
IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION

The Year in Review – 2016

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Globalizing the Local: Irish Film and TV in 2016

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“Ireland's presence globally is through its culture, that's our strongest identifier”

Lenny Abrahamson

By any standards, 2016 was an exceptional year of output and achievements for the Irish audio-visual sector which continued to grow in activity, ambition and international acclaim. Alongside headline achievements for feature films such as *Room*, *Sing Street*, *The Lobster*, *The Young Offenders* there were notable successes in animation, short films and documentary as well as a bumper – and unlikely to be repeated – level of drama and factual programming produced for the small screen as part of the 1916 commemorations. Thanks to such efforts, and despite an increasing tendency towards non-Irish settings and stories in feature film, one of the most striking elements of moving image production in 2016 was the degree to which this range of output balanced cultural and commercial imperatives in an era of increasingly commodified “content”. Having said that, there was irony in the fact that having produced an unprecedented quantity (and quality) of material dealing with the historical origins of an independent Ireland in the early part of the year, the television sector underwent rapid and seismic changes in the second half of 2016 in an apparently irreversible shift towards globalized ownership and formats and a fundamental re-shaping of RTE's role as national broadcaster.

Off-screen, 2016 was also marked by a perceptible advance in gender participation and a range of female-led successes and appointments. Prolific producers such as Rebecca O’Flanagan (*Viva*, *Handsome Devil*), Katie Holly (the period film *Love and Friendship* was one of the year’s biggest and most unusual Irish success stories), Rachel Lysaght (*Strange Occurrences in a Small Irish Village*, *Hostage to the Devil*) and Leslie McKimm continued to build business momentum while also being to the forefront of institutional decision processes; Holly and Lysaght were appointed as members of the IFB and McKimm as Project Manager. Within the same organization the confirmation of Dr. Annie Doona as IFB Chair (following the untimely passing of Bill O’Herlihy in June 2016), marked the first woman in the role since Lelia Doolin in the early 1990s. Doona was instrumental in the formulation of the IFB’s “six point plan” in Nov. 2015, “a holistic and integrated approach to achieve real change” around gender equality in the industry. Among its commitments was greater focus on, and transparency around funding decisions, the consequences of which have led to an increased proportion of development funding to projects with female involvement in July 2016 and a female-majority board in March 2017. Another notable appointment was that of Ms. Dee Forbes as Director General of RTE. Having previously held senior roles at Turner Broadcasting and the Discovery channel she is the first woman to hold the role at RTE at a time of enormous challenges to public broadcasting and the first external appointment in almost 50 years.

The March 2016 Academy Awards marked a well-publicized highpoint for the Irish film industry after years of declining state support and offered a timely opportunity (as in 1993 with Neil Jordan’s victory for *The Crying Game*) to both build international profile and for intensified lobbying of the Irish government to restore capital funding to pre-crash levels. While in Los Angeles for the awards, the IFB worked hard to position Ireland “as a

production and innovation destination” for inward US production. Partnering with IDA Ireland to co-host a meet and greet reception with LA based producers and players, such language upgraded the traditional Failte Ireland pitch of landscape, locations and (skilled) locals for the transnational media era. While inward investment is clearly an important part of the mix for Ireland’s globalizing audiovisual sector (and central to the business plans for the acres of new studio space announced in 2016), a feature article in the *LA Times* also saw Irish filmmakers and funders seeking to leverage their success for the development of the indigenous production sector. As a Best Director nominee for *Room* Lenny Abrahamson received plenty of press attention and used it not only to speak about himself but to pointedly remark that “The Irish government has treated the arts as an afterthought . . . They love when we do well, but they haven’t really taken it seriously. What has to happen is, we don’t just need to return to pre-recession levels of funding, we need to have a much bigger vision than we’ve ever had.”¹ Soon after his return from LA Abrahamson capitalized on his public profile to secure a meeting with the Minister to push the case. This pressure was sustained through a series of flattering articles in the American trade and lifestyle press about Irish film throughout the year. Industry bible *Variety* quickly picked up the integrated discourse of art and business by claiming that “Ireland has become a capital of filmmaking as well as a thriving business site for established industry pros and entrepreneurs alike,” whose “creative resurgence is benefiting not only the local film industry, but also world cinema at large.” *Forbes* magazine similarly contained a feature article on “Ireland’s Film Entrepreneurs” (a new word for producers). All this had a discernable if initially unspectacular effect: the 2017 Budget included €2 million increase for the Irish Film Board and, in a manner which continued the linguistic shift away from treating film as cultural artifact noted in 2011’s “Creative Capital” report, the commissioning of an economic analysis of “Ireland’s screen-based *creative industries*”. Under CEO James Hickey, the IFB has kept the pressure up, producing in July 2016, an ambitious Five-Year Strategic Plan entitled “Building on Success” which again called for “the immediate restoration of €20 million in state funding.”

The strong and sophisticated blend of talent showcased in Los Angeles through films such as *Room*, *Brooklyn* and *Viva* (which missed a nomination but drew plenty of attention), the short film *Stutterer* (which won the Academy Award) and actors like Saoirse Ronan and Michael Fassbender demonstrated the depth and confidence of the sector and the distance it had travelled from a position of peripheral nation mythmaking. (In several interviews after the Oscars, producer Ed Guiney noted how many people he met in LA did not know that *Room* was Irish – though that text’s complete eschewal of Irishness surely made this forgivable). Across 2016 a similarly eclectic slate of productions competed for critical and commercial attention, with mixed fortunes and increasingly diverse channels of funding and distribution. Compiling information from IFB and other sources we note approximately 18 Irish fiction feature film productions and co-productions made with local talent and/or funding; a remarkable figure in the context of population and funding levels. Additionally we count some eight feature-length documentaries (made outside of TV structures), and a variety of fiction and non-fiction productions aimed at the small screen. The short form, while relatively invisible to a majority of cinemagoers, continues to be a vital testing ground and showcase for emerging talent. Output in this format has grown exponentially over the past decade with many festivals running multiple “new Irish shorts” programmes to accommodate four IFB funding schemes (documentary, animation, live action and micro narratives), various local and regional initiatives (e.g. Galway Film Centre, Filmbase etc.) and untold numbers of young filmmakers – inside and outside of formal education settings – who produce films that find recognition at festivals around the world. Notwithstanding the importance of the IFB Short Film Channel, this area of production remains largely under-celebrated and under-researched. Perhaps just as peripheral in terms of perception and discussion is the zone of

experimental and essay films. While a number of filmmakers have made this area their own, funding remains restricted, with the largest contributor being the Arts Council's Reel Art scheme. In 2016 the scheme produced two fascinating films: *Further Beyond* (Christine Molloy, Joe Lawlor) and *We Are Moving – Memories of Miss Moriarty* (Claire Dix). It would be remiss not to note also the ongoing efforts of the *Experimental Film Society*, a highly productive and proactive cooperative of filmmakers who maintain a busy schedule of screenings around and beyond Ireland.

While the sheer quantity of production makes easy summary impossible, a number of projects are worthy of note. The year's breakout film was undoubtedly *The Young Offenders*, a micro-budget comedy centred on local laddish characters and accents, a shoot and script that was shaped on the hoof around the availability of actors and a development-to-release schedule lasting just 18 months. While such elements are not typically the stuff of critical or commercial success, from its first screening at the Galway Film Fleadh it was clear that *Offenders* was a film that had achieved what many long-forgotten Irish comedies with greater resources had failed to: be funny. Written and directed by Peter Foote (making his feature film debut but with a proven talent for contemporary comedy in shorts, sketches and music videos), this caper film transcended its episodic structure through the realization of its central characters (played by Chris Walley and Alex Murphy) and their touching relationship, as well as a deliriously preposterous conceit that reconfigured the hero's journey for a couple of "langers" from Cork city. Strong reviews and word of mouth (crucial for a film like this) built momentum at the domestic box office, where the film's distributors had gone for the widest released of any Irish film last year, passing the symbolic €1 million Euros in October. This was perhaps predictable but it then gained international attention, picking up a number of awards (notably at the Los Angeles Film Festival) and distribution from Vertigo Releasing (UK) and Carnaby International who placed the film in a number of English-speaking markets (Australia, New Zealand etc.) where the film's backstory, setting, nor one imagines, its strong accents would not be immediately recognizable. In late 2016 it was acquired by Netflix (UK/Irl), lengthening the life and reach of the film considerably and securing a follow-up project.

Drawing influence from American independent and European art-house cinema *A Date from Mad Mary* (Sept 2016) displayed impressive maturity and skill behind and in front of camera. It has been widely reviewed elsewhere but suffice to repeat praise of lead actor Seana Kerslake's performance in an all-too-rare young female role of depth and complexity and writer/director Darren Thornton who balanced emotional complexity and raucous humour in an original and involving story about a recently released young convict. The just returned home narrative set-up bears comparison with Donal Foreman's *Out of Here* which also focused on a young protagonist recently returned home to find himself adrift in a world he grew up in. Thornton's film excelled not only in the confidence of the performances but the directness with which he and his actors explored themes of guilt, sexuality and social conformity. Rebecca Daly's *Mammal* was also generically art-house and also centred on a female protagonist coming to terms with the past, this time a mother (Australian actor Rachel Griffiths) who abandoned her son (and his father) years earlier and is now confronted by his sudden disappearance. At the same time she develops an unusual and sexual relationship with a young man she encounters on the street (Barry Keoghan). Daly's second film had many of the strengths and some of the frustrations of her debut, *The Other Side of Sleep*, namely an interesting central character, strong performances and distinctive tone but also an underdeveloped narrative and sense of place that substituted mood for story. This ambiguity is characteristic of several recent Irish films which, along with inarticulate or marginalized characters alienated from traditional structures and spaces of home, makes for a notable trend in post Celtic Tiger cinema.

