
IRISH FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES PUBLICATIONS

THE YEAR IN REVIEW - 2018

Ciara Chambers (ed.)

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Introduction

Irish cinema and media production remains a small enterprise, in economic and industrial respects, relative to the international scene, and every year graduates of creative courses compete fiercely for jobs and funding. However, on a national level – inasmuch as this area can be determined – participants in the cultural field have offered us a great deal of hope. We can be optimistic about the international recognition received by our indigenous filmmakers and screen performers, and it is positive to hear names like Saoirse Ronan, Lenny Abrahamson, Ruth Negga, Mark O’Halloran, Carmel Winters, John Carney, Consolata Boyle, John Crowley, Emer Reynolds and Domhnall Gleeson being used far beyond our shores, not to mention the huge successes and visibility garnered by the multi-faceted work of Element Pictures. It is also encouraging that critical reviews and detailed analysis of this body of work proliferate through publications like *Film Ireland*, *Scannain* and *CinÉireann*.

Academic books are, inevitably, a little more delayed in analysing the impact of Irish screen production, but it is encouraging to see four eclectic and timely books published on diverse but relevant topics. Two belong to film studies: Barry Monahan’s *auteur* study of the work of Lenny Abrahamson, and Alison MacLeod’s vibrant exploration of Irish queer cinema. John Horgan and Roddy Flynn have usefully updated the canonical *Irish Media: A Critical History* to include the rapid expansion of media technologies post-2000. Paddy Hoey’s provocative consideration of republican media activism falls under the remit of print journalism, digital and social media. All five authors are to be commended on their significant contextualisation of the topics explored.

As well as providing thorough and thought-provoking critiques of the relevant texts, each of our reviewers has also raised significant questions about the role of Irish film and media in feeding into broader debates about the culture and politics of representation. Abigail Keating draws our attention to the limited depiction of Irish queer women on screen, speculating on whether Screen Ireland’s Six Point Plan on Gender Equality will address this gap. Eileen Culloty highlights how blogs and websites have provided an online space for exploration of the significant issues in Northern Ireland (like sustainability and gender equality) that were sidelined by a dominant focus on the peace process.

As Martin McLoone elegantly states below, “the media remain democracy’s great hope and democracy’s great threat”. So then, scholars’ critique of mainstream and alternative Irish cinema and mediascapes is charged with significant responsibility for meaningful debate in a contemporary melée of competing nationalisms and ideologies. Finally, Stephen Baker eloquently reminds us that “cinema is capable of *thinking*...with some profundity and complexity about being human”. It is important to think about the work of these artists and media producers as contributing to a discourse on modern Ireland, one that offers us a viewpoint on how we stand as individuals and groups in the twenty-first century, at personal and national levels. As we progress past the mid-point of the decade of centenaries and assess our history with an uncertain future, it is incumbent upon artists and citizens to explore notions of Irishness on the ever-evolving range of platforms now available for cultural expression. It is also vital that both national and international scholars continue to scrutinise these discussions and representations.

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Shinners, Dissos and Dissenters: Irish Republican Media Activism since the Good Friday Agreement.

Paddy Hoey.

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. 220 pp.

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Reviewer: **Eileen Culloty** (Dublin City University)

In *Shinners, Dissos and Dissenters*, Paddy Hoey provides an in-depth analysis of Irish republican media activism since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Hoey, a lecturer in media at Edge Hill University, assesses how different strands of republicanism have used newspapers, magazines, and online spaces to articulate their ideological positions. While providing a detailed historical account of republican media activism, Hoey advances important critiques of the mainstream consensus surrounding the Good Friday Agreement; the characterisation of oppositional voices as dissident extremists; and idealistic expectations about the power of digital media.

The first two critiques are closely related. As Hoey outlines it, the mainstream consensus surrounding the peace process and Good Friday Agreement left little room for debate. As the dominant or “hegemonic” force within republicanism, Sinn Féin’s move towards the mainstream marked a pivot from the republican tradition and defined the parameters of dissent. Republicans critical of the peace process and Sinn Féin were thereby characterised as dissident extremists or, in the parlance of security studies and international relations, as violent extremists. Hoey successfully undermines the latter characterisation by highlighting the activism of those who opposed the process, but not the peace. As Stephen Baker observed in his *Journalism Studies* article on the alternative press in Northern Ireland, “the dissident views of the alternative press have looked more prescient than mainstream media support for the peace deal” given the protracted political crises that followed the Good Friday Agreement (375).

