
Irish Film and Television – 2021

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Introduction.**Shuttered cinemas and an abundance of content: the 2021 paradox.**

Roderick Flynn

In September 2021, RTE screened Ken Wardrop's *Cocooned*, an exploration of how the elderly in Ireland coped with the unprecedented sequence of lockdowns prompted by the Covid pandemic. Though emphasizing the humour with which the subjects of the film confronted their situation, the documentary also emphasized the confined nature of their lives, shooting them almost exclusively through closed windows as they looked out over (typically dark) exteriors.

Given the extent to which Covid conditions had curtailed production activity in at least the first half of 2020, the reintroduction of *another* prolonged lockdown in January 2021 might have seen Wardrop's film regarded as an analogue for the Irish screen production sector entering another period of hibernation.

The value of production activity in Ireland in 2020 had fallen by 40% year-on-year to €13 million. Startlingly, however, by July, it was apparent that 2021 might be the single most successful year in the history of the Irish screen industry, measured in terms of projects in production and economic contribution. Figures from Screen Ireland suggested that 37 projects, worth €289 million had gone into production in the first six months of the year. If sustained this level of activity would comfortably eclipse the previous high (non-inflation adjusted) of €358 million recorded in 2019. End of year figures confirmed this. The total value of expenditure on

screen production in Ireland in 2021 was just over half a billion euros, spread across 24 animation projects (€97m), 21 feature films (€177m), 10 television dramas (€224m) and 12 documentaries (€2.7m).

This remarkable bounceback owed something to broader developments in the wider international screen sector and to the simple fact that projects put on hold in 2020 recommenced activity (in most cases even before 2020 was out). It also owed at least something to Screen Ireland's active development of Covid-specific measures during 2020 and 2021 (facilitated by additional one-off stimulus support from the Department of Arts). Not least among these was the Production Continuity Fund offering financial aid to productions by funding the additional production costs associated with implementing Covid-mitigation measures.

Those measures have been far from trivial. The direct costs noted in Screen Producers Ireland's updated "Return to Production Guidelines" (published in April 2021) include the purchase of PPE, ongoing PCR tests and the employment of on-set medical crew. But, in many cases, shooting schedules have had to be entirely rewritten to take account of the need to split crews into self-contained pods (to mitigate the potential for Covid transmission). Indeed, scripts themselves have had to be revisited to work around such difficulties as shooting large group or crowd scenes. (Notably, thus far none of the major television dramas shot and broadcast during the pandemic included any reference to Covid in their narratives. In that respect, Wardrop's non-fiction *Cocooned* remains something of an outlier.)

The fact of Covid formed part of the backdrop against which Screen Ireland developed its most recent strategy document, published in July and covering the period up to 2024. For the most part the five pillars of the strategy rehearse previously identified priorities. Still clearly nodding at the 2018 Audiovisual Action Plan, the first pillar emphasised the need to develop a "global" reputation for innovative and creative story-telling. This pillar is largely concerned with the status in which domestic screen production is held internationally and tacitly acknowledges that Irish feature film still struggles to make an impact beyond these shores, especially compared with the animation and television drama sectors. Though it appears animation was been knocked off its "first among equals" perch in 2021 (the remarkable €178m 2019 spend in the sector comfortably outstripping the value of feature and television drama production), it remains the indigenous screen sector most likely to penetrate international markets, a fact reflected in the strategy emphasis on the need to retain intellectual property rights for animation where possible. Irish-set television drama has also sold well internationally in recent years but the strategy reference to support for "collaboration with Irish public-service media and broadcasters with international partners" acknowledges the extent to which the cost of high profile drama production demands financial resources which cannot be found solely within the Irish market. As, Denis Murphy notes in his discussion of RTE's *Hidden Assets* drama (set in Ireland and Belgium), this raises questions as to whether Irish television drama must take into consideration the tastes of audiences outside this island if it is to be commissioned at all.

The second pillar's emphasis on investing in Skills and Talent is also far from novel although, in a development of the gender-focused responses to the #WakingTheFeminists drive since 2015, there is an acknowledgement of the need to broaden the cultural diversity of Irish screen talent to reflect the reality captured in the 2016 census that 17% of Irish residents were born outside Ireland. Hence the focus on the creation of a "national talent development and inclusion policy" and the provision of a "dedicated fund to support more access programmes." (In October Screen Ireland announced the launch of a €500,000 Pathways fund to encourage production companies to support work placements and shadowing for crew from diverse and under-represented backgrounds.)

We will turn to the third pillar below but the third and fourth respectively point to the need to maintain and expand the business skills base underpinning the industry and the support

for Screen Ireland itself as the key sectoral development body. There is clear emphasis here on the role played by overseas production in Ireland with reference to the need to sustain the conditions which have created a “pipeline of large-scale international projects filming in Ireland”. To this, in July, Screen Ireland announced that it would re-establish a permanent presence in Los Angeles by relocating Steven Davenport, the agency’s lead on inward international production, to an office there. (This had been previously signalled by deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar during a pre-Covid trade mission to Los Angeles in September 2021.) In the longer term, however, the strategy noted the need to ensure: that Section 481 remains competitive with similar incentives in other jurisdictions; that studio infrastructure (ongoing expansions of which are discussed below) continues to keep pace with demand but also that; the scope for production beyond Dublin and Wicklow is expanded.

The reference to Section 481 appeared to nod at an April 2021 report jointly commissioned from PriceWaterhouseCoopers by Ardmore and Troy Studios in association with Animation Ireland and Screen Producers Ireland. Stressing the extent to which Section 481’s operation underpinned the success of the screen sector, the launch of the report saw Ardmore/Troy CEO Elaine Geraghty argue that the upper limit of €70 million on the tax credit was increasingly coming to constitute a barrier to attracting incoming productions as alternative locations in the UK and Eastern Europe adjusted their own incentives.

Developments in studio infrastructure have continued apace although these were not unaffected by the pandemic. Having been on the cusp of closure scarcely a decade ago, Ardmore anticipated a dramatic expansion in 2021, with three new sound stages and new support buildings. The sound stages alone would expand Ardmore’s footprint by 140,000 square feet. The first stage of the expansion was scheduled for opening in September 2021 but the general post-Christmas lockdown saw construction suspended in January 2021.

This did not deter the US-based real estate investment management companies Hackman Capital Partners and Square Mile Capital Management from combining to purchase both Ardmore and Troy Studios in August 2021, adding them to what was already the world’s largest independent studio and media portfolio, consisting of more 360 sound stages spread across four countries.

(Whether these would be augmented by further development of studio space in Wexford remains to be seen. In January 2021, Wexford County Council approved an application from Tara studios to develop a seven-stage facility on the 154 acre Borleagh House estate (formerly home to Robin Hood actor Richard Greene.) The combined studio space of 150,000 square feet would make Tara the single largest studio facility in the Republic of Ireland. However an objection was lodged to the development in February 2021 and, though the case was due to be decided by June 2021, as of the beginning of 2022 it appears to be still under consideration.)

As for supports for Screen Ireland itself, the strategy spells out how the body will play a key role – driving industry collaboration informed by empirical research – in the wider expansion of the sector. This latter framing bore fruit in the October 2021 Budget announcement that Screen Ireland’s funding for 2022 would be upped by 22% over the 2021 level of funding to €36.74m of which €32.15m was dedicated to capital (i.e. non-administration) funding. (The Budget announcement was less forthcoming with regard to the sought-for expansion of Section 481. Although it was announced that the tax credit would be extended to apply to digital games production for now at least the €70 million cap remains in place.)

However, it is arguably the third pillar of the strategy that best reflects the changing nature of the screen sector, locally and globally: that focused on facilitating the consumption of Irish screen content. Though stressing the need to ensure that work is made available to audiences everywhere through the preferred medium of filmmakers (apparently a nod at the need to maintain the large-screen venues), there is a tacit acknowledgement that for “the next generation” of film-goers, the cinematic experience may not be considered paramount. Thus

while the strategy envisages actively supporting cinemas and funding marketing campaigns to drive post-lockdown audiences back into theatres, there is a realpolitik tone which considers how Irish content might exploit the affordances of on-demand, online and streaming services.

As lockdown conditions gradually eased over summer 2021, audiences did return to cinemas. Comscore figures for the UK and Irish markets, suggest that total box office revenues for the combined markets increased by 85% from 2020 to 2021. However, this needs to be placed in context: in each of the five years up to 2019, the UK/Ireland market was worth in excess of £UK1.3 billion. This plummeted to £324 million in 2020. Thus, while 2021 represents an improvement over the previous year, it is starting from a very – and artificially – low base. Furthermore, Comscore has noted that within the five regions captured in their survey of the UK/Ireland market, the Republic of Ireland's 2021 recovery was the weakest, up just 59% on 2020 figures, due largely to the maintenance of tighter restrictions (a 50% theatre capacity cap for example) than in the United Kingdom. In consequence, Ireland's long-held status as the most avid cinema-going nation in Europe (on a per capita basis) is likely to have been undermined (even if the removal of all Covid restrictions by March 2022 will almost certainly see cinema attendance rebound).

The apparent paradox of increased production at a time of reduced cinema attendance is obviously not especially puzzling. The rise of streaming services in particular over the past decade has seen an apparently inexorable shift in the screen industries' centre of gravity towards the small-screen. Amazon Prime's May 2021 move to acquire MGM for \$8.5 billion (finally approved without condition by the European Commission in March 2022) is just the latest demonstration of the logic of new media's absorption of older, legacy firms. The acquisition would immediately bolster the Amazon Prime Video library, potentially offering it access to, for example, elements of the James Bond franchise, at a cost which, though significant, was less than the tech giant's annual spend (\$US11 billion in 2020) on content production and acquisition.

The impact of this for production in Ireland remains evident. While slated for a big-screen release, Disney's *Disenchanted* (sequel to 2007's *Enchanted*) which completed its Irish location shoot in July 2021, will also enhance the roster of the Disney + platform. Similarly, of the other large-scale productions in Ireland in 2020 and 2021, only 20th Century's *The Last Duel* (directed by Ridley Scott and starring Matt Damon) was not directly commissioned by a streamer. Having ceased production in March 2020, Apple TV+'s adaptation of the Isaac Asimov *Foundation* sequence, recommenced in October 2020, initially with a view to September 2021 platform release. (In October 2021, extras casting began in anticipation of the production at Troy Studios of the second series.) For its part, the near back-to-back filming of seasons one and two of Netflix's *Vikings: Valhalla* ran from October 2020 to November 2021, through the strictest lockdown conditions. Netflix also commissioned Dublin-based Boulder Media to produce the 3D-animation reboot of the *My Little Pony* cartoon franchise (which premiered in September 2021) and in February 2021 the streamer commissioned a second series of *Fate: The Winx Saga* which shot in Wicklow between July and October 2021.

However, the influence of streamers on the Irish screen ecology extends beyond the libraries of on-demand services. Both of RTE's high profile autumn drama offerings – *Kin* and *Hidden Assets* – were penned by veteran screenwriter Peter McKenna who, having cut his teeth on RTE's *On Home Ground* and *The Clinic*, moved onto UK drama standards via the BBC Writer's Academy before creating *Red Rock* for TV3 in 2015. *Kin* and *Hidden Assets* also shared financial support from New York-based AMC Networks Inc. In the case of the latter, AMC's streaming subsidiary Acorn TV directly funded the production (along with RTE, Screen Ireland and Screen Flanders.) (Denis Murphy writes on this in more detail in one of his contributions to this year's review.) In the case of *Kin*, another AMC subsidiary – streamer AMC+ – acquired English- and Spanish-speaking territory rights for the series after production

was completed. Remarkably, at their Autumn programme launch in August 2021, RTE announced the addition of a third AMC-funded series to their schedule, the Jane Seymour, Dublin-set thriller *Harry Wild*. The implications of this transatlantic influence were spelled out by McKenna in an Irish Times interview in October 2021 in advance of the broadcast of *Kin*: “It has been produced with one main goal in mind; to be successful in the US... Success in Ireland won’t deliver enough money to keep it going.” (Lally 2021)

These are not the only dramas to have appeared on Irish television: having screened in Spring 2021, RTE’s *Smother* (reviewed here by Stephanie McBride) was re-commissioned and the second series is on air as this year’s review goes to press. Though developed by the BBC, RTE was the main funder but some reviews noted the reluctance of the script to overly explore the specificities of the local settings. This may have accounted for the series’ successful international sales to the US, US, Australasia and several European countries. For its part Virgin Media, which has already experienced considerable international sales success with the first and second series of the Adrian Dunbar-starrer *Blood*, saw filming commence on another series – *Redemption* – in April 2021. Like *Blood*, the international market is coded into *Redemption*’s story structure, centred as the narrative is around a Liverpool detective who finds herself working with the Irish police. In an April 2021 press release highlighting Virgin’s ongoing search for new post-watershed drama series, the station emphasized the importance of “gripping and compelling” stories that would “resonate with viewers here *and all over the world*.” (Emphasis added.) More material in this vein is already in the pipeline: in October 2021, filming commenced on *North Sea Connection*, an RTE co-production with the Stockholm-based Nordic Entertainment Group, commissioned for broadcast in Ireland *and* for the Swedish company’s Viaplay streaming service.