The buzz around *The Young Offenders* may have soaked up audiences for another comedy, *The Flag*, which despite the credentials of writer Eugene O'Brien (*Eden, Pure Mule*) and director Declan Recks, and a cast that included Pat Shortt (*Garage*) went largely unnoticed. Or perhaps it was simply centenary fatigue that made this story of a fellow in search the flag his grandfather flew over the GPO in 1916. More likely however it was because its comedy seemed forced and flatfooted and no amount of perceived topicality could make its Shortt-led "what the feck" feel relevant. At some future time it will undoubtedly live on as part of an academic study of the copious commemoration output that spanned genres, approaches and audiences. Such a study will no doubt highlight the influence of intended audiences and markets on content and historical perspectives (an influence directly linked to budget). At the top end (in terms of budget) was the glossy 3-part documentary *1916: The Irish Rebellion*, voiced by Liam Neeson (of course!) and funded by the University of Notre Dame with the intention of producing an authoritative account in the Ken Burns style of Irish History's pivotal moment. It was what the occasion called for: rich in archive and production values, and filled with expert opinions. The series was screened across 120 PBS affiliates in the US as well on public television in Australia, France, Spain, UK, Vietnam and elsewhere. No one else could afford, nor needed to compete with it, leaving space for a range of lower budget and more adventurous productions. Among the factual films that caught the eye were two developed from personal preoccupations: Joe Duffy's affecting *Children of the Revolution* (a development of his best-selling book) and the no-budget *Rebel Rossa*, a charming road movie made by two of O'Donovan Rossa's American male descendants who come to Ireland to find out more about their famous grandfather. Whether they are quite so naive as they seem is open to question (it begins with the director looking through an archive box of original materials he has never had time to look as a historian explains nineteenth century Irish history) but their lineage allowed them entry to some extraordinary moments and situations, culminating in the reenactment of the famous funeral which sparked the Rising, the ownership of which was in the process of being contested between Sinn Fein and a then hesitant, not to say ambivalent (this was 2014) Irish government. Their respective status in these events as representatives and reminders of the violent strand of Irish republicanism was fascinating.

The dramatic programming for the commemoration also displayed a variety of approaches that reflected a correlation between budgets and audiences. RTE's lush five-part mini-series *Rebellion* might be seen as the dramatic counterpart of *1916* and was intended by the state broadcaster to have "long-lasting legacy and a similar impact to *Strumpet City*". Produced for a very modest budget of 6 million and scripted by Irish playwright Colin Teevan, it attempted to capitalize on the popularity of interclass historical fiction (notably the *Downton Abbey* phenomenon) against the backdrop of the Rising. Widely anticipated, its opening episode had a sense of event and drew large and eager audience of 661,000 in early January 2016, a figure that dropped by approx. 60,000 by its finale. Making rich use of iconic locations, the drama was set amongst "ordinary Dubliners" of various classes and backgrounds and while this was a commendable effort to move away from stuffy "official" history, the degree to which the series invented characters and excluded real ones undermined its hoped-for "legacy". While RTE clearly intended to recoup some of the production budget through foreign sales, other producers opted for quirkier engagements aimed squarely at the domestic market. TV3 offered *Trial of the Century*: a three-part dramatization of Pdraig Pearse in the dock. If that doesn't ring a bell its because it didn't happen, but the conceit provided a highly cost-efficient means for Pearse (convincingly portrayed by Tom Vaughan-Lawlor) to defend the actions that changed the course of Irish history to a jury of "well known" Irish public figures. While the proposition was arguably daft, it was an inventive attempt to bring dimensionality to a historical figure and ideals that had fossilized for many.

TG4's *Wrecking the Rising* went the whole hog with a *Michael Collins* meets *Back to the Future* "time travel comedy caper" in which three contemporary Dublin lads travel back in time and accidentally wreck the Rising before it begun. Along with the sharp and satirical *The Rubberbandits Guide To 1916*, it took an irreverent approach to the most sacred event and provided a welcome shift in perspective and tone that may have attracted an otherwise indifferent audience. Finally – and perhaps most usefully for educational contexts – was the IFB funded *After '16* project: nine fiction and documentary short films selected from hundreds of applications which were screened at festivals and on RTE and have recently become available in the IFI player.

Perhaps as a consequence of being English-speaking but cinematically peripheral (not to mention a post-colonial capacity for introspection) Irish filmmakers have long demonstrated a taste and talent for documentary; a form conspicuously supported in recent years through IFB funding schemes for long and short films and three dedicated festivals (Guth Gafa, Stranger Than Fiction, Dublin Doc Fest). As one of Ireland's most singular non-fiction voices, a new Ken Wardrop film is highly anticipated and *Mom and Me* was a long-time coming by the time it reached Irish screens in late summer. Clearly imagined as a companion piece to his tender and highly regarded *His and Hers* (2010) (itself a development of his justly celebrated short *Undressing My Mother*), it represented a development of the director's canvas in being set in the American mid-west (Oklahoma, to be exact). After respectful reviews that noted Wardrop's signature intimacy with his subjects and DOP Kate McCullough's superb images, the film was released on DVD and On Demand, with the overall impression being that it did not really find its audience. While it is now commonplace for a number of feature documentaries to attain their "Irish" label through finance or talent rather than subject matter, 2016 was notable for a range of strong films developed from local circumstances and issues. The standout film in terms of vision, urgency and technical values was Richie O'Donnell's distressing eco-doc *Atlantic*. O'Donnell came to widespread attention with *The Pipe*, a wide-reaching examination of the political turpitude and corporate bullying underpinning the development of the Shell pipeline controversy in Rossport, Co Mayo. Here he takes on a related theme, through the evidence of a whistle-blower who describes in detail how the German factory ship he was on carried out illegal dumping of fish in Irish and Scottish waters in order to maximize profit. The film explains the largely invisible workings of the fishing industry and how Ireland has surrendered its resources to a rapacious and ecologically indifferent industry and the policing of its waters to the Common Fisheries Policy. Crowd funded (for a tiny budget of €30,000)² and self distributed the film is the very essence of citizen journalism, with O'Donnell remarking that "the lack of broadcaster or official fund support has been a blessing in disguise, because we have been forced to engage directly with the people whom this documentary will affect, and those who will form its eventual audience." He subsequently spent many months screening the film to interested groups around Ireland before it received an airing on RTE. It continues to be screened at international festivals as well as in schools and colleges.

At first sight, Brendan J. Byrne's *Bobby Sands: 66 Days* seemed a film that had perhaps arrived a decade late, particularly in the wake of Steve McQueen's deeply affecting *Hunger* (2008). Not so. It set box office records in its opening weekend and its initially limited release was extended to an additional 16 cinemas, a considerable achievement for a documentary on a difficult and, for many, distant topic. This is testament to ongoing fascination with Sands' political commitment and the context within which it took place – a curiosity that may have deepened in the post-Good Friday era – and Byrne's thorough and moving treatment of his subject. Counting down through Sand's 66-day hunger strike and including a wide range of archive and interviewees, it made for compelling viewing. Watching it, one could not but be moved by recollections of that awful period, the violence

visited on others and self and feel deeply grateful to all those who worked to bring about peace. (Sinn Fein, on the other hand, expressed deep dissatisfaction at the airtime afforded Fintan O'Toole and the exclusion of a broader context in which the argued hunger strike was the only option). In the wake of Brexit and talk of Irish unification this history takes on added topicality and significance.

Other films demonstrated the rich and commodious nature of the documentary form. Colm Quinn's *Mattress Men* belongs to the sub-genre of offbeat individuals that delight and inspire. Here it is Michael Flynn, who attempts to save his struggling furniture business during the downturn by reinventing himself as an online personality "Mattress Mick". He makes a series of YouTube videos and wears a mattress costume. While this charming character study lacks the weight and resonance of films such as *Atlantic* or *Bobby Sands*, it captures an era and character in vivid, engaging and deeply human terms. At its core *Mattress Men* is a variation on the classic Sayles' documentary *Salesman*. Transcending the local is the ambition of every documentary maker and Colm Quinn must have been gratified by the fact that his quirky film was picked up by Element and the increasingly influential Virgin Media to be shown across a range of its online platforms in Ireland and UK.

Netflix also extended its reach in Irish distribution by acquiring *Sing Street*, *Brooklyn* and *The Guarantee* in 2016 and wholly funding *The Seige of Jadotville* – Ireland's first "war film". Additionally in December 2016 Netflix became "seamlessly" available via Virgin Media's Horizon box platform (for six months) significantly expanding the reach of the service into approx. 350,000 Irish homes. The on-demand market was further expanded when Amazon (which commissions Dublin-made *Ripper Street*) made its Prime streaming service available to Irish customers. The wider context for such developments is that since 2015 all of the main commercial TV channels in Ireland have changed ownership. Having acquired TV3 from Doughty Hanson in summer 2015, cable giant Liberty Media (owner of Virgin Media) moved to acquire the struggling UTV Ireland which was subsequently rebranded as the "female orientated" Be3 in January 2017. Meanwhile, in December 2015, in a bid to expand its modest TV subscriber base (of approximately 45,000 customers) Eir acquired Setanta Sports, subsequently rebranded as Eir Sports. These acquisitions came at bargain basement prices; having acquired UTV for £100m in October 2015, UTV Ireland was sold to Liberty Global for just €10m. Eir paid a reported €20m for Setanta, something of a steal for a company valued at somewhere approached €1bn in 2007. However, these prices reflect the still depressed nature of the Irish television advertising market (€343m in 2016, still well behind the €416m figure for 2008) and the fact that although average per day television viewing minutes have increased since 2005, those minutes are now divided amongst an ever-growing number of channels.