Shinners, Dissos and Dissenters is a significant elaboration on Baker’s work. A key aim of the book is to reject the simplistic classifications that dominate in mainstream media coverage by investigating how dissidents created counter publics in opposition to the “propaganda” surrounding the Good Friday Agreement and “the changing focus of establishment republicanism” (21) represented by Sinn Féin. Undoubtedly, some readers will quibble with Hoey’s portrayal of dissidents and their ideological intentions. However, the book is very clearly set out as an effort to understand dissident media practices as forms of cultural production in the sense of Stuart Hall and John Fiske and as a means of challenging dominant beliefs in the Gramscian sense of contesting hegemony. Consequently, Hoey adopts a broad historical view that seeks to contextualise dissent and media activism within the “physical, ideological, and psychological spaces from which it emerges”(10). This contextual analysis is a key strength of the book.

Hoey’s third major critique concerns the enduring value of print media over digital media. Influenced by Evgeny Morozov’s (2011) critique of net-utopianism, Hoey repeatedly contests “superficial and depthless arguments” (2) about the mobilising power of social media. In so doing, he makes many interesting observations about how the shift to social media has reduced opportunities for civil interaction. In contrast to the righteous invective found on Twitter and the ideologically closed groups found on Facebook, Hoey suggests that long form journalism offered greater possibilities for engagement with opposing perspectives. As an example, he discusses the interesting case of an online magazine, *The Blanket* (2001-2008), which featured articles by republicans and loyalists opposed to the peace process.

Given the volume of recent research about polarisation and disinformation on social media, few would take issue with Hoey's argument about the limited value of social media for political deliberation. However, and allowing that the book is specifically about Irish republican activism, he is perhaps too dismissive of the potential utility of social media in other contexts. For example, the social media activism of Black Lives Matter has awakened a new generation of US activists demanding racial equality (see Taylor) and social media is a key tool for refugees and migrants to protest their conditions in detention centres (see Guida).

In the context of Northern Ireland, Hoey acknowledges that the web has brought opportunities "for a wider, more diverse range of actors to make their interventions", but maintains that "radical change has not and cannot be arrived at in this sphere" (142). Consequently, he argues that political blogs, such as Mick Fealty's non-partisan *Slugger O'Toole* (www.sluggerotoole.com), "made little deliberative difference to the structure and discussions of republicanism" (54) because they were unconnected to dissident movements and "there were few examples of the online world setting the political agenda" (55). This is perhaps a little unfair to the broader value of websites like *Slugger O'Toole*, which did not just bring together different views on the peace process but also gave voice to political issues that were sidelined such as the environment, gender equality, and so on. Thus, if Hoey maintains that republican publications made "meaningful contributions to the political public sphere" (87), it is hard to see why online publications that gave voice to marginalised issues did not.

Although the book is about media activism, it also reads as a recent history of republican ideology. Chapter 1 introduces republican media activism in the context of the public sphere and counter publics. Here, Hoey outlines some of the key arguments highlighted above. Chapters 2 and 3 examine how different strands of Irish republicanism developed and fragmented since 1998. Chapter 2 is dedicated to Sinn Féin's move towards mainstream politics while chapter three examines the grassroots organisations that gave voice to dissent against the Good Friday Agreement and Sinn Féin. In these chapters, Hoey proves to be an insightful navigator of republican ideology and its historical roots.

Chapters 4-6 examine how republican activist media transitioned from print to digital. This shift is clearly contextualised in terms of the historical repertoires of republican media activism, which Hoey traces back to the 18th century newspapers of the United Irishmen. With this rich history of media activism, Hoey argues that republicans could adapt to the new forms of online publishing with relative ease. However, Hoey reiterates the view that the internet was merely an "adjunct" channel for different strands of republican media activism.

Chapter 4 focuses on Sinn Féin's party newspaper *An Phoblacht*, which ceased its print publication in 2017. Chapter 5 examines two dissident magazines, *Fourthwrite* and the *Blanket*, which are characterised as the "mosquito press" in which "the new counter publics of Irish republicanism found a space to exist and develop" (122). Chapter 6 examines the growth of online media "(in)activism" by éirígí and the Republican Network for Unity (RNU). Here, Hoey develops an interesting analysis of how éirígí updated the historical repertoires of republican activism to tap into the anti-corporate ethos and guerrilla activist strategies of anti-globalisation movements such as Indymedia.

