

**An Archaeology of Irish Cinema:  
Ireland's Subaltern, Migrant and Feminist Film  
Cultures (1973-87)**

Submission for Doctor of Arts

by

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**Declaration:**

*I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of a Doctor of Arts is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.*

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Dennis McNulty, with love for his enthusiasm and his insight, and to my Dad, who always enjoyed a good argument...

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## Abstract

Maeve Connolly, *An Archaeology of Irish Cinema:  
Ireland's Subaltern, Migrant and Feminist Film Cultures (1973-87)*

This thesis examines the development of an Irish film avant-garde, from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. The thesis argues that this period was marked by an historically specific intersection between Irish and international film cultures, which can be traced through contemporary film theory, cultural policy and critical practice. This period witnessed a revitalisation of indigenous production, and new initiatives in Irish arts policy, but many important Irish filmmakers trained or began their careers in London and New York, while others were supported by cultural and political agencies outside the state. The thesis focuses on the work of five filmmakers (Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Vivienne Dick and Pat Murphy) and on three key areas of intersection between Irish and international film culture, associated with the 'subaltern', migration and feminism. Through close readings of specific films, supported by interviews with selected filmmakers, distributors and archivists, the thesis develops an expanded model of practice, which extends beyond production to address issues of distribution and exhibition. This archaeology of Irish cinema is informed by post-structural critiques of the archive, as well as theories of the avant-garde, and it argues that the reception of Irish avant-garde film has been structured by the institutional discourses of the museum and the academy.

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## Introduction

### An Archaeology of Irish Cinema:

#### Ireland's Subaltern, Migrant and Feminist Film Cultures (1973-87)

Irish culture rediscovers its best self, not self-consciously, not self-regardingly, but in its encounter with other cultures – continental, British, American, etc. [...] By reminding us of the many migrant minds which make up its heritage, Irish culture reveals that the island of Ireland is without frontiers, that the surrounding seas are waterways connecting it with 'foreigners' and that the *navigatio* towards the other presents the best possibility of coming home to itself.

Richard Kearney, "The Fifth Province" (1997)<sup>1</sup>

This project was originally devised as an investigation of the critically neglected *visual* or *optical* dimension of Irish cinema, focusing on the work of Irish filmmakers (such as Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy and Thaddeus O'Sullivan) who trained in art school and whose work is explicitly concerned with the interrogation of visual representations. Another primary goal of the project was to provide an account of contemporary avant-garde and experimental film-making in Ireland, informed by the fact that much of the work in this area has yet to be catalogued. In the course of the study, however, these initial goals and aspirations have inevitably been reassessed.

From an early stage in my research it was evident that art school training alone could not account for the visual or optical dimension in Irish filmmaking during the 1970s and 80s. For example, visuality is a key concern in both Bob Quinn's *Self-portrait with Red Car* (1976-8) and Vivienne Dick's *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981) yet Quinn received his training while at RTÉ while Dick is largely self-taught as a filmmaker. Art school *was* a site of radicalisation for some Irish practitioners, such as Joe Comerford, but it might be argued that the student protests of the late 60s were of greater significance in Comerford's education than any formal training received at the National College of Art.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture and Philosophy*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1997) 101.

In fact further analysis of these and other Irish films from the 1970s and 80s suggests a very diverse range of formative influences, including involvement in feminist and co-operative film movements and the personal experience of migration. When I examined the wider social, political and economic currents shaping Irish film culture in the 70s and 80s, I became particularly aware of the resurgence of interest in historical Avant-gardes during this period. These factors informed my decision to re-structure the project around a small number of specific filmmakers, whose work demonstrates an ongoing concern with issues of representation. One of the key issues to emerge in the study in its new form is the notion of ‘avant-garde’ practice, understood in terms of an intervention into institutions of film production, distribution and reception.

I have chosen to focus primarily upon the work of just five filmmakers: Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Bob Quinn. Their work shares a number of characteristics; a critical engagement with issues of representation, a thematic concern with questions of artistic practice and authorship and an exploration of the collaborative, artisanal and collective modes of practice that are sometimes associated with avant-garde film.<sup>2</sup> My study highlights the parallels between these diverse practices but it also situates them in relation to quite specific intersections between local and the international avant-garde film cultures. It sets out to address a number of questions; it seeks to identify the factors that influenced and informed the critical film practices that emerged in the 70s and early 80s and examines the various discourses structuring critical reception of these practice within the context of Irish cinema studies.

### **Critical and Historical Frameworks**

Although it focuses primarily upon the mid 1970s to the late 1980s, my archaeology of Irish cinema is shaped by developments in Irish film culture that have taken place

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<sup>2</sup> Collaborative production processes, and links with Irish and international collectives, are highlighted in Chapters Three, Four and Five. All five filmmakers were also directly involved, at various points, in the distribution and exhibition of their work.

within the Irish context *since* the 1980s. At this point I want to signal a number of key issues, which are explored in further detail in the course of this study. As has been widely noted, the past decade has witnessed a rapid growth of feature film production, supported in part by the re-establishment of the Irish Film Board. This upsurge in Irish filmmaking has contributed, in turn, to an expansion of the field of Irish cinema studies, most evident in the growing number of publications dealing with Irish film. In 2000 two substantial histories were published, Lance Pettitt's *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester University Press, 2000) and Martin McLoone's *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (British Film Institute, 2000). Recent years have also witnessed a growing number of publications dealing with issues of literary adaptation and with the work of Irish literary and cinematic "auteurs".<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: A selection of titles from the *Ireland into Film* publication series, © Cork University Press

These publications seem to suggest a privileged relationship between Irish film, theatre and literature. By comparison, relatively little critical attention has been devoted to the intersection between Irish film and visual culture.<sup>4</sup> The dominance of a 'literary' mode of analysis is by no means specific to the Irish context but it seems to lend credence to the notion that Irish culture is characterised by a certain 'resistance'

<sup>3</sup> See Eugene O'Brien, "Series Introduction" in Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett, *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*, (Dublin: The Liffey Press: 2003) i. While the Liffey Press has developed a series on contemporary film and literary auteurs, Cork University Press has instigated the *Ireland into Film* publication series, dealing with notable film adaptations of Irish literary texts.

<sup>4</sup> It seems significant that even Dudley Andrew, a theorist noted for his engagement with aspects of film and visual culture foregrounded the *literary* dimension to Irish cinema. See Andrew, "The Theatre of Irish Cinema", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15.1 (Spring 2002): 23-58.



to the image.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, Irish film policy also seems to have been informed by an emphasis on notions of ‘auteurist’ practice that may be linked to this broader cultural (and political) investment in the literary. Rod Stoneman (Director of Bord Scannán na hÉireann from 1993 until 2003) has repeatedly expressed support for both artisanal and auteurist production.<sup>6</sup> Filmmakers such as Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, or even Conor McPherson, do not rely primarily upon the Film Board for production finance but arguably their prominence as writer-directors confirms a particular public notion of the Irish filmmaker as literary or theatrical auteur. Irish cinema is not unique in terms of its prominent ‘literary’ dimension, however. For many critics, in fact, the emergence of the Irish literary adaptation during the 1990s invites comparison with an earlier ‘heritage’ cycle, in British cinema.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of the heritage film seems to form part of a complex of cultural and economic developments, variously associated with globalisation and ‘postmodernity’. In his analysis of “cultural change”, David Harvey identifies a number of structural continuities (as well as oppositions) between *Fordism* and the era of flexible accumulation. In particular, he emphasises that the nation state is still called upon to “regulate the activities of corporate capital in the national interest at the same time as it is forced, also in the national interest, to create a ‘good business climate’”.<sup>8</sup> This process of regulation takes various forms, and it extends well beyond economic policy. Focusing on the British context, and on the 1980s in particular, John Corner and Sylvia Harvey emphasise that the *arts* play an increasingly important role in mediating the social changes associated with globalisation.<sup>9</sup> In particular, they examine the structural relationship between the discourses of “heritage” and “enterprise”, which function to mediate tradition and modernity:

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Four for a discussion of this issue. This is despite the attention to Irish visual culture as a site of critical inquiry, in journals such as *CIRCA*.

<sup>6</sup> See Rod Stoneman, “Under the Shadow of Hollywood: the industrial versus the artisanal”, *The Irish Review* 24, (Autumn 1999): 96-103

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Barton “From History to Heritage: Some Recent Developments in Irish Cinema”, *The Irish Review* 21 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 41-56.

<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 170.

<sup>9</sup> John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, “Introduction: Great Britain Limited”, *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991) 4.

The 1980s has seen a radically conservative attempt to restructure British capitalism and to do so within the contexts of a restructured international economy. As infrastructural change has become more international in character, a resurgent nationalism has emerged partly as a response to the perceived diminution of national identity, and the 'trauma' of loss of empire and incorporation into the European Economic Community.<sup>10</sup>

Harvey and Corner argue that this resurgent nationalism fuels the consumption of the national past, through museums, exhibitions, television drama and advertising, but they also foreground the critiques of the national past articulated by feminism and by the nation's racialised 'others'.<sup>11</sup>

Within the Irish context, the rise (and fall) of the Celtic Tiger has also re-directed critical attention towards the intersection between culture and the economy. Michel Peillon, a contributor to *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, foregrounds economic and social change between 1986 and 1996. He argues that the "institutional basis" of Irish culture (the traditional site of socio-economic critique) has altered to the extent that there is no longer a sufficient "critical distance" between the cultural and economic spheres.<sup>12</sup> He writes:

Most aspects of cultural activity and production are now so integrated into the post-industrial economy, either as a means of production or as a means of consumption that the very possibility of a critical stance is suppressed or, more simply not entertained or even imagined. How, for instance, can artists who design commodities, film-makers who produce video promotions, writers

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<sup>10</sup> Corner and Harvey, "Mediating Tradition and Modernity: the Heritage/Enterprise Couplet", *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Corner and Harvey, "Mediating Tradition and Modernity: the Heritage/Enterprise Couplet", 73.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Peillon, "Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 52. For discussion of this convergence, in the area of tourism see Michael Cronin and Barbara O'Connor (eds.) *Tourism in Ireland: A Critical Analysis* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993). For analysis of globalisation in relation to Irish cinema see Nicholas Daly, "From Elvis to the Fugitive: Globalization and Recent Irish Cinema", *European Journal of English Studies* 3.3 (1999) 262-274 and Debbie Ging "Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, 177-195.

who manipulate the meaning of words for the purpose of advertising, how can the artistic practice of such individuals sustain any kind of critique?

Although he finds little room for critique or resistance, Peillon goes on to suggest that the new proximity between culture and the economy may actually *enhance* the effectiveness of any critical discourse that *is* formulated. These explorations of cultural change have informed my own analysis in various ways. In broad terms, my study focuses directly upon the mid 1970s, and as such encompasses a key moment of economic transition. In structuring my research, I have placed particular emphasis on developments in cultural policy. My discussion of ‘inter-national’ circulation also maps parallel shifts in state subvention within and across diverse local and international contexts. Interdependencies between the national and the global seem to have become more pronounced in the 1980s but it could be argued that structural shift was also signalled by the emergence of critical *national* film movements (New German Cinema, Australian Cinema) at an earlier moment.

In my analysis of the historical Avant-garde and the various revivals or ‘repetitions’ of the 1970s and 80s I take up Peillon’s notion that the effectivity of critical discourse may be *enhanced* by proximity between cultural and economic spheres. In fact, my study focuses explicitly upon the various ways in which Irish film cultures of this period both articulated and interrogated a new relation between culture and the economy. My analysis of these processes of cultural and social change is directly informed by work of theorists and historians who have sought to foreground possible points of resistance and critique in cultural practice, such as Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams and Arjun Appadurai and, within the Irish context, Luke Gibbons, David Lloyd and Richard Kearney.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1996); David Lloyd, *Ireland After History* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 1999); Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*. My discussion of international cultural policy and avant-garde practice also draws upon critiques developed by Andreas Huyssen, Rosalyn Deutsche,

There have been few (if any) book-length studies devoted to the work of these five Irish filmmakers but my analysis is informed by a range of contemporary and recent texts addressing aspects of their work. In particular I have drawn upon Paul Willemen's theorisation of Irish and international avant-garde film<sup>14</sup> and upon the authoritative accounts of Irish cinema during the 1970s and 80s developed by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill<sup>15</sup> and, more recently, by Martin McLoone and by Lance Pettitt. My analysis has also been shaped by an array of critical texts, referenced in the course of the study, addressing issues of representation and cultural identity in Irish cinema, and aspects of the 'national' in British, German, French and Australian cinema. Thomas Elsaesser's account of New German Cinema has proved particularly important, in terms of its attention to issues of authorship and audience<sup>16</sup> and like Elsaesser I focus upon developments within a relatively narrow timeframe in the interests of providing an in-depth analysis.

In theorising the avant-garde I have drawn repeatedly upon the work of Claire Johnston, Hal Foster, Peter Burger, Raymond Williams, Peter Wollen and, as already noted, Paul Willemen. Where possible I have also referenced the critical writings of avant-garde *practitioners*, including Maya Deren and Hans Richter (in the 1940s and 50s), Peter Gidal, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen (in the 1970s) and more recent texts by Irish filmmakers such as Vivienne Dick, Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy and Bob Quinn. I also draw upon theorisations of European and British avant-garde film cultures, such as Sylvia Harvey's analysis of *May '68 and Film Culture* (transecting several national contexts) and the histories of British film and video provided by

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Craig Owens, Serge Guilbaut, Tony Bennett, Grant Kester and, within the Irish context, Tom Duddy and Joan Fowler.

<sup>14</sup> My study references various texts reprinted in Paul Willemen's *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988); John Hill, Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth (eds.) *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies in association with the University of Ulster and British Film Institute, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

Margaret Dickinson, Michael O'Pray and Julia Knight.<sup>17</sup> Various surveys of international and North American avant-garde filmmaking have proved useful, including Scott MacDonald's *Avant-garde Film: Motion Studies* and David E. James' *Allegories of Cinema*.<sup>18</sup> My analysis is also informed by numerous theorisations of 'other' avant-garde cinemas: Patricia Mellencamp's *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1990), Jim Pines and Paul Willemen's *Questions of Third Cinema* (British Film Institute, 1989) and Hamid Naficy's more recent *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Finally, before outlining the structure and limits of the study, it may be helpful to foreground the various 'archaeological' dimensions of this project. My archaeological approach is informed by Foucault's interrogation of discourse but it also references more recent explorations of media archaeology, such as those developed by Lev Manovich and, from a different perspective, Mark Poster.<sup>19</sup> The notion of archaeology also positions this study in relation to a wider project of self-reflexive historical analysis, across the disciplines of film studies, art history and visual culture.

### **Selection and Organisation of Material**

My study is structured into five sections, each focusing primarily on the period from 1973 to 1987, although reference is made to developments prior and subsequent to this period. The overtly historical character of the study is underlined by a broadly chronological approach to the analysis of film texts. I have, however, sought to complicate this framework by highlighting *parallel* developments across local, national and international contexts of production and reception.

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<sup>17</sup> Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1999); Michael O'Pray (ed) *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996); Julia Knight (ed.) *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001); Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Chapter One examines the theory and history of the avant-garde, as it relates to Irish cinema, and Chapter Two traces the ‘inter-national’ circulation of Irish avant-garde film. The remaining chapters focus on practice and on specific areas of intersection between Irish and international film avant-gardes. The issue of ‘subalternity’ is discussed in relation to the practices of Joe Comerford and Bob Quinn in Chapter Three and, in Chapter Four, the experience of migration is explored through the work of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O’Sullivan. Chapter Five deals with feminism and the films of Pat Murphy and is the only analysis of practice to extend substantially beyond 1987. The issues raised in my analysis of Murphy’s work are explored further in the Conclusion, which provides an overview of recent developments in avant-garde production, distribution and exhibition.

The historical time frame is structured by institutional and political developments within the national context. The year 1973 witnessed both Ireland’s full entry into the European Economic Community and the passing of an Arts Act that recognised cinema as an art form for the first time. By 1987, an Irish Film Board had been both established and abolished, in favour of a different form of state subvention. This period witnessed a reinvention of Irish film, as a site for critical debate within popular culture and across a range of Irish and international publications.<sup>20</sup> This period was also marked by a direct and relatively sustained engagement with Irish filmmaking on the part of British agencies such as the Production Board of the BFI and Channel Four.

My study explores links between Irish and international film avant-gardes and this comparative approach necessitates a relatively narrow selection of filmmakers. As noted already I have chosen to focus on just five filmmakers: Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Bob Quinn. Their work shares

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<sup>20</sup> In his regular column on the *Sunday Independent* arts page, Ciaran Carty publicised films such as *Poitin* and *Down the Corner* and wrote various articles on the ‘new Irish cinema’. See Ciaran Carty’s Arts Page, *Sunday Independent* February 26, October 22, November 26, December 10, all 1978. Many of these articles are re-printed in Ciaran Carty’s *Confessions of Sewer Rat*, (Dublin: New Island Books, 1995). See also various articles in *Film Directions*, *Screen* and *Framework*, cited throughout this study. This period was also marked by a series of film seasons at home and abroad, discussed in Chapter Two.

a critical engagement with issues of representation, a thematic concern with questions of artistic practice and authorship and an exploration of the modes of production associated with the avant-garde but this definition might have allowed for the inclusion of several other filmmakers active from 1973 to 87, such as Cathal Black, Kieran Hickey, John T. Davis and Patrick Carey. In fact, at various points, specific works by these four filmmakers *are* referenced within the text but for reasons of scale their practices are not discussed in detail.

Vivienne Dick is, perhaps, the least familiar figure within the context of Irish cinema studies and analysis of her work presents an opportunity to interrogate existing Irish and international canons. She is rarely mentioned in accounts of Irish cinema and her work has only been represented in the Irish Film Archive since the late 1990s and then only through the assistance of two *American* institutions, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum.<sup>21</sup> Issues of canonicity are clearly of particular significance within a study that addresses the intersection between international and national avant-gardes. All forms of cinema are inevitably defined by (and perhaps even constituted through) forms of classification and categorisation. At the most basic level, a film may not qualify for production finance if it does not meet criteria pertaining to country of origin, scale of budget, language or personnel. The *reception* of any film is also, arguably, structured by discourses of classification in the form of an emphasis on genre, country of origin or a particular director or actor. Academics, critics, archivists and curators *also* participate in the formation of ‘canons’, whether these canons take the form of a retrospective exhibition, a reference publication or a DVD collection.

My study highlights the interdependencies and oppositions that structure the formation of national and avant-garde cinemas. As Steve Neale has noted, the discourses of ‘national’, ‘art’ and ‘avant-garde’ cinemas tend to foreground

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<sup>21</sup> A new set 16mm prints were struck from deteriorating Super-8 originals for inclusion in a major American retrospective of Super-8 film and the process was co-financed by the Irish Film Archive on preservation grounds. The new prints were made in 1999 and screened at the Irish Film Archive, the Whitney and at MoMA. Vivienne Dick outlined this process in an interview with the author, June 23 2001.

distinctions between commercialism and non-commercialism, between artisanal and industrial filmmaking, between the independent and mainstream production sectors and between popular and elite cinemas.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, an ‘archaeological’ approach to the analysis of film education and criticism, as well as production, distribution and exhibition, calls attention to interdependency.

The five filmmakers that provide the focus of this study do not constitute any clearly defined movement or school. They are notably diverse in terms of formats (working in video, Super 8, 16mm, 35mm) and their work references a range of genres, from documentary, Hollywood melodrama, television drama, to tourism promotion and home movies. But their works share a particular concern with issues of representation as they relate to Irish landscape, history and identity. Many have also employed forms of adaptation, developing work based upon short stories, autobiographical narratives, ballads or poetry. A number of specific parallels and interconnections between individual filmmakers are foregrounded in this study. For example, Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy all explore aspects of ethnography, while the theme of autobiography can be seen to run through the work of O’Sullivan, Dick and Murphy. My study also suggests that Vivienne Dick’s work, like that of Pat Murphy, can be defined as broadly feminist in terms of its concerns.

These interconnections and overlaps are central to my research but my study explicitly rejects the notion of a monolithic ‘Irish avant-garde’. Instead I highlight the *diversity* of local and international practices shaping Irish cinema during this period by situating these filmmakers in relational to international, as well as local, practices. My study foregrounds *three* different intersections between the local and the international – intersections that are theorised here as ‘subaltern’, ‘migrant’ and ‘feminist’ film cultures. The grouping of the five filmmakers in relation to each of these particular cultural intersections merits further explanation and is discussed below in the synopses of each chapter.

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<sup>22</sup> See Steve Neale, “Art Cinema as Institution”, *Screen* 22. 1, (1981): 11-39.



## Research Methods and Terminology

The research methodologies employed in this study include interviews with filmmakers, exhibitors and archivists, analysis of reviews, published interviews, publicity material and secondary texts, and close readings of selected films and art works. The interviews that I conducted with filmmakers in person, by email or by phone, provided an opportunity to explore aspects of production, distribution and exhibition and to clarify biographical details, with respect to education and early work. Where possible I have drawn upon reviews in Irish and international publications (both mainstream and specialist) as a source of information on reception and on contemporary film culture. Within the text, I summarise the form and content of all films referenced, unless they are widely known, but I prioritise discussion of lesser-known Irish works.

In the course of my research I have consulted a range of Irish and international archives and film collections.<sup>23</sup> Some, such as the Irish Film Archive, the BFI's National Film and Television Archive, the British Artist's Film and Video Study Collection and the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, are explicitly intended to offer resources for film study. Some collections of films and documents, such as the Lux in London and Anthology Archives, the Film-Maker's Co-op and Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, tend instead to serve the needs of film exhibitors and programmers. Others, like the files of the Federation of Irish Film Societies and Project Cinema Club, have rarely (if ever) been accessed by researchers. In addition to employing archival indexes and files as a source of information on Irish film in the 70s and 80s I have approached these materials as statements of policy in their own right.

The terminology employed in this study also requires a brief explanation. I explore various models of 'avant-garde' practice and employ *capitals* to refer to the work of

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<sup>23</sup> Video copies of many of the Irish films discussed in this study were provided by the Irish Film Archive, with the permission of the filmmakers. I have used imaging software to produce frame grabs from these and other video tapes, specifically in order to illustrate my text, and where possible I have also included production stills and posters. In some instances (most notably Thaddeus O'Sullivan's early work) video tapes were unavailable.

the historical Avant-gardes of the 1920s and 30s. My use of the term avant-garde is informed primarily by the work of both Peter Burger and Paul Willemen, discussed and defined in the first chapter. The term 'experimental' is used in this study to describe a particular *aesthetic* or approach to production, often associated with the New American Cinema and the North American Co-op movement.<sup>24</sup> The term 'national cinema' also provides a focus for discussion and I have explored various models, from the institutional formation that is critiqued by Andrew Higson in 'The Concept of National Cinema', to the ideal that is theorised by Paul Willemen as "positively yet critically seeking to deal with the multi-layeredness of specific socio-cultural formations".<sup>25</sup> In the course of the study, I refer occasionally to independent practices, networks or structures in the areas of production, distribution and/or exhibition. The term 'independent' is usually qualified, however, through reference to areas of dependency with respect to national political formations or, in some cases, multinational corporations. For the most part, the term 'postmodern' is used to refer to the broad range of economic, social and cultural shifts theorised by David Harvey but Chapter One also explores a number of other competing definitions.

The terms 'subaltern', 'migrant' and 'feminist' are also used to define particular aspects of Irish and international film culture. In my discussion of Bob Quinn and Joe Comerford I foreground the way in which both filmmakers have engaged with the experience of marginalized social groups, whose history remains under-represented within the political formation. The marginalized subjects of Comerford and Quinn's films include inmates of institutions, Islanders, Travellers, the disenfranchised and unemployed of both rural and urban Ireland, and individuals who experience

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<sup>24</sup> My exclusive use of the term avant-garde runs counter to existing accounts of these practices, within Irish cinema studies. For example, Martin McLoone identifies "innovative or experimental" exploration of film as a characteristic of many "First Wave" films. McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, (London: BFI, 2000) 131. Lance Pettitt's analysis of Irish film in 1970s and 1980s is subtitled "indigenous experiment". See Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000) 103.

<sup>25</sup> See Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema", *Screen* 30.4 (1989): 36-46 and Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, 212. See also Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, "Introduction" in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Hjort and MacKenzie, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000): 2.

discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or behaviour. In choosing to frame this engagement with class, ethnicity and gender in terms of a 'subaltern' critique, I am drawing upon Gramsci's categorisation of subaltern groups as diffuse, and divided in terms of their "active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations" and their claims for autonomy.<sup>26</sup> My analysis is also directly informed by various theorisations of Third Cinema, developed by Latin American filmmakers and subsequently revised by Willemen and Pines among others. But although the term 'Third Cinema' retains a particular resonance within the Irish context it does not adequately specify the particular intersections between Irish and international avant-gardes that I have chosen to highlight.

I have emphasised the issue of *migration* in my discussion of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan, in response to a thematic emphasis on mobility, ethnicity and identity in the early work of both filmmakers. My discussion also draws upon Hamid Naficy's theorisation of 'interstitial' modes of migrant filmmaking, in *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan cannot be described as 'diasporic' or 'exilic' in terms of their ethnic or cultural affiliations, as both explicitly rejected involvement with diasporic communities in favour of an immersion in the international film cultures centred around the film co-ops of London and New York. But I argue that the notion of a 'migrant cinema' can encompass aspects of their work and of contemporaries such as Chantal Akerman and Stephen Dwoskin.

I characterise much of Pat Murphy's work in the 1980s as part of 'feminist' avant-garde film culture because of its emphasis on explicitly feminist subjects and themes and because of Murphy's association with feminist organisations, particularly in the area of distribution. In recent years, however, she has gravitated towards an exploration of women's experience that is perhaps less clearly defined and she has resisted any definition of *Nora* (2000) as a feminist film. But the feminist

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<sup>26</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971): 52.

contribution to Irish historiography and cultural studies and to international film theory and practice in her work, and that of Irish and international contemporaries, remains a central focus of my discussion.

### **Synopses of Individual Chapters**

Chapter One addresses the late 70s and early 80s as a period of critical and historical re-definition with respect to avant-garde film, as evidenced by the production of competing genealogies, canons and definitions. Following an analysis of the social, cultural and political factors shaping the revival of avant-garde practice, I explore differences between European and American film traditions, focusing upon questions of authorship and models of production. In the second part of the chapter I deal primarily with issues of reception and with the turn towards narrative articulated in the work of Irish and international filmmakers. The final section explores the historicisation of the avant-garde practices of the 1970s and 80s within Irish cinema studies.

Chapter Two focuses specifically on developments in film policy since the early 1970s and aims to explore interdependencies between the Irish, American and British contexts of distribution and exhibition. In the opening section I provide an overview of developments in Hollywood and American independent film, focusing on the emergence (and subsequent re-appropriation) of alternative modes of distribution. I then address the various political, economic and cultural factors shaping the Irish context, including the development of Arts Council-funded initiatives such as Project Cinema Club, the Federation of Irish Film Societies and *Film Directions* magazine. The next section examines the role of British-based agencies and networks, such as the Production Board of the British Film Institute and The Other Cinema, in the formation of an Irish avant-garde film culture in the late 70s. The final part of the chapter explores changing contexts of production and reception, focusing on Channel Four's workshop programme, the MEDIA programme and the emergence of the gallery and cultural festival as privileged sites of film exhibition.

Chapters Three, Four and Five all follow a broadly similar format in that they are structured around the practices of specific filmmakers. In each case I have sought to develop an expanded model of practice, which extends beyond production to explore areas of film activism, publishing, programming and involvement in other forms of arts practice. In the course of each chapter I reference specific films by international avant-garde filmmakers, on the basis of direct association or in order to highlight a thematic or institutional link. Chapter Three considers the relationship between 'subaltern' cultural identity, artisanal practice and national cinema through the work of Joe Comerford and Bob Quinn. It examines the various factors structuring the development and reception of projects such as *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) and *Down the Corner* (1978) and it highlights a recurrent emphasis on artisanal or craft tradition in these and other works. It is informed by reference to contemporary British political cinemas. The second part of the Chapter focuses primarily on the use of music and sound in Quinn's *Self-Portrait with Red Car, Cloch* (1975), *Poitín*, (1978) and *Budawanny* (1986) and in Comerford's *Traveller* (1981) and *Reefer and the Model* (1988), calling attention to the parallels between their work and the 'political' avant-garde tradition.

Chapter Four situates the work of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan in relation to American and British co-operative movements. It theorises an historically specific *critique* of modernist film aesthetics, associated with a new emphasis on landscape, performativity and narrative, which is articulated in the work of New York's No Wave filmmakers and in the films of Chantal Akerman and Stephen Dwoskin, among others. The second part of the chapter provides close readings of selected films such as *Visibility Moderate*, *A Pint of Plain* and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* and traces a new engagement with genre in the later films of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan, particularly *Rothach* (1985) and *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985).

In Chapter Five I explore Pat Murphy's feminist critique of national cinema, focusing on the representation of history and the recurrent theme of critical spectatorship in

*Maeve* (1981)<sup>27</sup>, *Anne Devlin* (1984) and *Nora*. I situate Murphy's work, and that of contemporaries such as Lizzie Borden, Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter and Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, in relation to a critical re-definition of 'pleasure' in feminist avant-garde film. I then explore the influence of Murphy's work across aspects of Irish women's art and film and finally, through reference to *Nora*, I identify a number of key issues for the future development of Irish film.

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<sup>27</sup> Chapter Five foregrounds Pat Murphy's role as scriptwriter and co-director of *Maeve*, but also considers the contributions made by her collaborators John Davies and Rob Smith.

## Chapter One

### Museums, Maps and Margins:

#### Irish Film and the Theory of the Avant-garde

How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working? Or, in the register of history, how to tell the difference between a revisionist account written in support of the cultural status quo and a genealogical account that seeks to challenge it? In reality these returns are more complicated, even more compulsive – especially now at the end of the century as revolutions at its beginning appear to be undone, as formations thought to be long dead stir again with uncanny life.

Hal Foster, (1994).<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Hal Foster's questions are addressed towards a series of returns in post-war art practice, recalling the strategies of the historical Avant-garde. He notes that 'neo-avant-garde' practice has often been dismissed as inauthentic, precisely because it seems to constitute a 'repetition' of an historically specific critique. As an example of this approach, he cites Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde*.<sup>2</sup> Foster notes that while Bürger acknowledges the failure of the Avant-garde project, he is far more dismissive of post-war revivals or repetitions, which he tends to categorise "at best pathetic and farcical, at worst cynical and opportunistic".<sup>3</sup> Foster, however, takes a different view. He states:

[T]he avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its *initial* moments. It cannot be because it is traumatic: a hole in the symbolic order of its time that is not prepared for it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", *October* 70, Fall (1994): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", 10 - 16. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", 15.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", 31. [Emphasis added]. Hal Foster conceives of history in terms of the "psychic temporality of the subject" and he emphasises that the subject itself has returned in much contemporary criticism, sometimes through the conception of the *nation* as "psychic entity".

Foster suggests that the work of the historical Avant-garde is in fact 'acted out' in successive repetitions, in a process analogous to the operations of the psyche. Through this notion of "deferred action", Foster seeks to reclaim 'repetition' as intrinsic to the operations of the avant-garde project and foreground the explicitly historical character of its critique. He proposes a structural relationship between the historical Avant-garde and its successive revivals or repetitions, a relationship that seems to complicate definitions of the 'modern' and the 'post-modern'.<sup>5</sup>

The notion of repetition is of particular significance to the analysis of Irish film in the late 1970s and early 80s. During this period, Irish filmmakers such as Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn began to engage critically with issues of place and identity and some of their most significant works, including O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) and Murphy's *Maeve* (1981) actually stage a literal 'return' to a place of origin.<sup>6</sup> A number of critics and theorists have categorised these developments in terms of a 'new wave'<sup>7</sup> in Irish cinema, a term that suggests novelty or a departure from earlier forms of film practice. Yet the very notion of a 'new wave' is also intrinsically linked to repetition, in the sense that it recalls the French New Wave of the 50s and 60s, and its reworking

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<sup>5</sup> Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", 31. In many respects, Foster's text develops Rosalind Krauss's critique of authorship in "The Originality of the Avant-garde", *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) 151-170. Focusing on Rodin's use of multiples, Krauss rejects the alignment of modernism with originality and the alignment of postmodernism with citation or repetition.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Vivienne Dick, one of the key filmmakers in this study, has been theorised in terms of a 'postmodern repetition' of Underground cinema by critic J. Hoberman. See J. Hoberman, "After Avant-garde Film", *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984) 68-69 and my discussion in Chapter Four.

