abbey Theatre plays, and until the 1970s, it was entirely fair for Irish film to feel like little more than the unwanted bastard of literature and drama. It took Bob Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) to explode and confront the clichés and suggest a cinematic vocabulary capable not only of addressing the theatrical aesthetic, but of presenting an alternative.

Eden was first produced as a play in January 2001 at the Peacock Theatre under the direction of Conor McPherson, himself guilty of no small degree of parasitic cinematic activity following initial success on stage. The play consists of intersecting monologues from two characters, a married couple living the archetypal Irish lives of quiet desperation. Billy is a deluded drunkard, an eternal 'lad' who perceives himself to be part of the younger crowd despite his wife and two children. He spends his weekend getting dutifully drunk while dreaming of casual sex with younger women. Eileen is (understandably) lonely and has tried to mould herself to fit his flagging desire. All the time she nurses erotic fantasies of her own and hopes her husband will eventually fulfil her desperate and powerful need for love.

In the 2001 production, actors Don Wycherley and Catherine Walsh played the only roles, telling their respective sides of the story standing

in front of a simple but effective museum-style set (designed by Bláithín Sheerin) for approximately two hours. McPherson's blocking was simple and the lighting clean and bright, facilitating the sense of character presence and emotional distance between the two actors, who never converse, although their stories interlock. As Wycherley's Billy struggled with his inner conflict, resisting the urge to find his wife attractive because it would interfere with his self-image as a freewheeling stud, the actor had the facility to cast sidelong glances at his silent co-star, who sat frozen in her own on-stage space in a pose of intense concentration, awaiting her turn to address us.

The controlling metaphor of a concept of paradise (which gives the play its title) guides our understanding of these two people and their lack of understanding of themselves. The tone of sadness which it finally achieves has less to do with any particular resolution than it does with the sense that even resolution depends on the capacity to convince yourself of your own point of view. Many layers of psychological and emotional self-deception are plumbed in the play, and it is only as it closes that the characters have even glimpsed the truth. Though the reversal of fortune upon which the climax turns (a disastrous flirtation for him, a wild encounter for her) is predictable, this is not a work which depends heavily on its plot. The twists are predicated upon the exploration of character which in this case corresponds with the flavourful depiction of events and the environment encompassed by the storyline. The characters are the story, and O'Brien derives his anecdotes, gags, and scenes from their psychological and emotional disposition towards delusion.

The fascinating dilemma presented to any filmmaker in adapting this play is partly rooted here. Though the play is definitively verbal (built out of monologues), the dialogue is essentially internal. Though the characters report events and dialogue from their experience, they are not involved in it. They stand back from themselves in many ways and exist only inside their own heads just as the events they describe can exist only inside the heads of the audience in the theatre. In film, this could not be so.

Also in 2001, the year of the play's production, director Kirsten Sheridan had successfully adapted Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (another dual monologue piece) to film even though confronted with similar problems. In Walsh's play the monologues are more aggressive and descriptive, which gave Sheridan a greater level of exteriority with which to work, but she nonetheless successfully found visual analogues to Walsh's pace and feints of characterisation. Sheridan explored visual symmetries in the worlds of her characters and used frantic and sudden bursts of violence to confront her audience as directly as Walsh's words had done. Only one sequence in the film surrendered the cinematic voice to the purely theatrical, depicting Cillian Murphy's 'Pig' sitting alone in his room (possibly masturbating) thinking of 'Runt' (Elaine Cassidy) and describing his thoughts. Even here, Sheridan at least moved the camera in on Murphy's face, as if reflecting the sense of internalisation represented by Pig's lustful reverie.

Declan Recks has done something similar with the film of *Eden*. Though O'Brien provided a new draft of his story, broadening out the action, introducing more characters to spread the monologues out between more than two individuals, the contours of the drama are much the same as in the play, as is the sense of inner reflection which pervades the work aesthetically. The characters on stage described the events from their own points of view, and both are both victims of a shared flaw in perception. Neither character sees the other very clearly, and neither fully sees themselves either. Recks builds his film around a visual dynamic which represents this sense of a misrecognised reality.

His opening shot, an emblematic scene of a tree standing alone in a field is a visual echo of the painting of a country scene around which Billy's fantasies revolve in the play. On stage Billy dreams of sex behind a haystack depicted in the painting, and this is not a literal image. Recks must deal in the literal insofar as the profilmic image must register *something*. Yet the initial shot, painstakingly composed, centralised, and vibrantly coloured, seems to step out of the bounds of the real and into the symbolic. It is an image that returns to close the film. The painting itself also features, now an object across which light falls as Eileen stares into the darkness in their bedroom following an unsuccessful moment of coupling with her husband.

Recks maintains this compelling sense of shifting modes of perception throughout the film. Though there are now subsidiary characters, scenes of dialogue, and moments of literal, visual activity that are now seen rather than described, Recks takes a singular approach to all of them. As if standing back from O'Brien's screenplay, Recks finds a space between the stage and the screen. The less interest his camera shows in literal action, the more reflective it becomes. Billy and Eileen's encounters take on a dream-like tone, as if they too are not interested in the dialogue. The real drama is emotional and interior and can be *seen* rather than heard. Recks and cinematographer Owen McPolin put themselves in the position of observers observing people observing the world from a false perspective.

Throughout the film the camera tracks and moves with the system of looks and glances around which the characters' perceptions of their world revolve, often as if disconnected from their meaning. Incidental details like a photo snapped by mobile phone or a sponge dripping soapy water on a bathtub to not have particular physical meaning, but become part of a perceptual armoury of incidental detail in a world barely inhabited by these reflective fantasists. Even when Billy or Eileen are in company, they seem alone, often framed at the centre of the 2.35:1 frame and surrounded by space, like the emblematic tree. The camera drifts, the frame shifting in its rectangular

composition, and attains the quality of a drifting eye, another level of viewing and watching somewhere between Recks, McPolin, and the audience.

The film does feature a number of ‘monologue’ scenes that are forced to revisit the *Disco Pigs* dilemma, but again here, as with Sheridan, the camera is not permitted to remain completely still. Because O’Brien has usually provided a secondary character with whom his leads can interact, Recks gives us semicircular tracking shots moving in opposite directions. This creates visual conflict again reinforcing the sense that points of view can be in conflict and unreliable. Sometimes such scenes give way to images of the leads themselves, seemingly divorced entirely from what is being said either by themselves or those they are with, and this again shifts the audience from the word to the image in a surprising and effective way.

A range of long shots and mid shots in the early scenes give way to the intense close-ups with which the film concludes. As the characters finally confront one another in a way they never did on stage, the camera moves in on them as if unable to draw its gaze from them. This intensity of scrutiny falls now upon the faces of Aidan Kelly as Billy and Eileen Walsh (sister of Catherine from the original production), and the catharsis which it brings is a much to do with a visual damburst of facial expression as anything textual or spoken. Here Recks again provides a staging space that is at once ‘theatrical’ and ‘cinematic’, and the sense of dreamlike drift has

given way to an intensity of photographic analysis that requires a visual reading. This is a wholly remarkable achievement, successfully navigating the parallel but separate worlds of the dramatic text in performance and the drama of the image. In contrast to, for example, Conor McPherson’s own efforts as a director, especially *Saltwater* (2000) (based on the monologue piece *This Lime Tree Bower*), the film has a sense of cinema beyond the aged horror of the ‘filmed play’.

***Eden* (2008)**

Director: Declan Recks

Principal Cast: Aidan Kelly, Eileen Walsh,
Padraic Delaney, Enda Oates, Lesley Conroy,
Karl Shiels

Screenwriter: Eugene O’Brien

Producer: David Collins

Director of Photography: Owen McPolin

Dr Harvey O’Brien teaches film in the UCD School of English, Drama & Film. He is author of *Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester, 2004) and a coeditor of *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television* (Wallflower, 2004) and the journal *Film and Film Culture*.

***In Bruges* (2008)**

Joan Dean

Martin McDonagh's success as a playwright has already elicited two volumes of essays (Chambers and Jordan 2006, Russell 2007), most of which locate him in a tradition of Irish drama. However, McDonagh has long professed a greater interest in cinema than in theatre and his dramatic successes facilitated a quick and incredibly successful transition from stage productions of a national character to the international marketplace of screen. For his first cinematic effort, the 2004 short film *Six Shooter*, McDonagh won an Academy Award as well as BAFTA, IFTA, and a British Independent Film awards. Shot in Ireland and financed jointly by Film Four Lab (UK) and the Irish Film Board, *Six Shooter* featured Brendan Gleeson and Rúaidhrí Conroy in a blackly comic parable of mourners and murderers set somewhere in the Irish midlands that evoked echoes of Synge and Flann O'Brien. McDonagh's subsequent foray into feature-length filmmaking, *In Bruges* (2008), has – to date – taken in \$40 million worldwide, received generally positive reviews in Ireland, the UK, and the US. Both its lead actors have been nominated for several awards and the film has resurrected Colin Farrell's faltering career in the US with his winning of a Golden Globe.¹ However, nothing in its funding, distribution, or production suggests a connection with Ireland. So, does it belong in a review of Irish cinema? This question provokes the larger and thornier interrogation: What is an Irish film?

1. When Colin Farrell accepted the Golden Globe for his performance as Ray (Best Actor in a Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy), he described *In Bruges* as “simultaneously profound and beautifully comic and wonderfully painful, filled with delightful remorse and more than any thing else, the sweetest, sweetest redemptive qualities” (Farrell 2009). Farrell might have been referring the redemption of his own acting career after the debacles of *Alexander* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006).

In Bruges is another of McDonagh's meticulously plotted clockworks. After a child is accidentally killed during the assassination of a priest (the uncredited Ciarán Hinds), the two hitmen, Ken (Brendan Gleeson) and Ray (Colin Farrell) are dispatched from London to Bruges to wait for instructions from their employer, Harry Waters (Ralph Fiennes). While Ken immerses himself in the beauty of the picture-postcard medieval town, Ray is impatient with waiting and guilt-ridden over the child's death. Diverted by the shooting of a film (“They're filming midgets!” [McDonagh 2008: 13]), Ray meets and falls for Chloe (Clémence Poesy) who sells drugs to the film's cast and crew. On a date with Chloe, Ray attacks a couple he assumes to be Americans. Having received instructions from Harry to kill Ray for botching the London job, Ken collects a pistol and silencer from Harry's contact in Bruges. Ray, meanwhile, acquires a pistol from Chloe's ex-boyfriend.

On a day of brilliant sunshine, Ray watches children at play and decides to use that gun on himself. At that very moment, Ray finds not only his gun, but also Ken's pointed at his head. Realizing that Ray intends to commit suicide, Ken suddenly decides not to kill Ray but to save him from despair. Ken packs Ray off on a train and phones Harry to report just that. By a blackly humorous twist of fate the couple Ray attacked the night before identify him on the train, have him arrested and returned to Bruges.

Now Harry himself travels to Bruges, collects a gun, accepts a supply of dum-dum bullets (“I know I shouldn't” [65]) and finds Ken. Together they ascend the bell tower, where Harry shoots Ken in the leg intending to punish rather than kill him. As he helps Ken down the tower's stairs, Harry learns that Ray is back in Bruges. Harry again shoots Ken and sets off after Ray. Ken throws himself off the tower to warn Ray. An

elaborate chase scene ends on the set of the film-within-the-film, where Harry fires three rounds into Ray. Inadvertently, the film's midget, dressed as a schoolboy, has his head blown off by a dum-dum bullet that passed through Ray. Assuming that he has done exactly what he wanted to kill Ray for doing, killing a child, Harry kills himself. Ray survives and hopes to atone for the child's death.

The casting of two Irish actors, Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson, who not only speak with Irish accents, but repeatedly acknowledge an Irish heritage is one obvious Irish dimension to the film. "Originally Ray and Ken were written as Londoners", said McDonagh. "I only changed them to Irish after we'd cast Colin and Brendan. Everything seemed to fall into place after that – their camaraderie, their antagonism towards Harry" (McDonagh 2008a). That casting choice, however, gives rise to other Irish elements. As Ken decides to take his own life to save Ray's, the soundtrack departs from Carter Burwell's accomplished score and gives us The Dubliners performing "On Raglan Road". (Viewers of *Miller's Crossing* [1990] will recall that Carter Burwell there used another Irish anthem to male loss, "Danny Boy", as the soundtrack in that film's most violent scene.)

In Bruges is rife with references to nationality. Americans are said to be loud and vulgar; indeed, some are. Johnny (Jordan Prentice) twice asks that the fact that his nationality not be held against him. More than any other character Ray relies on these stereotypes and generalizations. When Ray says that "Amsterdam's just a load of bloody prostitutes" (48), he is speaking to a prostitute from Amsterdam, but he critically mistakes Canadians for Americans. Nationality is only one of many signifiers of identity. That Johnny is a dwarf might seem more defining than his nationality, but in Johnny's drug-induced fantasy of a coming race war between blacks and whites, the fact that he's white is more important than his physical stature or nationality. McDonagh's comedy often emanates from the odd choices characters make about their identity. That his characters can prioritize or exert agency in making these choices is surprising, perhaps optimistic.

In *The Myth of an Irish Cinema*, Michael Gillespie (2008) argues that while there are identifiable Irish qualities in films, the idea of an Irish film is inherently vexed if not empty. Similarly, Patrick Lonergan alludes to the folly of trying to locate McDonagh in "a stable 'Irish' tradition" (2009: 107). Whatever Irish dimension exists in *In Bruges* is inextricably linked to its moral, specifically Catholic, dimension of guilt, forgiveness and redemption. The distinction between assassinating a priest, one who was somehow mixed up with Harry Waters, and inadvertently killing a child was dismissed by many critics as spurious, but it forms the moral core of the film. It is both the reason Harry orders Ken to kill Ray as well as the reason Harry takes his own life.

Viewing Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgment* prompts Ken to observe, "I was brought up believing certain things, I was brought up Catholic, which I've more or less rejected most of...But the things you're taught as a child, they never really leave you, do they?" (25). Ray confesses his sins to Ken in scene that recalls the centrality of confession in McDonagh's plays. Harry can't shoot Ken because he's "Like Robert fucking Powell out of *Jesus of fucking Nazareth*" (74). The references to Catholicism are even more explicit in the screenplay: a stage direction describes the character who informs on Ray as "looking guilty as Judas" (87).

A surprising number of American reviewers identified an Irish dimension in *In Bruges*. The *New York Times* referred to Farrell and Gleeson as an "Irish Laurel and Hardy act". Chicago's Roger Ebert repeatedly mentioned Dublin, Ray's hometown. The *Village Voice* identified McDonagh as an "Irish playwright" and argued that "the movie's modest charm lies mostly in the blarney that flies between these three mobsters". *Rolling Stone* referred readers to McDonagh's "great Irish plays". *The New Yorker* wrote of an "Irish playwright" and "Irish assassins" (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0780536/external_reviews. Accessed 30 January 2009).

With six murders and three of the film's six principal characters dead, *In Bruges* offers the hyperbolic violence that infuses all of McDonagh's work. Alongside the violence is a

boatload of angst about guilt, loyalty, and honor. Harry's suicide, for instance, is motivated by his conviction: "You've got to stick to your principles" (86).

The geography here is no less prominent than in McDonagh's Irish plays, all of six of which employ geographical references in their titles. After three weeks rehearsal with Gleeson and Farrell, the film was completely shot on location in Bruges and, especially in its opening sequences, appropriates travelogue cinematography.

