Estudios Irlandeses, Issue 21, 2026, pp. 237-293.
https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2026-14290
AEDEI

IRISH FILM, TELEVISION & THEATRE – 2025

Barry Monahan (ed.)
University College Cork, Ireland

Copyright (c) 2026 by the authors. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Introduction
Barry Monahan...……...……..……...237-244

"What we did with our freedom when we won it": Review of *In the Opinion of the Censor*
Andrew Gallimore and Lydia Monin

Claire Mullaly…….....……244-248

Re-Creation
Jim Sheridan

Seán Patrick Donlan...……..……248-251

***House of Guinness* – The Importance of Representation and the Question of Accuracy**
Steven Knight

Sandra Costello……252-255

Leonard and Hungry Paul
BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ, 2025

Carlos Menéndez-Otero…….……..255-257

***The Walsh Sisters* – Doing it for themselves**
Ian Fitzgibbon

Veronica Johnson.……258-260

***Bring Them Down* – New Rural Spatialisations of Irish Criminality**
Christopher Andrews

Ciara Whelan……..……260-264

ISSN 1699-311X

***Christy* – The Politics of Spatial Injustice on Screen**
Brendan Canty

Rachel Gough ……...……...……264-267

Every Evil Has its Roots – Comparative Review of *An Taibhse* and *Fréwaka*
John Farrelly and Aislinn Clarke (respectively)

Simon Hewitt ……...……267-270

Báite
Ruán Magan

Ciara Barrett ……..……..270-274

***Aontas* – Empathy, Relationality, and the Irish-Language Puzzle Film**
Damian McCann

Sacha Wood ……..……..274-277

***Terrapolis: Staying with the Trouble* – Becoming with Each Other**

Kate Antosik-Parsons …….277-281

The Cave
Caitríona McLaughlin (Writer, Kevin Barry)

Stephanie McBride…….…….281-284

Reunion
Mark O'Rowe (Gaiety Theatre, October 22, 2025)

Graham Price……..…….285-287

A Want in Her
Myrid Carten

Ellen Scally…….……..…288-290

Four Mothers of Love: Reflections on *Four Letters of Love* and *Four Mothers*
Polly Steele and Darren Thornton (respectively)

Denis Condon…….……..290-293

Introduction

Anyone familiar with Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo* will identify an aspect of game theory in the narrative of the children's book also evident in contemporary geopolitics. The wily mouse, by far the most vulnerable of the woodland animals, strategically uses the threat of the horrible, but gormless, Gruffalo to outwit his stronger and less savvy predators. The story ends when the monster absconds, the other rodent-eating animals have scarpered, and the mouse sits down to enjoy a nut. A certain artificiality of the natural ecosystem balance prevails. However, the basic message is clear, and it resonates with recognisable strands of game theory. Quite simply: you do not have to be the most powerful player to succeed or survive.

Whether or not the global competition for cultural space is less aggressive than its geopolitical equivalent, it nonetheless requires careful strategic negotiation. Ireland enjoys a potency of cultural capital well beyond its size, but when it comes to the economics of the international film industry the country is a relatively small player. It requires judicious dialogue between the country's screen production, administrative and policy-making bodies and their international peers to navigate and manage this discrepancy. However, this local incongruity is not an anomaly in the wider global network, and it is one that may even work in our favour as a minor producer. Imbalances between cultural and economic influences are evident right to the top of the industrial food chain. For example, Bollywood is the largest film producer in numerical terms in its production output and audience numbers, but Hollywood is composed of the some of the wealthiest and most influential studios with the widest distribution network. Notwithstanding this, market unpredictability and rapid technological developments have continued to initiate reconfigurations and have introduced exceptions that frequently challenge these hegemonies. The development of streaming platforms has facilitated alternative modes of spectatorship that have the potential to create a more level playing field for marginal indigenous cinemas and filmmakers. Perennial anomalies also arise that disturb predictable forces of dominance: last year, the Chinese film *Ne Zha 2* generated colossal box office revenue placing it at the top of the profits list in 2025. Within the volatile, asymmetrical push-and-shove melee of international cultural production and distribution, there is a definite strategic benefit to being a minor player in the global game.

The advocates for our indigenous industry are proficient guardians of our international cultural currency, and the Irish screen ecosystem has never been healthier. Between them, last year, *Fís Éireann*/*Screen Ireland*, *Screen Producers Ireland*, the *Arts Council*, *Coimisiún na Meán* and the artists guilds played a role in the production or distribution of over eighty feature-length fiction films, television series episodes and documentaries, as well as a considerable number of short projects. The core value shared by these bodies is the protection and promotion of Ireland's cultural expression and self-representation, and the maintenance of Ireland's screen media platform as a site for the telling of "our" stories. This quality is front and centre in, and reiterated throughout, their publicised literature, promotions documentation and commissioned reports. In that, we can celebrate the unanimity with which the Irish screen institutions fight to support and strengthen indigenous filmmakers' creative endeavours. At the beginning of 2025, these organisations played a vital role in securing enhanced copyright protection for screenwriters, and by this time last year important discussions were underway on considering a national levy for international streaming platforms which provide access to material in the Republic (in a way that had already been implemented in a number of jurisdictions across Europe). The on-going question of the impact of AI-generated content on the industry has continued and developments in the sector are being closely monitored.

When we review the year, we find that the creative spaces and mechanisms provided by the Irish screen ecosystem have continued to facilitate some of the highest quality productions, proving this minor cinema's capacity to deliver authentic expressions as our filmmakers

demonstrate adeptness in creating artistic expression in the universal audio-visual language and, encouragingly, more frequently, through our native tongue. International awards also act as an endorsement of the excellence of indigenous filmmakers' work, and the consequences of such approbation are felt in a very real way at home as they are recognised abroad. On the back of Academy Award nominations and wins, and victories at other international festivals and ceremonies, our best talent is propelled into conspicuous networks of production with increased contractual bargaining power. This has direct implications not only in giving a moral boost to the national filmmaking community, but also in creating confidence among funders and among possible co-production collaborators. Successful Irish directors, writers and film artists have continued to work on local productions of modest scale and budget, and a whole new generation of Irish actors like Sarah Bolger, Jessie Buckley, Kerry Condon, Bronagh Gallagher, Éanna Hardwicke, Barry Keoghan, Paul Mescal, Cillian Murphy, Ruth Negga, Alison Oliver, Jack Reynor, Saoirse Ronan and Andrew Scott have marked our identity on a global map and increased the visibility of our native productions by returning to work on indigenous projects. Another optimistic characteristic of our current cinematic culture is evident in the extent to which filmmakers are moving from substantial career portfolios of short-film work to début feature productions, or returning from positively-received first films to second and third feature-length projects, or work on television series. On the back of a strong remit by TG4 to develop high-quality documentaries, unapologetically and unreservedly delivering material in the national language, the format is exceptionally well continued here. No doubt bolstered by the success of *An Cailín Ciúin* four years ago, so too are we seeing some remarkable fictional work being produced in Irish.

As many of the reviews below attest, it is favourable that many of the films discussed defy simple classification as "Irish" in any traditional way. Without having sacrificed a strong sense of national identity, many local stories and characterisations display evidence of fitting seamlessly into established generic frameworks, and Irish artists and filmmakers have found unique forms of expression in repurposing genre films. Some of this year's reviewers also implicitly or explicitly call upon critics to move beyond older evaluation criteria in their approaches, frameworks and the themes used to assess local productions. The same might be said of our present contributions discussing last year's theatrical work. Ever demonstrative of formal innovation and a radical *avant garde* tackling of the most pressing of contemporary issues, Irish drama has struck a fine Janus-faced balance between reflecting on the nation's theatrical heritage and social history, and a forward-thinking consideration of present concerns; both local and global.

Claire Mullaly considers the Andrew Gallimore and Lydia Monin documentary *In the Opinion of the Censor* in a piece that comprehensively analyses the film's formal qualities as well as its content. The structure of the film might be formulaic – it uses "talking heads" interviews, archive footage, images of historical documents from the office of the censor, and clips cut from films and their publicity material – but the story that it narrates is persuasive, revealing and, at times, shocking. Evidently informed by front-line expertise – former film censor and subsequent classifier John Kelleher was its scriptwriter and producer, and provides the voice-over narration for the piece – the portrait of who we were and what Ireland has become is woven with strands of cultural, sociological and political insights that make the documentary as relevant for understandings of the ideological entity that Free State Ireland was for most of the twentieth century, as much as for how we might view ourselves today. Evaluations of the representations and reconstructions of Ireland and the Irish character on screen have commonly focused on inaccuracies and distortions of fact. Nuanced analyses have pointed to ideological reasons – largely motivated by market interests – for filmmakers' use of shorthand stereotyping and historical political simplification in cinematic narratives. In his piece on Jim Sheridan's *Re-Creation*, Seán Patrick Donlan considers the creative repurposing of historical fact from an

interesting, differently informed angle. Donlan focuses on the film's liberal dramatic construction and its creative distortions of legal procedures and realities. What has frequently informed analytical writing about Ireland's representation on screen – specifically, the tendency to compromise verisimilitude for dramatic impact – is here identified in a metonymic way, as the processes and interactions of jury deliberations are unapologetically reimagined for lay spectators. Donlan suggests that this rendition might be all the more problematic because, unlike theatrical and cinematic precursors of courtroom dramas, this instance is based on a real-life case.

Sandra Costello uses her review of *House of Guinness* to reopen perennial debates about the accuracy of representations of Ireland by non-native producers but does so to question indigenous reviewers' motives and predispositions. With an implicit suggestion that there are as many tracks of well-trodden, predictably recurring critical angles as there are established stereotypes, Costello interrogates the usefulness of falling back on probable targets, rather than opening up discussions to acknowledge affirmative representations, and minor details that are often sidelined in reviews. The daring approach does not explicitly take sides, or list qualities of downplayed or overlooked historical details that are worthy of attention and (sometimes) commendation but, in juxtaposing the narrative of the historical clan members with the context in which we discover them, Costello invites a meta-critical reappraisal of our ways of evaluating ourselves on screen, regardless of the provenance of the producers. Carlos Menéndez-Otero considers the television production *Leonard and Hungry Paul* which was adapted from Rónán Hession's 2019 best-selling début novel of the same title. While there is no ostensible connection between *House of Guinness* and this BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ co-production, aside from having been based on existing "material", Menéndez-Otero's approach has echoes of Costello's in that it considers the dispositions of reviewers as much as the quality of the adaptation. He aims to challenge automatic criticism of dramas on grounds of their giving distinctive generic inflections to their filmed versions. According to Menéndez-Otero, Andrew Chaplin's direction of *Leonard and Hungry Paul* is ostensibly led by decisions to reproduce the aesthetics and formal qualities of the romantic comedy, and to nod with intertextual precision towards several of the best known of those from the last three decades. With sophisticated analytical detail, Menéndez-Otero picks through several semantic and syntactic elements from films as diverse as *Notting Hill* and *(500) Days of Summer* (passing quickly by *Bringing up Baby*) to celebrate Chaplin's wry acknowledgement of virtuoso examples of the rom com. In a way similar to Costello's final appeal, Menéndez-Otero invites us, and film critics, to become more open-minded about approaching a case study that is worthy of attention because of its generic fidelity rather than its *avant garde* reworking of established formulae.

In her piece, Veronica Johnson explores the characterisation in Ian Fitzgibbon's television series *The Walsh Sisters*, first broadcast by RTÉ in its autumn programme. Adapted from the Marian Keyes novels by writer Stephanie Preissner, who also performed in the episodes, the dramatisations offer a female-centred focus that informed the thematic concerns and narratives of the source material. With a consequent softening of the more explicit comedic tone of the books, the series held a more serious line as it shifted the experiences of each of the women to the foreground. Johnson invites reflection on the balance struck between the gendered performances and characterisations and finds favourably on the side of Keyes and Preissner. Evidently, the writers do not renegue on the importance of the peripheral male characters, but leave them beyond the spotlight to allow space and time for the women's psychological and emotional situations to unfold in a considered way.

The rural setting of Christopher Andrews' feature production *Bring Them Down* is an important starting point for Ciara Whelan in considering the film. The uneasy fusing of the urban and rural locations in *Báite* (reviewed below by Ciara Barrett) is rendered problematic in Andrews' film. Whelan's attention shifts from adjudicating representations of "authenticity" to

considering how the countryside landscape functions dialectically with characterisations to inform, validate and sanction problematic masculine behaviours, most notably those of extreme violence. Whelan compellingly proposes that the film reproduces a trend in many recent Irish productions that shifts male aggression and troubled pathologies from urban settings to rural counterparts which are manifestly equally accommodating of certain kinds of problematic, gendered anti-social dispositions. This review traces a latent reactionary quality in much of the symbolism and action of Andrews' film and implicitly encourages a relevant and urgent consideration of the relationship between these kinds of narratives and the prevalent social instances of extreme and destructive masculine conduct. The relationship between place, space and characterisation also informs Rachel Gough's review of Brendan Canty's début feature film *Christy*, a Cork-based story that seamlessly integrates its characters' stories with the locations they inhabit. Set on the north side of the city, in an area disadvantaged by socioeconomic circumstances, the film gently foregrounds the experiences of doubly marginalised individuals: teenagers and children who have suffered poverty and social disenfranchisement, but who are also coming to terms with aspects of their personal development and identity. Gough explores the nuanced ways that Canty's characterisation is deeply rooted in, and informed by, the place in which they are presented. The strength of the work, Gough argues, lies in how forms of liminality and otherness of space and personality are woven together aesthetically so that themes and issues that the film interrogates are drawn with sincerity and subtlety. Befitting of those pressing questions about how an affluent society disregards the disadvantage of many of its members, the film does not offer easy outs, or neat narrative resolutions. Gough focuses on the well-known structure, the Knocknaheeny water tower, "the Rezza", as a potent symbol of a central point, visible from miles around, whose ubiquity, like the stories of Canty's protagonist, can be all too easily overlooked.

Reflecting on John Farrelly's *An Taibhse* and Aislinn Clarke's *Fréwaka*, Simon Hewitt traces interesting generic similarities in the two stories, contemporaneously produced and released, and interweaves these with their Gaelic dialogue and locations. As Hewitt explains how the films have been tonally, thematically and narratively informed by the folk horror subgenre, he suggests – against what might be initially counterintuitive feelings about this "fit" – how readily the Irish landscape, characterisations and moments of historical experience find eloquent expression in a type of film more commonly associated with the British horror tradition (both cinematically and in literature). Hewitt's closing lines point to the tip of an Irish Gothic iceberg, reminding us of a rich and voluminous indigenous literary canon and a cultural tradition (whether printed, oral or sung) that may justify the writer-directors' propensity to explore the darker stories of our national folk subcultures. In her review of Ruán Magan's début feature *Báite* – the third Irish-language production considered this year – Ciara Barrett astutely unpacks the film's somewhat problematic interweaving of local and global qualities in a work that purports to be manifestly (on the surface) "Irish". Although, perhaps, an intriguing endeavour, the narrative is neither as uncontaminated by mainstream cinematic devices nor as indifferent to stereotypical overseas perspectives of Ireland as might first appear. The *mise en scène* is inhabited by "authentic" local characters, set in a "traditional" rural context, speaking the national language, and obliquely referencing "genuinely" identifiable themes and historical details. However, this framing is cautiously handled so that there are enough established, recognisable cultural points of contact for the non-native spectator. Barrett parses the intricacies and construction of these elements to propose that, in many respects, the film does not effect as much of a break with long-established representations of the country, as might be desirable in a work so imbued with indigenous qualities. Sasha Wood offers a perceptive review of Damian McCann's Irish language film *Aontas* and celebrates a definite maturation of cinema in the indigenous tongue. An important quality identified by Wood is the film's competent and nuanced engagement with global elements; whether thematically in its concerns about cultural

consequences of international neoliberal economic dominance, or cinematically in its adept adaptation of formal narrative characteristics of the ubiquitous "puzzle film". Wood is struck by the apparent ease with which McCann integrates patently global attributes with authentically local and national concerns, characters and circumstances. In fact, Wood wisely suggests that through McCann's subtle and intelligent sleight of hand, this integration is constructed so that thematic concerns of the film and the personal belief-systems of the characters come to problematise the global hegemonic forces that insidiously threaten and compromise individual and national selfhoods, cultural histories and values.

Kate Antosik-Parsons considers the live performance *Terrapolis* which was part of *Staying with the Trouble*, an exhibition last summer at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Referencing the effervescent merging of formal performative qualities – from costume design, to audio-visual registers, to vocal and choreographed movements – with the thematic concerns of the piece, Antosik-Parsons explains how the event successfully and intriguingly mobilised modes of dramatic fluidity to display and celebrate various fluidities of identity. Combining historical narratives with contemporary experiences, peripheral with "normative" modes of self-expression and selfhood, and on-the-nose emotional sincerity with tongue-in-cheek irony, *Terrapolis* unfolded as an innovative intertextual tapestry that engaged its audience viscerally, intellectually and emotionally, all the while acknowledging the incongruity of its *avant garde* theatricality set within the historically important arena of Dublin's former Royal Kilmainham Hospital. Stephanie McBride offers a reflection on the Abbey Theatre production *The Cave* by director Caitríona McLaughlin and writer Kevin Barry. The Beckettesque tragicomedy tells the tale of two brothers, living in a remote part of County Sligo, who connect only vicariously with the contemporary world through online content that they receive on their mobile phones. The precarity of their relationship with reality is explored by McLaughlin and Barry's gradual release of information about the very real and traumatic experiences of their youth and the volatility of the internet signal, which constantly disrupts their connectivity. The work is not simply a straightforward (and often seen) playing with juxtapositions of tradition (of the remote rural Ireland) with the trappings of modernity (corrupting technologies of the modern age). As McBride insightfully sets out: the innovation here is that the play confronts the implications for social and communal relationships of the hyper-mediated reality that ubiquitously haunts us, existentially and psychologically. The rocky Sligo cave inhabited by the reclusive brothers is more than a place of alienation and marginalisation: more terrifyingly, it is symbolic of the condition in which twenty-first century global citizens are voluntarily, virtually incarcerated by IT corporations and their owners.

In his contribution, Graham Price reviews the restaging of *Reunion* by writer-director Mark O'Rowe, which had a revival at the Gaiety Theatre in October. As in *The Cave*, O'Rowe's *mise en scène* is a remote western Irish location and, also reminiscent of Kevin Barry's play, it depicts the complexities of familial relationships rooted in historical residues of tormented experiences. Price situates the play within a tradition of Irish Revival theatre, especially invoking John Millington Synge's piece *Riders to the Sea*, but astutely observes tonal and structural qualities that show indebtedness to the work of the Norwegian playwright Ibsen and Samuel Beckett. He argues that an overtly (and overly) complex exposition, during which audiences are forced to navigate a complicated presentation of characters and their interrelationships, is likely a deliberate ruse by O'Rawe to dramatise the intricacy of the historical baggage borne by the individuals, and the *mal-à-l'aise* engendered in them, that they are forced to confront. This legacy is one that Price also traces from the great Irish authors who have dealt with the theme of the weight of Ireland's supressed histories – national and personal – on its citizens. The theme of historical haunting also informs the autobiographical feature début, *A Want in Her*, by Myrid Carten. Ellen Scally offers insights into how the narrative of Carten's reflections – on her family's affliction with alcoholism, and her personal negotiation

of its impact on her own experiences – is delicately but complexly represented through the film's formal elements. Scally incisively focuses on the camerawork and its strategic role in subtly creating an environment of instability and uncertainty that correlates with the emotional condition of the protagonist. She finds echoes of the found-footage horror permeating the visual construction of Carten's film and explores several cinematic (and cinematographic) techniques used by the director to engage and at times unsettle her viewers. Scally convincingly proposes that there is no "easy out" here offered by the filmmaker: sufferances of the past, of the historical burdens that continue to haunt us, of those brought to us by earlier generations must be managed, contained, observed and navigated in the renewal of each individual's self-determinism and well-being.

To conclude this section, Denis Condon uses the titular numerical coincidence in the films *Four Letters of Love* (Polly Steele) and *Four Mothers* (Darren Thornton) to take a peripatetic stroll between themes common to both narratives. While the stories share identifiable generic qualities and fit easily into shorthand categories with standard plot pieces, neither leans overtly into a rigid cinematic form or style. Nor does either film probe recognisable, traditionally recurring Irish topics in any dogmatic way: we are privy to intimate disclosures about the domineering patriarchal control over families and family structures, homosexual relationships, heteronormative and conventional marriages, belief in supernatural experiences and vocations, and associations between artistic liberation and personal expression. However, none of these is prescriptively or didactically approached, or used as a point of ideological proselytising. Condon could be implicitly suggesting that the films represent a certain moment of maturation of indigenous cinematic, whereby their depth is mined by strong characterisation and powerful stories, without recourse to the older themes and representations that have haunted negotiations of the Irish identity on screen.