<sup>7</sup> See Brian McIlroy "The new wave: 1977-88" in *World Cinema 4: Ireland*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1989) 59-88. Debbie Ging theorises the 'First Wave' in "Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 177-195. Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin also employ the term "New Wave" in relation to Irish cinema in the 70s and 80s in "Conclusions and Transformations", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, 197. Martin McLoone uses the term 'First Wave' in *Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000) 131.



of Hollywood's familiar idioms.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this study argues that the Irish film practices that emerged in the late 1970s and 80s were in some way structured by the form of repetition highlighted by Foster. In particular, it seeks to demonstrate that filmmakers such Comerford, Dick, Murphy, O'Sullivan and Quinn were all informed by a broader revival of interest in the avant-garde project. While issues of practice are examined in detail in the course of this study, *this* first chapter focuses primarily on theoretical developments during the 1970s and 80s and on the social, political and cultural factors shaping the return of the avant-garde. In particular, it foregrounds the interplay between theory and practice and identifies key areas of debate, in relation to realism and melodrama and the representation of place and popular memory, to which Irish filmmaking contributed.

Before commencing with this overview of theory and practice I want to signal an aspect of the avant-garde's 'historical' character that is of particular relevance to the national context. Irish cinema, particularly in recent years, has been characterised by recurrent returning to the national past and the late 1970s and early 80s also witnessed an emphasis on historical themes and subjects.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis is perhaps inevitable given the fact that the Irish context of production and reception is structured by a quite specific engagement with historiography.<sup>10</sup> The avant-garde critique, however, informs a very particular interrogation of *institutional* discourses structuring the production of history.

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<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the various European-American cultural exchanges associated with the notion of the 'New Wave' see Laura Mulvey, "'New Wave' interchanges: *Celine and Julie* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*", *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture and National Identity 1945-95*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci, (London: British Film Institute, 1998) 119-128.

<sup>9</sup> Examples include Bob Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975), Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), Cathal Black's *Our Boys* (1981), Tommy McArdle's *Its Handy When People Don't Die* (1982). For an analysis of historical representation in recent Irish cinema see Lance Pettitt, "Between heritage and Hollywood, 1988-92", *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000): 136-114 and Ruth Barton "From History to Heritage: Some Recent Developments in Irish Cinema", *The Irish Review* 21, (Autumn/Winter 1997): 41-56.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Irish history and historiography see David Lloyd "Nationalisms Against the State", *Ireland After History*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999) 19-36. Lloyd also

The modernist museum represents the intersection of many of these discourses and, as Hal Foster notes, it functions both as a target of critique and as a privileged site for neo-avant-garde repetition.<sup>11</sup> While the modernist institution is commonly defined by its role in the regulation of cultural canons, in more general terms museums are also central to the production of colonial and anti-colonial narratives of the nation. Benedict Anderson, for example, defines the production of archaeological photographs, books and postcards as a form of “political museumizing” and he reads the discourse of the museum as a key area of continuity between the colonial state and the independent nation.<sup>12</sup> Within the Irish context, critical art practice is often explicitly sited within the museum context, and theorised in terms of an interrogation of both modernist *and* national discourse. For example, in the catalogue essay accompanying a major touring exhibition of Irish art Declan McGonagle notes that much of the work is linked by its association with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which physically “inhabits a multi-layered, important, historical and highly charged context”.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Return of the Avant-garde**

There are other equally significant links between the issue of national history and the avant-garde critique, however. Despite its characteristic ‘internationalism’, the revival of the avant-garde project at the close of the 1960s was at least partly informed by a succession of distinctively *national* developments. For example, in his analysis of American film in the 1960s David E. James highlights a post-war “crisis” in Hollywood cinema, associated with the rise of television, the anti-trust suits of the

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emphasises the feminist contribution to critical historiography, an issue addressed in Chapter Five.

<sup>11</sup> Foster, 10. For an analysis of the work of Hans Haacke (one of the most prominent ‘neo-avant-garde’ critics of the museum) see Rosalyn Deustche, “Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate and the Museum”, in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996) 159-194.

<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, “Census, Map, Museum”, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, (London and New York: Verso, 1991) 182. For an extended exploration of the discourse of the museum see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1995). See also Susan M. Pearce, “Classic Modernist Collecting” in *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1995) 122-139.

1950s (that force the Studios to give up control of first run cinemas) and the ‘Red Scare’ and blacklisting that followed.<sup>14</sup> As James notes, the restructuring of production and distribution during the 1950s and 60s was paralleled by the growth of Civil Rights and Anti-War protest movements across the US. While not all of the new initiatives in filmmaking were associated with oppositional social and political currents<sup>15</sup> a range of political film collectives did emerge out of an established network of film societies, workshops and distribution co-operatives.



Figure 2: Student Anti-War Demonstration, Washington 1968 © Columbia University

*European* avant-gardes were also galvanised by the failure of established media to engage with social and political change. Sylvia Harvey’s account of *May’68 and Film Culture*<sup>16</sup> identifies an important intersection between popular protest, industrial dispute and philosophical inquiry, specific to the European context. In France, student protests against the Vietnam War and the university system at Nanterre and at the Sorbonne generated widespread support from labour unions and teachers and, although participants were motivated by very different aims, the movement escalated into a wave of mass strikes. Initially, state broadcasters such as ORTF presented only limited or biased coverage, in contrast with the detailed reports broadcast on ‘independent’ radio stations, Europe One and Radio Luxembourg.<sup>17</sup> But film technicians soon joined the strike and, together with film directors, producers and students, they established the Estates General du Cinéma, (EGC). The Cannes Film Festival was also brought to a halt, following statements by producers and distributors attending. By the third week of May the ORTF journalists had come out

<sup>13</sup> Declan McGonagle, “Renegotiating the Given”, *Irish Art Now: From the Poetic to the Political*, (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999) 9.

<sup>14</sup> David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 26.

<sup>15</sup> James reads *Easy Rider* as an allegory of the crisis of social relations within Hollywood, but he notes that it ultimately “discredits the alternative film styles and alternative modes of film production it exhibits and exploits”, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Harvey, *May’68 and Film Culture*, (London: British Film Institute, 1978) 3 - 40.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, 5.

on strike in response to censorship and in solidarity with other workers, adding considerably to public support for the movement.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 3: Paris Graffiti, May 1968

As Harvey notes, it was the work of the Estates General du Cinéma, and the various workshops and collectives to emerge from it, which proved most significant in the redefinition of avant-garde practice around notions of collectivity rather than auteurist authorship.<sup>19</sup> Participants in the EGC produced a series of films documenting the protests and strikes and also debated a range of film projects and proposals critiquing the institutions of production, distribution and exhibition. Harvey also highlights the radicalisation of film and literary criticism during this period. Journals such as *Cahiers du Cinema*, and the newly founded *Cinétheque* and the literary publication *Tel Quel* all engaged with the issues of May '68 in different ways. *Cahiers*, formerly associated with the 'auteur' model, began to publish writings by Eisenstein, to explore psychoanalytical perspectives on film and to address the issue of cinema and ideology. This emphasis on issues of 'reading' or reception was to prove highly influential, particularly within British film criticism.

While *Cinétheque* focused on problems of ideology at the point of cinema's production<sup>20</sup> and elaborated a materialist analysis of documentary practice and Third Cinema, *Tel Quel* was more directly engaged in debates around modernist aesthetics and textuality. Although Harvey emphasises that the landscape of film studies was transformed by this new "interest in structuralism and semiotics, in theories of

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<sup>18</sup> Harvey, 8.

<sup>19</sup> The film groups that emerged, or rose to prominence, during this period, include the Dziga Vertov Group (a collaboration between Godard and the activist Jean-Pierre Gorin. Another collective, SLON/the Medvekin Group (featuring the filmmaker Chris Marker) had been established since 1967 and had already collaborated with workers to produce films informed by the Soviet agit-prop tradition.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, 110.

narrativity and in notions of filmic specificity” she argues that many of these ideas have been easily accommodated by the institutions of film criticism. She states:

[W]hat is interesting about the way in which some of these ideas have been appropriated for English and American criticism is the precision of the operation through which they have been neatly cut free from that theory of the complex unity of the social formation and that mood of political militancy which engendered them in France.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between avant-garde practice and these institutions of film criticism bears further analysis and will be addressed in further detail at a later stage, in relation to the Irish context.

Despite Harvey’s pessimism the events of May’68 *did* contribute to a radicalisation of production and distribution, the effects of which could be felt throughout the late 60s, 70s and early 80s. The implications for Irish film culture were both immediate and far-reaching. For example, the Irish filmmaker Peter Lennon achieved prominence (and a degree of notoriety) by screening his film *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) to students and striking workers.<sup>22</sup> Lennon subsequently became a member of the Production Board of the British Film Institute and, as I argue in Chapter Two, he would appear to have played a role in financing the work of several Irish filmmakers. The collective Cinema Action was also formed in the wake of May’68. In 1973, after relocating to Britain because of growing censorship in France, Cinema Action produced *People of Ireland!*, a critical documentary on the Civil Rights campaigns in the North of Ireland, and on the escalating Troubles. Margaret Dickinson notes that the concept of ‘liberation’ was also central to the (relatively apolitical) London Film-Maker’s Co-operative in the late 60s and early 70s. She cites the London-based American filmmaker Steve Dwoskin, whose contemporary account

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<sup>21</sup> Harvey, 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> See McIlroy, 52-52. For further analysis of Lennon’s film see Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, 88 - 89.

of Co-op film culture foregrounds the influence of “the beats, the hippies, *the Provos*, marijuana, the underground press and the ‘anti-university’”.<sup>23</sup>

The protest movement also spread to Irish colleges and universities and, in 1969, Irish filmmaker Joe Comerford (then studying at the National College of Art) became involved in a series of student occupations that were to structure the development of his work. Around this time, Bob Quinn, Jack Dowling and Lelia Doolan all left RTÉ television in protest against incidents of censorship. They published a critique of Irish broadcasting policy, entitled *Sit Down and be Counted* and the preface (written by Raymond Williams) compares their struggle to that of the various contemporary protest movements in Paris and Prague.<sup>24</sup> These local and international developments were to inform Irish film culture throughout the 1970s and 80s.

### **Mapping the Avant-garde: European and American Traditions**

Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake have documented the critical redefinition of avant-garde practice during in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> They note that, of all the previous alignments between the left and the avant-garde, it was the work of Brecht that generated the greatest interest. In the wake of May’68 Brecht appealed to activists “because of the political urgency of his work, and because of his conception of art as intervention”<sup>26</sup> and to Althusserian Marxists and Post-Saussureans because of his critical materialism and self-reflexivity, while Lacanians were drawn towards the suggestion that Brecht’s practice could somehow produce a new spectator. During the 1970s, theorists such as Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe (associated with *Screen* and with *Tel Quel*) developed detailed analyses of Brechtian distanciation in the work of Godard, Straub/Huillet and Oshima. Lapsley and Westlake identify a persistent

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Dwoskin paraphrased by Margaret Dickinson in *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, (London: BFI, 1999) 35-36. [Emphasis added]. For an elaboration of Dwoskin’s position within the avant-garde and oppositional film movements of the time see his contemporary publication *Film Is*, (London: Peter Owen, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Williams “Preface”, Lelia Doolan, Jack Dowling and Bob Quinn, *Sit Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*, (Dublin: Wellington, 1969) xii.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, “The Avant-garde” in *Film Theory: An Introduction*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 181-213.

<sup>26</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 186.

tension between Brechtian and Lacanian models of subjectivity<sup>27</sup>, articulated in the work of Heath in particular, but emphasise that these theorisations of the 'subject in process' acquired even greater significance as revolutionary change began to *dissipate*.

In parallel with a new emphasis on the work of Brecht, this period was marked by a process of mapping and formal classification that provided an insight into the relationship between cinematic modernism and politics. Peter Wollen's influential analysis of "The Two Avant-gardes" (originally published in 1975) distinguishes between a tradition centred around the North American Co-op movement (closely associated with the visual arts and the modernism of Richter and Man Ray) and a more political European avant-garde centred around the work of Godard, Straub/Huillet and Oshima, which is indebted to Brecht, Eisenstein (and to the modernism of literature, theatre and film, rather than painting).<sup>28</sup> Wollen's genealogy raised a number of criticisms and Lapsley and Westlake point out that his analysis was subsequently amended through reference to the visual arts. Instead of relying upon "historical determinants", the revised version identifies a modernism "concerned with reflexiveness" and an avant-garde "concerned with semiotic expansion".<sup>29</sup> Wollen's account responds to, and implicitly challenges, a number of early theories and histories of avant-garde film. In particular it counters a dominant current within American film criticism (legitimised by association with prominent European filmmakers) which defines avant-garde or experimental film in terms of an 'essential' or 'pure' cinema.

The notion of a 'pure cinema', associated with certain forms of modernist criticism, invites further analysis since it can be seen to recur in various different contexts. Hans

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<sup>27</sup> Lapsley and Westlake note that the Brechtian "rationalist belief in the knowability and controllability of history" is clearly at odds with the Lacanian belief that there is "no place beyond language", 187.

<sup>28</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 190. Godard was a key figure in Wollen's project of classification. See Wollen's earlier "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent D'Est*." [1972] *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies*, (London: Verso 1982) 79-91

<sup>29</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 191-2. See Peter Wollen, "The Avant-gardes: Europe and America", *Framework* 14 (1981): 9-10.

Richter's 1955 essay on "The Film as Original Art Form" provides a classic modernist account of avant-garde film. It rejects the 'theatrical' conventions structuring production and exhibition in favour of an experimental tradition and a "screen style" that is rooted in painting.<sup>30</sup> Richter goes on to develop a chronology of European avant-garde and modernist film that is explicitly concerned with medium specificity. His work as a filmmaker and theorist is foregrounded in P.A. Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (1974),<sup>31</sup> one of the most authoritative accounts of the post-war New American Cinema.

Sitney traces the development of an American Avant-garde from Maya Deren's "symbolist" aesthetic, through the "mythopoeic" work of Stan Brakhage to the "structuralism" of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr and Joyce Wieland. His analysis of avant-garde film has prompted criticism, particularly because it tends to elide social differences between filmmakers.<sup>32</sup> It is, in fact, structured by an emphasis upon national tradition and by a particular model of authorship. Sitney suggests that 'experimental film' exists in a secondary relationship to commercial cinema and he draws a parallel with poetry's relationship to fiction. This analogy between film and poetry is extended in his discussion of the personal sacrifices made by filmmakers, the lack of financial reward and the limited audiences for avant-garde film.<sup>33</sup> In this way, the American avant-garde is figured as an extension of a national tradition, articulating the "preoccupations of [American] post-Romantic poets and Abstract Expressionist painters".<sup>34</sup> Many of the filmmakers referenced by Sitney are

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<sup>30</sup> Hans Richter, "The Film as Original Art Form", *Film Culture Reader* ed. PA Sitney, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970) 20. See also the critique of Epstein, Dulac and 'pure cinema', in Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, (1960; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997): 175-192. See also Dudley Andrew *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 115-116.

<sup>31</sup> P.A. Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, (New York University Press, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> David E. James takes issue with Sitney's approach but acknowledges the importance of his work, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, vii.

<sup>34</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, ix. In fact Sitney's earlier *Film Culture Reader* (1970) gathered together a number of presentations made by filmmakers (including Hans Richter) at a symposium on "Poetry and the Film", organised by the Cinema 16 film society in New York, in 1955.



not actually American but, in his determination to foreground continuity over any interrogation of structures of production, distribution or exhibition, he tends to subsume the explicitly “European perspectives” of Hans Richter and Peter Kubelka within a grand evolutionary narrative.

Clearly, not all theorists of the American avant-garde were informed by the same emphasis on Romantic authorship or national tradition. Maya Deren’s work, spanning both theory and practice, develops a critique of narrative realism *and* the “romantic realism” of the surrealists. Her 1946 statement, entitled “An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film”, is structured around a series of intersecting ideas and discourses. Significantly Deren rejects both abstraction *and* the hegemony of narrative codes and conventions. She writes:

It seems to me that the development of a distinctive film form consists not in eliminating any of the elements - whether of nature, reality of the artifices of other arts - to which it has access, but in relating all these according to the special capacity of film: the manipulations made possible by the fact that it is both a space art and a time art. By a manipulation of time and space, I do not mean such established filmic techniques as flashbacks, parallel actions etc. [...] Here time, by remaining actually constant, is no more than a dimension in which spatial activity can occur. *But the celluloid memory of the camera can function as our memory, not merely to reconstruct or to measure an original chronology. It can place together in immediate sequence, events actually distant and achieve, through such relationship, a particularly filmic reality.*<sup>35</sup>

This notion of a celluloid memory was to prove particularly influential in the turn towards narrative during the 1970s and 80s but Deren’s immediate influence on American avant-garde practice was also profound. Annette Michelson suggests that her critique of narrative hegemony, and her elaboration of a set of formal strategies

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<sup>35</sup> Maya Deren, “Appendix: An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film” [1946], *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) 42. [Emphasis added].

grounded in montage, generated a rethinking not only of production, but also of distribution, exhibition and reception.<sup>36</sup>

Michelson's own 1974 account of American avant-garde film also bears consideration, particularly in terms of its theorisation of authorship. Michelson reads the "radical organicity" of the post-war New American Cinema in terms of a *political* rejection of industrial filmmaking.<sup>37</sup> Citing Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction", she identifies the arrival of sound cinema in 1929 as a crucial turning point in industrial production and in European and American avant-garde practice. This moment signalled the full transition from craft to industry and the displacement of "artist-entrepreneurs" by paid employees. According to Michelson, it produced a "dissociation of sensibility" that American avant-garde filmmakers seek to counter through a "powerfully explicit critique" of social relations.<sup>38</sup>

Arguably, however, Michelson's model of radical organicity remains dependent upon a somewhat problematic notion of the filmmaker as artisan or craftsman. Elsewhere, Pam Cook has explored the discourse of 'self-expression' in avant-garde film, focusing on the New American Cinema and on structural and feminist film. She notes that the "break with the cinema of 'personal vision'" did not occur until the 1960s, with the cinema of Warhol, Snow, Wieland and Frampton, which "dispersed" the discourse of the artist so that it became "one code among many".<sup>39</sup> She also calls for an acknowledgement of the *dependent* character of avant-garde film practice and for an interrogation of the relationship between avant-garde practitioners and state

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<sup>36</sup> Annette Michelson explores the significance of Deren's work, and of *Anagram* in particular, in "Poetics and Savage Thought: About Anagram", *Maya Deren and the American Avant-garde*, 21-45.

<sup>37</sup> Annette Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration", *New Forms in Film* ed. Annette Michelson (Montreal: Lausanne Museum of Modern Art and Corbax, 1974) 9-16.

<sup>38</sup> Michelson, "Film and the Radical Aspiration", 11. By contrast, Michelson suggests that since the 1960s, European avant-gardes have tended to *foreground* cinema's dissociative quality.

<sup>39</sup> Pam Cook "The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-garde Film", *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie, (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 278.

institutions (such as the Production Board of the British Film Institute) that form part of the national film industry.

It is possible to identify a move towards a *materialist* model of authorship in the work of Michelson and Cook. The precedent for this model is, of course, Benjamin's theorisation of "The Author as Producer", which calls upon the artist/author to reflect upon his or her position in the process of production. Citing Brecht's epic theatre as an exemplary model, Benjamin notes that the role of the author is to induce others to produce, to put an "improved apparatus at their disposal", continually adapting it to the purposes of the proletarian revolution.<sup>40</sup> This theorisation of authorship shifts attention away from notions of craft and self-expression towards a more contingent, *collective* model of practice. To what extent does this overview of European and American film theory in the 1970s and early 80s inform analysis of *Irish* avant-garde practice? Although some Irish filmmakers developed their early work within British or American film schools, co-ops or collectives, others such as Bob Quinn and Joe Comerford remained rooted within local contexts of production. The critiques developed by Michelson and Cook may seem of limited significance to the analysis of Irish film culture in the 1970s, given the absence of an established industrial infrastructure, 'art cinema' distribution circuit or state-supported production fund within the Irish context. But as these structures developed through the 70s and 80s, aspects of American and British avant-garde cultures (including dominant models of authorship) began to emerge as points of reference for Irish activists, policy makers and practitioners. This will become apparent in my discussion of policy and distribution, in Chapter Two, and in my analyses of the practices of Joe Comerford and Bob Quinn, Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan, and Pat Murphy.

### **Popular Memory, Genre and the Social Formation**

The project of 'mapping' the avant-garde extended into the early 1980s, informed by contemporary developments in practice. But attention began to shift towards issues of

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, 306.

reception and the work of feminist theorists such as Constance Penley, and practitioners such as Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman, Sally Potter, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, is particularly significant in this regard.<sup>41</sup> D. N. Rodowick, writing in 1982, takes up Wollen's model of the 'Two Avant-gardes' and he proposes that it should be extended to take account of the work of the feminist avant-garde, engaged in an exploration of feminist issues "largely in expanded, experimental narrative formats".<sup>42</sup> He suggests that this third avant-garde should be positioned somewhere between the European and American traditions theorised by Wollen.

Lapsley and Westlake also note the turn towards issues of reception and narrativity around this time. They argue that, by the late 1970s, the "*Tel Quel*/Screen orthodoxy" had been displaced by an emphasis on the progressive or utopian potential of popular culture.<sup>43</sup> Before addressing the model of practice that emerged out of this process of critical re-definition, it may be useful to consider the critiques of this 'orthodoxy' that emerged through studies of genre and popular memory in the late 1970s and early 80s. Despite their differences in terms of form and production context, contemporary social drama and classic melodrama were the genres that seem to have the most interest among theorists of counter-cinema, perhaps because of a perceived address towards 'marginalized' constituencies such as women and the working class.

As Lapsley and Westlake note, theorists associated with *Screen/Tel Quel* tended to define avant-garde film primarily in terms of a 'counter-cinema', operating as a

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<sup>41</sup> See Constance Penley, "The Avant-garde and its Imaginary", *Movies and Methods: An Anthology 2*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 576-602. The referencing of early cinema in structural/materialist film also began to generate debate around the question of the audience. Rod Stoneman considers the critical reception of avant-garde re-workings of early cinema, such as Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) and Malcolm Le Grice's *After Lumiere* (1974). He argues that film historians have tended to assume continuities between the avant-garde and the early cinema at the expense of an interrogation of context. See "Perspective Correction: Early Film to the Avant-Garde" *Afterimage* (Winter 1980/Spring 1981): 50-64.

<sup>42</sup> D.N. Rodowick, "Politics, Theory and the Avant-Garde", *Undercut* 3-4, (March 1982): 60.

<sup>43</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 202. They note that the work of Fredric Jameson was central to this theoretical shift.

critique of the narrative conventions associated with Hollywood<sup>44</sup>. Within the British context, the debate over realism was also informed by developments in broadcasting, associated with the socially engaged work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett. In “Notes on Realism: Some Brechtian Theses” one of the key texts in the ‘realism debate’, Colin MacCabe theorises several essential categories of film structure, including the “classic realist text”, the subversive text, the revolutionary text and reactionary art. MacCabe argues that the classic realist text is characterised by “a hierarchy amongst the discourses”, a hierarchy that is defined in terms of “an empirical notion of truth”<sup>45</sup>. This hierarchical structure is, he argues, typical of both the narrative prose of the nineteenth century novel and the “metalanguage” of the Hollywood film.

Colin McArthur takes up some of MacCabe's arguments in a subsequent analysis of the television series *Days of Hope*, (directed by Ken Loach for the BBC in 1975). He acknowledges a persistence of realist/naturalist forms in *Days of Hope*, understood in terms of “classical narrative, individuated characters, and most particularly, the great stress on the accuracy of costume, set decoration and other inert elements of the profilmic event”<sup>46</sup>. He suggests that these textual strategies, in conjunction with the fact that the series was promoted by the BBC as an artistic rather than an explicitly political project, work to limit critical debate around the series. But despite these reservations, he argues:

[T]he progressive realist text, such as *Days of Hope*, might be a more appropriate agitational weapon than the (utopian?) revolutionary text canvassed by *Screen*.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For a critique of the editorial emphasis in *Screen* see Paul Willemsen, “Remarks on *Screen*: Introductory Notes for a History of Contexts”, *Southern Review* 16. 2 (July 1983): 292-311.

<sup>45</sup> See Colin MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses” [1974], *Popular Television and Film: A Reader*, eds. Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd- Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, (London: BFI in association with the Open University Press, 1981) 217.

<sup>46</sup> Colin McArthur, “Days of Hope” [1975/6], *Popular Television and Film: A Reader*, 306. *Days of Hope* is a series of four filmed plays centring on an English working class family during the years from 1916 to 1926. It was written by Jim Allen, directed by Ken Loach and produced by Tony Garnett.

<sup>47</sup> McArthur, 309.

Responding to these comments in a subsequent article, MacCabe agrees that *Days of Hope* does differ from the majority of ideologically conventional films, primarily because its subject, the working class, is posed as “collective”. But he maintains that it’s positioning of the working class as subject works to place it outside any notion of process, contributing to a mythical history.<sup>48</sup>



Figure 4: *Days of Hope* (Ken Loach, 1975) © BFI

This exchange between McArthur and MacCabe is particularly significant for the way in which it exposes the limits of a purely textual analysis. In “A Lecture on Realism” Raymond Williams considers many of the same issues, through reference to *The Big Flame* (a 1969 drama produced for the BBC by the same team responsible for *Days of Hope*). But Williams is primarily concerned with issues of reception and with the social relations of the production itself. He rejects the notion that realism can be conceived of simply in terms of an artistic method, available at any time, and instead emphasises that since its emergence within the bourgeois drama of the eighteenth century realism has been characterised by a conscious movement towards social extension.<sup>49</sup> This movement, he suggests, is evidenced by a shift in focus towards concerns of the bourgeoisie, rather than those of persons of rank, in the siting of the action within the present, rather than in the historical or legendary past and in a new emphasis on secular action. Williams is also concerned to distinguish between the mere *representation* of the working class and the kind of realist drama that is “consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint”.<sup>50</sup>

The ‘consciously interpretative’ aspect of *The Big Flame* is, according to Williams, located in the establishment of a political ‘hypothesis’. This term has a specific resonance within the context of theories of Third Cinema developed by Fernando

<sup>48</sup> See MacCabe, “Memory Phantasy, Identity: *Days of Hope* and the Politics of the Past” [1977], *Popular Television and Film: A Reader*, 314-318.

<sup>49</sup> Raymond Williams, “A Lecture on Realism”, *Screen* 18.1 (1977): 63-64.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, “A Lecture on Realism”, 68.

Solanas and Octavio Getino.<sup>51</sup> For Williams the hypothetical character of *The Big Flame* is located both in its mode of address and in wider context of production and reception. He notes that, at a key moment, a naturalistic onscreen discussion between workers is disrupted by the presentation of a different view (in voice-over). For Williams this type of strategy is central to realism and to the exploration of “the movements of history which underlie the apparent reality that is occurring”.<sup>52</sup> Williams also identifies a second hypothesis, posed by the film through the relations between director, script, non-professional actors (playing themselves) and the extended audience. It is important to note that this second hypothesis is linked, by Williams, both to a broader political movement towards a new phase of working-class consciousness and to television as a privileged site of social extension:

[T]elevision was often conceived of [...] as the site for a particular dramatic extension, since it had already a fully socially extended audience. It was seen as the proper site, in conscious opposition to the theatre with its persistent minority audience in social terms and its much more limited class audience.<sup>53</sup>

The debate around realism was also taken up within the Irish context, in relation to Joe Comerford's *Down the Corner* (1978). This film was made in collaboration with the Ballyfermot Community Arts Workshop and it featured non-professional local actors. In a contemporary analysis, published in *Film Directions*, Kevin Rockett argues that the film fails to deal with “the real as contradiction” as it is experienced by workers in Irish society, despite an evident ‘realist’ concern to represent the working class. Rockett suggests that a “lack of historical specificity fails to allow [the film] to set even an opposing ideology (critical, materialist) to the dominant ideology in Ireland.”<sup>54</sup> He also notes that, unlike the work of Loach and Garnett, *Down the Corner* is not informed by a “conscious politics” that predates production.

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<sup>51</sup> Solanas and Getino insist upon “hypothesis rather than thesis [...] works in process, unfinished, unordered, violent works” in “Towards a Third Cinema” [1969], *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 57.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, “A Lecture on Realism”, 72.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, “A Lecture on Realism”, 67.

<sup>54</sup> Kevin Rockett, “The Realism Debate and ‘Down the Corner’”, *Film Directions* 1.2 (1978): 19.

*Down the Corner* was partly financed by the Production Board of the British Film Institute, one of the first indigenous productions to be funded in this way. It would appear, from an analysis of Production Board files, that the BFI became involved in the production because of the Workshop's association with community development and activism. Contemporary reviews of the film also stress the involvement of the BFI and the Workshop in the production process.<sup>55</sup> Rockett's analysis, however, directs attention towards the particular model of *authorship* informing Comerford's practice and this is an issue that I will explore further in my discussion of *Down the Corner*, in Chapter Three.

Another key area of debate, with respect to the conventions of narrative cinema, relates to the aesthetics and politics of melodrama or the 'woman's film'. Laura Mulvey and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith are among those to theorise Hollywood melodrama, during this period, as a privileged site for the staging of the Oedipal drama. Mulvey challenges much of the work developed around the films of Douglas Sirk and she specifically questions the prevailing definition of the 'Brechtian' open, fissured text as inherently progressive. Instead she emphasises the significance of a particular address towards a female spectator, in narratives (such as Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*) that are coloured by the female protagonist's dominating point of view. She suggests that it is this point of view that produces "an excess that precludes satisfaction".<sup>56</sup> She also emphasises the historical context for the *reception* of classical melodrama, noting the growing importance of the female spectator as a consumer.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See David Simmons, "Down the Corner", in *Dublin 121* (November 1977): 4-5. See also Orla Ryan's discussion of realism in *Down the Corner* in *Screening the City*, (MA Dissertation, Dublin City University, 1998) 19-33.

<sup>56</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama" [1977], *Home is Where the Heart is*, Christine Gledhill, (1986; London: British Film Institute, 2002) 79.

<sup>57</sup> Nowell-Smith's analysis, also concerned with the theme of 'excess', identifies melodrama as a privileged site for the articulation of a set of political and social contradictions, but it focuses to a greater extent upon the historical development of the stage and film melodrama as a 'Bourgeois Form'. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Minnelli and Melodrama" [1977], *Home is Where the Heart is*, 70-74.



This theorisation of melodrama as a potentially subversive form recalls Claire Johnston's earlier analysis of "Women's cinema as Counter-cinema". Although Johnston highlights the work of women filmmakers, such as Dorothy Arzner, her account is primarily concerned with issues of reception, and with the familiar (or generic) stereotypes of Hollywood cinema. She argues that genre actually offers a potential for resistance that is unavailable to "Art cinema", precisely because it is not characterised by the same overt forms of myth.<sup>58</sup> Commenting on this text, Lapsley and Westlake note:

[M]elodrama, which had hitherto been vilified as trading in the most demeaning stereotypes of women, could now be perceived as subversive. Its characteristic inability to contain the various contradictions it sought to manage resulted in incoherent and fissured texts, thereby exposing rather than concealing the oppression of patriarchy.<sup>59</sup>

In different ways, then, these accounts all identify genre as a critical point of intersection between structures of production and reception, as a key site for the analysis of the historical and cultural development of narrative form.