In Bruges is even more aggressively allusive and self-referential than any of McDonagh's plays. In the Groninge Museum the camera, acting as Ray's eyes, lingers on a dishonest judge being flayed alive in Gerard David's "Judgement of Cambyses" and Bosch's *The Last Judgement*. Bosch's painting not only exacerbates Ray's guilt, but also inspires the design of the film-within-the-film. The production design of Michael Carlin, whose set design for *The Duchess*, also 2008, earned him an Academy Award nomination, fills the film-within-the-film's misty, hallucinatory set with enormous animals, menacing nuns, disconcerting doubles, masked figures, and, yes, dwarves.

Equally evident is McDonagh's debt to Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. Not only does McDonagh borrow Pinter's hired assassins and their recent botched job, but bits of stage business such as pointlessly having a character check for snoops outside a hotel door. He also lifts the names under which Ken and Ray register in the hotel, Cranham and Blakely, from a 1985 BBC production of *The Dumb Waiter* starring Ken Cranham and Colin Blakely. (McDonagh would have been fifteen at the time of its original broadcast.) The parallels between *In Bruges* and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), which inspires the film-within-the-film, are no less insistent. In both, a couple travels to a beautiful European city with an extensive system of canals after the death of a child only to discover a nightmarish world of grotesque visions. And so on. McDonagh's web of intertextual references not only to Bosch, Pinter and Roeg, but also to Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994, which offers a very different sense of the medieval), Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Mamet, Hitchcock,

and McDonagh's own *The Pillowman* will occupy academics for years to come.

In Bruges reiterates the centrality, almost sanctity, of childhood innocence seen in *The Pillowman*. As well as including references to a Belgian child abuse scandal, the camera dwells on the children Ray watches in the squares and parks of Bruges. Ray gives the heavily-pregnant owner of his hotel 200 euros for her baby. Later, when she stands in his line of fire, he cannot shoot at Harry.

Harry, too, is connected with children: not only does he say goodbye to his three children, but fond memories of his last happy holiday (he was seven) in fairy-tale Bruges.

The self-referentiality of McDonagh's plays is here fused with its counterpart in gangster films described by Lance Pettitt:

The screen gangster's self-awareness has long been a trait of the genre ever since a shot and dying Rico asks rhetorically in *Little Caesar* (1930): 'Mother of mercy, is this the end of Rico?' This sense of self-dramatisation, an awareness of their mediated image, is part of the gangster's charisma and power. (2004: 34).

Here Harry announces the final showdown: "Don't be stupid, this is the shoot-out" (82).

Apart from two comically dated references to American guilt over Vietnam and the use of euros, the film is devoid of topical references. There's nothing in the costuming or sets to suggest a specific time. There are, for instance, neither cell phones nor iPods in sight. The hotel doesn't have voice mail. Chases are conducted on foot. Herein lies an important distinction between *In Bruges* and the recent wave of British crime films described by Steve Chignall (2001). We are spared the cinematic pyrotechnics of the Guy Ritchie school of British "new-laddism" crime films (Monk, 2000). Thankfully, we are also spared their misogyny, Social Darwinism, sadism, amorality and insufferable hipness. The *mise-en-scène* of *In Bruges* is lush rather than austere, more medieval than high-tech. Instead of a flashy rapid-cut editing, the film dwells on the city's architectural splendors. The desperate macho posturing of films like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1999), *Sexy Beast* (2000) or *RocknRolla* (2008) is reduced to a torrent of comic homophobic slurs about gayboys, gay

beer, a “big gay baby” (43), and poofs. Rather than fashionista gangsters of the British films, Ray wears the same shirt for three days running.

McDonagh not only refutes the new laddist British films, but also reworks the formulae of hitmen films ranging from *This Gun for Hire* (1942) to the Bourne franchise featuring Matt Damon. Movie hitman survive by adhering to a well-defined code – sometimes that code produces an obsessive-compulsive precision and attention to detail; sometimes an allegiance to a noble cause. As violent as *In Bruges* unquestionably is, the violence goes wrong as often as it “succeeds”. As if to refute the new laddism of McDonagh’s generation, these hard men repeatedly “come over all Gandhi” (73). Ken and Ray each carry their own sadness: Ray’s stems from the death of the child Ken’s from his death of wife. (Although she died in 1976, Ken still wears his wedding ring.) Ken is sad after Harry tells him to kill Ray. He says that he gave up cocaine because it made him sad. He sadly recalls his wife’s death. Twice, Ray breaks down in tears. Ken tells Harry, “I love you unreservedly” (73). Ken’s loyalty to Harry began when Harry avenged the murder of Ken’s wife decades earlier, but he has transferred his loyalty to Ray, not only out of a sense of responsibility for bringing the much younger Ray into the business but because he sees redemptive possibilities for Ray that Harry lacks

McDonagh’s dilemma lies in trying to reconcile the postmodern and the moralistic. He sees *In Bruges* as exploring the possibilities of redemption. At the film’s premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2008, he told reporters “I don’t know if people can be redeemed after the terrible things they do, but I enjoyed asking the question” (2008c). Winner of the BAFTA for best original screenplay and nominated for a second Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for *In Bruges*, McDonagh will have other opportunities to do just that.

***In Bruges* (UK, 2008)**

Director: Martin McDonagh

Writer: Martin McDonagh

Cast (Principal): Colin Farrell, Brendan Gleeson, Ralph Fiennes, Clémence Poésy, Thekla Reuten, Jérémie Renier, Jordan Prentice, Ciarán Hinds (uncredited)

Cinematographer: Eigil Bryld

Music: Carter Burwell

Production Design: Michael Carlin

Producers: Graham Broadbent and Michael Czernin

Joan Dean teaches film and drama at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Her essay on Irish pageantry in the 1920s appears in the Spring 2009 issue of *New Hibernia Review*.

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Entering the Dark Place: Visions of Irish Horror in *Seer* (2008)

Zélie Asava

There has been a recent explosion in Irish horror. McMahon's *Dead Meat*, made in 2004, was the first feature to be funded locally and inspired a new genre in Irish filmmaking. Like recent Irish horrors *Isolation* (O'Brien 2005), *Shrooms* (Breathnach 2007) and *Dead Meat*, *Seer* (Courtney 2008) plays on ideas of fate and free will, the imagery of the rural, the hidden social horrors of the past and the figure of the independent Irish woman.

Horror films, like fairytales, are designed to provide their audience with a cathartic release, a scare which in the safety of the cinema bonds, revitalises and excites us. In these recessionary times, that release is a welcome pleasure. *Seer* takes us on a rollercoaster ride of emotion in the Irish countryside. The narrative begins with seven young people trapped in a farmhouse, one of whom, Mary Perry (Tara Nixon O'Neill), is revealed to be a seer (she has prophetic visions). This story is intercut with her parents' concurrent search for her from their home (another farmhouse). From a police visit we learn that she went missing from her flat in Kilkenny a week ago and was last seen by a farmer in a country lane struggling with a man. We've been duped, the house of seven was a dream world, in reality she is a lone victim. Finally, the film brings us to her true whereabouts, a shed on an isolated farm where she is being tortured by a serial rapist/killer. So there you have it, entrapment, abduction, certain death, all our worst fears brought into visceral focus.

Seer opens with the distorted audio of a news story about a fire in a remote 200 year old farmhouse in the Wexford countryside, matched with images of that house. Cut to a woman in a room who awakes on top of a bed, fully clothed, screaming. She doesn't know who or where she is and the only clue to her identity is a hospital bracelet on her wrist bearing the name Mary

Perry. As the story unfolds, six others go through the same ritual. They discover a deadly creature lurking outside. Tight shots in confined spaces relay the entrapment, claustrophobia and terror of uncertainty they feel. Like *Isolation*, our 'knowledge position' is restricted and it is the unmotivated point-of-view shots which affirm the monster's presence. From time to time the point of view switches to that of the monster's as the screen turns to red (a similar device to that used in Daoust's *The Room* (2006)).

As a 'siege horror' the film starts to resemble *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968). Four boys and three girls trapped in a house sounds rife for dramatic scenes but here the pacing lags and the dialogue flounders as repetition and boredom takes over, à la reality TV. The characters are all white, heterosexual, attractive and middle-class, and the men control the women (singling out Mary in their 'witch-hunt' for the source of their misery). Stuart (Damian Hannaway) takes over the house as patriarch, while Peter (Donal Patterson), in eye-level close-ups styled after *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971) and with knife in hand, starts to resemble the archetypal slasher. In a key scene he sits tied to a chair as Mary flirts with him, this S&M moment revealing another side to her – until this point she has played the panting, terror-stricken, fainting *femme fatale*. Now she takes on a sinister edge.

Unusually for a teen/young adult horror, alliances in the house are formed according to gender rather than sexual attraction, although delicately hushed and heated talk of sisterhood might suggest more (or could be read as signifying the masculine femininity of Mary as the 'final girl' (Clover 1992)). Following traditional Irish cinema gender codes the men play out the violent rituals of masculinity (they fight constantly and Peter stabs two guys) and

the women play out the maternal rituals of femininity (nurturing each other).

Each character – except Mary – is doomed to their fate; an encounter with death, embodied by the terrifying creature, whose penetrative claws recall Freddie Krueger (the killer in your dreams). But this is no ordinary slasher movie. Mary becomes plagued by visions which she passes on to each of the others who in turn, experience violent seizures and go to ‘the dark place’ in their minds, after which they become unhinged and preoccupied by the monster. These visions leave her victims with scratches on their face, unexplained fetishistic marks which link her to the monster and serve as a precursor for their deaths at its hands.

The beauty of the cinematography in fellow housemate Bridget’s (Hannah Jennings) mental shift to ‘the dark place’ stands out as a memorable scene. Here the film takes on a new aesthetic. It moves away from the previous sequences tendencies towards realism and an expressionist sensibility takes over. In a surreal, beautiful tableau Jennings performs a wonderful piece of Gothic acting against the stylised *mise-en-scène*. The chiaroscuro lighting here cuts the deep perspective shot diagonally to reveal the foreboding path to the monster as an isolated source of light. The light we traditionally associate with life forms a path to her violent death.

The monster is not a lone male stalker in a mask, rather it is an embodiment of the repressed unconscious, it represents our greatest fears, the ‘dark place’ in our minds. It is primordial and undead, a cloaked skull – a fetishistic lack – which stands 10 feet tall. Seen only in glimpses (following Hitchcock, Tourneur et al, what terrifies the spectator is not explicit violence but the art of suggestion, the terror of the unimaginable) it evokes mythology, folklore and the primeval past, all reiterated through other elements of the film such as seers, pentagrams, wake rituals and the living dead.

Mary faces the monster and assumes the power of the gaze implying, as Stephen Neale (1980) has suggested, that if read from a

Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective the monster can be understood as a representation of female sexuality, i.e. it may be Mary’s distorted mirror-image. Linda Williams (1983) argues that in horror the female protagonist and monster share a sexual difference from the ‘normal male’ and so represent a potent threat to male power. This difference is reaffirmed by Mary’s threat to the social order as a seer. The figure of the monster has also been read as a signifier of the repression – particularly sexual repression – produced by ‘monogamous, heterosexual, patriarchal capitalists’ (Wood 1979: 8). The monster becomes Mary’s ally in slashing the norms which oppress her. She seems to share a primitive connection with it.

As an animated corpse, a body without a soul, the monster is wholly abject. It serves as a manifestation of her extremes, of uncontrolled female desire and the primacy of the ego which will do anything for survival. Its claws thus recall the ‘vagina dentata’ motif as it kills – its victims are Mary’s victims and must die for her to survive. In this way, she is an ambivalent vampiric, cannibalistic heroine, both victim and monster. She can be read in Barbara Creed’s (1993) terms as a signifier of the female as abject in horror, the ‘monstrous-feminine’. In contrast to the self-sacrificing masochism of the mother-colleen archetype of Irish film the masochism of others is perversely pleasurable to Mary.

Following the death of the last of Mary’s housemates she reveals herself to be ‘the dark place’ and starts to unravel the meaning of her visions which provokes a fit of mania. It is now that we realise that the house of seven was Mary’s dream world. This may explain the somewhat wooden acting, sound problems and the implausibility of their initial hesitancy to escape. The dream is, like the horror movie itself, an escapist fantasy. Cinema is an analogy for dreaming and shows us our idealised selves in a heightened reality. Where Mary has no control she dreams of a world where she controls others.

Now we understand that only Mary is a fully developed character because she will fulfil the

trope of the 'final girl'. This is *her* story. We also realise the relevance of the scenes set at another farmhouse with Mary's parents which have been and continue to intercut the main narrative. (Although these scenes reveal her history they seem an unnecessary distraction.)

The movie cuts to its final location, another horror staple: the cabin in the woods – here a shed on an isolated farm. In the real-world of the film Mary is in the dark-lit shed, gagged and hanging from the rafters by her arms. Under a single light Mary is bloodied, bruised and tormented by a man (the slasher?), who explicitly states his plans to torture, rape and then kill her. Again the film's aesthetic shifts from realism to expressionism and here the camera style changes from penetrative movement to tightly encircling the pair. This mixture of fantasy and reality is the basis of horror, a genre which combines folk monsters with real ones (e.g. the combination of the fairytale and the real-life child killer in Freddie Krueger), and brings us to the real terror of the film – the psychosis of the real-life boogeymen (as best represented by the fictionalised family of Ed Geins (a real-life American cannibal/killer/necrophiliac) in the farm-set horror *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper 1974)).

The disjointed structure of the film as it skips between the three locations – Mary's internal world (the house of seven), her parent's kitchen and the final 'cabin in the woods'/farm shed – reflects Mary's crazed – but not insane – mind in this final horrific setting. It also draws us to the constructedness of the film (as do several references to visual art – her mother's/housemate's drawings), reminding us that, despite its pretences to reality, it is a work of fiction. We are safe.

With the help of her visions (her dead sister communicates to her the means of escape) Mary breaks free of her objectification (as she steps out of her shackles she steps out of the mirror in which she is framed) and destroys the killer by smashing his skull in with a spade while screaming manically in true rape-revenge style. We are granted the requisite release of tension. She returns home. Elements of the melodrama now arise as the family's repressed memories are exhumed and we are finally shown the

significance of the others she encountered in the farmhouse and why that place, and that fire, is so important to her family history.

By rationalising the irrational through explanatory family scenes, *Seer* neutralises its horror. It falls victim to Aristotelian logic and fails to reach the sublimity of terror as that which is beyond narrative control. W. H. Rockett notes: 'Things seen, fully explained, and laid to rest in the last reel... are mere horrors' (1982: 132). *Seer's* conclusion ties up any and all disturbing loose ends and safely restores the 'normal' world under paternal law. And yet the film leaves you with an enduring sense of unease and uncertainty – the dream monster was never killed and so we are denied a full sense of catharsis. The fear prevails.

In contrast to the parodic self-referentiality of so many modern horrors, *Seer* respects the limitations of the genre. The film's self-conscious artifice might be rooted in 1970s horror (one of Courtney's directorial influences for this film) and/or Philip Brophy's concept of 'horrority' (1986), that is, the idea that horrors knowingly play with the audience's knowledge of generic conventions.