Barry Monahan is a Senior Lecturer in the *Department of Film & Screen Media*, *University College Cork*. He has researched the history and aesthetics of Irish and other national cinemas, and theatre and film theory. His books include *Ireland's Theatre on Screen: Style, Stories and the National Stage on Screen* (Irish Academic Press, 2009); *The Films of Lenny Abrahamson: A Filmmaking of Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2018); and *Hands on Film: Actants, Aesthetics, Affects* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022; Routledge, 2025). He published a chapter in *Irish Literature in Transition: 1980–2020*, titled "Historical Transitions in Ireland on Screen", and an article on the amateur film adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer* in the *New Hibernia Review* (both 2020). His work has also been published in *The Conversation*.

b.monahan@ucc.ie

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2534-9244

"What we did with our freedom when we won it": Review of *In the Opinion of the Censor* Andrew Gallimore and Lydia Monin (2025)

Reviewer: Claire Mullaly (Queen's University Belfast)

The feature-length documentary *In the Opinion of the Censor* (Andrew Gallimore and Lydia Monin) charts how over the course of a century in Ireland nine men censored over 65,000 films,

banned around 2,500, and cut a further 11,000. One of the first pieces of legislation passed in the newly independent Irish Free State was the *Censorship of Films Act* (1923). The Act stipulated that publicly distributed films must be viewed by the Irish Film Censor whose remit was to cut or ban anything that "in the opinion of the Censor" was "indecent, obscene or blasphemous" or "contrary to public morality". The Act was a bold divergence from the British Cinematograph Act (1909) and centralised the power to cut or ban films, placing the decision into the hands of one individual and (where relevant) an Appeal Board which was often made up of conservative political and Church representatives. So enduring was Kevin O'Higgins' 1923 legislation that it remains in place to this day, albeit slightly amended. Co-director, Andrew Gallimore describes *In the Opinion of the Censor* as "very much a story of what we did with our freedom when we won it" (Hennessy 2025).

In the Opinion of the Censor was produced by John Kelleher Media and was supported by the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO); the television service of the Irish Dáil and Seanad, Oireachtas TV; Ireland's media regulator *Coimisiún na Meán*; and Caireann Associates. The film's producer, co-writer and narrator, John Kelleher, the film's producer, co-writer and narrator, was last holder of the position of Irish Film Censor and the first holder of the 2008 rebranded position of Director of Film Classification in Ireland. Expert contributions to *In the Opinion of the Censor* are drawn from a wide array of film academics, including Kevin Rockett and Ruth Barton, historians, veteran politicians, journalists, actors, archival experts, past film censors and the current Director of Film Classification. Their expertise is presented in the form of talking heads interviews, interwoven with rare archive footage, film clips, and images of documents and Film Censor archive records. The result is an entertaining documentary with intriguing use of some of the scenes that were removed, to illustrate the impact of the Censor's decision-making on the films ultimately screened. The exclusion of marginalised identities and ideologies from film, often deemed alien and imported, impacted audiences, cultural life and Irish society as a whole. *In the Opinion of the Censor* sets out to demonstrate how film censorship mirrored Ireland's shifting cultural and political values. However, perhaps a further question to explore is to what extent did film censorship shape rather than mirror the history of the country?

In the Opinion of the Censor draws on well selected film examples to illustrate an array of genres, eras and controversies. It sheds light on decision-making processes in a similar fashion to the hour-long *Dear Censor... The Secret Archive of the British Board of Film Classification* (Matt Pelly, 2011). *Dear Censor...* examines regulations and stipulations that the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) imposed upon films distributed to British and Northern Irish cinemas by drawing on BBFC archive material including letters and other censorship records, film and archive footage. An early film example used by *In the Opinion of the Censor* to shed light on Irish Film Censor decision-making processes is *From the Manger to the Cross* (Sydney Olcott, 1912). The film presents an early example of Church and press influence on film censorship in Ireland. Film historian Kevin Rockett, author of *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Rockett 2004), notes in the documentary that Protestant Churches objected to the depiction of Christ while the Catholic Church took issue with Gene Gauntier, the actress who played the Virgin Mary, because she was a divorcee. Even in the early days of cinema, under the pre-partition system of censorship using the British Censorship of Films Act (1909) and local corporations, controversies concerning religion and morality were widespread.

The chronological approach taken by *In the Opinion of the Censor* allows the film to chart social and political anxieties and sensitivities during the tenure of each censor from the 1920s. The family as the unit of the state and Catholic nationalism formed the basis of much censorship decision-making in the twentieth century in Ireland, and this led to the suppression of representations of – or the rendering oblique of more candid references to – sex, divorce,

adultery, homosexuality, birth control and abortion, all of which were also removed from films' advertising and promotional materials. *In the Opinion of the Censor* also dedicates time to examining the politics involved in the appointment of the Irish film censor. Many censors had connections with the governing parties, the most influential of which were Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil, or had Irish War of Independence and Civil War "credentials". The first film censors to have a background related to film were Cork Film Festival's Dermot Breen, appointed in 1972, and broadcaster Frank Hall, appointed in 1978.

In the documentary, historian and producer and host of the *Censored* podcast series, Aoife Bhreatnach, explores the subject of idealised femininity as a means of understanding the often-gendered disposition of film censorship. Bhreatnach observes the identified "idealised femininity" through traits that were problematically demure, restrained, non-confrontational and accepting of patriarchal control. Insights like these are important in deconstructing the role of gender in early Irish film censorship. Another contributor, Gráinne Humphreys from Dublin International Film Festival expands on this concept by using the film example of the pre-code musical comedy *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) to illustrate how a film with Busby Berkeley choreography, celebrated aesthetics, and a socially conscientious storyline about women surviving the contemporaneous Great Depression could be dismissed by the Irish Film Censor because of perceived on-screen risqué "transgressions" of women.

In the Opinion of the Censor explores the World War II years, or the "Emergency" as it was known in Ireland. Emergency censorship was operated under the remit of the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defensive Measures, Frank Aiken, in order to "keep the temperature down" (Ó Drisceoil 1996: 47. As the documentary considers film censorship during the Emergency it argues the significance of its role in ensuring that Ireland's neutrality was not questioned. The film example of *A Yank in the R.A.F.* (Henry King, 1941) is used to illustrate the delicate balance that neutrality demanded.

Contributor Ciaran Carty has been an outspoken critic of censorship in Ireland (Carty 1995). His anti-censorship campaigning exposed the extent of the measures and practices on Irish audiences who often were oblivious to the cuts made. In the documentary, Carty suggests that filmmakers could also become the target of censors, often for living "immoral lives". Mike Nichols, the director of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Mike Nichols, 1966) and *The Graduate* (1967) is cited by Carty as one such targeted director. Both films are explored in the documentary: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* for its over-21 classification and *The Graduate* as an example of a film that had scenes referencing sex and infidelity cut, exorcisms that left the plot almost unintelligible. As approaches to censorship developed with a more liberal outlook in Ireland, and some sensitivities subsided around themes of sex and morality, extreme violence remained subject to stringent observation until as late as the 1990s. *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) is used as an example of a film banned in that decade. The Censor at the time, contributor Sheamus Smith, explains his justification for banning the picture for its "gratuitous violence" and Gráinne Humphreys from Dublin International Film Festival observes that the film was only screened at the film festival before its ban. This last comment highlights the important role played by film festivals in exhibiting films that might otherwise never have been seen.

Former Irish President, Michael D. Higgins described censorship in the newly formed Irish Free State as "part of a wider exclusionary manifesto" that had "moral entrepreneurs, who, with an energy they suggested was drawn from divine sources, went from creating moral panics to legislative victories" (Higgins 2022). *In the Opinion of the Censor* charts a century of film censorship transformation from early "moral entrepreneurs" to liberalisation. The film ends with the on-screen text: "It's been over 20 years since a film has been banned or cut in Ireland". This marks the transition to classification from censorship and to openness from secrecy. Only in 1998 did the Irish Film Censor's Office agree to transfer over one hundred volumes of film

censorship material to the National Archives of Ireland. As recently as 1986, the former Fine Gael Minister of Justice, Alan Dukes justified the withholding of the files with the argument that Censors and Ministers for Justice "had always considered themselves precluded" on disclosure of film censorship information in Ireland (Gartland 2016). What *In the Opinion of the Censor* achieves is to draw together expertise, film and archive material to reveal a century of film regulation to people on the Oireachtas TV platform. It is entertaining, educational and an invaluable record of often overlooked histories. Contributor Anne Harris states that "film is one of the greatest starting points for a shift in societal attitudes". Given the level of extensive censorship that film met in Ireland, new questions arise on the socio-political histories of film censorship and the impact of film censorship on the nation. Perhaps for follow-up in an *In the Opinion of the Censor* part II?

Works Cited

A Yank in the R.A.F. (Henry King, 1941). Twentieth Century Fox.

Carty, Ciaran (1995). *Confessions of a Sewer Rat: Personal History of Censorship*. Dublin: New Island Books.

Dear Censor... The Secret Archives of the BBFC (Matt Pelly, 2011). BBC.

From the Manger to the Cross (Sydney Olcott, 1912). Kalem Company.

Gartland, Fiona (2016). "War of Words in 1986 Over Access to Film Censor's Files." *The Irish Times* (December 30). https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/war-of-words-in-1986-over-access-to-film-censor-s-files-1.2905774.

Hennessy, David (2025). "And Cut!" *The Irish World* (November 11). https://www.theirishworld.com/and-cut/.

Higgins, Michael D. (2022). "'1922 – The Most Significant Year?' Machnamh 100 Seminar VI: Memory, History and Imagination." *President of Ireland – Media Library* (November 17). https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/1922-the-most-significant-year.

In the Opinion of the Censor (Andrew Gallimore and Lydia Monin, 2025). John Kelleher Media.

Irish Statute Book, *Censorship of Films Act, 1923* (2025). http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1923/act/23/enacted/en/html.

Natural Born Killers (Oliver Stone, 1994). Warner Bros.

Ó Drisceoil, Donal (1996) "'Moral Neutrality': Censorship in Emergency Ireland." *History Ireland* 4 (2): 46-50.

Rockett, Kevin (2000). "Protecting the Family and the Nation: The Official Censorship of American Cinema in Ireland 1923–1954." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 20 (3): 283-300.

_____ (2004). *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967). Embassy Pictures.

United Kingdom Government, *Cinematograph Act, 1909* (2025). https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Edw7/9/30/enacted.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Mike Nichols, 1966). Warner Bros.

Claire Mullaly is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at Queen's University Belfast, and her thesis explores film censorship, national identities and state-building in the two Irelands from 1932 to 1937.

cmullaly01@qub.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1427-7043

Re-Creation
Jim Sheridan (2025)

Reviewer: Seán Patrick Donlan (Thompson Rivers University)

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Jim Sheridan to Irish cinema. Born in Dublin, he worked in the theatre there and in the United States before becoming Ireland's best-known film director. His friend Neil Jordan was his only significant cultural equal over the next decade or so. The international success of Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989), his début as writer-director, was aided by an extraordinary cast, including a young Daniel Day-Lewis. Inevitably, some biographical details of his subject, Christy Brown, were altered or occluded. But the director artfully balanced the talent and tantrums of Brown, who succeeded as a writer despite cerebral palsy. The film received five Oscar nominations and won two. Fittingly, the story of one Irishman's need to express himself against the odds helped to initiate a new era for the domestic film industry enabled by the subsequent successes of *The Commitments* (1991), Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), and the relaunch of the Irish Film Board in 1993, which oversaw the allocation of government funds directly to the sector.

My Left Foot, co-written with Shane Connaughton, was the first of several films in which Sheridan interrogated Irish events and identity. He adapted John B Keane's *The Field* (1990), with Richard Harris, although he shifted its historical setting rather substantially from the 1960s to the 1930s. Sheridan went on to write *Into the West* (1992) with David Keating. Directed by Mike Newell, the film was informed by a folkloric Celtic magic realism very different from the gritty urban realism of the Dubliner's other work. With Terry George, Sheridan wrote *In the Name of the Father* (1993), centred on the Guildford Four – a group of Irish men and women who, while resident in England, were wrongly accused of IRA-associated bombings in that country. Directed by Sheridan and again starring Day-Lewis, it was another global success, achieving seven Oscar nominations. But just as a wilful distortion of legal facts and the concerted construction of a false narrative had effectively imprisoned the accused, the writer-director's considerable liberties with the truth were troubling. Still, there appeared an underlying veracity about the corruption of the British state and legal order that demonstrated an ability to accommodate convenient deceptions.

Sheridan's contributions to Irish film expanded into production. He wrote *Some Mother's Son* (1996) and *The Boxer* (1997), again with Terry George, and he directed the latter. He co-produced Anjelica Huston's *Agnes Browne* (1999) and returned to an earlier passion when he acted (in a brief cameo scene) in John Boorman's *The General* (1998). His last significant success was *In America* (2002), a semi-autobiographical film about modern Irish emigrants to the United States. It was co-written with his daughters. In the same year, he acted as Executive Producer for Paul Greengrass' *Bloody Sunday* (2002). But Sheridan's subsequent films, mostly set outside of Ireland, have been of a decidedly uneven quality, although they

demonstrated some ingenuity with generic formulae such as those featuring in works like *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005), *Brothers* (2009), and *Dream House* (2011). *The Secret Scripture* (2016) saw him return to Ireland, adapting Sebastian Barry's novel. But local audiences were somewhat disorientated by the narrative, an experience not relieved by the director's choice to rearrange the film chronology by fragmenting the novel's original timeline, fundamentally altering its context and rendering many of its conflicts confusing. It is fair to assume that these creative decisions were taken as a way to accommodate foreign viewers who might have been ignorant of Irish affairs.

A few years after *In the Name of the Father*, a violent murder occurred in rural County Cork, a few days before Christmas 1996. French national Sophie Toscan du Plantier (*née* Bouniol), a television producer, was killed. She was thirty-nine. The narrative of the event has gripped Ireland ever since. Englishman Ian Bailey, a resident of the small West Cork village of Schull where the crime was committed, quickly became the primary focus of press coverage and police investigations. Peculiar and violent, he had held a variety of jobs, including work as a freelance journalist. As the number of his enthusiastically self-directed media interviews and appearances grew, unfavourable and incriminating details emerged, which intensified the mystery around the event: Bailey had suspicious scratches and was shown to have lied about his whereabouts on the night of the murder. While Bailey's partner initially supported him, her story changed over time, and he was later convicted of domestic violence against her. Some even claimed that he privately admitted the murder, although this was dismissed as the result of drink and colourful conversation. When the *Department of Public Prosecutions* failed to charge Bailey, the French government unsuccessfully attempted to extradite him. Finally, he was convicted in 2019 *in absentia* by the French courts. He was sentenced to twenty-five years but was never imprisoned. Ian Bailey eventually died of natural causes in January 2024, just shy of his sixty-seventh birthday.

At some point, Sheridan became interested in Toscan du Plantier's murder. Twenty-five years after it occurred, he directed a five-part documentary about the events. In *Murder at the Cottage* (2021), he suggested, against the weight of public opinion, that Bailey was innocent. The press and police were to blame for the failure to find the real killer. *Re-Creation* (2025) takes the same view. It began as an attempt to provide another dramatic retelling, supplemented by documentary footage, of the murder and its subsequent investigation. Sheridan and David Merriman directed the reiteration of the recreated historical story. The actress Vicky Krieps, best known for *Phantom Thread* (2017), played the central role. In interviews, Sheridan said that she would act as the victim's ghost, a sign of stranger things to come. But that initial project ran into financial problems, forcing a rapid rethink by its creators. With cast and crew sequestered, a script was written in a week. Under financial pressure, filming was limited for the most part to a single set. The resulting narrative film, prompted by necessity, would draw very deeply from Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957).

Re-Creation opens stylishly enough, with informative title cards, prosecutor Aiden Gillen, and a Camille O'Sullivan cover of Bob Dylan's "Long Black Coat". The cards note that the film imagines what an Irish trial would have looked like and proposes that real evidence will be presented in the reconstruction. When the film opens, Gillen asks the jury to convict so that Bailey will "die in a French Prison", presumably by extradition after the fictional trial, although it is not entirely clear why this would be necessarily the case. The jury settles. We meet a few jurors who are named; however, several remain almost anonymous throughout the film. Sheridan casts himself as foreperson; his real-life partner – producer, writer, director, and actress Zahara Moufid – plays the role of another juror. Sheridan, as foreman, is strangely given a "flashlight", a torch that is both metaphorical and comes to have a practical narrative function later in the film. Almost immediately, as an initial vote is taken, it is clear that *Re-Creation*'s cinematic intertextual borrowing will not be subtle. Krieps, for example, essentially plays the

equivalent character of Henry Fonda from *12 Angry Men*, nobly holding out until, one-by-one, the other jurors reach a "not guilty" verdict. With an exaggerated wink, Sheridan and Merriman assign Krieps as Juror #8, the same role Fonda played in the earlier film.

12 Angry Men is a classic. Originally a Reginald Rose teleplay in 1954, it was adapted for the stage the following year and reached the big screen in 1957. It has been remade and adapted across the globe: in Germany (1963), Spain (1973), India (1986, 2012, 2025), Japan (1991), Russia (2007), China (2015), and Korea (2019). Some of these countries include jurisdictions that do not actually use a jury in a form that would be familiar to western cinematic audiences. There was a television remake of the film, too, in 1997, as well as numerous parodies. Literary theorist Stanley Fish has correctly noted that

> [a]s viewers we are encouraged to understand the narrative as a vindication of liberal political values and as a demonstration of those values in action. Clouds of prejudice, bias, and ignorance are dispelled by rational deliberation supported by evidence that emerges from careful measurement and disinterested observation. In short, enlightenment occurs. (Fish 2024: 9)

But the film can be criticised for its idealisation of the jury, who are all white and male, and for its accuracy with respect to legal practice. In its more significant moments, viewers are, in fact, victims of "rhetorical manipulation at every moment" (Fish 2024: 12), and for dramatic purposes the film pushes us "toward a predetermined conclusion while presenting itself as the passive recorder of the discovery of fact" (Fish 2024: 20). *Re-Creation*, parasitic of this classic, attempts the same sleight-of-hand, with considerably less success. To some viewers taking a moral stance because it involves the circumstances and narration of an actual murder, it is arguably offensive in its liberal handling of accuracies of process and evidence.

Juries have been important to the Anglo-American legal traditions for centuries. This was true, too, for Ireland, given its long historical, political entanglement with Britain. Over time, the use of the jury declined in favour of more professional procedures. Its role remained significant, however, in serious criminal matters where the involvement of lay people appeared a safeguard against the state. Indeed, other legal systems beyond the common law borrowed the institution, usually in modified forms. The French courts, for example, combine several judges and a larger number of lay jurors; they sit together during trial and decide collectively. But *Re-Creation*'s "European Jury", situated in Ireland, appears a *sui generis* creation. Perhaps it reflects a repurposing of the cast assembled for the planned docudrama. But it is an odd sampling for an Irish jury, even for contemporary Ireland. And here the jurors are under constant supervision, appear to introduce new evidence that was not considered in the imagined trial, and seem to assume unanimity is required for a verdict. It was the case in *12 Angry Men*, but it is not so in Ireland, provided deliberations are not rushed. The whole film feels *jury-rigged*.

Indeed, it is fair to reason that Sheridan and Merriman sometimes forget that their film is, in fact, fiction. Some press and reviews have suggested rather breathlessly that *Re-Creation* is engaged with real evidence, in profound questions of justice and judgement. It speaks to the Irish psyche, personal prejudice, *fake news*, state corruption, and a modern rush-to-judgement by a manipulated public. But the evidence in the film was liberally, creatively and conveniently manipulated by its writers. As journalist Senan Molony, author of *Sophie: The Final Verdict* (2024), has suggested: significant but inconvenient evidence was excluded or ignored (Molony 2025). The film's jury deliberations are not remotely like the adversarial process of a trial, nor do its participants constitute a random sample of the public. They are ostensibly actors playing roles and their verdict is patently dramatically scripted: qualities of production necessity that the filmmakers have be unable – or unwilling – to transcend. For example, for lawyers, it is a well-known rule of cross-examination not to ask questions to which one does not already know

the answers. For *Re-Creation*, Sheridan and Merriman have written both questions and answers in a way that logically creates dramatic tension where required, but which disregards some of the basic realities of the professional courtroom experience. Echoing Fish, we can identify that the film "at every moment pushes us toward a predetermined conclusion while presenting itself as the passive recorder of the discovery of fact" (Fish 2024: 20).

Re-Creation's cast does what it can. John Connors engages in scripted histrionics as Juror #3, the equivalent role performed by Lee J Cobb in *12 Angry Men*. By cinematic cliché, his resistance to reason is revealed to be the result of his personal, if fictional, trauma. Colm Meaney's mute Bailey broods as an occasional spectral presence. But the deliberations are progressively contrived. As *Re-Creation* slouches towards its conclusion, one juror somewhat mystically claims feeling "the spirit of Sophie". Maybe this is mere colour or a mistranslation of the French spoken by the real-life counterpart. However, the statement is immediately followed by a reenactment of the murder that descends into a séance-of-sorts. Nor is the film averse to playing with the emotional machinations of melodrama. Sheridan's otherwise inexplicably present torch and soapbox eventually come out in the darkened room. Like Benoit Blanc, he rapidly explains what the public, the press, and the police have been too negligent to understand or too prejudiced to perceive. On Sheridan's character's intervention, Jurors #3 and #8 hug, with tears flowing. Talking about his late mother, the former says to the latter: "You remind me of her. She had integrity". Then, as the fictional jury reaches its fictional verdict, Bailey draws his final breaths. A stately and solemn montage follows for the "poet and journalist": he glares at his own coffin, a sober service takes place, and the "Long Black Coat" is reprised.

In fact, Sheridan attended the scattering of Bailey's ashes in summer 2025, just as *Re-Creation* made the festival rounds. At the film's end, Bailey receives what amounted to a two-and-a-half-minute homage. Sheridan's original project sought to conjure Toscan du Plantier's ghost, an image that would always have been his projection. Actual footage of her at *Re-Creation*'s end amounted to twenty-five seconds. Whatever the facts are, it is difficult not to feel that the directors have been incredibly negligent in their creative pursuits. Their film does little justice to the victim of a grisly murder. And it does little credit to Sheridan's legacy.