We have noted in previous years the growing orientation of television drama towards the international. However, as of 2021, this no longer feels like “a certain tendency”. Rather it has clearly become the default approach. And, given Virgin Media Television’s global parentage (as part of the US-headquartered but de facto transnational Liberty Global group) and the ongoing financial travails of an RTE facing both declining commercial and licence fee revenues (in real terms), it is hard to imagine that there remains any significant scope for drama commissions which exclusively address an Irish audience.

Piquantly, however, having long been identified (not least in the pages of this review) as sometimes almost frantically concerned with identifying “universal” narratives that might travel, Irish feature production in 2020 and 2021 has at least “felt” far more locally engaged. For all that companies like Element continues to plough an international furrow with their involvement in Joanna Hogg’s *The Eternal Daughter* and the most recent Yorgos Lanthimos production *Poor Things*, it is striking that some of the highest profile (though much delayed) local releases in 2021 have been filmed in Irish. Tom Sullivan’s *Arracht* (reviewed here by Tony Tracy) is the outstanding example in this regard but so too was *An Cailín Ciúin* which though not yet available for review achieved the notable achievement of being the first Irish feature to win a prize at the Berlin Film Festival (in February 2022). *Arracht*’s lead actor Dónall Ó’Héalaí also played the protagonist in Sean Breathnach’s well-received feature debut *Foscadh* and though generally the subject of more mixed reviews, Damian McCann’s noir-ish *Doinnean* built around the performances of Peter Coonan and Brid Brennan rounded out a remarkable year for Irish-language feature production, strongly endorsing the value of Cine4, the TG4/Screen Ireland/Broadcasting Authority of Ireland-backed support scheme which had funded most of these titles.

Beyond these lay an almost bewildering array of lower-budget features. We have written before of the increasing difficulty in attempting to capture all of these but in 2021, the lack of access to cinema releases in the first part of the year made it almost impossible to track the emergence of these films across the myriad on online platforms that played host to them. March

saw the release of Treasa O'Brien's ultra-low budget, Arts Council-backed *Town of Strangers* via the Irish Film Institute's IFI@Home platform. This came just days after the release of the Tailored Films' thriller *The Winter Lake* across at least seven digital platforms including iTunes and Google Play. A month later, the crowdfunded *Be Good or Be Gone* (following two young convicts on temporary release) debuted on iTunes and Amazon to be followed two weeks later by the impressively cast *Trainspotting*-esque *Here Are the Young Men* on Google Play, Apple TV and, ultimately Netflix. (The latter would subsequently receive a limited release in November at the Light House Cinema in Dublin.) As cinemas gradually re-opened in the summer, release strategies gradually pivoted back towards the big-screen platform: thus although July saw the thriller *The Green Sea* launch as a VOD title in the UK, Ireland and the US, the award-winning Irish-Polish production *I Never Cry* (following a young Polish woman's attempt to retrieve her father's body after his death in Ireland) was one of the first indigenous productions in 2021 to receive a limited theatrical release in both the UK and Ireland.

The limited profile of these films prompted Screen Ireland to assess the impact of cinema closures and reduced theatre capacity on the ability of Irish distributors to bring indigenous productions to a wider audience. There appears to be an acceptance that the cachet of a theatrical release at home remains essential if a film is to break out of the Irish market (whether digitally or offline). In October, Screen Ireland would announce the establishment of a Structural Marketing and Distribution Support scheme making up to €200,000 available in match funding for marketing and audience development.

This came too late for vampire-themed comedy-horror *Boys from County Hell* and for the low-budget midlands-set comedy *Redemption of a Rogue* both of which made muted impacts after their August cinema releases. *The Bright Side*, Ruth Meehan's adaptation of comedienne Anne Gildea's cancer memoir fared somewhat better after its August 20th release but still largely sank without trace.

Remarkably, however, September saw three Irish features – all well-reviewed – enter cinemas. Cathy Brady's debut *Wildfire* featured a commanding central performance from Nika McGuigan (alongside Nora-Jane Noone) filmed before her untimely death from cancer in 2019. Though offering a compelling depiction of tense sibling relations, *Wildfire* didn't quite catch the eye of local audiences who appeared more open to triumph-over-adversity tone of *Herself* helmed by Phyllida Lloyd, taking the opportunity to work with a smaller canvas than that afforded to her by her previous films *Mamma Mia* and *The Iron Lady*. Built around a emotive central performance from *Kin*'s Clare Dunne (who also co-wrote the screenplay), *Herself* confidently shifted gears from social-realist domestic abuse drama to a heart-warming family/community-centred narrative. That the protagonist struggles to put a roof over her head (ultimately building her own home) clearly resonated at a point when only Covid cold relegate a realworld housing crisis theme to a secondary political priority.

The far more cerebral *Rose Plays Julie* from arthouse stalwarts Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (or "Desperate Optimists") struggled to find an audience, notwithstanding a nationwide release on September 17. By contrast, THE hit Irish film of the year arrived three weeks later. Funded by Screen Ireland, the BAI and Virgin Media, the film (reviewed here by Maria O'Brien) earned €59,000 on its opening weekend, making it the most successful Irish opening since *The Hole in the Ground* in 2019. The dark but broadly comedic depiction of a working class community coming together (around a hair-dressing salon) to defend themselves from gangsterism and (scarcely distinguishable) political corruption evoked elements of the Barrytown screen trilogy and the sold-out screenings helped sell the film to international distributors Myriad Pictures and – at last count – nine online platforms. These included Netflix where by mid-January 2022 it was the most-watched film in Ireland.

Taken together though, the body of feature work released in 2021 does suggest a conscious re-engagement with the local. Even the more generic work released or shot in 2021-horrors from Conor McMahon (*Let The Wrong One In*) and Jon Wright (*Unwelcome*), thrillers from Stephen Fingleton (*Nightride*) and Lorcan Finnegan (*Nocebo*) – appear not to entirely eschew local signifiers even when, as with the casting of Eva Green and Mark Strong in *Nocebo* and Hannah John-Kamen and Douglas Booth in *Unwelcome*, the lead protagonists are not Irish. (Indeed outsider status of its leads is critical to the narrative of *Unwelcome* as a young English couple struggle to integrate into Irish rural society.)

A similar observation might be made about this year's Irish documentary releases. While recent years has seen non-fiction characterised by a distinctly outward glance, in 2021, it was hard to identify an Irish documentary not actively focused on the local. Although Tadhg O'Sullivan's mesmeric and lyrical *To the Moon* combined footage shot across the globe with found footage fragments from a myriad of international cinemas in its meditation on our relationship with our planet's most obvious satellite, other works largely derived their visual palettes from within Ireland. Released on VOD platforms in June, Jason Branegan's *Breaking Ice* followed the travails of the first Irish tram to compete in the bobsleigh (at the 1992 Winter Olympics), combining archive footage with talking heads and simple but effective animation to recreate the build-up to the Games. Supported by Science Foundation Ireland and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in the US, David Burke's sumptuous *Father of the Cyborgs* profiling the life and work of Irish neuroscientist Phil Kennedy was a welcome addition to the still slim ranks of Irish science documentary. Having long been the "natural" home for hour-long doc on historical subject, Tomás Seoighe's TG4-supported feature length drama-doc *The Queen v Patrick O'Donnell* revisited the notorious events surrounding the conviction and execution of the titular Irish nationalist, securing berths at a number of international film festivals. There were - coincidentally? – a sequence of Irish docs focused on the arts. Premiering at the BFI London Film Festival in October 2021, Pat Collin's *The Dance* traced the development of choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan's astonishing *MÁM* from rehearsal to its Autumn 2019 premiere. There were also three (!) docs centred around Irish musicians: Emer Reynolds' *Phil Lynott: Songs For While I'm Away* was released in cinemas in June. While perhaps overly respectful, it nonetheless provided a useful reminder of Lynott's ground-breaking role in putting popular Irish music on the international stage. Indeed, arguably Lynott contributed to the conditions in which the subjects of Michael McCormack's decade-in-the-making *Breaking Out* and Ross Killeen's *Love Yourself Today*, both released to theatres in November 2021, could even contemplate musical careers. *Breaking Out* traced the life (and death) of Fergus O'Farrell, lead singer of Irish indie sweethearts Interference, charting his determination to overcome the physical limitations imposed on him by muscular dystrophy. A fortnight earlier, *Love Yourself Today* celebrated the near-shamanic qualities of Dublin singer-songwriter Damien Dempsey: part concert film, part social excavation, the film was at least as focused on the lives of four fans attending one of Dempsey's legendary Christmas concerts and proved a remarkable document of the communal bond established between the artist and his audience.

That sense of communal engagement also pervaded *The 8th* co-directed by Lucy Kennedy, Aideen Kane and Maeve O'Boyle. Closely following key figures in the campaign to repeal the 8th amendment to the Irish constitution (originally introduced in 1983) prohibiting abortion, the film movingly captures an extraordinary moment in the emergence of a more humane and progressive society and is considered at length by Kate Antosik-Parsons elsewhere in this year's review.

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***Herself* (Phyllida Lloyd 2020)**

Deirdre Flynn

It seemed fitting that I sat down to watch this film when the number of homes available to rent in Ireland had fallen to an all-time low, with just 712 properties available to rent in the city of Dublin in February 2022. Since *Herself* was first released to the festival market in 2020, rents have also risen by 10.3%. And during the same time, family homelessness in Ireland increased by 10% with 169 families, involving 424 children, in emergency accommodation for over two years. While Covid may have delayed the full release of Phyllida Lloyd’s film, the housing crisis it depicts has only worsened. However, this film is not just about the homelessness crisis.

Clare Dunne’s note-perfect performance tells the story of mother-of-two Sandra, who leaves her abusive husband and is moved into emergency accommodation. Sandra and her two young girls, Molly and Emma, are stuck in one tiny room in an airport hotel. They must use the back entrance, play in the carpark, and with no cooking facilities are limited to takeaways. Sandra is struggling, getting the girls to school, working two jobs, making all her social worker meetings, and providing Gary, her abusive partner, with access to the children.

The story is all too familiar. In 2020 there were 57,277 calls to local and national domestic abuse helplines, and 23,875 incidents reported to Gardai. According to Allison Graham of Saoirse Domestic Violence Services, there are only “144 refuge spaces available across the entire country, [and] domestic violence services faced unmet requests for refuge from 1,351 women between March and August 2020” (Gleeson 2021). As she tells her daughters in the opening sequence, there are loads of Sandra’s in Dublin, and as the statistics show, all around Ireland.

While the situation for domestic abuse survivors is completely deplorable in Ireland, this has been exacerbated by the housing crisis. With little or no homes to rent, and those that are available way above the budgets of Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or single parent families, and many calls left unanswered, women like Sandra are left in limbo in the multitude of hotels across the capital. Sandra’s exceedingly kind social worker Jo, played superbly by Cathy Belton, is overwhelmed, disorganised, overworked, but unable to help; her ex-husband is full of promises and offers of a stable home, yet Sandra perseveres in the hotel. Indeed, the film is populated with a supporting cast of characters dealing with similar housing issues: Emma, Dariusz, Yewande and Tomo are all living in a squat in Ranelagh, for example. The diverse faces on screen showcase a more multicultural and inclusive Ireland (Daniel Ryan, in

particular, is fantastic as Francis, son of the cranky builder Aido), but also those who are most at risk from our out-of-control housing situation. While there are suggestions and hints to their situations and back stories, however, these characters are not fully explored in the film.

With the dual story of housing and domestic abuse, there is a lot resting on the shoulders of the only fully realised character, Sandra. Played by the co-writer Clare Dunne, *Herself* is an excellent vehicle for her range. She doesn't allow the character to descend into stereotype or overt sentimentality and injury. Dunne's performance is noteworthy. She's an incredibly likeable, and well-rounded character, and throughout you want her to succeed, when door after door is closed in her face. There is a journey here, and Dunne allows the viewer to watch those changes and see her gain her agency. There is a lot for Dunne to carry, and at times the story could benefit from some refining to maintain focus. The wrist injury that Dunne sustains is never fully developed or resolved and feels unnecessary to the narrative.