This in turn tells us much about the nature of mainstream TV shows in Ireland (if such a thing still exists). The relative absence of drama on RTE in particular (*Rebellion* aside) is not because the genre is unsuccessful: *Love/Hate* attained the single greatest drama ratings in the station's history averaging audiences within touching distance of 1 million viewers per episode. However, drama is expensive and even *Love/Hate*'s viewing figures may not have been sufficient to justify the (cheap by international standards) €3m price tag for the final (2014) series. Faced with a collapse in its combined licence fee and commercial revenues (from €441m in 2008 to €334m in 2015), RTE appears to now be looking at strategies successfully employed by TV3 from 2007; "shiny floor shows" such as *X-Factor* simulcast with ITV and localized reality TV. Compared with TV3, the schedules of which have been loaded with Irish versions of *Come Dine With Me*, *The Apprentice*, *Take Me Out* and *Bake-Off*, RTE's more tentative resort to shows like *Dragon's Den* had seemed more in keeping with its public service ethos. However, things are not what they used to be: if hiring Today FM's Willie O'Reilly as Group Commercial Director in 2011 pointed to a perception that

RTE needed to take the commercial side of its revenues more seriously, the appointment of Dee Forbes suggested a desire to have one's cake and eat it. Her previous employer's (Discovery Networks) factual programming was a good fit for a public service broadcaster while, on the other, her career began in sales and marketing, rather than programme-making. Her statement in February 2017 that RTE was "reviewing everything we produce" followed on the announcement that the hitherto sacrosanct Children Programming Department was being entirely outsourced to independent production. Thus, coincidentally or not, RTE placed its chips firmly within TV3 territory by commissioning Screentime Shinawal to produce *Dancing With the Stars*, a localized version of the BBC's wildly successful *Strictly Come Dancing*.

Since going on air in January 2017, *Dancing With the Stars* has been the most watched show on Irish television. *The Late Late Show*, for decades the most watched show in the country, now finds itself third-ranked behind both *DWTS* and *Room To Improve* which appears just an hour after *DWTS* on the Sunday schedule. *DWTS* success is not hard to fathom; sports commentator Des Cahill and the hitherto "outrageous" comedienne Katherine Lynch. "Dancing Dessie" quickly stood out as the hands-down weakest link but his wider popularity and the show's initial reliance on phone-in votes saw him plough on whilst more agile but less familiar faces fell by the wayside. Katherine Lynch – best known for creating sexually aggressive comic characters in a succession of eponymous RTE sketch shows – exemplified the ugly-duckling-to-a-swan transformation narrative such shows are built on as she exuded genuine enthusiasm but also a degree of pathos as she "found herself" through the various quicksteps, sambas, foxtrots etc.

But the localization ceases with the individual characters: everything else is constructed in line with the strict rules of the format book. Although the set does not incorporate the live band of the BBC's original, the layout is otherwise identical while the presenters – the steely professional Amanda Byram and former Westlife member Nicky Byrne – tightly scripted repartee allows little room for local spontaneity. Even the Judges appear to have been chosen for the manner in which they echo the UK originals.

In last year's editorial we noted the increasing deterritorialization of Irish cinema (a concept borrowed from Deleuze, Guattari [1972]) in films such as *The Lobster*, *Room* or *Tomato Red*. A year on, and a century from a violent revolt driven underwritten by a belief in a culturally specific Irish cultural identity circumscribed by national space, Irish television is an increasingly ephemeral concept within a globalized media sphere.

Notes

¹ Rebecca Keegan. "Irish Film Board has growing ambition for its industry after 2016 Oscars". *Los Angeles Times*. March 26th, 2016.

² <http://fundit.ie/project/atlantic>

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Gene Gauntier and the Consolidation of Early American Cinema”. *Film History: An International Journal* 28.1. 2016.

***Sanctuary* (Len Collin, 2016)**

Liz Carville

Sanctuary is a film that uses the generic conventions of a romantic comedy to explore the rarely-represented theme of sexual relations between young people with intellectual disabilities. The film originated from a theatrical commission by Petal Pilley, artistic director of Blue Teapot Theatre Co., a community arts project based in Galway that uses the expressive potential of performance as a “creative way to get people with intellectual disability involved in the community and kind of pull them out of themselves” (Collin 2016: 5). The resultant stage play by Christian O’Reilly impressed Len Collin, a Galway-based screen writer and director with a well-established career within the British and Irish film industry, who proposed rewriting the drama as a feature film. Collin began working with the cast from the Blue Teapot Theatre Co. in 2011, (most of whom had starred in the original play version and have intellectual disabilities), gradually developing a rapport with the actors and guiding them in film technique. With a modest budget of €800,000, funding for the new film was secured from the Irish Film Board’s Catalyst Project, as well as from the national state broadcaster RTE and the BAI (the Broadcast Authority of Ireland). Despite the adverse weather conditions caused by an Atlantic storm, the filming of *Sanctuary* was completed over an intensive five-week period involving eleven-hour days with the cast and their carers. *Sanctuary* premiered on July 10 2016 as the closing feature for the Galway Film Fleadh where it won the award for Best First Irish Film. This was followed by screenings at various locations across Ireland as part of the Audi Dublin Film Festival with national release scheduled for April 2017 as well as future festival screenings in America and Australia.

Collin’s decision to select Galway as a setting, a city that is local to the actors, is both novel and insightful and gives their performance a natural, relaxed quality that heightens the realism of the drama. *Sanctuary* is set during the busy Christmas season when nine adults with intellectual disabilities are on an excursion to the cinema with their well-meaning, if less than judicious, care-worker Tom (Robert Doherty). Tom has allowed himself to be bribed by one of the group, Larry (Kieran Coppinger), to arrange that he and Sophie (Charlene Kelly), (another service user of the day centre Tom works for), escape to a nearby hotel while their friends attend the film screening. How long Larry and Sophie have been romantically involved is never specified but the furtive glances between the couple, the clandestine way that Larry and Tom meet on the morning of the trip to arrange the payment for the hotel, and Larry’s insistence that the tryst take place on this day lest the pair miss their opportunity, communicates the fact that an intimate relationship between two people with (ID) intellectual disabilities is considered taboo by others within their community. Their plan begins to fall apart, however, when Tom learns from Larry that he intends to have sex with Sophie, which, as both have ID and are not legally married, is a criminal offence under Irish law. Despite his reservations, Tom gives Larry a condom from his wallet and leaves the lovers alone, but rather than return to the cinema to supervise the remaining group members, he delays at the hotel chatting up the receptionist, Clare (Karen Murphy). It is not long before the other members of the group at the cinema notice their friends’ extended absence and set out across Galway city in search of them. Tom then embarks on a frantic search for the wandering group before the arrival of the mini-bus which will return them to the day centre.

Sanctuary is not so much a film about disability as it is about how disabling society can be and the restrictions it can impose on the most natural of instincts; to participate in an emotionally and physically satisfying relationship with another human being. One of the most poignant and thought-provoking moments in the film occurs when Larry, on initially being refused his request to purchase a condom, asks Tom if things would be different if he and Sophie were “normal”. Tom responds with repugnance to Larry’s use of the word but the point is made: if Larry and Sophie love each other and are above the legal age of consent, why does the law prohibit something that is considered so normal for the majority of the population, a majority who are just as fallible, emotional and susceptible to heartache? That interpersonal relationships are both complex and fragile by their nature is underscored later in the film when Tom, whilst searching the streets of Galway for the missing members of the group he is supposed to be chaperoning, attempts to kiss Clare. This ends disastrously when she rejects him without hesitation. Tom’s furious swearing at himself for misjudging Clare’s response parallels a similar incident between Larry and Sophie when she finally learns of his intentions to have sex. To focus on the fact that neither couple’s relationship is intact by the film’s conclusion is to miss the general point: both are as capable of falling in love and failing in the execution.

Sanctuary is brave in the unflinching way it confronts, not only the social and legal barriers faced by people with ID in Ireland who want to experience the tenderness of a loving relationship, but also the way that, through the challenges of Larry and Sophie, the film highlights the practical difficulties that such a relationship involves; their lack of access to money beyond the spare change that Larry has accumulated in his piggy bank, for example, or the fact that Larry and Sophie eventually have unprotected sex because neither knows how to properly use a condom. If it falls down in terms of redressing imbalances of representation, it is in its tendency to privilege the perspective of male over female characters concerning sexual desire. It has for some time been recognized that media, such as film can be considered “amongst the most powerful tools of women’s ideological oppression” (O’Connor 1984: 79) and Irish cinema has been no exception in this regard. However, in a film such as *Sanctuary* that does contain such strong-willed and independent minded female characters as Sophie, Clare and Sandy (Emer Macken), the androcentric slant is all the more striking. This may be the inevitable result of a male writer and director, and to its credit the film does present a range of male identities. The most obvious contrast in this respect is in the way that the urgency of Larry’s desire to have sex with Sophie is juxtaposed with Peter’s (Michael Hayes) embarrassment that Sandy openly flirts with him in front of their friends, and thus offers two very different representations of non-hegemonic masculinity: one determined, the other hesitant and both sexually inexperienced. The problem is that this comes at the cost of both women’s prerogative. If it has been typical to consider people with mental or physical disabilities as “asexual” (Begum 1992), as Costan and Kimmel have noted, disabled men “are no strangers to accepting and relying upon social norms of masculinity. Despite their stigmatized status, they do have access to sites of privilege” (2012:103). Sandy’s playful sexuality, (“he’s lovely when he’s angry”) is tamed to suit Peter’s preference for a romance that is explicitly on his own terms, while Sophie’s immediate insistence that Larry phone Tom to take her home once she discovers the hidden condom, falls on deaf ears and is forgotten once Larry begins to dance in an attempt to defuse the tension between them.