Works Cited

Fish, Stanley (2024). *Law at the Movies: Turning Legal Doctrine into Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Molony, Senan (2024). *Sophie: The Final Verdict*. Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland.

_____ (2025). "Jim Sheridan's Sophie Toscan du Plantier film showcases a jury lost in seance and shouting." *The Irish Independent* (September 30). https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-reviews/jim-sheridans-sophie-toscan-du-plantier-film-showcases-a-jury-lost-in-seance-and-shouting/a514685810.html

Seán Patrick Donlan is Professor at the Faculty of Law, *Thompson Rivers University*, Canada. He previously studied and taught in Ireland. Among other things, he teaches *Law and Film* (always starting with *12 Angry Men* (1957)) both in Ireland and Canada. He has written on Edmund Burke, eighteenth-century Irish history, and comparative legal history. More recently, he has focused on film, especially Irish film, and has written for *Film in Dublin*, *Film Ireland*, *History Ireland*, the *Law on Film* Podcast, and *Scannain*.

sdonlan@tru.ca

***House of Guinness* – The Importance of Representation and the Question of Accuracy**
Steven Knight (2025)

Reviewer: Sandra Costello (University College Cork)

The narrative of Stephen Knight's much-anticipated Netflix series *House of Guinness* begins in 1868 with the funeral of Sir Benjamin Guinness, who has brought tremendous success to the Guinness brewery. The patriarch is survived by his sons Arthur (Anthony Boyle), Benjamin (Fionn O'Shea) and Edward (Louis Partridge), as well as by his daughter Anne (Emily Fairn). As the eldest son, Arthur, along with his brother Edward, reluctantly inherits the brewery. Arthur is forced to move home to Ireland after a period having enjoyed a certain amount of freedom and independence in London. Arthur is a closeted homosexual man, so his freedom is marked as personally important. It is made clear, however, that if he does not run the brewery with his brother he will be cut off financially from his due inheritance. Benjamin and Anne are both left out of the will because of the former's issues with alcoholism and the latter's status as a married woman. Other major characters include: Guinness henchman Sean Rafferty (James Norton), Fenian Ellen Cochrane (Niamh McCormack), Arthur's wife Olivia (Danielle Galligan), Edward's wife Adelaide (Ann Skelly), and their distant cousin Byron Hedges (Jack Gleeson).

In the last few years there has been a trend of similarly plotted shows and films across diverse genres depicting powerful, wealthy and influential families in productions like *House of Gucci*, *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *House of the Dragon*. It was Ivana Lowell, a Guinness family descendent, who conceived the idea of creating a programme about her ancestors after watching an episode of *Downton Abbey* (McHugh 2025). The worldwide success of that series alone demonstrates, at the very least, a contemporary universal desire to look at the fictional lives of wealthy families navigating the changing world and social circumstances of their times.

Kevin Egan, historian of nineteenth-century Dublin, has stressed the central importance of the Guinness family to the history and shaping of Ireland's capital by comparing them to the Medici of Florence (White 2025). In today's society, the Guinness brand and name are entities that carry potent cultural and economic significance. For many, it is likely that the association is indelibly present as they connect the product with the country. Considering this prominence, it was evidently timely and viable for distributors that a programme be made about the family behind the name.

Since, according to Egan (White 2025), the Guinness family has shaped Dublin more than any other family or person ever has done, for reasons of residual benefits to the local industry, it is a pity that this show was not made in the city. Rather it was shot in Liverpool, Manchester and Wales (Sunde-Brown). Although this is partly due to the changing architecture of Dublin city over the years, one could be tempted to ask if there might have been a way to film some scenes in Dublin, or at least the scenes where existing architecture and infrastructure are still ostensibly available, such as those in Ashford Castle and in the surrounding countryside. Filming completely outside of Ireland arguably creates an implicit separation from the country and its history, and invites reflection on the construction of the series' narrative.

The critical response to the Netflix series has largely been one divided between Irish reviewers and their international counterparts. The overall domestic reaction has been focused on the inaccuracies of the dramatisation while the international one has been mostly positive and enthusiastic in response to characterisations and narrative. Irish reviewers are adept at criticising foreign-made representations and often have good reason to do so. Notwithstanding this protectionist tendency, in this instance a few commentators may have been somewhat poetically pedantic. For example, Ed Power of *The Irish Times* states that English actor James

Norton sounds like a "Steampunk Mr Tayto" in his portrayal of Sean Rafferty (2025). In terms of accents, Power fails to mention that Fionn O'Shea uses his own South Dublin accent in his performance as Benjamin Guinness, despite the fact that this accent only developed in the later part of the twentieth century. O'Shea's accent is not called out because of the actor's Dublin origins, but this surely demonstrates the unreliability of examining individual Dublin accents in terms of "accuracy".

Power describes the Fenians as dressing and speaking like "feral leprechauns" (2025). The Fenians' depiction in some cases is certainly, collectively one-dimensional and they do wear a lot of green (!), but the exaggeration may compromise the evaluation. These characters are mostly played by Irish actors with authentic accents. Power also likens the show to "*Succession* with shillelaghs" which is a nicely alliterative soundbite but does not quite capture the essence of the series. The show is comparable to *Succession* because it involves a rich family and issues arising from inheritance, and indeed the success of the earlier show may make the comparison inevitable. The other obvious comparison is *Peaky Blinders*, Steven Knight's earlier television series success. In terms of contemporary music choices, violence and shots of slow-motion action, a more favourable formal and aesthetic similarity might have been found between *House of Guinness* and *Peaky Blinders*.

Certain types of critical commentaries run the risk of devaluing important areas of contention around Irish representation. An article by Rory Carroll in *The Guardian* summarises a barrage of negative Irish reviews, juxtaposing them with positive foreign counterparts (2025). Perhaps not as successfully avoiding essentialist positions as he may have been intending, Carroll's meta-review might nevertheless imply that the Irish tend to find representational faults by falling into long-established ways of critical reaction. The issue is not that commentators are ill-disposed towards the show. However, many of the responses by reviewers fail to consider how it deviates from historically problematic representations of which they have been perennially critical. There is much less of a focus on the writing and plot than there is on costumes and accents. We could usefully ask about the ideological implications of overt (and unrelenting) concentration on historical accuracy in certain modes of critical address and not others.

On *The Hard Shoulder* podcast with Kieran Cuddihy, Kevin Egan (who has carried out extensive research on the Guinness family during the time represented in the Netflix series), remarks that the show is a "great jumping off point" to get people interested in learning more about the famous family (Cuddihy 2025). Egan takes a different approach when he recognises that there are many inaccuracies in the dramatic work, but goes on to identify that key aspects of the show – such as the Guinness family's philanthropy, the depictions of the introduction of a contemporary comprehensive social care package, and the contextualisation of political interventions, events and ambition – constitute a very real part of Dublin's history (White 2025).

The music has been largely applauded, although the score is manifestly unconcerned with historical accuracy and may, in fact, be consciously working against expectations. The soundtrack contains compositions by Kneecap, Fontaines D.C., Gilla Band and Thin Lizzy all of which work in a strategic way to bridge the chronological gap between the diegetic events and the twenty-first-century spectator. In this way, *House of Guinness* takes its cue from shows like *Bridgerton* and *Peaky Blinders* and its use of contemporary songs and music provides a connective access point to period narratives, and simultaneously creates a mismatch with the scenes that suspends verisimilitude in favour of dramatic imperatives. Graphics are used to translate nineteenth-century monetary figures into modern equivalents so there are continual apparent reminders that we are invited to look back at, and reconsider, the representation with a contemporary and distanced eye. This works in a Brechtian (alienating) way that discourages our unreserved and unquestioning immersion in its narrative world.

In the scenes set in Mayo when the action moves to the Guinness-owned Ashford Castle, the show acknowledges the devastating consequences of the famine, undermining the superficiality of the family's struggles in comparison to the widespread starvation and illness rampant in the countryside. This inspires Anne and later Edward to contribute more to support working class Irish people. The people living in the tough conditions of the Mayo countryside speak only in Irish. This was an important example of a decision deliberately made counter to what might have been economically-motivated decisions; translating the dialogue would have ensured the show's greater accessibility and audience reach on the global streaming platform. The New York scenes also significantly reference the mass and forced emigration of Irish people to the United States after the famine. The production therefore attempts to present a broad portrait of Ireland and Irish people in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Ultimately bringing long-forgotten people back to life in a part of Irish history that has received less attention than more frequently depicted moments of the twentieth century is a quality worthy of note. Stephen Knight brings his own brand of aestheticised violence and slow-motion action to an Irish context and, in doing so, perhaps necessarily changes a number of real-life events. Knight has been candid about this, however, and even a nod in the credits forewarns viewers of liberties taken: "This fiction is inspired by true stories". Although it is necessary to be wary of stereotypical representations of Ireland that serve foreign interests, we must be able to decipher the exact areas in which accuracy matters and when we should let the minor details go.

Works Cited

Carroll, Rory (2025). "'A Steampunk Mr Tayto': Why Irish Critics Hate Netflix's House of Guinness." *The Guardian* (October 1). https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/01/irish-critics-netflix-series-house-of-guinness-ireland

Cuddihy, Kieran (2025). "Does it Matter if House of Guinness isn't Accurate?" *The Hard Shoulder* (podcast) *Newstalk* (September 2025). https://www.newstalk.com/podcasts/highlights-from-the-hard-shoulder/does-it-matter-if-house-of-guinness-isnt-accurate

McHugh, Clare (2025). "'A Lot Juicier than Downton Abbey': The Real-life Family Drama Behind New Netflix Show House of Guinness." *BBC* (September 23). https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20250922-the-real-family-drama-behind-house-of-guinness

Power, Ed (2025). "House of Guinness on Netflix Review: Wildly Unfaithful Retelling is like Succession with Shillelaghs." *The Irish Times* (September 25). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio/2025/09/25/house-of-guinness-on-netflix-review-wildly-unfaithful-retelling-is-like-succession-with-shillelaghs/

Sunde-Brown, Daniela (2025). "'House of Guinness' Filming Locations (and How you can Visit them IRL)." *Trafalgar.com* (October 8). https://www.trafalgar.com/real-word/house-of-guinness-filming-locations/#:~:text=Why%20wasn't%20House%20of,can%20visit%20in%20real%20life

White, Jack (2025). "House of Guinness: Fact v Fiction – Is the Netflix Series Historically Accurate?" *The Irish Times* (October 1). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio/2025/09/30/house-of-guinness-fact-v-fiction-is-the-netflix-series-historically-accurate/

Sandra Costello is a PhD candidate and Irish Research Council Scholar in Film & Screen Media at University College Cork under the supervision of Dr Barry Monahan. She recently submitted her PhD dissertation, titled "Cinema, Containment and Countervisuality: Irish Gendered Institutionalisation Framed by an Institutional Lens". Prior to this, she graduated with a BA (International) in English and Italian at the University of Galway and went on to complete a Professional Diploma of Education at UCC. She also undertook a Master's in Film Studies at UCC where she completed a thesis titled "Ireland Interrupted: Repressive and Ideological Institutionalisation in Contemporary Irish Cinema". Her research interests include Irish Cinema, representations of institutions, gender, cultural memory and identity, sociology, cinematic soundscapes and visual studies.

sandymcost@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6356-4220

Leonard and Hungry Paul
BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ (2025)

Reviewer: Carlos Menéndez-Otero (University of Oviedo)

Approaching a cinematic or televisual adaptation of a favourite book is always challenging. On the one hand, you cannot help but feel a happy tinge of validation, as if the very fact that it has made it to the screen proves that you were right in recommending it to friends and family as a worthy read and, therefore, there is nothing intrinsically odd, snobbish or wrong with your literary taste. On the other, a pang of anxiety is inevitable, as you are keenly aware that the adaptation creators' view of the story and characters will differ from your own and that, once you sit through it, regardless of whether you like it or not, there will no going back for your imagination. Whatever mind images you created of the characters, spaces and scenes while reading the book will be gone forever, irredeemably replaced – or at least intertwined – *ad aeternam* with those from the film or series.

When I first heard that BBC Northern Ireland and RTÉ would be airing a Subotica-produced miniseries based on *Leonard and Hungry Paul*, Rónán Hession's best-selling début novel from 2019, I was still very fond of the images it had spawned in my mind when I first read it three years earlier. Although not exactly a literary masterpiece, the 256-page novel about a couple of nerdy, boardgame-loving, thirty-something friends from a suburban somewhere trying to navigate the postmodern world and deal with the inevitability of change at their own (premodern) pace really caught me. Maybe it was that the novel manages to shroud the dull struggles, petty victories and defeats, and common miseries and joys of contemporary suburban middle-class life in a cloak of compelling epic lyricism. Maybe it was the sincere, non-judgmental affection the author shows throughout for his two unashamedly quiet, kind, quirky, unassuming protagonists. Or maybe it was just that, as I went through the pages of *Leonard and Hungry Paul*, Hession's stylisation of social awkwardness, contemplation, silence, and a suburban (perhaps, even) *normal* everyday made me think of different works by, among other Irish writers and filmmakers, Sally Rooney, Donal Ryan, Claire Keegan, Lenny Abrahamson, John Carney, and, albeit much less frequently, even James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. All the while, I was enticed to speculate which of these implicit intertextual connections were actually

intended by the author and which instances of my own reader-based, inferred intertextuality.

That aside, two of the names in the list above, Lenny Abrahamson and Sally Rooney, allow us to transition from Hession's novel to its audiovisual counterpart. For all their flaws, the Abrahamson (co-)directed adaptations of Rooney's *Normal People* (BBC, Hulu, and RTÉ, 2020) and *Conversations with Friends* (BBC, Hulu, and RTÉ, 2022) are exemplary in their enviable, deliberate confidence. In those cases, only a few minor adjustments to their source materials, Abrahamson's characteristically austere film style, and the restrained performances of their casts – at the time, largely unknown – were necessary to render the narrative both comprehensible and attractive to audiences worldwide. For all its virtues, however, the six-episode TV version of *Leonard and Hungry Paul* seems much too worried that its literary source and the charisma of its lead actors – Alex Lawther, Laurie Kynaston and Jamie-Lee O'Donnell as Leonard, Hungry Paul and Shelley, respectively – might not be enough to offset the inherently *un*televisual moments of introspection and inaction carried over from the novel into Richie Conroy and Mark Hodkinson's screenplay.

It may have been that the decision to drown most of these moments in over-expositional voice-over narration undermines any claim that the series is an ode to quietness, as the book had been, and that this exposes the creators' limited faith in the source material, as well as their *horror vacui*. For comparison, imagine a narrator telling you what Connell (Paul Mescal) and Marianne (Daisy Edgar-Jones) are feeling every time they fall silent in *Normal People*: the application of this comparative device is a reasonable description of what happens on (too) many occasions throughout *Leonard and Hungry Paul*. However, there is something else about the voice-over narration: the attentional weight it takes away from the visuals gets massively amplified by the fact that it is delivered by Julia Roberts, an A-list Hollywood star widely known worldwide.

Why her of all people? Of course, the idea that your mind first conjures up as an answer is "the need for publicity". In today's saturated, ultra-competitive media landscape, without the support of a major star, a deliberately non-controversial – oh well, we all know this is not, nor aims to be, *Adolescence* (Netflix, 2025) – modestly-budgeted, Anglo-Irish co-production such as *Leonard and Hungry Paul* would most likely have faced a much rockier road to finding an (inter)national audience and might not even have been made. However, once we start considering the Julia Roberts persona and other features of the series that either were not in the book or, if they were, were not as central to the narrative, what soon emerges is the certainty that the series' creators aimed to distil the novel. The intention was that it would fit like hand-in-glove within the cozy, easily-pitchable mould of the mainstream rom-com: or, rather, the Hollywood-financed appropriation of the genre that thrived in the UK for about a decade following the international success of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994), and that films such as *About Adam* (Gerard Stembridge, 2000) and *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 2003) tried to replicate in Irish urban settings with mixed results; something that the late Martin McLoone rightly pointed out in *Film, Media, and Popular Culture in Ireland* (2008: 37-50).

If we allow ourselves to approach *Leonard and Hungry Paul* through this generic lens, many elements that might initially seem odd – or even at odds with the novel – become much easier to understand, and perhaps even forgive. The uncalled-for presence of Julia Roberts, who is still the undisputed queen of the Hollywood rom-com and, for that matter, female lead of one of the tentpoles of its turn-of-the-century British appropriation, *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999); the voice-over narration, which is a recurring feature of the genre; the slick, IKEA commercial-like production design and cinematography, which make most of the interiors and exteriors in the series look almost as glossy, modern, sophisticated, and impersonal as Silicon Valley or, for that matter, the Dublin of *About Adam* and *Goldfish Memory*. Added to these are the concentration of much of the action on a streamlined, Hawksian *Bringing Up Baby*-like version of the romance between Leonard and Shelley at the expense of the bromance between

Leonard and Hungry Paul and other character relationships and interactions; Shelley's explicit *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (Rabin, 2007) overtones, basically a combination of the romantic interest of another nerdy fictional Leonard, Penny (Kaley Cuoco) in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019), Summer (Zooey Deschanel) in the quintessential millennial rom-com, *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009), and Jamie-Lee O'Donnell's own star persona – mostly shaped by her role as the feisty, foul-mouthed Michelle in *Derry Girls* (Channel 4 and Netflix, 2018-2022). Leonard's visual design, which – despite the feeble attempt to conceal it behind a hipster moustache and glasses – clearly evokes, along with Alex Lawther's performance, both Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character in *(500) Days of Summer* and the turn-of-the-century persona of the undisputed king of Britpop rom-com and male lead of *Notting Hill*, Hugh Grant. The commodification of a harmless, sanitised version of British (and Irish) quirkiness and accent for international consumption via the two male protagonists and, especially, an ensemble of supporting characters that could well have been lifted from the storyworlds of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, *About a Boy* (Chris and Paul Weitz, 2003), *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), or the *Bridget Jones* saga (Sharon Maguire, Beeban Kidron and Michael Morris, 2001–2025). The occasional inclusion of animated elements à la *(500) Days of Summer* to underscore the characters' inner emotions. The glossy red-green-blue palette of the two main versions of the promotional poster and their layouts, with one showing the protagonist couple sitting close together alone on a bench, and another with them sitting quite apart beside Hungry Paul – maybe not so popular as the back-to-back or the embracing/kissing couple layouts with which we are familiar, but that are definitely associated with the rom-com genre.

Taken together, these features confirm that *Leonard and Hungry Paul* is a televisual product eager to be read primarily as a mainstream rom-com and, more specifically, as a crossover of two of the films mentioned above – *Notting Hill* and *(500) Days of Summer* – and only secondarily as a literary adaptation of the eponymous novel. And it is only when we accept this generic shift, when we take *Leonard and Hungry Paul* for what it really is, that we can begin to truly enjoy all this little charm of a series has to offer the viewer.

You may wish to note the above.

Works Cited

McLoone, Martin (2008). *Film, Media, and Popular Culture in Ireland. Cityscapes, Landscapes, Soundscapes.* Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

Rabin, Nathan (2007). "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: *Elizabethtown*." *A.V. Club* (January 25). https://www.avclub.com/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-elizabet-1798210595.

Carlos Menéndez-Otero is a lecturer at the Faculties of Humanities, and Commerce, Tourism, and Social Sciences at the University of Oviedo. His main research relates to the Irish audio-visual industry and classic Hollywood and British films about Ireland and its diaspora, on which he has published over twenty papers and the volumes *Irlanda y los irlandeses en el cine popular (1910-1970)* (2017) and *The Great Pretenders: Genre, Form, and Style in the Film Musicals of John Carney* (2023). Other interests include Irish and Irish-American history and culture, dubbing, television series, regional television, film criticism, and ESP learning and teaching.

menendezocarlos@uniovi.es

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3576-0523

***The Walsh Sisters* – Doing it for themselves**
Ian Fitzgibbon (2025)

Reviewer: Veronica Johnson (Independent Scholar)

The question of fidelity to the original is never far away when it comes to a film or TV adaptation. In the case of *The Walsh Sisters*, the publicity for this new series – co-produced by RTÉ, BBC, Cuba Pictures and Metropolitan Films International – went to considerable lengths to emphasise how faithful the dramatisation would be to the original novels by Marian Keyes. In interviews before the series premiered on RTÉ, Keyes along with writer/actor/producer Stephanie Preissner (she plays Maggie, the second eldest sister) were emphatic about how closely the series kept to the books. Interviews with cast members also backed this up with tales of Keyes visiting the set and being on hand to answer questions about the characters as well as describing a party that she gave for the cast in her home. While, in respect of the series, Keyes was "the source of the Nile", it was also made clear that she had no desire to adapt her own books for a different medium. Indeed, much was made of the fact that Keyes chose Preissner to undertake the adaptation, giving the sense that a mantle had been passed. In fact, Keyes and Preissner ran a podcast to accompany every episode which was available after each broadcast. Thus, the fidelity of the adaptation to the original was energetically established before the series began. However, little is made of how this fidelity will be impacted by the switching of the setting of the novels from the 1990s and 2000s to the present. The interviews indicate that this choice was made to update and modernise the stories, with Keyes apologising for aspects of the novels that were "fatphobic, white and heteronormative" – elements understandably corrected in the reincarnations and, for contemporary viewers, most certainly laudable alterations.