Sandra, following a YouTube channel where the presenter promises that just under €40,000 will build you your own home, does the maths, and suggests to her social welfare officer, that providing her with a vacant lot and funding to self-build would actually save them money in the long run. But common sense and logic aren't of interest at the social welfare office, and the grimly bureaucratic system the film critiques is well captured here. That is, until Sandra is lucky enough to find a hero: Dr Peggy O Toole, for whom Sandra works as a cleaner. After stumbling across Sandra's internet history, Peggy decides to help, by offering her a site for this self-build, in the exceptionally large back garden of Peggy's leafy Dublin centre home. At this point, *Herself* swerves away from gritty Loachian realism and into fairy godmother territory. Is there a Dr Peggy O'Toole for all of us? Can all the wealthy retired doctors of Ireland open up their very large gardens so we can live in a 12m x 4m tiny home?

There is much to love about this film: it is beautifully shot, it is well paced, the topics are sympathetically presented. Tom Comerford's cinematography is exquisite, finding beauty and softness in urban spaces. His use of light and shade in locations that do not lend themselves to softness, like the concrete multi-story carpark where Sandra watches her kids learn to skate is wonderful. However, the film will suffer comparisons to another movie about the Irish homeless crisis, *Rosie* (Paddy Breathnach 2018). That film takes place over 36 hours of Rosie's life, and clearly intersect with the early sections of *Herself* as Rosie and her family (which also includes Molly McCann, who also plays Clare Dunne's youngest daughter) struggle to find stability after homelessness. *Rosie*, however, doesn't succumb to the same level of fantasy as *Herself*, and as they count down the hours to a night in the car *Rosie* becomes reminiscent of Loach's *I, Daniel Blake*, while *Herself* pulls back from that level of gritty realism when it comes to homelessness, arguably to the film's detriment.

The film excels in its depiction of what domestic abuse survivors have to go through, doubly injured by an unfair and difficult system. Throughout the whole film the bureaucratic red tape and unreasonable processes are precisely depicted: Sandra, for example, is penalised when her youngest daughter, who witnessed the abuse, doesn't want to attend visitations with her father. And while the moment of agency should be Sandra building her house, it is really her moment in court when she finally speaks up for herself and her children. The film sidesteps a darker realism again at the end, however, and Gary's mother calls to visit Sandra and tells her that Gary is going away for a long time. I find it easier to believe that a rich doctor will provide land for a house for a woman who cleans her home, than that the narrative of domestic abuse which has shadowed the film could be so neatly and sentimentally resolved.

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***The 8th* (Aideen Kane, Lucy Kennedy and Maeve O'Boyle, 2021)**

Kate Antosik-Parsons,

In 2018, Ireland voted by national referendum to overturn the pro-life 8th Amendment (1983) to the *Irish Constitution* which prohibited abortion in nearly all circumstances. The 35-year struggle for bodily autonomy was punctuated by key moments that marked the shift attitudes that eventually led to the referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment and the subsequent legalisation of abortion in Ireland. The documentary film, *The 8th* (1hr 35min), directed by Aideen Kane, Lucy Kennedy and Maeve O'Boyle, aims to tell the story of the repeal of the 8th Amendment. It weaves a complex and vibrant tapestry of contributions from pro-choice campaigners supporting the repeal of the 8th Amendment, pro-life campaigners who wished to retain the 8th Amendment, interspersed with commentary from public figures, academics and medics and complimented by with archival footage and materials.

From the start, the viewer is immediately drawn into the tension of the issue of abortion. With the opening scenes of the film an airplane lands and we see a parked bus emblazoned with "Rosa Bus4Repeal" and "Safe Abortions With Pills". Anti-abortion campaigners from the Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform put large posters bearing controversial imagery at the Dublin Bus stop outside Belfield. The camera focuses intently on the passengers of a bus, one of whom wears a black sweatshirt with a white 8th crossed out. A text sets the stage for the film by explaining that in 1983 the people of Ireland voted to insert the 8th Amendment into Irish constitution. Next at a crowded junction on Dublin's O'Connell Street, people argue back and forth. The cries of "murderers, murderers" are pitched against a woman's voice over a loudspeaker calling out "women must decide their fate." Several people offer their opinions to camera with one woman pointedly refuting abortion is "not a motherly thing to do, the natural motherly instinct is to save lives". Within the opening sequence there are references to travelling to obtain an abortion, the historical nature of the 8th, the referendum to repeal the 8th and, importantly, the entrenched views of those both for and against abortion.

The narrative arc of the film centres on the Together For Yes (TFY) referendum campaign which occurred between March – May 2018. TFY was the civil society campaign comprised of member organisations such as the Coalition to Repeal the 8th, the Abortion Rights Campaign, and the National Women's Council of Ireland. The film picks out two individuals

as focal points, activists Ailbhe Smyth, chair of the Coalition to Repeal the 8th and one of the co-directors of TFY and Andrea Horan, the owner of the popular Dublin nail bar Tropical Popical and co-host (with journalist Una Mullaly) of the “Don’t Stop Repealing” podcast. On a quiet Dublin morning we are introduced to Smyth, in her home talking on the phone about campaigning. To camera, she speaks candidly about her own daughter and granddaughter as part of her motivation to remove the 8th Amendment and her own bodily experiences with anorexia nervosa earlier on in life and the subsequent awakening of her feminist consciousness. Smyth is featured throughout much of the film whether it be encouraging people participating in the Abortion Rights Campaign’s March for Choice (September 2017), addressing a large gathering at the International Women’s Day March (March 2018), offering sound bites to media at launch of the TFY campaign and knee-deep in strategising as the viewer is privy to intriguing glimpses inside the TFY headquarters.

Breaking a sweat at the gym, we meet Horan, who contemplates that she doesn’t really know what her feminism is but identifies that pro-choice politics filled with anger weren’t particularly appealing. Horan seeks to challenge ideas about what constitutes a feminist and argues narrow definitions of feminism serve to alienate those who support bodily autonomy especially if they don’t see themselves reflected in traditional pro-choice politics. Horan identifies a cohort of young women disenfranchised with the current Irish political system and discusses how this sparked the idea for her that repeal needed to speak more broadly to a cross-section of contemporary Irish society. Horan’s PR savvy and marketing expertise enabled her to specifically appeal to would-be voters with her website Hun Real Issues. Throughout the film, Horan is depicted engaging in a variety of campaign activities including canvassing, her podcast, and poignant conversations with co-workers on the issue of abortion. Smyth and Horan act as a foil for one another and the decision to spotlight these fascinating individuals is surely to give a sense of the range of people involved with pro-choice activism from the more experienced to the newer, emerging activist. Although it gives a certain structure to the film, it may also inadvertently have led to the perception that the overarching movement to repeal the 8th was not particularly diverse. In actuality, the movement included a broad spectrum of activists such as migrant women, Traveller women, trans people, people with disabilities, and people seeking asylum living in direct provision centres, amongst others, and importantly without whom, repeal could not have been achieved – these voices, however, are not prominently featured.

The 8th also includes commentary from high-profile pro-life supporters like Cora Sherlock, chairperson for the Pro-Life campaign, John McGuirk, the communications director of the Save the 8th campaign and Wendy Grace, a broadcaster for Dublin’s Christian Spirit Radio. Grace features in the film talking about feminism and equality and considers how she came to adopt a pro-life stance. In her workplace, Grace rapidly scans multiple newspaper articles and heads into studio on air highlighting for listeners key ideas in the development of the referendum. The inclusion of people like McGuirk and Grace, and footage from a Rally for Life of Katie Ascough, impeached President of the UCD Student Union, underscores that the sometimes sketched out division of old vs young in abortion rights politics is a false one. However, as the film progress it becomes clear that this is the story of the pro-choice victory.

A major feature of the campaign was canvassing, as people across the country sought to engage the sway the undecided voter. *The 8th* portrays campaigners engaged in thoughtful conversations on doorsteps and in town squares, and highlights some of the difficulties and complexities that voters grappled with, specifically in reference to the proposed 12-week cut-off point in legislation should the referendum be passed. Key arguments are extracted from broadcast television debates such as those on RTE’s *Late Late Show* and *Claire Byrne Live*. The TFY team are filmed watching a television debate, totally engrossed, communicating the feeling that this could be a tipping point. It is at this stage that the film turns to the harm caused

by the 8th Amendment, reflected in newspaper headlines such as those relating to Michelle Harte, a woman who was undergoing cancer treatment and was denied an abortion in Ireland. Focusing on the death of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old Indian woman who died of sepsis in University Galway Hospital after she was denied an abortion while miscarrying her pregnancy at 17 weeks, the film includes a contribution from her husband Praveen and the candle-lit vigils held for Savita when the public learned of this horrendous tragedy. This was a particularly important moment of public outrage that galvanised emerging activists in 2012, which, like the X-Case (1992) mentioned at a different stage in the film, renewed the efforts of pro-choice movement in Ireland to remove the harmful amendment.

The film touches on the strategy to focus on the “hard cases”, those with wanted pregnancies who terminate for reasons of Fatal or Severe Foetal Anomaly, as a way of winning over the undecided voters. Sinead Kennedy of the Coalition to Repeal the 8th and TFY executive, and John McGuirk both contribute to understandings of how this issue became understood as central to winning over the undecided voters. Of particular interest is McGuirk who openly muses that if the referendum was solely about the hard cases the 8th Amendment would be repealed by an overwhelming majority. It is striking however, that there is no inclusion of the voices of the parents of Termination for Medical Reasons (TFMR), the support group and campaigning organisation of parents who have direct lived experience of this issue. The directors have missed an opportunity to include insight from TFMR who publicly and repeatedly told their harrowing stories over a number of years in the lead up to and during the the referendum campaign to draw awareness to the unanticipated impact of the 8th Amendment on wanted pregnancies.

The film captures different cultural moments that intersected with the repeal the 8th campaign such as the unveiling of Maser’s *Repeal the 8th* mural on the side of the Project Art Centre and its subsequent censorship. Collectivity and solidarity in the film is manifested in the gathering of people opposing the removal of the mural shouting “you can take down the mural but you can’t take down the movement” and in the collective body of large groups of people of all ages filling the streets holding banners in support of their cause. One of the most powerful moments in the film is use of the cacophony of women’s voices speaking out about their experiences under the 8th Amendment. This is presented in the build-up of the frenzied activity in the final days before voting day on the 25th of May and this mirrors the outpouring of stories from people whose lives had been negatively impacted by the prohibition of abortion in Ireland.

The film’s aesthetic of moving between present day and past, where it considers key historical moments in the 35-year struggle for abortion rights through archival materials such newspaper headlines and connected by animated transitions, conveys the sense of “living histories”, enabling such histories to be read as part of a continuum rather than discrete events that remain in the past. An example of this is when Smyth reflects on her age and the legacy of the 8th Amendment, the viewer is taken back in time through the use of illustrations dissolving to archival materials, like newspaper headlines on microfiche, black and white photographs of protestors and then television footage from 1983.

Time in this film moves across different temporalities, though the date is often signposted for the viewer. This traversing of time can be a little confusing, particularly with regards to the commentary of those of TFY executive who appear to be speaking post-referendum, while the pro-life campaigners are speaking of the referendum campaign as it happened. This also raises a point specifically related to some of the commentary from TFY organisers, in that the film gives TFY the opportunity to address criticisms of their campaign without really explaining who those criticisms were from or what they consisted of. Recent publications like the *Feminist Review: Abortion in Ireland* (2020), *After Repeal: Rethinking Abortion Politics* (Zed Books 2020) and *Feminist Encounters Special Issue on Repealing the 8th: Irish Reproductive Activism* (2022) have sought to flesh out the nuances of the multiplicity

of efforts that contributed to repeal. As such there are some important exclusions of the range of activists that worked for repeal and the varying strategies to ensure they brought repeal over the line, though undoubtedly the filmmakers faced a mammoth task in condensing down the complexities of the history of the 8th Amendment and covering the breadth of the campaign. *The 8th* paints with broad brushstrokes the compelling story of the repeal of the 8th Amendment and the central role of the TFY campaign. It offers a good starting point for those who want to learn about the 8th Amendment and to grasp the enormity of this historic victory for the people of Ireland at a time when hard-won reproductive rights world-wide face constant threat.