A second issue in need of mention here is the way that, while the film does raise the portent of the sexual abuse of people with ID by the system in place to safeguard them, it does not develop it further. Nor does it pursue the issue that the group’s employment opportunities at the care centre will soon be cut lest service users lose their menial but crucial social benefits. But then to do so would inevitably result in a different film, and perhaps one more in

keeping with the general tendency to represent people with ID as passive, vulnerable and lacking autonomy. Part of what makes *Sanctuary* so successful is the fact that, beyond dispelling any misconception that ID and sexual desire are mutually exclusive, it does not advocate a strong position on any of the issues it raises. Rather, the film incites viewers to contemplate its themes further outside the confines of the cinema theatre, and challenges them with the reality that there is rarely a right or wrong response to the dilemmas it puts forward. People with ID do deserve to meet their sexual needs as much as any other member of society, but unlike other members of society some are particularly vulnerable to abuse, and even with the best of intentions, putting in place a law that takes account of both realities is testing to say the least. It is apparent that Tom respects and cares deeply for the welfare of the group he chaperones but his actions, as a carer to Larry and Sophie, are ethically questionable. As a result, the combination of his lenience and negligence, without Larry's better judgement, has potentially fatal consequences for Sophie when the hotel's complimentary champagne interferes with her epilepsy medication. The film concludes with Sophie being taken to hospital by paramedics while Larry is prevented from travelling with her. As the ambulance drives off with the prospect that at best, the lovers will be separated permanently, at worst Larry will be charged with rape, Collin and O'Reilly's film refuses any semblance of closure but instead chooses to linger on the fact that the private spaces currently available to provide sanctuary for Irish people with intellectual disabilities are few and far between.

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Reimagining an Irish City: *I am Belfast* (Mark Cousins, 2016)

Seán Crosson

An early shot in Mark Cousins's *I am Belfast* lingers on a very unusual and unexpected landscape, what appears to be an icy vista reflected in water, with clouds drifting by in the distance. "Where's this", our narrator asks. "Are we at the North Pole? Or in the clouds? Or on an ice planet?" As the shot widens, it reveals a Belfast landmark, Shore Road Mill, hiding behind a hill of salt. From the beginning, Cousins' film is concerned to provide a different vision of Belfast, to encourage the viewer to look anew at the familiar, or (to the non-local) to familiarise ourselves with the extraordinary richness of place, space and people in this much misrepresented Irish city.

While the city (particularly Dublin) is undoubtedly the principal space featured in contemporary Irish cinema, this is a relatively recent development. For much of the twentieth century, Ireland was defined for audiences both at home and abroad in terms of rural spaces, in depictions informed primarily by an Irish-American imaginary. John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952) is often mentioned as a key text in this regard though the nostalgic pastoralism evident in that film was apparent from the earliest productions made in Ireland by the New-York based Kalem company in the 1910s. The city, however, rarely featured until the 1980s. Where it did, it tended to be so stylised as to be barely recognisable. John Ford again provides a further relevant example here in his German Expressionist influenced *The Informer* (1935). While set in Dublin, Ford shrouded the Hollywood set in an almost impenetrable fog rendering the location featured unrecognisable.

Given the criticism which this predominant focus often provoked in Ireland, it is not surprising that the emergence of a sustained period of indigenous production from the 1970s onwards would coincide with an increased focus on the city-space and the experiences of those who live there. Initial interventions – evident in Joe Comerford's *Down the Corner* (1978) and Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1985) – cast a critical eye on urban Ireland in their respective studies of marginalised characters, the victims of decades of state neglect. Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam & Paul* (2004) continued this focus though leavened by an O'Caseyesque eye for the tragi-comic circumstances of the main protagonists featured.

Cousins is undoubtedly aware of the prevailing tradition of pastoral depictions of Ireland, recalled in the impressive opening shots of *I am Belfast* that foreground the distinctive rural landscape that surrounds Belfast city, as a plane approaches a local airport. The film is thereby introduced both as a movement from the rural to the urban and a return by Cousins to the city of his birth and childhood, and it is the urban space that predominates from here on.

In terms of stylistic approach, Cousins's innovative work comes closest to the essay film form, rather than documentary. Laura Rascaroli's description of the essay film is particularly relevant to the distinctive aesthetic evident in *I am Belfast*:

The essay film produces complex thought that at times is not grounded in reality but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. This new type of film ... no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, such as chronological sequencing or the depiction of

external phenomena. Rather, it gives free reign to the imagination, with all its artistic potentiality. (Rascaroli 2008: 27)

This imaginative freedom is evident in Cousins's innovative updating of one of the most familiar tropes in representations of Ireland: the personification of places and indeed the entire island as a woman. Dating from the earliest Gaelic descriptions of the island, and indeed evident in the origins of the Irish form of the island's name, Éire (from Ériu, mythological daughter of Ernmas of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the eponymous matron goddess of Ireland), this trope has been reworked over centuries through the Gaelic Aisling genre and in the work of W.B. Yeats (*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*) and Patrick Pearse ("Mise Éire"). For Cousins, this figure is reimagined as a 10,000 year old (approximately the date of the first human settlements in Ireland) woman (Helena Bereen) who claims to be Belfast city itself and takes the filmmaker on a journey through time and space, recounting its historical development while travelling through its distinctive streets and landscape. In the process, Cousins offers one of the most innovative studies of an Irish city; his film is partly a paean to its people, language and culture, partly an impressive rendering of the distinctive colours and shapes one finds while walking the streets of Belfast, and partly a hopeful song to a future without bigotry and division.

As song, the film is as alert to the aural as the visual and indeed our guide's recollections begin by encouraging the viewer to listen to the voices of the city, voices from both the past and present who offer their recollections and anecdotes while rendering the distinctive Belfast accent and humour ("Our definition of love when we were children was, it was jam running down your back and you couldn't get round to to lick it"). These voices anticipate the images and extraordinary characters to come.

Cousins is fortunate to have collaborators such as acclaimed cinematographer Christopher Doyle and composer David Holmes who visually and aurally complement Cousins' own refreshing and engaging dialogue with the elderly woman as he travels across the city and into its past. Few previous films have managed to render the distinctive architecture and colours of Belfast as effectively; a "colour study ... a plan for a painting of Belfast, of me, a self-portrait" our guides remarks. There is also a patience to the film's pacing that allows the viewer to fully appreciate the film's aesthetic achievement.

While Dublin may predominate in representations of urban Ireland in film, Belfast has also featured prominently, though the city is still unfortunately primarily associated in film and television with recurring generic depictions of the Troubles and its aftermath; even where directors have taken more comedic approaches following the Good Friday Agreement – *Divorcing Jack* (1998), *An Everlasting Piece* (2000), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2000) – the shadow of the Troubles still looms large within the diegesis. Cousins, despite his own stated reluctance, does not shy away from confronting the legacy of Belfast's traumatic and violent past. Indeed, he engages directly with some of the most disturbing events, including the horrific bombing of McGurk's Bar in 1971 in which 15 civilians were killed and a further 17 seriously injured. However, his primary focus throughout *I am Belfast* is the contemporary city and its inhabitants.

Above all, Cousins is keen to foreground the visual and aural richness of Belfast city, finding moments of beauty and resonance (particularly with film) in the most ordinary (a woman crossing the street with her child throws a shadow that reminds him of Hitchcock's *Marnie*; "Shall we make a musical about the New Lodge?"). In Cousins' rendering of the seemingly ordinary and banal, his film is reminiscent of the work of a director he greatly admired, Abbas Kiarostami. His description of Kiarostami's "wholly distinctive approach to cinema" seems equally relevant to the exploration undertaken within *I am Belfast*: "the

examination of the relationship between the unpredictable flow of real life on one hand and the artworks that try to construct a shape out of it on the other” (Cousins 2013: 441). For Cousins so much of Belfast is a stage, or a frame, and he fills the film with doorways, windows, arches to illustrate. He even manages to find a peculiar beauty in the play of light and colour on the “peace walls” that continue to divide communities across the city – more now even than during the height of the Troubles.

While *I am Belfast* includes archival footage to incorporate events during the Troubles into its narrative, the film’s principal focus is on Belfast today and the hope that may lie in the future. Cousins films the mock-up of McGurk’s bar created under a Belfast underpass in 2011 and ponders the possibility of a different encounter between “salt and sweet” (a reference to the meaning of the name of one of Belfast’s rivers), Protestant and Catholic, beyond the traumatic legacies of the past. He personifies this evocatively in an imagined funeral of the “last bigot in Belfast”, and an upbeat funeral procession is featured towards the film’s close. It is here perhaps that the key message and achievement of *I am Belfast* lies, in its creative imagining of a time when “salt and sweet” can move beyond the painful legacies of the past and take pride in the spaces and people who populate the city they inhabit.

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The Tragedy of the Commons: *Atlantic* (Risteard Ó'Domhnaill 2016)

Eileen Culloty

In his seminal essay “The Tragedy of the Commons”, Garrett Hardin (1968) examined how unregulated access to a finite resource induces self-interested behaviour that ultimately destroys that resource. Reckless overfishing is a classic example. Hardin proposed two solutions to preserve sustainability: either the commons is privatised or state regulation is imposed. In Risteard Ó'Domhnaill's *Atlantic* we see why both solutions can fail.