Courtney described his film for US horror site Fangoria as "*Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1948) infused with *Halloween*". Made by Carpenter in 1978 *Halloween* was the first classic American slasher movie and *Seer* borrows many structural elements from it, including the idea that the real horror lies in the underside of normal, middle-class homes and the repressive patriarchal family. The final scene of *Seer*, a dialogue between Mary and her father set against the natural landscape of the home farm marries the American slasher film heroine with local images of patriarchy and negates Mary's independence, as she moves from one man's control to another.

Seer is a distinctly Irish horror film. The cinematic trope of the rural idyll, briefly displaced, is firmly back in place by the end of the film. This along with the social and familial gender stereotypes (e.g. her mother's characterisation as soft, irrational, passive and pre-linguistic (she's also a seer)), Celtic and Christian symbolism, Beckettian paralysis and the absence of sex gives the film a traditionally conservative Irish feel.

Seer (Irl, 2008)

Director: Eric Courtney

Writer: Martin Andrew Robinson

Principal Cast: Tara Nixon O'Neill, Siobhan Lam, Hannah Jennings, Damian Hannaway, Donal Patterson, Declan Reynolds, Declan McGauran, David Walsh, Rita Evelyn Smith, Rory Mullen

Cinematographer: Alan Kennedy

Music: Kevin Jennings

Producer: Jim Cahill

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32A

Roddy Flynn

The mid-1990s saw a swathe of Irish coming of age dramas set in the 1950s which frequently (and often quite clumsily) sought to equate the experiences of their young, mainly male protagonists with the emergence of the state from its post civil war “adolescence”. With varying degrees of success, *Korea*, *Broken Harvest*, and *All Things Bright and Beautiful* all ploughed the same furrow. Similar narratives centered around female leads were notably absent, so when a drama like *32A* arrives, focusing on four teenage girls as they deal with the impact of puberty and burgeoning sexuality on their relationships with friends, boys, parents and even with themselves, one is immediately inclined to welcome it.

The female lead in *Broken Harvest* was played by Marian Quinn, a member of the Quinn film dynasty which extends to her three brothers: cinematographer Declan and actors Paul and Aidan. *32A* sees her move behind the camera for the first time, working as writer and director (although she also performs a small but critical role as one of the girls’ mothers.) Watching the film the first time, one is immediately struck by the success with which the look and feel of 1970s middle class Dublin suburbia is recreated. Particular kudos go out to the production and art design along with those responsible for set and costumes: one glance at those off-lime green/brown-orange interiors, the blocky facia of a Renault 6 and poured concrete roads and the setting is impossible to mistake. (This notwithstanding the fact parts of the film were shot in locations as far flung as Sligo in a bid to access regional film funds).

However, the narrative territory of the film is not established as effectively. The film follows two strands: in one, 14-year old Maeve (the wonderfully cast Ailish McCarthy), encounters local Lothario Brian Power (Shane McDaid, a convincing ringer for *Tommy*-era Roger Daltrey)

at a party she shouldn’t be at. Despite the age gap (two years), they hit it off, aided by a lying-on-the-ground-staring-at-the-stars sequence lifted from Bill Forsyth’s *Gregory’s Girl*. Girl having met boy, the rest of the strand pans out in a predictable fashion: girl falls out with friends over boy, boy drops girl (nicely enough) and girls make up. The reappearance of the estranged father of one of these friends (and equally rapid disappearance) constitutes the film’s only subplot suggesting that even adult relationships are not always straightforward.

If this seems an overly brief narrative summary, it is not because I’m pressed for space: at a narrative level *32A* features less incident than that contained in a typical episode of *Sex and the City*. But while Carrie Bradshaw and her friends used to do all this in a 22 minutes, *32A* runs on for an hour and a half. As a result, the film meanders. This is not automatically a problem: the success of a film like Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* derives in large part from the fact it doesn’t wear its narrative on its sleeve: McQueen’s camera adopts an unobtrusive gaze, methodically observing events which rarely feel as though they have been constructed for the camera. Nonetheless in McQueen’s hands the result is an almost unbearably intense and compelling film.

32A has the space to take a somewhat banal skeleton narrative and hang upon it an exploration of what it is (or was) to be a pubescent girl in Ireland. This is potentially rich territory and certainly under-explored in Irish cinema. It is nearly two decades since Margo Harkin’s *Hush-A-Bye Baby* pulled off the notable feat of simultaneously exploring teenage sexuality and the mores and moral codes of Catholic culture in Ireland north and south. However, although a number of thematic possibilities are thrown up – teenage sexuality,

the unreliability (and even mortality) of parents – 32A fails to explore them in any particular depth. Indeed with the possible exception of Imelda (she of the absent father played here by the barely used Jared Harris), the characters seem remarkably unaffected by their experiences: when Maeve is dumped (Brian having gone off with an older – by two years – “woman”) her response is remarkably stoic and self-contained for what we are given to understand is the end of her first “relationship” (if such a term can be applied to the short-term liaisons characteristic of many teenage romances.) Similarly, when her mother goes into hospital for an unspecified treatment, Maeve’s family seem remarkably unconcerned about her fate. (This is not to suggest that such a visit may not be routine but it does raise questions as to why the medical interlude is included at all: unavailability of Orla FitzGerald who plays the mother during shooting? A device to allow Maeve and her father (a garrulous Aidan Quinn) an extended scene together?).

Indeed, in some respects, the successful recreation of the *mise-en-scene* of 1970s Dublin is problematic in that it reminds reviewers of a certain age (such as your current writer) not merely of the time and place but recalls how teenagers of that period really behaved. Even accepting that all memories are unreliable it is difficult to reconcile my recollections of teenage discos with the curiously chaste depiction of teenage romance offered by 32A. The film includes a scene at the famous “Grove” in Raheny (where commitment to verisimilitude includes casting the original DJ as himself). Actually, “notorious” might have been a better word to describe the Grove: although there was much apocrypha about who did what with/to who and exactly “how far” kids went, there seems little doubt that romance at the Grove went beyond the ‘snogging’ depicted in 32A. Yet even if there was only snogging, the film seems reluctant to explore the very real and intense heat and passion generated by teenage lust.

This is all the more problematic because the last decade or so has produced – mainly from the US – something of a revolution in the manner in

which teenagers are depicted on screen. Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*, or Rian Johnson’s *Brick* suggest a much more troubled (and troubling) undercurrents amongst contemporary youth. In fairness, both those films feature individuals *in extremis* and as such it is perhaps unfair to use them as points of comparison for 32A. However, even films driven by far less overtly dramatic narratives such as Larry Park’s work from *Kids* onwards or Catherine Hardwicke’s *Thirteen* (surely the most obvious point of comparison for 32A) point to the potential to explore interior lives of infinitely greater complexity than that hinted at in 32A. And as for how it compares with Channel 4’s *Skins*...

Furthermore, from an anthropological perspective it is fair to acknowledge that there may be very real differences between the mating habits of Irish teenagers in the 1970s and their 21st century US or UK counterparts. Thus there is no requirement that an Irish film in this setting must perforce include full-on representations of teenage sexuality. Nonetheless the insight offered by 32A into how teenage girls really think is ultimately rather banal and unconvincing. The focus on breast size in the opening sequences (from which the film’s title is derived) is repeatedly signalled by the girls’ envious glances at the more amply endowed. But such concerns seem more reminiscent of a Judy Blume novel like *Are You There God, It’s Me Margaret* than the world conjured by the more recent explorations of teenagedom cited above.

Ultimately then, 32A feels a little unfinished. In fairness, given what must have been a particularly complicated financial circumstances surrounding its conception (evidenced by a plethora of references to public funding bodies in the credits) and a short six week shoot, much has been achieved, especially in the visual department, although even here some of the editing decisions feel odd: shots linger on several beats to no great effect. The constraints of the shoot are also evident in some of the performances: though able, the young cast feels under-directed and line readings are often unconvincing. Ultimately, however, as has so often been the case with Irish cinema over the

past 15 years, it is the underlying script which is most problematic. This is all the more striking given that its development apparently benefitted from the support of the Moonstone Screenwriters Lab (which has itself recently gone into liquidation despite support from the EU, Scottish Screen and the Irish Film Board). Nonetheless the script as shot still feels several drafts away from completion.

32 A (2007)

Producer: Tommy Weir, Roshanak Behehst Nedjad

Director / Screenwriter: Marian Quinn

Cinematographer: PJ Dillon

Music: Gerry Leonard

Principal Cast: Aidan Quinn, Orla Brady, Jack Lynch, Kate O'Toole, Jared Harris.

Roddy Flynn teaches film and media studies at Dublin City University and has published widely on Irish media policy and history.

**Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin:
Home insecurity in recent Irish Cinema**

Veronica Johnson

2008 saw the release of two feature films which focused on the home as a place of danger. Given Ireland's obsession with house-hunting and home-making over the past decade it is perhaps not surprising that cinema is beginning to reflect this aspect of our national psyche. In *A Film with Me In it* the homemaking is of a rather haphazard and impermanent nature. Rather than a house, the main couple live in a run down basement flat which they rent and are therefore marked as 'losers' of some sort. In contrast the main protagonist of *Alarm* – Molly (Ruth Bradley) – is able to buy the home of her dreams as soon as she decides to make a fresh start. Money is no object here, not only can she purchase her home immediately but she can happily afford to pay €5000 more to the estate agent to secure the sale and begins to decorate and furnish it immediately. This disparity in wealth marks the protagonists in each film as occupying opposite ends of the spectrum of life in modern Ireland. The protagonists of *A Film With Me In It* belong to the Dublin which was also inhabited by the characters in *Once*; that part of Ireland which was marginal to the wealth of the Celtic Tiger. In contrast Molly in *Alarm* seems to represent the excess of the Celtic Tiger mentality in all its covetous consumption. Despite having a home with an older couple – Frank and Jess – and a large group of friends she chooses to abandon this life in order to, as she says herself “get a foot on the property ladder”. She is a representative of the modern Irish woman: financially independent, ambitious and successful. Yet as with the characters in *A Film With Me In It*, her home, her place of refuge turns into a house of horror.

In *A Film With Me In It* the home is attacked by the people who live there, by the inhabitants themselves. A series of disastrous accidents

befall every living creature connected with the house, except for the two protagonists who are the involuntary instigators of each and every accident. As a black comedy, all of these incidents are played for laughs, the humour increasing with each accident as each seems more implausible than the previous one. By the end of the film, it can be said that we have been watching a “house of horror”, one dog, and four human beings have been killed over less than two hours of story time.

In contrast, *Alarm* plays on the anxiety, stress and tensions that arise when a home is no longer a sanctuary. Here the horror begins in the protagonist's first home, the place where she grew up. Near the beginning of the film we watch a flashback which establishes why she is undertaking counselling and living with friends of her father. We learn that her father was murdered during a night time robbery when he was awoken by the home alarm system. Hence Molly's refusal to place an alarm on her newly purchased house and the film's title.

The death of her father leaves Molly fragile and vulnerable. When the film opens she announces to her therapist that she wants to make a fresh start and has decided to purchase her own house away from the city in order to find peace and quiet. Shots of gridlock and an amplified soundtrack of city traffic nicely capture the daily stress of living in a major city. However, rather than the rural idyll that she is searching for Molly encounters problems with her new home even before she purchases it. The morning after viewing the property she decides to buy it only to discover that someone else has got there before her. On hearing this news she breaks down in the estate agent's office and is only consoled when the agent illegally offers her the house for an inflated price which he will

pocket. She accepts.

Alone in her new home Molly is soon the victim of unwanted attention. Her house is broken into and although nothing is stolen the event has a major impact on her. All that she has been working towards since the death of her father: peace, quiet, independence, a home of her own, has been violated by a random act. A second break-in convinces her to purchase the initially unwanted alarm system, but this decision brings with it more difficulties, with accidental tripping of the alarm and questions as to who she can trust with the alarm code. As each incident is unresolved Molly becomes more and more suspicious of every other character in the film. While she and new boyfriend Mal quickly establish a loving relationship and make a home together she is unsure as to whether she can trust him and eventually begins to suspect that he might in fact be the cause of all her recent difficulties. The home, traditionally a place of refuge, succour and safety, a place to return to has become the place which Molly wants to escape from. Moving from the home as the centre, to the home as the place which promotes nightmares, it seems that writer/director Gerry Stembridge is reflecting on the changes brought about in Irish society as a result of the economic boom. In showing us that most of Molly's neighbours are rarely at home due to the long commute to and from Dublin he is commenting on the fact that while Molly's unhappiness with her home might be an extreme case, it is certainly not unique in contemporary Ireland for homes to be abandoned, for people to be sheltering in houses rather than creating homes.

While Molly searches for tranquillity in her life and seeks to build a home for herself to replace the one she has lost, the protagonists in *A Film With Me In It* rarely have a moment of tranquillity and live in a world of unfolding chaos. They are aimless, feckless and (until their talent for dealing with dead bodies comes to the fore) rather gormless too. Dylan Moran's Pierce is the latest cinematic version of the Irish bachelor, a man so engrossed in alcohol, gambling and the camaraderie of male friendship that his life seems unlikely to change or progress anytime soon. Mark Doherty takes the role of Mark the homemaker, an unemployed actor who

is henpecked by his girlfriend Sally (Amy Huberman) and under threat from his landlord for non payment of rent. The flat which Mark shares with Sally and David (David O'Doherty) his disabled brother, is falling apart at the seams, the prototype dingy student flat. In fact so run down and in need of repair is this home that many of the deaths which occur there are a result of faulty equipment, furniture or fittings. The first to succumb is the golden Labrador whose demise occurs as a result of a badly hung bookshelf. Next is David, thanks to a precariously connected chandelier. Sally manages to avoid the other dangers in this house of horrors, her end coming when she slips in David's blood and cracks her skull. Perhaps there is a sense that the carnage will end when Jack the landlord (Keith Allen) comes to fix another potential danger spot; the light in the kitchen, but he too becomes a victim of this dangerous home. The final victim, a Garda (Aisling O'Sullivan) who has come as a result of a neighbour's complaint about Doherty's trumpet playing equally fails to make it out alive.

The old Irish saying "Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin", (there's no fireside like your own fireside), a variation of "There's no place like home" rings true in both of these films but certainly not in the original meaning of the saying. For the firesides in these two films are not the welcoming, homely places of domestic bliss. There certainly is no comforting fireside for Molly in *Alarm* and as the film progresses it becomes clear that her intense desire to create a home for herself to replace the one that was so violently taken from her has led her further into despair rather than the security she wished for. In *A Film With Me In It* Pierce and Mark are the type of characters who would happily sit at any fireside. However, even these two laid back characters eventually become overwhelmed and anxious at the level of sheer bad luck that is generated by their domicile. The Irish home as represented by these two films then is a place of violence and mayhem, a place distinguished by terror in *Alarm* and ferociously black humour and violence in *A Film With Me In It*. Each film centres on the living space with only rare excursions into the outside world, for the protagonists in these films everything important

that happens, happens in the home. This works to place the focus on the significance of the home and its place in modern Irish society. Both films seem to contest the myth of security, the obsession with home ownership in Ireland offered. How right they were.

A Film with Me In It (2008)

Producer: Alan Moloney, Susan Mullen

Director: Ian Fitzgibbon

Screenplay: Mark Doherty

Cinematographer: Seamus Deasy

Principal Cast: Dylan Moran, Mark Doherty, Amy Huberman, Keith Allen, David Doherty

Alarm (2008)

Producer: Anna J. Devlin, Marina Hughes

Director / Screenplay: Gerard Stembridge

Cinematographer: Bruno de Keyzer

Principal Cast: Ruth Bradley, Aidan Turner, Tom Hickey, Owen Roe.