There are seven novels published that tell the stories of the five Walsh Sisters, and one complementary A-Z "compendium". The television series focuses on two of these novels – *Rachel's Holiday* (1997) and *Anybody Out There* (2006) – respectively, the second and fourth novels in the series. The dramatisations tell the story of Rachel (Caroline Menton), whose near-death experience as a result of her addiction to alcohol and drugs lead to her "holiday" at a rehab centre, and almost inconsolable grief suffered by Anna (Louisa Harland) following the death of her fiancé Aidan (Samuel Anderson) in a car crash. With necessary narrative contrivance, that disaster happens when the partners are on their way to collect Rachel to bring her to rehab. The series follows the impact of these events on the relationship of Anna and Rachel, their three sisters, parents, and Rachel's boyfriend Luke (Jay Duffy). Moving the setting to the present time makes for some awkward moments, and the intention to be true to the novels compromises credibility in situations that are incongruous in 2025. Perhaps the biggest adjustment made with the change in time periods is that the most recent novel in the series – *My Favourite Mistake* (published in 2024 as a sequel to *Rachel's Holiday* and *Again, Rachel* published in 2022) – and the latter presents the Walsh sisters middle-aged, having matured on a chronological timeline with the books. For fans of the novels, whom it is reasonable to imagine are the target audience of the series, it is demanding to reimagine the sisters as young on screen when they have already witnessed them age on the page.

To have a new series, based on books by a female writer, with a female showrunner, telling the stories of five women, is a welcome piece of television programming. This series has strong predecessors in *Derry Girls*, *This Way Up* and Sharon Horgan's *Bad Sisters* (all written by Irish women and dealing with relationships between sisters or, in the case of *Derry Girls*, a 'non-blood' sorority). *The Walsh Sisters* female-dominated set up is very persuasive in part due to the number of women's voices we hear. The successful drawing of five individuals as compellingly empowered characters is a credit to both Keyes and the production team who judiciously ensure that there is no overlap, no imitation, and no shadowing with any of the

sisters. Each is a unique voice and character, and all are well developed and credibly poised to figure out her own way in the world. They epitomise the best of strong independent twenty-first-century women. They are outspoken, verbal, incredibly articulate, funny, complicated and kind; while their life-paths are pre-determined by their birth family, they are trying honourable and realistically to live with and escape from this. These are familiar Irish women. Performances by Máiréad Tyers as Helen, and Caroline Menton as Rachel are excellent, and Louisa Harland as Anna and Carrie Crowley as Mammy Walsh also give great performances, fully realised in spite of storylines that are less nuanced.

The series gets a lot right when it comes to the intimacy between sisters, particularly the dramatic and sometimes swift situational changes from contented intimate connections to bitter disagreements. The relationships are drawn compellingly but credibly as they are charted through details like the easy body familiarity and irritability that comes with growing up with four siblings. These are represented in minor moments such as the borrowing of clothes (with and without permission), the popping of spots, the physical interactions of holding, amicable the patting, and the delicate touches or subtle looks that indicate a deeper connection and bond. It is exemplified in one scene in the final episode where all the sisters join Anna on the bed and talk and argue. In an unforced way, Fitzgibbon shows us the shifting moods and allegiances between them, the way they have developed an arm scratching similarity that keeps them linked to each other physically when words fail: a meaningful moment that becomes both a point of humour and argument.

The Keyes books are frequently hilarious, and always humorous, but the series leans into the serious topics and gives them more prominence. The first episode ends with a dramatic and horrific car crash, the second episode features the death of Aidan, and from these events develop the two main stories: Anna's grief and Rachel's battle with addiction. Maggie's struggles to get pregnant and Helen's anxiety, along with Claire's (Danielle Galligan) ambiguous feelings about motherhood also feature. While there are comic moments, a serious tone is maintained throughout. This is especially true for episodes three and four, which were written by Kefi Chadwick, and are the darkest and the most intense of all the programmes.

Much of the humour that does break through comes from Mammy Walsh, although most of this is laughing at her and there is a touch of cruelty in her being the brunt of the jokes. Again, this is one of the most disjointed aspects of moving the timeframe. It was more believable for a woman of Mammy Walsh's age to be disconnected from the modern world in the 1990s, it is much more difficult to believe that a fifty-something year old woman with five daughters would be so out of touch in 2025. A lot of the time Mammy Walsh is portrayed as being angry and as someone who must be humoured, or worse still managed. At the same time, she is given some of the funniest lines: "A bit of physical work seems to help", she comments in a deadpan aside to Luke when his visit to Anna after Aidan's death coincides with her power-washing the patio. There is a sense of an individual here, of a woman who has raised and is still raising five girls capable of using acerbic humour to help her get through.

The setting and tone of the series are noteworthy in their complementing the books' prosaic creations. The choice of songs played over the cold openings of the first episode and over the title credits throughout are interesting. Aimee Carty's song *Sister* is the first piece we hear. The lyrics refer to how little sisters look up to older sisters when they are both young, and how this can lead to problematic relationships as they age. This is thematically apt and could have been written especially to depict the bonding between Rachel and Anna. Over the opening credits we hear Cathy Davey's song *Little Red*, this initially seems to be referring to the relationship between Rachel and Luke, with lyrics stating "Hey, I wouldn't let him in" apparently indicating Rachel's reluctance to open up emotionally and acknowledge her vulnerability. In fact, the song refers to male predatory behaviour and acts as a warning to other women not to fall for that kind of character. It is an odd choice as none of the men in this series

is especially threatening. Notably, in a reversal of the fate that often befalls women in television dramas, the men are rather thinly drawn characters with little psychological breadth or depth. Jay Duffy, who plays Luke, went as far as to question Marian Keyes about what makes his character tick in order to gain a greater insight into his motivation. Luke, Daddy Walsh, (Aidan Quinn) and, to a lesser extent, Aidan are cyphers: strategically positioned to reflect the emotions of the female characters. This can lead to their appearance as solid, reliable, dependable and rational. However, this kind of characterisation does not necessarily guarantee agency. Rather, it becomes more relevant because it provides a counterfoil to the female characters whose emotional lives are the definitive focus of the series. We do not hear or need to relate to the emotional ups and downs of the male characters: we are not granted access to their desires and needs as we are with their female counterparts. It is a strength of this series that the emotional lives of the women form its backbone: it is the series' characterisation and not its novelistic plot that affords greater insight into the fictional family presented.

It is good to see Keyes' work being adapted for television and great that Preissner was chosen as showrunner for the series. Caveats about updating the series aside, the characters are well written and well acted and they work together very well to form a convincing family.

Works Cited

Brennan, Suzanne (2025). "Marian Keyes on casting The Walsh Sisters: 'The big worry was who is playing Luke Costello?'" *The Irish Times* (June 19).

Brown, Niamh (2025). "Marian Keyes: 'Addiction in the please love me disease.'" *The Irish Times* (October 10).

Ingle, Róisín (2025). "Behind the scenes with Marian Keyes on the set of The Walsh Sisters: 'I couldn't be happier.'" *The Irish Times* (September 27).

Veronica Johnson is a council member of the International Association for Media and History and co-editor and book review editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. Her work focuses on early and silent film and cinema, particularly in relation to the Film Company of Ireland, female film workers and cinema management. She has been published in numerous journals including *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Media* and her work is forthcoming in Manchester UP and Rutgers UP.

veronicaj@outlook.ie

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2146-8692

***Bring Them Down* – New Rural Spatialisations of Irish Criminality**
Christopher Andrews (2025)

Reviewer: Ciara Whelan (University College Dublin)

An affective shift toward the tragic spectacularity of male decline is represented in the recent migration of the Irish cinematic crime narrative from urban to rural settings. This is apparent in

a new spatialisation of male civil disobedience that dichotomously invests in pastoral Ireland as a repository of restorative authenticity and a site of conservative repression (Holohan 2019: 408). These newly wrought rural settings stage a reversal of traditional Irish masculine subjects, subject matter and ideological positions that were frequently represented during the Celtic Tiger:

> Not only did the focus shift from a concern with rural male characters in distinctively Irish contexts to a growing preoccupation with urban, working-class masculinities in more universal settings; there was also a distant ideological trajectory at work here, whereby an unequivocally critical approach to patriarchal masculinity gave way to more ambiguous portrayals of machismo. (Ging 2021: 161)

In these early years of the twenty-first century, the deluge of urban-set crime and gangster screen media constituted a generic break with traditions of exploring Irish masculinity in relation to the natural landscape contrived by Irish films of the first wave (Bob Quinn's *Poitín* [1978], Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* [1988]) and second wave (Jim Sheridan's *The Field* [1990], Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* [1997]). Although the concern with Dublin-based working-class masculinities and gangster social worlds has endured somewhat in the post-Covid period, with low-budget gangster flicks like *The Irish Mob* (Patrick McKnight, 2023) and independent co-productions by Irish filmmakers with credentials in the genre such as *Amongst the Wolves* (Mark O'Connor, 2025), this urban cycle is lately surpassed by a series of rural-based crime thrillers. The satirical placement of gangster aesthetics in rural Ireland by Martin McDonagh's dark comedy *The Guard* (2011) is superseded by crime thrillers like *Bad Day for the Cut* (Chris Baugh, 2017), *Dark Lies the Island* (Ian Fitzgibbon, 2019), *Calm With Horses* (Nick Rowland, 2019), *In the Land of Saints and Sinners* (dir. Robert Lorenz, 2023) and, more recently, *Bring Them Down* (Christopher Andrews, 2025).

While Irish crime and gangster screen media produced during the Celtic Tiger did frequently retreat to rural spaces, they still ardently maintained their affinity with the urban landscape. Director Paddy Breathnach's *I Went Down* (1997) and *Man About Dog* (2004), as well as screenwriter Mark O'Rowe's *Intermission* (2003) and *Perrier's Bounty* (2009), depicted underclass criminals and urban "scumbags" temporarily removed to the Irish countryside, for example, and Holohan notably contends that the climactic chase sequence in *Intermission* enacts a key binary in Irish screen culture's spatial logic in which the rural is foregrounded as absolutely alternative to the urban (2019: 407). *Young Offenders* (2016) adopts a similar narrative geography, moving the juvenile delinquents from their native Cork City across the unfamiliar rural and coastal landscape of West Cork. So, violence is not an unfamiliar spectacle in Ireland's rural landscape, but what is significant is the slow transposition of a screen genre normally locked in the Dublin (or Belfast) cityscape to the Irish countryside in the decade after the financial crash.

The Celtic Tiger years saw the architectural and metaphysical renewal of Dublin city, located by Diane Negra in "the metallic sheen of a new Dublin landscape that showcases generic, postmodern features such as the Spire, the Luas, the refurbished Connolly Rail Station, and new financial districts/cultural quarters such as the International Financial Services Centre and the Docklands" (2010: 844). In the wake of economic collapse, Dublin's financial district and the city at large constituted the ideological and geographical site of the nation's plutocratic and liberal glut. In terms of the Irish spatial binary, then, rural Ireland increasingly became the setting of an authentic national culture and attractive Irish masculine mythologies. In contrast to "the celebratory cinema of the Celtic Tiger Ireland, [in which] the country's urban landscape is reimagined as a home that is open to all – gay, straight, black, white – in a rhetoric of non-exclusion, even as the actual experience of exclusion which persists in the country is somewhat evaded" (Holohan 2015: 19), rural Ireland serves as an authenticated national homestead and

new masculine domain for a delimited demographic of white Irish men in the contemporary crime genre cycle. The new cycle of rural-based crime thrillers creates a sense of place in a post-crash Ireland fraught with masculine crises, that was in part provoked by the prospect of a commercialised and globalised nation devoid of authenticity; a modern egalitarian Ireland that is signified in the nation's urban spaces. The newly wrought rural settings connect their male representations with histories of outmoded masculine mythologies and, consequently, Irish crime thrillers like *Bring Them Down* render spectacular the phantasmagoria of white male injury and decline (Carroll 2011).

Bring Them Down is a non-linear dual narrative film set in an unspecified region in the rural Irish countryside, and focuses on the spiralling rivalry between two male-dominated local sheep farms. The film depicts the destruction of a peaceable male existence within the Irish agricultural industry by the corrupting forces of greed and envy, in which shepherd Michael O'Shea's (Christopher Abbott) humble flock is stolen and then maimed by his neighbouring farmer's young son, Jack (Barry Keoghan). Patriarchal agriculturalism is presented as the natural order of the rural locale, especially when, for example, the construction of temporary tourist accommodation near the farmland by competitors is condemned by Ray O'Shea (Colm Meaney) and framed as a stain on the natural Irish landscape, tenderly cultivated by a patrilineage of Irish-speaking O'Shea shepherds. The film's scattered imagery of Michael sheep farming, against the backdrop of a sprawling and mountainous valley, operates a similarly sublime wide-angled visual economy. Depicted in this reverential light and framed by the immutable rugged Irish scenery, Michael's representation connects his masculine performance with older modalities of Irish manhood screened in early-twentieth century national cinema: "which attempt[ed] to (re)construct Irish masculinity as virile and self-determining as well as spiritual, family-oriented, and connected to the land" (Ging 2019: 387). Inflected by Christian myth, the film's narrative and aesthetics combine to produce a mode of male-dominated national culture indelibly linked with the restorative powers of the rural farmland.

The film's harsh natural landscape stages the brutal conflicts that emerge in this male-dominated industry. *Bring Them Down* shares with *Calm with Horses* (also starring actor Barry Keoghan) a tense car chase down winding forested roads, and a concern with their protagonists' bloodied hands after strenuous bouts of violence: Arm's (Cosmo Jarvis) from his instructed assault of a sexual predator and Michael's after euthanising his maimed herd. The repeated close-up shots of the men's bloodied knuckles imbue their masculinities with a "reflexive sadomasochistic" spectacularity, something that David Savran argues has come to characterise reactionary white masculinity and is discursively materialised in print and screen media through fictional male heroes (or anti-heroes), who "remonstrate against a culture made uneasy by traditional machismo by proclaiming themselves victims, by turning violence upon themselves and so demonstrating their implacable toughness, their ability to savour their self-inflicted wounds" (1998: 207). Both films map the gendered rural spatial realms in which the phantasmagoric pleasures of white male injury and decline are sadomasochistically indulged (Carroll 2011), and thus connect vicariously with disaffected and discursively emasculated Irish men.

Such a gender performance is firmly situated in the rural landscape in *Bring Them Down* during the climactic fight between Michael and Jack. Having discovered that Jack is responsible for the loss of his flock, Michael chases the young man into the rugged mounds of the hilly landscape. Armed with the same dagger Jack used in the massacre, Michael fumbles aimlessly in search of his prey until he is pounced upon by the boy himself. The pair's pitiful showdown leaves Jack with the dagger lodged in his stomach and an injured Michael steeped in regret, as he carries Jack back home to his mother Caroline (Nore-Jane Noone). The martyred male body is the imagistic apotheosis of contemporary white masculinity's reflexive sadomasochism, informed by a Christian iconographic and filmic tradition that values the spectacle of painful

male sacrifice (Walsh 2010: 51-52). The film's denouement privileges the restorative power of the Irishman's reflexive sadomasochism and martyrdom to produce a masculine mythology of power and virtue that is undergirded by the virile significance of the Irish rural space. The bleak ending underscores the tragedy of men's ostensible redundancy in contemporary Irish society; a tragedy that is accentuated by the crime thriller's rural setting as the mythic site of Irish men's trials and injury.

The new rural spaces represented in contemporary Irish crime and gangster screen media texts such as *Bring Them Down* dually articulate the restorative powers of the authentic national pastoral homestead and the mythic qualities of this space that naturalise the phantasmagoric spectacle of male pain and sacrifice. The film's narrativisation of male martyrdom operates as justification of Irish patriarchal authority and order as a form of righteous self-sacrifice rather than imposed social condition. The genre cycle, whose growing popularity is indexed by the renowned Irish and international actors cast in lead and supporting roles (Jarvis is an English actor with Armenian-American heritage and Abbott is American with Caribbean and European ancestry, for example), and the international channels in which they find distribution, marks the resurgence of historically-contingent modes of nationalism in screen representations of fraught post-crash Irish masculinities. The contemporary crime and gangster screen genre cycle, transposed to the rural domain, avoids the ostensibly emasculating forces of modern urbanity and, furthermore, circumvents critical discussion around social and economic marginalisation in post-crash national culture.

Works Cited

Bring Them Down (2025). Directed by Christopher Andrews. Mubi, Tailored Films and Screen Ireland.

Calm With Horses (2019). Directed by Nick Rowland. Film4 Productions, Element Pictures and Screen Ireland.

Carroll, Hamilton (2011). *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ging, Debbie (2013). *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Holohan, Conn (2015). "'Nothin' But a Wee Humble Cottage': At Home in Irish Cinema." *Ireland and Cinema: Culture and Contexts*, edited by Barry Monahan. London: Springer. 13-23.

_____ (2019). "Space and Place in Irish Cinema." *A Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, edited by John Hill. New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell. 407-22.

Negra, Diane (2010). "Urban Space, Luxury Retailing, and the New Irishness." *Cultural Studies* 24 (6): 836-53.

Savran, David (1998). *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Walsh, Fintan (2010). *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ciara Whelan is a second-year Ph.D. student researching Film Studies and Cultural Studies at University College Dublin. Her doctoral research into contemporary Irish masculinities and the discursive production of existential gender crises in post-Celtic Tiger screen and star texts is the first major study of Irish celebrity culture in the multi-platform era, and she has published

in journals including *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and *Film Matters*. Her research is funded by Research Ireland.

ciara.whelan4@ucdconnect.ie

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3260-0770

***Christy* – The Politics of Spatial Injustice on Screen**
Brendan Canty (2025)

Reviewer: Rachel Gough (University College Cork)

In the 1970s, Cork County Council redeveloped existing farmland to provide housing for an anticipated workforce tied to the city's expanding manufacturing industries. Cheap, sub-standard public accommodation was constructed, and what had once been agricultural land became Knocknaheeny, a large urban housing project. Within fifteen years, however, the recession of the 1980s brought the closure of Dunlop, Ranks Ltd, Fords, Verolme, and Lunhams – some of the industrial projects that had initially created the increased employment. Knocknaheeny experienced mass unemployment and, with it, the rise of poverty, illness, crime, disenfranchisement, and wider socioeconomic decline. Today, it remains one of the most deprived areas in Cork City. A recent Cork City Council report noted that "the communities living in these areas have the lowest levels of income, highest levels of single-parent households, highest levels of disability, lowest levels of education and lowest levels of health" (*Local Economic & Community Plan 2023–2029*: 10).

Just beyond Knocknaheeny sits a facility that provides a striking contradiction: Apple's Cork campus, the trillion-dollar multinational corporation's only wholly owned manufacturing facility in the world. Knocknaheeny is a place whose socioeconomic and sociocultural mapping can only be properly conceived across the tensions created by this contrast.

Another significant tension is evident in the concrete infrastructure of this environment. The inexpensive public housing installed in the 1970s clusters around a listed example of Brutalist architecture: the Knocknaheeny water tower. Known locally as "the Rezza", it is one of the most iconic elements of Cork's skyline. Designed by Brutalist architect Guillaume Gillet (1912-87) and engineer René Sarger (1917-88), the construction is visible from every part of Knocknaheeny and across its surrounding districts.

The Rezza also haunts the frames of Brendan Canty's Knocknaheeny-set and staged feature film début *Christy* (2025). The film follows its eponymous protagonist, played by Danny Power, as he returns to Knocknaheeny to live with his older brother Shane and his family after a period in foster care. *Christy* explores the intricacies of belonging – to people, to place, to memory – particularly when those relationships are strained by socioeconomic deprivation and personal tragedy. Power's quiet performance is compelling; he presents a character with a keen, watchful and often heartbreaking insight into the world around him.

The central tension of the narrative is Christy's deciding what he will do when he turns eighteen, an imminent milestone that legally releases him from foster care. Shane and his wife Stacey have a home that could offer shelter, but they also have a new baby. Shane's reluctance to let Christy stay with them is one of the film's most complex and compelling emotional arcs. Initially we are allowed to assume that his brother's unwillingness stems from his frustration at

Christy's removal from a foster home for fighting, or from his perception of Christy as lazy and unfocused. However, in one scene, Shane creeps downstairs alone at night to unpack a digital camera containing footage of the brothers' late mother and it is hinted that Christy's presence and a renewed proximity to their shared past is problematic for the sibling. This factor informed his motivation to see Christy placed first with a foster family (who might be willing to take an eighteen-year-old) and, if that option should fail, in residential aftercare.

This focus on childhood – on how its emotional damage might be revisited and replayed like old video footage – is mirrored in a later pivotal scene. Christy, returning to his aunt's house for the first time since he was five, is confronted with the possibility that his life could take a very different path. His cousin, a drug dealer who is subjecting his mother and younger brother Troy to physical and emotional abuse, asks Christy how long it has been since Christy was last there. Christy looks across the room to see a five-year-old version of himself looking back, as if he had never really left.

Canty's choice to foreground youth experience is an important one. Knocknaheeny has a large youth population, yet it remains underserved and frequently maligned – especially its teenage demographic (O'Sullivan 2020: 80). This demographic is not new to Irish cinema: Peter Foott's *The Young Offenders* (2016) also depicts life on the Northside, albeit with a more upbeat, comedic tone. Christy departs from this emotional register, offering instead a more grounded and compassionate portrayal of Northside youth.

The director's focus is particularly striking given the recently initiated City Northwest Quarter Regeneration Plan, which aims to address long-standing deprivation in the area. However, as O'Sullivan *et al*. observe, many children and young people have "felt excluded, disempowered and alienated from the decision-making process in their community on regeneration" (2020: 84).