These interrogations of melodrama are, to a certain extent, informed by reference to other art forms, such as theatre and painting. Johnston, in particular, re-works a mode of iconographic analysis that has proved particularly influential within the context of genre studies. But a quite different theory of generic production and reception is developed by Stephen Neale, in the form of a structural account of its characteristic operations and dominant discourses. Neale interrogates the relationship between generic form, high art and mass culture and attempts to counter the prevailing notion of genre cinema as a self-contained 'tradition' (against which individuality may flourish) or as an agreed system of signs. Focusing instead on the systems of orientations, expectations and conventions circulating between industry, text and subject, Neale defines genres as "instances of *repetition and difference*", which "provide, simultaneously, maximum regularity and economy in the utilisation of plant

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<sup>58</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-cinema", *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 216.

and personnel, and the minimum degree of difference necessary for each individual product".<sup>60</sup>

Neale points out that, in order to guarantee meaning and pleasure and produce a return on capital, the industry must institutionalise a set of expectations that it will be able to fulfil within the limits of its practices. The memories produced in viewing through the experience of cinema (as narrative or as spectacle) intersect with the star system, with concepts of authorship and the institutionalised practices of reviewing, criticism, and advertising. As systems of texts and expectations, then, genres function to regulate both desire and memory. Although his analysis focuses exclusively on cinema, rather than upon the historical development of specific genres, Neale provides an insight into the way in which the institutional operations of genre may work to close off *other* forms of memory. His systemic approach can, of course, be extended to address other cinematic discourses associated with avant-garde practice, 'art cinema'<sup>61</sup> and national cinema.

### **Peter Bürger's Theory of the Avant-garde**

While issues of reception and generic form can be seen to dominate film studies at the close of the 1970s, the analysis of contemporary avant-garde practice was also galvanised by an historical study of 'reception aesthetics', focusing on literature and the visual arts. Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* was originally published in 1974 but remained unavailable in English translation until 1984. It is explicitly shaped by the "historical constellation of problems that emerged after the events of May 1968 and the failure of the student movements in the early seventies"<sup>62</sup>. For Bürger, the historical Avant-gardes of the 20s provide a standpoint from which *preceding* phases in the development of art can be understood and a framework for the interrogation of historiography. Bürger situates the emergence of the Avant-garde in relation to nineteenth century Aestheticism and the institutions of Bourgeois art. He notes that

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<sup>59</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) 53. [Emphasis added]

<sup>61</sup> See Neale's subsequent "Art Cinema as Institution", *Screen* 22.1 (1981): 11-39.

<sup>62</sup> Bürger, 95.

“it is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art became a fact and it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond”.<sup>63</sup> Following the consolidation of political rule by the bourgeoisie, the content of a work of art narrowed in favour of an emphasis on form, to the extent that form became less a matter of principle than one of available “artistic means”. With the emergence of the proletariat, Bürger notes, “the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism” and criticism of art as an institution replaced criticism of previous schools of art.<sup>64</sup> Art’s “lack of social impact” only becomes recognisable (and open to critique) when Realism, for example, no longer appears as *the* principle of artistic creation but becomes understandable as the sum of “certain period procedures”.

Developments in bourgeois society do not fully explain how the ‘self-criticism’ of the Avant-garde became historically possible, however. In fact, Bürger notes that an autonomous sphere of art was already in existence in the eighteenth century. Self-criticism only became possible when this autonomy, or distance from everyday life, was articulated in the *content* of art. He writes:

[T]he apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the *content* of works [...] as institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the self-criticism of art.<sup>65</sup>

Although the historical Avant-garde project constitutes a critique of and a development from nineteenth century Aestheticism, Bürger’s analysis points to the fact that the history of the subsystem of art cannot be understood simply in terms of the evolution of society. Instead he theorises a complex dialectic between form and content and a transformation of the aesthetics of reception as well as production. Following Marcuse’s analysis of “The Affirmative Character of Culture”, Bürger emphasises that works of art are not received as single entities, but within

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<sup>63</sup> Bürger 17.

<sup>64</sup> Bürger uses the concept of ‘art as institution’ to refer to “the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works”, 22

“*institutional* frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works”.<sup>66</sup> He also recognises the importance of Benjamin's concept of aura in defining the type of relation between work and recipient that evolves in the institution of art in bourgeois society. He states:

Two essential insights come together [in Benjamin]: first, that it is not in and of themselves that works of art have their effect but rather that this effect is decisively determined by the institution within which the works function; second, that modes of perception must be based in social history; the perception of aura, for example, in the bourgeois individual.<sup>67</sup>

So the moment of the Avant-garde is marked by a profound (and resolutely historical) reconsideration of the relations between artistic tradition and the praxis of life, which can only be understood through an analysis of production *and* reception.

Aestheticism had made “distance from the praxis of life the content of works” but the Avant-garde rejected the notion that art should simply be reintegrated into this ‘bad’ praxis. Instead, the Avant-garde attempted to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art, through content that was *wholly distinct* from everyday life.<sup>68</sup> This is, however, a profoundly contradictory endeavour. In Marcuse’s model, ‘affirmative’ art relieves the pressure of means-end rationalism in Bourgeois society by providing a confined and separate space where the values ‘extruded from life’ (such as humanity, joy, truth and solidarity) can flourish. Avant-gardist art, in contrast, explicitly rejects the notion that art is a separate sphere, but as a result it inevitably faces the possibility that “an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it [and rooted in the everyday] will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.”<sup>69</sup>

Bürger acknowledges that the hoped-for “return to the praxis of life” did not occur. He claims that the avant-garde critique has, instead, been absorbed into the

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<sup>65</sup> Bürger, 27. [Emphasis added].

<sup>66</sup> Bürger, 12. [Emphasis added]

<sup>67</sup> Bürger, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Bürger, 49-50.

<sup>69</sup> Bürger, 50.

institutions of art, despite “genuinely avant-gardiste intentions”. In particular, he cites the incorporation of ‘ready-mades’ into museum collections and the re-appropriation of the historical Avant-garde’s “means” or “effects” in the practices of the ‘neo-avant-garde’.<sup>70</sup> He suggests that, in achieving institutional recognition, ‘neo-avant-gardiste art’ becomes fully autonomous, negating the intention of returning art to the praxis of life. As I have already noted, Hal Foster is among those who have critiqued this reading of the ‘neo-avant-garde’. Foster argues that Bürger “projects the historical avant-garde as an *absolute origin* whose aesthetic transformations are fully significant and historically effective in the first instance”<sup>71</sup> and this approach leads him to reject ‘repetition’ as a negation of the original.

Foster suggests that Bürger’s “despair”, although seductive, is mistaken because it neglects the very lesson of the avant-garde that Bürger teaches elsewhere: “the historicity of art, of *all* art including the contemporary”. Foster goes on to highlight the way in which the historical Avant-garde mimes and performs the “degraded world of capitalist modernity”, suggesting a structural relationship between these strategies and the “deconstructive testing” of the institutions of art (such as the museum), by the ‘neo-avant-garde’.<sup>72</sup> This re-reading aims to counter not only Bürger’s ‘melancholy’ but also the critique advanced by Jürgen Habermas, whereby avant-garde practice is dismissed as the preservation (rather than the negation) of the category of art.<sup>73</sup>

Yet Foster seems to overlook a key aspect of Bürger’s historical analysis, particularly with respect to filmmaking: his interrogation of modernist and realist aesthetics. Responding to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Bürger emphasises that “through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate [...] and the time has gone when one could argue against the use of realistic techniques because the

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<sup>70</sup> Bürger refers here to ‘happenings’, 57-58.

<sup>71</sup> Foster, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Foster, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Foster, 17-18. See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity – An Incomplete Project”, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed Hal Foster, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983) 3-15.

historical development had passed beyond them".<sup>74</sup> This underscores the distinction between modernism and avant-garde art and opens up the possibility for a reconsideration of 'realist technique'.

### **Irish Filmmaking at the Intersection of Theory and Practice**

Bürger's research into production and reception aesthetics is paralleled in film studies, as I have suggested, by a re-assessment of the historical alignment between modernism and avant-garde practice. This project finds its most direct expression in the work of Paul Willemen and was in fact partly shaped by the work of Irish filmmakers in the 70s and 80s. The work of both Willemen and Claire Johnston, evinces a particular concern with issues of cultural, regional and national specificity and it is in response to films such as *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1981) and in *So That You Can Live* (Cinema Action, 1982) that Johnston first theorises a model of practice rooted in the politics of place and popular memory.<sup>75</sup>

In her 1982 analysis of *Maeve*, Johnston highlights shifting conceptions of Irish gender, class and national identity, theorising the 'national' in terms of a contested site that is continually in process. In particular, she highlights a "move away from the concept of nation to that of class by such organisations as Sinn Féin – The Worker's Party"<sup>76</sup> and the social and political implications of Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. Johnston also highlights the populist base of Irish literary culture by comparison with the British formation, where oppositions between high and popular culture are "more entrenched". Perhaps the most significant element of her analysis, however, is its attention to the representation of landscape in *Maeve*.

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Habermas suggests that the "reciting" of aesthetic modernity, in the 1960s, signals the need to complete the Enlightenment project, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Bürger, 63.

<sup>75</sup> See Claire Johnston, "Maeve", *Screen* 22.4, (Winter 1982): 54-71. and "So That You Can Live: Popular Memory", *Framework* 19 (1982): 12 -14. Johnston's earlier work with Paul Willemen also calls attention to issues of national specificity. See Johnston and Willemen, "Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film in Britain", *Screen* 16.4, (Winter 1975-6): 101-118. For an overview of 'Brechtian' practice within the British context see Sylvia Harvey, "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties", *Screen* 23.1 (May/June 1982): 45-59.

<sup>76</sup> Johnston, "Maeve", 61. This is, of course, a reference to the funding of Bob Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975).

She suggests that, in order to construct “an imaginary *for* women” the film subverts the status of landscape, as either “male domain [...] the central metaphor for generations of republican men” or “the repository of a ‘Celtic’ truth that lies beyond history and politics”.<sup>77</sup>

This process of subversion requires a critical reconfiguration of narrative and setting, a project taken up by Paul Willemen in “An Avant Garde for the Eighties” (1984).<sup>78</sup> The primary aim of Willemen’s project is to expand definitions of avant-garde practice in order to engage with films that are made in dialogue with the feminism (such as Godard’s *Numero Deux*) or within the context of anti-colonial movements. Referencing the work of Irish filmmakers such as Pat Murphy, Willemen highlights a new avant-gardism of cultural practices no longer caught in the “realism-modernism dichotomy”. This new avant-garde operates *in-between* the conventions of modernism and psychological realism and “seeks to represent subjectivity as one, and only one, not necessarily important process within a situation over-determined by the forces that shape social existence”.<sup>79</sup> Willemen suggest that a characteristic of this work may be the mobilisation of “what Raymond Williams, following Brecht, called ‘complex seeing’” and he defines this, in relation to *Maeve*, as “reading of landscape within the diegesis as itself a layered set of discourses, as a text in its own right”.<sup>80</sup> This ‘dialectical image’ of landscape, contrasts with conventional representations:

In conventional narrative [...] a tourist’s point of view is adopted as opposed to the point of view of those whose history is traced in [the landscape], or for whom the land is a crucial element in the relations of production that govern

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<sup>77</sup> Johnston, “Maeve”, 59. Elsewhere, Meaghan Morris has provided an insightful analysis of Johnston’s critical project, with respect to *Maeve*, feminism and the concept of the ‘minor’. See “Too Soon, Too Late’: Reading Claire Johnston, 1970-81”, *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, ed. Caitriona Moore (St. Leonard’s, N.S. Wales: Allen and Unwin in association with Artspace, 1994) 127-138.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Willemen “An Avant Garde for the Eighties”, *Framework 24* (1984): 53-73. An extended and updated version, entitled “An Avant-Garde for the 90s”, was also included in Willemen’s *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994): 141-161.

<sup>79</sup> Willemen, “An Avant Garde for the Eighties”, 68.

<sup>80</sup> Willemen, “An Avant Garde for the Eighties”, 53.

their lives. The tourist sees in the landscape only mirrors or projections of his/her own phantasms.<sup>81</sup>

Willemen suggests that the new avant-garde is characterized by a double strategy, in relation to both diegetic setting (location, décor) and narrative. Just as location is mobilized as a text, the narrative is split between the story and the 'generic setting', defined as 'the inscription into the narration of a history of discursive practices'.<sup>82</sup> This exploration of generic setting is specifically concerned with the hierarchical, determining and transforming power relations that exist between traditions of representation, whether they are associated with oral culture, literature or cinema. This discursive regime "engages with audience expectations but also brushes them against the grain" and again requires a process of 'complex seeing'.<sup>83</sup>

Willemen's theory of contemporary avant-garde practice is also informed by Andreas Huyssen's analysis of European and American postmodernism, but there are significant differences between their respective approaches. While Willemen simply acknowledges that aspects of the European avant-garde project<sup>84</sup> survived in the US, well into the early 70s, Huyssen focuses on distinctions between the European and American contexts of reception, noting that while Europeans might react to "Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction and performance art" with a certain sense of déjà vu, "Americans could legitimately sustain a sense of novelty, excitement and breakthrough".<sup>85</sup>

Willemen actually rejects the term 'postmodernism' (or, to use his phrasing, "Post-Modernism") as "confusing". He suggests that it compounds "the mystifying effects of the previous equation of modernism and avant garde" but (like Huyssen) he situates the revival of avant-garde practice within the context of a return to history:

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<sup>81</sup> Willemen, "An Avant Garde for the Eighties", 69.

<sup>82</sup> Willemen, "An Avant Garde for the Eighties", 70-71.

<sup>83</sup> Willemen, 72. Willemen goes on to specify this process in further detail through reference to Akeman's *Tout Une Nuit* (1982) Mulvey and Wollen's *Crystal Gazing* (1982), as well as *Maeve* and *So That You Can Live*.

<sup>84</sup> Willemen, "An Avant Garde for the Eighties", 65.

<sup>85</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s", *New German Critique* (Winter 1981): 30.



This critical return to history manifested itself in many different ways: massive exhibitions devoted to the historical avant gardes, a flood of books and articles devoted to the subject, the re-thinking of the methodologies of historical enquiry itself, the proliferation of anthologies, of confessional literature and oral history as well as other archival activities, the renewal of interest, especially by feminists, in utopian socialism, etc.<sup>86</sup>

This resurgence of exhibitions, anthologies and other 'archival activities' seems in many respects to be characteristically 'post-modern' and *Huyssen* explicitly reads this development in terms of a wider cultural phenomenon, a nostalgic "search for tradition" that is particular to the late 1970s. Focusing on museum culture (as well as conferences and academic debates) he compares a striking fascination with the historical Avant-gardes in Europe and America with what he terms as "that other obnoxious nostalgia of the 1970s, the nostalgia for Egyptian mummies (Tut exhibit in U.S.), medieval emperors (Stauffer exhibit in Stuttgart), or, most recently, Vikings (Minneapolis)."<sup>87</sup> He emphasises that this investment in the "archaeology of modernity" actually contrasts sharply with the counter-culture movements of the 1960s, which were characterised by an emphasis on the future and by a rejection of canonical modernism, because of its perceived alignment with the state.<sup>88</sup>

In this way Huyssen seems to set up an opposition between an avant-garde that is oriented towards the future, an institutionalised modernism, and a (postmodern) cultural impulse towards nostalgia.<sup>89</sup> But his investment in notions of growth and progress lead him to dismiss the exploration of myth in post '68 European film and

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<sup>86</sup> Willemen, "An Avant Garde for the Eighties", 66.

<sup>87</sup> Huyssen 25. Here Huyssen is referring to a series of 'blockbuster' museum exhibitions in the 70s and early 80s, a phenomenon discussed further in Chapter Two.

<sup>88</sup> Drawing on the work of Serge Guilbaut, Huyssen reads the emergence of Pop, Fluxus and Minimalism as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, which was closely aligned with the state. See Serge Guilbaut's account of ideological investment in the modernist aesthetic in the post-war years in "The New Adventures of the Avant-garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center'", *October* 15 (1980): 61-78.

<sup>89</sup> By situating the return of the avant-garde in relation to the 'nostalgic' exhibition of national (or imperial) history, Huyssen foregrounds the *institutional* factors structuring the distribution and reception of film during the 70s and 80s, possibly anticipating a subsequent investment

art, exemplified within the German context by the work of Beuys and Herzog, Wenders and Fassbinder, because it lacks the “sense of the future” that is “a prerequisite of avant-garde art”.<sup>90</sup> It is possible, however, that Huyssen overstates the avant-garde’s orientation towards the future, given that others (such as Bürger and Foster) have highlighted its intrinsically *repetitive* character.

In order to understand these various opposing theories of the avant-garde and the post-modern, a revised conception of *nostalgia* (and myth) is necessary. In an exploration of romantic myth within the Irish context, Luke Gibbons notes that it was the Irish experience of modernisation and emigration that prompted “the backward look towards a peasant arcadia”.<sup>91</sup> If the backward look is evidence, then, of a *break* with tradition, rather than a sign of continuity, both nostalgia and myth cannot be so easily dismissed. The revival (and re-definition) of avant-garde film practice *and* the institutional investment in history can, in fact, both be read as signs of cultural dislocation. So critical attention must focus upon the specific differences between these projects, in terms of their representation of the past and address to the present.

In his theorisations of Third Cinema and the ‘National’, Paul Willemen directs attention towards the institutional formations, associated with state policy and academic practice that structure the intersection between contemporary avant-garde practice and anti-colonialism.<sup>92</sup> Willemen emphasises that, unlike European counter-cinema, Third Cinema was *always* informed by an awareness of the historical variability of necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted. Yet he suggests that the manifestos developed by Solanas and others often failed to engage fully with questions of gender and ethnic difference, or with the fact that “most Third Cinema

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in ‘heritage’ in national cultural policy. See John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>90</sup> Huyssen, 30.

<sup>91</sup> In his discussion of nostalgia, Luke Gibbons cites Kerby Miller’s analysis of Irish emigration. Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, (Cork: Cork University Press: 1996) 85.

<sup>92</sup> Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question”, *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, (London: BFI, 1989) 2.

products have definitely been consumed in a Second Cinema way”.<sup>93</sup> Willemen also considers a more recent model of Third Cinema developed by Teshome Gabriel, which introduces the Bakhtinian notion of the ‘chronotope’ – as a set of “distinctive features of time and space”. He suggests that Gabriel fails to account adequately for the range of chronotopes to be found within the various (‘First’ or ‘Second’) cinemas operating in relation to both Hollywood and its national-industrial rivals, or to address the way in which “national socio-cultural formations determine particular signifying practices”.<sup>94</sup> He goes on to extend Gabriel’s discussion of Bakhtin, focusing on the concepts of dialogue, otherness and the chronotope and also citing Bakhtin’s account of genre and collective memory:

Cultural and literary traditions [...] are preserved and continue to live, not in the subjective memory of the individual nor in some collective ‘psyche’, but in the effective forms of culture itself. [...] In this sense, they are intersubjective and interindividual, and therefore social.<sup>95</sup>

Willemen rejects the notion that the multiplicity of voices foregrounded by Bakhtin is somehow free of hierarchy and he concludes that, while Third Cinema may be made by “intellectuals”, it requires “both lucidity and close contact with popular discourses and aspirations – with a people *engaged in bringing about social change*”.<sup>96</sup> Focusing on the British context, he goes on to cite films such as Cinema Action’s *Rocinante* (1986), Isaac Julien’s *Territories* (1984) and Murphy’s *Anne Devlin* (1984), as evidence of the ‘re-actualisation’ of the Third Cinema debates from a position of “outside-otherness [...] the only vantage point from which a viable cultural politics may be conducted in the UK”.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question”, 9.

<sup>94</sup> Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question”, 17. Teshome Gabriel’s “Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films” is reprinted in *Questions of Third Cinema*, 30-52. [Originally published in 1985].

<sup>95</sup> Bakhtin, cited by Willemen in “The Third Cinema Question”, 23.

<sup>96</sup> Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question”, 27. [Emphasis added].

<sup>97</sup> Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question”, 28-29. The revised version of this article, included in *Looks and Frictions*, also references Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *December Bride* (1990).

This account of Third Cinema is of particular relevance to the work of Bob Quinn, in terms of his association with the anti-colonial project of Sinn Féin - The Worker's Party. But Willemen's historicisation of 'the national' also provides a crucial insight into the structural relationship between avant-garde practice and the Irish cultural and political formation during the 1970s and 80s. He points out that campaigns for the establishment of a cinema rooted in the 'national culture' first emerged in the 1920s, in response to Hollywood's dominance of international markets. In countries without advanced industrial sectors (perhaps as a consequence of colonisation) the debate around national cinema may recall earlier struggles over literature, the fine arts, theatre and music. But Willemen notes that these campaigns, often led by "cynical national bourgeoisies", have tended to support the development of *authorial* cinemas.

Willemen suggests that the authorial model predominated in the post-war period but by 1975 "the dominant industrial cinemas' ideological and economic functions [...] began to shift towards television".<sup>98</sup> This model is particularly useful for the way in which it foregrounds the structural development of national cinemas, yet it is clear that Irish cinema deviates from the norm outlined by Willemen in certain important respects. The emergence of an Irish 'author's cinema' was largely delayed until the *mid-1960s* (if not actually later). Patrick Carey, whose work initially developed within the context of the travelogue genre, might perhaps be one of the first Irish filmmakers who could lay some sort of claim to an 'authorial' practice. It was only in the mid 1970s, well after television had begun to assert its presence within the national context that authorial (or perhaps artisanal) practices began to really emerge.

National cinemas are dependent upon economies of scale and in his analysis of "The National" Willemen highlights both the forced internationalism of film industries lacking a large domestic market, and the nationalism that may inform industries that

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<sup>98</sup> Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question", 17

do address larger national audiences.<sup>99</sup> A critical national cinema, such as that theorised by Willemen, is inevitably characterised by dependence:

[A] cinema which seeks to engage with the questions of national specificity from a critical, non- or counter-hegemonic position is by definition a minority and a poor cinema, dependent upon the existence of a larger multinational or nationalised industrial sector [...] By the same token, a cinema addressing national specificity will be anti- or at least non-nationalistic, since the more it is complicit with nationalisms homogenising project, the less it will be able to engage critically with the complex, multidimensional and multidirectional tensions that characterise and shape a social formation's cultural configurations.<sup>100</sup>

As this model emphasises, the specificity of national cinema is to be found both in the interrogation of this dependency, and in the exploration of the nation's *multiple cultural configurations*.

Although it draws upon developments in Irish and international film practice during the late 1970s and early 80s, Willemen's analysis is in many ways addressed towards emergent discourses around multiculturalism and narrativity, associated with the 'post-modern'. Elsewhere, Lapsley and Westlake also note that the issues raised by the rethinking of the avant-garde (the "upward estimation of popular culture", the new emphasis on reception) "*recurred* within the debate around postmodernism".<sup>101</sup> At a later stage in this study I consider further aspects of postmodern critical discourse, primarily in relation to the work of Vivienne Dick, but at this point I want to focus upon one key aspect of this discourse, associated with a critical shift towards the margins, whether understood in geographical terms or in relation to the politics of identity.

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<sup>99</sup> Willemen, "The National", *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, 211-212. Clearly, the existence of significant audience within the Diaspora also complicates analysis of the *Irish* context.

<sup>100</sup> Willemen, "The National", 212. There are, of course, obvious parallels between this and the model of 'poor cinema' outlined by Colin McArthur, "The Necessity of a Poor Celtic Cinema" in *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, ed. John Hill, Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies in association with University of Ulster, 1994) 112-125. See also Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema", *Screen* 30: 4. 1989: 36-46.

<sup>101</sup> Lapsley and Westlake, 206. [Emphasis added].

### **From the Metropolis to the Margins: Interrogating the Archive**

Postmodernism has often been theorised in terms of a critique of the centre, or of the canonical. Mark Poster situates the emergence of postmodern cultural (and philosophical) discourse in relation to developments in communication technology. His analysis is of particular relevance to avant-garde practice in the 70s and 80s because of its emphasis upon the modes of subjectivity associated with particular structures of production, distribution and reception. Poster defines two distinct 'media ages', the first dominated by broadcasting and the second promising "a system of multiple producers/distributors/consumers, an entirely new configuration of communication relations in which the boundaries between those terms collapse".<sup>102</sup> Poster suggests that the discourse around the communication technologies of the second media age is paralleled by the discourse of postmodern culture, which privileges an "identity or new subject position, one that abandons what may in retrospect be the narrow scope of the modern individual with its claims to rationality and autonomy."<sup>103</sup> In particular, he positions the Habermasian model of rational subjectivity in opposition to the model of the emergent 'cosmopolitan' subject proposed by theorists such as Appadurai. Although Poster notes post-structuralism's privileged engagement with the relation of the subject to language, he acknowledges that it has largely failed to develop a new politics. Instead, he suggests that the poststructuralist critique has often been reduced to a "politics of postmodernity", as in the case of academic multiculturalism, which has tended only to confirm the institutional apparatuses of modernity.<sup>104</sup>

Poster's emphasis on the potential benefits of new technology does not result in any unconditional endorsement of the new media age and instead underscores the fact that the proliferation of new channels of communication may actually *confirm* existing power structures. Poster also suggests that Lyotard's rejection of metanarratives is

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<sup>102</sup> Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) 3.

<sup>103</sup> Poster, 23.

rooted in a persistent *suspicion* of communication technologies, as potentially complicit with new tendencies toward totalitarian control. He emphasises that electronic databases, for example, may function to *constitute* subjects and he advocates a 'politics of the database' that, instead of attempting to preserve a notion of privacy, can identify the forms of agency that are particular to the dispersed subject of the second media age.<sup>105</sup> A possible starting point for this critical project can be found in Foucault's archaeological model. He notes that while the subject constituted by Foucault's Panopticon was "the modern 'interiorised' individual, the one who was conscious of his or her own self-determination", the database or "super-panopticon" produces "individuals with dispersed identities, identities of which the individuals might not even be aware".<sup>106</sup>

Foucault defines discourse as "from beginning to end, historical – a *fragment* of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality".<sup>107</sup> A discursive formation is, accordingly, a *system of dispersion* that is defined by regularity and the goal of discourse analysis is to "maintain [discourse] in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity".<sup>108</sup> In order to achieve this, Foucault advocates an 'enunciative analysis' of statements:

This analysis presupposes that statements are considered in the remanence [or residue] that is proper to them, and which is not that of an ever-realizable reference back to the past event of the formulation. To say that statements are residual (*rémanent*) is not to say that they remain in the field of memory, or that it is possible to rediscover what they meant; but it means that they are preserved by virtue of a number of supports and material techniques (of which the book

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<sup>104</sup> Poster, 54. See also David Lloyd "Foundations of Diversity: Thinking the University in a Time of Multiculturalism" in *Culture' and the Problem of the Disciplines*, ed. John Carlos Rowe, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 15-43.

<sup>105</sup> Poster, 78. [Emphasis added]. Lev Manovich seems to have taken up this challenge and he proposes a theory of 'database cinema' in *The Language of New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass; MIT Press, 2001) 212-243.

<sup>106</sup> Poster, 93.

<sup>107</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 117. [Emphasis added]. The use of the term 'fragment' should also be noted here, since it recurs within context of postmodern cultural theory.

<sup>108</sup> Foucault, 47.

is, of course, only one example), in accordance with certain types of institutions (of which the library is one) [...] This also means that they are invested in techniques that put them into operation, in practice that derive from them, in the social relations they form, or through those relations modify.<sup>109</sup>

The Foucauldian project is informed and authorised by a concept of the archive as “the law of what can be said” but the notion of the archive itself has also been problematised from various different perspectives. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, for example, Derrida explores the etymology of the word archive. He notes that the ‘archon’ refers to the domicile or address of the (male) citizen who held political power, the site where official documents were filed. He argues that Freudian psychoanalysis, which models subjectivity through reference to various forms of media storage and retrieval, has transformed the very notion of historiography itself.

<sup>110</sup> But archives continue to retain a political significance, even within the context of postmodern cultural practice. Writing in 2001, Stuart Hall theorises the development of an African and Asian Visual Artists’ Archive. He notes that “the moment of the archive represents the end of a certain kind of creative innocence and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness”, which involves the whole “apparatus” of history. But, drawing upon Foucault’s model, he emphasises that the project of archiving can also be a critical one, constituting “an interruption into a settled field”.<sup>111</sup>

Empirical structures and practices may also expose the limits of the archive, as it is constituted within a particular cultural context. For example, despite its title, the Irish Film Archive (IFA) cannot claim to present a definitive canon. Curator Sunniva O’Flynn notes that staff of the IFA regularly survey international archives for Irish and Irish related material, often employing the *Irish Filmography* as a reference

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<sup>109</sup> Foucault, 123.

<sup>110</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 2. A parallel account of archival storage and retrieval can be found in Mary Ann Doane, “Temporality, Storage, Legibility, Freud, Marey and the Cinema”, *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 313-343. See also Alan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October* 39, (Winter 1986): 3-64 and James L. Hevia, “The Archive State and the Fear of Pollution: From the Opium Wars to Fu-Manchu”, *Cultural Studies* 12: 2 (1998): 234-265.

<sup>111</sup> Stuart Hall, “Constituting an Archive”, *Third Text* (Spring 2001): 92.



source.<sup>112</sup> But the IFA cannot acquire material located in other collections, except on the grounds of *preservation*, so acquisitions are often structured by the priorities of external funding agencies.<sup>113</sup> The IFA has also, until relatively recently, lacked the resources to provide comprehensive online access to its collections. As a consequence of these funding arrangements, it offers only a partial representation of Irish filmmaking.<sup>114</sup>

### **The Avant-garde, National Cinema Studies and Irish Film**

Post-modern interrogations of the 'centre' have also emerged from *geographical* peripheries. In a panel discussion of popular culture and the avant-garde Luke Gibbons recalls Huyssen's distinction between the modernism of the metropolitan intellectual and the Avant-Gardism of writers from countries (such as Russia and Ireland) outside the metropolitan centre. He suggests that countries that remain "in an adversarial relationship to the core regions and metropolitan centres" may continue to offer areas of resistance precisely because they are "slow to aestheticise popular culture."<sup>115</sup> He also emphasises that many Irish artists working with 'Post-modern cultural forms' (such as photography or installation) during the 1980s have explored questions of cultural and political identity.

In a more general sense, theorisations of 'Critical Regionalism' have also proved central to the discourse of postmodernism. Analysis of the regional, as a site of resistance or critique, has been taken up by those engaged in cultural *and* political re-

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<sup>112</sup> Kevin Rockett, *The Irish Filmography: Fiction Films 1896-1996*, Dun Laoghaire: Red Mountain Media, 1996.

<sup>113</sup> For example, viewing copies of Irish films are sometimes acquired through the assistance of the Department of Foreign Affairs, if they are needed for festivals or promotional screenings. But these films would not necessarily be a priority for the staff of the Archive. Certain acquisitions have also been financed by the Lumière Project (an international initiative supported by the MEDIA programme of the European Union, renamed the Association of European Cinémathèques (ACE) under MEDIA II). I am indebted to the current curator of the IFA, Sunniva O'Flynn, for providing details on the acquisitions and preservation policy at the archive in an interview on March 28 2001. See also John Kenny, "Irish Film Archive", *Film West* 45, (Autumn 2001): 24-26.