Veronica Johnson is IRCHSS Scholar at the Huston School of Film and Digital Media, NUI Galway. Her research focuses on the role and representation of the unconscious in film.

Tom Jordan Murphy: An Appreciation

Michael Patrick Gillespie

Mark O'Halloran opened a retrospective of Tom Jordan Murphy's work at the Irish Film Centre with an affectionate synopsis of the definitive elements of Murphy's acting abilities, but those seeking an illustration of the power the actor brought to the screen need look no further than the final moments of *Adam and Paul*, a film in which Murphy played opposite O'Halloran. The concluding scene opens with a close-up of Murphy's face as he awakens from sleeping rough on Sandymount Strand. It unfolds with no dialogue and abbreviated action. Nonetheless, Murphy brilliantly conveys — through marvelously restrained expression, gesture, and movement — the complex despair and desperation of a heroin addict who slowly realizes that he has lost his only friend to an overdose and that taking the remaining drugs from the dead man's pocket is more important than anything else in his life. Murphy articulates this existential moment through an understated approach that blends bathos, pathos, and cynicism without engaging in clichéd or even predictable representations to make the point.

While this scene highlights Murphy's disciplined physicality, a survey of his career show him as equally adept at manipulating the nuances of language. He delivers even the most direct and simple lines with a marvelously precise sense of their meaning. Through a combination of speech and movement Murphy establishes an evocative though not a dominating presence on screen, and his body of work exemplifies the best features of acting in Ireland, even when it appears in vehicles that hardly seem worthy of his talent.

Adam and Paul stands as Murphy's *tour de force*, and I will examine it in detail below. At the same time, Murphy's presence asserts itself in whatever part he takes on, regardless of its importance. That is not to say that he dominates

every scene in which he appears. Quite the contrary, he infuses the scene with exactly the presence it requires from the character he is portraying. If the film does not live up to his efforts, that reflects more on it than on him.

Few, if anyone, without experience as an actor could say with precision how Murphy's training in the theater affected his performances on screen. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that his extensive practice on stage had a profound impact throughout the pursuit of his profession, beginning when he was twelve playing the Artful Dodger in a production of *Oliver!* and continuing through his 1998 Tony award winning performance in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Certainly, his career trajectory followed a path familiar to many Irish actors. Given the limited number of opportunities to perform in Ireland, Murphy, like many other prominent actors, spent time both on stage and in front of a camera. However, my concern here is with Murphy's contribution to Irish cinema.

I think it important to note that Murphy developed as a screen actor in parallel to his stage career. Two early cinematic roles, in *The Lost Hour* and *The Key*, show Murphy as a child holding his own playing opposite the very formidable Donal McCann in these two adaptations of works by John McGahern. Each film turns on the delicacy and vulnerability Murphy brings to his performance, but that atmosphere never degenerates into preciousness. Even as a child he shows a wonderful command of his expressions and his gestures, conveying a great deal of his character's strengths and weaknesses without over emphasis or understatement.

One sees this sense of complexity and balance very clearly in the small parts he plays in films from the mid-90s to the early part of this century. In these roles, Murphy is called upon to represent

an attitude rather than portray a complex individual, and the effect of his work shows how completely he understood the task. In *Michael Collins* (1996), for example, as Vinny Byrne, wise cracking when first told of his role as an assassin and saying a prayer before he shoots a G-man, he conveys the embodiment of innocence caught up and transformed by the violence of the War of Independence. It is Murphy's restrained style that gives poignancy to Liam Neeson's line, as Michael Collins, "I put a gun in young Vinny Byrne's hand."

Two years later, in *The General*, Murphy plays a feckless criminal mugging for the camera while Martin Cahill (Brendan Gleeson) nails a man to a pool table. It seems a throwaway performance, with flashes of Jordan's charisma reminding the viewer what a waste to have him in such a part. Much the same is true of his role as a detective in *Mystics*, yet whatever the artistic merit of the work, Murphy always conveys the sense that he takes his acting seriously.

One sees this well demonstrated in Brian, the video store manager in *Intermission* (2003). There, Murphy shows how completely he understands the function of characters in forwarding a narrative. He appears in the scene where Oscar (David Wilmont) has come to the store searching for pornographic films that will counteract his sexual incapacity. Oscar's desperation stands at the heart of the scene, and Murphy's representation of a man mildly sympathetic but fundamentally unconcerned with Oscar's plight, ending by blowing him a kiss, emphasizes without overstatement the bathos that the moment demands.

In none of these motion pictures does Murphy occupy more than a few moments on camera. In none of them does his role do more than underscore the development of another individual. Nonetheless, in all of these films, Murphy succeeds in moving forward the narrative, in supporting the main character, and in clarifying the viewer's sense of how the film is unfolding. In this fashion both a self-effacing and a profoundly secure ego works to forward the overall cinematic experience. As much as in the larger parts that I will take up below, these performances show the depth of Murphy's understanding of his function as an actor.

The 2002 film, *Boxed*, marked his first major cinematic role. The film's plot sets up a straightforward narrative struggle. Father Brendan (Murphy) is taken to hear the final confession of a suspected IRA informant before the man's execution. Father Brendan balks at the idea of participating, even indirectly, in the killing, and the film plays out as a struggle of wills with IRA and the priest over what is to be done.

Murphy's character, in the hands of a lesser actor, could easily succumb to a type or even a stereotype. Clearly, the narrow narrative field of the screenplay gives little apparent room for development. Nonetheless, within the tight scope of a dialogue centered in the present and offering little information of the world outside the small farmhouse where most of the action takes place, Murphy's craft allows him to add layers of complexity to a seemingly uncomplicated character.

From the start Murphy resists the temptation to equate his role with an easily categorized figure. His Father Brendan is not inherently noble, and indeed not entirely likeable. He is a man with a measure of pride that, as we see in the early scene with his superior Father Moran, enables him to feel comfortable judging others and to consider morality as a black and white issue.

At the same time, Murphy imbues him with all too human frailty. Father Brendan's fear, once he realizes the situation in which he finds himself, is palpable. His horror at witnessing the violence of which his captors are capable, when they drown an RUC man in a bathtub, is unmistakable. And his self-righteousness when confronting Father Moran whom he feels has been too accommodating to the IRA offers a sense of inflexibility and even fanaticism that suggests, without sacrificing ambiguity, a similarity to the IRA men who hold him captive.

Murphy achieves all of this with the low key approach that characterizes all of his acting. His dialogue, particularly in light of his position at the center of the action, is minimal and often his lines take on the predictable cadence of a man who believes himself correct in any moral situation. At the same time, the wonderful ambivalences that he conveys with his expressions alert viewers to the struggle through

which he is going without presenting those feelings in the didactic fashion that speech often imposes. Indeed, the strength of his voice contrasted by the slackness of his body underscores the profound struggle which engages him throughout the film.

In the end Murphy must confront the script's predictable decision to have the priest die. Here too he breaks with expectations by drawing multiple and conflicting, if unarticulated, motives into Father Brendan's behavior. As with all his performances, Murphy does not allow Father Brendan to overwhelm the film, nor does he impose upon the audience a single interpretation of the priest. Instead, he leaves us with a complex figure behaving simply, and invites us to discern the motives behind it all.

Adam and Paul (2004), as I noted at the beginning of this essay, perfectly captures Murphy's profound effect as an actor. In the role of Paul, which the film's director, Lenny Abrahamson, described to me as a combination of Stan Laurel and a Yorkshire terrier, Murphy takes an individual circumscribed by addiction and uses those limitations to construct an unforgettable character. Paul manifests the solipsism of dependence with remarkable diversity. Although he spends the day with Adam wandering through Dublin in a single-minded search for drugs, his the variety of his character emerges through dozens of subtle maneuvers. Murphy understands Paul as a figure who has lost interest in anything other than heroin, and yet he is able to define this man in great detail through a series of negations that show what he has renounced: friendship, loyalty, basic dignity, self awareness.

Adam and Paul succeeds in no little part because it shows a gritty assuredness for capturing the life of the underclass, and that comes across in no little part through the way the world acts upon the maddeningly passive Paul. Mark O'Halloran, who wrote the film, gives a marvelous performance as Adam, the straightman to Murphy's Paul. The humor of the film always enforces the cruel desperation that engulfs the two characters, and it underscores rather than deflects the pointless waste created by their obsession.

Man about a Dog (2004) followed, and, while Murphy had a featured role, the film itself stands as a tired representation of all too familiar slapstick routines. In the role of an addled druggie, Murphy has nothing with which to work. The thinness of the material becomes all the more distressing when one realizes in retrospect how few remaining chances we will have to see Murphy practice his craft.

In contrast, as Shamie in the television series *Pure Mule*, for which he won the IFTA Best Actor Award in 2005, Murphy shows, as he did in *Adam and Paul*, how much he can accomplish with a script that rises to his talents. He plays a young man in a small midlands town with a romantic view of sex and an ambivalent relationship with his brother, Scoobie. The two work as laborers on a construction site (with Shamie as the foreman), and do everything else together. Scoobie, the younger, is a chancer who consistently manipulates his brother through simple selfishness. On the weekend of Shamie's birthday, they have a falling out seemingly over girls but actually over Scoobie's callousness. With a wonderful sense of pacing, Murphy shows how this confrontation has a cathartic effect upon Shamie. Left to his own, he makes several desultory efforts at physical gratification, and then comes to an uneasy epiphany. Without resolving anything or even suggesting the capacity for the character to change, Murphy shows Shamie accepting what he is without slipping into a cloying melodramatic effect.

Small Engine Repair (2006), a film that does not seem to fully understand itself, squanders another fine performance by Murphy. He plays a father grieving over the death of a child with minimal dialogue and yet great force in a wonderful combination of language and gesture. He knows his place in a scene, neither exaggerating nor inhibiting his role. Perhaps it is the knowledge of his impending death that leads me to see his physical decline as emphasizing the despair that his character feels

Jordan has a small part in *48 Angels* (2006), appearing at the end as Stevie, a paramilitary man, yet he presents a commanding presence in a profoundly flawed film. In his confrontation with Darry, the gunman on the run, he transforms an

otherwise lifeless scene with a range of facial expressions and a simple phrase that puts Darry in a corner. The same is true in the improbably staged action scene that follows when Jordan's cynical smile conveys more in that moment than the featured actors do throughout the film.

Murphy is both a unique and a familiar figure in Irish film. His presence continually emphasizes the subtle understanding of the roles he was given, showing an ability to enliven the most turgid part without ever distorting its function in the film. At the same time, he stands as emblematic of the kind of actor that reflects the best in contemporary Irish cinematic efforts, one whose training gives him the confidence to

engage whatever role comes to him and the discipline to situate himself within it. One cannot review Murphy's acting career without feeling a deep sense of loss, yet the expanse of his talent remains as source of hope for anyone interested in the future of filmmaking in Ireland.

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The Short Film and Irish Cinema

Conn Holohan

A single chapter in Martin McLoone's *Irish Film* (2000) aside, the short film form is one which has suffered a significant level of neglect within writing on Irish film. Despite the relatively high number of shorts produced in this country, and the success of films such as *Six Shooter* (Martin McDonagh 2004) and *Give Up Your Auld Sins* (Cathal Gaffney 2001) at the Oscars, there has been little exploration of the significance of the short form within Irish cinema. Indeed, this is a neglect which is replicated within the wider field of film studies. Where the short film has been considered, it is usually within a teleological narrative which sees it as merely a training space for aspiring filmmakers, a momentary stopping point on the path to feature-length fulfilment. This inevitably leads to a critical focus, when addressing short films, on the potential displayed by the filmmakers involved rather than the intrinsic qualities of the short film form. It is to a preliminary exploration of those qualities, through discussion of the Irish language short, *An Ranger* (P.J. Dillon 2008), that this article will now turn.

One obvious point of departure when seeking to establish the textual properties of the short film is in the relationship between the short story and the novel. This is both a productive, and potentially troubling, analogy. It is a much noted fact that many successful feature films have in fact been adapted from short stories rather than novels, which would seem to trouble any easy comparison between the novel and the feature film or indeed between literary and cinematic shorts. Nevertheless, a consideration of the formal properties of the short story, and how it functions differently to the novel, offers an insight into the inherent qualities of the short film and suggests how we might critically approach the form.

Wendell Harris describes the essence of the

short story as the impulse 'to isolate, to portray the individual person, or moment, or scene in isolation – detached from the great continuum – at once social and historical' (cited in May 2002: 13). In its necessarily pared down approach to incident, the short story must strip away context, frequently reducing narrative to a single moment of reversal or revelation. This focus on the individual person and moment neither requires nor permits social and historical contextualisation. Although every story must have a setting, and the individual character must be situated in a meaningful relationship to his or her environment, the nature of that relationship retains a crucial element of ambiguity in the short form.

However, whilst the story environment may be sketched in a few short sentences within short fiction, film's visual nature pushes the question of setting to the fore. The short film, like the feature, must fill the frame with visual detail and each of these details draws the film away from the sketch like quality of the short story and into a more concrete relationship with the historical world. A relevant example is '*An Ranger*', which tells the story of a Connaught Ranger returning to his family home in the years following the Irish famine. The film opens with the returning soldier, Myles, framed in long-shot on horseback, his red uniform standing in relief against a distant mountain haze. In the foreground, the rich green Connemara scrub fills the frame. A close-up gives us a glimpse of his hardened features, staring coldly into the distance, before we return to wide-shot as Myles and his horse pick their way across a valley, a mere speck against the grey-green expanse of mountain and bog. Throughout this opening sequence, the sound of Uilleann pipes can be heard playing on the soundtrack.

The film hinges on a moment of confrontation between Myles and his former neighbour,

following the discovery that his family home is in ruins and the neighbour's pigs are grazing within. This confrontation occurs within the darkened interior of the neighbour's cottage and takes up over six minutes of the film's ten minute running time. What narrative information we receive is revealed in the dialogue between the two. Myles' mother died in a poorhouse and the neighbour seemingly profited from her misfortune by taking over the family land. Brief reference is made to the suffering that occurred within the famine years in Ireland, as well as to Myles' career fighting the colonial wars of the British army. This exchange builds to a violent confrontation, and a strikingly visual narrative payoff in which the neighbour's wife returns to find him dead, a pig's head sitting where his own should be. However, despite the sparsity of narrative detail and historical context within the film, the images and audio track immediately situate the film in relation to a set of discourses which have been dominant within Irish visual culture. If the short story is considered in terms of lifting the individual character or moment out of history, the familiarity of the imagery deployed within this short film draws it back into a set of debates associated with visual representations of the Irish west, thereby insisting on its relationship to a very specific historical context.