Atlantic is a story of resource mismanagement and the contrasting fate of fishing communities in Ireland, Canada, and Norway. Recalling Ó'Domhnaill's debut documentary *The Pipe* (2010), about Rossport's controversial Shell pipeline, *Atlantic* weaves together a narrative that sets globalisation against national sovereignty, industrial expansion against environmental degradation, and political opportunism against community decline. Ó'Domhnaill punctuates his polemic with scenes of harsh Atlantic beauty; long rolling swells gather in the open sea, snow covered fjords protrude along the Norwegian coast, and seabirds swoop and dive above it all.

In the prologue, narrator Brendan Gleeson sets a doleful tone reciting “Lines To The Ocean” by Martha Lavinia Hoffman:

*Old Ocean, none knoweth thy story;
Man cannot thy secrets unfold,
Thy blue waves sing songs of thy glory
But where are thy treasures untold?*

“Where are thy treasures untold?” acts as an epithet for the decimated fishing communities of Newfoundland and Ireland. In contrast, Norway's vibrant industry sustains generations of fishermen in their coastal towns and villages. To explain these differences, Ó'Domhnaill uses archive news footage to trace the impact of key political decisions in each country. In parallel to this political history, the film derives much of its force from its three fishermen protagonists. In Newfoundland, Charlie Kane sits in his seaside home where a once booming village is now dotted with abandoned houses and idle boats. He recalls how industrial overfishing closed the cod fishery and mourns the loss of heritage as the traditional trade is no longer passed on from father to son. With the discovery of offshore oil, Charlie's sons continue to make a living on the water, although they fear that oil and the income it provides will soon run out.

Off the Donegal coast, Jerry Early is filmed working his modest boat. He points inland to the village where he sees little future and points out to the horizon where foreign supertrawlers – “a city of lights” – Hoover up an enormous catch and illegally discard tonnes of dead fish. Jerry is only briefly filmed on land when he appears in court for illegally using a net “with the potential to catch a salmon”. He accepts his guilt but, considering the misconduct of the supertrawlers, rejects the legitimacy of his conviction. In Norway, the gregarious Bjørnar Nicolaisen hauls his large catch onboard while his sons and neighbours fish around him. Although Bjørnar worries about the environmental impact of oil exploration, the actions of successive Norwegian governments and the commitment of community campaigners give him hope that the fishing grounds will be protected.

The Politics of the Sea

Norway is Ó'Domhnaill's model for what Ireland and the Irish fishing industry could have been; a country that asserts sovereignty over its natural resources to serve the interests of its people. Norway negotiated with the oil companies to secure a 50 per cent state share in exploitation licenses. In Ireland, Seán Lemass gave away these rights for the astoundingly low sum of £500. Norway remained outside the European Economic Community (EEC) to retain fishing rights in its territorial waters. Ireland joined the EEC and sacrificed these rights in exchange for favourable terms for agriculture. The result, as skipper Máirtín Éanna O'Conghaile says, is that "fishing isn't done at sea anymore; it's done at tables in Brussels".

It is not surprising that Ireland surrendered fishing rights for agricultural gains given the relative size of each sector. Moreover, the Irish fishing industry was never comparable in scale to the industries in Canada or Norway and critics of the film will no doubt question the ease with which Ó'Domhnaill makes national comparisons. The deeper point, however, is about Ireland's lack of political and social vision. Ireland's fishing communities feel neglected because they have been. At the time of the EEC negotiations, the Junior Minister for Fisheries, Brian Lenihan, noted that there were not enough fishermen to "elect one Fianna Fáil TD on the first count in a five-seat constituency" (qtd. in Mac Conlomaire, 2006).

If Norway is Ó'Domhnaill's model for what could have been, Newfoundland is his cautionary tale. Overfishing in the Newfoundland Grand Banks, once the world's most productive fishing grounds, brought cod stocks to the point of collapse in the early 1990s. Startling news footage shows angry fishermen storming the news conference in which Federal Minister John Crosbie announced an immediate moratorium on cod fishing. Some ten years later, this angry scene is reversed as the Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, Daniel Williams, is hailed as a hero for negotiating a deal allowing Newfoundland to keep all offshore oil revenues. In Ireland, political heroes are harder to find. In the 1970s, Labour's Justin Keating introduces regulations to return potential oil revenues to the state; his work is later undone by Fianna Fáil's Ray Burke and Bertie Ahern. Younger generations familiar with more recent forms of political mismanagement are likely to find to common ground with the deep-seated grievances of Ireland's coastal communities.

Sovereignty and the Environment

With nearly 90 per cent of global fish stocks either fully fished or overfished (FAO 2016), *Atlantic* tells a bleak and hugely important story. As such, it meets Paula Willoquet-Maricondi's (2010:10) definition of an eco-critical film, which plays "an active role in fostering environmental awareness, conservation, and political action". However, Ó'Domhnaill relies heavily on the concept of national sovereignty while the ecological catastrophe of industrial fishing runs deeper than national politics and national rights. In his influential study *The End of the Line*, Charles Clover (2004:317) makes clear that overfishing is a concern for all citizens because "their birth-right, a healthy ecosystem, has been stolen". Here, Clover speaks on behalf of the global commons and this voice is regrettably absent in *Atlantic*.

Although the future of the oceans and the future of fishing communities are interrelated, from an ecological perspective they are not necessarily the same cause. As Andrew Dobson (2007) cogently argues in *Green Political Thought*, ecological politics does

not sit with an ideology of industrial expansion whether that expansion is advocated by market-driven capitalism or state-driven socialism. On this point, *Atlantic* is unclear about whether the tragedy of Ireland's Atlantic Ocean is the ecological disaster of overfishing or the fact Irish fishermen have been unable to exploit Irish waters to the same degree as their European counterparts. For many Irish fishermen, the latter view seems to dominate their thinking.

When fishermen refer to the foreign "rape" of Irish waters, as they do in *Atlantic*, it is a nationalistic, rather than environmental, expression of loss and rage. Harry Browne (2008:47) in *The Dublin Review* encapsulates this perspective: "if the Spanish fleet has been committing concentrated rape, then Irish fishermen see themselves as mere flashers". To counterbalance this rhetoric, the film would benefit enormously from contextualising the sustainability of Norwegian fisheries. Norway is a model not simply because it supports a native industry over a globalised one, but because Norway is a leading exponent of sustainable fishing. The cod that floundered in Newfoundland thrives in Norway due not only to state regulation but the cooperation of fishermen for a mutual goal. In expounding the tragedy of the commons, Hardin neglected to consider that individuals might co-operate.

Co-operation was also crucial to the development of Ó'Domhnaill film. Unable to secure official funding – "I hit a brick wall. There was no real appetite for this kind of a story" (qtd. in Brosnan, 2016) – Ó'Domhnaill raised an impressive €56,000 from two crowd-funding campaigns. The Irish Film Board subsequently matched this figure and contributions from broadcasters in Canada and Norway brought the budget to €235,000. In addition to a screening on RTÉ, the Marine Institute of Ireland has sponsored educational screenings across the country.

Atlantic deserves a wide Irish audience if only to highlight our willful ignorance of the seas that surround us. Tourism campaigns invite us to imagine the quaint villages and picturesque vistas of the "Wild Atlantic Way". We are rarely asked to think about the floating factories that operate, legally and illegally, a few miles out at sea. In 2015, the world's two largest supertrawlers – the Annelies Ilena (14,055 gross tonnage) and the Margiris (9,499 gross tonnage) – trawled off the Irish coast; both have been hunted out of territorial waters elsewhere. Much of the seafood we consume is imported while restaurants and celebrity chefs promote fish with little thought for sustainability. Thinking of the supertrawlers Máirtín Éanna O'Conghaile says in *Atlantic*, "we'll just have to put up with it for the moment – until Ireland gets some politician who's brave enough to stand up to them." Perhaps, we should not wait for a politician.

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***The Young Offenders* (Peter Foott, 2016)**

Philip Devine

When confronted with the task of adapting words to accompany numerous canonical Irish airs, bard Thomas Moore stated that "The poet who would follow the various sentiments which they express, must feel and understand that rapid fluctuation of spirits, that unaccountable mixture of gloom and levity, which composes the character of my countrymen, and has deeply tinged their music" (1850: 216). Moore's dualistic conception of Irishness manifests itself in a schizophrenic national cultural impulse which places tragedy and light-heartedness side-by-side. It is the same schismatic, cheerful melancholia which can be found, for example, in tonally inconsistent Irish institution *The Late Late Show* (RTE 1962-), which as part of the same Friday night entertainment platform is permitted to broadcast comedic segments featuring the likes of a celebrity impressionist in one slot and an interview with a family recently bereaved by suicide in another (RTE 2009). This inclination buried within the national character also means that even the broadest of Irish comic capers, *The Young Offenders*, is imbued with a hint of sobering social realism. As announced by the caption placed over a panoramic wide-shot of Cork City at its opening, the film is inspired by real-life events, specifically that of Ireland's largest ever cocaine seizure which occurred when a boat carrying the drug capsized off the coast of West Cork in 2007. The story follows two dunderheaded working-class teenagers, Conor (Alex Murphy) and Jock (Chris Walley), who upon hearing that one of these bales of cocaine is missing, set off on a coming of age bicycle trip to locate the drug while pursued by the petty-crime obsessed Sergeant Healy (Dominic MacHale). The fact that the film is grounded in reality, albeit tenuously, is responsible for its most comedic and deceptively affecting moments which grow out of its truthful sense of place and its well-observed sense of character, even if these elements exist amid a host of hackneyed gags. Indeed, the film too often aims for the cheapest laugh, its aesthetic reflecting writer/director Peter Foott's origins in broad TV comedy, symptoms of which can also be found in the manner that its story beats are hammered home by its at times overbearing soundtrack. Yet, through the barrage of surface noise emerges a surprisingly deft humanity and organic comedy which at least intermittently belies the brash and unsophisticated pitch of the narrative.