<sup>114</sup> For further discussion of some of these issues see the conclusion of this dissertation and Maeve Connolly, "Green Screen", *CIRCA* 104 (Summer 2003): 22-23

<sup>115</sup> Luke Gibbons, in conversation with John Hutchinson and Nigel Rolfe, "Avant-garde and Popular Culture: A Roundtable Discussion", *CIRCA* 44 (March/April 1989): 27.

workings of national identity.<sup>116</sup> But Gibbons' analysis raises the question of whether 'regionalist' cultural policy and practice can actually hope to counter the dominant discourses through which identity is constructed, particularly when, as he notes:

[C]ultural identity has never been as centralised as it is today, or, in the West, so embedded in metropolitan centres.<sup>117</sup>

My exploration of the avant-garde has highlighted a number of theoretical and critical discourses structuring the development and reception of Irish film in the 1970s and 80s. One key area of analysis remains to be addressed, however - the discourse of *national cinema studies*. All forms of academic analysis can be seen to function as sites for the formation as well as the interrogation of cultural canons. Even Willemen's work, despite its insistence upon the contingent character of avant-garde film, references a number of specific film texts and defines a particular mode of practice. The same could be said of any survey of avant-garde film. In fact many accounts of avant-garde practice include comprehensive and detailed filmographic references (complete with archival sources) and as such they can serve as maps of unfamiliar terrain. The cartographic dimension of film analysis is foregrounded in Scott MacDonald's *Avant-garde Film: Motion Studies*, an explicitly pedagogical project that takes as its starting point the critiques of authorship, patriarchy and Eurocentrism articulated in avant-garde film and identifies specific works by Hollis

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<sup>116</sup> An emphasis on the regional can be found in one of the founding texts of the 'postmodern' - Kenneth Frampton "Towards a Critical regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 16-30 and in the work of those, like Raymond Williams, who challenge the value of the concept itself. See Williams, "When Was Modernism?" in *The Politics of Modernism*, (London: Verso, 1989) 31-35. See also John Hume "Europe of the Regions", *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s: Cultural - Political - Economic*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988) 45-57 and Michael D. Higgins "Ireland in Europe 1992: Problems and Prospects for a Mutual Interdependency", also in *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, 58-78. See also Declan McGonagle "Looking Beyond Regionalism", *CIRCA Art Magazine* 53, (September/October 1990): 26-27 and Martin McLoone's 'National Cinema and Cultural Identity' in John Hill, Martin McLoone and John Hainsworth (eds), *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, (London: British Film Institute, 1994) 146-173.

<sup>117</sup> Gibbons, 27. Within the Irish context, Joan Fowler critiques the espousal of regionalism as a strategy for 'self-determination' in "Regionalism Reconsidered", *Circa* 50 March/April 1992: 22-25.

Frampton, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen and by Yvonne Rainer as “under-utilised classroom resources.”<sup>118</sup>

In his introduction, MacDonald notes that these “critical films can function as a backdrop against which viewers can measure their journeys across the boundaries that separate them from unfamiliar cinematic terrains, towards a larger awareness of Cinema”. This comment is important because it locates avant-garde film in an oppositional relation to other, more familiar, forms of cinema. Many of the avant-garde practices that MacDonald examines could be described as counter-hegemonic and, as such, these references to the wider context of film production and reception are to be expected. Yet in defining avant-garde film as a tool for interrogating mainstream film production, MacDonald’s text seems to explicitly address film students, rather than activists or other socially engaged groups.

Discourses of ‘art’ or quality cinema may provide a focus for avant-garde critiques but these notions are in many ways central to academic film study, particularly within the US. Peter Catapano provides an insight into the institutional formation of film studies in an analysis of the establishment of the film library at MoMA, during the 1930s. He suggests that MoMA transformed the relationship between film and its audience, by “imbuing a kind of sacredness or aura” and he proposes that “it might be better [...] to think of the museum as a church in which any object on the aesthetic altar becomes sacred only through the elaboration of certain rituals of worship”.<sup>119</sup> While one aspect of this ritual involved the regulation of viewing habits within the cinema, another required the definition of the director as the single author of a coherent film text, in order to “stress individual vision as an expression of artistic genius”.

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<sup>118</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 15.

<sup>119</sup> Peter Catapano, “Creating ‘Reel’ Value: The Establishment of The Museum of Modern Art Film Library, 1935-1939”, *Film & History* 24. 3-4, (1994): 34-5. I discuss the role of MoMA Film Library in the distribution of Irish film in Chapter Two.

Catapano also explores the museum's role in mediating concepts of cultural or national tradition. Those campaigning for the establishment of a film library at MoMA initially stressed the 'artistic' character of European cinema and cited only one American director (Chaplin) amongst a list of film auteurs that included Pudovkin, Pabst and Eisenstein. But in practice the Museum's first programmes actually foregrounded the achievements of *Hollywood*, because (according to Catapano) Hollywood "was considered a crucial source of archival material."<sup>120</sup> Even though Catapano does not fully address the factors structuring MoMA's engagement with Hollywood cinema it remains evident that the academic study of film, particularly within the US, has always been bound up with notions of artistic 'value', and with institutional projects of canon formation and concepts of national tradition.

In her discussion of the politics of film exhibition culture, focusing on the development and curation of an exhibition of Venezuelan cinema at MoMA, Karen Schwartzmann also addresses the various ways in which museums work to structure and to produce discourses of national cinema. Schwartzmann points out that by "grouping a selection of films as contemporary national cinema, the exhibit sets up a relation of film to the nation where the films function as historical documents and cultural objects".<sup>121</sup> In this model it is the *process of exhibiting* that produces the films as 'national' and which must be interrogated.

As I have already noted, the critical practices that emerged in the wake of May '68 were associated with a different (and predominantly European) current within film analysis, associated with the work of Brecht and Benjamin. The mapping of avant-garde practice, which I have traced through various competing genealogies, seems to have inaugurated a wider process of critical revision.<sup>122</sup> But, although postmodernist

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<sup>120</sup> Catapano, 41.

<sup>121</sup> Karen Schwartzmann "National Cinema in Translation: The Politics of Film Exhibition Culture", *Wide Angle* 16:3 (February 1995): 72

<sup>122</sup> The genealogical impulse continues to inform a range of works exploring the disciplinary foundations of art history and film studies. For a critical analysis of the development of film historiography see Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History, Theory and Practice*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985). See W.J.T. Mitchell, "What is Visual Culture?", *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside, a Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky*,

cultural discourse has privileged the interrogation of the canon, and the displacement of grand narratives (to the extent that institutional investment in projects of canon formation and concepts of value and tradition is at least less *overt*) many of the foundational concepts of modernist film studies persist. Even within the field of national cinema studies<sup>123</sup>, which is structured by particular attention to issues of cultural and national specificity, traditional notions of authorship, genre or canonicity can be seen to prevail. This is not to suggest that theorists of national cinema are uninformed by the avant-garde's interrogation of institutional discourse, history, narrative, and memory, or by critiques of the national formation associated with feminism or anti-colonialism. In fact many important analyses of the 'national', such as Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema* and Susan Hayward's *French National Cinema*, foreground aspects of avant-garde practice, particularly in relation to issues of gender or ethnicity.<sup>124</sup> Yet even these accounts seem to be characterised by structural emphases that work against a full analysis of 'national avant-gardes'.

Susan Hayward acknowledges the canonical dimensions of her project but she notes that she focuses on popular cinema only in terms of its "true proportion to the other [non-mainstream, avant-garde] cinemas".<sup>125</sup> In practice, however, this means that Hayward and O'Regan both tend to concentrate on industrial modes of production, distribution or exhibition. So, for example, Hayward provides a very useful overview of changing audiences within the national context, but it deals exclusively with *theatrical* exhibition. O'Regan, meanwhile, examines the role of the international festival in shaping the reception of Australian film, noting that the circuit provides

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(1892-1968), ed. Irving Lavin, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 207-217 and also various texts in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Dalle Vacche, (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003). On the specific relationship between art history, the museum and the archive see Hal Foster, "Archives of Modern Art", *October* 99 (Winter 2002): 81-95.

<sup>123</sup> It may be that the coherency of this field is to be found in the arena of *publishing*, through the production of survey anthologies such as *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000) and publications dealing with particular national contexts.

<sup>124</sup> Tom O'Regan *Australian National Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 327-329. Susan Hayward *French National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 253-260.

<sup>125</sup> Hayward, 6.

“cultural esteem [...] and public relations value [which] are critical to sustaining the domestic reputation of the industry”.<sup>126</sup> But he is more concerned with the exhibition of ‘art cinema’ than with the circulation of avant-garde work by filmmakers such as Tracy Moffatt.

Both O’Regan and Hayward also tend to define authorship according to prevailing institutional standards. They both refer primarily to the director rather than other members of the production team although Hayward, whose approach relies more heavily on notions of genre, does explore the significance of the “star as sign”. This is problematic in that traditional models of authorship do not acknowledge either the particularity of collective avant-garde practices or the range of other activities that a filmmaker may be engaged in, as a curator, programmer, activist, broadcaster, teacher or writer. Evidently, no comprehensive account of national cinema (particularly one aimed at a broad readership) could be expected to engage with the aspects of production, distribution and exhibition that are particular to avant-garde practice. Yet, as the work of Willemen and Johnston suggests, ‘the national’ has repeatedly served as a critical focus for avant-garde practice and as such these practices merit analysis within the framework of national cinema studies.

Some accounts of the national *do* pay particular attention to issues of authorship and reception. Thomas Elsaesser’s focus on a specific movement in *New German Cinema: A History* enables him to devote an entire chapter to the question of authorship, in which he considers the contradictory status of the national author in relation to the ‘Autorenfilm’, as state-subsidised cultural form.<sup>127</sup> He highlights the ‘elusive’ character of the national audience and, through the analysis of specific practices, charts the emergence of television as the privileged site of national cinema. Elsaesser’s approach, focusing on the public role of the ‘national filmmaker’, as well as developments in broadcasting, provides a useful model for the analysis of Irish

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<sup>126</sup> O’Regan, 65.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 74-115. The ‘Autorenfilm’ model is discussed further in Chapter Three.

filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s. New German Cinema has served as an exemplar of the internationally successful European cinema, in terms of both critical and commercial achievement and parallels have often been drawn between Irish and German filmmaking.<sup>128</sup>

Yet this type of comparative approach has rarely been extended to the analysis of Irish avant-garde film, in relation to the wider international context. In fact Irish cinema studies has tended to theorise avant-garde work primarily in terms of its difference from dominant narrative forms. There are, of course, several important exceptions to this rule and elsewhere in this study I cite important readings of Pat Murphy's work (by Luke Gibbons) and Nicola Campbell-Bruce's 1999 film *I Could Read the Sky* (by Paul Willemen). My analysis is also indebted to recent studies of Irish cinema provided by Martin McLoone, and by Lance Pettitt, as well as earlier accounts of Irish film culture by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill.<sup>129</sup> But in addition to acknowledging these key references, I want to consider the way in which the critical reception of Irish avant-garde film, particularly in recent years, has been shaped by the conventions of national cinema studies and by the moment of historical analysis.

*Cinema and Ireland*, by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, situates the practices of the 70s and 80s in relation to a wider critique of representation. The authors do not impose a distinction between a narrative 'mainstream' and an avant-

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<sup>128</sup> See Martin McLoone, "Funding an Identity Crisis", *Film Base News* 30 (July/August 1992): 12-13. McLoone notes that Irish filmmaking has been urged to follow the examples of Soviet cinema of the 1920s, post-war Italian Neo-Realism, East European cinema in the immediate Post-Stalin years, the French new Wave of the 1950s/60s, Australian and New Zealand cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s and Canadian filmmaking "in any era". Elsewhere Luke Gibbons also draws a parallel between Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) and Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), both of which feature images of pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick. See Gibbons "Romanticism in Ruins: developments in recent Irish cinema", *The Irish Review* 2 (1987): 59-63. For a comparative analysis of German and Irish cultural and political identity see Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture, Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 51-79.

<sup>129</sup> Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and*

garde, experimental, oppositional (or 'postmodern') other. In fact Kevin Rockett rejects a "false opposition" between the 'commercial' and the 'non-commercial' and he notes the domestic commercial success of Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), a film designated as "demanding" and "different".<sup>130</sup> Rockett goes on to emphasise that the appeal of Irish cinema, for both national and international audiences, lies in its engagement with questions of national difference and he warns that "cultural compromises will need to be made if the scale of budgets increase such that the international co-productions shift decisions of form and content from Ireland to England or America".

Elsewhere in the same publication, Luke Gibbons critiques an "eagerness to make Ireland palatable for external consumption" and he distinguishes between two modes of representation; one that lends "credibility to the darker aspects of romanticism and hard primitivism" and one that recognises "important motifs such as landscape, violence, language and community" but approaches identity as a "construct" rather than an essence.<sup>131</sup> Gibbons concludes that "the most important contemporary Irish film-makers are intent on [...] cultivating an indigenous rather than an innocent eye":

"Instead of chasing the medium of perception [...] Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Bob Quinn, Cathal Black and Joe Comerford are seeking in various ways to prise open the cracks in the distorting glass, exposing the political and cultural pressures which give rise to the fissures in the first place".<sup>132</sup>

The publication of *Cinema and Ireland* in 1987 coincided with a number of significant developments in film policy, most notably the abolition of the Film Board by the new Fianna Fail government (ostensibly for financial reasons). The impending crisis in funding is perhaps signalled by the various references to commercial imperatives in *Cinema and Ireland*. The "Postscript" to the second edition (in 1988)

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*Ireland*, (1987; London: Routledge, 1988); Kevin Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture: Ireland", *Screen Education* No 27, Summer 1978: 23-33.

<sup>130</sup> Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 143.

<sup>131</sup> Gibbons, *Cinema and Ireland*, 241.

<sup>132</sup> Gibbons, *Cinema and Ireland*, 249.



acknowledges that many of the films aided by the Board were “perceived as undermining the image of contemporary Ireland which the state itself wished to project”.<sup>133</sup>

The context for the publication of Martin McLoone’s *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* and Lance Pettitt’s *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* in 2000 is somewhat different. Following a decade marked by the restoration of the Film Board (as Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board) and a notable expansion of indigenous production both authors express a degree of optimism with regard to the future of Irish film. Pettitt emphasises that Ireland has achieved a “distinct film culture” through the adaptation of “dominant cinematic forms”, and McLoone (although more ambivalent) identifies melodrama as a particularly important site for the working through of traumatic cultural experience”.<sup>134</sup>

Neither Pettitt nor McLoone claim to provide definitive accounts of Irish cinema and they seek instead to highlight particular aspects of film culture and practice. Pettitt addresses developments in cinema and broadcasting since the 1920s (including documentary film) and he brings these two strands together in the final chapter, in acknowledgement of the institutional and economic links between Irish film and television in the 90s. McLoone’s study spans roughly the same period but focuses explicitly on narrative cinema, excluding documentary film and television production. This approach allows for a more extended discussion of short film, an in-depth analysis of key film texts (such as *The Butcher Boy*) and an expanded exploration of film theory and culture. McLoone draws upon theories of Third Cinema, for example, in order to address the work of filmmakers such as Quinn and Comerford. In his discussion of Bob Quinn’s *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) he notes that the actors’ discussion of their performances in the filmed sequences is “a perfect

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<sup>133</sup> Rockett, Hill and Gibbons, “Postscript”, *Cinema and Ireland*, 274. For an analysis of the first Film Board’s policy (addressing the issue of finance) see Pádraig L. Henry, “Michael’s Manifesto”, *Film Ireland* 34, (April/May 1993): 12 -15.

<sup>134</sup> Pettitt, 45 and McLoone, 183.

illustration of that key objective of Third Cinema, identified by Solanas and Getino - the opening up of debate".<sup>135</sup>

McLoone also references other aspects of international avant-garde practice. In his analysis of *Maeve*, he likens the bathing sequence (in which Maeve adopts a "classical 'reclining nude' position") to a scene from Godard's *Numero Deux* (1975), in which a seventy-five year old woman "strips to the waist to wash herself slowly and meticulously in front of a bathroom mirror".<sup>136</sup> He notes that the use of a single long take in both films draws attention to mechanisms of representation and, in the case of *Maeve*, "challenges the (male) audience to question why the scene is constructed in this way".<sup>137</sup> This reference is significant in that it situates Murphy's work in relation to an international, and explicitly political, avant-garde. But although it engages with the issue of spectatorship it does not explore the specificity of the *feminist* audience.

Lance Pettitt also positions the work of Pat Murphy in relation to feminist cinema, noting that in the screenplay for *Maeve*, Murphy "applied the formal aspects of 1970s feminist politics to specifically Irish subject matter with considerable success".<sup>138</sup> While this may be a fair description of Murphy's project it seems to locate the 'difference' of her practice within the formal strategies of the text, obscuring issues relating to distribution and exhibition. This is perhaps because the frame of reference for Pettitt's analysis is provided by mainstream narrative cinema and not international avant-garde.<sup>139</sup> There is little scope within his analysis of film and television representation for Pettitt to explore the modes of production that are particular to critical film practice. He notes, for example, that the work of filmmakers such as Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Cathal Black was "typically produced on

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<sup>135</sup> McLoone, 132.

<sup>136</sup> McLoone, 145.

<sup>137</sup> McLoone, 143.

<sup>138</sup> Pettitt, 105.

<sup>139</sup> In fact Pettitt's primary concern is with *representations* of Ireland and, as such, he references international works such as *Ryan's Daughter* (David Lean, 1970) and *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975), 103.

16mm film, which limited its distribution”.<sup>140</sup> He goes on to point out that *The Courier* (1987) and *Joyriders* (1987) were both made on Super 16mm, “a film stock more easily and cheaply blown up to 35mm, the standard gauge for commercial cinema distribution.”<sup>141</sup> This seems to position the earlier generation of filmmakers as somehow opposed to a wider distribution. A number of important Irish films, including *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, *Down the Corner*, *Traveller* and *Maeve*, were distributed internationally by the Production Board of the British Film Institute. But in reference to the funding of *Maeve*, Pettitt simply notes that “inexperienced filmmakers like Murphy had to take funding from where they could”.

Although their accounts are characterised by very different emphases, both McLoone and Pettitt both situate the practices of the 70s and 80s in relation to subsequent developments in Irish filmmaking, and specifically the expansion of indigenous production in the area of narrative cinema. McLoone’s account is perhaps particularly significant in this respect, in that it foregrounds the “*emergence of a contemporary cinema*”, a phrase that perhaps suggests progression or evolution. The emphasis on narrative cinema seems to work against the exclusion of other forms of practice<sup>142</sup> and it frames the practices of the 1970s and 80s in a particular way. For example, Pettitt situates the short films of the 1990s within the context of a “vital element running through contemporary Irish film culture” which encompasses “experimental, formalist films” such as Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *A Pint of Plain* (1975) and Joe Comerford’s *Waterbag* (1984). While he is clearly concerned to establish a continuity

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<sup>140</sup> Pettitt, 97. Elsewhere, he has examined modes of production in far greater detail. See Lance Pettitt, *December Bride*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001). See also Lance Pettitt, “Phillip Donellan, Ireland and Dissident Documentary”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.3 (2000): 351-366.

<sup>141</sup> Pettitt, 107. 16mm distribution circuits did cater for a specialised, and arguably elite, audience but it is equally evident that many of these works were a focus for popular as well as specialist attention. Both Quinn and Comerford were, in fact, deeply committed to a ‘popular’ audience and Comerford’s *Reefer and the Model* (1988) was actually produced on 35mm.

<sup>142</sup> Vivienne Dick’s work is not referenced by either McLoone or Pettitt. Other works overlooked include *Sometime City* (City Vision, 1986), *The Bargain Shop* (Johnny Gogan, 1992) and *Before I Sleep* (Paul Mercier, 1997). *Cinema and Ireland*, however, provides an analysis of *Sometime City*, which situates it in relation to British tradition of social drama, 271-2.

of Irish “experimental” film (a project that since has been taken up by others)<sup>143</sup> the current context for short film production is radically different from that which informed the work of O’Sullivan in 1970s.

Kevin Rockett articulates a very different perspective on recent Irish cinema, and on the changing relationship between the national and the international, in a 1997 article written for a special issue of *Cineaste*.<sup>144</sup> Like McLoone and Pettitt, Rockett notes the emergence of an Irish cinema modelled around Hollywood genres. Yet, instead of highlighting a productive reworking of generic convention, Rockett emphasises a pronounced shift *away* from the culturally engaged practice of the late 1970s and 80s. He suggests that “the huge expansion in the production of Irish films in the 1990’s, [...] is not leading to the type of critical indigenous cinema that would make a significant cultural intervention in Ireland.”<sup>145</sup> This is because, he argues, Hollywood’s standardised forms work to shift the focus of the narrative away from social or political issues into the sphere of the personal.

Debbie Ging’s recent analysis of “Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger” also develops an unfavourable comparison between the ‘First Wave’ and recent Irish cinema. Ging argues that the work of filmmakers such as Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy has been largely “written off as experimental or avant-garde and thus of little relevance to what we might now refer to as a national film industry.”<sup>146</sup> She suggests that these works have also been ‘dismissed’ because of an “excessive” thematic emphasis on issues such as religion, violence or national identity. She does not develop this notion of

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<sup>143</sup> Pettitt, 254. See Ted Sheehy, “Essay - 30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Film Maker”, *30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Film Maker*, (Dublin: Arts Council, 2003) 13-15.

<sup>144</sup> Kevin Rockett, “Irish Cinema: The National in the International”, *Cineaste*, XXIV.2-3 (1999): 23-25. See also the historical overview of Irish cinema in Richard Haslam, “Irish Film: Screening the Republic”, *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-99*, ed. Ray Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000): 130-146. See also Joe Cleary’s analysis of dominant aesthetic and political ideologies in the Irish cinema and writing of the 90s in “Modernisation and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture”, *Writing in the Irish Republic*, 105-129.

<sup>145</sup> Rockett, “Irish Cinema: The National in the International”, 25.

<sup>146</sup> Debbie Ging “Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger”, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, 178.

thematic excess, however, and instead theorises a First Wave in which ‘outsiders’ “spoke their own realities rather than being interpreted through dominant discourses”.<sup>147</sup> Ging emphasises that this “progressive” body of work developed through a “reworking” of “*conventional cinematic form*” and a process of self-questioning, which finds expression in a narrative emphasis on history and issues of identity. Although her account is persuasive it foregrounds a dialogue between “conventional” cinematic form and popular cultural memory over any exploration of the international currents shaping Irish practice.

Both Rockett and Ging seem to read the shift from culturally specific critique to postmodern homogeneity as a failure of Irish policy and practice in the face of globalisation. Ging states:

Just as this ‘cinema of resistance’ was starting to get off the ground, the growth in multinational investment and our increasing sense of global identity shifted the focus from a concern with popular memory to a concern with constructing a more ‘progressive’ cosmopolitan identity.<sup>148</sup>

This trajectory is by no means specific to Irish cinema, however, and it might also be useful to consider the factors shaping the development of *international* avant-garde film. Thomas Elsaesser is among those who have called attention to the decline of oppositional cinemas in the 1980s and 90s. He argues that with the resurgence of Hollywood led by blockbusters such as *Jaws* (1975) avant-garde filmmakers “found themselves forced into coexistence on the Americans’ own terms”.<sup>149</sup> One of the key factors shaping Hollywood’s transformation during this period was, of course, television and Elsaesser contends that the avant-garde has largely failed to engage with this medium. He writes:

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<sup>147</sup> Ging, 185.

<sup>148</sup> Ging, 185.

<sup>149</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Hyper-, Retro- or Counter-Cinema”, *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, eds. John King, Ana M. Lopez and Manuel Alvarado, (London: BFI Publishing 1993) 121.

Video art has had to retreat to the museums and galleries in order find any public space at all. The national cinemas of developing or post-colonial countries [...] have had to struggle even on the festival circuits.<sup>150</sup>

He emphasises that Hollywood's hegemony can only be challenged through the recuperation of *mythology* and he notes that some filmmakers, often those able to secure funding from television, became "double agents for a cinema which knowingly pastiched or cleverly inverted movie mythology".

The growth in Irish film production during the 1990s has certainly been most pronounced in dramatic features and shorts, the areas highlighted by Irish cinema studies. During the same period, despite the re-establishment of state subvention, filmmakers such as Comerford and Murphy have faced significant obstacles with regard to financing. This would seem to reinforce the critique of Irish cinema developed by Rockett and Ging. Yet it could be argued that forms of critical film practice *do* persist, albeit in more marginal areas such as artist's film, media activism and television drama. Arguably, it is the *displacement* and *dispersion*, rather than the disappearance of a film avant-garde that must be theorised. This process cannot be understood without an analysis of film distribution, education, curation and distribution that encompasses international and local contexts.

### **Conclusion: The Archaeology of Irish Cinema**

In the course of my analysis, I have identified a number of specific social, cultural and political factors structuring the international revival of avant-garde practice in the late 60s and early 70s, ranging from developments in Hollywood, and in media technology, to the various Civil Rights and anti-war protest movements that radicalised elements of American and European society. Drawing upon the theories and genealogies of avant-garde practice developed by Foster, Burger, Willemsen and Huyssen, among others, I have highlighted the avant-garde's connection to popular social and political movements and the structural relationship between successive revivals or repetitions. As Bürger has noted, the avant-garde project is resolutely

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<sup>150</sup> Elsaesser, "Hyper-, Retro- or Counter-Cinema", 123.

historical, emerging as a critique (and a consequence) of art's autonomy from everyday life, a critique that is directed, at least in part, towards the institutional discourses structuring production and reception. The key point that emerges from this analysis of theory and practice is, perhaps, the fact that the 'avant-garde' can *only* be defined through reference to contemporary social formations.

My analysis has also emphasised the *national* character of avant-garde revivals. For example, Sylvia Harvey's account of May'68 highlights the fact that French media workers, labourers and students were, at least temporarily, all united in their critique of state institutions, including universities and broadcasting authorities. Raymond Williams' theorisation of realism can also be situated in relation to a broader debate around critical practice in British broadcasting and I have also called attention to the cultural and economic factors shaping the development of both North American and English avant-gardes, through reference to the work of Annette Michelson and Pam Cook. With respect to the Irish context, Claire Johnston's analysis of Irish filmmaking in the 70s and 80s suggests that Irish literary culture retains a radical potential while, elsewhere, Luke Gibbons highlights the particular relationship between Irish avant-garde practice, media technology and the popular.

This survey of critical discourse structures my own approach to the analysis of Irish film in the remainder of this study. Informed by the historical character of the avant-garde critique, and by Foucault's archaeological model, I examine the systems of relations between texts, practices, structures and institutions. In the course of my analysis I place considerable emphasis on the role played by international agencies and institutions in the circulation of Irish film during the 1970s and 80s and read developments in film culture through specific texts, approaching them as 'allegories' of a particular system of relations. It might be argued that allegory is somehow particular to 'postmodern' culture and Craig Owens is among those that have theorised the resurgence of an "allegorical impulse" in film and art practice.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse – Towards a Theory of Postmodernism" [1980] *Art After Modernism*, 203-235. See also Fredric Jameson's "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film" [1977], *Signatures of the Visible*, New

Although he focuses on the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Cindy Sherman, Owen identifies allegory as a long-established critical method, deployed by the historical Avant-garde. He emphasises that the allegorical work reads as a *site* in which fragments are embedded, fragments that signal “mortality [and] the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject”.<sup>152</sup>

A theory of allegory, informed by the work of Benjamin, is also central to Bürger’s account of the historical Avant-garde. Noting that allegory is “essentially [a] fragment and thus the opposite of the organic symbol”, Bürger points out that it is through the removal and the re-assemblage of fragments, outside their original context, that meaning is linked to an image of history in decline.<sup>153</sup> While the ‘fragmentary’ character of allegory initially leads him to foreground the phenomenon of *montage* in painting, film and literature, Bürger’s account emphasises that the significance of montage is located in reception-effects rather than in production, since it functions primarily to turn attention towards the principle of construction. So allegory is *not* limited to strategies of overt appropriation, nor is it particular to the ‘open, fissured text’ privileged by *Screen/Tel Quel*. Instead the allegorical mode can also be located in the reconfiguration of narrative and generic setting that Paul Willemsen theorises in Irish and international film. Craig Owens’s account also raises a further issue; the fact that the postmodern work also operates as “the narrative – the allegory – of its own fundamental illegibility” and, instead of proclaiming its autonomy or self-sufficiency, narrates its own contingency and insufficiency.<sup>154</sup> Despite Owens’s apparent pessimism, this articulation of ‘insufficiency’ could also be understood as an *extension* of the avant-garde project of institutional critique. Following this model, Irish filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s can be read as the site of both an interrogation of representation *and* a critique of contemporary structures of production and reception.

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York and London: Routledge, 1992) 35-54 and his more controversial “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text* 15, (Autumn 1986): 65-88.

<sup>152</sup> Owens, 226.

<sup>153</sup> Bürger, 68-73.

<sup>154</sup> Owens, 235.



## Chapter Two

### From Film Societies to Festivals:

#### The Inter-National Circulation of Irish Avant-garde Film

In the discourse of any film is written the context of its discourses; the functions of its production are visible in that documentation of its own production that every film performs. [...] For as every film – from the multi-million dollar epic of conspicuous investment to the fragments of a home movie – internalises the conditions of its production, it makes itself an allegory of them. *This is especially clear, though no more true, in films that transgress the dominant cinema's form or function.*

David James (1989)<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

David E. James suggests that every film *performs* the “documentation” of its own production, noting that this performance may be most overt in avant-garde or oppositional film. It might be possible, however, to expand James’ model beyond the issue of production, to encompass film-cultural networks of distribution and exhibition so that the circulation of a film text would also be read as the document of a particular cultural moment. The latter part of this study develops this approach to specific film practices, theorising the work of Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Bob Quinn in relation to emergent ‘subaltern’, ‘migrant’ and feminist film cultures. But, in advance of these in-depth analyses of practice, it is necessary to outline the broader ‘inter-national’ context for the circulation of Irish avant-garde film.

The current chapter focuses primarily on the late 1970s and early 80s and it highlights parallel developments in film and arts policy, in Ireland, Britain and North America. It theorises avant-garde practice, particularly in the area of distribution, as an index of wider cultural and political change. In particular, it considers the work of independent

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<sup>1</sup> David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) 12. [Emphasis added].

(although frequently state-sponsored) distributors and broadcasters during this period. It foregrounds the growing importance of art galleries, museums and national cultural festival as sites for the exhibition of avant-garde film and video and examines the role of film education and criticism in shaping archival and distribution policies.

My discussion is informed by a number of important histories of avant-garde film distribution, including Sylvia Harvey's analysis of 'The Other Cinema' and Margaret Dickinson's *Rogue Reels*, an account of British oppositional political cinema that charts the rise and fall of various distribution collectives.<sup>2</sup> Yet there has been little in the way of an overview of the international networks for avant-garde distribution and exhibition during this period and even less attention to the interplay between national and international agencies. This is perhaps surprising given the emphasis within many accounts of globalisation on the issues of distribution and on the development of media and communication technologies.<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson and David Harvey are among those who have identified film as a site for the articulation (and allegorisation) of the cultural, political and social changes wrought by globalised capitalism. Jameson suggests that the "formal features" of postmodernism "express the deeper logic" of late, consumer or multinational capitalism while Harvey focuses specifically on the theme of "time-space compression", as evidence of a transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation.<sup>4</sup> Before Irish avant-garde film can be theorised as a document or *performance* of globalised postmodern culture, however, it is necessary

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<sup>2</sup> See Sylvia Harvey, "The Other Cinema – A History: Part I 1970-77" *Screen* 26.6, (November/December 1985): 40-57 and "The Other Cinema – A History: Part II", *Screen* 27.2 (March/April 1986): 80-96. See also Sylvia Harvey, "The 'Other Cinema' in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984", *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr, (London: British Film Institute, 1986): 225-251 and Marc Karlin, interviewed by Claire Johnston, Mark Nash and Paul Willemen "Problems of Independent Cinema: A Discussion between Marc Karlin and Claire Johnston, Mark Nash and Paul Willemen", *Screen* 21.4, (1980/81): 19- 43.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) and Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985) 125. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 308-323. For an analysis of earlier crises of over-accumulation see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

to outline the 'inter-national' context for film production and distribution in the 70s and 80s.