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***Frank of Ireland* (2021)**

Anthony P. McIntyre

The late 2010s/early 2020s have brought a reinvigoration of Irish television comedy. The critical and commercial success of programmes such as *Derry Girls* (2018-) and *The Young Offenders* (2018-), as well as the celebrated Irish-in-Britain narratives of *Catastrophe* (2015-2019) and *This Way Up* (2020-) means that the persistent backward glance to *Father Ted* (1995-1998) as the prime example of acclaimed Irish comedy is abating somewhat. In part, the renewed vigour of the Irish sitcom came from the excavation of fresh narrative ground. A focus on underrepresented urban and rural regions, and a foregrounding of youthful protagonists (*Derry Girls*; *The Young Offenders*; *Moone Boy* (2012-2015)); and on female-centred narratives examining diasporic subjects (*Catastrophe* and *This Way Up*, building on from the influential BBC3 sitcom *Pulling* (2006-2009)) were two approaches that helped drive this shift. That is not to say these years only brought success and fresh approaches. Lisa McGee's *Derry Girls* predecessor *London Irish* (2013), while complying with one of the above approaches, underperformed for Channel 4, for instance, and the cultural juggernaut of *Mrs Browns Boys* (2011-) though drawing record viewing numbers, was a divisive hit, partly due to what many perceived as a regressive format more at home in the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, the increased prominence of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and Hulu has seen Irish comedy in these years reach audiences beyond the UK and Ireland, a somewhat paradoxical phenomenon given the highly regionalised nature of many of these comedic successes (McIntyre 2022: 67-9).

This is the broadcasting context in which *Frank of Ireland* emerged. Like *Catastrophe* before it, the series is a co-production between Channel 4 and Amazon studios, and was produced by Merman, the company the influential Irish comedy producer, actress and writer Sharon Horgan co-founded. Indeed, Horgan was central to US marketing of the series, doing an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* to promote the sitcom's north American release on

Amazon (Grey 2021; McIntyre 2022: 165). The feature stressed Horgan's entrepreneurialism and Irishness, in a manner presumably intended to resonate with a business-savvy US readership for whom Irish cultural texts continue to have an outsized impact given Ireland's modest size. Key also to the sitcom's marketing has been the attached stardom of Brian and Domhnall Gleeson, as the two main characters Frank and Doofus (the siblings are also co-writers along with Michael Moloney). The promotional image for Amazon features the two in matching outfits standing atop a diminutive Ireland sparsely populated by lighthouses, a church, and livestock (fig. 1). The image no doubt is intended to act as counterpoint, the bucolic island imagery with its *Quiet Man*-esque associations, undercut by the swears and acerbic content of the sitcom. Having the internationally recognised actors (with Domhnall having the higher profile of the two) attached to the project will presumably have helped in the process of commissioning. The sitcom's development would also have been aided by the proven success of a predecessor such as Chris O'Dowd's *Moone Boy*, a Sky UK production that was marketed as a "Hulu Original" on the US streaming service, and which drew upon the Irish actor's post-*Bridesmaids* (2011) stardom to gain traction. In short, in drawing upon celebrity association, successful forebears in Irish screen culture, and a pre-established traditional broadcast/streaming distribution pathway, *Frank of Ireland* highlights transnational features of commissioning and distribution that increasingly shape the 21st century Irish sitcom.



Fig.1. A marketing image for *Frank of Ireland* emphasizes a bucolic Irishness that is undercut by the sitcom's content.

Frank of Ireland is a something of an anomaly on the Merman roster, though, given the production company's investment in female-authored narratives. Merman, for instance, has produced female-centred comedies such as *This Way Up*, *Catastrophe*, *Motherland* (2016-), and has also co-produced the Irish housing crisis feature *Herself* (2020), a drama that charts a woman leaving an abusive relationship and building a home for herself and her children. *Frank*

of Ireland, by contrast, is avowedly male-centric, sharing a genealogy with what Debbie Ging (2013: 179) has termed “new lad” texts, such as Castletown-set *Hardy Bucks* (2010-2018). Such new lad narratives often feature the withdrawal of such males from workplaces increasingly perceived as “feminised” and which feature the cultural type of the “slacker” who, as Suzanne Leonard has noted, “frequently act[s] out the desire to escape from domestic imperatives” (2014: 43). Such is the main narrative impetus of *Frank of Ireland*. Frank, aided by long-suffering friend and subservient sidekick Doofus, is a slacker musician who lives at home with his mother, Mary (Pom Boyd). Frank’s music career has stalled, with a purported concept album, with songs based on each of the 32 counties of Ireland both a source of creative impasse and a source of some funny recurrent gags in the series.

The humour of such slacker/new lad narratives is often reductively misogynistic. In the opening episode, we learn that Frank broke up with his girlfriend because she “wouldn’t do anal”, a joke that sets a low bar for the gags to follow, and which the series revisits on several occasions. The cultural appetite for such celebrations of puerile masculinity has arguably waned, along with the trend for the man-child narratives and bromances that crested during the post-2008 recession. Indeed, the workshy man-child who can’t leave the family home due to laziness seems something of a redundant cultural type, particularly in the contemporary Irish context of a housing crisis that has seen adult children (and in many cases their own offspring) co-habiting with parents increasingly an unavoidable privation, rather than a life-choice. *Frank of Ireland* in some ways posits a tentative disapproval of the slacker figure. This is most vividly presented in the final episode of the series when one of Pam’s lovers, Liam, strongly suggested to be Frank’s father (and played by Brendan Gleeson to underline the point), although initially seen as an admirably rebellious figure, is ultimately presented as pathetic and stuck due to his inability to abide normative commitments. Though this is a standard message of slacker narratives, the centrality of Frank in the series at the same time constitutes a celebration of such wilfully unfettered masculinity.

While *Frank of Ireland* may seem somewhat anachronistic in terms of comedic and indeed wider social trends, what the series does have in its favour is star wattage. The Gleeson siblings (and as mentioned, their father in one episode) fully commit to their roles. Frank is played as suitably egotistical and deluded, with just enough light and shade to establish audience empathy, while Domhnall has fun with the sheer idiocy and vulnerability of Doofus. If anything, Brendan Gleeson’s ageing rebel Liam is one of the clunkier characterisations in the series. Alongside this prominent acting family, celebrated talent such as Sarah Greene (as Frank’s ex-girlfriend, Áine), Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, and Pat Shortt (as Áine’s new love interest, and father respectively) fill out the cast. A running joke that Áine is incredibly boring is doubly hamstrung by the same premise being utilised to greater comedic effect in *Arrested Development* (2003-2019), and the fact that in Greene, Áine is played by one of the most talented and watchable Irish actresses to emerge in recent years.

One means by which *Frank of Ireland* taps into previous currents in Irish screen culture is through continued reference to American popular cultural texts, specifically film. The opening episode has multiple references to *Taxi Driver*, and later episodes reference *Home Alone*, *12 Angry Men* and the screen oeuvre of Kevin Costner, all a means of presenting a longing to be elsewhere, while at the same time the central character is afraid to make the leap beyond the sureties of home. Such allusions lead to some of the funnier moments in the sitcom. Frank’s confusion of *12 Angry Men* and *A Few Good Men* when adapting the former for a local amateur production (“12 Angry Women”) is one highlight. Many Irish films have drawn upon similar cultural longings as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the humdrum of Irish life, with the US presented as a utopian getaway, such as *I Went Down* (1997) featuring Gleeson sr., or Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *The Woman who Married Clark Gable* (1985), or even *Hardy*

Bucks. Whether the fractious present-day US exerts the same appeal is debatable, and *Frank of Ireland*'s overt homage may just be another case of the series missing its cultural beats.

Frank of Ireland ultimately constitutes a missed opportunity. While the Dumb and Dumber central pairing and absurdist humour of the series generate a few genuinely funny moments, and the excellent cast certainly draw out the best in the material, the writing fails to bring a fresh enough take on some well-trodden comedic tropes. The series looks wonderful, making great usage of scenic locations and subtly visualising the allusions to the Hollywood films that shape the worldview of its central characters. However, given the sheer amount of series currently emerging on broadcast and streaming platforms, *Frank of Ireland* fails to stake its claim as a must-watch sitcom.

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***Hidden Assets* (2021)**

Denis Murphy

RTE's latest flagship drama series, *Hidden Assets* (starring Angeline Ball; written by Peter McKenna and Morna Regan) premiered on the Sunday night Drama on One slot last week. The series, like the vast majority of the station's major drama productions in recent years, is an international affair, bringing together production companies from Ireland (Saffron Moon Pictures), Belgium (Potemkino) and Canada (Facet 4). It's the second time this production partnership has assembled to produce RTE drama, following 2017's *Acceptable Risk*, in which Ball played the same character, Detective Emer Berry (despite a mysterious surname adjustment in the meantime). Like that production, *Hidden Assets* was co-commissioned by the

US streaming service Acorn TV, which specialises in developing, producing and acquiring English-language programming, much of it in the mystery, comedy, and police procedural genres, from the UK and other anglophone territories.

Hidden Assets represents the latest in a lengthening line of RTE-Acorn projects. The relationship commenced with the Amy Huberman drama/comedy vehicle *Striking Out* (2017), followed later that year by *Acceptable Risk*. The synergy intensified when RTE recruited Dubliner Shane Murphy, one of Acorn's London-based production executives, as its Group Head of Drama and Comedy in 2018. The accompanying [press release](#) highlighted Murphy's extensive global experience in TV drama, much of it in the international co-production arena. And although Murphy left RTE earlier this year, his three-year stint at Montrose brought several more Acorn projects into the RTE fold. The US streamer co-originated a significant chunk of RTE's drama and drama/comedy content during this period, including *Finding Joy* (2018-2020), *Dead Still* (2020), and *The South Westerlies* (2020).

What should we make of this relationship, and the curious range of programming it has spawned? As the national public service broadcaster, RTE has a duty to "reflect the democratic, social and cultural values of Irish society", according to its [Public Service Charter](#). This admittedly wide remit is nevertheless harder to achieve under circumstances of international co-production, when alternative and possibly conflicting cultural and commercial values come into play, with imperatives to succeed in multiple TV drama markets invariably impacting on the look, feel and sound of the resulting work. RTE's recently concluded crime drama *Kin* (also written by Peter McKenna) is a case in point. That show's odd phrasing, unusually diverse casting, and overwrought noir elements are arguably more suited to the US market served by its co-commissioner, AMC Networks. It's one thing for RTE to buy in overseas content made for an international market, quite another to produce its own material – using considerable amounts of public money – with similarly "international" ambitions, if the need to serve international markets undermines that public service remit.

Whatever these concerns for the Irish broadcaster, there's little doubt that RTE's involvement, and the international co-production status it solidifies, is of value to Acorn, AMC and RTE's other production partners. International co-productions facilitate easier access to specific international markets. They also, of course, enhance opportunities for production subsidies in the co-producing territories. *Hidden Assets* is no exception. The production was supported by Screen Ireland (€300,000), Screen Flanders (€200,000), the Section 481 tax credit (between €500,000 and €1 million), and the Belgian Tax Shelter (amount undisclosed). Post-production took place in Canada, allowing access to the Quebec Production Services Tax Credit and further Government of Canada funding incentives, as indicated in the show's credit roll.

In an unusually revealing interview with Laura Slattery of *The Irish Times*, *Hidden Assets* producer James Mitchell suggested the six-part drama had a budget of around €1 million per episode, some of that driven by extra costs associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. He also indicated that, in Ireland, broadcaster advances and production subsidies generally provide up to two thirds of the production budget. While the Belgian subsidies are evidence that eight of the twelve reported shooting weeks were spent in Antwerp, the decision to locate only post-production in Canada – despite an emerging Canadian sub-plot in the storyline – was apparently the result of a costly learning experience during the production of *Acceptable Risk*.

International coproduction is of course built on such experiences and relationships developed over time as producers seek to develop new intellectual properties and new markets in which to exploit them. One wonders, though, if the national broadcaster is creating too much dependence on this Acorn-inflected production chain – especially when you consider that Acorn's corporate parent is AMC Networks, the US cable and streaming provider with whom RTE collaborated for *Kin*. On the other hand, it's worth noting that AMC, through its "boutique" range of offerings including Acorn, Sundance Now, BBC America and IFC Films,

seeks to differentiate itself from streaming giants like Netflix and Disney+ precisely by offering non-mainstream niche content from independent and international producers. In that sense, its development goals are very different from those of its competitors.