This historical positioning of the short film by virtue of its reliance on pre-existing visual discourses need not necessarily be seen in a negative light. However, it does seem to defuse the power, evident in the short story, to evoke the uncanny. Charles May distinguishes between the novel and the short story in terms of their connection to the everyday, arguing that whereas the novel reaffirms our relationship to everyday reality, the short defamiliarises it. The short is concerned with the uncanny moment where our relationship to the known world shifts. It addresses '[those] moments when we sense the inadequacy of our categories of conceptual reality' (May 1994: 139). It is in the uncanny image of Myles' neighbour Ignatius, sitting in his armchair, a pig's head atop his body, that the power of *An Ranger* lies. This moment most certainly does disturb our relationship to the

lived world, filling an everyday image with horror. However, the chain of associations evoked by the historical setting and by the imagery within the film can work to tame that horror, to make the uncanny familiar. What the short story critics cited above are arguing is that, despite the necessity for stories to have a concrete setting, the very brevity of the short form lifts it out of the historically specific. This shifts the focus of the short story towards both the individual and the universal. By removing an explanatory context, the short speaks necessarily of individuals, but also speaks consequently to all. If we cannot situate the disturbance of everyday reality which the short story narrates, then we cannot explain it away. By situating its moment of horror, necessarily, within a recognisable visual world, *An Ranger* allows us to comprehend this horror within a set of discourses around landscape, violence and the nature of the Irish character which have circulated in colonial and nationalist texts. In short, the recognisable imagery throughout the film provides a context within which we can make sense of the uncanny image at its heart, thereby distancing ourselves from its visceral impact and explaining away its violent disruption of the everyday as an inevitable consequence of colonial conquest.

However, despite the inevitable materiality of cinematic visuals, I would argue that the short film retains some of the ambiguity of the short story in its relationship to historical context. As argued above, in the short film and short story alike we see a paring away of narrative excess, a narrowing of focus to the moment of narrative revelation. Thus, in *An Ranger*, the legacy of the Famine, the dynamics of colonialism and the centrality of land in Irish history are reduced down to and expressed within a single moment of violent confrontation between neighbours. Yet this act of compression is central to all acts of storytelling, none more so than that of the feature film, which must equally narrate its story in as concise a manner as possible. If the stripping away of extraneous detail is common to the short film and feature alike, then, the question arises as to whether there is a qualitative difference between the two forms or whether the distinction

is merely a question of duration. I would argue that the two are qualitatively different, however, and that the distinction between them can be considered in terms of metaphor and metonym.

Both metaphor and metonym are rhetorical gestures for referring to a larger reality than can be expressed within discourse. However, the relationship of discourse to reality is fundamentally different in each. The metonym presents itself as being of the same order as the reality which it represents. It merely selects from reality the elements necessary to convey the wider order or truth. The job of the addressee is to fill in the gaps in order to understand the image of reality which is being conveyed. This is the rhetorical mode of the feature film, which attempts to convey its story world by judiciously selecting and presenting key expository details and narrative moments from within it. Furthermore, although it can necessarily only tell one story amongst many, its narrative is construed as representative of a wider reality. Thus, for example, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* offers us the story of a single fighting column in the Irish War of Independence. However, through its careful historical contextualisation and use of archetypal characters, it leaves us in no doubt that this column is merely a representative element of a wider historical reality. The short film, on the other hand, can only offer a singular narrative moment, and the relationship of that moment to any wider reality or truth is necessarily tentative, provisional, dependant upon interpretation and insight. It does not sample reality to make it meaningful but transforms reality into something other. It is up to the viewer to translate this vision back into meaningful terms, to interpret its relationship to the historical world. This is the operation of metaphor.

To return to *An Ranger*, the force of the film, as argued above, lies in the moment of dramatic revelation at the film's climax. It is from this singularity, this moment of narrative disturbance,

that any wider inferences about the film's relationship to Irish history must be read out. Whilst the film does visually situate its narrative in relation to wider cultural discourses, we receive a minimal amount of exposition or character background. We are denied the kind of psychological or sociological explanation for the film's violent act which we would expect from a feature film. One of the demands of the narrative feature is that ambiguity be minimised within the story world. It is expected that character behaviour will be explained at the level of narrative, that actions will be justified within the story. However, there is insufficient narrative context in *An Ranger* for us to easily comprehend Myles' violence towards his neighbour. Therefore, explanation must come at another level of discourse or else the act must remain uncanny, an unsettling disturbance of the known world. Either way, unlike the self-contained world of the feature film, the short film asks to be read in a metaphorical fashion, as speaking to a reality which is outside of itself, which its brief moment of narrative transformation can only gesture towards.

The problem of definition is a recurrent one in discussions of the short-fiction form, and the difficulty of marking clear distinctions are no less vexing when considering the relationship of the short film to the feature. However, what this short discussion hopefully raises is the necessity of considering the operations of the short film as an aesthetic form in its own right, and not merely as a training space for aspiring feature film makers. Given the sheer volume of celluloid committed to short fiction film over the hundred plus years of cinema's existence, the inauguration of this discussion seems long overdue.

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Drawing Conclusions: Irish Animation and National Cinema

Liam Burke

Traditionally perceived as the unclassifiable stepchild of many national cinemas, animation has recently become recognised as a form capable of astutely articulating and reflecting a nation's identity and concerns. In 2007, *Persepolis* (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi) was chosen to represent France in the 'Foreign Language Film' category at the Academy Awards. The film was adapted by Iranian expatriate Marjane Satrapi from her own graphic novel, and charted her turbulent childhood growing up in Iran during the Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq War. Although the film did not make the final shortlist, its effective use of simple black and white art to convey a child's perspective of complex issues, did see it garner a nomination in the 'Animated Feature Film' category: a section ordinarily dominated by big budget family fare from Disney, DreamWorks and Pixar. The 2008 animated-documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman) also used surface simplicity to more deeply penetrate a complicated topic. The film's examination of the 1982 Lebanon War achieved renewed piquancy by superimposing haunting, comic book-like graphics onto images that have become worryingly familiar in live-action. Like *Persepolis*, *Waltz with Bashir* has also become an international breakout 'hit' and was chosen to represent its country (Israel) in the Foreign Language Film category at the Academy Awards (2009).

Yet, it seems strange that animated features have taken this long to co-habit the privileged status of 'national cinema' automatically granted to live-action films. If one subscribes to Jean Cocteau's belief that 'film will only become art when its materials are as inexpensive as pen and paper' then surely animation, while still beholden to budgetary concerns, is the form better positioned to reflect national interests, avoiding as it does, most of the vagaries of live

action production (stars, crew, locations etc.). 2008 found the Irish film industry on the cusp of achieving a consistent level of Irish animated feature production; but do the films of this burgeoning trend reflect their local origins, or do they yield to marketplace pressures demanding cultural ambiguity?

The animated form was first earnestly adopted by Irish filmmakers in the 1970s, with animators such as Aidan Hickey and later Steve Woods producing independent work. By the mid 1980s the form had become an industry, sparked by the arrival of Sullivan Bluth, an American animation studio run by former Disney animator, Don Bluth. Sullivan-Bluth was enticed to relocate from Van Nuys, California to a site near Phoenix Park, Dublin by substantial Industrial Development Authority (IDA) grants and lower wage costs. Although Sullivan Bluth's productions, including *The Land Before Time* (Don Bluth, 1988) and *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (Don Bluth, 1989) bore a superficial similarity to the output of Bluth's former employer Disney, the director's newfound autonomy allowed for the exploration of darker themes, with these films proving considerable competition for Disney at the box office.¹

Sullivan Bluth's impact on the Irish animation scene was game-changing and far-reaching. In order to develop the burgeoning studio, Sullivan Bluth established Ireland's first animation course at Ballyfermot College in Dublin, which continues today under the banner of the Irish School of Animation.² Many of the graduates

1. In 1988 Disney's *Oliver & Company* grossed \$53,279,055 at the US box office, only narrowly outperforming Sullivan Bluth's *The Land Before Time* \$48,092,846. Figures from: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm> [Retrieved January 19, 2009]

from Ballyfermot College found work not only at Sullivan Bluth but also at Murakami Wolf, a production company that had expanded from Murakami films and was responsible for animating *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Another company founded during this time was Emerald City, established by American Al Guest (clearly emulating the Sullivan Bluth model). This commitment to animation was echoed south of the city by the introduction of animation courses with a more experimental emphasis at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT).

This prolific period of American animated production in Ireland drew to a close in the mid-1990s when financial difficulties, exacerbated by under-performing releases,³ prompted the closure of Sullivan Bluth. Emerald City soon followed suit, while Murakami Wolf was downsized to Fred Wolf films. Yet, throughout the 1990s the number of experienced animators in Ireland continued to grow, as animation programs at IADT and Ballyfermot College produced filmmakers trained to a world-class level. There were intermittent attempts during this time to revive feature production. Most notably, Dublin-based Terraglyph Production released three animated co-productions *Carnivale* (Deane Taylor, 2000) *Duck Ugly* (Emmanuel Klotz and Deane Taylor, 2000) and *Help! I'm a Fish* (Stefan Fjeldmark, Michael Hegner and Greg Manwaring, 2000). Yet these films failed to resuscitate the animated feature. During this fallow period many animators began to concentrate on short films, finding audiences at

events such as the Irish Animation Festival.⁴ In time, the lobbying of Anamu (a collective of Irish animators) prompted the Irish Film Board (IFB) to introduce *Frameworks*, a scheme for financing animated shorts. *Frameworks* began in 1995 and early successes included *Midnight Dance* (John McCloskey, 1996), *Guy's Dog* (Rory Bresnihan, 1997) and *The Last Elk* (Alan Shannon, 1998). Today, 'Frameworks' offers filmmakers budgets of up to €50,000 to produce animated shorts with a running time of less than six minutes.⁵

These various factors coalesced to foster the production of a wealth of animated short films, which began receiving the kind of international acclaim that escaped most Irish live-action efforts. 2002 proved a particularly successful year with two Irish works – *Fifty Percent Grey* (Ruairí Robinson, 2001) and *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (Cathal Gaffney, 2001) – nominated in the 'Animated Short Film' category at the Academy Awards. Although a Pixar effort, *For the Birds* (Ralph Eggleston, 2000) took home the prize, the nomination helped propel *Fifty Percent Grey* director Ruairí Robinson to the director's chair of the Leonardo DiCaprio-produced anime-adaptation *Akira* (2011),⁶ while *Give Up Yer Aul Sins* was expanded into a best-selling DVD anthology, suggesting that there was as much appetite for Irish animation at home as there was overseas. Yet, as in live action, the animated short can only achieve so much and in 2008 the potential for regular Irish animated feature production, hinted at in the shorts, finally began to be realised.⁷

2. <http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=4381094778>

3. The box office performance of Sullivan Bluth productions post-1990 lagged far behind previous successes and productions from rival studios. Sullivan Bluth productions and their US box office grosses for this period are as follows, *Rock-a-Doodle* (Don Bluth, Gary Goldman and Dan Kuenster, 1991) \$11,657,385, *Thumbelina* (Don Bluth and Gary Goldman 1994) \$11,373,501, and *The Pebble and the Penguin* (Don Bluth and Gary Goldman 1995) \$3,983,912. Figures from: <http://www.boxoffice Mojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm> [Retrieved January 19, 2009]

4. Launched in 1994, the Irish Animation Festival was run out of the Irish Film Centre in Dublin. The festival initially ran for three years showcasing Irish shorts alongside international works.

5. From the 'About Frameworks' section of the Irish Film Board website http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Frameworks/65 [Retrieved January 15, 2009]

6. Ironically for director Robinson, whose greatest success to date has been in animation, the adaptation of anime *Akira* will be in live-action.

7. For further information on the history of Irish animation and ongoing productions see:

Fittingly for a stratum of filmmaking bubbling just under the crust of public recognition, Galway-based Magma Films has been promoting animated feature production for some time. Magma Films is a prolific and diverse independent production company, creating everything from Irish language fashion shows (*Paisean Faisean*) to live action family films such as *Summer of the Flying Saucer* (Martin Duffy, 2008). It is also one of the greatest proponents of animation in Ireland, previously co-producing with European partners *The Ugly Duckling and Me* (Michael Hegner and Karsten Kiilerich, 2006), a feature film and television series that was a computer-generated twist on the Hans Christian Andersen tale.

2008 saw the release of Magma Films' latest animated co-production, *Niko & the Way to the Stars* (Michael Hegner and Kari Juusonen, 2008), which like past efforts, was a family film, this time following a young reindeer who, believing his father to be one of 'Santa's Flying Forces' traverses the dangerous wolf-invested wilderness to find him. In its story of anthropomorphic animals with abandonment issues, the film recalls some of the highlights from the Disney canon, particularly *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942) and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), while its use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) allows the film to compete with DreamWorks' green ogre and Pixar's talking toys.

Yet quality computer animation comes at a price, necessitating a larger budget that in turn demands the widest possible appeal if the film is to stand a chance of recouping its costs. This economic reality was cited in the film's production notes, 'Fairly soon it became clear that the budget goal had to be six million euros to invest and that the genre needed to be family entertainment'.⁸

<http://www.stevewoods.ie/>, *Animation Ireland* <http://www.animationireland.com/> and 'Animation in Ireland' by Maeve Clancy <http://www.ncad.ie/faculties/visualculture/research/thoughtlines/mclancy.shtml>.

8. 'Niko & the Way to the Stars Fact Sheet', <http://www.magmaworld.com/NIKO/FactSheet.doc> [Retrieved January 19, 2009]

Consequently, the film is a familiar blend of talking animals, musical interludes and comedy sidekicks (here a cowardly flying squirrel and a pampered, purple poodle), with animation that is competent, if a little rough around its digitally-rendered edges. However, the film does avoid the knowing cynicism of some of the celebrity-laden US efforts, and the computer-generated gamble seems to have paid off with *Niko and the Way to the Stars* selling to over 120 countries.⁹

The success of *Niko & the Way to the Stars* does raise a number of concerns about the future of not only Irish animation, but the larger field. As an international co-production *Niko & the Way to the Stars* migrates about a vague movie-land, displaying no traits that could be identified as specific to Ireland or any of its funding nations. Similarly, while the film had a significant number of Irish contributors,¹⁰ it must be acknowledged that most of the animation was handled overseas. Finally, as a computer animated film, *Niko & the Way to the Stars* joins a wave of digital efforts that have washed over the form since the success of *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995), with the technique becoming the industry standard and drowning out more traditional styles.¹¹ These concerns prompt a

9. 'Double Win For 'Niko' at Cinekid', *IFTN*, Tuesday, October 28, 2008, <http://iftn.ie/?act1=record&aid=73&rid=4281635&sr=1&only=1&hl=Niko+and+the+way+to+the+stars&tpl=archnews> [Retrieved January 14, 2009]

10. The film's voice track was recorded in Ireland and features many Irish actors including Andrew Mc Mahon (Niko), Morgan Jones (Dasher), Paul Tylak (Specks/Prancer) and Alan Stanford (Black Wolf), it was co-written by Irish-based Martein Thorisson, and Wicklow-based Stephen Mc Keon composed the score.

11. Evidence of computer animation's dominance of the field is apparent by Walt Disney Animation Studios current focus on computer animated films, with the studios last theatrically-released, traditionally animated film being 2004's *Home on the Range* (Will Finn and John Sanford). Similarly Aardman Animations, which built its reputation on stop-motion films such as the *Wallace and Gromit* shorts, released its first computer-animated feature in 2006, *Flushed Away* (David Bowers and Sam Fell).

three fold question: Is it possible to animate a traditional, hand-drawn film in Ireland that maintains a national interest and succeeds at the box office? As if anticipating such concerns *The Secret of Kells* (Tomm Moore, 2009) answers these questions – Yes, Yes and time will tell.

The *Secret of Kells*, due for release in March 2009, is the first feature length production from Kilkenny-based animation studio Cartoon Saloon. The company was founded in 2000 by Ballyfermot College graduates Tomm Moore, Paul Young, Ross Murray and Nora Twomey, and has since secured a reputation as a world-class production company through the international success of its *Skunk Fu!* television series.