Canty is acutely aware of this frustration. He presents Christy as a young man intimately familiar with having limited control over his own life. Throughout the film, conversations about Christy occur in his absence – discussions in which others determine his needs, wants, desires, and imagined future. More strikingly, Christy himself is beholden to these conversations but does not intervene. Canty offers a character who, through habit perhaps, already understands that, even if he speaks, he will not be heard. Yet the film's narrative ultimately depends on Christy gaining some degree of agency, or at least a sense of purpose. It is in this context that the water tower – the Rezza – becomes significant. The film gestures strongly towards the environmental conditions that shape his characters' lives. Knocknaheeny is marked by a scarcity of public green infrastructure. Children and young people in the area have repeatedly identified a lack of safe, accessible places to play and roam: exactly the kind of unstructured outdoor spaces crucial to positive social, emotional and personal development.

There are other related spatial injustices at play in the real-life location. The established Traveller halting site on the Northside – home to families who keep horses – has long been constrained by a shortage of grazing and amenity land, a problem that recurs in welfare controversies, local press and municipal records. This absence comes to the fore in a manifestly meaningful way aesthetically and politically in Christy. The result is a neighbourhood whose cultural geography is shaped as much by absence as by presence: the lack of green space curtails informal social learning, reduces opportunities for play, and reinforces the sense that children's needs are peripheral to official regeneration priorities.

Reading *Christy* against these conditions renders Canty's choice to stage some of the film's most engaging scenes – indeed the scenes in which Christy is most empowered, most talkative, most noticed and welcomed – in the scrubby edgelands around Gillet's water tower a deeply political and socially engaged one. In these marginal, unofficial spaces, Christy finds room to breathe, to speak, and ultimately to begin imagining a future that is not already

prescribed for him. Marion Shoard describes the edgeland as a landscape between urban and rural that is:

> quite different from either. Often vast in area, though hardly noticed, it is characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plants, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy farmland. All these heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland frequently swathed in riotous growths of colourful plants, both native and exotic. (Shoard 2017)

Shoard notes that, for the most part, we do not visit edgelands without a specific purpose. In *Christy*, however, the edgeland becomes one of the few spaces in which the young people of the area *can* gather with purpose.

Earlier in the film, Christy is frequently situated against moving backdrops as he sits in the passenger seat of his brother's van. The world streaks past in blurs of light and colour. In the scenes by the water tower, things slow down. We hear ragwort crackling in the summer heat as it goes to seed, we can hear laughter, and wind moving through scrubby grass. There is something to be said about the connection between edgelands and teenagers: both are non-productive, in a traditional capitalist sense, both exist in liminal, interstitial states of flux. Both are easily ignored – even within their own communities – until the point when someone decrees they are undesirable or a source of disturbance and promptly makes moves to subject them to "official management".

Canty's narrative space is populated by the children and young people from Cork's "Kabin Crew" – a vibrant not-for-profit music and creative hub based in Knocknaheeny in a studio repurposed from a metal container. The group came to widespread attention in 2024 with their song "The Spark". The young actors involved in the film deserve praise for performances that speak not only to their creative skill but also to the clear communal benefits of arts funding in the area – funding that allows such talent to be nurtured and sustained.

Christy is an engaged, engaging and sensitive portrait of place, at once sharp and tender. The film resists an easy narrative conclusion. It does not suggest that family bonds can automatically overcome a childhood and adolescence shaped by addiction, institutional care, and the loss of a parent. It does not suggest that deprivation and systemic failures in social care can be resolved through goodwill alone; these issues require sustained governmental and social engagement. What it does suggest, however, is that one potential and potent antidote to these issues is community, as long as that community is given the space it needs to flourish and thrive.

Works Cited

Local Economic & Community Plan 2023–2029 (2023). Cork City Council publications.corkcity.ie/view/925196156/11/.

O'Sullivan, Siobhan, Cathal O'Connell and Lorcan Byrne (2020). "'Listen to What We Have to Say': Children and Young People's Perspectives on Urban Regeneration." *Social Inclusion* 8 (3): 77-87. doi:10.17645/si.v8i3.2884.

Shoard, Marion (2017). "Edgelands." *The Land*, 21. https://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/articles/edgelands.

Dr Rachel Gough is a writer, lecturer, and researcher at University College Cork, working across film theory, video game studies, and national cinema. Her interdisciplinary research

focuses on ecological representation, hauntology, and postcolonial theory. She is co-founder of "Haunted Futures", an international research network that hosts annual conferences and fosters critical dialogue on hauntology and radical cultural inquiry. Dr Gough is also a researcher with UCC's Sustainability Institute on the CLIMATUDE project, an engaged research initiative examining Irish public attitudes and values around climate change. She has consulted for multiple Irish environmental charities, contributing to Media Action Plans that promote public understanding of biodiversity and environmental legislation. She serves on the *Estudios Irlandeses* editorial board and is Public Relations Officer for Women in Research Ireland. Her creative work spans fiction and poetry, with publications in *Outpost*, *Bealtaine*, *Quarryman*, *Best Small Fictions*, and *The National Flash Fiction Anthology*. Her short fiction has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 as part of the *Short Works* Programme. In 2025 she was awarded first place in the flash fiction category at the Write by the Sea Literary Festival.

rgough@ucc.ie

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5280-3329

Every Evil Has its Roots – Comparative Review of *An Taibhse* and *Fréwaka*
John Farrelly and Aislinn Clarke (respectively) (2025)

Reviewer: Simon Hewitt (Maynooth University)

July 10, 2024, the Galway Film Fleadh presented the premiere of John Farrelly's *An Taibhse*. According to Donald Clarke of *The Irish Times*, the film contains "blood, religion, familial abuse" and a "fiery ceremony [that points] towards folk-horror tropes" (2025). Less than a month later at the 77th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland, audiences saw the premiere of another "Bloodcurdling folk horror" (White 2025), Aislinn Clarke's *Fréwaka*. This accidental concurrence of the release of two Irish "folk horrors" is notable as, according to Hilary White of the *Irish Independent*, the "Irish should be leaders in folk horror, what with our deeply rooted myths, dark Church history, and general knack for off-beat rural weirdness" (2025). However, the term has more often been applied to British cinema where the horror of encountering something that forces us to confront our dark history is a common cinematic trope that evokes the literary traditions of Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and M.R. James (Young and Fowler 2010: 20). Being British, I have come to understand a common narrative schema, or what Adam Scovell calls a "chain", in British horror cinema whereby an outside character enters a rugged desolate landscape and experiences a foreboding sense of social isolation, whereupon they encounter "skewed belief systems and morality" that culminates in a violent and/or supernatural "happening/summoning" (Scovell 2017). It would therefore be interesting to consider how well Scovell's schema applies to *An Taibhse* and *Fréwaka*, as contemporary examples of Irish folk horror.

An Taibhse is set in 1852 Ireland, at the latter stages of Great Famine, and shows a father and daughter (played by Tom Kerrisk and Livvy Hill) arriving at an isolated country mansion, which they have been tasked to maintain over the winter months by an absent wealthy landowner. If this plot sounds familiar to Stanley Kubrick fans, the familiarity is not misplaced. Farrelly's film is replete with intertextual references to *The Shining* (1980) that include a ubiquitous symmetrical framing, a gradual unravelling of the protagonist's sanity, an axe-

wielding father, and a violent third act scene that is reminiscent of Scatman Crothers arriving at The Overlook shouting (in fidelity to *that* recognisable moment in the genre): "Hello, anybody here?" *Fréwaka* similarly involves a character arriving at an isolated country house. Except in Clarke's film, Clare Monnelly's Shoo is a contemporary Home Care Nurse who arrives from Dublin to look after an elderly woman living on the outskirts of a sparsely populated fictional West Coast village. The woman, Peig (Bríd Ní Neachtain) has a "skewed" belief system, contrasted with a contemporary urban perspective, and claims that she is being haunted by "Them": a term the story leads us to understand as hostile fairies. Scovell's schema fits equally well with this film, as its violent and supernatural ending leaves no doubt that Peig's beliefs are real.

It is clear, therefore, that we should look beyond British cinema for examples of folk horror. Indeed, Dawn Keetley and Ruth Heholt's edited collection, *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* (2023), seeks to do just that by inviting scholars to look at folk horror from other places such as Ukraine, Thailand and Appalachia, as well as other media, like video games. Scovell's schema is nevertheless still useful because it provides an early example of a sustained inquiry into folk horror, and by grounding its discussion in the "unholy trinity" – three films that provided the foundation for what we now call "folk horror" – it offers an ideal counterpoint by which we might better understand regional and cultural specificities of Irish folk horror, simultaneously bringing a comprehensive and nuanced definition to the term. These three films are Michael Reeves's *Witchfinder General* (1968), Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973). They had a profound effect upon our contemporary understanding of the term "folk horror", although they did not initiate the application of the term. The earliest example of its use was in a 1936 article in *The English Journal* (Rodgers 2023: 223). It entered common parlance after it featured in the Mark Gatiss 2010 BBC documentary series, *A History of Horror* (Bayman and Donnelly 2023: 2). In episode two, "Home Counties Horror", Gattis highlights that in the 1960s and 1970s, a loose collection of films emerged that "shared a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore, and superstition". This is notable because if we switch "British" with "Irish" here, then Gattis' description applies well to both *An Taibhse* and *Fréwaka*.

In *An Taibhse*, the father and daughter, Éamon and Máire, live off the land and are forced to contend with the harsh winter in the isolated location. This cold unforgiving landscape preludes a major turning point in the film when Éamon suffers a debilitating accident while chopping wood for the fire, an incident that pushes him towards alcohol, insanity and violence. In *Fréwaka*, Shoo's isolation from her accustomed urban environment, duly exemplified by the standard horror film trope of a bad phone signal, is made malevolent by Peig's insistence that they are not truly alone in this isolated Gaeltacht. Fittingly, there is "a house under the house" where "They" live. The stark counterpoint between these two films and the unholy trinity of 1960s' and 1970s' British cinema is made clear by the Gaeltacht setting. Placing the narrative action in this linguistic location justifies both films being primarily performed in the Irish language.

An Taibhse has been heralded as the "first and currently only fully Irish-language horror feature" (Fealy 2025) and, while that categorisation holds true, it is important not to overlook the fact that *Fréwaka* is also predominantly in Irish, using English only to emphasise further Shoo's separation from her Dublin home and English-speaking Ukrainian partner. *An Taibhse* takes place at the time that many Irish people were leaving its shores. From the mid-1840s to the early 1850s, roughly 1.5 million people fled the Irish Famine (Ó Gráda and O'Rourke 1997: 4). While not discounting the pernicious impact of the British in suppressing Gaelic, the impact of this mass emigration on the Irish language was profound, and remains evident today (FitzGerald 2003; Montgomery 2015). In *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* Diarmaid Ó Giolláin argues that this reduction of active speakers of the indigenous

language led to a "direct loss of Gaelic oral traditions, traditional knowledge in general, and the attendant opening to modem ideas" (2000: 16). He quotes Sir William Wilde, ophthalmologic surgeon, folklorist and father of Oscar who, in 1852, lamented the weakening of the language "in which most of our legends, romantic tales, ballads, and bardic annals, the vestiges of Pagan rites, and the relics of fairy charms were preserved", and asks: "can superstitious practices continue to exist?" (Wilde 1979 [1852]: 10-11). The comparable question posed by *An Taibhse* is whether the experiences of the characters, framed for us through the Irish language, are just psychological or truly supernatural. By contrast, *Fréwaka*, explores our contemporary moment in which a diurnal experience of Irish as a primary language is largely confined to the Gaeltacht areas. According to the 2022 census, while 1.9 million people (40% of the population aged three or over) have some Irish, only 10% of that number (4% of the population) said they speak it "very well" (Central Statistics Office 2023). Despite this, superstitious practices very much continue to exist in the film, and the other-worldly "They" residing beneath the house are powerful and malicious: only those familiar with the correct customs, rites and practices can repel them with incantations that must be delivered in the Irish language.

The Irish folk horror of *An Taibhse* and *Fréwaka* represents an emerging and exciting sub-genre, and there are others that might fit within this new canon. *The Hallow* (Corin Hardy, 2015) is set in a rural Irish village replete with "fairies, banshees and baby stealers". In a similar evocation of the changeling myth, *The Hole in the Ground* (Lee Cronin, 2019) features a mother and son who move to the Irish countryside, after which the mother worries that "there's something not right with him lately". Perhaps instead of Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and M.R. James, these films evoke the literary traditions of writers like Elizabeth Bowen and Sheridan Le Fanu. The exploration of folk horror and, specifically, folk horror in the Irish language, provides an ideal lens through which contemporary Ireland might reconcile the horrors rooted in its past with the uncertainties of its future.

Works Cited

Bayman, Louis and K. J. Donnelly (2023). *Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Central Statistics Office (2023). *Census of Population 2022*. Central Statistics Office. https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/population/censusofpopulation2022/.

Clarke, Donald (2025). "*An Taibhse* Review: Queasy Atmosphere and Good Performances Drive this Taut Irish-language Horror." *The Irish Times* (March 27). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/review/2025/03/27/an-taibhse-review-queasy-atmosphere-and-good-performances-drive-this-taut-irish-language-horror/.

Fealy, Aoife (2025). "Review: *An Taibhse*." *Film Ireland* (April 2). https://www.filmireland.net/review-an-taibhse/.

FitzGerald, Garret (2003). "Irish-Speaking in the Pre-Famine Period: A Study Based on the 1911 Census Data for People Born before 1851 and Still Alive in 1911." *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 103C (5): 191-283.

Keetley, Dawn and Ruth Heholt, eds. (2023). *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Montgomery, H. E. Rory (2014). "Foreword." *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online] XIX-2. https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.197.

Ó Gráda, Cormac and Kevin H. O'Rourke (1997). "Migration as Disaster Relief: Lessons from the Great Irish Famine." *European Review of Economic History* 1(1): 3-25.

Scovell, Adam (2017). *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. Leighton Buzzard: Auteur Publishing.

White, Hilary (2025). "*Fréwaka* Review: Bloodcurdling Folk Horror Hits Home with its Sideways Glance at Modern Ireland." *Irish Independent* (April 24). https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-reviews/frewaka-review-bloodcurdling-folk-horror-hits-home-with-its-sideways-glance-at-modern-ireland/a137402634.html.

Wilde, Sir William (1979 [1852]). *Irish Popular Superstitions*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

Young, Rob and William Fowler (2010). "The Pattern Under the Plough." *Sight and Sound* 08: 16-22.

Simon Hewitt is an Assistant Professor in the *Department of Media Studies* at *Maynooth University*. His research focuses on the interstices between media audiences and media industries, and examines how this gap is bridged. His current projects include an article for *Convergence* on video game/cinematic convergence in the late 1990s, and a chapter for an edited collection on the financial exploitation of paratextual film audience communities. He was also awarded an NUI Early Career Research Grant (2024) to organise a symposium on the "Samhain Industry" in Ireland.

simon.hewitt@mu.ie

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0325-9870

Báite
Ruán Magan (2025)

Reviewer: Ciara Barrett (Sacred Heart University)

In their book on Irish myth-busting director Neil Jordan, Emer and Kevin Rockett first highlighted the iconoclastic significance of his exploding the image of Lough Tay in the 1997 film adaptation of *The Butcher Boy* (2003: 192). Sandra Costello recalled the importance of this moment in her review of the Hollywood rom-com *Irish Wish* in this journal last year, showing how the latter film's more traditionally scopophilic depiction of the lake – a rejection, if an unwitting one, of Jordan's revision – represents the lingering, ideologically opposed tendency of Hollywood films to (re-)impose a tourist gaze on Ireland's landscape, seeing only "one-dimensional versions of the country as perpetually undisturbed and unchanged by time" (2025: 260).

In Jordan's film, the image of the lake rising into a nuclear mushroom cloud behind the head of an Irish schoolboy functioned in visual terms to explode both the coloniser's primitivist gaze upon Ireland and Ireland's own internalised colonial mentality. In a plume of grey-brown vapor the hopes and dreams of protagonist Francie Brady – a native youth of the heavily

patriarchal, postcolonial mid-twentieth century Ireland – dissolve; aspirations which might have been realised had he not fallen victim to the multiple side-effects of patriarchy and colonialism: socio-economic disenfranchisement, sexual abuse, and a litany of others of which indigenous narratives constantly remind us. In the burned-out, post-apocalyptic wasteland that remains after the explosion both within and beyond Francie's mind, Jordan shows the "perpetually undisturbed" and timeless Ireland of the coloniser's vision (Costello 2025: 260) to be, in fact, profoundly disturbed, like so much lake water.

While Ruán Magan's début fiction feature film, the Irish-language *Báite* ("Drowned" in English), is set upon a different lake (shot in Connemara but obliquely set in Kerry, judging from the film's taking place during the 1975 All-Ireland football final between Dublin and Kerry), the lake's visual representation and narrative omnipresence within the film renders it inescapably derivative of the iconic Lough Tay. The film must therefore be read in this semiotic context, even if it were not for the fact that the narrative subtext of the film critiques – with limited success, I will argue – the globalisation of Ireland *vis-à-vis* American influence.

The story of the film, adapted by screenwriter Sheena Lambert into Irish from her own English-language novel *The Lake*, centres on Peggy Casey, proprietor of Casey's Pub and guest house, located on the shores of a manmade lake in the fictional town of Glanaphuca. The fact that the exact location of Glanaphuca in Ireland is never directly named (minus the green and gold flags at its end) renders the town, similar to the island in *The Banshees of Inisherin*, at once spatially specific – rural and quintessentially Irish – and also place-less. As such, it is to be understood as an archetypal Irish town and a microcosm for Irish society.[1] From the outset, *Báite* buys into at least half the hackneyed "binary of Irish cinematic representations, between the urban and the rural, in which the latter is alternately depicted as a pastoral repository of cultural authenticity" – which the film's political project supports – "or a repressive site of outdated conservative values" (Holohan 2019: 408), which the film tries awkwardly to reject through characterisation and dialogue.

The opening of the film is a conventional drone shot, diving through clouds over Glanaphuca's lake (these clouds' mysteriousness is enhanced by ethereal background music), and soaring swiftly beneath them as we follow Peggy's dip into its waters. Splitting the lake's surface, we quickly discover there is a whole, ruined world beneath. The lake covers the remains of an original village, drowned to allow for the creation of a power plant, which – we learn through some pointed dialogue – provides electricity to far-away Dubliners. Thus, a familiar diametric opposition is imposed between traditional/rural Ireland as a pastoral "source" culture versus the urban as foreign, capitalist, and exploitative. Under Magan's direction, the film doubles down on its myth-making of rural Ireland as "real" – at least as it is associated with Irish-speaking rural Ireland. Yet through its sumptuous cinematography, *Báite* serves up the landscape to be consumed, as unironically as ever, by a fetishising touristic gaze.

Returning to the plot, more than two decades before the start of the film, American soldiers stationed in Belfast post-World War II have been called in to lay explosives to facilitate the lake's flooding. Thus, American outsiders – associated with an international conflict Ireland famously refused to join – strongarm the town into joining the global capitalist machine. Around the same time, a local woman named Bernadette Murphy disappears, presumably having run away with her American soldier lover. By 1975, during a period of drought alongside the All-

[1] While not within the scope of this review to examine further, it is interesting to note that Inisherin also contains a lake within its microcosmic space. In his introduction to *Estudios Irlandeses* "2024 review of Irish Film, Televison, & Theatre", Barry Monahan highlights the significance of Banshees and other films' settings on oceanic coasts, "occupying a bifurcated position: always simultaneously looking outward from a centre, and imagining an inward gaze from the peripheries" (2025: 237). There is scope, certainly, for a comparative and sustained semiotic analysis of lakes, specifically, in Irish Cinema, and how they might be seen to represent isolation and liminality within Irish culture.

Ireland final (which, in real life, pitted a rural county team against an urban one), the lake waters have subsided to reveal a woman's body stuck into the silt of the lake. The discovery is disturbing to Peggy on two levels: for one, it is off-putting to the tourists on whom she relies to keep her business going – a business which all three of her siblings and fellow stakeholders would rather sell so that they can abscond to various other corners of the globe (London, Dublin, Australia); secondly, she has a visceral connection to the discovered body (she nearly collapses when she lays eyes on the dead woman's face). Of further consternation to Peggy is that a detective from Dublin, Frank Ryan, is dispatched to investigate the scenario. He quickly finds that the woman, identified as Bernadette Murphy, was murdered, casting suspicion on a local bachelor, Coleman Devitt, who was in love with Bernadette prior to her disappearance.

While Peggy and Frank grow closer (they bond over having been named after American singers and Frank's revelation that he is the son of a rural publican himself, further explaining his natural affinity for the Irish language), it comes to light through a series of interviews and admissions (from priests, townspeople, and Peggy's own brother) that Bernadette was strangled at the lakeside by her soldier lover. Notably, characters in the village representing traditional Irish institutions such as the Church and Gardaí are revealed, one after the other, to be entirely faultless in their association with the crime, involved only in the rescue of Bernadette's child. Indeed, some time before her murder, Bernadette had given birth to the soldier's baby and been taken in by Coleman Devitt. Devitt witnessed her murder, and in order to avoid the child's being removed to "one of those awful places", with the help of the village priest, Devitt gave the baby to the Casey family to raise.

Devitt's mention of these "places" is an oblique yet unequivocal reference to the infamous Mother and Baby institutions, which the script attempts unsatisfactorily to dis-place from its setting. This must be taken as a deliberate obfuscation by Lambert and Magan of one of the darker aspects of Ireland's history, which cannot be tied back to American influence and globalisation; the reference to the Laundries is useful to the script only inasmuch as it ticks a box for contemporary audiences. The residents of Glanaphuca are absolved of all collusion, which real Irish communities displayed in systematically abusing women and children until at least the end of the twentieth century. Similarly, the script glances at the institutional oppression of queer people in Ireland, yet stops short of placing blame on/within Glanaphuca/Ireland itself. For example, her brother is broadly hinted to be gay, but crucially never experiences any discrimination from within his home community: however, he mentions having been hassled specifically by Dublin Gardaí. Irish oppression is only homegrown in the world of *Báite* when it is urban and/or influenced from the outside.