Chapter 7, the epilogue, carries the misleading title "Brexit, the border and nationalism's bounceback". In effect, the chapter outlines the electoral fortunes of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. As such, it takes up the theme of chapter 2 in charting Sinn Féin's movement towards the political mainstream. There is little comment on Brexit and its implications for the Irish border, but this is hardly surprising given the lack of clarity from the British government since the 2016 referendum.

Shiners, Dissos and Dissenters is a well-researched and well-written book that offers an important counterpoint to the security studies literature on republican dissidents. With its

breadth of historical insight, the book is recommended for those interested in the ideology of Irish republicanism as well as radical or alternative media practices.

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Irish Media: A Critical History.

John Horgan and Roddy Flynn.

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017. 334 pp.

ISBN: 9781846826542

Reviewer: **Martin McLoone** (Ulster University)

In terms of our media we certainly live in interesting, if disturbing times.

Two recent media items, one international and one local, illustrate this very well. Both raise fundamental issues about social media, about information dissemination and about media ethics and provide a gloomy scenario for the concept of an informed and stable democratic space. The first story was in *The Guardian* newspaper in January 2019, a piece that interviewed five people who were the victims of conspiracy theories in the USA that were largely fomented online and through social media. Some of these seem to be beyond rationality – the pizza restaurant owner who was accused of running a paedophile ring in the basement of his restaurant on behalf of Hilary Clinton, for example – and some have been around for many years – the MMR vaccine controversy that has ruined the life of the American doctor who has debunked the original evidence of a link to autism. (In the same paper a few weeks earlier, John Naughton ran a piece decrying the way in which the internet and “social media echo chambers” can enable far-right conspiracy theories that have tragic and violent consequences). The second item comes from Ireland. At the end of last year, there was a minor skirmish on Twitter over a tweet from journalist (and failed presidential candidate) Gemma O’Doherty, who lamented the “latest act of insanity against Ireland” by the political elite who “dole out citizenship to another 3,000 people today”. She was accused by many of the respondents on her timeline of pandering to the small but growing Irish “alt right” and doing so by employing the language of Trump and anti-immigration fear

mongering. Whether she intended to do this or not, it illustrates well how social media can be the foundation for conspiracy and the platform for counter charge.

These examples also show that in the age of Trump, “of fake news” and Brexit, the question of media ethics, journalistic responsibility and dispassionate reporting – indeed the question of truth itself – are under increasing challenge. I was reminded of these stories and the issues they raise after reading John Horgan and Roddy Flynn’s excellent critical history, *Irish Media* and especially their rather sombre account of where we are today in regard to media ethics.

John Horgan’s insightful and measured history of the media in Ireland was first published in 2001 and established itself as an important text in general media and journalism courses as well as an invaluable secondary/background text in film and television studies. The book was premised on the notion that the media generally both reflect and impact on society in increasingly complex ways and that by tracking the development of the media in Ireland against the country’s changing social and political circumstances, this complexity could be mapped out and better understood. This new reprint largely keeps intact the central chapters from this original publication and forms the bulk of the book’s historical overview.

Horgan’s project was to track the development of the print and broadcast media in Ireland (north and south) from the foundation of the new dispensations in 1922 until the turn of the millennium in 2000. This project proceeded chronologically, narrating the various stages of change and development in Ireland’s newspaper, radio and television industries throughout the decades of the twentieth century, especially in relation to key political, social and cultural events. By looking at the media together in this way, in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, Horgan’s study established not only a clear development narrative but also demonstrated in detail how the different media interacted with one another at various points along the way. This approach offered breadth and depth to an analysis of the media’s collective impact on the changing societies that sustained them.

Central to his argument was the fact that the media in Ireland came to play a key role in both state and nation building, in sustaining and exploring a sense of collective identity, and was therefore, never far from generating or being sucked into political controversies. Furthermore, since governments quickly came to realise the enormous influence that the media could have, the question of media policy and regulation was a constant debate throughout the years, one that became more complex as changing media technologies and patterns of ownership completely changed the nature of governments’ ability to manage, regulate or control.

Horgan is, of course, uniquely equipped to undertake such a task. He has been a participant in and an astute observer of the Irish media for over fifty years now, as both a print and broadcast journalist, a politician, a media academic who became Professor of Journalism at Dublin City University and finally, and most tellingly, as Ireland’s first Press Ombudsman. He held this post from its inception in 2007 until he retired in 2014 and in 2012, he used the Irish experience to make a much lauded intervention to the UK’s Leveson inquiry into press media ethics, an inquiry that remains essentially unresolved today in a climate which has reached new depths of suspicion and angst in Brexit UK.