The protagonists' buddy relationship and their relationships with their respective families are wisely placed at the core of the film which serves to anchor its farce in emotional reality. Both victims of parental bereavement, the duo are described as being from "Shitty one-parent families", with Conor living and working with his fishmonger mother Mairead

(Hilary Rose) and Jock sharing a house with his abusive, alcoholic father (Michael Sands). As is often the case with buddy films, their bond is drawn in “bromantic” terms and is largely played for easy laughs, but as evidenced by a scene in which Conor teaches Jock how to swim, Foott also transmits an unexpectedly poignant portrait of teenage friendship, in this case by intercutting their interaction with images of shared formative moments. The fraternal wholesomeness of this relationship is refreshing with the pair's innocence apparent in how they mythologize their caper, elevating their pursuit of the missing Cocaine to a mythical, childlike search for “Treasure”. Thus, as the film progresses it becomes evident that the cat-and-mouse game they play with Sergeant Healy exemplifies the ritual, myth-making and brotherhood through which they escape the powerlessness of their home life and the drudgery of working-class masculinity's often limiting and corrosive milieu.

Maleness in *The Young Offenders* is predominantly represented by maladjusted characters such as the obsessive workaholic Sergeant Healy, and the drunk, angry farmer (Pascal Scott) who at one point harbours the “on the lam” duo. The farmer can be interpreted as part of a lineage of drunken Irish archetypes, illustrated by the fact that he remains unnamed. However, when revealed to be estranged from his adult children he is shown to possess an underlying loneliness in common with Sergeant Healy, a concept which is addressed in a montage which ties these flawed male figures together. Conor's voiceover alludes to both characters as locked in a cycle of isolation leading them to bury their emotions in work and alcohol respectively before he explicitly stresses the importance of expressivity through “Picking up the phone”. By emphasizing the power of human connection and communication, Conor and Jock's friendship, itself built upon idiotic repartee, is shown to be all that separates them from these dysfunctional representatives of masculinity. This notion is then reinforced by Jock's recourse to alcohol, his behaviour echoing that of his father (who is characterised in undeniably archetypal terms), following his inevitable, inevitably temporary, alienation from Conor at the end of act two. This scene cements the film's leitmotif which indirectly posits social marginalisation as a root cause of social problems while simultaneously pathologizing Jock by giving credence to the idea of the existence of inherent or inherited anti-social tendencies among working-class males. Thus, *The Young Offenders* both embraces and rejects the Irish cultural trend in which anti-social behaviour among this cohort is “pathologized as a hereditary or hormonal disposition to crime, violence and drug and alcohol abuse” (O'Brien 2014: 129). Yet, as its male characters are given a modicum of psychology, by the reductive standards of the genre at least, the film should be interpreted as a clumsy progression away from archetypal characterizations of working-class Irish masculinity.

Similarly, Conor's Mother is another iteration of the “Irish Mammy”, her tough love an undoubted source for good in her son's life with her dominant maternal presence in the narrative displayed in how she adopts Jock at its conclusion, thereby formalising the protagonists' brotherhood. Although, a former teenage mother who has a contentious relationship with her son and who struggles with the idea of motherhood, Mairead is also portrayed in a manner that humanises and subverts the “Mammy” archetype. This is exemplified by a scene late in the film in which she and Conor highlight the other's failings while admitting their own. Their exchange undermines the familiar concept of doting yet dogmatic maternal Irishness and therefore in his characterisation of Mairead, the filmmaker can once again be seen to complicate while simultaneously playing into Irish archetypes. As Conor and his Mother obliquely express their love for each other across the kitchen table their dialogue is cloaked in a palpable warmth and effortless wit, and it is in these moments, when language overtakes the pantomime which prevails throughout, that Foott's film, as well as being at its most alive is also at its most humorous.

This notion extends to Conor and Jock as a comedy double-act as the film thrives on the occasions when its well-worn plot is secondary and when its main characters are in dialogue with each other. The music of their Cork accented Hiberno-English in these largely improvised scenes (Brady 2016) is central to their functioning as sporadic comedic highlights with Murphy and Walley's naturalistic riffing a joy to behold. One such scene details Jock, who while conversing with Conor draws parallels between his relationship with nemesis Sergeant Healy and that of "De Niro and Pacino" in Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995). Jock then proceeds to rehearse his performance while receiving acting critique from Conor, prior to attempting to recreate the L.A. set films mid-narrative meeting between its competing cop and criminal in a Cork cafe. It is a hilarious (but within the film, unfortunately rare) occasion when the quality of the actors' delivery is complemented by equally sharp comedy writing at script level. In combining these elements, the sequence can be considered as the film's zenith; a canny intertextual, self-reflexive flourish that is not merely an excuse for arch cinephilia but an ingredient that is plausibly congruent with Jock's cultural diet, adding colour to his character while also creating a hilarious and thoroughly satisfying meta-cinematic moment.

On the other hand, the film's self-aware tendencies are often responsible for its more tired, uninspiring scenes, such as its denouement in which virtually the entire cast of characters descend on Conor's house for a farcical kitchen standoff. This scene crystallises the playful, faux deconstructionist tone, now painfully ever-present in comedic Irish narratives including the anachronistic *Mrs Browns Boys* (BBC 2011-), a text which, thankfully, even at its most stale and puerile Foott's film towers above. Yet, the filmmaker still strains every sinew to wring broad laughs from the narrative such as in this concluding sequence which only serves to obstruct some of the organic humour which flows from Conor and Jock's interaction. Foott's penchant for creating moments rather than grounded, fully formed scenes, made him a perfect choice as director of the music video for the Rubberbandits "Horse Outside" (2010), providing the satirical, socially conscious group with their sole mainstream success. Thus, it can be argued that the film functions as "Rubberbandits-lite" in its focus on Irish urban youth with Foott substituting Limerick City for Cork and the articulate colloquial poetry of the bandits' patter for the poetry of Conor and Jock's colloquial inarticulacy. The incidental and colloquial are this film's strength but these elements and their associated potential for social commentary and truthful, nuanced comedy are often squandered by the desire to entertain the widest possible audience.

While it would be inaccurate to suggest that *The Young Offenders* was conceived as anything other than a broad comedy, it is reflective of a certain conception of Irishness, a notion that is reinforced by its surprise success at the Irish Box office – taking in over €1 Million. (Scannain 2017) Its awkward, alternately broadly farcical/social realist tone perhaps reflects the national character in a way in which a navel-gazing, conscious attempt at a state of the nation could not. While the film's characteristically Irish nature can be seen to contribute to its interesting alternating timbre, it is also responsible for another Irish tendency in that it overestimates just how much "craic" is to be found within it. Yet, the sporadically nuanced moments conjured by its lead actors and which grow out of its dualistic tone, serve to elevate it above other popular, banal Irish capers such as 2004's *Man About Dog* (Paddy Breathnach). As Thomas Moore put it "Even in [its] liveliest strains we find some melancholy note intrude ... which throws shade as it passes, and makes even mirth interesting" (1850: 216). It is unfortunate, however, that the film's distinctive minor key elements are accompanied by some majorly derivative comedy.

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The Horrors of Grief: *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin 2016)

Loreta Goff

Noting the growing number of Irish horror films in 2013, Emma Radley argued that when a national cinema is disrupted with genre films "traditional understandings of representation and meaning (of the national, cinematic, and indeed generic) are transformed and remade", thus leaving the space for a "rearticulated subject of Irish cinema" (111). Considering this, not only are "traditional" conceptions of Irish National Cinema reconfigured by these films, so too are the lines of generic convention often blurred. This certainly holds true for the horror films that were released in 2016 with (at least partial) funding from the Irish Film Board. These include the eco-horror *Without Name* (Lorcan Finnegan), the genre-blending emotional rollercoaster *I Am Not a Serial Killer* (Billy O'Brien) and *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin), a horror film that also reads as an allegorical drama. These films follow certain tropes of horror, blending naturalism with the supernatural and tapping into "the deepest unease at the core of human existence" (Prince 3). However, the way that the unease — universal concerns from the environment to aging — at the heart of each film is dealt with results in a hybridisation of its genre. In the case of *A Dark Song*, it is the horrors of grief that drive the film, but director Liam Gavin grounds these with a "social-realist" approach that marks his film, as he described it in an interview with *Scannain*, as "elevated genre".

A Dark Song takes a close look at the grieving process of Sophia Howard (Catherine Walker) after the death of her young son, Jack. In the film, Sophia rents a vacant, stately house in the remote Welsh countryside (shot in Wicklow) that has gone into disrepair and hires an occultist, Joseph Solomon (Steve Oram) to perform an Abramelin invocation with the

hope of being able to speak to her dead son once again, or so she claims at the start. This ritual, which in reality takes somewhere between a year and eighteen months to complete, occurs over a period of about eight months in the film, and Gavin gives proper attention to its process. The house is sealed off, with only Sophie and Joseph inside, and this seal cannot be broken until the invocation is complete, with a warning from Joseph that, now that they have begun, “everything has consequences”. Following this, Sophie must have complete faith in Joseph, obeying all his rules, and he must rely on her honesty with him about everything (though neither can really be trusted as Joseph, who also struggles with alcoholism, tricks Sophie, who is holding back her own secrets).