Returning once again to the plot, it of course turns out that Peggy is Bernadette's biological daughter. As a means to reassure Peggy of her authentic "Casey-ness", her London businessman brother Hugo declares he will buy out his siblings' shares and sign the pub entirely over to Peggy. So, while she will always belong spiritually to the Casey family, she is assured by both the physical and financial consequences of her becoming their home's owner. Peggy's "belonging", as represented by and through her family, is claimed to be a space of mind; yet at the same time, the physical space of Glanaphuca is preserved as the specific locus of Peggy's belonging. Glanaphuca, a microcosm for traditional Ireland in the age of globalisation, is thus safe from further, literally murderous, Americanisation/culture-killing globalisation as long as the Peggys of modern Ireland continue to pull pints.

The second-to-last shot of the film sees Peggy and Frank gazing happily at each other over their taps of Guinness as Kerry wins the All-Ireland final. The final shot of the film returns to the drone perspective, soaring over the deep blue waters of the lake. This time, however, we stay on the surface; we do not dive in. With this shot, Magan asserts the possibility of a lasting harmony between rural and urban Ireland following the threat of belligerent Americanisation. This harmony seems as impermeable as the lake water itself – that is to say, in reality not very,

but Magan leaves us high and dry above the water, with the sense that the integrity of Ireland – at least as it belongs to the rural and the Irish-speaking – is preserved, for now.

Again, *Báite* wants to have it both ways: it is generic (being a murder mystery) and political (being narratively anti-globalist), like a number of Irish-language films to date, for example *Arracht* (the historical drama and revenge film), *Kneecap* (the hip-hop backstage musical), and *An Taibhse* (the horror). It is not inherently critical of Irish-language cinema to say it is increasingly genre-pursuant. Indeed, this trend has resulted in the production of some formally complex and ideologically compelling films (the aforementioned included), in the industry's simultaneous attempts to harness the popular appeal of genre cinema and to preserve the Irish language as a viable medium for cultural expression.

However, the more genre films that Cine4 funds, the less "vulnerable" Irish language cinema becomes as a marketable product, and thus perhaps less harmonise-able with the "minor cinema" mode with which, according to Jeannine Woods, less generically categorisable Irish-language films chime more comfortably, ideologically. She argues films that films like *An Cailín Ciúin*, which resist generic strictures and the formal tendencies of "dominant" cinema, "stand outside of the hegemonic power centres and structures of the industry […] and in so doing offer a challenge to discourses of globalisation particularly as they relate to vulnerability" (2025: 24–25).

Instead, genre filmmaking in the Irish language necessarily assumes some of the narrative and formal paradigms of "dominant" cinema, whereby iconographic and ideological tendencies coalesce into film typologies. As Conn Holohan has shown, "in the case of Irish film […] landscape has stood in for […] a set of auteurs or aesthetics as the distinguishing characteristic of an Irish national cinema both domestically and abroad" (2019: 411). *Báite*'s fetishisation of the Irish landscape is embraced by the film's narrative and visual storytelling. This works alongside its narrative ingenuity as "place-ness" performs a key role in both reflecting on, and giving inflection to, characters' destinies. Its alignment with "dominant cinema's" prescriptions for Irish cinema contradicts – trumps even (allusion intentional) – the rather heavy-handed project of its narrative.

And so, to conclude with a similarly heavy-handed metaphor, Magan's *Báite* exists at the interface of two immiscible liquids: Jordan's subversively vaporised Lough Tay from *The Butcher Boy* and the placidly re-colonised waters of the same lake in *Irish Wish*. *Báite* occupies a liminal space in this way, concerned narratively with an anti-globalist or anti-colonial project that attempts to place itself as an Irish-language film as/at the heart of "authentic" Irish culture. At the same time, it appropriates the visual language and sale-ability of the dominant (Hollywood) style of storytelling-about-Ireland uncritically, unmooring it ultimately from its ideological anchor.

Works Cited

Costello, Sandra (2025). "Irish Wish." *Estudios Irlandeses* 20 (March): 257-60. https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/reviews/irish-wish/.

Holohan, Conn (2019). "Space and Place in Irish Cinema." *A Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, First Edition, edited by John Hill. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons. 407-22.

Monahan, Barry (2025). "Introduction: Irish Film, Television & Theatre – 2024." *Estudios Irlandeses* 20 (March): 237-421. https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2025-13409.

Rockett, Emer and Kevin Rockett (2003). *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*. Dublin: Liffey Press.

Woods, Jeannine (2025). "Language, Silence and the Place of Irish-Language Film in Contemporary Cinema: Colm Bairéad's *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) and Sean Breathnach's *Foscadh* (2021)." *Estudios Irlandeses* 20 (March): 22-35. https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2025-13182.

Ciara Barrett is Program Co-Director and Lecturer in Film Studies at Sacred Heart University's Campus in Dingle. Her research interests include genre film, performance and representation in popular screen media, and Irish cinema.

barrettc26@sacredheart.edu

Aontas – Empathy, Relationality, and the Irish-Language Puzzle Film

Damian McCann (2025)

Reviewer: Sacha Wood (University of Galway)

Signalling another confident stride forward in Irish-language filmmaking, Armagh director Damian McCann's second feature film *Aontas* is a bold and poignant offering with much to add to the steadily growing indigenous-language canon. As much an empathetic portrait of a struggling community as a heist story told in reverse, the festival-favourite's exploration of three women driven to rob their local credit union moves Irish-language cinema yet further in the direction of assured genre storytelling and poignant social commentary. Rather than simply an attempt to "resemble global product" (Barton 2019, cited in Woods 2025), however, it can be argued that it is precisely this intertwining of the Irish language with a new, non-linear mode of storytelling which elevates the affective and sociopolitical impact of the film.

Responding to the contemporary proliferation of "puzzle films", Warren Buckland summarises this phenomenon in relation to the postmodern experience: "[I]n today's culture dominated by new media, experiences are becoming increasingly ambiguous and fragmented; correspondingly, the stories that attempt to represent those experiences have become opaque and complex" (2009: 1). It is a point Thomas Elsaesser then develops into a deep exploration of the "epistemological problems" and "ontological doubts" (2009: 15) at the heart of these puzzle, or "mind-game" (13) films. These characteristics place the viewer into alternative and "abnormal" ways of "'being in the world'" (14) in response to an increasingly complex and precarious social reality. Taking a Foucault-inspired reading of these films, Elsaesser points to their political power in portraying "'aberrant' mental states [which] signify the effects of [...] new disciplinary machines" (2009: 32), most acutely that of "the social matrix of 'affective labour'" (Hardt and Negri 2001, cited in Elsaesser 2009: 32).

While *Aontas* is perhaps not a "true" mind-game film by Elsaesser's definition (2009: 27-28), given that it limits its narrational complexity to a relatively consistent reverse-chronology which is ultimately resolved for a concluding sequence, the effect of its non-linear storytelling can nonetheless be illuminated by answering Elsaesser's own thought: "[W]hy [did] the writer or director [go] to such trouble in the first place[?]" (2009: 22). By situating us within the aftermath of a fatal credit union robbery, the film's opening scenes place immediate emphasis on the crucial narrative element of cause-and-effect – specifically, on the absence of cause in the face of extreme effect. More poignantly, by preceding this first narrative scene with

a short, slow-motion montage introducing the protagonist, Máiréad, in a highly distressed emotional state, the film directs as much, if not more, attention to the extreme *affect* at the heart of this unexplained action. With the question of cause thus formed, by the time the first close-up of a backwards-ticking clock cues a jump back in time, we are primed to scour the visual landscape for clues and hints, indicators and inscriptions – "index and trace", in Elsaesser's words (2009: 31) – of "how we ended up here". It is this very "forensic" attention (to paraphrase Mittell) and "passionate involvement" (to paraphrase Elsaesser 2009: 13) which forms our close relationship to the on-screen world and its characters, guiding us towards a deeper understanding of the diegetic social reality and, crucially, a heightened level of empathy.

While it is not paranoia, schizophrenia, or amnesia which forms the "'aberrant' mental state[s]" (Elsaesser 2009: 32) of *Aontas*' characters and perspective, the "madness" (32) which guides the film's non-linear "perception of reality" (14) manifests as what could be termed "explosions of affect". Like the very first shot of a mug smashed on the floor, these moments of social misbehaviour inscribe the audiovisual landscape with the signs of a community struggling under the weight of the "affective injustice" of neoliberalism (Srinivasan 2018); a quality represented in the narrative by the arrogant, exploitative Dara. Cáit, first introduced as a victim and subsequently revealed to be both Máiréad's estranged sister and her accomplice in the robbery, acts as the main "inscriber" of this struggle, with her confrontation of Dara at the wake, destruction of shop property, and throwing of a rock at the quarry protest marking out a pattern of deliberately disruptive behaviour which simultaneously explains her social exclusion and voices her desperation. The characters who remain comparatively quiet, however, are those who find their own bodies inscribed with these signs of socioeconomic struggle and decline, from Sheila's black eye (inflicted by her husband, Colly) to Nóirín and Caoimhín's deaths, respective, from stress and suicide.

If, as Elsaesser's Foucaultian reading maintains, such madness signifies the socialisation of "subjectivity [...] under the conditions of liberal market economics" (2009: 32), then we can see how *Aontas*' sociopolitical narrative is intertwined with the empathetic impetus of its non-linear narration: presented backwards, each one of these "explosions of affect" might be understood as both cause and effect, both pathology and symptom, each becoming a clue in the viewer's process of understanding Máiréad's extreme transformation between by-the-book police officer and gun-wielding heist leader. Discouraging the viewer's socialised response of judgement by imposing this task of understanding, the heightened level of empathy thus encouraged allows these events to transcend dramatic plot-points and come to signify a wider, more systemic story of a community's unwitting reactions to and embodied protests against their experience of socioeconomic vulnerability. Indeed, if Peadar Kirby and Karl Polyani's understanding of vulnerability in the contemporary context is one where "the relationship of the market to society [is understood] as the central *causal mechanism* at work" (cited in Woods 2025: 26; my emphasis), then this can be seen to be equally true of *Aontas* itself, with each jump back in time motivated by a pivotal moment of realisation of this socioeconomic "relationship" and the community's vulnerability within it. A crucial example of this is one which also demonstrates a (cor)responding shift in Máiréad's understanding of morality: when Sheila begs her to confiscate Colly's gun, Máiréad initially refuses simply because he has the legally required licence. As Sheila's emotional regulation ("affective labour") breaks down, however, Máiréad comes to understand the reality of the young woman's vulnerability as one that cannot be truly protected by the legal system. She ultimately takes the gun, signalling a movement towards a postconventional morality – to use Kohlberg's terms (1981: 411) – to which Sheila appeals through allusion to Máiréad's own vulnerable past.

The theme of vulnerability within Irish-language cinema is illuminated by Jeannine Woods in her analysis of *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) and *Foscadh* (2021), in which she finds the qualities of a "minor cinema" (James 2005, cited in Woods 2025: 24) defined not only by the

socioeconomic marginalisation experienced by Irish-speaking communities, but also by the "symbolic universe" (Ó Crualaoich 1988, cited in Woods 2025: 27) held within Irish-language culture which can offer alternative ways of being and knowing in the face of the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism. Central to the symbolic universe of these Irish-language films is the concept of "*dúchas*" (Woods 2025: 25), a notion loosely translatable as "indigeneity" or "place" in which the foregrounding of "relationality" (25) offers a mode which could, Woods argues, "mitigat[e] some of the major challenges and divisions issuing from vulnerability" (34). Relationality is undoubtedly at the heart of *Aontas*' empathetic mode as heretofore explored, with the scene above proving its pivotal role in the characters' understanding of their own experiences and their roles within the community, ultimately leading to their joining of forces towards a postconventional, community-focused solution: the staging of a robbery to frame the Ó Baoills and claim back the money they stole. Moreover, as in *An Cailín Ciúin* and *Foscadh*, we can see how *Aontas*' expression of this relationality is not only intertwined with its form in terms of narration, but also in terms of language and place, through the central metaphor of the standing stone.

The standing stone represents a key element of *dúchas*, with such monolithic structures serving across the island as legacies of ancestral communities and thus linked to pre-modern (and pre-colonial) "landscapes" (Woods 2025: 27). Taking on a role of increasing centrality in *Aontas*, from unassuming subplot to the ultimate repository of the film's resolution, the stone serves as a key index of relationality within the narrative as the characters' various ways of understanding and relating to it reflect their own self-positionings within the community. Valuing the standing stone as a symbol of individual power, for example, Dara Ó Baoill purchases it and has it moved to his own property, decontextualising it from its cultural and historical place (*dúchas*) and reappropriating it into his own discourse of socioeconomic hierarchy. Unlike *An Cailín Ciúin* (or, indeed, McCann's first feature film *Doineann*), power and vulnerability in *Aontas* are thus not directly "indexed in linguistic terms" (Woods 2025: 28) but rather in cultural and epistemological ones, where Dara's simultaneous use of the Irish language and disrespect for its cultural and discursive heritage points to the decontextualising and assimilating forces of globalisation. Reflected similarly in his misnaming of Nóirín at her own wake, the film thus demonstrates how Dara's cultural and linguistic heritage, and therefore his identity within the community itself, have been appropriated into the individualist and exploitative discourses of neoliberalism at the expense of their own rooted and relational "symbolic universe".

In contrast, Éamonn's (Máiréad's young colleague) respect for the standing stone and its place within the community is demonstrated in his attempt to arrest Dara for theft, an apparent naïveté redressed by Máiréad as she explains the lack of an existing legal framework for such a situation. Positioned as the catalyst of the film's longest sequence, which moves from Dara's arrest to Sheila's plea to Caoimhín's suicide in climactic succession, narrative parallelism here thus embodies a relational mode of understanding for both viewers and protagonist, as the standing stone and the community are shown to be subject to the very same forces of exploitation and therefore the same vulnerability. In this light, Éamonn's expression of a postconventional understanding based on respect and relationality (rather than ownership and hierarchy) illuminates the alternative ontologies and epistemologies afforded by the symbolic universe of indigenous Irish culture, and offers, in retrospect, a solutional mode through which Máiréad can process the grief, guilt and moral struggle informing her own vulnerable position.

That the film's ultimate reunification of narrative and narrational chronology takes as its "causal mechanism" the restoration of the standing stone to its rightful place, suggests a poignant message of cultural reclamation as affective reintegration, in which personal and communal freedom, healing and justice are rendered alongside relational, postconventional and

ultimately de-colonial lines. With a resonance for struggling Gaeltacht communities across the island, as well as echoes for a nation still reckoning with the legacies of economic collapse and state-sanctioned abuse, *Aontas*' intertwining of non-linear narration with the discursive world of the Irish language thus extends an empathetic mode of cinematic storytelling which combines the expressive power of the puzzle film with the "mitigating" (Woods 2025: 34) potential of minor cinema. Building on the affective impact of those that came before it, *Aontas* thus reasserts the potential of Irish-language cinema as one which not only illuminates, but offers solutions to, the complex contemporary experience of affective injustice and vulnerability.

Works Cited

Buckland, Warren, ed. (2009). *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Elsaesser, Thomas (2009). "The Mind-Game Film." *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, edited by Warren Buckland. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated. 13-41. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Kohlberg, Lawrence (1981). *Essays on Moral Development, Vol. I: The Philosophy of Moral Development.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Mittell, Jason. n.d. "Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text." *Spreadable Media* (Web Exclusive Essays). https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/index.html.

Srinivasan, Amia (2018). "The Aptness of Anger." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (2): 123-44.

Woods, Jeannine (2025). "Language, Silence and the Place of Irish Language Film in Contemporary Cinema: Colm Bairéad's *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) and Seán Breathnach's *Foscadh* (2021)." *Estudios Irlandeses* 20 (March): 22-35. https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2025-13182.

Sacha Wood is a Research Master's student at the University of Galway, specialising in Irish-language cinema. Her current research is focused on humour and the negotiation of post-Agreement northern Irish language and identity in *Kneecap* (Rich Peppiatt, 2024). This Master's is funded by Research Ireland's Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship.

S.Wood13@universityofgalway.ie

https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9222-2568

***Terrapolis: Staying with the Trouble* – Becoming with Each Other**
Mary Cremin, Rachael Gilbourne, Seán Kissane, Sara Damaris Muthi and Georgie Thompson

Reviewer: Kate Antosik-Parsons (Trinity College Dublin)

Terrapolis was a live performance event held on July 26, 2025 as part of *Staying with the Trouble* (May 2, 2025–September 21, 2025), an exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

It featured performances by artists Léann Herlihy, Sam Keogh, Bea McMahon, Venus Patel and Eoghan Ryan. It was co-curated by Mary Cremin, Rachael Gilbourne, Seán Kissane, Sara Damaris Muthi and Georgie Thompson. The exhibition responded to feminist philosopher Donna Haraway's generative text *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) with works by forty Irish and Ireland-based artists exploring themes of Techno-Apocalypse, Critters, Making Kin, Composting and Sowing Worlds.[2] The curatorial inquiry of *Terrapolis* addressed Haraway's concept of the same title which she proposes as "a story, a speculative fabulation, and a string figure for multispecies worlding" (2016: 10). Importantly, for Haraway, speculative fabulation is "a mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding" (213). Arguably, this thread is woven throughout the performances of *Terrapolis*, aiming to represent what Haraway has called "a chimera of materials, languages, histories" (11).

Eoghan Ryan's *Circle A* (2024) was staged outside within the arena of IMMA's impressive courtyard. The former Royal Kilmainham Hospital – a site with deep imperial resonances – was a hospital and retirement home for British soldiers, where injured or failing male bodies received care in the aftermath of their military service to the British Empire. It was an aptly suited location for a work that considered systems, order and chaos. On the ground, the symbol for anarchy, a large Circle A, was chalked in white. The Circle A was derived from French political thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's statement that "society seeks order through anarchy" (1840), (referenced in Finn 2021: 31). Within that symbol, the O signifies order while the A represents anarchy. Speakers were positioned at strategic points on the perimeter of the symbol and, beyond that, audience members were seated or stood. Three performers in short denim cutoffs, socks – one red, one black – and tap shoes, moved around the Circle A. Their black hooded sweatshirts were pulled up over their heads, partially covering their faces in a sinister fashion like a balaclava. Three performers walked in time, marched and danced around the symbol in different patterns and movements while a fourth performer, positioned behind a drum kit on a small platform, played the drums at different intervals.[3] The uniform tapping of the performers' metal soles evoked military parades or soldiers marching in formation. Intermittently, a DJ at mixing decks isolated and stripped back key elements from John Lennon's *Come Together* (1969) and *Breakdown* (1976) by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. *Come Together* was originally written for the countercultural figure, American psychologist Timothy Leary, when he ran for office. It later became better known as an antiwar anthem. *Breakdown* is an ambiguous but emotional song about relationships. At times, the performers moved around the Circle A individually, as a duo, or, in unison. Conversely, the drum beats either punctuated the performers' movements or struggled against them, representing both order and chaos. At its heart, this work addresses the different systems that we have imposed on our world to regulate and order it, posing questions about how we can engender systemic change while still upholding these systems.

The audience was navigated through *Terrapolis* under the precise guidance of compère Daisy Duvall, played by artist Venus Patel. Dressed in a white cutwork top and skirt**,** a bolero tie, a straw cowboy hat and cowboy boots, the fresh-faced Daisy conveyed all the trappings of a wholesome country girl. Patel reprised her performance from *Daisy: Prophet of the Apocalypse* (2023–2025), a work based on her experiences as a trans femme of colour negotiating her identity and position in the world.[4] Like a Christian street preacher warning that the excesses of the world lead to eternal damnation unless one repents, Daisy addressed another sort of salvation: that of a new queer world. She framed *Terrapolis* as "break[ing] away from the violent structures society has imposed on us", urging its audience to "to listen, open yourself

[2] *Staying with the Trouble* https://imma.ie/whats-on/staying-with-the-trouble/
[3] It was originally commissioned by Live Works at Centrale Fies and supported by Mondriaan Fonds Project Grant.
[4] *Daisy: Prophet of the Apocalypse* was also exhibited in *Staying with the Trouble*.

to the astral plane, to break free from social conformity, and ultimately, to become transgender" (Patel 2025).

In the Chapel, Léann Herlihy stood elevated on a metal scaffolding against the backdrop of a stunning stained-glass window, gifted in 1849, during the height of the Famine, to the Royal Hospital Kilmainham by Queen Victoria. *i'd rather be a fag than be your bird* (2022) was a complex work queering mis-recognition.[5] Beneath their makeshift perch, a red hand truck held a 35mm slide projector aimed at a nearby screen. On the screen, white text on a black background offered brief image descriptions. Herlihy held in their hand a remote control that advanced the slide carousel. Firstly, traversing intergenerational trauma via colonised and colonising bodies, Herlihy gave an account of the end of the tumultuous reign of British monarch King Edward II (1284-1327), who was deposed amidst rumours of homosexuality. A key part of the story was the manner in which the King had died, by apparently having molten metal poured into his anus. The artist's voice, and the pace of their delivery, lulled the viewer into a false sense of security, while their description of Edward's tortuous death from within, was viscerally provocative intending to leave viewers clenching their body tightly as a way of grounding the self against the imagined pain. Next, foregrounding their *trans** identity, Herlihy recounted a public encounter where they were declared a "fag" and mis-gendered as a cis-gender homosexual man. Herlihy described their internal thought process in the seconds before the accusing homophobe realised the mis-recognition and self-corrected with another derogatory and gendered utterance. Throughout the performance, the alt text image descriptions on the screen, typically used to enhance accessibility or provide a more detailed context of the image, cleverly moved beyond binary oppositions and the visual in terms of identification. Their inclusion prompted the audience to think about identification and Othering, embodiment and the limits of language.