Directed by Kilkenny-native Moore, *The Secret of Kells* features the voices of Brendan Gleeson and Mick Lally, with music provided by Irish folk group Kíla. Like *Niko & the Way to the Stars*, *The Secret of Kells* is a co-production, which sees Cartoon Saloon partnering with Les Armateurs in France and Vivi Film in Belgium. However in a change to the usual strategy, the majority of *The Secret of Kells*' key animation took place in Ireland, with 35 animators working from Cartoon Saloon at the peak of production. Also unusual for the field, is the film's rejection of CGI in favour of hand-drawn animation, allowing *The Secret of Kells* to adopt a highly-stylised and intricate look.

Yet, *The Secret of Kells*' Irish interest extends far beyond the nationality of the person putting pen to paper or the geography of its studios. Taking its inspiration from what is considered Ireland's greatest national treasure; *The Secret of Kells* tells the story of Brendan, a 12 year-old boy living with his uncle, the Abbot (Brendan Gleeson), who strives to protect his monastery from Viking invaders by building an impenetrable wall. Brendan's life is turned upside down by the arrival of Brother Aidan (Mick Lally), a survivor of a Viking strike on Iona Island and the protector of the yet-to-be completed Book of Kells, a manuscript whose detailed beauty is a testament to a way of life under attack.

It may be too much to see the film's story of safeguarding a fading national artform from

foreign invaders as an analogy for hand-drawn Irish animation in a global marketplace, but there is something commendable about the film's adherence to a more traditional style employed in a national interest. Film academic Paul Wells notes that 'many studios worldwide have insisted upon using their own indigenous fine arts traditions, mythologies and cultural imperatives in order to differentiate their own work from what may be regarded as a diluted form of American artistic and cultural imperialism'.¹² In this vein, *The Secret of Kells* is far removed from the textured polygons of computer animation, telling its story in curves and swirls that mirror the insular style of the eponymous book, and makes one nostalgic for the more ornate designs of pre-Euro Irish currency.

Given the inevitable difficulties Irish animated features face competing in a global box-office dominated by pixel-powered American productions with mammoth budgets, *The Secret of Kells* suggests an alternative route. In looking to the past for its style and inwards for its inspiration, *The Secret of Kells* does not invite unfavourable comparisons with overseas ventures, allowing it to achieve successes and failures all of its own. It will be up to the box office to see whether this film becomes a stand-alone achievement, or the future tactic of Irish animated feature production.

In a 2007 report submitted to international economic consultants Indecon by the Irish Film Board, it was noted that, 'The Irish animation sector has recently established itself as a credible international player'.¹³ The report cites Magma Films and Cartoon Saloon alongside other Irish producers of animated content Jam Media, Monster, Boulder Media, Kavaleer and Brown Bag as the key practitioners of the form. The same report also noted that 'There lies great potential to build a real "industry" in Irish animation'¹³ – an assessment that is borne out in

12. Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p. 2

13. 'Creating a Sustainable Irish Film and Television Sector: A review of Section 481 film relief' by the Irish Film Board, submitted to Indecon on June 29, 2007, <http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/files/reports/IFB> p. 32 [Retrieved on January 19, 2009]

the early promise of *The Secret of Kells* and echoed by its producer Paul Young, ‘the talent and the will is here’.¹⁴ Perhaps sometime in the near-future, the film representing Ireland at the Academy Awards will come from drawing on a national identity.¹⁵

14. From an interview with *Secret of Kells* producer and Cartoon Saloon founder Paul Young, January 19, 2009

15. The growing confidence in animation within the Irish film industry is further testified by the Screen Director’s Guild of Ireland choosing *The Secret of*

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Kells, above live-action features, as the 2008 Directors Finders Series Awards winner. The award sees the winning film given an industry screening in L.A., and is an important platform for securing US distribution. Recent winners of the award include John Carney’s *Once*.

Meltdown makeover: TV3's *The Apprentice*

Gavan Titley

The Apprentice unfolded as the nation's political economy unraveled. Shot between July and September 2008 and broadcast as the anchor of TV3's autumn schedule, what was then termed 'the coming recession' seeped slowly into the steep learning curve of the 14 proto-apprentices. The contrast between their furious multi-tasking and the economic meltdown of the autumnal viewing context could, at a push, be described as dialectical. Contestants striving to embody the flexibility of the new capitalism were frequently book-ended by news of the inflexibility of capital itself, bidding 'adios'. As programme participants trumpeted the adaptability of their 'skillsets', retreating CEOs and politicians soothed the newly redundant of Ireland's regions with assurances that their skillsets were just great; 'it's not you, it's so us'. As desperate final stage contestants pleaded, skillsets numbed, that they would walk through walls for the Master, a desperate government exhorted the nation's workers to take a little pain – then a little more – for team Ireland. It is always so much more interesting when television captures the zeitgeist so unwittingly.

When TV3's Director of Programming, Bill Frow, flagged *The Apprentice* as one of a new series of programmes 'hold(ing) a mirror up to contemporary Ireland' (Healy 2008) this is probably not what we were expected to see in the reflection. The Irish version of the show was seen as a significant domestication of a format which, in its previously syndicated British and American guises, had proved highly popular with Irish audiences. In focusing on the workplace, it consolidated the continuing fascination of Irish reality television formats with the performance of self in pressurized and team/task driven work contexts. *The Apprentice* is also one of the pivotal programmes deployed to develop TV3's emerging multimedia and cross-media

strategies, from the provision of additional online content to the use of an off-shoot series – *The Apprentice: You're Fired!* – to launch TV3's surrogate channel 3e (Channel 6 made over as E4). Licensed to Irish production company Screentime ShinAwil by Mark Burnett Productions, the latter are now reported to be keen to potentially 'bundle' the Irish *Apprentice* with other versions for sale in the southern hemisphere (Sweeny 2009). As a reality television format, *The Apprentice* follows the usual procedures of hybridizing generic possibilities, blending a competitive gameshow format with docu-soap intimacies. In its travels, this generic cocktail has been combined with more culturally embedded aspects, from the BBC's branding of their version as a public service contribution to 'economic education', to Donald Trump's Jerry Springer-like sermons on the morals of accumulation in NBC's original version. So how has it been rendered Irish? The key act of localization is the persona of the Master, and the Irish role was filled by Bill Cullen, a media-friendly entrepreneur and self-mythologised, self-made man with a lucrative sideline in motivational speaking and coaching ('be a Happy, Healthy Achiever').¹ Cullen's casting was astute, as his persona follows in the tradition of Irish television personalities so well captured by Kuhling and Keohane as figures that combine the 'ideal of fully actualized individualism in modern society' with being "'household names', embodiments of the idea of community" (2004: 80).

In common with other Masters, Cullen is designed to embody a recognizable myth of national capitalism. Donald Trump, in the NBC

1. www.goldenapples.ie

series which commenced in 2004, set himself squarely in the tradition of the grand family oligarchies of US industry, actively encouraging his first apprentice, Bill Rancic, to see himself as the creator of cross-generational wealth. Alan Sugar, as Jim McGuigan points out in his discussion of ‘cool capitalism’ in the UK Apprentice, “is instantly recognizable in Britain as the very type of an East-End barrow boy made good” (2008: 315) and this self-made authenticity is shared and amplified by Cullen. These biographical reference points hover in Master/apprentice encounters as ambivalent touchstones of real experience, implicit counterweights to the participants’ shakier mediations of self, formally reliant as they are on the contingent vocabularies of self-realisation common to reality television and the fluidities of the ‘new capitalism’.

The pleasures of Sugar/Trump involves their unambiguous policing of the bottom line, their insistence on what Alain Badiou calls ‘an ontology of profit’. Yet to understand Cullen, attention must also be paid to versions where this ontology is partially obscured by the affinities between the performative imperatives of reality television and the self-actualising scripts of the ‘new economy’. In the Finnish version *Dilli*, for example, the management consultant Jari Sarasvuo dissolved Sugar/Trump autocracy in the postmodern pretence of the corporation that wants to be your friend, symbolized by his refusal to fire people, preferring to release or free them. Bill Cullen’s persona is an almost perfect synthesis of these generational fractions, as his captain of industry bravura is fused with a fondness for the possibilities of late capitalism’s cannibalization of forms of cultural legitimation. He shares with Sarasvuo a penchant for vocabularies hewn from books arranged in steps, and for candidates who not only make money, but who do so in ways that allow a window on their warrior soul.

Their search for the soul or spirit of the contestants is a substratum of a wider search, expressed in the cultural forms of reality television and immanent in what Richard Sennett has termed the ‘culture of the new capitalism’. Writing in 2006 in the book of the same name, and reflecting on reactions to his previous study

of subjectivity, labour and capitalism *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), Sennett rightly criticises commentators who saw his ethnographic accounts of disoriented workers in their flexibilised environments as cautionary tales of American excess. The forms of rationalisation and reorganisation described were not only global, he argued, but had come to occupy a position of symbolic value in the wider economy and beyond, exerting ‘...a profound moral and normative force’ (2006: 10). Sennett’s respondents make common cause with Zygmunt Bauman’s imagined ‘individuals’, forced to try and find ways of responding biographically to institutional and political-economic disjunctures, or even required, in conditions of instability, to frequently improvise, re-fit, or ‘...do without any sustained sense of self.’ For Sennett, societies are searching for a normative flexible subject, a new type that can embody what he critiques as a profoundly damaging ‘cultural ideal’ (2006: 5).

Reality television is not quite an orchestrated search for this ideal, but it is possible to read the fusion of competition, surveillance, life experiment and heightened reflexivity as a cultural form intimately shaped by the ambivalences of liquid life. *The Apprentice* sits easily in this flux as it features contestants presented as searching not so much for a job as for a vocation, a new stage of existence, one where the membrane between life and work has given way to a portfolio of projects, one of which is the self. The competition is organized around weekly projects tackled by teams, teams which were initially organized into ‘lads and ladies’ on the prevalent reality television assumption that gender, race or class must be formally shoehorned to assure immediate conflict. With the exception of the first task – selling fruit on Dublin’s Moore Street as a living footnote to Cullen’s autobiography *Penny Apples* – the tasks are extended product-placements, with the proto-apprentices briefly indentured to clients who have paid for the commercial exposure. Nevertheless this client portfolio manages to reference some of the prime conceits of the Celtic Tiger; designing a ‘personal loan card’ for Blue Cube Loans, producing a commercial for the exclusive Elysian residential development in Cork, upping sales of duty free

in Dublin airport, and in the grand finale, organizing tax-deductible philanthropy at a Charity Gala Dinner.

The vast majority of the fourteen candidates – with the important exception of the eventual winner – were drawn from similar backgrounds in commercial sales, and their regional backgrounds were not parlayed into the kind of simulation of GAA fandom so prevalent in RTÉ's competition-based formats. Instead, the candidates who manage to carve out a presence as 'characters' beyond the rituals of being *natural born winners that don't take crap from anybody* were those that realized, in effect, that they were involved in a double mediation; their warrior business self, and the warrior business self folded into fashioning their distinctive 'backstage' self over the course of the series' narrative. Meet Stuart, who set out to translate his 'lack of formal qualifications' into a form of biographical destiny – he will be the new Bill. And Joanna, an early 'front-runner' and favourite of the tabloid media coverage who cheated by phoning a friend in the task for week 7, and so became the node around which discussions of ethics could be wired.

The discussion of Joanna's sin illustrates how the revelatory narratives of reality formats and the self-fashioning imperatives of the mediated, flexible self not only interconnect, but must also diverge. Commenting in an early extract from *The Apprentice: You're Fired*, Cullen and his partner and fellow judge Jackie Lavin conclude that Joanna *wanted it too much*. Not a happy healthy achiever then, but when is too much, too much? Stuart, similarly, in the semi-finals, found his 'lack of formal qualifications' read bluntly as a liability by a special panel of business consultants, and blinked back the tears as the possibilities of what Sennett calls the history-less individual were over-ridden by reality television's exhaustive capacity for surveillance. Wanting it too much, or too little, education doesn't count, and then it does; the point is not inconsistency but that the criteria are situational, derived from the ways in which the contestants unfold themselves and are unfolded as characters, as models of conduct, as object lessons on 'values'.

In the end the series was won by Brenda, a bridal shop owner, and her status as a successful small business owner now ready to 'take a step up' is the appropriate translation of the Master's *geist*. With just enough history and embedded in her 'community', yet ready to move to Dublin and fully actualize as an individual for Bill, she emerged just in time for *The Apprentice* to issue a reassuringly local rebuke to the wayward global capitalism that has rocked its world (symbolized by the aerial views of Dublin's financial services sector). You couldn't script it; all soundness and local know-how, the good woman from the West sweeps into Dublin to authenticate our *Apprentice*, a particularistic triumph over the empty globalism of the format. Unless of course one is inclined to see the empty globalism as precisely the particularity of the Irish Apprentice; there are few things more redolent of the immediate past than one of the key elements of the final task; recruiting Irish celebrities – including a former Big Brother contestant and a 'glamour model' step up to the plate – to sell mobile phones in big, empty shopping centres.

If there is a consistent attempt to self-consciously 'theme up' the Irishness of the series, it is in the lacquering of *our essential decency* on the unavoidable brutality of the bottom line. Bill tells it like it is, but those weak in warrior spirit lack '*liathróidí*' rather than 'balls', the Irish word soulfully mediating a Sugar/Trump article of faith (you must have balls). Much is made in the retrospectives of how team-mates grilled in the board room were reluctant to criticize or damn each other – fair play to the 'sound lads' and 'girls with mega-*liathróidí*' – yet as McGuigan perceptively argues, *The Apprentice* simulates "...a turnstile world of work, (where) the mask of cooperativeness are among the only possessions workers will carry with them from task to task, firm to firm, these windows of social skill whose 'hypertext' is a winning smile" (2008: 112). Perhaps that's the reflection in the mirror; this condensed commonplace of recited Irishness being mobilized to theme away the humiliations and insecurities of the new capitalism.

The Apprentice

Produced by Screentime ShinAwiL for TV3 under licence and guidance from Mark Burnett Production in Los Angeles.

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‘Not Every Fairytale has a Happy Ever After’¹: *Fairytale of Kathmandu* (2008)

Laura Canning

It must have seemed an enticing but simple prospect: make a film about your neighbour, a poet whose work you have loved since you were a student, whose simple bravery in coming out as a gay man in a rural Irish community has inspired you. Perhaps you will illuminate his work for those unfamiliar with it, perhaps reveal hidden depths in the man himself. And yet, for Neasa Ní Chianáin, the project took on a life of its own as her subject, poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh, revealed himself to be not quite the man she had imagined.

Ó Searcaigh is a writer of lyrical grace, whose delicate, sophisticated poems on loneliness, personal identity, and homosexual love have deservedly gained him a place in the Irish language canon, and in the Irish literary establishment via membership of Aosdána. But this film depicts a tremendously flawed man, unwilling to see how his sexual relationships with vulnerable Nepalese teenagers are fatally corrupted by their dependence on his Western power and money, and his (apparently) guileless inability to see the terrible bonds of obligation this supposed generosity places upon them.