It will be interesting to see if the RTE/Acorn/AMC connection will survive Shane Murphy's quiet departure from RTE. A lot may depend on the fate of *Kin* and *Hidden Assets* in the US markets, and whether either one of these expensive productions gets renewed for a second series. That in turn may depend on economic and competitive pressures far removed from the RTE campus at Montrose.

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***Arracht* (2020)**

Tony Tracy



With the explosion of production for domestic/small screen consumption – a shift that was already underway but greatly accelerated by the Covid pandemic - the Irish screen sector has moved with increasing speed and deliberation (by both producers and policy makers) towards “content creation” aimed at the global TV and streaming sectors. Quantifying the shift to new markets – in either financial or quantitative terms - is difficult but it is nonetheless evident that this burgeoning and highly capitalized sector brings with it an inevitable impact on Irish productions both at the level of format [feature films], subject matter and content [homogenized for international audiences]. While this represents a major – and still developing - success at an industrial development level [comparable to the impact of global Pharma and Tech on Ireland's

GDP and employment], the scale of such activity, as well as the parallel challenges experienced by theatrical feature film distribution/exhibition, places increasing pressure on the scope and viability of what was once understood as “national cinema”.

It is thus both heartening and instructive that one of the most artistically and commercially successful productions over the past year not only fulfilled traditional expectations of Irish cinema in terms of its setting [Connemara] and themes [the Great Famine] but told its story entirely through the medium of the Irish language. That it achieved mainstream theatrical success within the limits of a modest made-for-TV budget signalled that, in the right hands, powerful and well executed local stories retain not only resonance for Irish audiences, but perhaps assume greater cultural importance than ever in an ever-splintering, globalized landscape of streamers, box-sets and franchises. In responding to the film, I want to frame its achievements and importance within two, intersecting contexts. On the one hand the film can be understood as part an upsurge of interest in narrating the Great Famine in recent years in individualized and usually male terms, while it might also be argued that the appeal of the film’s treatment of tragic events is enhanced in its foregrounding of a historical Irish masculinity that has contemporary appeal as a favoured embodiment of non-hegemonic white manhood.

While the Great Famine has been understood as a central and defining event in the narrative of modern Irish history (central to the formation of the Irish diaspora) it has also been something of a ghostly presence which, in spite of common knowledge of general facts and occasional efforts to evoke the tragedy in epic terms (beginning with Liam O’Flaherty’s *Famine* [1937]), remains vague and often elusive for many. The reasons for this are complex but are generally attributed to three main factors: the silence surrounding the event itself in the British controlled political and journalistic discourse of the era; the silence of millions of victims who died or emigrated; and the trauma and shame of those who survived. In the aftermath of the famine Ireland was emptied of half its population and with it went witness and memory. We find this sense of a collective [“our”] trauma and narrative (as well as a hoped-for revenge), in poems such as “The Famine Year” by Lady Jane Wilde:

But our whitening bones against ye will rise as witnesses,
From the cabins and the ditches, in their charred, uncoffin’d masses,
For the Angel of the Trumpet will know them as he passes.
A ghastly, spectral army, before the great God we’ll stand.
And arraign ye as our murderers, the spoilers of our land.

While notable, if sporadic, interventions have been made among historians, writers and artists to narrate the Great Famine, this sense of a story whose details are not fully told or commonly understood has persisted down to the present day.

Recent years have however seen an upsurge in efforts to remedy this from a range of perspectives and artforms. In 2018, Ireland’s Great Hunger Museum, an initiative of Quinnipiac University, Connecticut (USA) brought a selection of its collection to Ireland. Entitled *Coming Home: Art & the Great Hunger*, the year-long exhibition proved immensely popular, attracting over 11,000 visitors and widespread media attention during exhibitions at Dublin Castle, Skibbereen and Derry. Clearly aware that the artworks often approached their subject from oblique angles and distances, its curator Niamh O’Sullivan wrote that “An aesthetics of atrocity is difficult to conceive and represent. Nevertheless, the inexpressibility of the atrocity created interpretative opportunities that many contemporary Irish artists uniquely addressed.” Notwithstanding its careful hanging, a detailed and extensive catalogue and an eclectic mixture of historical and contemporary art works the exhibition nonetheless seemed to perpetuate some of this inexpressibility; respectfully relating facts and “interpreting” the history while often keeping us at a narrative distance from its stories.

Around the same time as the Coming Home exhibition was attracting large audiences and media attention, singer/songwriter Declan O'Rourke released a collection of story-driven songs *Chronicles of the Great Irish Famine* (2017). O'Rourke was inspired to work on the theme after encountering John O'Connor's classic text *The Workhouses of Ireland* (1995). One story in it which particularly resonated, that of a man whose children died in the workhouse and who carried his wife home only to be discovered dead the next morning, "his wife's feet held to his chest as if trying to warm them." Shocked by the account O'Rourke says he asked himself "Why don't we, as a nation, all know this story." Indeed, he felt, "the subject seemed to have been grossly neglected, in relative terms, in the realms of the arts and culture," inspiring in him a desire "to chronicle a collection of untold or neglected stories ... to re-humanise [the Famine] using the language of our own time, appealing to the listener's own imagination and empathy." (O'Rourke, 2021.) "Poor Boy's Shoes", was the first of thirteen songs that attempted to achieve these aims. O'Rourke returned to the story of the story during the Covid 19 lockdown when he wrote his first novel - *The Pawnbroker's Reward* (2020) – seeking to imaginatively inhabit the lives and hardship of Pádraig and Cáit ua Buachalla and through their tragic tale give form to the lives of 19th century famine Irish who lived and perished in appalling circumstances.

O'Rourke was not alone in such ambitions: 2018 saw the release of *Black '47*; the first Irish feature film set during the famine and largely shot in the wilds of Connemara. Lance Daly's film (developed from a 2008 short film *An Ranger*) was structured as a revenge western centring on Martin Feeney (James Frecheville) who absconds from his Connaught Rangers unit in colonial Afghanistan and returns to Ireland to take revenge on those who evicted and killed his family. A huge hit with Irish audiences who made it the biggest grossing Irish film of the year [local box office of almost €1 million], the film seemed to address a national narrative need that recalled Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996). Again, the theme of how to represent atrocity was central to discussions around the film. In this case the (fictional) story of Martin Feeney was overlaid by norms of Hollywood genre cinema: "The famine is one of those essential Irish stories that we haven't figured out a way to bring to the screen," Lance Daly, told the Guardian. "Doing it as a revenge thriller was a really smart way to smuggle the story of the Great Hunger to a wide audience." (Carroll 2021.) (That, despite the film's enormous popularity locally, it took just \$50,000 at the US box office suggests that this ambition was not entirely realised.)

The latest entry in this recently revived interest in the Great Famine is *Arracht* [first screened in 2019 but not released in Irish cinemas until 2021]. Like "Poor Man's Shoes" it centres on the father of a family decimated by the tragedy. It eschews the generic tropes that structure *Black '47* in favour of a relatively small scale and intimately captured sense of place and community. The restrictions of its budget become a force and gives *Arracht* a unique imagination and strength; it is largely mono-lingual and makes vivid, though low-key use of its Connemara/coastal settings which, through the lens of talented cinematographer Kate McCullagh, offer not merely a photogenic backdrop but convey the harshness and beauty of the terrain. Such qualities clearly develop from writer/director Tom Sullivan's vision of the story as well as its relatively modest budget (€1.2m). Developed as the first film produced under the "Cine4" initiative, TG4's partnership with Screen Ireland and the BAI to develop original feature films in the Irish language, O'Sullivan has said that his original screenplay would probably have cost in the region of €15m and that the budget restraints meant that the screenplay was cut from 90 to 75 pages. (Creagh 2021.) Such limitations seem to intensify rather than exclude: the finished 85 min running time feels both economic and complete; each scene a plausible development within its narrative of fall and redemption.

Where Declan O'Rourke sought to capture history through song with "Poor Man's Shoes", *Arracht* is based on the conceit of a fictional murder ballad about a folk hero named Colmán Sharkey [Dónall ÓHéalaí], a fisherman and maker of poteen. Described by

writer/director O’Sullivan as ‘very able and capable, a bit of an entrepreneur who has ideas about himself’, Colman is thus conceived in quasi-contemporary terms and this characterisation, blending the abject and ambition, is at the very centre of the film’s narrative and structure. Where the Famine Irish might once have been imagined as forelock-tugging peasants or simian-featured primitives, Sullivan/Ó Héalaí give us an Irishman with strong sense of himself and his place in the world. Like O’Rourke’s drive to “chronicle untold or neglected stories ... to re-humanise [the Famine] using the language of our own time”, *Arracht* seeks to represent the Famine through the experience of an individual, a kind and loving father who combines wisdom and resourcefulness in a manner which suggests that, in other circumstances, he might have socially and economically thrived.

While the cruel and venal Anglo landlord played by Michael McElhatton maintains the stereotype of such figures, he exits after a rapidly dispatched first act and the film shifts to focus upon Colman as a man on the run; deprived of dignity, freedom and family. This narrative emphasis on a single determined character offers a fresh and engaging perspective on the famine and while it cannot be said to be neatly generic in the way of say *Black ‘47*, it nonetheless brings *Arracht* into a tradition of male survival stretching from *Robinson Crusoe* to *The Revenant* and contemporary TV shows such as the *Walking Dead*, often discussed in terms of “apocalyptic masculinity”. Central to such narratives is the self-sufficient [white] male and after a period of physical and spiritual crises [during which Colman contemplates taking his own life] we see the Colman recommit to a life that is primal yet resourceful: finding shelter in a cave, catching fish and smoking them for future consumption, making a curative tincture from seaweed. In each of these endeavours Colman not only demonstrates “entrepreneurial” instincts but distinguishes himself from the [historical] coastal Irish who died in their hundreds of thousands despite access to the sea. His renewed life-force is given further impetus through the arrival of a child called Kitty who Colman discovers at his abandoned home. However, he is also attacked by starving neighbours who have tracked him to his cottage, one of whom stabs him in the hope of securing some means of nourishment. Here the filmmakers further adumbrate the apocalyptic masculinity trope with visual references to the crucified Christ: his long hair, beard, emaciated torso and a bloody stab wound near his heart. Underlining this association further we get a period of isolation in the “tomb” of the cave (replete with an image of a cross which Kitty visits while he is unconscious) before Colman emerges into the bright morning light of resurrection before the final act of the story. While all this sounds somewhat schematic, it is handled with care and beauty and the result is a bridging between mere survival and a renewed hope, embodied by the child who represents a changed future for Colman. The final third of the film takes place in light of this sense of purpose that brings with it an avenging violence as Colman defends Kitty - symbol of innocence and the future - from his returned tormentors.



The filmmakers of *Arracht* find the solution to the oft-proclaimed “difficulty” of putting the Famine on film by focusing on the story and point of view a single male character imagined in terms of a classic three-act structure: (familial) contentment, giving way to unjust suffering and self-abnegation and the recovery of hope achieved through a combination of fate and will power. In foregrounding this point of view and perspective we can see similarities to other recent tellings in song and cinema. However, it might be argued that even as the filmmakers are deeply sensitive to the specifics of Irish Famine history and place, and deploy stylistic means to emphasize the local (costumes, cinematography and notably the Kila soundtrack), they also draw on more general patterns of contemporary cinematic storytelling, in particular the positioning of white masculinity in terms of abjection, what Claire Sisco King calls “Abject Hegemony”, a kind of *noble* suffering or empowered marginality. (Sisco King 2009.) In *Arracht* this position stems from colonial history and its attendant suffering (through famine, dispossession and injustice), from which develop tropes of phallogocentric survivalism, messianic suffering and, eventually, righteous anger/retribution. The contemporary currency of Irish masculinity is central to this imagining of history. Resourceful and entrepreneurial while also socially and economically marginalised, Irish whiteness facilitates - as it so often does - a portrait of male victimhood that is both blameless and finally triumphant (both within the narrative and also in the act of narrating this history some century and a half later). It is little wonder then that Hollywood quickly showed interest in re-making this film, though tellingly, according to Sullivan, only in the film’s story beats and themes, rather than its historical details. (Creagh 2021).

Shot in late 2018 and originally slated for a cinema release in late spring 2019. *Arracht* became a victim of Covid 19 and didn’t receive a theatrical release until October 2021. The extended delay may however have benefitted the film’s commercial success and cultural standing. Emerging from their own isolation, post-lockdown Irish audiences kept it in cinemas for several months and it garnered strong word-of-mouth during a relatively quiet period of cinema releases to make it one of the most visible, highly regarded and perhaps even most important films of recent years.