In his careful chronological survey, Horgan outlines the way in which governments attempted to regulate this growing media influence, either through hands-off regulation or, when deemed necessary, through direct censorship and control. Not surprisingly, a key question for Horgan is the question of media ethics and especially the duties and rights of journalism to both reflect society as it changes but also to hold to account those with economic, social political and religious power. Media ethics were particularly challenged in the 1970s and 1980s as the violence in Northern Ireland escalated and in these chapters

Horgan outlines the complex and sometimes traumatic relationship between the media and the state especially in the fields of news and current affairs reporting.

In this new revised and updated version of the original book, Horgan has been joined as co-author by his DCU colleague Roddy Flynn and again, given that Flynn has been at the forefront of academic studies into Irish media ownership and regulation for two decades now, this has proved an altogether appropriate collaboration. The original central chapters from the 2001 book are retained here with only minor revisions and some necessary updates. The authors have usefully “topped and tailed” these original chapters with a new first chapter that considers the state of the Irish media in the years before independence and partition and three further chapters that explore the media landscape in Ireland from the year 2000 down to 2016, with a very useful and very thorough account (presumably the work of Flynn) of how patterns of ownership and regulation changed as digital media technologies developed rapidly. What is most striking about the new material, then, is just how much Ireland and its mediascape has changed in the relatively short timespan since the first edition of the book was published. The Irish economy became increasingly globalised and neo-liberal as it moved from boom to collapse in 2007/8 and government policy changed from free-market liberalism that rode the wave of affluence and optimism to retrenchment and austerity. The resulting economic recession threw the press in Ireland in particular into crisis and one of the new chapters carefully and with considerable attention to detail, maps out just how the printed media sank into “an abyss” which, even today, it has barely emerged from.

The last two decades has also witnessed the growth and development of new digital technologies and social media platforms that have revolutionised the way in which information is gathered and disseminated and has thrown traditional patterns of media ownership and information consumption into ever increasing flux. To explain this the authors have usefully delineated the traditional media and the new digital forms as “legacy” media and “hybrid” media and although the old and the new continue to interact – one needs audiences, the other content – they exist now in a complex *pas de deux* that has considerable impact on notions of objective truth and fact.

It is interesting that in the dog days of the UK’s torturous Brexit debate much praise has been lavished on the Irish media (and Irish politicians) by the liberal British press for their deeper knowledge of and more informed, less dogmatic approach to the complex issues involved. But there is a small Irexit lobby out there, there is an increasing anti-immigrant sentiment floating around and if it is today quite marginal and unrepresentative, it is well to remember that it once was too in the UK. Reading Horgan and Flynn’s history, it is clear that the democratic “public sphere” has come under the same kind of pressure in Ireland from neo-liberal, market-driven forces as it has in other developed economies and that traditional patterns of news and information dissemination have changed just as irrevocably as they have elsewhere.

The point of history is surely to learn from it and what this book does is to remind us that the search for objective fact in our media has always been problematic and that there is often a lack of fit between the governors and the governed in relation to what we should know and what we can say. This excellent study reminds us that we cannot be complacent about the strength of our democracy and the stability of our freedoms. There have always been challenges to our right to information and our ability to ask questions of those in power. The media may have changed and the nature of information may have become more diverse but the right to a fully informed public sphere remains a priority for the health of democracy. Horgan and Flynn show that the media have always been a key element in the struggle over such an informed public sphere and as we move forward, into an increasingly monetised and fragmented media future, the media remain democracy’s great hope and democracy’s great threat.

Martin McLoone is Emeritus Professor of Media Studies at Ulster University. He has researched and published extensively on many aspects of screen culture and popular music in Ireland, including *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (BFI, 2000); *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland: Cityscapes, Landscapes, Soundscapes* (Irish Academic Press, 2008) and *Rock and Popular Music in Ireland: Before and After U2* (Irish Academic Press, 2012).

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Irish Queer Cinema.

Allison Macleod.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. 176 pp.

ISBN: 9781474411486

Reviewer: **Abigail Keating** (University College Cork, Ireland)

Irish Queer Cinema is a most timely addition to the field of Irish cinema studies in this current, rather reflective, post-Celtic Tiger period. Twenty-two years after the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the Irish same-sex marriage referendum of 2015 established Ireland as the first country in the world to pass this legislation by popular vote. Its significance is more intricate than that of a global milestone in the arena of LGBTQ rights, commendable and celebratory as that is, and is reflective of the tireless work of activists and grassroots campaigns across the nation, and of a rapidly changing Ireland – socioeconomically and socioculturally – most predominantly over the three decades previous. With this, the “queer” in past Irish cinema merits being viewed through a new lens, most especially within a comparative context alongside a trajectory of queer representation symbolic of a changing sociopolitical milieu. As such, Allison Macleod explores feature films and short films released between 1984 and 2016, with a predominant focus on the former, mapping and placing case studies under the rubrics of three periods of indigenous filmmaking: the First Wave; Celtic Tiger; and post-Celtic Tiger.