### **Allegories of New Social Relations: Theorising Irish Film Culture**

Kevin Rockett has provided a number of authoritative accounts of Irish film culture in the 1970s and he identifies a number of social, political, cultural and institutional developments that contributed to increased fiction film production during this period.<sup>5</sup> Within the broader social context he highlights the end of protectionism, entry into the European Economic Community, increased urbanisation, declining self-employment, in favour a more high-skilled labour market, and a move away from nationalism towards class politics. As Rockett notes, narrative cinema emerged as the primary focus for a very diverse group of Irish practitioners during this period; from documentarists and filmmakers trained in RTÉ to artists working in Ireland and in Britain. He also highlights a number of developments in the area of film and cultural policy (following the introduction of the 1973 Arts Act), which will be addressed in further detail at a later stage in this chapter.

Other accounts have, however, foregrounded the changes that took place in the early 80s. In "The Theater of Irish Cinema", Dudley Andrew notes that indigenous Irish filmmaking gained momentum in the 1980s, "a decade of doldrums for the medium generally, when cine-clubs and arthouses dwindled and Hollywood reasserted its global grip on distribution."<sup>6</sup> He suggests that a film such as *Eat the Peach* (1986) can be read as "the allegory of the cottage industry of which it is a part" and he draws a parallel between the 'Wall of Death' built by the film's central characters and the production process itself. He states:

Full of blarney itself, the film might have been conceived in a pub and inspired by videos of Hollywood pictures. Cobbled together, its rickety

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Rockett, "Breakthroughs" *Cinema and Ireland*, Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, (London: Routledge, 1987) 127-129. See also Kevin Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture: Ireland", *Screen Education* 27 (Summer 1978): 23-33.

<sup>6</sup> Dudley Andrew, "The Theatre of Irish Cinema", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15.1 (Spring 2002): 27.

structure starts to fall apart as things accelerate. And yet the effort to make a film in Ireland, to build an incongruous attraction in the middle of nowhere and on the cheap...this is what counts.<sup>7</sup>

Andrew notes that *Eat the Peach* was funded by Channel Four as well as by the Irish Film Board and he suggests that it is characterised by “a crucial international dimension” that is *absent* from earlier “makeshift” productions such as Bob Quinn’s *Poitin* (1978). Andrew is particularly keen to situate developments in Irish cinema in relation to the Field Day project (established in 1980), and to emphasise the critical frame of reference produced through the interaction between film, theatre and postcolonial theory.

As a consequence, Andrew seems to pay less attention to the radicalisation of indigenous production and distribution during the 1970s, ignoring the fact that *Poitin*, and much of Quinn’s early work, is also characterised by international dimension. Of all of the filmmakers addressed in this study, Bob Quinn might appear at first glance to be most resolutely *local* in his concerns and approach to production and distribution. While contemporaries such as Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O’Sullivan, Vivienne Dick and Pat Murphy were supported by British and American agencies, Quinn’s work was predominantly financed in Ireland (through political sponsorship, commissions or state subvention). But as others have noted, Quinn’s emphasis on the local is informed by reference to international movements, such as Latin American Third Cinema and the work of the National Film Board of Canada.<sup>8</sup> More significantly, for the purposes of the current discussion, many of Quinn’s films circulated within structures of distribution and exhibition (such as the MoMA Circulating Film Library and Project Cinema Club) that were defined by an engagement with international critical practice. The “critical regionalism” that Andrew identifies in the films of the 1980s can, in fact, be traced to an earlier moment in Irish film culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew, 36.

<sup>8</sup> See Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, (London: BFI, 2000) 132. For a comparison of the work of Quinn and Canadian documentary filmmaker

### Avant-garde and Independent Distribution in the US

As I have already noted, avant-garde practice in Europe and the US re-emerged partly in protest against American and European national media. The development of oppositional distribution and exhibition networks (particularly in the US) was also an indirect production of Hollywood's process of transformation during the 60s. In his account of American film in the 60s, David E. James foregrounds a fluid exchange of practices between the industry and the 'independents'. He states:

[F]ar from being categorically defined against a monolithic, uncontradictory industry, these alternatives emerge from (and in certain circumstances merge with) a similar plurality of practices constructed in the margins of the industry or even as mutations within it.<sup>9</sup>

The commercial success of *Easy Rider* (1969), a film that exemplified a new approach to production, seemed to signal a turning point in the relations between independent and mainstream cinema. But James notes that by the late 1960s the industry had *already* been forced to acquire a much greater flexibility in both structural and economic terms, partly as a result of earlier anti-trust legislation. The decentralisation of production during the 1950s had, he argues, enabled major studios to become "more and more the distribution apparatus for independently produced features, which by 1967 amounted to 51.1 percent of all features released".<sup>10</sup> During the same period, networks for the theatrical and non-theatrical distribution of avant-garde and experimental film in the US had also become more established. In the late 1940s Amos Vogel had founded Cinema 16, "America's largest and most successful film society",<sup>11</sup> and in 1951 the first American Art Film Festival was held in New York. In the decade that followed, overall US box office attendance declined

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Pierre Perrault see Jerry White "Arguing with Ethnography: The Films of Bob Quinn and Pierre Perrault", *Cinema Journal* 42.2 (2003): 101-124.

<sup>9</sup> James, 22.

<sup>10</sup> James, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987) 197-199.

dramatically but the theatrical market for 'art cinema' and commercial foreign releases boomed.

By the 1960s many independent distributors had also begun to target a number of niche audiences within urban centres. Kevin Heffernan has analysed changing patterns of genre production and distribution during this period. He notes that, in the early 60s, many smaller "art cinema" distributors (such as Continental) shifted focus to the inner-city movie houses serving the African American community.<sup>12</sup> Certain genres or sub-genres, such as the horror film or the low-budget race-relations drama, proved particularly popular with these audiences. Heffernan cites Roger Corman's *The Intruder* (1961), Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1962) and Ossie Davis' *Gone Are the Days* (1963) as examples of the latter category. But it seems that this sub-genre achieved coherence only in exhibition, as these three films were defined by very different modes of production and were subsequently associated with quite distinct traditions. Clarke's film has been categorised as part of the American avant-garde, "a crossover between beat and black bohemianism", and is prominently referenced in the publicity materials for a 2001 survey of American Avant-garde film curated by Chrissie Iles and Mark Webber at the Whitney Museum of American Art, entitled *The Cool World: Film & Video in America 1950–2000*.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, *The Intruder* (which stars William Shatner) is a naturalistic, although low budget, drama that achieved wider commercial success when it was renamed *I Hate Your Guts* and promoted as an "exploitation" film.

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<sup>12</sup> Kevin Heffernan, "Inner-city Exhibition and the Genre Film: Distributing *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)", *Cinema Journal*, 41. 3, (Spring 2002): 59-77. It is, of course, difficult to specify what is meant by 'art cinema' but Heffernan notes that Continental's art cinema successes during this period included *The Mark* (1961) a social problem drama dealing with an Irish man imprisoned in a psychiatric ward for child abuse and Joseph Strick's *Ulysses* (1967) which grossed over \$3 million. See also Douglas Gomery, *A History of Movie Presentation in the US* (London: BFI, 1992) 155-96. For further details on "alternative exhibition" see the filmography included in Dan Streible, "The Literature of Film Exhibition: A Bibliography", *The Velvet Light Trap* 25, Spring 1990: 81 –119.

<sup>13</sup> Chrissie Iles and Mark Webber, Programme notes for *The Cool World: Film & Video in America 1950–2000*, Whitney Museum of American Art, Fall 1999. *Hi-Beam: An Online Magazine for Experimental Film and Culture*. April 23, 2002. <<http://www.hi-beam.net/org/whitney/part1.html>>

Informed by these developments in distribution, a group of US filmmakers, led by Jonas Mekas, established the New American Cinema and the Film Maker's Co-operative, which acted as a distributor. Members retained the rights over their films but collaborated in the distribution of every film submitted to Co-op, with 75 per cent of the rentals returned to the filmmaker. This model was followed by other non-profit groups, such as Canyon Cinema in California. In 1968 the Film-Maker's Distribution Centre was set up to distribute avant-garde film on a more commercial basis, to meet the popular demand for art cinema. The 1970s also witnessed the rise of a *regional* model of production and distribution, developed in explicit opposition to both Hollywood and the independent film cultures associated with the metropolitan centre.

This movement was based around "Four-Walling", a mode of exhibition associated with early cinema's touring road shows, which involves the payment of a flat fee for the hire of the cinema in return for box-office receipts, minus the profits from concessions. The 1970s Four Wall trend originated with a series of amateur 16mm hunting films that a group of Utahans showed to small-town groups around the Rocky Mountain States in the late 1960s<sup>14</sup>. In many of these regions, television reception was either poor or nonexistent and the success of these impromptu screenings prompted the amateur filmmakers to distribute and exhibit documentary films on a commercial basis.<sup>15</sup> They targeted a conservative family audience (which included a high proportion of children) and tended to focus on films with "wilderness themes".<sup>16</sup>

Frederick Wasser situates the 1970s Four Wall movement in relation to earlier regional or community based practices, such as the pre-War films of Oscar Micheaux (made for the African-American market), the Ukrainian-American films of Edgar

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Wasser, "Four Walling Exhibition: Regional Resistance to the Hollywood Film Industry", *Cinema Journal* 34. 2 (Winter 1995): 54.

<sup>15</sup> See Wayne Kabak, "Four-Walling", *Film Comment*, (November-December 1975): 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> Wasser, 54. These values were of course politically conservative. A typical plotline of a wilderness film concerned an escape from the corruption of modern society, a struggle against natural disaster, developers or hunters and a resolution of natural order. Wasser notes that these films rarely featured female characters, and women were never portrayed as independent. One of Sunn's most successful films, *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams* (1975), became the basis for an NBC television series.

Ulmer, Yiddish-American films and the films of the American labour movement. He suggests that community-based “alternative filmmaking” is defined by “three factors: genres grounded in the region or community, marginal production practices, and alternative marketing”.<sup>17</sup> But unlike earlier community practices, Four-Wallers such as Sunn Classics soon began to prioritise *marketing*. They began to research their target audiences, often testing story concepts in “field studies” at local supermarkets. Local television advertising also became an important part of their strategy, to the extent that distribution was dictated by “the strength of the television signals carrying the ads”.<sup>18</sup>

The most significant impact of the independents’ new approach was in this use of “saturation advertising” on television and in the careful booking of films. In rural areas they would move from town to town, reducing the costs of producing large numbers of prints and limiting the impact of negative word of mouth. In more urban areas, they tended to book twice the standard number of theatres for the opening week. Four-wallers benefited from the fact that, in the early 1970s, the major Hollywood studios were increasingly leaning towards longer first-runs and ignoring the second and third run neighbourhood theatres. From 1973 to 76 they generated profits that rivalled those of Hollywood, to the extent that Universal and Warner Bros also began to ‘Four-wall’ cinemas (for the release of both *Westworld* and *The Exorcist*) until theatre owners protested.<sup>19</sup> Mainstream studios also re-appropriated many of the marketing, advertising and booking strategies that were associated with Four Walling.

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<sup>17</sup> Wasser, 61.

<sup>18</sup> See Wayne Kabak, “Four-Walling”, 31.

<sup>19</sup> Wasser notes that, in 1976, theatre owners instituted a ten-year ban on Major studios’ use of this practice, 57. Four-walling strategy was also damaged by rising inflation in television advertising rates and the cinema experience had, in any case, largely failed to live up to the advertising hype. See James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, The Power, The Money, The Movies*, (New York: Plume New American Library, 1979) 15. Four Walling was largely discredited as a commercial practice but it retains a certain currency within the independent sector. See Amanda Harcourt, Naomi Moskovic, Neil Howlett and Sally Davies, *The Independent Producer: Film and Television*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 218



## Film Distribution and the Irish State

Within the Irish context, debates around independent and indigenous production were of course structured by 'national' discourses, such as those foregrounded by Paul Willemen.<sup>20</sup> But an examination of state subvention during this period illustrates the extent to which national policy was shaped by reference to both North American and British distribution. During the 1950s and 1960s, Irish state agencies such as Bord Fáilte, Aer Lingus, the Department of External Affairs and the Industrial Development Authority commissioned and distributed a range of documentaries and shorts for the British and American markets, generally promoting tourism or other industries. Irish film companies, however, produced little of this material because of the existence of international commercial monopolies and subvention structures.

In a study of the Irish film industry published in *The Irish Times* and as an Irish Film Society booklet in 1967, Louis Marcus analysed the impact of British distribution monopolies on Irish production.<sup>21</sup> He noted that, in order to take advantage of the British Eady Fund, companies such as Rank and Pathé produced all of the shorts shown in British cinemas and, as a result, they were not inclined to show Irish made films on their screens.<sup>22</sup> The Eady Fund, a statutory levy on cinema seats, was distributed amongst British producers in proportion to their success at the box office and Kevin Rockett notes that during the 1960s, Ardmore Studios was actually defined as a UK studio in order to take advantage of this fund.<sup>23</sup> This meant that only members of UK unions could be employed as technicians. During this period the Irish Film Finance Corporation was set up as an inducement for foreign producers but it offered little assistance to Irish filmmakers, as they could not provide a guarantee of distribution.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question", *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, (London: BFI, 1989) 17.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Marcus, *The Irish Film Industry*, (Dublin: Irish Film Society, 1967) 26.

<sup>22</sup> Irish subsidiaries of Rank and Pathé did provide distribution (within Ireland) of Irish-made documentaries such as the Gael-Linn newsreels but Bord Fáilte and Aer Lingus had to commission Rank to produce tourism films aimed at British audiences. For a discussion of some of these tourism films see Stephanie Rains, "Home From Home: Diasporic Images of Ireland in Film and Tourism", *Irish Tourism: Image, Culture and Identity* eds. Michael Cronin and Barbara O'Connor (Clevedon, England: Channel View Publications, forthcoming 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Rockett, *Cinema and Ireland*, 100-101.

In his analysis Marcus argues that since Irish state agencies commission films from Irish producers for *non-theatrical* international screenings circuits they should focus on ‘prestige’ documentaries such as Patrick Carey’s *Yeats Country* (1965). Carey’s film was acclaimed at international festivals; it won the Golden Bear at Berlin and was also Oscar-nominated and, according to Marcus, it achieved a wide circulation in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, Japan as well as in Britain and Ireland, through “art-house cinema distribution, 16mm specialised distribution and television showings”.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 5: Scenic Irish landscapes in *Yeats Country* (© Patrick Carey, 1965)

Marcus also calls attention to the decline of commercial circuits and the relative boom in art-house exhibition, particularly within the US and he emphasises the importance of reaching a “quality audience”. He suggests that Irish films should be addressed towards:

[N]ot only the foreign administrators and businessmen whose good opinion of us will be vital in the competitive years ahead, but also the men who run the mass-media of their various countries, and thus create the popular image which Ireland enjoys in most countries.<sup>25</sup>

He ends his discussion with the observation that, as British arthouse distributors such as Contemporary Films or Gala are concerned only with “quality”, they should be receptive to Irish film. Marcus’ account is instructive for the way in which it relies upon a particular notion of art and ‘quality’. These terms are highly contested, however, and the 1970s were in fact marked by political and cultural battles around

<sup>24</sup> *Yeats Country* featured prominently in a festival season devoted to Irish film at Toronto in 1970, alongside a mix of Irish-produced and Irish-themed work.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus, 28.

definitions of 'quality' cinema, particularly within the British context.<sup>26</sup> An analysis of subsequent developments in Irish film also points towards a recurrent tension between notions of art cinema, and quality, and a more politically engaged avant-garde critique. But the model proposed by Louis Marcus, and in particular the call for state involvement in an Irish 'art cinema' aimed at an international festival audiences, seems to have informed Irish cultural policy in the early 1970s.

The 1973 Arts Act allowed the Arts Council to support cinema as an *art form* for the first time<sup>27</sup> and this policy shift led directly to the establishment of a Film Script Award for production (co-funded with RTÉ), and to a number of other initiatives. These included *Film Directions: A Film Magazine for Ireland*, a quarterly publication that was jointly funded with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Many of the contributors to *Film Directions* addressed issues relating to distribution policy and practice (as well as film theory) and like Ciaran Carty's regular film features, in the *Sunday Independent*, the magazine lobbied for improvements within the domestic infrastructure. For example, in a report from the 1978 London Film Festival, David Simmons notes the inclusion of Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* and a double-bill of films produced with Arts Council assistance in 1978 (*Poitin* and Kieran Hickey's *Exposure*).<sup>28</sup> While acknowledging this latter event as "important international recognition for developing Irish film-making activity", Simmons describes O'Sullivan's film as "another victim of [Ireland's] limited avenues of exhibition and distribution".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John Ellis explored the notion of 'quality cinema' developed by critics during the 1940s in support of a high-brow but commercial British cinema, within the context of debates around independent cinema in the 1970s in "Art, Culture and Quality – Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and Seventies", *Screen* 19. 3 (Autumn 1978): 9-47. Steve Neale compares various national manifestations of Art Cinema in "Art Cinema as Institution", *Screen* 22. (1981): 11-39.

<sup>27</sup> For an analysis of the background to the 1973 Arts Act see Ted Sheehy, "Essay: 30 Years On – The Arts Council and the Film Maker", *30 Years On – The Arts Council and the Film Maker* (Dublin: Arts Council and Film Institute of Ireland, 2003) 13-15.

<sup>28</sup> David Simmons, "London" *Film Directions* 1.4 (1978): 9-11 and 24.

<sup>29</sup> Simmons, 11.

In 1981 *Film Directions* produced an issue specifically devoted to distribution, focusing on parallels between the British and Irish contexts and on the challenges presented by *television*. In a section on 'art film', Barry Edson notes the existence of two regional British circuits (the schools and film societies that made up the non-theatrical circuit and the network of Regional Theatres, which were affiliated to the British Film Institute) but he suggests that the regional circuit has been undermined by television screenings of new films.<sup>30</sup> In practice, this meant that films with apparently limited commercial potential (often subtitled material) could be screened on television almost immediately after their London screening, bypassing the Regional circuit entirely.

In the same publication, Michael Open emphasises the low rates paid by British broadcasters (prior to the establishment of Channel Four) for transmission rights for feature films. Open suggests that the British property boom of the 1970s had contributed to the demise of a number of "marginally profitable" cinemas<sup>31</sup> and he notes the increased use of television advertising by major distributors to reach audiences that are not regular cinemagoers. He is highly critical of this approach, however, primarily because of its associations with "four-walling" in the US. He also suggests that it is likely to be heavily exploited in the "provinces", which (for the purposes of distribution) include Ireland. Irish distributor Gerry Duffy also acknowledges that television advertising has "revolutionised the whole pattern of cinema attendance" in Ireland<sup>32</sup> to the extent that Irish distributors must actively "create" audiences for smaller films, through advertising and promotion. It is significant that, like the majors studios in the US, both Open and Duffy look towards *marginal* practices as a means of reaching more elusive audiences. Duffy's analysis, in fact, concludes with a call for independent Irish theatrical operators to appropriate

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<sup>30</sup> Barry Edson, "Percolating Pictures" *Film Directions*, 4.14 (1981): 13-16.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Open, "Putting on a Show" *Film Directions*, 4.14 (1981): 20. For further analysis of property speculation and changing patterns in US theatrical exhibition see Thomas Guback, "The Evolution of the Motion Picture Theater Business in the 1980s", *Exhibition: The Film Reader*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (London, New York: Routledge, 2002) 127-136.

<sup>32</sup> Gerry Duffy, "The Film Distributor in Ireland", *Film Directions*, 4.14 (1981): 11.

the niche marketing strategies employed by the Federation of Irish Film Societies (later to become known as Access Cinema).

### **Critical Contexts: Irish Film Clubs and Societies in the 1970s**

An Irish Film Society had been in existence since 1936 but it was perceived to be biased towards Dublin in terms of its organisation.<sup>33</sup> In the late 1970s, however, a Federation of Irish Film Societies (FIFS) was formed with the support of the Arts Council, as a means of developing a national arthouse circuit. The FIFS booked films from Irish and international distributors for a growing number of film societies around Ireland.<sup>34</sup> It had an office in Project Arts Centre and a full-time administrator, who organised bookings on behalf of each member society. There were no selection criteria as regards distributors and in its early stages the Federation approached every 16mm outlet in London and Dublin, passing on the information as to what they had available. In practice, however, the FIFS dealt primarily with independent British distributors such as Contemporary and The Other Cinema.

Although its programming and policy objectives remained implicit rather than explicit, the Federation seems to have supported the distribution and exhibition of newer work as well as 'classics'. Most operated in cities and towns where, as Michael Dwyer notes, there was no alternative to the local commercial cinema and "no opportunity whatsoever" to see foreign-language films or US and UK independent productions<sup>35</sup>. As a result societies often prioritised the exhibition of "mainstream arthouse" film. But from 1979, under the administration of Michael Dwyer, the Federation of Irish Film Societies organised "national viewing sessions".



Figure 6: Poster, *Harlan County, USA* (© Barbara Kopple, 1976)

<sup>33</sup> Michael Dwyer provided details on his work in Tralee Film Society (1972-77) and in the FIFS (as administrator from 1978-82) in an email interview, June 5 2002.

<sup>34</sup> In 1978 there were 23 societies listed in the "Film Diary", *Film Directions*, 1. 4, (1978): 23. Michael Dwyer notes that membership of larger societies such as Tralee Film Society numbered around 600 in the period from 1972-1977.

<sup>35</sup> Dwyer, interview with the author.

These were weekend screenings and information meetings, held in different towns across the country, and they enabled society organisers (usually voluntary representatives) to view a large number of otherwise inaccessible films within an informed context. Michael Dwyer suggests that these screenings contributed to the success of a small number of political films such as *Harlan County, USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1976). Kopple's film documents the Kentucky coal miner's strike in 1973 and provides an overview of labour politics in mining. The FIFS circuit also featured feminist work such as *Take It Like A Man, Ma'am* (Knudsen, Rygaard, Vilstrup, 1975), a drama that uses fantasy to explore sexism in the home and the workplace.

Irish film clubs and societies were able to subvert strict licensing laws through a membership system, and they may also have evaded censorship because, as Rockett notes, they were perceived to serve the "middle and upper classes".<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere (in an article written in 2003) Ted Sheehy notes that the persistence of this censorship regime inevitably limits the circulation of avant-garde film:

The less commercial the screening context, the heavier (proportionately) the financial burden of censorship is on the exhibitor. This has the effect of pushing non-commercial, abstract, and experimental work out of the public domain.<sup>37</sup>

But some Irish filmmakers dismissed the club system, and the Irish film society circuit in particular, as elitist and inaccessible. In a *Film Directions* interview in 1979, Bob Quinn describes society members as "filmophiles", and "aesthetes" and he emphasises the need to reach "people that might benefit from seeing independent films".<sup>38</sup> Quinn aspired to reach an audience that was "somewhere between the

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<sup>36</sup> Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture", 27. For a relatively contemporary account of Irish arts audiences (with some reference to cinema) see Richard Sinnott and David Kavanagh, *Audiences, Acquisitions and Amateurs: Participation in the Arts in Ireland*, (Dublin: Arts Council, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> Ted Sheehy, *30 Years On*, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Bob Quinn, interview (along with Joe Comerford and Cathal Black) by Michael Open, "Standard Deviations: Distribution for Independent Films", *Film Directions* 2. 5, (Spring 1979): 14-16. There were no unions or worker's groups within the FIFS but Michael Dwyer (interviewed by the author) emphasises that many of the members of regional film societies were also active in labour unions and other political organisations.

filmophiles who go to the film societies and the I.F.T [Irish Film Theatre] and Q.F.T. [Queens Film Theatre, Belfast] and the like and the more general film viewing public who think of cinemas only in terms of James Bond”.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 7: “Public Barred from Year’s Best Movies!”, Ciaran Carty’s Arts Page, *Sunday Independent* 3 Dec. 1978 © Sunday Independent

The Irish Film Theatre (IFT) was established in 1977 under the direction of an Arts Council-appointed Independent Board, which provided programming advice until this role was taken over by the Irish Film Institute. These IFT programmes (published in *Film Directions* along with those of the FIFS) included a high proportion of foreign language film, by filmmakers such as Bergman, Besson, Fassbinder and Bertolucci.<sup>40</sup> Instead of the existing membership system, Bob Quinn proposed that film societies should use the 16mm equipment in school halls, in order to show films more “publicly”. Both Quinn and Joe Comerford sought to establish a more direct involvement in distribution by presenting their films in person. Quinn in particular privileged local cinemas over commercial television, primarily because he strenuously objected (and still objects) to advertising on television. He screened his film *Poitin* in a Galway cinema, because he claimed that he wanted to assess the “reactions” of this “public audience.”

Critiques of the film society system also emerged from those who, like Ciaran Carty, objected to state censorship. In a 1978 article, for the *Sunday Independent Arts Page*, Ciaran Carty notes that foreign language features are “the exclusive pleasure of a small minority of privileged members of the Irish Film Theatre, Project and the

<sup>39</sup> Quinn, “Standard Deviations”, 15.

<sup>40</sup> The Irish Film Theatre retained its ‘members only’ status until 1982, when it shifted to full public access. But attendances declined and it closed in 1984, with significant financial losses. For background information on the IFT see Rockett, “Constructing a Film Culture”, 25 and Brian McIlroy, *World Cinema 4: Ireland*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1989) 59.

Federation of Film Societies".<sup>41</sup> During this period the IFT, Project Cinema Club and the FIFS were all partly funded by the Arts Council<sup>42</sup> and the FIFS office was initially based in Project Arts Centre. But Carty's comparison obscures a number of important distinctions between these three organisations. Unlike the IFT and the FIFS, the Dublin-based Project Cinema Club (1976-80) prioritised the exhibition of oppositional and avant-garde film. Its programmes for 1978/79, for example, included a high proportion of feminist work including *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, 1977); *Lives of Performers* (Yvonne Rainer, 1972); *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce 1080, Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975); as well as classics such as *Dance, Girl, Dance* (Dorothy Arzner, 1940).

Project introduced Irish audiences to diverse avant-garde traditions, screening "Selections from the London Film-makers Co-op" (featuring the films of Peter Gidal, Malcolm le Grice, Michael Snow), Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet's *History Lessons* (1973) and *Fortini/Canì* (1976) and various films by Godard. Irish and international political cinemas were also represented in programmes that included *Caoineadh Art Uí Laoire* (Bob Quinn, 1975); *Going, going, gone* (Sinn Féin: The Worker's Part, 1976); *The Miners Film* (Cinema Action, 1975); *Queimada!* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969) and *Kuhle Wampe* (Stan Dudow/Bertolt Brecht, 1932).<sup>43</sup> Most of these films were obtained from the independent British Distributor The Other Cinema, with whom Project Cinema maintained a particularly close relationship<sup>44</sup> although a number were also provided by embassies. Project received little support

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<sup>41</sup> Ciaran Carty, "Public barred from the year's best movies!", *Sunday Independent*, December 31 (1978): 31

<sup>42</sup> The Arts Council was headed by Colm O'Briain, one of a number of artists and dramatists associated with the establishment of Project Arts Centre, during the mid 1970s. For a short history of Project see Anonymous, "Project's Birth and Rebirth", *The Irish Times*, September 17, 2002: 12.

<sup>43</sup> See Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture", 24-25. Also see *Film Directions* 1.1-4 (1978) for Project Cinema Club listings. Rockett's film policy during this period included an emphasis on World Cinema, encompassing films such as *Le Mandat* (Ousmane Sembene, 1968), *Bleak Moments* (Mike Leigh, 1971) and *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971). I am greatly indebted to Kevin Rockett for providing access to Project Cinema files from his time as Director of Film at Project [1976-79]. Further details were provided in an email interview, September 5, 2001.



from commercial distributors and for this reason screenings of Hollywood films were often problematic.



Figure 8: Project Arts Centre Programme (July – Sept. 1978).

Project Cinema Club did show some European arthouse film, such as the work of Fassbinder and Wim Wenders, but from the start it was informed by a far more explicitly political (and pedagogical) agenda than the Irish Film Theatre.<sup>45</sup> Project's "Film Policy", developed by Kevin Rockett in 1976, stressed the need for theory in place of "impressionistic cliché" and advocated an exploration of the avant-garde, women's cinema, documentary history and silent cinema, as well as the interconnections between film, theatre and the visual arts. The exhibition programme adhered closely to debates in *Screen*, although the Cinema also operated a "peak-time" schedule and a more commercial late-night slot. Thematic seasons, such as *Women and Film* (October/November 1977, February and May 1978), *The Two Avant-gardes* (March 1978) and *Versions of History* (April 1978) also featured lectures by invited theorists and practitioners, such as Laura Mulvey.<sup>46</sup>

In 1978 the Cinema Club hosted *Film and Ireland*, a season of over 100 Irish and Irish-related films, organised under headings such as "Family", "The North", "Depiction of Class/Work", "Irish Literary Traditions on Film", "Foreign Images of Ireland - Ireland as Tourist Commodity" and "Nature". In his introduction to the published programme Rockett stresses that these groupings are largely "arbitrary", and intended to prompt discussion rather than assert evaluative or interpretation

<sup>44</sup> The Other Cinema supported Project's "Your Alternative Cinema" screenings in 1976 and when it experienced its own financial difficulties in 1977, Project planned a benefit night to raise funds.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Rockett, "Project Film Policy 1976" (unpaginated). See also Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture", 25.

claims.<sup>47</sup> This season was one of the first events of its kind and it was followed by a series of Irish and international events, including *A Sense of Ireland: London Festival of the Irish Arts* (1980), discussed in further detail below. Project Cinema Club also began to explore links with the contemporary labour movements and in 1977 Project hosted a *Seminar on 1917*, in collaboration with the ITGWU.

The Cinema Club was just one element in a highly ambitious plan to revolutionise Irish film culture, a plan that initially encompassed a 16mm production workshop and a distribution organisation (intended to serve the Film Society network as well as Trade Unions and other political groups). The workshop was to be established along the lines of the LPMC but given the level of available funding, this proved problematic. The relationship between various Project personnel also seems to have become increasingly strained during this period. Although Project Arts Centre was ostensibly a co-operative, board members Jim and Peter Sheridan and administrator John Stephenson had 'professionalised' its institutional structure in 1976.<sup>48</sup> Jim Sheridan was to remain as Director of theatre for the next five years and by 1979 he had also created and assumed the role of overall 'artistic director'. During this period the theatre programme absorbed a considerable amount of Project's limited resources<sup>49</sup> and this emphasis eventually prompted criticism from other staff members, even leading to the resignation of Nigel Rolfe (Director of visual arts) in 1979.

In any case, the Cinema Club was under pressure to maintain its audiences by the end of the 1970s, partly because of increased competition from the IFT. By the early

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<sup>46</sup> Laura Mulvey participated in a seminar on *Feminism and Cinema* in May 1978. The *Women in Film* season also included a lecture series exploring the work of Douglas Sirk and Dorothy Arzner. See Ray Comiskey, "The Female Eye" *The Irish Times*, May 22, 1978: 10.

<sup>47</sup> Kevin Rockett, "Film and Ireland", *Project Arts Centre Programme* July – September 1978 (unpaginated). It might also be useful to compare this event with *The Green on the Screen: A Celebration of Film & Ireland*, a season organised by the Irish Film Institute at the Screen Cinema, Dublin, in 1984.