Sam Keogh's performance *The Unicorn Surrenders to a Maiden Cartoon* (2024) was inspired by the 16th-century Flemish tapestry *The Hunt of the Unicorn* (c. 1495-1505), seven massive tapestries. Keogh's work focused specifically on the section *The Unicorn Surrenders to a Maiden*. This was composed of three separated pieces of large butcher paper, with brightly coloured pencil and marker collaged drawings, pieced together with blue decorator tape and mounted on telescoping metal poles, and a metal ladder. Keogh's semi-improvised text imagined the lost fragment of the tapestry where the Maiden awaits the arrival of a fabled unicorn she hopes to capture with her virginity. Keogh's performance wove together fragments of an ekphrastic meditation on *The Unicorn Surrenders to a Maiden*. This was inspired by *The Tapestry* (1960) by Afrofuturist writer Samuel R. Delany, combined creatively with Ridley Scott's fantasy film *Legend* (1985) and fused with the legend of Europa's abduction and the origin of the design of the flag of the European Union. In Keogh's humorous performance, the artist played the Narrator, the Maiden awaiting the Unicorn's appearance and the swamp hag Meg Mucklebones. An unexpected intruder in the rose garden, the green-faced Meg, a character from Ridley Scott's film (which features a quest to kill a unicorn), interrupts the established narrative. The materiality of blue decorator tape emphasised the construction and piecing together of Keogh's compositional intertextuality. While a cartoon might ordinarily be a preparatory drawing for a fresco, an oil painting or a tapestry, in this instance, the cartoon is animated, weaving together an interplay of texts, images and performances, traversing histories, politics and temporalities. Following this segment, Daisy ushered the audience into the final performance space with an invitation to: "Let the power of unknowing wash over you into the depths of transformation".

In the Great Hall, Bea McMahon's *Background* (2025) featured the artist alongside collaborators choreographer Artémise Ploegaerts and writer Díc Walsh.[6] *Background* is a

[5] This work is in the Collection of the Arts Council (2022).

[6] Supported by Mondriaan Fonds, Dublin City Council, Kunstverein Aughrim and the Arts Council.

fragment of McMahon's *Crickets*, a six-part TV series filmed at different locations in Ireland. McMahon's work invokes an aesthetics of "cringe tragedy", that is a sombre cringing that "feeds righteous indignation" (Smilges 2024). In this somewhat surrealist work, two performers and a narrator brought together movement, spoken word and objects. McMahon wore a black leotard with black tights with a large flesh coloured dildo stuffed down one leg, thus offering an overt demonstration of crossing the normatively policed boundaries of biological sex. Ploegaerts was dressed in leather shorts and a long sleeve shirt with bold designs that appeared like blackwork tattoos on both arms. The statuesque Walsh, with a white fur draped around his neck and a large wide-brimmed hat bearing a tangle of leafy branches on his head, visually referenced something arboreal. The performance was decidedly interspecies as performers used a variety of props that morphed into hybrid human-avian and -stingray chimeras. The sexual innuendo "choking the chicken" – an informal term used to describe male masturbation – here moved beyond heteronormative reproduction, as the unified bodies of the three performers sandwiched together in a curious position imagined a new sexual formation. At other times, bodies were folded and stuffed into red plastic bags and awkwardly dragged around, likely signifying they were merely inconvenient waste to be disposed. Throughout the performance, viewers were aware that the theatrical event and its audience was being filmed for a larger project.[7] Although this performance was more abstract than the previous two (which followed more narrative approaches), in relation to *Terrapolis*, it offered the opportunity to focus on what may often be dismissed as mere ancillary details, and how these can come to the fore when specifically presented for closer inspection. In this way, this performance was suggestive of Haraway's assertion that "staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles", perhaps indicating that something that makes one cringe might be worth such discomfort if it calls us to question what we often dismiss as normative (Haraway 2016: 4).

At the conclusion, Daisy, now transformed into a slithering monster, flung open the doors of the Great Hall. Crawling on the floor, her soft purple tentacles spread themselves wide as she scrambled to reach audience members, eagerly bidding her fellow "Monsters" to follow her into the next room for the drink reception. Performance events like *Terrapolis* are crucial for extending further engagement with the challenging ideas within the exhibition. Importantly, the dynamic interplay between theoretical and relational of such events temporarily convene communities of engaged viewers whereby worlding becomes an active mode of thought, for worlding is an "embodied and enacted progress – a way of being in the world", enabling human and non-human to become with each other in the time and space we currently inhabit (Palmer and Hunter 2018).

Works Cited

Finn, Mike (2021). *Debating Anarchism: A History of Action, Ideas and Movements.* London: Bloomsbury Academic Press.

Haraway, Donna J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Palmer, Helen and Vicky Hunter (2018). "Worlding." *New Materialism, How Matter Comes to Matter* (March 16). https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html.

Patel, Venus (2025). Performance Script [Copy provided to author].

[7] Prior to commencing, audience members who did not wish to appear on camera could be seated in an area off camera.

Smilges, J. Logan (2024). "Cringe Theory." *Lateral: Journal of Cultural Studies Association* 13 (1). https://csalateral.org/issue/13-1/cringe-theory-smilges/.

Kate Antosik-Parsons is a feminist art historian and interdisciplinary scholar who researches performance, politics, gender and embodiment. Kate was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Social Studies at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland on the HEA-funded Reproductive Citizenship project (2022-2025). www.kateap.com

Kantosik@tcd.ie

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1609-6372

The Cave
Caitríona McLaughlin (Writer, Kevin Barry) (2025)

Reviewer: Stephanie McBride

The Cave is a recent play by Kevin Barry, who came to prominence with novels such as *City of Bohane* and the 2019 Booker longlisted *Night Boat to Tangier*, plays including *Autumn Royal* and *There Are Little Kingdoms*, and several screenplays and short stories. *The Cave* premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in June 2025, followed by a run at Galway International Arts Festival. Directed by Caitríona McLaughlin, the black comedy featured Tommy Tiernan and Aaron Monaghan as brothers Bopper and Archie McRae, with Judith Roddy as Garda/Helen (revealed as their sister).

Eschewing a conventional act structure, it presents "13 Desperate Scenes from the Lives of the McRaes" with surtitles. Living in a cave in the mountains of south Sligo, the brothers are local outcasts and petty thieves. Dependent on each other in their isolation, they attempt to repair their van, search for a reliable Wi-Fi connection to follow soap-opera celebrity Elvira Martinez on *Streets of Tomorrow*, and ventilate their resentment for Irish actor Con Costello, whom they see as their rival in Elvira's affections.

The action and dialogue bristle with jokes and witty incongruities, tinged with an absurd logic and tragic inevitability. Beneath the surface banter, their story takes shape. Garda/Helen's attempts to manage the brothers appear futile: they seem incapable of any kind of stable existence; racked by a troubled past, socially disconnected, ailing both physically and mentally, and are caught in a narrative of blurred boundaries between reality, celebrity culture and local gossip. Tommy Tiernan's comedy and stand-up experience worked to great effect and revealed nuanced pathos, alongside Aaron Monaghan's agility and fluid movement. The brothers' struggling with a ladder, at one point for example, precariously balancing on the roof of the van to get a signal, as well as physical clowning and fisticuffs, all make for hilarious visual comedy, while capturing their fraught yet often tender relationship. Judith Roddy's Helen was an effective foil, and her own troubled tale encapsulated both a garda's official tone and that of a concerned and weary sister.

Joanne Parker's clever design presented the cave as a set of grey sculptural mounds reminiscent of a lunar surface – greyness and blackness mark much of the play's visual expression. The design also achieved a clever realisation of a broken-down rusty van, vehicle

gubbins, ladders and trailing cables. The play's first line sounds a rueful note as Archie crawls out of the cave to ask: "Am I right in myself yet?", then swiftly answering his own question: "Indeed and I am not". After dogged attempts to start the van, he gives up. Eventually, the engine and generator shudder into action, and Archie, now fully focused, bustles around, hooks a domestic socket board to the generator, and sets about charging his smartphone while Bopper looks on. But in this dead zone no phone signal is available; their struggles and obsession with coverage is a constant in their rickety, threadbare lives.

The McRae brothers' streaming and scrolling media distractions sidestep the truth of their situation. Bopper is fixated by the soap opera diva while trapped by an idealised time in his past and, on the soundtrack "Forever in Blue Jeans", underpins this yearning for a lost youth. The brothers' attachment to media celebrity culture is so tenacious that the announcement of Elvira's wedding leads Bopper to violent self-harm. Even Archie's brotherly love is expressed in a birthday phone greeting "by" Elvira to Bopper in oleaginous tones; the shallow, glib script she reads to him is just one of a range of "personal" video greetings costing €300 a pop.

The lively idiomatic language drives the play, folding the pastoral and colloquial with digital neologisms into a rhythmic eloquence, and Barry's talent for bathos in dialogue and stage directions is notable. "It is desolate and wintry in the Sligo mountains. It is the month of May" (Barry 2025: 12). "Confusion is general" (Barry 2025: 33). His wit and rooted knowledge of rural Ireland today is laced throughout the play, which is peppered with quips about Irish popular culture such as the brothers' comic riffs on the "Sixty-Second Quiz", the language of DIY manuals, or memories of a treacherous Superser heater. Places, townlands and counties feature frequently, with a comic begrudgery and rivalry as well as local interest – debs photographs, local football teams, Airbnbs, Lidl's "middle aisle" with its associated jokes: "We were only in after a leg of lamb and we came out with a socket wrench set and a Spacehopper" (Barry 2025: 82). Amid the comic exchanges and constant swearing is a lyricism, as when Archie, remembering gentler times, sings the children's song "Morningtown Ride" as a calming lullaby to Bopper, reassuring him that "we'll be like two of god's lovely little apples" (Barry 2025: 91), or when the prospect of a miserable death comes astride an image of children picking blackberries (Barry 2025: 23).

As noted by several commentators, Archie and Bopper echo Beckett's duo in *Waiting for Godot*, and endure a similar mental, physical and emotional misery. The piece also offers an occasional nod to Martin McDonagh's work, and has echoes of Patrick Kavanagh's rural poverty in "The Great Hunger". Misery, suicide and poor health are all part of the McRaes' story. They even list instances of depression in the town, calibrating it in their exchanges: "depressed enough, like, but not black depressed" (Barry 2025: 32). Barry presents the McRaes' suffering and ragged lives without sentimentality, yet with a comic exuberance that is shot through with a tragic insight and sad humanity that unfolds before the audience.

In a radio interview on RTÉ's *Arena*, Barry said: "This is a play of rural Sligo in a very new way […] that tries to go into this total immersion that we're in now in the digital world and what it's doing to us" (Barry, RTÉ Radio 2025: 12/05). In the absence of any other links to the outside world – apart from Garda/sister Helen – the McRaes are bound to their phone screen. Rich Gilligan's striking publicity image for the play, reminiscent of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ*, shows the brothers' rapture, gazing up at the smartphone, engrossed in and illuminated by its light while Helen looks outward, separated from her siblings both visually and metaphorically. According to Gilligan, his main objective was to create "more of a visual atmosphere or a state of mind […]. It was a kind of accidental Caravaggio meets wild Sligo energy and I just ran with it" (Gilligan 2025). Yet their rapture is also an entrapment: as the play implies, in the way that the search for a signal claims their attention. The trance-like state – gaze raised to screen – is not casual but a deliberate outcome of the attention economy. This harnessing process by tech companies and influencers – sometimes termed "human fracking"

(Burnett 2025: 1) – is largely unregulated, with the full impact on individuals and societies not yet known. When the brothers venture down from the mountain to Helen's house, "trying to work things out" themselves, they are fraught with fear and unease about a loss of control; as Archie explains: "It's an awful torment when you don't have control of your thoughts, Helen, you know?" (Barry 2025: 55). At another point, he suggests that there is a wistful release in the "no coverage situation" when he says: "We're safe from it all … for a while … when we're up here" (15). Cataclysmic loss of electricity and internet/phone access is given a dystopian inflection in Helen's speech when her professional role is further jeopardised after an incident involving the son "of a gentleman who owns Airbnbs in Rooskey" (79). Her weariness and anxieties are channelled in her prospect of a solar radiation storm with apocalyptic impact:

> solar radiation storm… it's gonna wipe out the power grid entire… across the planet entire… from Tobercurry to Timbuck-fucken-too… [sic] it'll take years before there's power again… no phones… no internet… not the GPS even… nor the Tinder nor the Grindr… nothin' but darkness… no lights on the hills… Nothin' but… quiet… (80)

Stunned by Helen's dark vision, all three McRae siblings lie down together to gaze in "perfect unison to the sky" – a still calm moment in their rattled world – and Archie scrolls on his phone to play Don McLean's "Vincent".

In Helen's explanatory monologue after her brothers' deaths, she makes a formal statement as a Garda to an inquiry and then, with a shift in register, reveals and reflects on their family's troubles – lost youth, ruined plans, exclusion, failed care, alcoholism – that marred their lives. Her life was also thwarted, her aspirations for promotion to Dublin Castle derailed. Though lacking a clear story arc, there is some sense of resolution for Helen in her new posting to Kenmare. The play ends on a quiet, sombre note as we see Bopper and Archie make their own exits.

Declan Kiberd has cogently argued that art and literature have always acted as a critique in Ireland since Independence, and reminds us: "In our own once-thriving rural areas, libraries are cut back, police stations close, teachers let go. At the same time, incidences of mental illness rise. There is a connection between these events. Extreme market forces make lots of people ill" (Kiberd 2017). In *The Cave*, Archie's conviction that "phones are the ruination of the country" (Barry 2025: 81) and Helen's recollection of her "father's old line about 'Cause of death: The West of Ireland'" (Barry 2025: 104) pose wider reflections about the current state of rural communities and environments. The closures of small shops, local post offices, bank branches and pubs and the reduction of local services are accompanied by the pervasive rise of digital devices and the increasing App-ification of people's lives. The McRaes are homeless and mentally unsettled, obsessed by digital streams yet without any effective help.

Barry's portrait of the McRaes' wretched existence is a powerful insight into their delusional fixation with digital media and their ailing decline. This is shadowed by the wider social and community decline in rural Ireland in the twenty-first century, caught in the grasp of large corporations, media technologies and streaming platforms and "the cloud" itself. Although "cloud" carries airy, even ethereal connotations – of being "up there somewhere" (*i.e.*, nowhere), and somehow disconnected from the players involved – the data centres that it requires have a highly material presence in a definite *somewhere* – as large buildings with banks of servers, many of which are located in rural Ireland: storing, processing and transferring a vast amount of the cloud's data. While social and public services decline, the cloud's insatiable demands continue to be politically accommodated, despite growing concerns about their drain on energy and water resources, heat pollution, and reports of serious land/peat slides in the construction of access routes and additional energy infrastructures (Bresnihan, Brodie 2025: 3, 5).

In a discussion of John McGahern's view of rural Ireland since 1922, Kiberd has suggested that McGahern saw Independence as "the British transferring responsibility of the management of the crisis of rural society to, if you like, an Irish comprador class, but the continuing decay of the rural areas continued under the new masters" (Maher and Kiberd 2002: 82-97). Today those new masters include big tech with its industrialisation of human attention and nature, in a "total immersion" which Barry explores in the McRaes' servile dependency. His bleak comedy is a provocative invitation to reflect on their sad and damaged lives in these rapidly shifting social and physical contours of rural Ireland.

The Cave alludes to Plato's allegory in which people trapped in their cave mistake the shadows cast on the wall as reality. Today, the same spectres haunt and harvest through glowing screens, collapsing boundaries and re-shaping realities. Just as the Anthropocene era has scarred the landscape and poisoned the waters, the attention economy has undermined and deranged not only the public sphere and social environment but also the inner world of the individual, the consequences of which have yet to be fully acknowledged, understood and addressed.

Works Cited

Barry, Kevin (2025). *The Cave*. London: Faber & Faber.

_____ (2025). *Arena*. RTÉ Radio 1 (May 12). https://www.rte.ie/radio/radio1/arena/2025/0512/1512506-arena-monday-12-may-2025/.

Bresnihan, Patrick and Patrick Brodie (2025). *From the Bog to the Cloud: Dependency and Eco-Modernity in Ireland*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Burnett, D. Graham (2025). "Human Attention as a Philosophical Problem: The Question and the Nature of Questions." *Metaphilosophy* 25 (November 25): 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.70024.

Gilligan, Rich (2025). Interview with this author, 7 July 2025.

Kiberd, Declan (2017). "Irish writers were an early warning system about abuse." *The Irish Times* (October 21). https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/declan-kiberd-irish-writers-were-an-early-warning-system-about-abuse-1.3260748.

Maher, Eamon and Declan Kiberd (2002). "John McGahern: Writer, Stylist, Seeker of a Lost World." *Doctrine and Life* 52 (February): 82-97. https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=ittbus.

Stephanie McBride writes on film, photography and visual culture. Formerly Assistant Professor in the *School of Communications*, *Dublin City University*, Tutor in arts, literature and film at *New York University Tisch School of the Arts*, she has also taught In the *Department of Visual Culture* at the *National College of Art and Design*. A former Education Officer at the *Irish Film Institute*, she has also edited a number of publications on art education, film, art and science. She is a trustee of Photo Museum Ireland.

stephanie.dublin@gmail.com

Reunion
Mark O'Rowe (Gaiety Theatre, October 22, 2025)

Reviewer: Graham Price (University College Dublin)

Following on from a very successful run at the Gaiety in 2024, Mark O'Rowe's intense family drama, *Reunion*, returned in October 2025 with largely the same cast which included Irish acting talent such as Ian-Lloyd Anderson, Venetia Bowe, Stephen Brennan, Leonard Buckley, Simone Collins, Peter Corboy, Kate Gilmore, Stephen Hagan, Aislín McGuckin and Catherine Walker, actors who are known for their roles in various Irish and international productions. O'Rowe also undertook directing duties. As in his 2014 drama, *Our Few and Evil Days*, O'Rowe continues his interest in intrafamilial strife and buried secrets that threaten to rip a family apart. On the evidence of the style of both of these dramatic texts, it is clear that O'Rowe has moved away from his monologue play roots and has embraced a more domestic, kitchen sink form of drama.

During an interview he did with RTÉ on the occasion of the revival of *Reunion*, O'Rowe outlined his initial vision for the type of play that *Reunion* would become:

> My initial inspiration in writing *Reunion* was Chekhov's major plays, particularly their structure. I liked the idea of four extended scenes, each of them long enough to create a sense of real life happening in real time. I also wanted to fill the stage with characters who felt complex and unpredictable and real, recreating the recognisable choreography of a large family gathering while also conveying its chaos and spontaneity: people talking over each other, digressions, people interrupting to call for one thing or another, subjects dropped mid-discussion to be picked up again later, or sometimes not at all. (O'Rowe 2025).

In this exchange, O'Rowe perfectly describes both the style and content, not just of *Reunion*, but of Chekhovian theatre in general. What is equally interesting, however, are the ways in which his work departs from a traditional Chekhov play. Audiences who are expecting a "Chekhov's gun" moment of tragedy in *Reunion* may well have their expectations frustrated by the time of the play's climactic moment.

In the same interview, O'Rowe also highlighted some aspects of *Reunion* that are representative of his dramatic œuvre more generally:

> I wanted to explore the angry, frightened, domineering, ugly elements we all contain (and which are often heightened when with family), while also presenting their counterbalance: affection, generosity, pride, the heroic effort we make to combat the worst, most self-destructive elements of our nature in order to maintain our bonds with those we love, however problematic and painful these bonds may be. (O'Rowe 2025)

From *Howie the Rookie* (1999) onwards, O'Rowe has probed humanity's heart of darkness while also suggesting that the darkness may actually have a heart. *Reunion* arguably contains the most sympathetic characters and moments of redemption that are to be found in O'Rowe's theatrical work.

Reunion centres on a family gathering on an Island off the west of Ireland. It is entirely set in the kitchen/living room of the house in which members of the clan, anchored by the matriarchal figure of Elaine (Aislín McGuckin), have come for their gathering. The kitchen setting reminds the audience that this play will adhere to some of the formal and thematic aspects of a kitchen-sink drama such as claustrophobia and domestic discord.

Like many Russian texts (theatrical or otherwise), *Reunion* contains a large cast of characters whose relationship with each other creates complexity in situating individuals' connections. Situating them within the narrative engages the audience who reasonably might take some time in the endeavour. It would likely have been easier to be armed with a family tree infographic to assist in determining which person is a sibling, a wife, a father-in-law, a boyfriend, and how the whole community of characters fits together. That being said, such a degree of concentration is rewarded by the tense and compelling plot that involves many moments of hysteria and aggression as tensions between the family members and their partners come to a head over the course of a day. As is the case with numerous works of tragedy and theatrical naturalism, the plot of *Reunion* revolves around various repressed truths that erupt to the surface and shatter certain illusions the characters have about themselves and their relations with others.