The productive and social contexts of these periods are summarised in Chapter 2 “Mapping Ireland’s Queer Films”. But before this, in Chapter 1 “Queerly National and Nationally Queer: Paradoxes of an Irish Queer Cinema”, Macleod states two reasons for the book and elaborates on the key focuses that are to follow within its three temporal categories. Most urgently, this is the first extensive, book-length study on the topic of Irish queer cinema. Much great work has been done on related topics of representation, of identity, of national cinema, of space and landscape, of gender, and of queer performance. Macleod highlights these crucial works here and continues to engage with them pertinently throughout. Second, as argued by the author, *Irish Queer Cinema* “offers a new approach to the study of Irish cinema via theories of space” (3). With this, Macleod lays the foundations for the book’s framework, and somewhat definitionally addresses its three key paradigms: “Queer”, “Irish”, and “Space”. It is upon this that one begins to see how past discussions are going to be drawn from and built upon. Here, the nation and its construct are established as a fundamental focus, through the author’s reiteration of the queer (predominantly male) subject’s standing through

the trajectory of twentieth and twenty-first century history – from symbol of deviated, colonial identity or national treason, to a marker of modernisation – and through an investigation of “how sexual norms are deployed within dominant culture to participate in the ideological construction of the Irish ‘nation’” (9).

The paradigm of “Irish” is outlined concisely in the first chapter. Macleod states that the focus will be on films from the Republic of Ireland, and will not feature films from Northern Ireland, as a result of developments that are specific to the Republic, along with the complexity of conflicts in the North that merit more attention beyond the scope of the current study (4-5). Subsequently, the paradigm “Irish” is tracked historically through the tensions between the queer subject (as pre- and post-Independence threat to a dominant order, to Catholic Irishness, to the family) and the nation, before noting the incredible strides made through the 1960s to the 1980s in terms of activism, and legislatively from the 1990s. Here, the book places itself within a particularly significant category of Irish film scholarship, in terms of its interest in the Celtic Tiger, the globalisation, urbanisation, and modernisation of the nation, and thus the redefinitions of Irishness attempted or established – queer or otherwise. Similar to previous contributions with focuses on Celtic Tiger cinema, spatiality continues to be central, but here it goes notably beyond that of physical or geographical place, with the author’s approach to “space” presented through the importance of questions of the private and public spheres in relation to queer representation. As such, Macleod outlines the spatial interests for Chapters 3-9, respectively: “the family, the pub, the city, the rural, the journey, diaspora and the short film” (17). Chapters 3-8 each begin with an introductory section that provides thematic contextualisation, before analysing a selection of case studies, often comparatively, and concluding by way of highlighting the narrative and spatial threads across the selection. Chapter 9 “The Irish Queer Short Film” looks at “the short film as an arena where LGBTQ struggles have been documented” (146), building on previous work that reflects on the potential and (often conducive) limitations of the short film, before investigating a range of case studies under thematic frameworks of public and private spheres/spaces. Chapter 9 also reflects briefly on “The Spatiality of Lesbian Desire”, arguing for the potential of the Irish short film in “showcasing non-normative female sexuality” and in challenging “the representational containment queer women have been subject to as symbols of national morality, narrative devices or objects for male viewing pleasure” (155). Again, this is illustrated through a number of important case studies. Presumably for reasons of timing, this section favours an encyclopaedic rather than a textually analytical approach.

In *Irish Queer Cinema*, “Queer” is approached in two broad and often overlapping ways: as an umbrella term for LGBTQ identities, and as a discursive tool to interrogate established social norms and power structures and the identities and practices that challenge or reject them. This approach has proven to be particularly fruitful in contemporary studies on questions of space in European national cinemas, wherein representations of social “outsiders” are analysed against the backdrop of both the dominant ideology (and the tangible, everyday institutional workings of such) and the privileged physical space of the nation within which they are displaced (for instance, in an Italian context, see Derek Duncan [2008]; along with Fintan Walsh’s excellent reading of *Adam and Paul* [2013], as an Irish example). This is an especially useful framework under which to explore a film like Lenny Abrahamson’s *Garage* (2007); as the author does alongside a reading of Suri Krishnamma’s *A Man of No Importance* (1994) in Chapter 4 “The Contested Space of the Irish Pub”, with a thoughtful reflection on the importance of the pub “to the construction, performance and regulation of Irish ethnicity and masculinity” (48). Indeed throughout, “Space” is approached by the author through close readings of systems of power and their reliance on the “coherent and ordered mapping of space, and those bodies within it, to construct a dominant social order” (14) and thus, historically central to Irish cinema, a homogenous national space.