<sup>48</sup> See "Project Theatre gets a new Team", *Sunday Independent* July 18, 1976: 5.

<sup>49</sup> See Jim Sheridan "The Project in Danger", *Irish Times*, Tuesday September 5, 1978: 8 and "The Project in Danger – 2" *Irish Times*, Wednesday September 6, 1978: 8. See also Ciaran

1980s the Cinema Club had ceased to operate, and its educational role had been taken over by organisations such as the Irish Film Institute. But the establishment of Project Cinema Club in a multi-purpose arts space represented an important precedent within the Irish exhibition context and I will return, at a later stage, to the analysis of other such initiatives. First, however, I want to address developments within the British context, which are of particular significance for Irish filmmaking in the late 1970s.

### **Irish Film and the Production Board of the British Film Institute**

In the late 1970s and early 80s, the Production Board of the British Film Institute provided funding and international distribution for a number of significant Irish avant-garde films; *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1978), *Down the Corner* (Joe Comerford, 1978), *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981) and *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1981). In order to account for this level of support for Irish film it is necessary to examine the history of the Board itself. Originally established as an 'Experimental Film Fund', the Production Board existed to support filmmaking outside the dominant feature and documentary industries *and* to provide "a passport" into these same industries.<sup>50</sup> By 1978 it was in receipt of around £90,000 per year from the British Arts Council for the production and distribution of film (and after 1976, video). This was supplemented by a grant of £30,000 from the Eady Fund but, according to Board member Peter Sainsbury, this level of funding was "drastically inadequate".<sup>51</sup>

In 1976 the Production Board's policy (or lack of policy) became the subject of a critique by John Ellis, published in *Screen*.<sup>52</sup> Ellis argues that many films funded by

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Carty "Surely we can afford to keep Project Alive?", *Sunday Independent*, September 10, 1978, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Petley, *British Film Institute Productions 1977/78*, (London: BFI, 1978) 134.

<sup>51</sup> The Eady fund amounted to approximately £5 million a year in 1976 and contributions were made to the Production Board, the National Film School and the Children's Film Fund with the remainder going directly to film producers. Peter Sainsbury was a prominent figure in both the University Film Society movement and the London Arts Lab (from which the London Film-Maker's Co-op grew in 1966-67). He was the first organiser of Parallel Cinema/The Other Cinema (1969-72) and also co-founder of *Afterimage* magazine. His comments were made in "Funding Bodies and Funding Procedures in Relation to Independent Film-Making", *BFI Production Board* ed. Alan Lovell (London: BFI, 1976) 6.

<sup>52</sup> John Ellis, "Production Board Policies", *Screen*, 17.4 (Winter 1976/77): 9-23.

the board suffered from a loss of “coherence (of textual space) and accuracy (of research)”, because of an absence of development funding and an over-reliance on industry personnel whose “aesthetics in their defined fields are inevitably formed by the demands of the dominant industry for which they usually work”.<sup>53</sup> Ellis also notes a shift in focus from “art” to documentary around 1973-4 and he attributes this to both rising costs (“documentary needs less labour, less invention”) and the Board’s own personal expertise in this field, suggesting that the Board is more at ease with “openly revolutionary content than [with] a politicisation of form”.<sup>54</sup> He argues that explicitly political films such as *Ireland: Behind the Wire* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1974) received funds because they provided the Board with an opportunity to demonstrate its liberalism while operating “within conventional documentary categories”.<sup>55</sup> Earlier Michael Relph (Chair of the Board) had cited the Production Board’s support for *Ireland: Behind the Wire* as evidence of its “healthy disregard for established moral or political precepts”.<sup>56</sup>

Despite his criticisms of the Board’s policy, Ellis argues for an extension of its powers, through the establishment of a more overt policy and specific categories of support. He calls for a mix of funding and commissioning, suggesting that in certain instances the Board “would be involved in the stage of the elaboration of ideas and the evolution of groups before an official application was made”.<sup>57</sup> But this plan provoked criticism from filmmaker and critic Peter Wollen and from Jane Clarke, writing on behalf of the Independent Film-makers Association (IFA).<sup>58</sup> In a letter to *Screen* Wollen argues for the need to consider the “alternative modes of distribution,

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<sup>53</sup> Ellis, “Production Board Policies”, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Ellis, “Production Board Policies”, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, “Production Board Policies”, 18. See Chapter Three for a discussion of *Ireland: Behind the Wire*.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Relph, “Some Conclusions”, *BFI Production Board*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> Ellis, “Production Board Policies”, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Wollen “Letters” and Jane Clarke “Letters”, both *Screen*, 8.1 (Spring 1977): 119-121. The Independent Filmmakers Association, which emerged in 1976, included many art school graduates who were members of the London Filmmaker’s Co-op members. Ellis had already critiqued the fact that IFA representatives could serve only in a personal capacity on the Production Board. For details on the establishment of the IFA see Sylvia Harvey, “The ‘Other Cinema’ in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984”, 237.

exhibition and consumption”, represented by organisations such as Cinema Action, the London Film-Makers Co-op and The Other Cinema, while Clarke questions the notion that the BFI or Arts Council should own the means of independent distribution and exhibition.<sup>59</sup>

Responding to these criticisms, Ellis in turn questions the “independence” of the alternative structures foregrounded by Wollen (and by Clarke) and he rejects any “uncomplicated” alignment of the Production Board with the State. He suggests that the BFI represents:

[T]he institutionalised form of the ideological crisis which runs through the practice of cinema: an ideological crisis which, in different ways, has produced both *Screen* and the IFA.<sup>60</sup>

This “ideological crisis” seems to have manifested itself in a temporary alliance between critics, activists and a variety of filmmakers (under the auspices of the Independent Film-makers Association) despite very different political, institutional and aesthetic objectives. Sylvia Harvey has suggested that Peter Wollen’s writings on film were a key element in this alliance, although she notes that disparate groups were also linked by a shared interest in broadcasting and the proposed Fourth Channel.<sup>61</sup>

Ellis subsequently became a member of the Board and the influence of his critique is evident in the 1978 catalogue. A section on “Production Contexts” acknowledges that much of the work previously supported by the Board conforms to the “traditional categories of British independent filmmaking [such as] documentary or art film”.<sup>62</sup> The catalogue announces a new and more “intensive” policy, a “concentration of resources into pre-defined areas of film-making practice”. In practice this meant a realignment of acquisition, funding and distribution policies with contemporary

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<sup>59</sup> See Wollen, 119 and Clarke, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Ellis, “Letters”, 125.

<sup>61</sup> Harvey, “The ‘Other Cinema’ in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984”, 238.

theoretical debates. The distribution library, for example, had initially been established as a broad collection of film material, aimed at film societies and educational organisations. But in 1978, in keeping with a new emphasis on contemporary film criticism, the Library shifted its focus to “material relevant to the art and history of film and television” and the catalogue was reorganised into “study extracts” and selections with subheadings such as *Realism and Documentary* or *The Avant-Garde(s)*.<sup>63</sup>

It is possible that this policy change also informed the funding of Irish projects, such as *On a Paving Stone Mounted, Down the Corner, Traveller* and *Maeve*, which are concerned with both overtly ‘political’ subjects and a *critique* of documentary modes of representation.<sup>64</sup> The Production Board’s engagement with Irish themes and Irish filmmaking during this period could also be attributed to the influence of another Board member - Irish filmmaker and journalist Peter Lennon. As noted in Chapter One, Lennon (a feature writer at *The Guardian*) had previously directed *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) and had a particular investment in critical documentary practice.

Ellis had also critiqued the Board’s distribution practices, stating that the films “are abandoned, thrown onto the market.” His *Screen* article describes the 16mm circuit as “still embryonic” and emphasises that, “as the only large-scale producer in that circuit [the Board] has to play a role in forming a public for its films”.<sup>65</sup> In response BFI established a “promotion operation [...] designed to contend with the problem of distributing films made without emphasis on commercial production values”.<sup>66</sup> The promotions office specifically targeted film educators and academics and the catalogue, together with documentation and publicity material, was advertised in film

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<sup>62</sup> Petley, 134.

<sup>63</sup> Petley, 41. This latter section begins with reference to Peter Wollen’s essay on “The Two Avant-Gardes”.

<sup>64</sup> In 1976 the Board also began to support the use of video in “social work and community politics”. See Sainsbury, 58. This engagement with “community politics” could perhaps explain the decision to fund *Down The Corner*, as Comerford (unlike O’Sullivan and Murphy) was not resident in the UK and so would ordinarily be disqualified from funding.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, “Production Board Policies”, 14.

journals. One such advertisement, published in *Screen* in 1979, indicates both the diversity of films funded by the Production Board during this period and the emphasis on Irish material.<sup>67</sup>



Figure 9: Advertisement, *Screen* 20. 3/4 (Winter 1979). © *Screen*.

BFI maintained a limited involvement in Irish filmmaking throughout the 1980s and 90s, extending into the area of video distribution with films such as *December Bride* (Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1990) and *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (Derry Film and Video Co-op, 1989). In fact, one of the last productions to be funded before the role of the Production Department was taken over by the British Film Council (in 2000) was Nicola Bruce’s *I Could Read the Sky* (1999).<sup>68</sup> But it could be argued that the role played by the Production Board during the late 1970s and early 80s was *particularly* significant, given the very limited degree of support available to Irish filmmakers at this time. Like the Irish Arts Council, the Production Board funded filmmakers as *individuals* and this meant that directors (rather than producers or production companies) retained a degree of control over the production and distribution process.<sup>69</sup>

During the 1970s and early 80s the Board also occasionally represented the interests of Irish filmmakers in negotiations with Irish agencies. In a dispute surrounding

<sup>66</sup> Petley, 134.

<sup>67</sup> See *Screen* 20. 3/4 (Winter 1979): 4. The ad lists recently completed films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx*, *Down the Corner*, *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, *My Ain Folk* (Bill Douglas, 1973) and also mentions, as films in production, Comerford’s *Travellers*, Carola Klein’s *Mirror Phase* (1978) and Yvonne Rainer’s *Journeys From Berlin/1971*(1980).

<sup>68</sup> This film is discussed in the Conclusion of this study. The BFI Annual Reviews of 1999 and 2000, published on the BFI website at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/about/review/> detail the organisation’s changing involvement in production.

<sup>69</sup> This is not to suggest that the process was entirely free from compromise. See Chapters Three and Five for a more detailed discussion of the Production Board’s role in relation to

proposed RTÉ screenings of *Maeve* and *Traveller* in 1983 (which RTÉ had co-funded through the Arts Council Film Script Award) the Board defended the position expressed by Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy. Their preference was for their films to be shown on RTÉ with those of Cathal Black, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn, as part of a cohesive group. In a letter to the Controller of Programming at RTÉ Production Board member Peter Sainsbury writes:

I wish to support the views that have been expressed by the directors of the films about the context of transmission [...] it is clear that they have even greater difficulties finding support and recognition than do their English counterparts. I do feel that it would be of immense value to the cause of Irish film making if RTÉ were to transmit these and other independent Irish films in which RTÉ has an interest in a context that would emphasise their nature as *independent* productions.<sup>70</sup>

The reply from RTÉ is missing from the file but it is possible to infer something of the broadcaster's position from an account of Irish television drama published in 1987. Written by Helen Sheehan, it emphasises that RTÉ *promoted* Irish independent film by co-funding and transmitting films such as *Traveller* and *Maeve*.<sup>71</sup> While this may be the case, the Production Board was evidently anxious to raise the profile of *independent* film culture within the Irish context

### **The State and the Other Cinema(s)**

The BFI was not the only 'independent' British institution that contributed to the development of an Irish film avant-garde. Cinema Action was a collective established by a group of filmmakers, theorists and labour activists, including Richard Mordaunt, Ann Guedes and Schlacke Lamche. Lamche and Guedes had both been expelled from Paris in the immediate aftermath of May 1968, because of Guedes's involvement with the ORTF strikes and Cinema Action was initially founded as a 'mobile

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*Traveller* and *Maeve*. (The Production Board files for *On A Paving Stone Mounted* are, unfortunately, incomplete and include only production stills).

<sup>70</sup> Peter Sainsbury, letter dated 11 May 1983, held in BFI Special Collections, Production Board File on *Traveller*. [Emphasis added].

<sup>71</sup> See Helena Sheehan, *Irish Television Drama: A Society and its Stories* (Dublin: Radio Telefís Éireann, 1987) 380. See also Rockett, "Constructing a Film Culture: Ireland", 27-28.



cinema', in order to distribute French student protest films.<sup>72</sup> Informed by the presentation and circulation of films by other collectives, the group moved into production with *People of Ireland!*, a 1973 film about the civil right protests in Derry.<sup>73</sup> At this point, however, Mordaunt left to set up the Berwick Street Film Collective with Marc Karlin.

A number of newer distribution organisations, including The Other Cinema, Liberation Films and Politkino, had also emerged in the late 1960s, following the collapse of a "Third Circuit" proposed by filmmakers and activists as a commercial response to distribution monopolies in the British market.<sup>74</sup> This initiative (established under the name "Parallel Cinema") had the support and involvement of high profile British filmmakers such as Joseph Losey, Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, among others, but it failed because it did not have enough capital to import the type of films that existing independent cinemas were prepared to screen. The Other Cinema was established by many of the same personnel, but in the form of a non-profit trust focusing *solely* on distribution.

Labour unions and workers groups had occupied a prominent place in British independent film culture during the 1930s and many of the production and distribution initiatives of the 60s and 70s could be read as an attempt to reconnect with the labour movement. Yet by this time, economic and social conditions had changed considerably. As David Harvey notes, this period witnessed a rolling back of

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<sup>72</sup> An oral history of Cinema Action's foundation, practice and dissolution is provided in Margaret Dickinson *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, (London: BFI Publishing, 1999) 263-288.

<sup>73</sup> Attempts to locate a viewing copy of *People of Ireland!* have proved unsuccessful to date but it may have included some of the same footage as *Ireland: Behind the Wire*. Cinema Action's film has been described by Margaret Dickinson as: "An analysis and chronicle of the instance of dual power in the north of Ireland: we see the barricaded resistance zone of Free Derry in August 1969, the struggle for democracy, the right to assemble and for free expression, the contradiction between labour and capital, the struggle against imperialism, the demands: a socialist worker's republic." See Dickinson, 286.

<sup>74</sup> See Jim Pines, "Left Film Distribution", *Screen* 13.4 (Winter 1972/73): 116-117. Liberation Films began as the British outlet for the films of US Newsreel and subsequently shifted focus towards media education and production projects. Various distribution groups focusing on Women's cinema were also established some time later. See Sylvia Harvey, "The Other Cinema – A History: Part I 1970-77", 51 and "The Other Cinema – A History: Part II", 84.

union power, a new demand for flexible and mobile workers, high levels of “structural” unemployment and a rapid destruction and reconstruction of skills.<sup>75</sup> These factors worked against an expansion of film education within the context of the labour movement.

By comparison with its competitors the Other Cinema seemed to achieve a degree of financial stability, in that it was “secure enough to attend festivals and negotiate for films”.<sup>76</sup> It also had a relatively coherent policy, focusing on issues of representation, and by the mid 1970s it was supplying films to universities as well as political groups. These were “new kinds of users who didn’t meet primarily around film but around socialist or Third World issues in order to discuss anti-colonialist, anti-nuclear and anti-imperialist ideas”.<sup>77</sup> But many of the activist organisations relied upon an indirect form of state subvention, in the form of grants or student fees, and the more overtly political work of the Other Cinema was subsidised by “significant” revenue from titles such as *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971), *Themroc*, (Claude Faraldo, 1972) *Tout Va Bien* (Godard, 1972) and *Harlan County, USA*, which were popular with students. Andi Engel of Politkino (later the founder of Artificial Eye) notes:

All organisations like ours can only exist because there’s quite a lot of money around, because universities are able to pay fifteen, twenty-five pounds for a screening; it just comes out of the students’ union [...] so if we lose the rich society as we have it now all these alternative newspapers, alternative distributors etc will disappear.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 147-52.

<sup>76</sup> Pines, 118.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Sainsbury, interviewed by Sylvia Harvey, “The Other Cinema – A History: Part I 1970-77”, 48

<sup>78</sup> Engel interviewed by Pines, 120. Engel also suggested that while organisations such as the London Film-Maker’s Co-op could “get their films for free from people who manage to make the film and make five or six prints”, distributors of *political* work had to charge hire fees in order to cover prints and overheads.

By 1975, the existence of the Other Cinema had become more precarious and it was “bailed out” by the BFI, with a one-off grant of £10,000 in order to ease its debts.<sup>79</sup> The Other Cinema sought to establish more secure sources of revenue by opening a cinema in London’s West End in 1976. BFI contributed to the capital costs, primarily in order to secure an outlet for Production Board films and it is possible to draw a parallel between this initiative and the establishment of the Irish Film Theatre. In his 1978 analysis of Irish film culture Kevin Rockett notes that a number of Irish films, including *Down the Corner*, were excluded from the Cork Film Festival, forcing the Council to hire its own cinema and distribute its own press releases.<sup>80</sup> In this context, the Irish Film Theatre offered an important platform for Arts Council-funded films.

The Other Cinema’s theatrical programme featured thematic seasons, lectures and other events, including live music. The aim of this policy was to create new audiences and generate press coverage for independent features, prior to showings elsewhere in Britain, and it was initially successful. Despite the support of BFI, however, the venture suffered from insufficient capital and it collapsed after only fifteen months, leaving enormous debts to filmmakers. But the distribution library remained intact and during the late 1970s and early 80s The Other Cinema began to address new constituencies, often with limited experience of film analysis. The catalogue changed to reflect the fact that progressive film societies in local areas and colleges were declining in favour of issue-based campaign groups and the catalogues that were produced in the 80s included sections under headings such as “Ireland”, “the Media” and “Anti-Racism”.<sup>81</sup>

Partly in order to serve these new audiences, (and partly because of spiralling costs) video began to replace 16mm film as the primary non-theatrical distribution medium.

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<sup>79</sup> Sylvia Harvey, “The Other Cinema – A History: Part I 1970-77”, 49.

<sup>80</sup> Rockett, “Constructing a Film Culture”, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Sylvia Harvey, “The Other Cinema – A History: Part II”, 89. While the rising cost of film hire costs remained prohibitive for many organisations, The Other Cinema supplied film and video to a range of community and social groups (many of which were funded by the Greater London Council), also national groups such as the El Salvador Solidarity Campaign, CND and the Labour Party. Until its abolition in 1986, the Greater London Council also provided support for independent cinema in London.

Video does not carry the same overheads as film and is arguably a more accessible medium for many organisations. But returns from video hire are low, necessitating a higher turnover of screenings (or an emphasis on sales). In parallel with this switch to video, The Other Cinema became increasingly reliant on broadcasting as a source of revenue and in the process it acquired a new and more powerful competitor, in the shape of Channel Four.

### **Channel Four and Independent Film in Ireland**

The establishment of Channel Four in 1982, following a lengthy development process, contributed to a restructuring of independent film culture. According to Charles Barr, its founding marked a shift in the relations between British cinema and television: from “fascination and fear, through scorn, then envy, to a complex co-operation.”<sup>82</sup> A comprehensive analysis of Channel Four’s contribution to independent film practice would be beyond the scope of this chapter, and the various debates surrounding the development and structure of the Channel have been addressed elsewhere.<sup>83</sup> But a more focused analysis of the relationship between *Irish* filmmakers and Channel Four illustrates both the achievements and innovations of the first few years and the economic and political pressures brought to bear upon the channel as it developed.

Sylvia Harvey notes that, in the early 1980s, a certain amount of independent production was still supported by sources “outside the remit of either state or commercial television finance”, such as trade unions and local councils.<sup>84</sup> Channel Four provided a new, and very significant, source of production funds for independent film and video but little of this material was intended for either video or theatrical release and, as such, it did not necessarily generate income for independent *distributors*. Under the direction of Deputy Commissioning Editor Rod Stoneman,

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Barr, “Broadcasting and Cinema 2: Screens within Screens”, *All Our Yesterdays*, 223.

<sup>83</sup> See Simon Blanchard and David Morley (eds.) *What's This Channel Four?: An Alternative Report*, (London: Comedia, 1982).

<sup>84</sup> Sylvia Harvey “The ‘Other Cinema’ in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984”, 245.

the channel maintained close ties with avant-garde filmmakers (particularly those associated with the IFA, the Arts Council and the BFI) and developed a range of innovative commissioning schemes.<sup>85</sup> Initially, the Other Cinema benefited from the arrival of the new channel. They supplied films for broadcast from their own back catalogue and also distributed a range of programmes commissioned for the high profile "Eleventh Hour" slot.<sup>86</sup> But soon Channel Four began to acquire material directly from filmmakers<sup>87</sup> and, in terms of scale, it displaced other funding (and exhibition) structures for oppositional material.

In an historical overview of Britain's various 'other cinemas', Sylvia Harvey emphasises the impact of the new channel, comparing it to the (relatively successful) non-commercial distribution circuits of the 1930s:

In 1936 Kino [the socialist distributor] estimated that 1,000 screenings had reached a total of nearly 250,000 in the course of the year; by contrast, 1983 *The Cause of Ireland* (Platform Films, 1983), a film made from a perspective highly critical of the role of the British state in Northern Ireland and focusing on the views of the working-class people, reached through one screening on Channel Four Television an estimated audience of 294,000.<sup>88</sup>

Harvey's foregrounding of *The Cause of Ireland* is appropriate given Channel Four's prominent engagement with Irish issues throughout the 1980s. In 1982, the Chief Executive Jeremy Isaacs promised Irish filmmakers that the new channel would provide sports programmes from Ireland and a weekly political programme to

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<sup>85</sup> Michael O'Pray, "Introduction", *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*. Ed. Michael O'Pray. (London: Arts Council of England/John Libbey Media/University of Luton, 1996) 21. Elsewhere O'Pray has suggested that Channel Four's funding strategy contributed to a historical shift from formalist avant-garde towards 'Art Cinema', represented by the work of filmmakers such as Derek Jarman. See O'Pray "The British Avant-Garde and Art Cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s", *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson, (London and New York: Cassell, 1996).

<sup>86</sup> Sylvia Harvey, "The Other Cinema – A History: Part II", 84-87.

<sup>87</sup> Sylvia Harvey, "The Other Cinema – A History: Part II", 88.

<sup>88</sup> Sylvia Harvey, "The 'Other Cinema' in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984", 235. For further information on Kino and this period in British independent cinemas see Dickinson, 210-211.

“inform viewers of the range and variety of complexities in Irish politics”.<sup>89</sup> As part of this commitment both *Maeve* and *Traveller* were included in a special season of Irish programmes in 1983, entitled Ireland: The Silent Voices. The Channel also contributed funds to independent Irish film projects such as *Outcasts* (Robert Wynne Simmons, 1982) and *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1981), but the new Channel’s involvement in Irish film was not universally welcomed. *Angel* was a controversial production and Muiris MacChonghail, the new Chairman of the Film Board, was openly critical of its funding and distribution. He suggested that, because Channel Four’s investment had “satisfied the film’s distribution requirement”, insufficient thought had been given to the theatrical exhibition of the film.<sup>90</sup>

Yet Channel Four continued to co-finance Irish films, such as *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986), *Budawanny* (Bob Quinn, 1987) and *Reefer and The Model* (Joe Comerford, 1987), and co-produce RTE television dramas such as *The Year of the French* (1982), *The Irish R.M.* (1983) *Caught in a Free State* (1983), *Night in Tunisia* (1983) and *The Price* (1985).<sup>91</sup> In 1987, Channel Four also commissioned the “Irish Reel” season, a series of eight documentaries by independent filmmakers, which included *The Road to God Knows Where* (directed by Alan Gilson and photographed by Thaddeus O’Sullivan).<sup>92</sup> A second “Irish Reel” series, planned for 1989, was cancelled at relatively short notice, however, with the stated reason that the

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<sup>89</sup> See Michael Dwyer, “10 Days that Shook the Irish Film Industry”, *Film West* 30, (Autumn 1997): 26. [An earlier version of this article was originally published in *In Dublin*, April 8, 1982].

<sup>90</sup> Muiris MacChonghail interviewed by Michael Dwyer, “The Reel News” *In Dublin* No 158, July 22 (1982): 9. *Angel* received IR£400,000 and was one of the first films to be principally funded by Channel Four. It was also part-funded by the first Irish Film Board during the period of director John Boorman’s involvement. According to certain sections of the Irish film community, the link between Jordan and Boorman had contributed to “an appearance of impropriety”. See Dwyer, “10 Days that Shook the Irish Film Industry”, 26. Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett note, however, that *Angel* was the first film made by Channel Four to actually receive a theatrical release. See their discussion of the “Production and Exhibition Contexts of Jordan’s work in *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*, Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003, 259-260.

<sup>91</sup> For further details on these and other co-productions see Helena Sheehan, *Irish Television Drama*, 459 - 463. Channel Four also co-produced (with UTV) a six-part documentary series on the cinema and Ireland, entitled *A Seat Among the Stars* (1984). For a critique of this series see Kevin Rockett “Stars Get in Your Eyes”, *Framework* 25 (1984): 28-41.

<sup>92</sup> See Alan Gilson and Martin Mahon, interviewed by Johnny Gogan, “Tourists at Home!”, *Film Base News* 9, (Oct/Nov 1988): 8-9.

“proposals [which totalled 168 in number] were not of a particularly high standard”.<sup>93</sup> This policy shift was not entirely unexpected, however. Channel Four’s overt commitment to Irish filmmaking was regarded, by certain commentators, as the direct result of Jeremy Isaacs’s personal interest in Irish history and politics.<sup>94</sup> When Michael Grade replaced Isaacs, pending de-regulation of the channel, one of his first decisions was to postpone a screening of *Acceptable Levels* (Belfast Film Workshop, 1983) scheduled for January 1988. This represented a clear sign of his opposition to ‘controversial’ Irish material.

But Channel Four’s withdrawal from Irish issues and from Irish independent filmmaking can also be viewed as part of more general shift away from the radical regional model of independent production and distribution represented by workshop practice. The Workshop Programme had initially developed as a result of the involvement of the Independent Film-maker’s Association in the development of the Fourth Channel, noted earlier. Throughout the late 1970s the IFA had lobbied for the establishment of a workshop network and for a closer relationship with the ACTT Union (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians). This resulted in the evolution of an entirely new union agreement, the Workshop Agreement, which “gave formal recognition to the principles of workshop practice and opened up the possibility of extending them as the basis for fully professional participation in the industry”.<sup>95</sup>

By the early 80s a network of regional film and video workshops had developed throughout Britain, with support from the Regional Arts Association. In the mid 1980s the movement was “thriving” with “over one hundred video workshops in all the main cities in Britain”, and many groups affiliated to the IFA (renamed the

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<sup>93</sup> Irish filmmakers were instead invited to submit programmes for other programming strands. For a contemporary critique of this policy shift see Paul Donovan and Johnny Gogan, “The Last Irish Reel”, *Film Base News* 13, (July/Aug 1989): 8-9

<sup>94</sup> Jeremy Isaacs was widely credited with “swinging” the Channel’s support for Joe Comerford’s *Reefer and the Model*. See anonymous, “Channel 4 and Ireland”, *Film Base News* 10, (December/January 1988/89): 12.

<sup>95</sup> Dickinson, 58. The Agreement was established in 1980 and revised in 1984. For an abridged version see Dickinson, 163-167.

Independent Film and Video Association).<sup>96</sup> At the height of its workshop programme, Channel Four contributed funds to a network of twelve to fifteen workshops each year, from a budget of £2 million. Much of this funding was relatively long term, especially by comparison with the contracts issued by the Channel to the majority of its other independent producers.

The workshop programme was initially characterised by a regional emphasis and, in its first year, it included two groups from Northern Ireland, one from Scotland and one from Wales. One of the groups funded under the programme was the Derry Film and Video Collective (DFVC), established in 1984. The DFVC was eligible for funding because all seven members were in the ACTT Union, and it produced a number of documentaries that were distributed in Britain by The Other Cinema and by the feminist organisation Cinema of Women.<sup>97</sup> Some DFVC workshop members were critical of Channel Four's engagement with "Ireland" and "Women" as media issues. In an interview prior to the completion of their documentary *Mother Ireland* (1988) DFVC members Anne Crilly and Margo Harkin argued, "Channel Four would like to think they are sticking their necks out funding a group from Derry's Bogside."<sup>98</sup> They also noted "Channel Four would love if a Loyalist group applied for funding". Yet sources of production funding for the collective were limited, as BFI did not recognise the Six Counties as qualifying for regional funding and DFVC's other primary source of income (the European Social fund) was earmarked for

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<sup>96</sup> Geoff Mulgan and Ken Walpole, *Saturday Night or Sunday Morning: From Arts to Industry – New Forms of Cultural Policy*, (London: Comedia, 1986) 58. Many of the workshop films were screened to small groups rather than (or in addition to) broadcast contexts. ACTT was also directly involved in the *sponsorship* of workshop productions such as the series on the Miners Campaign that was made by Platform. The Miners films were shown "collectively" accompanied by lectures or presentations by the National Union of Miners. See Harvey "The 'Other Cinema' in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984", 239.

<sup>97</sup> See Johnny Gogan, "Derry Film and Video Collective", *Film Base News*, 3 (Sept/Oct 1987): 10-11

<sup>98</sup> In the event, *Mother Ireland* fell foul of the ban on broadcasting announced by Douglas Hurd in October 1988, because it included footage of members of proscribed organisations. See Belinda Loftus "Review of *Mother Ireland*", *CIRCA* 44 (March/April 1989): 33-34.



training.<sup>99</sup> As such, the Collective were relatively dependent on the workshop programme.

Some British workshop organisations, such as the UK-based Worker's Film Association and Amber Films, *are* still in existence. But the majority are involved in training schemes or low-budget commercial production and few have maintained the engagement with a broader audience that Channel Four provided. The dissipation of the workshop movement towards the end of the 1980s can be attributed both to changing policies within British public service broadcasting and to structural problems within the original Workshop Agreement and programme. The ACTT Workshop Agreement (which enabled Channel Four to commission and distribute workshop-made films) was limited to non-profit organisations that employed at least four staff members, paid at a specified rate, so commercial groups and workshops operating on a voluntary basis were effectively excluded from participation. As Margaret Dickinson has suggested in her recent history of British independent film, qualifying workshops became increasingly reliant on long-term grants from public funds. This structure had "disadvantages in the context of cutbacks and privatisations in which the ACTT agreement was to be used".<sup>100</sup>

As early as 1986 critics had begun to voice concerns about the centralisation of funding for independent film around Channel Four. John Caughie noted:

As the present government cuts off other sources of funding [...] film and television are equally vulnerable to the current economic, political and ideological pressures against public service which come from domestic government, and to the pressures against national cultures which come from the growing power of the international market.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Rockett, Gibbons and Hill note that, in order to force a change in BFI policy, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland refused to fund film and video production. See *Cinema and Ireland*, 266-267.

<sup>100</sup> Dickinson, 59.

<sup>101</sup> John Caughie, "Broadcasting and Cinema 1: Converging Histories", *All Our Yesterdays*, 202

Caughie pointed out that 1985 (British Film Year) marked both the end of the Eady Levy and the closure of the National Film Finance Corporation. This began a process that, he argued, would eventually “lead to a massive dependence on private [...] funding”.<sup>102</sup>

Rod Stoneman has also provided an account of Channel Four’s workshop programme and he notes that it was the Labour administration, under pressure from the ACTT lobby that initially developed the notion of a regional network of exhibition cooperatives and production workshops.<sup>103</sup> When the Conservative government came to power it did set up the Fourth Channel, but as a subsidiary of the existing Independent Broadcasting Authority, which derived its revenue from ITV. The excess profits levy, which was paid by ITV franchise holders, was to be diverted to the Fourth Channel for the first five years of its operation. But after five year it was expected that the new Channel’s own advertising income would be enough to fund it.