Creditably, Ní Chianáin conducts neither witch hunt nor show trial – and all of the boys with whom Ó Searcaigh conducts his liaisons are above the Nepalese age of consent. Instead she allows us to experience her own dawning realisation, in what becomes a tentative

exploration of one of the central questions of documentary: what happens when the film you intend to make is not, in fact, the film that needs to be made? So much of contemporary documentary consists of ‘experts’ constructing elaborate platforms from which to display their own supposedly superior knowledge that it is refreshing to encounter a film in which the filmmakers’ awareness of their own contingent, limited access to the truth is central to the narrative.

Ó Searcaigh is approached at first with a degree of deference, observed looking through childhood photographs. One image, of him at school, is greeted with the words “The poor thing! He didn’t know what was going to happen to him!” – a phrase that seems to prime us for simple hagiography, but which later resonates at more sinister levels. He comes across as a rather fey, socially awkward character; unselfconsciously delighted with his nickname “the Guru of the Hills”, a moon-faced boy trapped in an ageing body. This spiritual Peter Pan is altogether disarming and seductive; a sign in his Donegal house reads “It’s never too late to have a happy childhood”.

As prayer flags flutter in the wind outside, he talks proudly of his surrogate-father relationship with Prem, the Nepalese “spiritual son” he has known since he was a teenager. Prem, we are told, is now married and a father, with a jewellery business part-financed by the poet. This opening, full of apparent openness and innocence, will gradually come to take on radically different meanings.

Ní Chianáin travels with Ó Searcaigh to Nepal, where she meets Prem and a slew of young men who appear to have nothing but respect and

1. This is the tag-line for the film taken from the official website, <http://www.fairytaleofkathmandu.com>, which includes an explanation and defence from the filmmaker concerning her ambitions and methods for the project as well as some of the many articles and commentary surrounding the film.

affection for the poet. Among them is Santharam, a young man thrilled at the generosity of his Western benefactor, who pays his room and board while he studies. And yet, for all the laughter and celebration at the poet's return, there is something slightly disturbing in the men's treatment of him; garlanding him with flowers, cleaning his room, polishing his shoes. As sometimes happens when we are given the opportunity to observe other cultures from afar, we find ourselves uncertain how to interpret what we are seeing.

Is this sort of practiced subservience normal, or are we witnessing some subtle kind of neo-colonial dynamic? Ní Chianáin does not press the point; she simply observes as Ó Searcaigh is welcomed as an old friend, bringing coveted gifts of chocolate, the men later swapping stories over dinner. And so we are unsure whether to read his statement that one of the things that has impressed him most about Nepal is that "men and young teenagers are very comfortable with each other" as the musings of a benevolent mentor or something less laudable.

It is when the group treks outside of Kathmandu that deeper stirrings of something amiss creep in. At a rural inn the poet invites Ram, a teenage local boy with no English, for dinner and then later into his bed. This seems extraordinarily naïve, particularly in a culture where men appear to remain almost entirely sexually inexperienced until marriage, and where homosexuality is not tolerated, physically warm and open friendships between men notwithstanding.

And yet here is the crux of the matter; Ó Searcaigh seems to have no awareness of the innately predatory character of his behaviour; he is all self-willed romantic delusion, driven by what seems a combination of rampant ego and hidden loneliness, his previous apparently ingenuous appreciation for the "innocence" of young Nepalese men appearing more sinister by the moment. Ram's slow, measured gaze at the camera the next morning does not seem to invite further discussion. Ní Chianáin pronounces herself disturbed, but cannot bring herself to confront Ó Searcaigh, saying that she felt she had no right to judge, Ram being of age.

Their return to Kathmandu brings more unease for the clearly ambivalent Ní Chianáin, as Ó Searcaigh buys clothes and a bicycle for various teenage boys and speaks of his desire to protect their innocence. Yet – through compassion, cynicism, or cowardice – she delays what seems an inevitable confrontation, instead concentrating on his first relationship, secret and tormented, which appears to have set the template for his later expectations of love and sex. Her repeated revisitation of Ó Searcaigh's lost Irish love muddies the moral waters rather than clearing them; his eloquent poetry speaking of wasted passion and abandonment, his behaviour unthinkingly exploitative.

Finally, even his long friendship with Prem seems blighted. Ó Searcaigh's story, told early in the film, of their chance meeting on a Kathmandu street and immediate "unique bond" – a story Ó Searcaigh concludes with the words "We have to believe in these little miracles that happen to us every day" – is soiled by the evidence of a succession of young men with poor English summoned to Room 405 of the Buddha Hotel in front of the increasingly-uneasy hotel manager.

It is this unnamed hotel manager who speaks the truth most clearly. As he describes how Westerners say they want to help, but in fact are "taking benefit" from their encounters, his discomfort and weary anger are clear. For him, the ultimate point is that "If somebody really wants to help Nepal or the Nepalese, they should help without terms and conditions".

It is clear, for him, that the kind of relationships Ó Searcaigh conducts are symptomatic of larger dislocations between the first and the developing world. In speaking out, he forces the filmmaker – who here moves from intermittent commentator to participant in the film – to acknowledge that she has been deliberately deceiving herself; her voiceover tells us that she "felt shame, shame for not wanting to see." What had been intended as an intimate artistic portrait has inadvertently turned into a battleground for debates on modern morality and questions about how the West has come to treat the developing world as a money-buys-everything playground for its tourists, sexual and otherwise.

The Nepalese boys whose company Ó Searcaigh enjoys may in some ways benefit, but at what larger cost? Sexual exploitation of the poor remains exploitation, regardless of the amounts of money concerned, the good any individual sum may do, or the wide-eyed self-deceptions employed by those engaged in it. It is at this point that Ní Chianáin's conception of herself as a filmmaker seems to change in front of our eyes, and the film takes on a different character. She adopts a more investigative role, returning to Nepal alone to interview some of the boys she has seen Ó Searcaigh with. Now without the charismatic presence of the poet, one young man confesses that he considers himself the victim of a sexual predator, while another admits he did not even know what sex was, describing the poet's anger when he would not have sex with him, his apparent insistence that "this is how we do it in the West".

This change in focus leads to a rather disjointed feeling within the film, and Ní Chianáin's final confrontation with Ó Searcaigh is clearly uncomfortable for both, her face a picture of torment as much as his. She clearly regrets that her project of poetic exploration has turned out this way, her friend still unwilling to acknowledge the dubious nature of his actions. When she accuses him of exploiting the boys, he says "For me, that is not the truth". Asked why he would sleep with young men whose awareness of the sexual world was minimal rather than help them with their school work as he had promised, he replies bewilderedly, "why not?"

It is perhaps to the film's greater good that there are no final answers here, certainly no trace of the slaver's tabloid exposé; in some ways it is a story of the wider hurt that sexual exploitation brings to the community beyond its direct victims. The resulting media frenzy in Ireland was far less subtle or muted. From politically-opportunistic calls to have Ó Searcaigh's poetry removed from the school curriculum, to hysterical and often casually homophobic radio phone-ins, the film was widely discussed and dissected at all levels of Irish society and everyone seemed to have an opinion; many, but not all, condemning. Torn between the desire to defend a friend and fellow

artist and the unedifying sight of such apparently heedless misuse of economic and social power, even the Irish cultural establishment seemed finally to repudiate Ó Searcaigh.

Ní Chianáin and producer David Rane have not escaped the controversy, nor have production partners RTE, from whom they were forced to seek legal advice.¹ At one point they almost abandoned the project; their lack of investigative journalism skills had left them in deeper waters than they were prepared for. Ó Searcaigh went to ground in the wake of the film's screening but has consistently refuted its representation, saying that it gives a distorted, unfair version of his relationships with the men and has drawn comparisons between himself and Oscar Wilde. It is a provocative parallel, requiring us to ask uncomfortable questions regarding how we view sexuality that does not conform to heterosexual, family-centred norms. This was precisely the tack taken by the group of eminent Irish artists who wrote to the *Irish Times* supporting Ó Searcaigh, commenting "Had this documentary been attempted regarding a comparable heterosexual context, it would simply be a non-story."² The irony of those whose professional identities often seem bound up in discourses of cultural resistance expressing their disapproval of the film by unintentionally valourising colonial-style exploitation seems pointed.

Do we hold artists to different standards of morality? Do we expect them to be 'odd', our Byrons and Wildes, to live lives of social and sexual liminality, and forgive their transgressions on the basis that their work redeems their acts? All of these young men were above the age of consent; Kathmandu apparently has a burgeoning gay rights movement and cruising areas; Ó Searcaigh has done nothing illegal, and has clearly made close friends in Nepal. Relationships between adults and teenagers are not always immoral, deviant or psychologically damaging. Has Ní Chianáin breached his trust in

1. Extensive coverage of the debate surrounding the film is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairytale_of_Kathmandu_controversy

2. The *Irish Times*, Letters Section, Tuesday March 11th 2008

gaining access to Ó Searcaigh as a friend rather than as a filmmaker? Very possibly; but in doing so she has demonstrated one of the painful principles of documentary filmmaking – that although it remains a powerful way of bringing the hidden to light, both subject and filmmaker may suffer for doing so.

The public wrangles Ní Chianáin found herself engaged in also point to a larger issue within documentary; in a media-saturated age, uncertainty or open-mindedness in a filmmaker frequently comes across as merely rhetorical ploy – used to structure narrative in order to build empathy, introduce doubt, play with it, and then vindicate or convict the subject. The narrative's emphasis on her uneasy presence within it places the audience in the position of judge, jury, friend and filmmaker, asks us to interpret for ourselves the 'meaning' of Ó Searcaigh's actions, but Ní Chianáin's subsequent 'investigations' leave us in no doubt that all is not quite right. It is a shame that these interactions are so limited – and unfortunately the Nepalese men shown often seem irretrievably 'othered', as she seems unable to reach beyond polite questioning, excluded by their friendly smiles and apparent enthusiasm for interaction with foreigners.

Ní Chianáin has been criticised for faults as contradictory as self-willed blindness and cynical entrapment. The documentarian as artistic chronicler is a world away from the documentarian as evangelical revealer of truth; her film gives us a portrait of a woman recoiling from unpleasant truths about a man she once respected. And yet her elegantly-drawn, matter-of-fact film does not flinch from confronting him, albeit compassionately and finally rather ineffectually. Power and responsibility are the primary weapons of the documentarian's armoury; this film is a reminder of how fine the balance is between them.

Fairytale Of Kathmandu was first broadcast on RTÉ1, 11th March 2008.

Produced by David Rane

Directed and narrated by Neasa Ní Chianáin

Music by Arnaud Ruest

Cinematography Tristan Monbureau

Editing by Úna Ní Dhongháile and Declan McGrath

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Bertie: Portrait of a Politician Under Suspicion

Pat Brereton

As many commentators have pointed out, the mass media has helped to shrink the world to a global village, producing new forms of social relationships where people appear to achieve 'intimacy at a distance' with famous people. Richard Dyer for example, notes that the media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of what they are 'really like', and to uncover the 'real' person behind the public appearance. Such examination of the star system and modern society's growing fixation and fascination with a wide range of stars can also be applied in some measure to the media persona of the politician and former taoiseach Bertie Ahern.

With frank and deeply revealing interviews from family, political colleagues, former constituency activists and commentators, this new four-part series asks: who really is Bertie Ahern?

The promotional blurb goes on to foreground how the enigmatic politician remains a mass of contradictions, including purporting to be a self-proclaimed socialist who governed as a laissez-faire capitalist. The documentary uses extensive interviews with his family and friends to provide some insight into what makes this complex man tick, and most surprisingly how his close supporters, nicknamed the 'Drumcondra Mafia', helped to force his way to the very top of the political ladder.

Audiences were afforded a comprehensive look behind the scenes at the last three decades of Irish politics, and witnessed Bertie's successes and failures, which culminated in his resignation from the post of Taoiseach on 6th May 2008 after eleven years in the job; second only to Eamon DeValera in terms of longevity. In particular much time was given to the Planning/Mahon Tribunal which was set up in 1998 to enquire into political corruption allegations. Nearly a decade later it would focus on Ahern's missing bank accounts and a pattern

of lodgements and withdrawals with various interviews and media interventions used to explain his 'irregular affairs', with the infamous term 'dig out' entering Irish political folklore. First broadcast on RTE on 3rd November 2008, the series secured viewing figures of 601,000, which went down slightly from there in subsequent episodes. Nonetheless, it has become a very successful RTE series during 2008.

While episode one traced Ahern's life up to the general election of 1989 – when he got elected to the Dáil on his first attempt – episode two commenced with the 1990 Irish presidential election in which Mary Robinson became the country's first female president, and followed Ahern's career up to his appointment as leader of the Fianna Fail political party in 1994. The third episode focused on the period from 1994 when Ahern very nearly formed a coalition Government with Labour. There was also the major issue of alleged corruption and a briefcase full of cash delivered to Celia Larkin – his then partner – who lodged it in a bank account. The final episode covered the period from early 1999 up to the present day.

Ahern's crowing achievement, acknowledged by all, remains the Northern Ireland Peace Process, which he worked on patiently over a period of many years. His tenacity in that endeavour received surprising accolades from his erstwhile nemesis in the North, Ian Paisley, alongside Tony Blair, then Prime Minister of Britain.

Ahern was born on the 12th September 1951 and was elected the sixth leader of Fianna Fail in 1994 at the comparatively young age of 43. He has since secured his place in party history as one of their most hallowed and respected leaders. His parents were both from Cork and his father ended up as a farm manager at All Hallows College, Drumcondra. Bertie married Miriam Kelly in 1972 and had two daughters, Georgina

who is now wife of Westlife member Nicky Byrne and Cecelia who is a best selling author. In 1992 he separated from his wife and until 2003 maintained a relationship with Celia Larkin, who becomes the femme fatale of this story, if one was to adapt a film noir analogy.

Larkin however refused to be interviewed for the series, yet remains a defining presence throughout the series, being particularly vilified by the 'Drumcondra mafia'. The very fact of her not appearing in the documentary causes difficulty for the production, which is somewhat allayed by a stand-in actress, used to dramatise her walking to the bank to lodge her lover's money for instance. The series reconstructs this incident by also filming her from above, as if by a security camera. One wonders of the benefits of such recreation and its implications for the story of Bertie. Eilis O'Hanlon's piece in the *Irish Independent* is very strident in its criticism, as evidenced by the review's headline 'If a woman isn't fluffy enough, the daggers come out'. O'Hanlon concludes that Larkin was right not to contribute to such a series as she could not possibly compete with the 'Bertie machine, especially when the real machine was obviously Bertie himself'. Much is made of recorded comments by Bertie's supporters. When asked if she played a significant role in shaping his constituency office, 'no, said one Bertie's supporter Chris Wall bluntly after a significant pause', through the evidence from elsewhere was that her contribution was crucial. 'The majority of us wouldn't be that mad about her', Paddy Duffy, another of the gang observed wryly. Using the analogy of the femme fatale, alongside other gangster parlance, the 'Drumcondra Mafia' certainly fulfil the generic expectation that the Don must be protected at all costs [even from himself!].

Throughout the four episodes more than 70 contributors and interviews are expertly knitted together through the tight editorial work of Nathan Nugent. The complexity of the storyline is narrated within a cinema verité documentary format, which has become very much a stylistic signature of recent Mint productions. Producer Steve Carson described the series as 'a political biography of the Taoiseach, while also covering

Ireland's political history from 1992 where the Haughey series left off'.¹ *Film Ireland* praises the series' for its 'rigorously accurate information with brilliantly creative storytelling' and Mint Production for establishing a niche in Irish broadcasting by constructing factual documentaries based on contemporary Irish politics with a surfeit of interviewees who willingly contribute to such productions and accept their role based on 'trust' in the producers' skill and integrity.