Part of the process is a number of chambers — which can also be read as equating to the five stages of grief — which Sophie must master in order to strengthen the merging of worlds to achieve the ultimate goal, the appearance of a Guardian Angel who can be asked a favour. In the process of mastering these chambers we see Sophie repeatedly fasting, writing scriptures and working at shifting her consciousness, purifying her body and mind through torturous rituals of sleep deprivation, being doused in cold water, drinking blood and remaining still in one place for days on end, even relieving herself in the spot and remaining seated in it. While these scenes, which account for nearly the first two-thirds of the film, are not scary in a traditional horror sense, they are uncomfortable, generating a sense of unease, and reveal the depths of Sophie’s grief and the guilt that accompanies it, made visible through all that she is willing to subject herself to. At this stage in the film, Sophie is very much figuratively haunted by her dead son, who appears in her dreams and whose toy appears to take on a life of its own, falling off tables and going missing — suggesting a more literal haunting of the house to come.

In addition to Sophie’s grief and guilt, her determination to succeed at this ritual shines through. It has become her purpose (as it is revealed that she spent time institutionalised when she was doing nothing in the immediate aftermath of Jack’s death, and now she is doing something about it). It is interesting then, given this determination, that she refuses to complete the chamber of forgiveness, and even opts to drink a glass of Joseph’s blood in lieu of this. Forgiveness arguably goes hand in hand with the final stage of grief, acceptance, in the case that someone or something is at fault. Sophie’s inability to even consider completing this chamber belies the fact that she is nowhere near the end of her grieving process and, as the ritual continues to fail and the house becomes more confined and isolating (shades are often drawn to create a dark atmosphere and we no longer see the outdoors and expansive sky that featured prominently at the start of the film), the two leads lash out at one another with distrust and raw emotion, oscillating the tension and power between the two. As the process (and the characters) begins to break down, we finally learn Sophie’s truth: her son was taken from his daycare three years prior and killed as part of a ritual. Though she believes that those responsible were teenagers messing with the occult, the killers were never found and Sophie plans to ask her Guardian Angel to enact vengeance on them, hoping they will suffer horrible deaths. In a sense, Sophie has become the same as her son’s murderers, turning to ritual and death, further reflecting the guilt she feels in her grieving process. This revelation, and the persistence with the ritual that follows, unleashes the traditional horror elements of the film, with dark spirits emerging in the house — some taking on the voice of Sophie’s son — along with eerie sounds and bloody handprints. In this sense, Sophie is trapped and tortured by her grief, just as she is by the house and occult ritual. Her inability to overcome it results in her horror.

While the film is writer/director Liam Gavin’s feature debut, the leads of this two-hander are no strangers to Irish horror: Walker featured in *Dark Touch* (Marina de Van, 2013) and Oram in *The Canal* (Ivan Kavanagh, 2014) (reviewed by Ciara Barrett in *Estudios*

Irlandeses 11). Barrett noted “the film’s cultural dis-location” — a statement also true, to a degree, of *A Dark Song*. Reflecting Gavin’s own background (he is from North Wales, but has Irish parents) and the film’s funding (principally from Ireland, but with some from Film Cymru Wales), the film hybridises Wales and Ireland (also using a blend of Irish and English actors with accompanying accents) into a remote countryside location, largely removed from culturally specific national or local ties. Noting his own time spent between Ireland and Wales, Gavin focuses on their similarity, rather than anything marking them as different: “the two countries don’t feel like they are different countries” (Murphy). However, despite the nationally-detached feel, Irishness can be read into elements of Sophie’s grieving process in *A Dark Song*.

The film opens with the text of Psalm 91:11 — “for he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways” — written across a black screen, adding a tenor of Catholicism from the start. While the occult ritual that follows wholly breaks from religion, a religious theme runs throughout the film and comes full circle in its conclusion. Sophie and Joseph directly confront the subject of religion, questioning whether or not they have forsaken it, or it them. Sophie’s inability to forgive, and strong desire for vengeance, precludes her from finding true solace in Catholicism, which takes an opposite stance to hers on these matters. While this leads her away from religion and into the practice of dark magic, perhaps reflective of a contemporary crisis of religion and the lessening power of Catholicism in Ireland, the outcome of Sophie’s process once again aligns her with the tenets of the religion. Sophie remains immersed in the horrors of her grief — both figuratively and literally — throughout the film until the moment she utters the words: “I’m sorry”. It is only after she is able to express this, asking for forgiveness from her own guilt (however misplaced it may be), that the spirits tormenting desist and her Guardian Angel appears in a burst of bright light and golden petals — dazzling imagery that removes all sense of horror. While it can still be assumed that the angel has been conjured through the supernatural ritual, it is a being associated with religion and its appearance only after her request for forgiveness alludes to the fact that religious ritual may also be at play here (with Sophie’s suffering at the hands of the Abramelin process standing in for her penitence). What is really responsible for the appearance of this angel? Similarly, when she is finally given the chance to speak with the angel, it is no longer vengeance that Sophie desires, but the ability to forgive. This marks the end of Sophie’s grieving process, her final acceptance of her son’s death and ability to move forward with her life by forgiving his murderers and herself, releasing her drive for revenge. It is this conclusion that fully marks the film as a moral allegory for the process of grief and benefits of forgiveness, again strongly linking the film with principles of Catholicism.

Equally, the ghost-like appearances of Sophie’s son — from his toy to her dreams and the dark spirit’s appropriation of his voice — reflect a possible link with the “ghosts” of Ireland’s past. In *The Politics of Irish Memory*, Emilie Pine considers the use of ghosts — the past appearing in the present — in Irish drama and film as reflective of “the tension between forgetting and remembering that runs through Irish remembrance culture” (154). In the film, Sophie is trapped by the memories of her son and his death, made manifest through his various apparitions. However, she equally becomes trapped by the house, unable to leave the confines of the seal, and is tortured by it, suffering for the ritual. Interestingly, the house — a country manor that has fallen into disuse — connotes the Anglo-Irish Big Houses that were a trademark of Ireland’s colonial past. While the setting of this manor adds to the gothic horror aesthetic of the film — with spacious, high-ceilinged shadowy rooms lit by candles — it also evokes this memory of colonisation in post-colonial Ireland, with the house itself acting as a material “ghost” of the past. In this way, while Sophie is haunted by her son and the house more literally as a result, the manor can also represent a more figurative haunting of Irish

memory and the “tension between forgetting and remembering” that Pine discusses. Just as Sophie struggles to come to terms with her ghosts, ultimately moving forward with a resolution of forgiveness, so too has Ireland had to come to terms with its own historical traumas.

A Dark Song blurs lines — the supernatural with realism, black magic with religion — and, in doing so, also blurs the lines of genre, resulting in an allegorical film that is a hybrid of horror and drama. Sophie’s difficult grieving process, which drives the film, is acted out through the process of the Abramelin ritual, manifesting the film’s horror and forcing the viewers to struggle alongside Sophie, following in close, often uncomfortable, detail her suffering and fluctuating emotion before reaching the pinnacle of acceptance and forgiveness. While the supernatural elements of the ritual certainly move the film into horror, the very real horrors of grief are also heavily present throughout this film and can be universally recognised. This universality, and the film’s overall lack of national (or local) cultural specificity tying it closely to a particular place, means that *A Dark Song* will appeal to international audiences. However, this does not mean that culturally specific elements cannot be perceived by local audiences — as in the reading of the film with particular attention to Catholicism and the manor house in an Irish context. After all, the ghosts that haunt us in horror films often reflect the ghosts of memory that figuratively haunt us, individually or nationally.

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Turn and Face the Strange: *Sing Street* (John Carney 2016)

Harvey O'Brien

The death of David Bowie weighed heavily over 2016. It was a year of many “celebrity” deaths that brought something of the taste of mortality to a generation looking back to the pre-millennial years as their living past in a world that increasingly knows those days only as history. A prevailing theme in the obituaries and editorials that surfaced after Bowie’s death was his chameleon quality – his capacity for change and his determination to never remain fixed in one persona or identity no matter how beloved. Somehow through Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, The Thin White Duke, and The Man Who Fell to Earth to the Tin Machine, the Earthling and the Blackstar, the only consistency was “David Bowie”, who, in the end, as David Jones’ first creation, seemed as clear and distinct a personality as any persona he had played with over time.

A key scene in John Carney’s *Sing Street* involves the direct evocation of Bowie when 15 year old schoolboy Conor Lalor (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) has arrived at his Christian Brothers’ School in Dublin’s inner city wearing make-up. He is confronted by the domineering Brother Baxter (Don Wycherly), who is unimpressed by Conor’s argument that men in the 18th century wore make-up and that he needs to look like this to give his newly-formed band a visual identity (grounded in new romantic exoticism at this point). Brother Baxter somewhat ambiguously tells him he’s pretty enough without make up and invites him to use his private bathroom to wash his face. When Conor refuses politely and opts to return to class, Baxter chases him down the corridor, drags him into the school toilets and violently plunges the boy’s face into the sink to wash him. “No more Ziggy Stardust”, says Baxter with a vehemence that may be as much closeted desire as flat out institutionalised bullying.