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***Smother* (2021)**

Stephanie McBride

Smother is a six-part television crime series written and created by Kate O’Riordan (*Mr Selfridge*, *The Bay*) and commissioned by RTÉ, which first broadcast it in March 2021. The co-production was developed by BBC Studios and Treasure Entertainment (*Finding Joy*, *Handsome Devil*), with Screen Ireland and Western Region Audiovisual Producers Fund. The series has been sold widely – to Alibi (UK), Peacock (USA), ABC (Australia), TVNZ (New Zealand), CANAL+ (France), RTVS (Slovenia) and ETV (Estonia) – and a second season was announced in April 2021.

Smother’s cast is led by Dervla Kirwan, with Niamh Walsh, Seána Kerslake, Gemma-Leah Devereux, Stuart Graham, Conor Mullen and Thomas Levin. It follows the fortunes of the Ahern family – formidable matriarch Val (Kirwan) and her three daughters – in the aftermath of the suspicious death of patriarch Denis, whose influence persists from beyond the grave. The show received mixed reviews, some critics opting for a tentative “promising” after the first episode, others less forgiving. Liam Fay in the *Sunday Times* called it “self-consciously picturesque” and “the show’s most striking feature is the contrast between the rocky mountain scenery and the prairie flatness of the scriptwriting” (Fay 2021). Pat Stacey in the *Irish Independent* wrote that the “Overstuffed subplots and the three worst daughters in the world suffocate RTÉ’s *Smother*” and “an unlikely prospect still is finding an RTÉ drama that entertains rather than embarrasses” (Stacey 2021). Ed Power in the *Irish Times* thought it “possesses a pulse and it clicks together effectively”, though “the plot unspools like fresh-from-the-microwave *Midsomer Murders*” (Power 2021). For Éilís O’Hanlon in the *Sunday Independent*, “The stifling claustrophobia of family life is hypnotically conveyed,” but its status as quality drama “remains to be seen” (O’Hanlon 2021). When it was shown on Alibi in June 2021, Lucy Mangan of *The Guardian* gave a lavish endorsement, invoking Maeve Binchy’s addictive storytelling and praising the “assorted other seeds of suspicion, reveals and red herrings scattered across the hour” of the first episode (Mangan 2021). By contrast, Ed Power again, this time for a UK readership in *inews.co.uk*, found that “there were too many characters, each with complicated motives. This was accompanied by a curious apathy towards drilling into the psychosphere of the West of Ireland setting ... Change the accents and it could have been anywhere” (Power 2021). Admittedly many of the reviews were written in response to the opening episode, but most reveal a downbeat welcome at best, while many of the Irish reviews also had general criticisms of RTÉ’s drama efforts.

The narrative unfolds across six episodes. This structure allows for the setting up, playing through and exploration of a gallery of suspects as in a classic whodunit. Most of this revolves around Val and her three daughters – Jenny (her eldest), Anna (her step-daughter) and Grace (the youngest, and the only issue of the marriage of Val and Denis). Other key characters include Elaine, separated from her husband Rory, and their sons Calum and Jacob, all of whom now live with Anna. As the story opens, Anna and Rory are trying to secure custody of his sons from mother Elaine. A large cast of characters and their stories demands coherent writing, and

this is not a strength of *Smother*: the complex and unwieldy family links were a major source of confusion on social media. The production team then published a family tree online to clarify matters, and several newspapers produced their own trees and plot summaries including the *Irish Sun* and *Irish Mirror*, but narrative distractions and structural weaknesses should have been ironed out long before going into production.

The promotional material and trailers all laid claim to the noir genre, associating *Smother* with the global success of Nordic/Scandi noir, and several media commentators dubbed it “Celtic noir” and “domestic noir”. With this blanket embrace of the noir term, it is useful to recall noir’s origins in 1940s Hollywood cinema, in which the key characteristics were black-and-white, chiaroscuro lighting, reflective surfaces, an investigative narrative structure and, frequently, a morose detective. 1940s noir was a grim world of greed and corruption, betrayals and conspiracies, duplicity and sexual excess – usually provoking murder most foul. Yet since then the term has been critically and popularly adopted, stretched and tagged with other locations and geographies. While historically and in popular memory it’s usually raining and often night-time down the mean streets of the noir city, its legacy has influenced the emergence of crime narratives in other environs, such as ITV’s *Broadchurch* as a “seaside” or “coastal noir”. Scandi/Nordic noir, however, while relocating it and inflecting it for a specific time and geography, clearly reprises the 1940s legacy of lighting and atmosphere and its uncovering of the dark underside.

In *Smother*, while the narrative starts as a mystery – how did Denis fall? – it quickly becomes a whodunit investigation into his murder. As in early film noir, this investigation is not only of a crime but of the victim himself. As the story opens, Denis and his wife Val are about to separate and a sense of his patriarchal boorishness is evident during her glittering birthday party. After his death, Val assumes the role of detective, probing into all aspects of her family’s lives; it soon becomes clear that her search is not only for the murderer but also – and above all – to protect her family and control the narrative. The local garda sergeant Paudie officially investigates the crime to restore law and order and stability to the local community. Val, however, is motivated more by the self-interest and entitlement that characterise the Aherns as outsiders in that same community. Moral ambiguities and deceptions surface as Val pursues her investigation and conceals any potentially damaging evidence from the authorities. This narrative layering offers competing approaches and imports moral and ethical perspectives into the text, although the rather scant regard for local Garda processes tends to undermine the narrative.

Besides the generic staples from 1940s film noir that apply in *Smother*, its heritage includes the hybrid melodrama/noir, such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945). The latter, like *Smother*, begins with a man’s murder on a dark night along a coast. The eponymous Mildred is also a determined mother who has worked her way up from lowly origins and strives for the approval of her highly acquisitive daughter. The visual style creates a duality/duplicity around Mildred through shadows, glass and mirrors – the fractured images expressing the film’s dual nature of noir (dark, shadowy lighting) and maternal melodrama (conventional evenly-lit sequences). Like Mildred, Val is in a struggle to control her own narrative – and determined to maintain control of her family’s histories and destinies. This is often for outward appearances and voiced in stark terms, such as when she insists “Grace will remember what I tell her to remember”. *Smother* also visually underlines Val’s duplicity/duality, hallmarked in the opening credits with a powerful mirrored profile of her, which frames the screen at opposite sides.

As it develops, the narrative releases clues or insights into Val’s excesses. She has ignored or implicitly supported her husband’s underhand schemes and is content to enjoy its fruits – the wealthy lifestyle in the Big House; meanwhile Denis has been secretly planning to sell their home due to business problems. The strong visual emphasis on the family’s trophy house underlines the association of property with conspicuous wealth in Ireland. The house

used in the filming is Moy House, built in the mid-18th century as the holiday home of Sir Augustine Fitzgerald and more recently transformed into a hotel. The image of the house is central to the show's branding – an etched drawing of it is used as an ident, as if on the headed notepaper of a titled owner (which it originally was) or of an award-winning country house hotel (which it has since become).

The house provides an opulent façade for the murkier activities of its owners and is not only a visual sign of Denis's drive to acquire trophies – at one stage Val vehemently asserts that she is *not* one of his medals. It also provides a sharp contrast to Seaview Estate, his tawdry housing development of fire traps and shoddy building practices.

If 1940s noir showed an inversion of the American Dream, *Smother* is haunted by the nightmares of the Celtic Tiger which Denis's property development taps into. Hovering over the plot is an awareness of the continuing consequences of a credit-fuelled, apparently unfettered expansion, of ghost estates and defective homes – memories and actualities which are laced with a widespread public distrust of authority, banking and property speculators. The collapse of the property market and banking sector in Ireland was followed by the intervention of the Troika (the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) that took control of the Irish state's fiscal policy, the ramifications of which continue to be felt today. For example, the estimated *future* cost of fixing building issues in defective homes from the Celtic Tiger era now stands at €365 million (Horgan-Jones 2021).

In this context, *Smother's* narrative can be seen to refract the wider socio-political implications of Denis's shady business dealings. Cranes and diggers, visible in several backgrounds, are reminders that resonate with viewers' memories of the earlier property bubble.

Smother, however, lacks the explicit political corruption plot at the core of much Nordic noir, in which the crime is frequently a means of unravelling an underlying system of governmental or corporate corruption. Rather, *Smother* represents corruption and double-dealing as the agency of the ruthless, conniving individual. It might be instructive, however, to regard Denis as representative of the comprador class. Pat Collins's film *Living in a Coded Land* (2014) includes archive footage in which writer Seán Ó Faoláin identifies an emerging class in Ireland, among whom he lists: "Managers, capitalists, entrepreneurs, speculators, whizz-kids, the new bourgeoisie, chancers, new business types, industrialists, men of property, moneymakers and so on".

Arguably, Denis's dealings identify him as ticking almost all of Ó Faoláin's categories. In the same Pat Collins film, historian Conor McCabe explains how global capitalism's shift to finance in the 1970s led to the growth of a comprador class of stockbrokers, legal professionals, land speculators and property developers (such as Denis) – middlemen who act as intermediaries, in a subordinate role but within a mutually advantageous arrangement between international capital and the indigenous resources of the state.

Denis's machinations pervade family life too. He devises a plan to withhold Val's right to her home and property; he sells Grace's café behind her back; he involves Jenny in his corrupt investment scheme (making her professionally compromised), and his last will deprives her of equal inheritance as her sisters; he pressurises his teenage daughter Grace to terminate her pregnancy. After his death, Val's urge to protect her daughters is manifested as control and manipulation redolent of Denis's approach, which Máiréad, Val's sister, is swift to point out.

Val: "No, I am not like Denis. I've done nothing but protect my girls."

Máiréad: "That's exactly what he'd say. You know I love those girls, but they have a sense of entitlement that is off the Richter scale. Denis did that and you did that too."

Layered with the central narrative enigma of the whodunit are the narrative spokes of family melodrama: Grace's mental health, trauma and emotional loss; Jenny's marriage

breakdown and struggle to have a child; Anna's affair with the married Rory and custody of his sons; Val's own relationship with her lover Carl. These weave soap operatic elements into the investigation storyline.

Val, resolute in pursuit of her own agendas, resists having Grace hospitalised, fearing that her daughter might let something slip and reveal some unpalatable truths. Her other daughters seem well aware of Val's tendency to control and connive ("Let's go and see how Mam's gonna play this one"). Clearly though, despite Denis's overweening and patronising control and betrayals, Val is not conspicuously a victim. In a telling moment she dismisses his smug view of their marriage and blended family, saying "It suits me, Denis, until it doesn't," and leaves viewers in no doubt as to Val's strength and self-possession in this union. Even lover Carl, seeing Val's assured determination in satisfying her own desires, complains that he is always "only what's left". Her emphasis on her family leads to their break-up, despite her plea: Why can't I have both?

Historically, the femme fatale and maternal figure are portrayed as opposites – the mother as life-giving, the femme as a sexual agent – a binary that informs many representations of women in early noir. Val, in post-feminist times, asks: Why can't I have / be both? Her character articulates aspects of both the mother and the femme – voicing empathy for her daughters, yet manipulative and duplicitous. At times, her seeming selflessness also hints at an egotism, revolving around how she sees herself and wishes to be seen.

Although she appears outwardly successful to local townspeople, Val's drive to control her daughters and family signals a lack, an unease, a tension. In a quiet yet powerful moment, too, she expresses regret, guilt and doubt as to her mothering of Jenny as a baby. As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir was writing of the dangers of self-sacrifice and victimhood in efforts to be a good mother; 21st-century media and consumer culture promote further idealisations of motherhood, in a tyranny of social expectations to which many women feel compelled to conform. Placing Val, a mother who is also assured and sexually engaged, at the centre invites responses as to how she inhabits her motherhood role, her over-investment laced with a strong sense of privilege as she negotiates the demands and challenges of motherhood, and intervenes in the lives of her daughters and blended family. Moreover, while Val is not deadly, she is devious and driven; her strength and determination may be admirable if misdirected. Earlier femme fatales suffered containment or punishment for their audacity in transgressing social norms and expectations. Val escapes such a fate in a 21st-century narrative – an ambivalence surrounds her and she is not an unsympathetic figure. Recent critical writings exploring the legacy of noir's femme fatale in shifting contexts, particularly the impact of feminist political struggles, note how the femme might be reclaimed as a potential ideal in the post-feminist age. Significantly, however, what emerges is that women remain defined and confined, across domestic and work spheres, alongside popular media's femme fatale image as a marketable and co-optable brand of feminism. Contemporary consumer culture's rhetoric of empowerment and lifestyle choice reinforces neoliberal individualism only by ignoring and concealing ongoing inequalities, conditionings and anxieties. In this light, it might be instructive to consider how Val is seen – as a victim, a heroine, or an anti-heroine?