There has been no space more embedded in the national construct than that of the rural idyll. In Chapter 6 “The Queerly Productive Constraints of Rural Space”, the “metaphorical function” of the Irish landscape is confronted (91), through concise historical (colonial) reflection, before considering the recent rural turn in Queer Studies – “exploring the social and spatial processes that emerge at the intersection of queer place-making practices and rural sensibilities” (93). Here, Macleod elaborates ideas that have been touched on in Chapter 3 “Re-imagined Kinship and Failed Communities” and Chapter 4 on the Irish pub, wherein Joe Comerford’s *Reefer and the Model* (1988) is read through its reimagination of the traditional family, and the queerness of Fergus Tighe’s *Clash of the Ash* (1987) is argued through the complexities surrounding the protagonist’s confinement under the pressures of family and community. Finally, John Butler’s *The Stag* (2013) is viewed as a subversion of homosocial conventions “by showing male bonding across a spectrum of masculinities”, all within a rural terrain (108).

Films that focus explicitly on LGBTQ identities are afforded some of the most compelling textual analyses in the book. Quite often, these considerations solidify the transnational importance of the book’s topic, by drawing on questions of space within a local milieu, of mobility and displacement, and of the universality of queer experiences under the constraints of normative orders. While the diasporic experience is taken up in Chapter 8 “Contested Belongings within Diasporic Space”, through the themes of crisis, identity and the relationship to home, Neil Jordan’s *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), as analysed in Chapter 7 “Queer Mobilities and Disassociated Masculinities”, is an especially significant case study, through its representation of a trans woman’s reconfigurations of space as produced under national paradigms (126). Another notably universal feature of cinema from the same period has been an interest in the urban spaces of “new”, Celtic Tiger Ireland: its cosmopolitan lifestyles, fluid sexualities, rejections of traditional Irish identity markers, and embracing of global consumer culture. Macleod’s intricate reading of David Gleeson’s *Cowboys and Angels* (2003) in Chapter 5, “Compartmentalised Cosmopolitans and Rigid Fluidity”, is particularly engaging in this context. Here, the author explores the different ways in which the queer and heterosexual male protagonists occupy space, and how the former has expanded his body and thus his identity onto his surroundings – quite literally within the men’s shared apartment, through products and fashion, and most significantly within spaces of sociality. While this initially subverts the notion of the queer “outsider”, such a binary representation is problematic (69-76). A similar reinforcement of “heteronormative structures and binary understandings of sexuality” is argued (80) in the section on Liz Gill’s *Goldfish Memory* (2003), before the author concludes that the latter film “offers a more radical potential in allowing its queer characters to find a sense of placehood and belonging in Ireland” (80) – unlike that of *Cowboys and Angels*, wherein the queer character ultimately emigrates.

Along with careful considerations of some of the most powerful moments of queer representation on an Irish screen, *Irish Queer Cinema* also highlights, sometimes directly but often implicitly, that which is severely lacking. Like much of the significant scholarly work gone before it, this book focuses predominantly on cisgender male representation, white Irish masculinity, and male crises – as a result of what Irish cinema has been producing, especially in the thematic arenas of identity, gender and sexuality. On queer female representation, Macleod argues that “[t]he relative absence of Irish queer women on-screen is indicative of the more general invisibility of lesbians in Irish society and culture” (80-81). While this is an important point in the context of repressive patriarchal and religious views on female sexuality, alongside perhaps male-centric notions of what the queer community is, it would have been interesting to link this point to what has been lacking in the Irish film industry, particularly in relation to the correlation between the gender of a filmmaker and the content of the film. In this regard there is hope, however, particularly in light of Screen Ireland’s “Six

Point Plan on Gender Equality”, which was unveiled in December 2015, and of the potential for a more diverse body of representation to become more explicitly tangible in the next few years. With that said, one section of Chapter 5 is devoted to “Situating Irish Lesbianism within Urban Space”, wherein feature-length films like Trish McAdam’s *Snakes and Ladders* (1996) and Paul Tickell’s *Crush Proof* (1998) are explored in their demonstration of “how the queer woman operates as national allegory... reducing women to emblems” (90). Ending the chapter on a more positive note, however, Macleod argues that Darren Thornton’s *A Date for Mad Mary* (2016) provides “a more fluid representation of queer female identity... [and] can be seen as allegory for a contemporary Ireland trying to break out of preconceived notions about what it means to be Irish” (90).