In his review of *Bertie*, Liam Fay in *Sunday Times* spoke of the former taoiseach as 'a skilled actor from whom the interlinked masks of noble statesman, straight dealer and nice guy slowly but surely slipped', a reading which elucidates the underlying exposés of 'Citizen Bertie'. The documentary's most remarkable feature, according to Fay, was 'the grim determination with which Ahern and his closest henchmen are still sticking to their prepared script, despite the fact that the rest of us can plainly see the scenery collapsing around our ears'. The story also incidentally serves 'as a guide to the economic mess in which the country currently languishes'.

Meanwhile Fintan O'Toole [Thurs Dec. 4th 2008 *Irish Times*] who has written more opinion pieces than most Irish journalists on politics and politicians, affirms that only a fraction of the material recorded appears on screen and that a great deal of important material is left out simply because of the tight narrative structure. (We can only conclude he knows this because his comments were so ruthlessly pruned). A reality of course which is not so surprising for students of the documentary format, calling to mind for instance the hours of footage shot for *Man of Aran*, with Robert Flaherty trying to capture the 'poetic essence' of life on the islands in the 1930. One contributor Des Richardson felt particularly hard done by, as the chosen sound

1. Mint Productions also produced behind *Haughey* (2005), and *Fine Gael: A family at War* (2004). It is co-run by Cason and his wife Miriam O'Callaghan the anchor on Prime Time, Ireland's premier current affairs programme. O'Callaghan's involvement cannot be coincidental in gaining access to so many any political figures to contribute.

bite doesn't represent precisely what he wanted to say, according to O'Toole. Surprisingly few other interviewees have publically suggested that they were misrepresented, which says a lot for the even-handedness of the series.

Examining how 'ordinary viewers' consumed the series from an *Irish Times* blog, one notes how many were exercised by representation of 'The Drumcondra Mafia':

they were happy to sit back and explain at great length to Steve Carson's cameras how they got their man into the Taoiseach's office. They're proud of what they did and how they did it and they're happy to flex their muscles retrospectively for the gaiety of the nation'. Of course every politician out there would secretly at least love to have a mafia like that to keep an eye on their back and keep the home base happy while they were off seeing to matters of state and driving around in a Merc. Sadly, the programme didn't ask these well-upholstered, grand gentlemen what they got out of all those late nights tending to Ahern's patch, but I suppose they got a few pints and a box of biscuits from the grateful Ahern at the Christmas'. Meanwhile other contributors' went even further suggesting the 'mafia connection' had parallels with 'Tammany Hall'? [www.irishtimes.com/blogs/ontherecord/2008/11/11/bertie/]

Throughout the four episodes, much was made of the miscommunication skills of this master evader of verbal clarity; counterpointed by the eloquent straight-talking Ian Paisley. Unlike Bertie however, Paisley is characterised as closing down dialogue by saying no to any form of concessions. Nonetheless, in the twilight of his long life, Paisley has been turned around by the chameleon-like charm of Ahern. In some ways, it is suggested Bertie's apparent lack of

vision was a positive, as it made him flexible and willing to compromise, making him an efficient negotiator and problem solver. Tony Blair concludes his assessment: 'I found Bertie Ahern to be a man of courage, tenacity and integrity'. Meanwhile Jody Corcoran in *The Irish Independent* suggests that the style of programme, was 'too slick' in its editing and almost 'a trick of style over substance'. In an unusual apologia for Ahern, he concludes, Carson has a 'heroic story to tell, but he fell into the trap which so many in the Irish media have; that is not seeing the big picture'. As a piece of political documentary, the documentary series efficiently captures the range of issues and complexities which define the political context of the enigmatic Bertie, but like the abiding theme of *Citizen Kane*, even a four part series cannot really define and explain the man, but merely dramatise his strengths together with his fatal flaws, while exposing the consequence of his actions.

[*Bertie* won the 2008 IFTA for the Best Documentary Series].

Bertie (2008) 4 x 60 mins. First broadcast on RTÉ: 3, 10, 17, 24 November 2008

Directed by: Steve Carson

Produced by: Mint Productions

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Striapacha Tri Chead Bliain Duailcis (Prostitutes: Three Hundred Years of Vice)

Niamh Reilly

A three-part documentary series written and directed by Virginia Gilbert, *Striapacha: Tri Chead Bliain Duailcis* (Prostitutes: Three Hundred Years of Vice), is an astutely crafted, honest and engaging account of prostitution in Ireland from the 18th century to the present. The series excavates the social, economic, cultural, moral and political context that has shaped everyday attitudes and practices surrounding prostitution in Ireland through three centuries. Narrated by Carrie Crowley, this lively documentary includes commentary from an array of well-chosen social historians, experts and politicians including Ivana Bacik, Diarmaid Ferriter, Mary Kenny, Mary Luddy, Liz McManus, David Norris and Paul Reynolds.

The series intelligently interweaves cogent commentary with contemporaneous art and popular media images, including graphic clips from early pornographic films, to cast a critical light on what is known as 'the oldest profession'. Using real-life stories, Gilbert successfully maintains a focus on the humanity of girls and women who engage in prostitution – whether through 'choice' or the complete lack thereof. The series effectively highlights the interplay of sexual double standards, limited economic options available to many women, and deep class divides, which emerge as the common denominators of prostitution in Ireland from the 18th century to the present. In doing so, *Striapacha* holds up a mirror to persistent problematic stereotypes about women, female sexuality and male sexuality in Ireland and how these have shaped societal and policy responses to prostitution.

The first episode, *Enlightened Vice* explores prostitution in Ireland in the 18th century; the second episode, *Poor, Unfortunate Girl* underlines the links between the abject poverty surrounding the Great Famine and the rise of

urban prostitution; and the final episode in the series, *The Pleasure Chest* problematises the extensive and widely accepted presence of the 'sex industry' in contemporary Ireland.

Enlightened Vice reminds us that prostitution was a highly visible and pervasive aspect of everyday life in 18th-century Dublin. In particular, the presence of the Irish Parliament, the large concentration of taverns and theatres and high numbers of women living in poverty made Temple Bar a centre of prostitution. Unsurprisingly, the prostitution trade reflected class divides of the day, not dissimilar from the present. Women from very poor and marginalised backgrounds engaged in street prostitution, primarily dealing with working class men; indoor brothels organised by madams were largely patronised by middle-class men; while 'courtesans' – often the illegitimate daughters of the upper classes – were organised by well-connected madams to meet the sexual needs of the wealthiest men in the highest echelons of Irish society. The story of the top end of the prostitution trade is captured in this episode's portrayal of the life and times Margaret Leeson. From the age of 15 (after she became pregnant and was abandoned by her upper-class seducer), Margaret Leeson effectively navigated upper-class society to ensure her survival, first as the 'kept woman' of a succession of wealthy men and later as the operator of a lucrative, high-end brothel frequented by the rich and famous of the day.

Such 'success' however, was highly unusual. One commentator draws attention to the deeply ambivalent societal attitudes to women that prevailed at the time; on the one hand all women were expected to be 'meek and genteel', on the other hand, women were assumed by nature to be passionate and irrational with voracious sexual appetites that would inevitably led them to

promiscuity and prostitution if they were not properly controlled. Within this context, there were few 'respectable' forms of employment for working-class women in the 18th century, which were limited to jobs in the textile industry or domestic service, and work as shop assistants. Even in these contexts, the 'reputation' of girls and women was always questionable; any real or perceived sexual indiscretion could be used against them and end up with them on the street. Thus caught between male-defined societal expectations of female virtue and exceedingly limited opportunities for economic independence, *Striapacha* highlights the experience of prostitutes in 18th-century Ireland as a life-and-death struggle for survival.

This reality is further underlined by the documentary's graphic coverage of venereal disease, a rampant, disfiguring and often fatal condition for which there was no effective treatment prior to the discovery of penicillin in the 20th century. Moreover, within the logic of the prevailing sexual double standard, prostitutes were constructed as the source of the disease rather than the men who used them, who were seen – like society at large – as victims of prostitution. The parallels between such attitudes and contemporary discourses around HIV/AIDS is chilling – especially the references made in this episode to prevailing myths in the 18th century that having sex with young girls was a way for men to avoid contracting sexually transmitted disease. In addition to the scourge of venereal disease, *Enlightened Vice* underlines the alarming pervasiveness of violence throughout society, particularly violence against women, including many rapes of prostitutes. Indeed, the brutal realities of the sex trade in 18th-century Ireland are poignantly captured in the final chapter of the 'successful' life of Margaret Lesson, who died following a street gang rape and resulting complications of venereal disease from which she did not recover. Fortunately for many, there was some relief – albeit mediated through the strictures of Christian piety. In the mid 18th century, Lady Arabella Derry founded the Magdalene Asylums to provide basic shelter and subsistence in exchange for 'penitence' and menial labour.

Episode two, *Poor, Unfortunate Girl* foregrounds the links between poverty and the rise of prostitution in 19th-century Ireland. While the Act of Union in 1801 heralded the end of the Irish Parliament and demise of affluent Georgian Dublin, the Napoleonic Wars prompted a massive mobilisation of the British army, including the intensified militarisation of towns and cities around the country. At the same time, an impoverished, rural population – 37% of whom lived in clay dwellings – was about to be decimated by the Great Famine. Culturally, the Victorian era brought the deepening influence of middle-class Christian mores whereby the institution of marriage and women's confinement to the private sphere were reinforced as integral to maintaining social order and containing women's unruly sexuality. In Catholic Ireland, 'the nun' came to signify idealised womanhood with marriage and motherhood offering the next best route to social affirmation for women. In the media, prostitutes were despised and their existence deemed an affront to 'respectable ladies'.

Yet, in Dublin alone some 17,000 women were engaged in prostitution – the neighbourhood of the Monto was the single biggest prostitution district in Europe. In addition, 85 brothels operated in Cork at this time. The episode reveals that much of the prostitution was fuelled by the expanded military presence in Ireland with up to 30,000 soldiers stationed around the country. Most notably, it tells the story of the 'Wrens of the Curragh' – a community of about 60 outcast women 'army camp followers' who lived and died in the bushes surrounding the Curragh. These women, however, were not simply victims of a sexist Victorian morality and deep class and rural–urban inequalities. They also embodied a spirit of solidarity by providing makeshift shelter to women who were out of options and support to women too old or too ill to earn money through prostitution. Against this backdrop, the pandemic of venereal disease worsened in the 19th century. In response, a series of contagious diseases acts in the 1860s were introduced that permitted the authorities to apprehend any woman suspected of prostitution, submit her to forced internal examinations and

even detain her for a period of time. Isabella Tod of the Ladies' National Association organised against the acts and struggled for the recognition of the humanity of women engaged in prostitution and of root causes of the sex trade - poverty, 'inequality of law' and 'inequality of social judgement'. Tod was exceptional in 19th-century Ireland, when few paused to consider the role of social inequalities in underpinning prostitution, preferring to see it entirely as a reflection of women's moral inadequacies.

The final episode, *The Pleasure Chest* surveys changing attitudes and practices in relation to prostitution and sexuality in Ireland through the 20th century. In the first half of the century, within emerging discourses of Irish independence, nationalist and feminist suffrage movements were understood as modernising forces. From this perspective, the prevalence of prostitution and rampant venereal disease were viewed as part of the legacy of the British presence, which would be resolved with Irish independence and improvements in the status of women. These modernising discourses, however, were inevitably inflected with a conservative Catholic ethos which sought to cast the new Irish identity as 'pure' and to link the process of political independence to a campaign of social purification – starting with the Monto. In particular, Frank Duff who founded the Legion of Mary and worked assiduously (often negotiating deals with brothel madams) to put an end to the open brothel system. The documentary portrays 1920s and 1930s Ireland as a new era of Church–State moral policing and censorship of all matters pertaining to sex and sexuality. During this time, the Magdalene Asylums became more punitive, effectively imprisoning for indefinite periods young girls and women who transgressed acceptable moral boundaries at the request of family members or local priests. Many women remained in these institutions – where they were forced to work 'as human washing machines' – for their entire lives. The last Magdalene Asylum closed only in 1996.

Also during the 1930s, the Criminal Amendment Act prohibited contraception and required all sex crimes cases to be heard in camera, thereby curtailing media coverage of sex

crime trials and contributing to the illusion of a purified Ireland. By the 1950s public attention shifted to the plight of Irish prostitutes in England who were cast not as ordinary 'bad' prostitutes but as innocent, vulnerable girls lured into prostitution. The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s did much to raise the lid on the oppressive double standards and institutionalised hypocrisy surrounding sexuality in Ireland, including the realities of prostitution. In particular, June Levine collaborated with Lyn Madden (who had been a prostitute in Dublin the 1970s and 1980s), to write *Lyn: A Story of Prostitution*, which exposed a vicious circle of heroin addiction and prostitution. By the 1990s, burgeoning economic buoyancy and the weakening grip of Catholic morality set the stage for a more visible and largely tolerated sex industry.

The 1993 Criminal Amendment Act made it an offence for prostitutes or their 'clients' to transact in public. This had the effect of driving prostitution indoors. A key player in the underground prostitution industry of this time was the mainstream entertainment magazine 'In Dublin', which earned substantial revenues by advertising 'massage parlours' and 'escort services' until it was prosecuted in 1998. As crime journalist Paul Reynolds notes, however, the clamping down of magazine advertising did little to curtail the prostitution business as internet websites and untraceable mobile phones provided the advertising and marketing infrastructure needed to reach motivated 'clients.' More generally, commentators highlight the inadequacy of the current legislation and policy covering prostitution in Ireland. In another version of an 'Irish solution to an Irish problem', there has been virtually no public debate about prostitution and the different approaches that might be taken. Politician and academic Ivana Bacik notes that there are two competing feminist views on the issue in Europe – the Dutch model, which treats prostitution as a valid form of work and regulates it accordingly, and the Swedish model, which criminalises users and supports prostitutes in finding alternative income-earning activities. Ireland falls between both. We learn that while the Irish government is, at least in principle, committed to EU law on

safeguarding the well-being of women trafficked to Ireland for the purposes of prostitution, it remains silent on the rights and well-being of Irish women engaged in prostitution.

This documentary series does an excellent job dealing with a complex and difficult topic in an engaging and non-didactic way. It reveals the varying forms that prostitution has taken, the different experiences of women engaged in prostitution, and the shifting social issues that have accompanied prostitution in Ireland over three centuries. In highlighting all that has changed, however, *Striapacha* draws attention to what has not changed: the persistence and prevalence of prostitution. Some will fault *Striapacha* because it does not give much space to the possibility that prostitutes and their 'clients' are simply engaging in a freely chosen and consensual 'contract' to provide and receive sexual services. Instead, it contributes much more to the argument that women's agency and

freedom is deeply compromised in and through prostitution, which ultimately relies on women's economic and social disadvantage as well as deeply engrained, old-fashioned sexism, which normalises the idea that women selling sex to men is an inevitable (and even liberating) dimension of human existence.

Striapacha: Tri Chead Bliain Duailcis screened on TG4 on May 1st, 8th and 15th 2008.

Produced by Katie Holly for Blinder Films / TG4
Written and Directed by Virginia Gilbert.

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