Though the writing is uneven at times, *Smother's* exploration of gender dynamics involves thinking through the different experiences and circumstances of the women at the centre of the drama – all bound up with motherhood, mothering, motivation and morality. The title itself provides an obvious cue, although it hints at a wider question: who is being stifled or obscured, mother or child?

Despite her insistence on keeping her family afloat, there is a sad absurdity about Val's attempts to have a family dinner – prepping vegetables for a meal that nobody will eat; a birthday lunch at the local hotel that is riven by spite, anger, accusations and recriminations, at which Val reminds her girls that they were happy to benefit from their father's morally suspect

endeavours – time and again, a meal remains unshared and uneaten, representing a failure in communality.

The series features strong characterisation, persuasive and powerful performances in all the central female roles. At a narrative level, glimpses of potential female solidarity between the women are offered, however shortlived, and mainly thwarted by the deeds and misdeeds of the men about them. Val's deliriously extravagant gesture in throwing one of Denis's medals off a cliff is also a casting out of his influence, a gap which she now fills to powerful and chilling effect. In contrast to traditional reclamation by patriarchal order, *Smother's* finale involves a sisterhood pact, a female conspiracy to surrender Rory in place of Elaine (who is the guilty party this time) – in an upturning of earlier wrongdoings, a morally-flawed exchange of guilt and blame. Val voices a calm but firm conclusion: "What we're doing here is best for this family. No one else gets the right to decide that." Grace, troubled by this cover-up, remarks: "But it's not the truth. I think we should know that – what we're doing here."

Although Val's actions appear to restore justice and counteract Denis's damaging influence, her position reinforces the sense of her superiority – as outside and beyond the law. It also reinforces Val's role as head of the family, showing her as the architect of a future based on secrets and lies – setting in train a legacy of cover-ups which will haunt the family not only in the domestic realm but in wider field of justice and law and order.

In a narrative structured on family and generational tension, a tentative redemptive future is suggested in the blossoming relationship of Calum and Ingrid (Carl's daughter), whose honesty and openness contrast with the older generation's hypocrisy and bullying. "Grown-ups tell you not to lie, but *they* do it all the time." Moreover, Ingrid's candour advises a recognition of past mistakes, rather than a concealment. Yet any optimism is undermined by the conspiracy on which the future of the Ahern family is based – the lies which close the narrative.

As noted, *Smother* has had significant overseas sales and a second series is under way. Despite patchy writing, some clumsy dialogue, overly complex structures and occasional plot incoherence, it locates itself firmly within the Nordic noir generic orbit, with high production values and strong performances. On the other hand, its central focus on Denis and family misses the Nordic genre's powerful critique of systemic corruption and society's flaws.

Initiated as a public service remit to create content for national audiences, in the past decade the Nordic noir genre has become a huge success in the international TV marketplace, and now has its own dedicated categories on streaming services and within broadcasting schedules. The critic Mark Lawson's assertion of Nordic noir's demise in 2017 proved to be premature, but does raise a fundamental issue as this Nordic model becomes a lead for other producers in developing drama: he argues that, rather than self-consciously catering to the global market, public service productions should first focus on a home audience. (Lawson 2017.) As Irish producers build up productive international partnerships, there may be a growing temptation to develop dramas that are overgeared towards a pan-national marketplace and bent out of shape by the demands of international co-productions.

Dramas with a sense of place and local topologies can strongly engage audiences through stories that illuminate the lives of their own society. *Smother* was filmed on the west coast around the small town of Lahinch in County Clare, and turbulent oceans, waterfalls and leaden storm skies feature extensively in its compelling cinematography by Cathal Watters. While the visuals and coastal settings link it to others in the genre (such as *Hinterland*, *Shetland*, *Broadchurch*, *The Bay*), it also invites other frames of reference from the growing scholarship in the Blue Humanities, which consider how the arts have configured the coastal and maritime worlds and reflected shifting cultural and environmental concerns.

With an ecocritical lens, *Smother's* dramatisation of coercion and corruption is instructive in the ways in which land and sea are vulnerable to dangers of unregulated exploitation. While Celtic Tiger excesses may not always be to the fore for contemporary

audiences, arrogance and duplicity are timeless in their damage. Denis's patriarchal domination of his family is paralleled in his attitude to business, land and sea. This is Anthropocene Man in his element, relentless and lacking any nuance, cutting corners with defective materials. In his drive for growth at any cost he shows a contempt for family, people, the environment, and regulation, whether of planning, land use or coastal erosion. Yet as recent global crises – wildfires, floods and pandemics, all suitably apocalyptic in tone – have shown, humanity's efforts since the industrial revolution to control nature in such patriarchal fashion have backfired utterly.

A frequent image, of Denis gazing out to sea, recalls Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of encounters between the ego and the elemental. Images of such majestic forces make a travesty of Denis's assertions that "These are my cliffs, my sea." While Val and Denis assert their power, they are often undermined by this very imagery. In a night-time scene, the town's distant lights glimmer under an ominous midnight-blue sky and the camera moves in a slow, stealthy, menacing arc across the sea towards the town. Other images of mudflats and dark pools along the shore, highlighted in shafts of light, connote a sense of unease in these liminal spaces, shifting sands and uncertain ground – a hallmark of coastal noir. The black pools are also reminiscent of what Seamus Heaney referred to as *Atlantic seepage*, where we have lost our footing as land and sea collide. Besides echoing the Nordic genre's use of atmosphere, the sublime splendour of churning seas and wild landscapes in *Smother* carry a warning of a wider and deepening crisis.

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***Positive Vibes: Love Yourself Today* (Ross Killeen 2021)**

Denis Murphy

There is an extraordinary moment about halfway through Ross Killeen's gorgeous, absorbing, life-affirming documentary/concert film, a work that probes the meaning of Dublin singer-songwriter Damien Dempsey's everyman appeal. As 'Damo' performs his ballad *Chris and Stevie*, the camera lingers on several audience members shedding quiet tears at the story of two friends lost to suicide. Harnessing the emotion of the moment, Dempsey rides the wave and coaxes the audience into catharsis, as they join as one to deliver the song's powerful coda:

*Talk to me and tell me how you feel.
Lean on me, I'm here, my love is real*

It's impossible not to be moved by the emotional power of the sequence. In that instant, the documentary equivalent of a narrative point of no return, the film reveals itself. Dempsey ('Damo') is the centre, the linking figure between several overlapping narratives, but ultimately, the story is not about him. It's about trauma, as revealed through the stories Killeen and editor Mick Mahon weave around Damo's triumphant annual Christmas gig at Dublin's Vicar Street venue. It's also about the healing, redemptive power of music in dealing with that trauma. During Damo's shamanic performance, it feels as if the music flows through him, not from him – echoing the singer's recollections of advice received from Christy Moore, one of his heroes and early champions. The performance, from Christmas 2019, and more importantly the audience reaction captured by the filmmakers, are powerful reminders of the value of live music to Irish cultural life, and the loss represented by the shuttering of venues like Vicar Street during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dempsey's songs, thematically concerned with a multitude of issues – drugs, religious oppression, the working-class suburbs, gentrification, anxiety, anger – project a powerful sense of place. Killeen's documentary explores the boundaries of that place, interweaving impeccably captured performance footage with portraits of four trauma victims. We meet Nadia, a former heroin addict; Packy, whose depression fuels his love of boxing; Jonathan, a recovering alcoholic; and Damo himself, whose youthful 'wildness' might well have brought him to an entirely different place. Killeen documents these four characters and their formative experiences, eloquently articulated by the individuals themselves, as they navigate their respective journeys towards self-insight and varying degrees of redemption. Their relationship with Dempsey's music is never directly articulated. However, their presence at the performance, their obvious familiarity with the music, and their clear identification with the often dark themes of the songs, all combine to underline the importance of the music to their lives.

Cinematographer Narayan Van Maele's empathic visuals reveal the dignity and beauty in these characters' everyday actions: Packy's quiet encouragement of a young boxing pupil; Nadia's affection for the women and men in her counselling programme; Jonathan's love of sea-swimming; Damo's embrace of nature on the slopes and forests of Howth Head, the Dublin landmark that looms over the northside suburbs where he was born and raised.

Love Yourself Today blends the poetic with the observational in a seamless combination of documentary modes. Van Maele's monochromatic tableaux highlight, in a literal way, the contrast between light and shadow that represents, metaphorically, the emotional worlds of the four protagonists. And protagonists they are: without these stories, Dempsey's performance would be stripped of much of its power, reduced to the tribalism of football-terrace chanting – a quality it undoubtedly contains, but easily transcends.

The film is Ross Killeen's feature directorial debut, following the short films *Becoming Men* (2013) and *99 Problems* (2019), both of which contain visual and narrative elements that prefigure the Dempsey film. Killeen's production company, Motherland, is based in Dublin's north inner city, bringing together a self-described "collective of directors, producer and editors", making commercials, corporate multimedia, music videos and now features. Much of Motherland's short-form work is infused with the social realism and sense of place that infuses *Love Yourself Today*, characteristics that set the film apart from other Irish music documentaries and concert films more generally.

To make the film, Motherland received a production loan from Screen Ireland and further subsidy through the Section 481 tax credit. The film had a limited theatrical release in Ireland and the UK in November, realising (according to the-numbers.com) box office revenues of \$22,500 from 20 screens. Distribution was handled by Break Out Pictures, a recently established company headed by Nell Roddy and Robert McCann Finn, both formerly of Element Pictures. While the box office return has been unspectacular, the delayed release was undoubtedly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues to impact on the cinema and other sectors of the arts. Motherland, Dempsey and everyone else involved will have been encouraged by the January 2022 announcement that *Love Yourself Today* has been picked up for global distribution by 101 Films International, the London-based distributor and sales agent.

It remains to be seen, then, if Ross Killeen's documentary/concert film, and indeed Damo's musical persona, will appeal to audiences beyond Ireland, perhaps through a 'long tail' strategy across various international streaming markets. Either way, the film represents a considerable achievement for Killeen, Motherland, and Dempsey himself, whose film involvement to date has been mostly confined to cameo roles in home-grown crime dramas such as *Between The Canals* (2011), *Split* (2016), and *Cardboard Gangsters* (2017).

Undoubtedly, *Love Yourself Today* is a more suitable vehicle for Dempsey's unique ability to connect with an audience. There is no arguing with the "positive vibes" that wash over the ecstatic Vicar Street crowd, as the camera swoops from the rafters, discretely capturing moments of intimacy, ecstasy and collective abandon.

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***Deadly Cuts* (Rachel Carey 2021)**

Maria O'Brien

Deadly Cuts, written and directed by Rachel Carey, produced by Auveen Lush, Ciara Appelbe and Liz Gill for O'Sullivan Productions with funding from Fís Éireann / Screen Ireland, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) and Virgin Media was acquired by Netflix Ireland/UK and has secured an international release with a planned opening over St. Patrick's weekend in USA (Wiseman, 2022). The project was pitched at the Galway Film Fleadh in 2017 and was screened as the closing film at the 2021 Virgin Media Dublin International Film Festival illustrating the importance of development and exhibition support structures at all stages of a film project.

Set in the fictional Piglinstown, (and filmed on location in a northwest suburb of Finglas in north Dublin) the film centres on the eponymous hair salon owned by Michelle (Angeline Ball), adopting a mostly comedic approach to the threats of gangland violence, gentrification and working class struggles. However, Piglinstown is, for the most part, not portrayed as a place to escape from. Rather, strong ties illustrate the importance of place and community.

The shops in Piglinstown, including the eponymous hair salon, are under threat of redevelopment as apartments and a hotel dubbed "Piglinstown 2.0". The project is driven by corrupt local councillor Darren Flynn (Aidan McArdle), who funds a local gang led by Deano (Ian Lloyd Anderson), using their behaviour as an excuse to redevelop the area under the guise of improvement. "Deadly Cuts" takes on a second layer of significance when Michelle and her young staff's vigilante defence of the salon from Deano, leads to the latter's demise, dispatched by a pair of hair scissors. Having incinerated his body in the neighbouring butchers shop, Michelle and her young female hairdressing staff are led to believe that winning an *Aah Hair!* hairdressing award will stop the redevelopment. The salon duly wins the award (incidentally vanquishing Michelle's demons from a disastrous mishap at prior award ceremony) only for the staff to realise that Councillor Flynn has no intention of keeping his promise. And, in a reprise of Deano's death, it's up to the local nannies to dispatch the corrupt politician in order to save their community.