Irish Queer Cinema provides an important catalogue of sociohistorical contexts and textual analyses of a broad range of films; some of which coupled together for the first time. Thematic and narrative threads from different temporal and sociocultural periods are woven together neatly, breathing fresh life into discourses on past or neglected films alongside explorations of contemporary productions whose storylines reflect (or imagine) a changed nation. As the first of its kind within Irish film scholarship, *Irish Queer Cinema* is a very necessary addition. In particular, this book will interest scholars who work on topics of Irish film, and on queer cinema more generally. Undergraduate students of, and those with an interest in, Irish film, Irish LGBTQ culture and Irish history are likely to find it engaging not only because of its thematic focuses but also its accessibility, its handling of social contextualisation, and its wide-ranging bibliography. For this reader, *Irish Queer Cinema* is a book that will be revisited and, commendably, will remain important as – hopefully – queer cinematic representation in Ireland continues to expand and diversify beyond that which is white, cisgender and male.

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The Films of Lenny Abrahamson: A Filmmaking of Philosophy.

Barry Monahan.

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Reviewer: **Stephen Baker** (Ulster University)

In an interview that provides the concluding chapter to Barry Monahan's illuminating study of Lenny Abrahamson's films, the filmmaker sets out what he sees as cinema's potential to engage with character:

... the possibility that cinema gives you is this sort of present tense encounter with a person which at least appears, or can appear, as unmediated by the author ... and it's in that space of almost unmediated presence of that character, that the most, sometimes I think that the finest things can be ... that cinema is at its best. (197)

Later in the same interview Abrahamson warms to this theme in reference to his first feature film *Garage* (2007) and specifically its central character Josie, a social outsider who works at a petrol station on the outskirts of a rural Irish village. Josie's artlessness, combined with a seemingly innocuous event, leads to his disgrace and tragic end. Mocked by some of his neighbours and acquaintances, Josie bears all the hallmarks of the archetypal village idiot, but he is spared such condescension and ignominy in the hands of writer Mark O'Halloran and director Abrahamson. Loosely based on someone known to the writer and director, Abrahamson elaborates on the inspiration for Josie.

One thing that Mark and I said from the beginning was that we would like to do justice to this man ... to make it an elegy to that life. ... we didn't just assert the social value of Josie and make you feel for him ... It [the film] talks about very deep things that are very hard to put into words, about the ontological value of Josie, the fact that he is a real person who is now absent from nature, that he is now gone, and whatever way you thought you understood him, there are depths and spaces – interior spaces – that none of us will ever know, but you believe in him – as someone defined by his limits – you hope that he is somehow infinite by the end of the film. (201)

It is worth quoting the above at length because it gives an insight into the emotional and intellectual commitment that Abrahamson brings to the depiction of all his main characters, and it is surely the starting point for understanding what makes Abrahamson, as Monahan claims, one of the most "exciting and innovative contemporary filmmakers in Ireland" (1).

It is precisely his faithful and meticulous attention to the characters that people his films that makes Abrahamson hard to place in relation to debates about Irish film. National cinemas tend to provoke discussions that privilege the local and in relation to the global; that engage in debates about national history and society. Abrahamson's films are studies in broader existential and universal themes. Therefore, while Monahan identifies the filmmaker as one of national significance, he emphasises Abrahamson's international influences, ambition and reach. This is not to deny the debt owed to Irish film activists, policy makers, educators, critics and audiences, all of whom strove to develop film production in Ireland throughout the 1980s. Indeed, in the introduction to his book, Monahan makes clear that regional developments provided the seed-bed for Abrahamson's aspirations. However, Monahan's book is a substantial exploration of the ways in which the filmmaker has

distinguished himself from the political and thematic concerns that inform much of the activist and critical debates surrounding Irish cinema. The key to this is situating Abrahamson in relation to his formative, creative influences – John Cassavettes, Werner Herzog, Ingmar Bergman, among others. Throughout the book Monahan draws upon the work of these auteurs to illustrate Abrahamson's affinities with their respective films, and in doing so establishes Abrahamson's credentials as an auteur in his own right.