As Stoneman points out, “by the time the seventies lobbying was eventually effective, the television station it had created was based on the ideas and values from a previous epoch – belatedly launched into a rather new situation.”<sup>104</sup> Yet he also suggests that there had been little support from either audiences or critics for more radical forms of television production. Stoneman tends to downplay the structural flaws in the workshop programme but he does acknowledge that the very notion of “pluralist” broadcasting, with independents representing a wide range of views, required the existence of a pool of “increasingly desperate semi-dependents competing in a “free’ market”.<sup>105</sup> So, in one sense, Channel Four’s success necessarily involved the displacement, if not the actual destruction, of existing infrastructures.

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<sup>102</sup> Caughie, 204. Although Caughie’s account is primarily concerned with commercial feature production this broader shift towards privatisation clearly had particular implications for oppositional filmmaking.

<sup>103</sup> Rod Stoneman, “Sins of Commission”, *Screen* 33:2, (Summer 1992): 127-144. For further detail on the role of filmmakers in this process see John Ellis in “The Independent Filmmakers Association and the Fourth Channel”, *Screen* 21. 4 (1980): 56-57.

<sup>104</sup> Stoneman, 133

<sup>105</sup> Stoneman, 133-4.

By the late eighties, industrial relations in broadcasting had deteriorated and production contracts were amended so that they no longer required producers to abide by the ACTT agreements. Channel Four had, by this time, become the primary (if not the only) source of funding for many of the workshops, as national and local state support receded. This relatively dependent and static relationship was at odds with Channel Four's growing need to define itself in terms of innovation, following deregulation. After a transitional period at the end of the 1980s the workshop programme was phased out. Interesting parallels can be drawn here with Thomas Elsaesser's account of New German Cinema. Elsaesser contends that the surge in filmmaking in West Germany in the 1970s followed a transfer of power from cinema



to television. Initially, independent cinema could draw upon a pool of “unaffiliated” personnel on a freelance basis but he notes, “with the stabilisation of the labour market by the mid 1980s the new German cinema vanished like Cinderella’s carriage”.<sup>106</sup>

Figure 10: *Eleventh Hour* logo (© Channel Four)

During the late 80s and the early 90s, Channel Four did maintain its commitment to ‘expanded practice’ in film and video, through programmes such as the *Eleventh Hour* Joint Commissioning Scheme (co-funded by the British Arts Council). Vivienne Dick’s film *London Suite* (1989) was commissioned and broadcast as part of this series. She also produced a short piece, entitled *3AM* (1990), for the BBC/British Arts Council One Minute Television Series, which ran from 1990 until 1993. Although the *Eleventh Hour* series continued until 1996 under various titles, such as *Experimenta* and *Midnight Underground*, it gradually lost its high profile. William Raban notes:

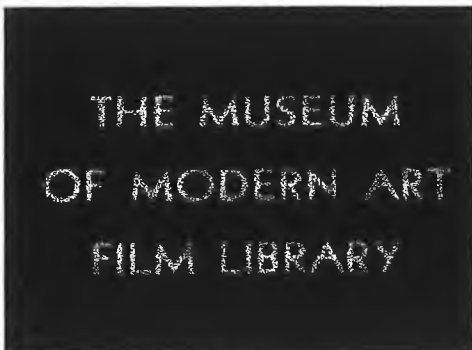
<sup>106</sup> Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1989) 313-314. Elsaesser does, however, acknowledge that the state

Channel Four displayed an increasing tendency to ghettoise expanded work into the dark zones of post-midnight transmission. The final series of *Midnight Underground*, for example, played to audiences of around 50,000 whereas the original *Eleventh Hour* slot regularly reached 1/2 million.<sup>107</sup>

Writing in 1998, Raban notes that digital television has been hyped as the new arena for expanded practice, but he expresses a degree of scepticism, which seems to have been borne out by subsequent developments. While the BBC can position its joint commissions within the prime-time schedule, Raban emphasises that Channel Four's policy is increasingly constrained by advertising and by "the need to operate within a 'branded space'".

### Irish Film and the US Arts Sector

Contemporary developments within the US context illustrate the dependent character of ostensibly 'independent' structures of distribution and exhibition. The circulation of avant-garde film, through both established institutions and newer 'alternative' organisations, was structured by broader developments in economic and cultural policy. During the 1960s and 70s, the Circulating Film Library of the Museum of



Modern Art provided programmes of avant-garde and oppositional 16mm film (together with course materials and notes), which could be bought or hired by non-commercial private societies and university film clubs throughout the US and Canada.

Figure 11: MoMA credit from print of *Cloch* (Bob

Quinn, 1975) held in Irish Film Archive.

The catalogue included a considerable number of *Irish* films and several of these, such as *A Pint of Plain*, *On a Paving Stone Mounted* and *Down the Corner*, were

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structures established in the 1960s and 70s continued to provide a degree of support for independent film culture in the new media landscape

<sup>107</sup> William Raban, "Expanded Practice in Television: Defending the Right to Difference", *Vertigo* 8, (Summer 1998): 44.

distributed by the Production Board of the British Film Institute. The 1979 catalogue states:

Our selection of new contemporary titles includes individual works by both established and emerging filmmakers, as well as larger bodies of work like the British Film Institute's Production Board titles, which have largely gone unseen in this country. Notable additions include [...] *Poitin* (1978) by Bob Quinn, *Vertical Features Remake* (1976) by Peter Greenaway [...] *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to *Poitin* the MoMA catalogue includes two shorter films by Quinn: *Self-Portrait with Red Car* (1976-8) and *Cloch* (1978) and it is possible that these were acquired specifically because they explore the theme of artistic production. The Museum does not hold records for the circulation of films prior to 1992 but a survey of the files on *Poitin*, *Down the Corner*, *A Pint of Plain* and *Self-Portrait with Red Car* from 1992 to 2001 indicates a relatively high level of activity, particularly for Quinn's work.<sup>109</sup> In the early 1980s, however, the Department of Film Study lost its status as a non-profit division and became increasingly dependent on revenue from the lease or rental of prints to universities or other clients. The library could no longer justify the acquisition of prints unless they could be commercially exploited, through sale or hire to universities or film clubs. It began to focus on developing its collection of early and classic films, which (in contrast with contemporary international avant-garde practice) have remained a staple of academic film study.<sup>110</sup> As such, the library did not acquire subsequent Irish films, such as *Traveller* or *Maeve*.

A similar process of privatisation can be traced throughout New York's avant-garde film and art circuits, which included a range of workshops and co-operatives such as the Millennium, Anthology Archives, Collective for Living Cinema, PS.1 and the

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<sup>108</sup> Donald Richie ed., *Film; The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film Circulating Programs: Supplement; Recent Acquisitions October 1979* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1979): 1. Unlike the other films mentioned in this list, Quinn's film was not funded or distributed by the Production Board.

<sup>109</sup> I am greatly indebted to John Harris in the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center for providing me with copies of these records. *Poitin* was screened 21 times during this nine-year period (at four Irish-themed festivals, five times within the museum itself, in six different US universities and in a variety of other locations).

<sup>110</sup> These details of the acquisition policy were provided by Bill Sloan (former director of the MoMA Circulating Library), in a telephone interview with the author, February 14, 2001.

Kitchen. The No Wave or 'Punk' movement, in which Vivienne Dick was a prominent figure, emerged out of this context in the late 1970s. As I note in Chapter Four, Dick's work in the US was predominantly self-financed but certain aspects of her practice *were* supported by the state. For example, she screened her Super-8 work in venues (in New York and around the US) that were partly funded, during the late 1970s and the early 80s, by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

Figure 12: Advertisement for Millennium published in *Village Voice*, March 4 1981.

The NEA only came into being in the late 1960s but it was informed by earlier federal programmes for the arts, such as those developed in the late 1930s. Maureen Turim notes that, in 1970, it adopted a policy of “unconditional funding of innovative projects by unknown artists” and supported both critical media production (funding films such as *Harlan County, USA*) and a wide variety of alternative and established avant-garde spaces.<sup>111</sup> But in the early 1980s, under the Reagan administration, the NEA’s policy began to come under attack and direct funding was substantially reduced in favour of “private philanthropy”. Private corporations were able to match, and in fact exceed, the funds available to the NEA but, as Turim notes, “they never contributed much to the experimental and political sector of artistic production”.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Maureen Turim, “The Retraction of State Funding of Film and Video Arts and Its Effects on Future Practice”, *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices*, eds. Patricia Mellencamp and Philip Rosen, (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984) 132-143.

<sup>112</sup> Turim, 138. For an extended discussion of these developments, encompassing the American and British contexts see Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London and New York: Verso, 2002.) The same administration also stopped enforcing anti-trust legislation that had enabled the proliferation of independent

### **Irish Avant-garde Film in the 1980s and 90s: Policy and Practice**

The early 1980s witnessed a number of important attempts to revitalise Irish structures for film exhibition and production. The Ha'penny film club, established by Trish McAdam and Jane Gogan, organised regular screenings in a room above the Ha'penny Bridge Inn pub on the Dublin quays. The club aimed to provide a "permanent venue for showing Irish 16mm, Super-8 and audiovisual production" but it initially received little support from the Federation of Film Societies, perhaps because it did not enforce strict membership rules.<sup>113</sup> While the Ha'penny was undoubtedly informed by the work of both the FIFS and Project Cinema Club its relatively informal approach to exhibition may also have been influenced by the success of No Wave Cinema in the US. The Ha'penny Club's opening film in 1983 was *Like Dawn to Dust* (1983), Vivienne Dick's first entirely Irish-made Super-8 work. Earlier 'No Wave' films by Dick, such as *Liberty's Booty* (1980) and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981) also featured in subsequent programmes, alongside the work of Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton and Irish avant-garde films such as *Cloch* (Quinn, 1975), *Emtigon* (Comerford 1972), *Acceptable Levels* (John Davies/Belfast Film Workshop, 1983), *Shell Shock Rock* (John T. Davis, 1978), *Pigs* (Cathal Black, 1984) and *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984).

By the end of the 1980s, however, the Ha'penny Club had accumulated various debts and it closed in 1987. This period was marked by transformation of Irish structures of production and distribution. Following the dissolution of the Irish Film Board in 1987, the primary source of film finance came from the European MEDIA programme<sup>114</sup> and from the Arts Council. This period also witnessed the

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cinemas. See Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*, (Chicago: A Capella Books, 2000) 44.

<sup>113</sup> Correspondence and records relating to the Ha'penny Film Club are held by Access Cinema (FIFS files) and I am indebted to Mareta Dillon of Access for her assistance. The file on the Ha'penny includes a letter (dated January 5, 1984) from Jane Gogan and Trish McAdam to the Federation of Film Societies, outlining the club's policy and letters of support from Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy (also January 1984).

<sup>114</sup> See Simon Horrocks's overview of "European Community and the Cinema", *The Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, eds. John Caughie with Kevin Rockett (London: BFI

establishment of Filmbase, a training and resource organisation, funded by the Arts Council.<sup>115</sup> The 1987 pilot phase of MEDIA included a workshop scheme and it supported the work of organisations such as the Dublin-based Exposure Film and Video Co-operative, which had previously relied on production grants from non-governmental agencies, such as Combat Poverty.<sup>116</sup> The MEDIA programmes did contribute to an improvement in distribution channels for European independent filmmaking but their primary emphasis was on medium-budget cinema.<sup>117</sup> The main MEDIA production fund, the European Script Development Fund, was explicitly oriented towards *narrative* film. In a review of a MEDIA policy document, entitled "Stories Come First" (1989),<sup>118</sup> filmmaker Pat Murphy highlights this narrative emphasis and critiques the scheme's definition of independent production. She points out that the Irish state (like Greece) has identified itself as "an independent producer" in order to take advantage of these funds – a strategy that works to further marginalize independent filmmaking.

The 1980s and 90s did witness a strengthening of the *commercial* independent sector, supported both by MEDIA and by changes in Irish broadcasting legislation, which undercut RTÉ's monopoly on the transmission of foreign and domestic production.<sup>119</sup>

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Publishing, 1996)177-180. See also Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 43.

<sup>115</sup> Filmbase acted as a lobbying group for the interests of independent filmmakers, following the abolition of the first Irish Film Board and it retains an involvement in short film production through the RTE/Filmbase Short Script Award and the TG4/Lasair scheme. See Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, "Postscript", *Cinema and Ireland*, 267.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Talbot and Enda O'Brien, interview, "Exposure", *Film Base News* 7, (June/July 1988): 18. During this period the Arts Council also funded community-based work such as City Vision's film drama *Sometime City* (1986).

<sup>117</sup> Roddy Flynn "Europa, Europa: Ireland and MEDIA II", *Film Ireland* 46 (April/May 1995): 15-17. For an extended discussion of European and American "media systems", focusing on the issue of co-production see Sharon Stover "Recent Trends in Coproductions: The Demise of the National", *Democracy and Communication in the New Europe*, eds. Farrel Corcoran and Paschal Preston (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995): 97-123.

<sup>118</sup> Pat Murphy, "Stories Come First", *Film Base News* 10, (Dec/Jan 1988/89): 14-15. Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford and Ed Guiney also critique aspects of the MEDIA funding regime in "Once Upon a Script", *Film West* (Winter 1991): 12-14.

<sup>119</sup> This monopoly had allowed it to buy foreign programmes at a rate substantially lower than that of domestic independent production, militating against the independent sector. But, as Roddy Flynn notes, domestic competitors have made only a limited contribution to innovative programming. See Roddy Flynn, "Broadcasting and the Celtic Tiger: From Promise to



But many of the distribution and exhibition problems that had dogged the earlier generation of independent filmmakers remained largely unresolved in the late 1980s. Writing in 1988, Ted Sheehy highlights Ward Anderson's control over 80% of the Irish cinema trade. He also suggests that the emerging videotape rental/purchase sector may not provide any real competition, once independently owned outlets are taken over by the same enterprises that control cinema exhibition.<sup>120</sup> More recently, policy-makers have begun to reconsider the regional non-theatrical circuit advocated by critics and filmmakers during the 1970s and 80s. For example, a 2001 report on "Developing Cultural Cinema in Ireland", by Neil Connolly and Maretta Dillon examines "the options and feasibility of creating a cost-effective network of independent arthouse cinemas in regional areas of Ireland, North and South".<sup>121</sup> Instead of referencing avant-garde practice, however, or even 'art cinema' the report employs the notion of "cultural cinema", defined as:

[A] space which, while defending the possibility of film as art and the filmmaker as artist, implies a more broadly-based cultural vision that recognises that cinema is a consumer industry with a powerful influence and also a complex cultural phenomenon.<sup>122</sup>

As well as recommending a nationwide expansion of the activities of the Federation of Film Societies, the report emphasises that both the Irish Film Centre (since renamed the Irish Film Institute) and the FIFS should be encouraged to profile the work of Irish Film-makers. Joanne Hayden, writing in *Film West*, also argues that the programmes of the Irish Film Centre tend to neglect Irish filmmaking, in favour of

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Practice", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002): 160-176.

<sup>120</sup> Ted Sheehy "Distribution in Ireland", *Film Base News* 6 (April/May 1988): 12-13. For a discussion of commercial video distribution see Franco Moretti "Markets of the Mind", *New Left Review* 5 (September/October 2000): 111-115. For a general history of Hollywood's dominance of video and other distribution channels see Jane Wasko's *Hollywood and the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994). Interestingly, Wasko charts the rise and fall of Vestron, one of the first independent commercial video distributors, whose video releases included John Huston's *The Dead* (1987).

<sup>121</sup> Neil Connolly and Maretta Dillon, *Developing Cultural Cinema in Ireland*, (Dublin: Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíona, 2001) 6. The report was commissioned by the Arts Council, in partnership with Bord Scannán na hÉireann, Enterprise Ireland and Northern Ireland Film Commission.

<sup>122</sup> Connolly and Dillon, 6.

“films that do the circuit of European art-house cinemas”.<sup>123</sup> Although the Irish Film Institute has made attempts to broaden its exhibition programme, with recent screenings of Peter Watkins’ *La Commune* (1871) and various films by Chris Marker, it could be argued that it also favours ‘Cultural Cinema’ over avant-garde practice, whether Irish or international. But this emphasis is by no means particular to Film Institute, or the Irish exhibition context. In fact cinemas and film societies are no longer the only contexts for the exhibition of avant-garde or, indeed, national cinema. Instead, that role has largely been taken over by galleries and festivals, and before concluding this discussion I propose to consider some of the key issues structuring these modes of exhibition.

Gallery and museum exhibition of film work is not a new phenomenon as my earlier discussion of the Museum of Modern Art demonstrates. But in recent years film exhibitions have often privileged gallery installation over scheduled screening programmes in cinematic settings.<sup>124</sup> The work of Tate Modern is interesting in this regard as one of its permanent exhibitions incorporates a presentation of Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* on a small flat screen TV, which is inset into the gallery wall. Many prominent international filmmakers, such as Isaac Julien, have also begun to move away from single screen filmmaking towards installation work. This development could be attributed to shifts in production formats (from 16mm to digital video) but equally it could be read in terms of a return to an earlier “expanded” model of practice, associated with filmmakers as diverse as Carolee Schneemann and Derek Jarman. Some filmmakers have approached this new context of exhibition from an explicitly critical perspective. For the 49<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, in 2001, filmmaker Chantal Akerman presented a reworked version of *Jeanne Dielman...*, which was screened on a series of conventional television monitors.<sup>125</sup> In contrast, the vast

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<sup>123</sup> See Joanne Hayden, “The Film Institute of Ireland; A Time of Reckoning”, *Film West* 32, (May 1998): 26-28.

<sup>124</sup> For an overview of gallery-based film and video work in the 90s, focusing on the British context, see James Swanson, “Visual Art and the Moving Image”, *Vertigo* 8 (Summer 1998): 13-15.

<sup>125</sup> *Documenta II* (July-Sept 2002) included new work by Chantai Akerman and Jonas Mekas as well as a programme of screenings featuring avant-garde ‘classics’ such as Isaac Julien’s *Territories* (1984) and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982).

majority of other film works in the Biennale (including projects by Irish artists Grace Weir and Siobhan Hapaska) were either projected on DVD in darkened installation spaces or displayed on fashionable flat screen TVs. In this context, Akerman's approach could be read as a comment on the convergence of art and spectacle in large-scale events such as the Biennale.

Gallery and museum exhibitions inevitably contribute to the construction of official (often national) narratives of art or film history, in spite of the critical objectives of curators. In his introduction to the catalogue of *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film* (1978) Deke Dusinberre notes that this is particularly true when institutional authorities, such as Arts Councils, support curatorial selection.<sup>126</sup> But the absence of a structuring narrative may *also* prove problematic. Michael O'Pray is critical of the "structuralist-formalist" hegemony that was established in canonical projects of the 1970s, such as Dusinberre's. But at the same time O'Pray notes a collapse of avant-garde film festivals during the late 1980s and he attributes this partly to a *crisis of categorisation*.<sup>127</sup>

It is evident that this "crisis of categorisation" has also presented problems for distributors. As I have already noted, the Other Cinema's involvement in distribution declined during the 80s. Newer organisations, which developed out of a critique of the existing archive or canon, such as Cinenova, have also experienced financial difficulties. Cinenova was formed in 1991 through a merger of two feminist distribution organisations, Cinema of Women and Circles, but it had to cease operations in 2001 because of funding problems.<sup>128</sup> The British distributor Lux

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<sup>126</sup> Deke Dusinberre, "Introduction" *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film: A Touring Exhibition Selected by David Curtis and Deke Dusinberre*, eds. David Curtis and Deke Dusinberre (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978) 7. Dusinberre acknowledges that the 'touring exhibition' format necessitated the exclusion of 'expanded cinema'. This was a marginal, but nonetheless important, component of English Avant-Garde practice.

<sup>127</sup> Michael O'Pray, "Introduction", *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, 20.

<sup>128</sup> For background information on feminist distribution see Jo Imeson's interview with Eileen McNulty of Cinema of Women and Felicity Sparrow of Circles (on the occasion of the release of *Anne Devlin*) in "Breaking Down the Myths: Feminist Film Distribution Today", *Monthly Film Bulletin* 53.624 (January 1986): 6-7. For a discussion of US feminist distributor Women Make

Centre (an amalgamation of the London Film-maker's Co-op and London Electronic Arts) also experienced a recent funding crisis and has had to close its cinema and exhibition space. It is now operating primarily as a distributor, focusing on curated projects such as *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* (2001) a touring retrospective of LFMC work from the 60s and 70s.

Figure 13: *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* Exhibition logo (© Shoot, Shoot, Shoot 2001)



*Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* provides the focus for a recent study into avant-garde film distribution in UK, led by Julia

Knight.<sup>129</sup> Knight identifies two different approaches to independent distribution; the 'traditional' model involves the maintenance of a library and catalogue and is represented by organisations such as the LUX and Cinenova, originally founded and run by artists and filmmakers. The traditional model has its roots in a co-op structure, which distributes the work of all members but, significantly, does not hold the rights to any films. The newer approach, exemplified by curatorial agencies such as the British Film and Video Umbrella, prioritises the selection, packaging and touring of film programmes over the establishment of a permanent distribution library. This overtly *curatorial* approach runs counter to the co-operative principle, which is inclusive and non-selective.

*Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* represents a fusion of the traditional and curatorial modes and was particularly successful in generating audiences through the use of email lists, with very limited print advertising and press coverage.<sup>130</sup> But Knight suggests that the

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Movies see Hamid Naficy *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) 60-62. Although Naficy highlights a crisis in independent distribution, as a consequence of a decline in state funding during the 1990s he is relatively optimistic about the distribution and exhibition prospects offered by the web.

<sup>129</sup> References to this ongoing research project are taken from Julia Knight's presentation, entitled "Reaching Audiences: The Role of the Distributor", at *Experimental Film Today*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, July 6, 2003. See also Knight's earlier discussion of video art distribution: "In Search of an Identity: Distribution, Exhibition and the 'Process' of British Video Art", in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, ed. Julia Knight (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996) 217-237.

<sup>130</sup> Knight emphasises that many of those who attended the screenings would have already had some association with the avant-garde film culture located around the LUX and mailing

funding crisis at the LUX may have contributed to a groundswell of support for the exhibition. Knight also calls attention to an institutional demand for some form of structuring curatorial 'narrative', and suggests that this may contribute to a shift away from traditional models of distribution. In fact she seems to argue that distributors founded on the traditional model may come under increased pressure from funding agencies to provide "value for money" through curated programmes. This type of activity is clearly problematic for an organisation such as Cinenova, which evolved as a distributor for women's cinema through a *critique* of canon formation.

### **Exhibiting the National: Festivals of Irish Culture**

Perhaps the most notable development during the 1980s, in the area of film exhibition, is the rise of the *international* festival of Irish culture. International festivals have long been central to the distribution, exhibition (and perhaps construction) of 'national cinemas'. Theorists such as Teshome Gabriel, addressing the development of Third Cinema, have emphasised the potentially "revolutionary" role of national or pan-national collectives and federations formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These include the Pan African Federation of Cineastes and the Committee of African Cineastes Distribution and, within the South American context, Argentina's *Cine Liberation* and Colombia's *Cine Novo*. Gabriel writes:

[F]ilmmakers who adhere to the Third Cinema [...] came to realize that it is not enough to make a film with a revolutionary perspective, or to simply express a political opinion, but that the whole institution within which filmmakers and audiences interact must undergo a radical change.<sup>131</sup>

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lists such as *Frameworks*. The searchable *Frameworks* mailing list archive can be found at <http://www.hi-beam.net/fw/>

<sup>131</sup> Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982): 23. Paul Willemen has also examined the contradictions and difficulties surrounding attempts to develop a more "critical, responsible festival policy", in Edinburgh and in Pesaro. He provides a critique of festival culture in "Pesaro: The Limits and Strengths of a Cultural Policy", *Framework: A Film Journal* 15/16/17 (1981): 96-98 For an in-depth analysis of the role of the festival in critical media practice see Barbara Trent "Media in a Capitalist Culture", *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1998) 230-246

Others, however, have implicated international festivals in the continued *colonisation* of African cinemas. Filmmaker Manthia Diawara argues that the “proliferation of African film festivals everywhere in Europe and America” is not in the interests of African cinema.<sup>132</sup> He suggests that African cinema is often “used for the purposes of multiculturalism” in European or American contexts,<sup>133</sup> contributing to the “ghettoization” of African films. Diawara argues that festivals may also distort and disguise their role in the maintenance of production and distribution monopolies. The Pan-African Film Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), in Burkina Faso, provides an important source of revenue from tourists and other visitors for the host nation. But, as Diawara points out, FESPACO is funded primarily by the French government and Pan-African structures for production and distribution remain largely underdeveloped. As a consequence, he suggests, festivals deliver African cinema to foreign audiences while domestic cinemas remain dominated by imported “Western and Kung Fu films”.<sup>134</sup>

Throughout the 1970s Irish filmmaking was showcased at the film festivals in Berlin, Toronto and Edinburgh. This established international circuit expanded in the late 70s and early 80s to include curated film seasons and regular festival events. One of the first international exhibitions of Irish film with an explicitly critical focus was curated by Kevin Rockett at the Spanish Filmoteca in 1979, on the invitation of the Dept of Foreign Affairs. It was followed by a series of subsequent events, organised by the Irish Film Institute both at home and abroad.<sup>135</sup> A tradition of international exhibition continues and the 1990s witnessed a number of Irish film events in the US, such as *Irish Eyes* (Pacific Film Archive, San Francisco, March 1999) *Forbidden Journey*:

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<sup>132</sup> Manthia Diawara, “On Tracking World Cinema: African Cinema at Film Festivals”, *Public Culture* 6 (1994): 385-396.

<sup>133</sup> Diawara, 386. He notes, in particular, a high profile African Film Festival that took place at New York’s Lincoln Center in April 1993.

<sup>134</sup> In a recent account of World Cinema, however, Dudley Andrew emphasises the growth of an indigenous Nigerian cinema orientated towards *domestic* audiences. Andrew, “Dialects and Dialectics of Cinema in the World”, *The Irish Seminar* Keough-Notre Dame Centre, July 5 2002..

<sup>135</sup> The Spanish event included films such as *Ireland Behind the Wire*, marking a departure from the type of programming previously favoured by the DFA. See Ciaran Carty “The Pride

*The New Irish Cinema*, (Boston, Dedham Community Theater, April 1993), *In The Name of the Nation: Celebrating Irish Filmmaking 1910-1994*, (Film Society of Lincoln Center, June/July 1994), *Travelling Dublin* (Rennes Film Festival, March 2001).<sup>136</sup> This is in addition to annual events such as the Film Fleadh at New York's Cantor Centre or the Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Counties (informally known as the Celtic Film Festival), which moves between Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Cornwall. Many of these festival events have prompted critical debate around policy and practice and Martin McLoone identifies the Celtic Film Festival, in particular, as a focal point for regional cultural resistance during the 1980s and 90s.<sup>137</sup>

The past decade seems to have witnessed an increase in the number of touring international exhibitions of Irish visual art (many of which include moving image work). Examples include *0044 – Irish Artists In Britain* (1999, New York, London, Belfast, Cork) and *Irish Art Now: From The Poetic To The Political* (2000, Dublin, New York, Boston, Chicago). A tradition of nationalistic exhibition is, of course, well established within the visual arts, as evidenced by the continued importance of events such as the Venice Biennale, but international exhibitions of Irish art are now often likely to form part of a larger national cultural festival, which is characterised by a quite specific mode of address. Both *0044* and another exhibition, *When Time Began To Rant And Rage* (1998, Liverpool, Berkeley, New York, London) toured to the US, as part of an Irish cultural festival marking the fifth anniversary of Ireland House in New York in 1999. Other examples include *L'Imaginaire Irlandais* (1996), a French festival of Irish culture, which included screenings of over forty films as well as a

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and the Shame of Irish Cinema", *Sunday Independent*, June 10, 1979: 31. See also the discussion of film festivals and seasons in Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland*, viii – ix.

<sup>136</sup> *Travelling Dublin at Rennes* attracted over 64,000 spectators, a higher attendance than any previous festival of national cinema at Rennes. See Henry Lewes "Film Festivals: Travelling Dublin at Rennes" *Film West* 44, (Winter 2001): 70-71. For a survey of US festivals of "accented" (exilic and diasporic) cinema during the late 80s and the 90s see Hamid Naficy, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, 297 n3.

<sup>137</sup> See Martin McLoone "Internal Decolonisation? British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe", *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001) 184-190.

number of visual arts projects.<sup>138</sup> By definition, national cultural festivals tend to incorporate a *range* of art forms, encompassing theatre, dance, music, literature and cinema as well as educational or interpretative elements such as artists' talks, scholarly lectures, tours and publications. They may encompass various modes of visual arts exhibition, across an array of venues, but while contemporary art is often a central attraction in festival programmes, the 'multi-component' cultural event aims to reach a broader audience.

Clearly, artworks have long been employed by states as instruments of cultural diplomacy. Brian Wallis characterises festivals as a "form of cultural diplomacy [...]" the latest development in a long history of propagandistic deployments of art exhibition<sup>139</sup> and, elsewhere, Judith Huggins Balfe has analysed the political uses of artworks since the 1930s, providing case studies on major US exhibitions of art from Japan, Egypt, China and the former Soviet Union.<sup>140</sup> Huggins Balfe's account suggests that the symbolic value of artworks, for audiences, derives not from modes of exhibition but from the "elective affinity between great artworks and those who possess great political, economic or religious power".<sup>141</sup> She cites *Irish Gold: Treasures of Early Irish Art* (1978)<sup>142</sup> and *Treasures of the Kremlin* (1979) as prominent examples of this type of 'blockbuster' exhibition. But she identifies a critical backlash against this overtly propagandistic use of art and the early 1980s seems to have witnessed a displacement of the blockbuster art exhibition by the more populist cultural 'festival'.

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<sup>138</sup> For a highly critical review of the film component see Seamus McSwiney, "The Imaginaire Irlandais Film Festival", (*Film West* 25, Summer 1996): 7.

<sup>139</sup> Brian Wallis, "Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy" *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacle*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, (London: Routledge, 1994) 265.

<sup>140</sup> Judith Huggins Balfe, "Artworks as Symbols in International Politics", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 1.2, (1987): 5-27. The US has, of course, also exported its own art practices, in the interests of achieving cultural, political and economic objectives. See Serge Guilbaut's analysis of the construction of the American avant-garde in Guilbaut, (trans. Arthur Goldhammer) *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>141</sup> Huggins Balfe, 215.

<sup>142</sup> This exhibition featured "treasures" from the collections of the National Museum, the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College, Dublin and it toured to a number of US venues including



Wallis also acknowledges that the blockbuster has given way to the festival but he suggests that the newer form of exhibition “only signals a more aggressive assertion of nationalism”.<sup>143</sup> He notes that events such as *Turkey – The Continuing Magnificence* (1987-88), *Mexico: A Work of Art* (1990), and the *Festival of Indonesia* (1990-92) were developed in order to achieve specific political goals, such as an increase in tourism, trade or even aid. The exhibited national cultures tend to share a particular economic profile; huge international debts, cheap and docile labour markets; valuable exports managed by US multinational corporations (principally oil) and recently privatised state industries. These events signal that the “guest” nations are “ready to play ball economically with the United States”.<sup>144</sup> Wallis dismisses the festival as a sophisticated form of advertising which offers only “easily digestible vignettes of a foreign nation’s culture”, noting that while museums may benefit in terms of audience numbers, this may be at the expense of “intellectual resources and professional integrity”. This critique of institutional practice is no doubt valid but Wallis does not consider the specificity of relations between host nation and guest nation. In particular he fails to account for the presence of diaspora communities, or practitioners, and their role in structuring or critically negotiating cultural relations between nations.