The plot is driven ostensibly by the need for the plucky underdog hair salon to beat the inner circle of elite hairdressers to win the big award at the prestigious *Ahh Hair!* awards ceremony. But this is a post-#MeToo film, built around strong women rising up and harnessing the collaborative potential of community strength. The genuine menace of Deano's threats brings home the everyday threat of male violence to women. The fawning grovelling treatment of star hairdresser, D'Logan Doyle (Louis Lovett) epitomises the hollowness of patriarchal dominance of society. The narrative arc of the plot brings in issues of gentrification, redevelopment, corruption, individualism, patriarchy, and profit mongering, defeated by strong women working together with the community spirit and support structures driving the narrative. While the Netflix algorithm codes *Deadly Cuts* as an offbeat, irreverent comedy, the twin threats of violence towards women and a kind of social violence – gentrification through redevelopment – are deeply disturbing.

Chantelle, a young member of the hairdressing staff, is too scared to go out at night because of threats (having her head shaved) from gang members. The harassment of women in the local pub by the male gang members is an everyday occurrence. Only after Deano is killed by the hairdressers and the other gang members are duped into dispersing, is Chantelle finally brave enough to go to the local pub in the evening.

The hair salon is portrayed as a place of community, creativity and freedom. The threat to close it through redevelopment invokes the ongoing developer-led dominance of Dublin at the expense of developing a city people can actually live in. The Irish housing crisis is driven

by a capitalist need for profit, with insufficient development of mixed-use housing and liveable communities. The Piglinstown community's obligation to take direct action against the threat of a redevelopment that will split their community exposes the the absence of political will to address these issues. Instead, the Piglinstown sorority must take control (to the extent of actual murder) to defend their place in society.

Historically, the female in Irish cinema has been unevenly represented, often serving to support or shore up Irish masculinity. This tendency is upended in *Deadly Cuts*, with strong female representation across all generations. Filmed on location in Dublin, *Deadly Cuts* moves away from this narrow regressive categorisation of the female as supportive of the dominant male figure and instead provides us with a number of strong nuanced independent female characters.

From a film industry perspective, the international success of *Deadly Cuts* – written and directed by female director Rachel Daly – is important in the context of the lack of gender parity in the Irish screen industries. Screen Ireland gender breakdown statistics (on www.screenireland.ie) points to the ongoing underrepresentation of female directors and writers. The six point plan introduced by Screen Ireland in 2015 to address this imbalance is structured to encourage more women to apply for funding. Crucially, the provision of enhanced funding measures for female talent and a specific “POV” scheme for supporting projects in development is providing a support base towards gender parity. However, mentorship and encouragement don't necessarily tackle the problem of the existence of patriarchal structural barriers, particularly around gendered caring roles, means that gender parity is still some way away (Liddy, 2020; O'Brien, 2019). In addition, while explicit policy measures to combat gender inequality in the screen industries are welcome, there is a failure to address other issues of equality and diversity in the screen industries. As yet, the kind nuanced work undertaken with regard to diversity in the UK cultural and creative industries by Brook, O'Brien & Taylor (2020) has not been paralleled in an Irish context.

Historical uneasiness around national cinemas and national identities as an “other” to be defined and evaluated against a dominant Hollywood are not visible here. Instead an assured Irishness is developed through addressing specific nuances of current problems within Irish society, including gender-based inequality, gentrification, and political corruption. *Deadly Cuts* does not showcase a globalised, gentrified Dublin, but a living community. It is salutary that it is an unashamedly local Dublin story that gets international recognition, sufficiently Irish to woo both national and international audiences. The use of Kneecap's (the Belfast-based rap trio) Irish language “C.E.A.R.T.A” in the opening credits, over a run-down, impoverished suburb, establishes from the outset that the film is hailing its explicit Irishness (although on Netflix, the decision to subtitle the Irish lyrics with a generic “singing in Irish Gaelic” somewhat dilutes this message). A locally made film in a time where the film is increasingly transnational, *Deadly Cuts* embraces its local and Irish roots and in doing so shows us an assured new Irish cinema.

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Groundswell (Johnny Gogan, 2021)

Pat Brereton

As Stephen Hughes affirms at the start of his 2019 doctoral thesis, Fracking is an emotive issue. Hughes's dissertation, focused on the "Love Leitrim" campaign, strove to explore what affective practices are evident in the anti-fracking imaginary, detailing love, hate, positivity, enchantment, anger, fear, and more. His analysis examined how emotions such as shock and fear unsettle the community, opening a fracking future that produces distinct orderings of time, space, and society. The study also uncovered political issues such as traumatic memories of Troubles-era violence, the violation of borders, and control and ownership of meaning, land, and resources. In sum, Hughes signalled how scientific knowledge and understanding were insufficient to capture the impact of fracking on communities, pointing to the need to augment this with a "felt and meaningful performative imaginary".

All of these issues and tensions are effectively visualised and contextualised in filmmaker Johnny Gogan's comprehensive study of a community struggle to ban fracking in the Republic of Ireland. Gogan, who himself worked on the campaign for nearly a decade offers a perspective which nonetheless offers a broad ranging audio-visual summary of this uniquely Irish movement.

Environmentalists generally take a very dim view of the growth of fracking per se, especially as it has recently developed in America. "Just as there is no such thing as a little bit pregnant, neither is there any such thing as a little bit of fracking. Due to the economies of scale and the required infrastructure, fracking is an all or nothing, shock-and-awe operation. Either the drillers come into an area and plaster it with well pads – or they don't come" (Steingraber 2011).

The Power of Community Engagement and Activity

Gogan talked of "positive campaigning" and the celebration of what we have as a community, which is always a good place to start in any long and contentious environmental struggle. His co-creator Eddie Mitchell is a local farmer and member of Fine Gael Political party, with both appearing as key protagonists in the documentary. Mitchell was the first to see a "no fracking" sign in the region and had to Google it to find out what it meant. Their accomplished

documentary was kick-started with a trip to America and filming fracking on the ground; effectively highlighting what Ireland ought to be concerned about.

Gogan also mentioned his earlier fictional film *Mapmaker* (2002) – about a cartographer who encounters a long-buried body, while mapping beauty spots on the north-south border – to help signal his ongoing love of landscape, which incidentally encouraged him to move and live in Leitrim. As an area and region, it is perceived as a “sacrifice zone”, being more “easy to exploit”, with north Leitrim constituting the least densely populated area in the European Union. Surprisingly, the locals are apparently perceived as a mild-mannered people, but by all accounts the significance of the level of “under-employed and over-education” citizens within the region was under-appreciated and helped produce effective campaigners who could be mobilised for the long term “Love Leitrim” campaign.

Incidentally, the famous Irish writer William Trevor was apparently driving north and saw “The Ballroom of Romance” (Mayflower) that inspired him to write his famous story. This renowned community space is witnessed several times in the documentary as a safe place for active citizen engagement. Such “creative imaginary” and visualisation of community activity is echoed by the iconic love-heart denoting “Love Leitrim” which was created as an illuminated art-piece and planted on various mountains for all to see, helping to connect with and celebrate a love of landscape and support local community.

The documentary effectively teases out and maps the glue necessary to keep such a campaign together, noting how an early challenge for any protest group is simply to maintain cohesion. In fact one could argue the whole documentary serves as a template for exploring how a community group can effectively deal with an ever-changing political landscape and set of obstacles.

Role and Power of (eco)Media

There is a growing role for documentary and media in general to help spark new forms of environmental and political activism. Originally, eco-cinema scholars tended to emphasize environmental communication as first and foremost a cognitive, rather than an affective or emotional experience. Cognitive estrangement is set up as the first step by which the desired state of environmental awareness might be attained. This is arguably a very narrow, even an elitist framing, with other scholars suggesting that environmental media criticism’s overarching purpose “should *not* be to impose a political program - much less pre-defined aesthetic practices – but to help create public spaces for debate and ethical argument over the claims of the environment for a place in political life” (Rust et al. 2013: 3). Popular fiction film, alongside more conventional even activist-driven documentaries like this one, remain an excellent starting point in promoting and also helping to puncture any simple[istic] formulations in dealing with environmental issues, including threats from fracking.

Certainly mainstream environmental documentaries like Josh Fox’s *Gassland* (2010), snippets of which Gogan shows several times, act as a spur for action and remains a historical model to follow. The image which spurs most global reaction is the presence of methane in drinking water, producing a memorable concrete manifestation and cautionary tale around the ill effects of fracking. This is visualised when a Colorado resident is able to literally set his tap water on fire. More recently, fictional stories like *Promised Land* (2012) documents rural American resistance (or not) to corporate attempts to promote fracking in a rural region; especially calling out the illusory power of even well-funded pressure groups, while unpacking a range of cover-ups, which are in turn stock-in-trade within this Hollywood subgenre (see Brereton 2020).

Within eco-media we are always looking for new “creative imaginaries” that speak effectively to environmental issues. *Groundswell* deploys an innovative piece of black and

white animation which stands out and helps map out the global effects of fracking and a more “sophisticated” illustration is evident in the opening credit sequence of the recent western televisual series *Yellowstone*. While this sequence appears somewhat crude, being apparently just dropped into the *mise-en-scene*, it is nonetheless driven and moulded by a pertinent Steve Wickham song with evocative lyrics including:

“hundreds of trucks ... they don’t give a Fuc*.... Just sand and water... we’ve been fractured.... Beware the cute hoor.... When you get fractured... isolation and a bankrupt nation.... money turns good people bad.”

Greening the Irish Landscape

Landscape and its relation to place identity remains a powerful tool for visualising and making legible the effects of environmental change. The director signals this to great effect with numerous drone shots and lovingly-framed environmental images of the landscape. This is significant in an era where inspiring audiences and policymakers/politicians to respond to unsustainable resource usage such as fracking, needs to be constantly kept in public view. By all accounts, resource use, extraction and landscape change, are communicated through such media and highlight the central importance of place identity and landscape (Haarstad and Wanvik 2017). A key through-line argument of the documentary is how landscape remains an important vehicle for expressing anxieties and contexts for resource interdependency, while another is how elements of local and regional identity compete and interact with global concerns, including climate change or globalisation in complex ways.

Telling stories is an essential part of the process of communicating issues around fracking, much less any environmental concerns including the ongoing climate crisis, as the “stories we tell ourselves about the world (about what matters, what doesn’t matter, what is true, what is false) play a significant role in how we regard our world, what decisions we make, what policies we endorse and what actions we undertake” (Pargaman et al. 2017: 177). The other main activist environmental documentary within the Irish canon is Risteard O’Domhnaill’s *The Pipe* (2010) – focuses on the “Shell to Sea” campaign in Mayo, which similarly spends a long time – made over four years – to capture on-the-ground community activity and resistance to the Corrib gas line.

Within Irish film studies however - as suggested in Brereton and Barrios O’Neill (2020) – landscape has most often been framed through romantic, nostalgic or heritage lenses, especially in postcolonial film (Barton 2004; Gibbons in Rockett et al. 1988), or alternatively as a political prism for exploring conflict and Troubles narratives (Hill in Rockett et al. 1988; McLoone 2000). Furthermore, across much Irish film history, landscape remains commonly attributed to a “green” touristic agenda, rather than an environmental, much less an extractive energy, framework.

Incidentally, Kate Ruddock of “Friends of the Earth”, who also plays an important part in this story in helping to draft a Government bill to ban fracking, represents one of the 100 Irish organisations that signed up to a position which embraces alternative energy, and envisions Ireland as a nation of “energy citizens” who will plan, generate and distribute energy for the benefit of their communities (2017). But how to transcribe these ideals into a viable reality on the ground, while focusing especially on one small community group remains a challenge.

Concluding Remarks: Ownership of land and the Environmental Ethical “Common Good”

Many scholars are severe on the provenance of contemporary notions of rights in Western notions of property, ownership and identity that are already deeply implicated in tensions

around the environmental crisis. By all accounts, many stories foreground the rights to land such as the iconic filmic adaptation of *The Field* (1990). What lies beneath such precious land reveals pathological desires to control rather than to simply use such extractive resources for the common good. *Groundswell* alternatively tackles these rights and responsibilities for contemporary society, while highlighting the need for ongoing community solidarity towards protecting the future. While the detail and broad range of interviews and reflections don't always cohere and may be too much for a non-engaged audience to fully comprehend the overall power of activist environmental community, the documentary nonetheless leaves a strong impression on the mind of an audience. We certainly need more environmentally-themed audio-visual media to speak to the ongoing crisis being faced.

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