Sing Street derives much of its humour and its symbolism from the image of change and the changes in image undergone by its teenaged protagonists as they attempt to become musicians. This is done at least initially in order for Conor to impress Rafina (Lucy Boynton) a 16 year old girl who lives across the road from the school and dreams of being a model and going to London. Each time we see her, she looks different, first a Joan Jett/girl rocker in denim, then Madonna with jewelry crosses and a bow in her hair, then new wave Chinoiserie, then later a Lea Thompson 1950s fantasy inspired by the 1985 retro-conscious oedipal text extraordinaire *Back to the Future*, eventually even showing her bare face as a bruised teenage girl with shattered dreams. Conor tells Rafina he is in a band just to get her phone number, then has to start one, and though he begins by imitating others, specifically Duran Duran, he is quickly directed to taking the risk of having an original voice, a voice that Rafina hears and begins to respond to. As Conor and his classmates write more and more songs and he learns more about music from his elder brother, the guru-like pothead Brendan (Jack Reynor), Conor arrives at the school sporting not only make up, but later a Curehead look, then a new romantic fringe, then a Hall & Oates mullet. Each song is different, each mood is different, each experience of writing and performing in their original voice transforms the band, chameleon-like, in a search for a self that was there all along. Like Bowie, it is not the individual changes that matter, because time can change them, but they can’t trace time.

As Rafina and Conor constantly change their look, their feelings for one another grow stronger, and yet there are hidden truths behind both that will, eventually come to the surface. As Rafina is finally brought to earth with the realisation that her adult boyfriend’s promises to take her to London were just a line, Conor’s initial shock at her quick abandonment of hope to a life “working in McDonalds and hanging out with a fifteen year old schoolboy” enables him

to turn his back on her resignation and proceed with his own dreams, now so near realisation, and maybe bring her with him out of the past and into the future.

Time is also a key motif in the film in broader cultural terms, the film being set in the 1980s (1985, to be exact) during the recessionary era from which Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* emerged to become Alan Parker's film in 1991. 2016 was also, it so happens, the 25th anniversary of that film, which was being celebrated at the time as a beloved nostalgic object constituting a type of cinematic authenticity that had passed during the years of the Celtic Tiger. Parker's film was, like Carney's, infused with a combination of nostalgia and contemporary perspective. A film built around 1960s soul music in the consciously incongruous setting of late eighties/early 90s Dublin "urban decay", the film served a simultaneously affirmational and critical function as a portrayal of Irish cultural identity in 1991, a mixture of hope and despair, imagining and creation even in the face of the possibility of failure (measured on what terms, the film asked?).

Sing Street also invokes the spectre of failure, but figures it in terms of the risks of facing the future. Rock and roll is risk, we are told – you run the risk of being ridiculed for being yourself – and so is love: stepping out of the comfort zone and into the possibilities of self-creation in the face of the crushing weight of conformity, obedience, and tradition that Irish culture is seen to feed upon in a most cannibalistic and repressive way. The issue of legacy hangs heavily over the film, as Conor and his siblings watch the disintegration of their parents' marriage (in a nod to the cinematic past that does not deny the actor her abilities, the casting of Maria Doyle Kennedy from *The Commitments*, in the role of Conor's mother cannot be entirely without meaning). The older brother, Brendan, is 21, but acknowledges his own disappointments. He is eloquent, educated, and knowledgeable, but housebound in drug-addled hopelessness – doling out advice to his younger brother, whom he loves, but feeling lost in himself. He shares his parents' story with Conor from a place of despair of his own – a story of two Irish teenagers who had to get married because they wanted to have sex, but didn't love each other and then found themselves in a rented flat with a screaming baby (him). Several scenes in the film repeat the motif of the Lalor children drowning out the sounds of their parents' bitter battle by listening to music, sometimes dancing, sometimes desperate, sometimes, as in the film's opening scene, as an inspiration to self-expression. Here Conor sits along strumming his guitar, using the words his parents hurl at each other in anger as lyrics for an imaginary song, literally repeating them. By the end of the film he has learned to absorb the hurts that surround him and to reject the fatalism of Irish destiny. You do not have to do as your parents do, the film tells us, and even if you make missteps, or change your mind about how you go forward, the aim should be the hopeful future, not wallowing in the traumatic past.

At the climactic disco, he sings a scabrous song inspired by Brother Baxter: "See your curtain's falling/so take your bow. You're stuck in the past/I'm writing the future." Conor has come to own his rebellion and to forge his identity, not necessarily by simple reactionary defiance, but by acts of creation and recreation that reshape the patterns and the moulds that have to date given him his shape. "Sometimes I pull myself apart. I shift my shape the way I change my colours," he sings, "Guess I'm a human work of art/a never-ending video, oh, oh, oh". Carney constantly confronts us with the image of the image and image culture through the film, and revels in the fascination with creation and affectation that comes with the culture of early 1980s music video and the adolescent infatuation with it. It also enjoys presenting the sense of foolish danger that comes with this kind of cosplay defiance. The scene where the band assembles for the first time to shoot "The Riddle of the Model" is a marvellously casual gathering of signifiers and signified. The "alley behind Quinnsworth" comes complete with broken plaster and a painted swastika, but the band sport a range of costumes from a child's

cowboy outfit and vampire teeth to velvet suits and make-up. The style themselves “futurist” – no nostalgia – “not looking backward, just forward” away from where they are or where their parents were to where they might be.

But it is generous with its disappointment. Brendan and Conor speculate about what their mother must be feeling as she sits soaking in the sun for a few minutes, her marriage falling apart, her home about to be sold. When Conor opts to leave, he whispers “I love you, Mum” in the dark, and even Dad (Aiden Gillen) is shown in sympathetic compositions denoting pitiable loneliness, juxtaposed with Conor’s own musings that must, dramatically, result in change. The film even has time to redeem the school bully, Barry Bray (Ian Kenny), whose homophobic provocations are denied, confronted, and rejected, and he is told by the “manager”, classmate Darren (Ben Carolan), that ultimately everyone in Sing Street (the school) is the same (subject to the same institutional disregard that the obedience-based education system offered), and that there’s more of a chance for him as the band’s roadie than joining his addict parents in squalor and violence.

The film is even able to be comparatively easy on white Ireland’s self-definition in 2016 through a 1985 filter when it comes to racial profiling. *The Commitments* had famously gone straight for the racial jugular with a deft ideological side-step. The famous speech by Jimmy Rabbitte (Robert Arkins) to the effect that the Irish were the blacks of Europe and Dubliners the blacks of Ireland and North side Dubliners the blacks of Dublin gave textual credence to the co-opting of soul music by an all-white line up of young musicians. Though academic debate about this side step would rage in other contexts, and the cultural conflation of “white” and “Irish” remains a focus for scholarly studies and a trope in itself, Carney gives the subject an airing as another identity gag. The one African-Irish student in Sing Street, Ngig (Percy Chamburuka) is assumed to be musical because of his race, and when the fledgling band go to his home to visit him, Darren asks his mother (Vera Nwabuwe), who answers the door, if this is where the coloured fella lives. The exasperated woman says “no: four doors down”, and the boys turn to leave, at which point she chides them for their stupidity. Taking the joke to the next logically masochistic ideological dressing-down, when Darren outlines the plans for the band to Ngig, he speaks slowly with exaggerated hand gestures as if the boy might not understand him, to which Ngig responds in a Dublin-African accent “What the hell is wrong with him?”. Later on, Ngig also adopts a touch of image-cultural commentary when he dresses in whiteface during the band’s Cure/Goth phase.

All of this would be rather didactic without the naturalistic acting from the young cast, who also perform the original songs, and Carney’s careful filming of their performances to establish the sense of creativity and energy that comes with young people something out for themselves. In one particularly showy but clever 360 degree camera move, he follows Conor on guitar and the rabbit-obsessed Eamon (Mark McKenna) on piano as they put music to the words of their second song to sound. The camera tracks around the front room of Eamon’s home, connoting the passing of time in space with changes in light and the sudden appearance of the other band members working the song fully into life, then back to Conor and Eamon in different clothes. It’s a Hitchcock-level camera movement with a real “did he or didn’t he” quality to it, but what it captures is that energy of the song moving forward from first steps to full performance that has even Eamon’s mother (Marcella Plunkett, sporting a denim pants suit, huge glasses, and an 80s perm when we first meet her) dancing. Like *The Commitments* and *Once* (Carney’s previous musical hit, from 2007), this Irish musical does not feature the kind of spontaneous bursting into song that characterises the classic Hollywood variety, but rather locates the expression of emotion through music and lyrics in the textual performance of song by the actors and participants as musicians. The songs are full of meaning, both in their humorous derivativeness and in the lyrics spoken, and again Carney’s use of the image

of the image is canny, and layered, and funny, but they are also framed by narrative performance and performativity: at once in and of the diegetic space.

As the film ends though, a song is performed without visible source that may represent the “stream of consciousness” lyrics Brendan has written for his younger brother and handed him on legal paper as the young man prepares to leave for England on their grandfather’s boat, Rafina alongside him. The journey is dangerous, possibly suicidal, arguably symbolic, but certainly metaphorically necessary. “You’re never gonna know if you don’t find out. You’re never gonna grow if you don’t grow now” we are told in song, and we watch in horror and hope as the weather turns and Conor and Rafina are buffeted by wind and rain as they challenge the Irish sea in the wake of a Ferry. But the image of Conor’s rain-swept face with which the film ends is not of suicidal nihilism, but exhilarated hope. “You’ll probably die” says Brendan, “But go on, anyway.” Indeed. The film is dedicated to brothers everywhere, and there is no denying that it is heartfelt, be it a fantasy, an imagining, or a worn identity: an Irish film musical full of hope and uplift from cruelty, repression, and fixedness.

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