In chapter one, Monahan highlights how Abrahamson's earliest films, the two shorts, *Mendel* (1987) and *3 Joes* (1991), already signalled an artist with stylistic and thematic ambitions beyond his immediate national formation. The first – directed with Stephen Rennicks while they were undergraduates – offers a talking-head style documentary of the reminiscences of Mendel Walzman, a Polish army recruit during the First World War who moved to Belgium, then Ireland, to evade the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s. Monahan detects in the film a visual maturity, and an interest in marginalized characters that would become a signature of Abrahamson's later work. The subsequent, *3 Joes*, is a homage to Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and a further demonstration of the director's attention to the unconventional, following the domestic routine of three oddball male characters who share a house in an unnamed Irish city. It is in this opening chapter that Monahan establishes the terms of his own study, subjecting the films to a textual analysis that is both theoretically and philosophically informed.

Each of Abrahamson's subsequent feature films has a chapter dedicated to it. The first, *Adam and Paul*, is considered as a dystopian urban fairy tale, in which the film's nomadic protagonists are set against a Dublin landscape where signs of Celtic Tiger affluence are conspicuous by their absence. It is an early indication that the sociological is not entirely absent from Abrahamson's work. Rather, as Monahan argues, it is placed beyond the diegetic world as the films endeavour to look to wider existential questions (111). Similarly, the affluence and gentrification of the boom times seem to have passed by the rural environs and village life depicted in Abrahamson's second feature, *Garage*. Monahan analyses the film in terms of its aesthetic minimalism, a strategy that draws the spectator into a contemplative relationship with the banal routines, utterances and behaviour of its main character, Josie. Often these actions appear narratively pointless, but as Monahan explains, they offer an ontological wholeness which he explores through a consideration of the film in phenomenological terms.

In contrast to his first two feature films, Abrahamson's third, *What Richard Did*, is located in a privileged milieu of the Dublin middle class, presenting the story of a teenage boy from a well-off family who avoids criminal responsibility. Monahan applies Sartre's concept of bad faith in an analysis that highlights Richard's competence as a performer of dutifulness and contrition, a façade that is ultimately underlaid with deceitfulness and self-gratification. The question of appearances and performance are returned to in Abrahamson's next film, *Frank*, the story of avant-garde rock band, led by an eccentric singer-songwriter who wears a prosthetic head, masking his visage. Monahan draws upon the respective ideas of Barthes and Deleuze with regards the fetishization of the actor's face in cinema, rendered more complex by the concealment of Michael Fassbender's continence as the eponymous lead in *Frank*. In *Room*, Abrahamson's latest film, an adaptation of Emma Donoghue's novel of the same name, the child Jack suffers his own form of concealment. Incarcerated in a shed all his life, with his kidnapped and captive mother, Jack is forced to construct his own lived reality in a confined space, his only view to the world beyond, a television. Fittingly, Monahan's insights into the ontological questions the film explores are grounded in his reading of Baudrillard's simulacra and Plato's allegorical cave.

Monahan is as comfortable elaborating on the philosophical underpinnings of Abrahamson's work as he is subjecting it to a film analysis and placing it in relation to

national and art cinema, as well as the work of other auteurs. This is a book of considerable intellectual breadth, and in Monahan, Abrahamson has found a suitable interlocutor. Philosophy, after all, clearly matters in Abrahamson's films. He is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin's School of Philosophy, and as Monahan notes, philosophy and filmmaking merge in his work (145), in both the aesthetic strategies he employs and his films' thematic content.

If this poses potential challenges to the lay person, it will excite the cinephile who will find Monahan's analysis stimulating, and feel inspired to revisit or seek out Abrahamson's films for the first time. For film scholars, teachers and students, *The Films of Lenny Abrahamson* offers a fascinating auteur study; a useful case study in film and philosophy; and for those with a specific interest in Irish film, it situates Abrahamson in relation to Ireland's film industry and culture, but as an artist who avoids easy categorisation in national terms. The book should further engage teachers and students at a time when film and media studies courses are under pressure to displace intellectual content with technical competence in pursuit of the holy grail of graduate employability. For *The Films of Lenny Abrahamson* is a wonderful reminder that cinema is capable of *thinking*; not just about its own forms, genres and styles in some depthless postmodern fashion, but as an art form, able to think with some profundity and complexity about being human.

Stephen Baker is a lecturer in film and television studies at Ulster University. He has published two books with Greg McLaughlin; *The British Media and Bloody* (2016) and *The Propaganda of Peace: The Role of the Media and Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (2010), both with Intellect Books.

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