Reunion marks one major departure for the theatre of Mark O'Rowe: it is a rarity for his dramas to be set in a rural Irish setting as opposed to against an urban or suburban landscape. By making this staging decision, O'Rowe is placing the play in the context of a long Irish dramatic tradition of imagining Irish rurality; one that goes back at least to the theatrical works of the Irish Revival and the heyday of the Abbey Theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. One particular work of the Irish Revival might be recalled from the beginning of *Reunion*, and it is likely that O'Rowe had elements of John Millington Synge's Aran Island play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) in mind as he invites us to explore his world. As is the case with that archetypal work of Irish theatrical tragedy, O'Rowe's *Reunion* contains palpable anxiety about the power of the sea and the destruction it can wreak on human lives. In the opening minutes of *Reunion*, Elaine casts herself in the role of Maurya, the domineering matriarch from the Synge play, in an exchange with her daughter Marilyn:

> MARILYN. It is pretty choppy. (*Beat*.) Come over and have a look. (*Beat*.) Ma. *Elaine sighs, then joins her at the window*. Look at the heights of those there!
> ELAINE. Jesus. (*Long pause*.) Would you say they'll cancel the ferry?
> MARILYN. Ah yeah. You couldn't let people cross in those kinds of conditions.
> ELAINE. I suppose.

Like Maurya, Elaine feels it her duty to keep her family safe from natural and human predatory forces and it is soon evident that she regards them as an extension of herself. Also, Elaine (like Maurya) suffers from the memory of her dead husband, Seán, about whom she wishes to reminisce with her family. It becomes apparent that this is one of the primary reasons she has organised this gathering. Tragically, no proper moments of remembrance or mourning for Seán ever occur during the play because they are frustrated by a series of arguments that undermine Elaine's hopes and yearning for commemoration through recollection. For this reason, *Reunion* can be said to belong to Ireland's enduring dramatic tradition of "theatre of memory".

In *Reunion*, the sea functions as a version of Chekhov's gun. By mentioning the sea and its power from the outset, its threat is made apparent and the tension concerning whether it will subsequently erupt for dramatic purposes, perhaps even to claim a life or lives before the play's conclusion remains throughout the drama. These expectations are only resolved in the final moments of the action.

Near the beginning of *Reunion*, Elaine makes a remark that cascades through the plot: "I hate when there's someone who does not fit in". Much of the play's action presents characters who either cannot or refuse to fit into the dynamic of the family unit and the present get-together. It is apparent in the tense exchanges between siblings Janice (Venetia Bowe) and Marilyn (Kate Gilmore) that range from passive aggressive to explicitly aggressive. Many of

these confrontations bring to light events from the past that are insensitively revealed, and with devastating consequences.

Two non-family characters who do not fit in and add to the tension of the dysfunctional family dynamic are Felix – the father of one of the sons' partners – and Aonghus, the former boyfriend of Marilyn. Felix functions as a detached observer of the intrafamilial strife and acts somewhat as a choric figure. As is often the case with such characters, whose observational objective detachment from many of the events can be compromised in some way, Felix appears to be struggling with alcoholism. Aonghus adds to the tension in the household by revealing that he still loves Marilyn and wishes to win her back. The final quarter of the plays focuses on his disappearance and possible drowning. Most of the other characters begin searching for him and leave audiences in a state of suspense as they are made to wonder whether, like a tragic version of Beckett's Godot, Aonghus will appear onstage again.

Reunion ends in an open-ended way, and we are never certain about the fate of many of the characters. Notwithstanding this suspension of traditional narrative resolution most of them have been granted moments of redemption. This undecidable note at the conclusion of the drama is a feature of many post-crash Irish plays; a quality perhaps echoing a lack of certainty that has permeated the Irish state experiencing consequences of the recession of 2008, and the subsequent and inevitable austerity measures imposed on the Irish population for the decade afterwards.

Mark O'Rowe's *Reunion* provides an extremely compelling night at the theatre that combines the tragic and the comic to create an effective dramatic cocktail. Some spectators will find themselves turning away with embarrassment at staged moments of social and interpersonal ineptitude and awkwardness, yet they will also be compelled to engage more than once when empathy and pathos are evoked. The acting is powerfully naturalistic (especially from Elaine and Felix) and each one of the characters is clearly individuated and roundly developed, so the invitation extended to respond to each of them as an individual is positively rewarding.

Works Cited

O'Rowe, Mark (2025). "One big happy family? Playwright Mark O'Rowe on *Reunion*'s Return." *RTÉ* (October 18). https://www.rte.ie/culture/2025/1018/1538297-one-big-happy-family-playwright-mark-orowe-on-reunions-return/

Dr Graham Price tutors and lectures in the School of English, Drama, and Film at UCD. He lectured in modern Irish and British Literature at the University of Limerick from 2015-2018. Price's monograph, *Oscar Wilde and Contemporary Irish Drama: Learning to be Oscar's Contemporary*, was published in 2018, and is the first book-length examination of the Wildean strand in contemporary Irish theatre. He has published widely on Irish drama, Irish literature, continental philosophy, and queer theory in journals such as *Irish Studies Review*, *New Hibernia Review*, *Irish University Review*, *Reading Ireland*, and *Estudios Irlandeses*. Price's book (co-written with Darragh Greene), *Film Directors and Emotion: An Affective Turn in Contemporary American Cinema*, was published in June 2020 by McFarland Press. His recently completed textbook *Beginning Irish Studies* (Manchester University Press) will be published soon.

grahamfmprice@gmail.com

A Want in Her
Myrid Carten (2024)

Reviewer: Ellen Scally (University College Cork)

"Do you think this house is haunted?"

Part-way through her autobiographical feature début, *A Want in Her*, this is the question that Myrid Carten poses to her mother, Nuala, about the family home in which they both grew up. Throughout the film, we see the London-based visual artist struggle to put distance between herself and the circumstances that keep pulling her back to her childhood home in the Donegal Gaeltacht region of Gweedore. The problem is outlined from the film's opening moments through an audio recording of a phone call in which Carten learns that her mother is missing, having disappeared from the rehabilitation centre in Belfast where she had been receiving treatment for alcoholism. We soon learn that the sickness afflicting Nuala appears to be genetic; almost every one of her siblings is similarly affected. The only one who has managed to maintain some semblance of stability is Carten's uncle Kevin who has, perhaps for that very reason, inherited the family home. This home is the nexus that draws Kevin's siblings back in as they, at different times, navigate periods of addiction and recovery. When Carten arrives home at the beginning of the film to search for her mother, her uncle Danny has recently taken residence and is sleeping, without Kevin's permission, in a dilapidated mobile home on the grounds of the house. The impossibility of Kevin's position is highlighted when he is reluctantly forced to call the emergency services to remove Danny, who has become violent and smashed the windows of the mobile home.

While we do not get an explicit answer as to whether Nuala believes the house is haunted, Carten's choices throughout the film might serve as a response to this question, although there are no easy answers to be found here. This is reflected in the structure of the film. Echewing any traditional narrative structure, Carten opts instead to move back and forth in time, switching between newer footage and home movies that she captured on a mini-DV as a child. In one home movie taken when she was in primary school, Carten's classmates perform for the camera, acting out a scene in which a concerned wife tries to convince her husband to stop drinking and come home from the pub. Although the children perform for laughs, the scene takes on a sinister edge in this context and is indicative of the cyclical nature of addiction and intergenerational trauma, core themes that are grappled with throughout the film.

Some of the film is shot with a hand-held camera and from a first-person point of view, although Carten often places distance between herself and her subject by filming through windows or discretely from a distance. This is likely necessitated in part by the sensitive nature of what she is filming, but it also resonates with the filmmaker's struggle to negotiate some means of distancing herself from her mother's illness. This negotiation is literalised in a recorded conversation featured in the film between Carten and her uncle, Kevin. While Kevin shouts out that he can no longer look after Nuala and that Carten must come home and step up to the plate, she calmly responds that she cannot be responsible and that, at this stage, they must both prioritise themselves. This moment breaks from the cyclical representation of addiction, intervention and recovery that has preceded and, as Kevin concedes that his niece may be right, he offers a suggestion that there is hope for healing.

The issue of control permeates the film's photography. The camera is a means for Carten to manage and process what is happening, something that is exemplified most clearly when we see her reviewing footage she has taken of her mother. We see Carten watching and editing this footage in office and in gallery settings that are drastically different to her family home. She also frames these scenes differently; the camera is static and the spaces are orderly, even

clinical. Within the house the camera is comparatively agile and at times chaotic, intermittently appearing to become untethered from the filmmaker's point of view to climb the walls and scale the ceilings of empty rooms, suggesting an unidentified presence or spectral perspective. The effect is claustrophobic and unsettling and, in these moments, *A Want in Her* might have its closest cinematic parallel in found-footage horror. Cecilia Sayad writes about the found-footage horror as inscribed with features traditionally associated with documentary cinema (2016: 43) and, in this context, Carten's film could be described as a kind of palimpsest illustrating how these same techniques have come to represent a sense of unease and *unheimlich*, even when applied outside of the sub-genre with which they are primarily associated. In this case the apparatus, neither subjective nor wholly objective, moves unnaturally, impossibly up the walls and surveys the home through a distorted lens like ghostly CCTV.

Sayad links the act of filming in found-footage horror to the need for control, using the example of *Paranormal Activity* and protagonist Micah's decision to install security cameras in the bedroom in an attempt to capture and understand what is happening to his wife at night (2016: 43). *A Want in Her* portrays Carten's filmmaking process as a similar exercise: she captures confronting and deeply personal footage which we then see her review and edit in controlled spaces. It is similarly reflected in the use of windows as a tool for distancing the filmmaker from the action. The suggestion by Carten that the house might be haunted could imply that the family is somehow cursed, or that her mother's illness is the spectre that hangs over the place. This seems to be reinforced when Nuala, interviewed by Carten, describes the experience of her episodes as "like being possessed". However, the use of the filmmaker's point of view in much of the home footage arguably does not align Nuala, but rather Carten herself, with the film's spectral presence. Her home movies and shaky point-of-view footage of activities in the house are intercut with the ghostly surveillance of empty rooms. At one point we see Carten enter the house and the action is immediately followed by a cut to the "spectral" point of view. Following the aforementioned phone conversation between Carten and her uncle, Kevin, in which she urges him to step back and stop taking responsibility for Nuala's recovery, we see the spectral camera cut loose from its claustrophobic position. We move with it as it leaves the house and speeds down country roads, away from the domestic setting, its newfound freedom seemingly correlated with Carten's realisation that she cannot control her mother's illness but might still preserve herself by building a life elsewhere.

Carten has spoken about her resistance to the use of voiceover in the film because she "didn't want to talk from a place in the future", instead leaving a sense of open-endedness, with a degree of cautious optimism (Carten 2025). She also did not wish to give herself "the last word", and potentially compromise the immediacy or intimacy of the interactions shown (Carten 2025). Given this context, the camera-spectre's departure may be interpreted as indicative of the filmmaker's acceptance that she cannot entirely control this narrative, either, and that it is possible to create something deeply human without having all the answers. Instead, Carten hands this intimate piece of her life over to the viewers and allows them to draw their own conclusions.

Works Cited

Carten, Myrid (2025). '"I Put 30 Years of My Life into 80 Minutes": Myrid Carten on her True/False Documentary, *A Want in Her*. Interview by Natalia Keogan." *Filmmaker Magazine* (February 28). https://filmmakermagazine.com/129843-myrid-carten-a-want-in-her/

Sayad, Cecilia (2016). "Found-Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing." *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 55 (2): 43-66.

Ellen Scally recently graduated with a PhD from the Department of Film & Screen Media at University College Cork. She is a former graduate of the MA in Film & Screen Media at UCC. Her PhD project concerned the history of amateur film and cine-culture in Ireland, and research interests include Irish cinema history, amateur film practice, community cinema culture, and the audio-visual archive.

ellenscally1@gmail.com

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4086-2716

Four Mothers of Love: Reflections on *Four Letters of Love* and *Four Mothers*
Polly Steele and Darren Thornton (respectively) (2025)

Reviewer: Denis Condon (Maynooth University)

Two new Irish films with the word "four" in their titles had gala screenings within days of each other at the Dublin International Film Festival (DIFF) in early 2025. With a cast headed by Gabriel Byrne, Helena Bonham Carter and Pierce Brosnan, and a script adapted by Niall Williams from his own best-selling novel, it is not that surprising that *Four Letters of Love* was chosen for the mid-week Lord Mayor's Gala on February 26, after its international premiere at the British and Irish Film Festival in Christchurch, New Zealand the previous November. The festival's closing film, *Four Mothers*, had been seen at a small number of festivals (London, Chicago, Palm Springs, Göteborg, Glasgow, BFI Flare) before its screenings at DIFF on March 2. Even if they appeared to have few other similarities, the coincidental naming quirk was no doubt appreciated by the festival programmers. The serendipity also kept me thinking about them together in the intervening months even as their separate, subsequent theatrical releases took place. This ongoing rumination held despite my initial reaction that they were very different films; not only depicting different eras but also seemingly from different eras, offering different visions of Ireland for different audiences. *Four Letters of Love* is the kind of heritage cinema representing a simpler, traditional Ireland that Hollywood producers seek for American audiences, while *Four Mothers* is a poignant comedy – a melancomedy, perhaps – from writer-director brothers Darren and Colin Thornton (*A Date for Mad Mary*) forming part of a post-Marriage Equality Referendum cinema exploring queer Irish lives (Macleod, Kerrigan). I will not be contradicting the critical consensus that *Four Letters of Love*, in spite of a few laudable features, is a weak film, while *Four Mothers* is a strong one. Instead, I will make some observations prompted by considering the films' echoes and resonances.

Focalised by characters who write, both films are substantially concerned with the familial cost of artistic expression, although these concerns are worked out in very different contexts. Set some time in the mid- to late-twentieth century, *Four Letters of Love* addresses its themes with melodramatic excess in which metaphysical forces intervene in the lives of the characters. It opens with 17-year-old Nicholas Coughlan (Fionn O'Shea) narrating how his civil servant father William (Brosnan) receives a message from God and abandons his job for good and his family for months at a time while he retreats to paint in the west of Ireland. This mysterious act, and its impact on her ordered suburban domestic life leads Nicholas's mother

Bette (Imelda May) to have a nervous breakdown. The deterioration in her health eventually causes her death, leaving Nicholas to look after himself until he resolves to follow his father west. Returning to Dublin, William gives his best painting as a prize in a poetry contest before dying in a house fire. Meanwhile, on a western island, another defining act (perhaps divine) occurs: Isabel Gore (Ann Skelly) is singing on the seashore with her musician brother Sean (Dónal Finn) when he is struck down by unexplained paralysis. Some time later, Isabel is sent by her schoolteacher and frustrated-poet father Muiris (Byrne) and Mother Margaret (Bonham-Carter) to a convent boarding school in Galway. Fleeing the unfamiliar convent strictures, Isabel meets the appealing but unreliable Peadar O'Luing (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo). Their relationship develops until she marries him, just when Nicholas arrives on the island looking for his father's painting, which Muiris had won. His arrival also coincides with Sean's recovery, and Nicholas becomes besotted with Isabel, writing her the titular letters, which Margaret ensures never reach her now unhappily married daughter on the mainland. Nevertheless, Nicholas and Isabel are united in a cathartic scene that may be more wish-fulfilment than reality but is one foreshadowed in Muiris's poem and William's painting.

Art's capability to create alternative escape routes from an unpleasant reality might also be said to characterise *Four Mothers*, but that film focuses more meaningfully on the competing demands of care and creativity. Inspired by Gianni di Gregorio's *Mid-August Lunch* (*Pranzo di ferragosto*; 2008), the film is set in contemporary Dublin and centres on Edward Brady (James McArdle), a gay author struggling to promote a breakthrough young-adult novel while caring for his ageing mother Alma (Fionnula Flanagan), who has suffered a stroke and can only communicate using a tablet. Although Edward's therapist Dermot (Rory O'Neill/Panty Bliss) advises him to be assertive and tell his mother he is going to America to promote his book, Dermot and two of his other gay friends scupper this by abandoning their mothers with Edward as they head off to Gran Canaria for a hedonistic weekend at the Maspalomas Pride celebrations. Already finding his mother's criticisms undermining his fragile self-confidence as he attempts to publicise his novel in advance of the US tour, Edward now has to care for three other older women whose various needs and personalities he must accommodate. In his initial panic to meet even their basic care, he calls on help from Raf (Gaëtan Garcia), Alma's physiotherapist and his former boyfriend. Significantly, we learn that they split up because of Edward's inability to commit to the relationship. While his book tour seems ever more in doubt, Edward and the acquainted mothers gradually build a rapport. In spite of their growing affection, he is dismissive of their sentimental recounting of their lives with their deceased husbands, pointing out their blindness to the gender inequalities of their generation, and their failure to acknowledge the absence of reciprocal care and consideration they ought to have received from the men they had looked after and now miss.

The film does not need to hammer this point home. Early scenes between MacArdle and Flanagan are often beautifully tender, when they are not undercutting too much sentimentality by showing that Alma's recourse to electronic communication has in no way restricted her ability to tell her son exactly when she feels he is doing something wrong. The audience experiences something of a generational rebalancing of care by Edward and his gay friends, in spite of the fact that they have left him temporarily in the lurch while they get some respite. For the mothers, however, suggestions of their husbands' neglect do not prompt them to make recriminations. Instead, they become more determined to visit Maura, a Galway-based medium (Niamh Cusack), to contact their deceased spouses to make sure they are happy in the afterlife. With this objective in mind, they persuade Edward to arrange a road trip on a care-centre bus that Raf borrows. This becomes a mostly amusing episode, but there is renewed poignancy in Edward's again choosing to put his mother's needs before his own, echoing what his mother has done in the past for him, his brother and his father.

In this way, *Four Mothers* reflects the heteronormativity of films such as *Four Letters of Love*, which has no openly queer characters and whose family dynamics are largely patriarchal. Nicholas' main parental relationship is with his father, despite William's absences from his life and the disastrous consequences his choices have for them all. Nicholas also looks after Bette following William's abandonment, but that relationship receives little attention in the film. Indeed, the four mothers of *Four Letters of Love* are narratively neglected. Until the end of the film, Bette is the only mother figure in Nicholas's life, but Isabel has three: her own mother Margaret, the mother superior at the convent (Brid Ní Chumhaill) and her future mother-in-law Maire Mhor (Norma Sheahan). The relatively benign, if stern, mother superior and the openly hostile Maire have little screentime to develop beyond these brief sketches, but Margaret is a major character (played by Bonham-Carter). The fact that the star actress had been committed to ensuring the production of the film for several years, was revealed by Williams at the Q&A session after the DIFF screening, and this was central to its completion. Nevertheless, while Margaret is a largely sympathetic figure, and the chemistry between Bonham-Carter and Byrne one of the film's genuine pleasures, she is not an unproblematically good mother from the perspective of a narrative whose cutting between the episodes in the lives of Nicholas and Isabel requires that they will ultimately unite. Margaret is the force that keeps them apart by repeatedly destroying Nicholas's letters to Isabel and compelling him to reach the quota inscribed in the title. It is only then, it seems, that she realises that Muiris' poem had prophesied this all along, and she has been merely the instrument and not the author of events because she is not one of the film's artistic characters.

But *Four Letters of Love* seems to highlight the dilemma of how *Four Mothers*' narrative can be resolved or perhaps even to clarify the problem it poses. While Edward openly critiques the patriarchal social relations that the mothers have had to live through, he seems compelled to benefit from them. He is also an artistically active man who needs to reconcile his caring responsibilities with his professional ambitions. And for all her skill with her tablet, Alma's loss of her voice seems to represent a literal lack of self-expression. But it is through the tablet that Alma becomes the author of the film's resolution. As the possibility of the book tour seem to vanish, she wakes Edward from an adjacent bedroom to tell him that he has to live his life. In an emotionally satisfying resolution, we see Alma following his success on the tablet screen with the other three mothers who are caring for her in Edward's absence.

Four Letters of Love (2024)
Directed by Polly Steele.
Written by Niall Williams.
Cinematography by Damien Elliott.
Produced by Debbie Gray, Douglas Cummins and Martina Niland.
Featuring Pierce Brosnan, Gabriel Byrne, Helena Bonham Carter, Fionn O'Shea, Ann Skelly, Dónal Finn, Ferdia Walsh-Peelo, Imelda May, Pat Shortt and Olwen Fouéré.

Four Mothers (2024)
Directed by Darren Thornton.
Written by Darren and Colin Thornton.
Cinematography by Tom Comerford.
Produced by Martina Niland, Eric Abraham and Jack Sidey.
Featuring James McArdle, Fionnula Flanagan, Rory O'Neill, Gearoid Farrelly, Gordon Hickey, Dearbhla Molloy, Stella McCusker, Paddy Glynn and Niamh Cusack.

Works Cited

A Date for Mad Mary (Darren and Colin Thornton, 2016).

Kerrigan, Páraic (2021). *LGBTQ Visibility, Media and Sexuality in Ireland*. New York: Routledge.

Macleod, Allison (2019). *Irish Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Mid-August Lunch (*Pranzo di ferragosto*; Gianni di Gregorio, 2008).

Williams, Niall (1997). *Four Letters of Love*. London: Picador.

Denis Condon lectures on cinema at the Departments of English and Media Studies, Maynooth University, Ireland. His publications include *Early Irish Cinema, 1895-1921* (2008) and as co-editor *Music and Visual Cultures: Threshold, Intermediality, Synchresis* (2021). His current project is the book *The Explosion of Images: Ireland's First Cinemas* and accompanying website Ireland's First Cinemas.

Denis.J.Condon@mu.ie