Festivals have continued to develop as a mode of exhibition and the 1990s witnessed an overt critical engagement with notions of cultural exchange and translation on the part of some curators and institutions. Events such as the 1993 *Festival of Los Angeles* (focusing on diaspora communities within the city) or the *Distant Relations* project of 1996 (featuring Irish, Chicano and Mexican art and critical writing) share an emphasis on a critical exploration of relations between communities.<sup>145</sup> Pat

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The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>143</sup> Wallis, 245.

<sup>144</sup> Wallis, 277.

<sup>145</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's analysis of the Festival of Los Angeles; “Confusing Pleasures”, in Octavi Riles, Muntadas, Wilte de With (eds), *Muntadas: On Translation: The Audience*, Rotterdam, Center for Contemporary Art, 1999 and also Trisha Ziff, *Distant Relations: Chicano, Irish, Mexican Art and Critical Writing*, (New York: Smart Art Press, 1996)

Murphy's work, in the curation of events such as *From Beyond the Pale* (1994) and *The Event Horizon* (1996), also bears further consideration in this regard. Commenting upon her role as a curator, Murphy states:

What is important about [*From Beyond the Pale*] is that it is clear that there is an audience for this kind of programming and that there is a potential for developing a repertory system so that it is on-going for audiences rather than a special, once-off, event.<sup>146</sup>

This suggests that one-off festival events can raise the profile of an *audience*, as well as a particular set of film practices, and perhaps contribute to an expansion of avant-garde exhibition. Even an overtly promotional event, such as EXPO, can provide a context for critical curatorial and artistic practice. Fiach MacConghail, cultural director of the Irish EXPO 2000 presentation, commissioned Desperate Optimists (an art group whose members Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor are Irish but London-based) to produce a piece of work to coincide with the event. Their project, entitled *Lost Cause*, is an audiovisual narrative staged and filmed around the EXPO site and accessible on the web. In an introduction to the piece, Molloy states:

Using an evocative sound score, *Lost Cause* follows a woman as she makes her way through a futuristic city intent on finding and ultimately blowing up the head quarters of the Chemi-drome Corporation. *Lost Cause* very consciously makes reference to a number of classic sci-fi films including *La Jetee* and *Alphaville* and is, in many ways, an attempt to look at the notion of narrative as experienced on the web.<sup>147</sup>

Through its exploration of dystopian narratives, this project aims to interrogate a range of discourses around science and technology, which converge at the site of EXPO. Interviewed by Rosita Boland about the context for this project, MacConghail

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<sup>146</sup> *From Beyond the Pale*, a major exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (September 1994 - February 1995), included a film programme curated by Murphy at the Irish Film Centre and it featured work by Rene Clair Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Joseph Cornell, Godard, Eisenstein as well as a number of Irish films including *On a Paving Stone Mounted*. See Pat Murphy, Interview with Stephanie McBride, "The Peripheral Eye", *CIRCA* 72, Summer 1995: 34-37. *The Event Horizon* involved a curatorial collaboration with Michael Tarantino and Declan McGonagle. See Pat Murphy "Oh Such Love, Oh Such Suffering!", *The Event Horizon*, ed. Michael Tarantino, (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1997): 29-38

states: “EXPO isn’t an arts festival. Ireland’s participation in EXPO is because of economics, and Germany is a very important market. [...] Germany has had a rural view of Ireland, and my job is to be to try and open that up a little. What is Ireland? I don’t have any answers to that, but I can ask questions”.<sup>148</sup>



Figure 14: IDA Ireland advertisement in *No Country for Old Men* exhibition catalogue (published as part of *A Sense of Ireland* 1980). © IDA

### ***A Sense of Ireland: Archaeology of a Cultural Festival***

An insight into the changing discourse of the national cultural festival can also be gained from an analysis of the programmes for *A Sense of Ireland: London Festival of the Irish Arts* (held in 1980, 1988 and 1990).<sup>149</sup> The first event was directed by John Stephenson, formerly of the Project Arts Centre, and the film, theatre and visual arts programmes included a number of productions and practitioners associated with Project. For example, the programme included revivals of Project Theatre productions such as *The Liberty Suit* and *The Risen People* and three visual arts exhibitions, including work by artists associated with Project, such as Nigel Rolfe.<sup>150</sup> The film component of *A Sense of Ireland*, curated by Kevin Rockett, offers parallels with Project Cinema Club’s 1978 Irish programme, although it was structured somewhat differently. As I have noted, the Project season was organised around specific themes and presented indigenous and non-indigenous works together. The London event, however, featured *two* distinct programmes: a selection of recent indigenous work screened at the

<sup>147</sup> This project can be accessed at <http://www.lostcause1-10.com>

<sup>148</sup> Fiach MacConghail, interviewed by Rosita Boland, “Inside Ireland’s Far Pavilions”, *The Irish Times*, June 28, 2000: 1212.

<sup>149</sup> I am focusing on the 1980 and 88 events because the third festival seems to have emphasised literature and the performing arts over visual art and cinema.

<sup>150</sup> Nigel Rolfe featured in *Without the Walls*, curated by Dorothy Cross at the ICA and including work by John Aiken, James Coleman, Felim Egan, Brian King, Ciaran Lennon, Alanna O’Kelly, Michael O’Sullivan, and Noel Sheridan. *The International Connection: Irish Art in the Seventies* took place at the Roundhouse and *The Delighted Eye* was a touring exhibition funded by the Arts Councils of Ireland and Northern Ireland and selected by Frances Ruane.

National Film Theatre under the title *New Irish Cinema* and a selection of Irish-related material presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art as *The Outsider's View*. This shift is significant because it attempted to highlight developments in indigenous production, while at the same time exploring a broader cultural context.<sup>151</sup>



Figure 15: Irish Tourist Board Advertisement, *A Sense of Ireland* Programme, 1980. ©Irish Tourist Board

*A Sense of Ireland* seems to have articulated a new emphasis on the promotion of contemporary Irish art in cultural, political and economic terms. Interviewed in 2000 about the project, John Stephenson states; “in 1980, Ireland saw itself as a cultural backwater, where only dead artists mattered”.<sup>152</sup> He continues, “as a direct result of *A Sense of Ireland* the Cultural Relations Committee’s budget multiplied. And we pioneered the idea of commercial and business sponsorship of the arts.” The festival was prominently sponsored by Bord Fáilte and the Irish Development Authority and it explicitly sought to counteract negative stereotypes in the British media, in the interests of Irish tourism and industry. Stephenson’s catalogue introduction makes direct reference to the “trauma of Northern Ireland”, pointing to the need to move beyond “accepted mythologies.”<sup>153</sup> Another contributor to the catalogue, Seamus Deane, articulates a different perspective, however, when he describes the festival as a “presentation of Ireland to itself”.<sup>154</sup>

*A Sense of Ireland* was revived in 1988 and 1990 on a somewhat smaller scale and the 1988 event seems to have placed less emphasis on film than on music, literature

<sup>151</sup> Kevin Rockett defines the project in terms of a reconstruction of lost histories in the catalogue introduction to “A Sense of Ireland: Irish Cinema”, *BFI/National Film Theatre Programme*, (February 1980) 30.

<sup>152</sup> John Stephenson, interviewed by Rosita Boland, “Inside Ireland’s Far Pavilions”, 2.

<sup>153</sup> John Stephenson, “Introduction”, *A Sense of Ireland*, (Dublin: A Sense of Ireland Ltd, 1980): 13.

<sup>154</sup> Seamus Deane, “The Artist in Ireland”, *A Sense of Ireland*, 38.

and theatre, even though the programme included a selection of new Irish cinema and a “directors forum”.<sup>155</sup> The visual arts element was also substantially smaller and there was just one exhibition, entitled *Selected Images*. It was developed by artist James Coleman in collaboration with curator Declan McGonagle (then based at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London) and it focused on the intersection between image and narrative in Irish culture. In addition to contributions by poet Paul Durcan and critic Joan Fowler, *Selected Images* featured mixed media work by artists such as Micky Donnelly, Alanna O’Kelly and Victor Sloan and film projects by Vivienne Dick. In contrast with the position outlined by Stephenson in 1980, the catalogue introduction by Coleman and McGonagle seems to foreground a more fluid, diasporic, and perhaps ‘post-national’ cultural identity. They state:

Our intention in this exhibition has been to show a selected number of artists within whose work imaging is an important part of a narrative structure. The exhibition is representative of their work in a range of disciplines [...] Particular ideas/processes are present in the work which link the artists and their activity to a continuum from Armagh to America – beyond expectations of categorisation or nationalistic identities.<sup>156</sup>

Inclusion in this Irish-themed festival seems to coincide with a significant turning point in the critical reception of Vivienne Dick’s work. Previously, she had failed to secure funding from Irish agencies but in 1987 she was commissioned by RTÉ to direct an episode of *Pobal i London* (a documentary series produced by Bob Quinn’s Cinegaeil company). In 1989 her film *London Suite* (1989) was screened by RTÉ and subsequent works such as *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994) were co-financed by RTÉ and by the Arts Councils of Ireland and Britain.

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<sup>155</sup> The 1988 film programme included *Budawanny* (Bob Quinn, 1986) *Reefer and the Model* (Joe Comerford, 1988), *The Dead* (John Huston, 1987), *The Courier* (Frank Deasy, Joe Lee, 1987), *The Ballroom of Romance* (Pat O’Connor, 1982), *Night in Tunisia*, (Pat O’Connor, 1983) and *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984) as well as screenings of *Man of Aran* (Robert Flaherty, 1934) and *The Playboy of the Western World*, (Brian Hurst, 1961). Details of the 1988 and 1990 programmes can be accessed at <http://www.ecp.ucl.ac.uk/projects/1998/e1/dsabelli/Riverside/>

<sup>156</sup> Declan McGonagle and James Coleman, “Introduction”, *Selected Images: Vivienne Dick et al*, (London: Riverside Studios, 1988).

### **Conclusion: Shifting Structures of Distribution and Exhibition**

My analysis of the changing discourses of the *Sense of Ireland* festival underscores its shifting role as a site for cultural promotion *and* cultural critique. I have called attention to a number of shifts in film distribution and exhibition since the 1970s, most notably the emergence of the festival and gallery as relatively distinct contexts for film practice. These developments might seem to suggest a new alignment between film and the art market yet, as I have suggested through reference to the work of Desperate Optimists and Chantal Akerman, these new contexts can *also* function as sites for the critical interrogation of national culture and the 'spectacular'. In light of the shifts in exhibition and distribution noted by Julia Knight and others, it seems likely that *curatorial* agencies will play a significant role in structuring the future development of avant-garde film culture.

My exploration of 'inter-national' circulation also highlights the dependent character of art and film practice, as exemplified by the parallels between the policies of British and American institutions such as MoMA, the Other Cinema, the BFI Production Board and Channel Four. It supports the view, advanced by David E. James, that avant-garde film practices can be read as an index of wider social, political and economic change. I have identified a number of specific factors structuring the emergence of Irish avant-garde film during this period. These include a rise (and subsequent fall-off) in various form of indirect subvention and a temporary expansion of critical sites of reception, such as film societies and issue-based groups. My analysis suggests that these intersections between the local and the international were central to the development of a critical 'national' cinema.

## Chapter Three

### Between the Subaltern and the State:

#### The Artisanal Practices of Joe Comerford (1972 – 88) and Bob Quinn (1975 – 1986)

We live in a post-colonial, third world country whose national aspirations were long ago hijacked a la Frantz Fanon by its national bourgeoisie, resulting in a haemorrhage of people exiting plus an unwinnable war against its own people.

Bob Quinn (1988)<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion you can tell what is happening to a society not by looking at the centre so much, but by looking at the margins. The centre knows this and when necessary it ensures that you cannot function on the margins. But I intend to continue making films.

Joe Comerford (1997)<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

The films of Joe Comerford and Bob Quinn constitute a powerful critique of Irish society, a critique that is often articulated from the margins. Lance Pettitt notes, for example, that the representation of “Travellers, unemployed people, homelessness, homosexuality and urban lives” in their work, and that of other Irish filmmakers, serves to expose “the faultlines of modernity in Ireland”.<sup>3</sup> A commitment to socially and politically engaged practice is also evident in the collaborative practices employed to produce these works. My analysis explores these processes of collaboration but it also considers *other* areas of intersection between the work of Comerford and Quinn. In particular, it explores the complex use of sound and music and the thematic emphasis on *craftsmanship* and *folk culture* in several key films.

<sup>1</sup> Bob Quinn, “How the West Was Won”, *Film Base News* 9, (October/November 1988): 11.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Comerford, “Opinion”, *Film West* 27, (Spring 1997): 25.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of Quinn and Comerford’s work in Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 103-104.

There is insufficient scope within the context of this study to address fully the range of work produced by Bob Quinn. As such, I have chosen to exclude the bulk of his documentary work, with the exception of projects such as *Cloch* (1975) and *Atlantean* (1981-4), which explicitly subvert documentary convention. Bob Quinn was born in Dublin, in 1935, but he has been based in Connemara since the early 70s. He first became involved in documentary filmmaking while working within RTÉ's religious department. During the early 1960s, the new television station proved to be a site of relative intellectual and artistic freedom and Quinn was able to complete a considerable number and range of film projects.<sup>4</sup> This period was also marked by the development of formally innovative works at RTÉ, such as *Insurrection* (1966), a high profile drama series (in eight parts) commissioned on the anniversary of the 1916 Rising. *Insurrection*, directed by Louis Lentin and Michael Garvey from a script by Hugh Leonard, is described by Helena Sheehan as "one of the best remembered and well-received productions" in the station's history, one that "commanded an unprecedented marshalling of resources".<sup>5</sup> Sheehan notes that Leonard's script offered a highly naturalistic, dramatised account of the events of Easter week 1916, framed as though actuality reportage. As such it evidently offers close parallels with Peter Watkins' *Culloden* (1964), as well as the contemporary work of Loach and Garnett, discussed in Chapter One.

By the late 60s, however, RTÉ had come under increased governmental and commercial pressure to conform to a more conventional representation of social and political issues. As a consequence of this growing conservatism, Quinn left the station with fellow producers Jack Dowling and Lelia Doolan in 1968 and in the following year they published their critique of Irish broadcasting policy and practice, entitled *Sit*

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Quinn, interviewed by Brian McIlroy in *World Cinema 4: Ireland*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1989) 142. Quinn notes that, during this period, he would direct a different film every five weeks, and the filmography listed at the close of this study gives an indication of the variety of topics addressed.

<sup>5</sup> Helena Sheehan, *Irish Television Drama: A Society and its Stories* (Dublin: Radio Telefís Éireann, 1987) 111. See also Kevin Rockett, "Documentaries", in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Routledge, 1988) 90.



*Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station.*<sup>6</sup> Around this time Quinn left Dublin for Carraroe, Co. Galway and, in 1973, he set up an independent production company, Cinegael, to make films for (and about) the Irish language community.

In 1974 Quinn was commissioned by Sinn Féin – The Workers Party to make *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975). This project generated considerable critical debate and the context of production and reception is discussed in detail below. Quinn's next work, *Cloch* (1975), is a less overtly political piece – a short film documenting the work of a group of sculptors at the Kilkenny Arts Workshop – and it marked Quinn's first collaboration with composer Roger Doyle. Quinn's next project (co-directed with Joe Comerford) was a 1976 documentary about the National Film Board of Canada, entitled *A Film Board for Ireland*. Around this time, Quinn also made *Self-Portrait with Red Car* (1976-78), a film without dialogue featuring the painter Brian Bourke. It was acquired and distributed by the Museum of Modern Art Circulating Film Library, together with *Cloch* and *Poitín* (1978), Quinn's next film and his first independent feature. The Irish language script for *Poitín*, by Colm Bairéad, won the first Arts Council Script Award and the film includes performances by Cyril Cusack, Niall Tóibín and Donal McCann as well as a number of non-professional local actors. During this period, Quinn also continued to work as an independent producer for RTÉ, completing a series of documentaries including *The Family* (1978), a harrowing film about a commune in Donegal that was not broadcast until the 1990s.

Quinn continued to work within a broadcast context and *Atlantean: An Irishman's Search for North African Roots* (1981-4), is a series of three documentaries exploring parallels between North African and traditional Irish music and culture. It was

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<sup>6</sup> *Sit Down and Be Counted* features a preface by Raymond Williams, which draws parallels between their protest and that of students and workers in Paris and Prague. See Raymond Williams, "Preface" in Lelia Doolan, Jack Dowling and Bob Quinn, *Sit Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station*, (Dublin: Wellington Press, 1969) xii. See Helena Sheehan's critique of the publication and its "grandiose" introduction in *Irish Television Drama: A Society and its Stories*, 142. Raymond Williams was also a supporter of certain RTÉ productions during this period. See his discussion of *The Riordans* in "Most Doctors Recommend", *The Listener*, 27 November 1969: 770

financed by RTÉ, the Irish Film Board, Sianel Pedwar Cymru, TRM Morocco and Egypt TV and followed by a publication entitled *Atlantean: Ireland's North African and Maritime Heritage* (1986). In 1986 Quinn returned to drama with *Budawanny*, a film without spoken dialogue, which was set on Clare Island. Based upon the novel *Súil le Breith* by Pádraig Standúin, it was later remade by Quinn as *The Bishop's Story* (1994).<sup>7</sup> Quinn has also maintained an involvement in distribution and exhibition. From 1973 to 1976 he made "video current affairs" programmes, which were screened in pubs and halls in Connemara. He also ran a weekend cinema club in his home in Carraroe (from 1975 to 78) featuring both Irish and international film drama and documentary and subsequently screened his own 16mm films at the Taibhdhearc theatre in Galway and at the Academy cinema in Dublin. More recently, Quinn has begun to release works such as *Poitín* and *Cloch* on video, distributing them via the Internet.

Born in Dublin in 1947, Joe Comerford studied Fine Art at the National College of Art from 1967 until 1972. His transition towards filmmaking was gradual; he took photographs of a stained glass mobile that he had constructed and then borrowed an 8mm camera in order to film the mobile in motion. These initial experiments led to an exploration of portraiture and performance. He states:

I went from stained glass and sculpture into using the model and then it sort of evolved from that into getting someone who was a person in their own right to say lines so it sort of came about inadvertently.<sup>8</sup>

Comerford experienced a certain amount of resistance to this film work while at the College of Art and he would produce storyboards as "a way of showing that I was doing something at least connected with the art school". The narrowness of the College curriculum became a focus for student unrest in the late 1960s and

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<sup>7</sup> Quinn's work since 1987 is primarily in the area of documentary and it includes *Graceville*, focusing on the 19<sup>th</sup> century migration of fifty Connemara families to Minnesota, and *It Must be Done Right*, a biography of his long-standing collaborator Donal McCann. Details on these and other productions can be found at the Cinegaeil website <http://www.conamara.org/filmogr.htm#>

<sup>8</sup> Joe Comerford, interviewed by the author, May 8, 2001.

Comerford was actively involved in a series of student occupations. During this period, he helped to organise screenings of avant-garde film, often supplied by embassies. Partly as a consequence of the protests, he notes that the College gradually became “less like a finishing school for girls and more like a college, where art and artists were taken seriously”.<sup>9</sup> Comerford completed two films during this period: *Swan Alley* (1969) and *Emtigon* (1972). His ‘Diploma’ film *Swan Alley* is rarely shown and Comerford has described it as “naïve” but it marked the beginning of an important long-term collaboration with the composer Roger Doyle (a friend of Comerford’s since childhood)<sup>10</sup>.

Although Comerford has worked across a range of formats and within a variety of production contexts it is possible to trace two quite distinct currents within his practice through reference to the use of music. The soundtracks for *Swan Alley*, *Emtigon*, *Withdrawal* (1974) and *Waterbag* (1984) were all produced by Roger Doyle and Comerford acknowledges that he prefers to work with Doyle on his more ‘personal’ films. In contrast, on *Down the Corner* (1978), *Traveller* (1981) *Reefer and the Model* (1988) and *High Boot Benny* (1993) he deliberately commissioned musicians with a perceived connection to the locality or the community that served as the focus of the narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Comerford subsequently spent some time in working as a trainee in RTÉ and he left to make *Withdrawal*, an exploration of the experience of heroin addiction and institutionalisation. Comerford’s next film, *Down The Corner*, is based upon a

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<sup>9</sup> Joe Comerford, interviewed by Gerry Sandford, “Independent Film-making in Ireland”, *Sunday Tribune*, February 21 1982: 20. For an alternative account of the National College of Art during this period, see John Turpin “The National College of Art and Design”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, (Winter 1996): 341-351.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to providing music and location sound on a range of Irish films Roger Doyle has worked extensively in theatre and performance, most notably with the group Operating Theatre. A film about his work, directed by Quinn and entitled *Listen* (1978) was produced for RTÉ and broadcast on 28 November 1978.

<sup>11</sup> The music for *Down the Corner* (discussed below in more detail) is by Dublin singer and songwriter Liam Weldon. The uilleann pipe-player Davy Spillane appeared in and composed the music for *Traveller* while the soundtrack for *Reefer and the Model* is by Limerick-born songwriter and uilleann-pipe player Johnny Duhan. Weldon, Spillane and Duhan would all

children's story written by Noel McFarlane. Filmed and set in Ballyfermot, it focused on urban life and unemployment and was supported by range of non-governmental Irish and international sources. The film was only finished, however, with the assistance of the BFI Production Board. The Board also funded Comerford's next film, *Traveller*, based upon on Neil Jordan's Arts Council Award-winning script. It was relatively well received and widely screened at international festivals<sup>12</sup>, but Jordan was reputed to be unhappy with Comerford's approach to the script.

With *Waterbag*, a visually complex exploration of sexual and social isolation funded by the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board, Comerford returned briefly to short filmmaking. His next work, *Reefer and the Model*, was his most ambitious and it was the first indigenous feature to be made on 35mm. It was the last major film to be financed by Irish Film Board before its dissolution. Comerford's next film, *High Boot Benny* (1993), was financed by the newly revived Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann but made on a relatively modest budget, with a small crew.

### **Critical Frameworks and the 'subaltern'**

As this brief survey suggests, it is possible to position the work of Quinn and Comerford in relation to a number of distinct, although overlapping, critical currents. In a recent article for *Cinema Journal*, Jerry White theorises Quinn's work in terms of a critical *ethnographic* tradition, specific to the 1950s and 60s. He argues that the filmmaking styles of both Bob Quinn and Canadian documentarist Pierre Perrault recall the work of Jean Rouch, rather than the "more aggressively experimental ethnography" of Trinh T. Minh-ha.<sup>13</sup> He notes that Rouch "sought to put people in semifictional situations that echoed their own lives, so as to document not only a culture but to illuminate the interior lives of people who make up their culture" and

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have moved within the same circuits, and may have played together at various points. On *High Boot Benny*, Comerford worked with Derry-based traditional musician Gaye McIntyre.

<sup>12</sup> *Traveller* was shown at Locarno, Sydney, Melbourne, Ghent, Turin, Berlin Forum of Young Cinema and at the Celtic Film Festival (where it won the Silver Award) in 1982. It was shown at Arnheim and Lisbon in 1983. Also, together with *Down the Corner*, it was included in a season entitled *British Cinema Now* at the NFT in April 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry White "Arguing with Ethnography: The Films of Bob Quinn and Pierre Perrault", *Cinema Journal* 42.2 (2003): 101.

he highlights a similar approach in Quinn's *Poitin* and *The Bishop's Story*. Yet he suggests that (unlike Rouch) Quinn and Perrault both explore the "idea of national self" and examine the way in which "extraterritorial situations, such as migration and diaspora" relate to nationalist movements.<sup>14</sup> Despite his emphasis on an explicitly ethnographic tradition, however, White theorises Quinn's work in terms of much broader set of cultural developments, that are generally associated with globalisation, anti-colonial discourse and/or the 'postmodern'. He concludes that Quinn's practice forms part of a "hybrid" cinema, a practice that is "uniquely organic to the cultural condition of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries".<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere, Hamid Naficy provides a different perspective on these 'hybrid' currents. Focusing on "exilic and diasporic" filmmaking, he theorises the emergence of an "Accented Cinema" across a range of postcolonial and Third World contexts. Naficy specifies particular modes of production, which he defines as either 'interstitial' or 'collective'. The first mode, associated with filmmakers such as Fernando Solanas, Chantal Akerman and Atom Egoyan, is characterised by certain "financial provisions", which may require filmmakers to subsidise their work through commercial practice and by "the multiplication or accumulation of labour" on the part of the filmmaker. It may also be characterised by multilingual production, multi-source funding and by protracted distribution processes (within which academic structures may play an important role).<sup>16</sup>

Naficy's second mode, centring on collectivity, is exemplified by the work of Third World Newsreel and Women Make Movies (distribution collectives based in the US) and by British production workshops such as Black Audio Collective, whose 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* proved central to theorisations of postcolonial cultural practice.<sup>17</sup> Yet Naficy complicates his own model by also highlighting the collective

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<sup>14</sup> White, 103.

<sup>15</sup> White, 122.

<sup>16</sup> Hamid Naficy *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) 46-56.

<sup>17</sup> For analysis of *Handsworth Songs* see Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University

dimension to the practices of filmmakers such as Mira Nair and Trinh T. Minh-ha. He also foregrounds the collaboration between Hanif Kureishi and the “Irish-British” Stephen Frears.<sup>18</sup> As such, there seems little in the way of a fixed distinction between the interstitial and the collective modes of ‘Accented Cinema’.

My own discussion of film theory and ‘inter-national’ circulation has highlighted the emergence of collaborative practices in broadcasting and in film production during the 1960s (the work of Loach and Garnett), 70s (the Co-op movement) and 80s (Channel Four and the workshop programme).<sup>19</sup> But to what extent should these different practices be defined as ‘collective’? Comerford and Quinn have both collaborated extensively with non-professional local actors, often on adaptations of the work of local authors. Yet few films by either director are rooted in collaborative processes of production, with the possible exception of *Down The Corner*. While groups such as the Derry Film and Video Co-op and the Belfast Film and Video Workshop are often identified as the authors of such works as *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (1989) and *Acceptable Levels* (1983), Comerford and Quinn are usually credited with sole authorship of the films that they have directed. It might then be more appropriate to categorise the practices of both directors in terms of a movement between the interstitial and collective modes of production theorised by Naficy.

Comerford and Quinn have never claimed a ‘subaltern’ position, or sought to represent any of the marginalized social groups represented in their films. The term itself is somewhat loaded, perhaps because subaltern identities are open to forms of essentialisation.<sup>20</sup> For Gramsci, however, subalternity is characterised less by fixity

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Press, 1994) 177. See also Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha, (London: Routledge, 1990) 306. For a discussion of Black Audio Collective see Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, (London: BFI, 1999) 208-9.

<sup>18</sup> Naficy, 93.

<sup>19</sup> I have not addressed the development of community-based video practice in the late 70s and 80s to any great extent, as I have chosen to focus primarily on film practice. For a discussion of professional associations and research centres dedicated to community video production in the British context, see Margaret Dickinson, 49-50.

<sup>20</sup> Naficy, for example, rejects the term subaltern in order to foreground the “interstitial, partial and multiple positions” that are occupied by ‘accented’ filmmakers, 47.

than by a certain 'diffusion'. In his discussion of "subaltern social groups", he calls for an analysis of:

[T]heir quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a long time; [...] their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formation, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations to press claims of their own.<sup>21</sup>

David Lloyd has taken up Gramsci's model, within the context of an analysis of nineteenth century Irish literature and agrarian violence.<sup>22</sup> He points out that while Gramsci's 'subaltern' may be a euphemism for 'proletariat' (a term likely to invite censorship) it has often been taken to apply to groups, such as ethnic or sexual minorities, which do not conform to Marx's definition of the proletariat. Lloyd notes that, for Gramsci, subaltern history is completed only when the subaltern group becomes a state. But he argues that this history can also be read against itself "as the sign of another *mode* of narrative, rather than an incomplete one".<sup>23</sup> He goes on to suggest that it is the *interface* between the subaltern's own history, "of complex formations and traditions" and the history of the civil state that can produce sites of resistance. It is in this sense that the concept of the subaltern seems most relevant to the work of Comerford and Quinn.

'Third Cinema' also functions as a recurrent point of reference within critical discourse around the work of Comerford and Quinn. Martin McLoone defines Joe Comerford's central concerns as "doggedly those of Third Cinema" and he also reads Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* as a Third Cinema text, while Jerry White has developed accounts of both filmmakers that are informed by reference to Third

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) 52.

<sup>22</sup> David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993) 126-28. Lloyd's work is of course informed by the Subaltern Studies project, associated with historians of the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd, 127. For an exploration of "Irish Subalterns", incorporating a critique of Lloyd's reading of Gramsci, see Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) 106-112.

Cinema.<sup>24</sup> As defined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their 1969 manifesto, Third Cinema is constructed in opposition to both the imperialism of Hollywood and the ‘art cinemas’ of the 1960s. It is a collective project, a cinema of “decolonisation” that rejects the Second Cinema of the auteur; variously labelled as “author’s cinema”, “expression cinema”, “nouvelles vague” or “cinema novo”.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 16: Poster for *The Hour of the Furnaces/Hora de los Hornos* (Solanas and Getino, 1968)

The final third of Solanas and Getino’s film *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*Les Hora de les Hornos*, 1968) is, in fact, devoted to a critique of colonial intellectualism and of European artistic and cultural values. The film advances the notion, more fully elaborated in the written manifesto, that neo-colonialism has cut the “intellectual sector, especially artists, off from national reality by lining them up behind ‘universal art and models’”<sup>26</sup>. Both film and manifesto can be read as a call for a rejection of humanist Eurocentrism and, by extension, modernism. For Solanas and Getino, the work of collectives, such as *Newsreel*, the films of Joris Ivens, Chris Marker and the États Généraux du Cinéma, provide an important model for a radical film movement precisely because they *precede* rather than follow social revolution.

In another key text of the Third Cinema movement, first published in 1970, Julio Garcia Espinosa rejects the aesthetic ‘perfection’ of the impartial or uncommitted

<sup>24</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, (London: British Film Institute, 2000) 132 - 136. See also Jerry White’s “The Films of Bob Quinn: Towards an Irish Third Cinema”, *Cine Action: Radical Film Criticism and Theory* 37 (1995): 3-10. White also examines the work of Comerford, in “Resisting Convention: The Films of Joe Comerford”, *Eire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies*, (Fall/Winter 2000-2001): 134-147.

<sup>25</sup> Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino “Towards a Third Cinema” [1969] reprinted in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976) 51. The authors do not specify this Second Cinema in *exclusively* European terms but their examples, which include the work of Godard, tend to be European.

<sup>26</sup> Solanas and Getino, 52.



filmmaking, in favour of an 'Imperfect' cinema. He writes; "imperfect cinema must, above all, show the process which generates the problems. It is the opposite of a cinema principally dedicated to celebrating results, the opposite of a self-sufficient and contemplative cinema, the opposite of a cinema which 'beautifully illustrates' ideas or concepts which we already possess".<sup>27</sup> Espinosa explicitly rejects the services of critics, noting that the Imperfect cinema renders the "function of mediators and intermediaries anachronistic" but his antagonism towards the institutions of film criticism should not be confused with a rejection of theory or intellectual critique. Like Solanas and Getino, Espinosa explicitly situates the Third Cinema in relation to a transformation of the relations between art and society, highlighting the conditions of production and reception that are associated with European modernism. He states:

[I]n the realm of artistic life, there are more spectators now than at any other moment in history [...] the task currently at hand is to find out if the conditions which will enable spectators to transform themselves into agents – not merely more active spectators but genuine co-authors – are beginning to exist.<sup>28</sup>

Espinosa notes that the goal of an 'imperfect cinema' is to attain the status of a genuinely popular art, distinct from the 'mass art' that is "produced by a minority in order to satisfy the demand of a public reduced to the sole role of spectator and consumer". His analysis, which recalls the work of Benjamin, suggests that Latin America retains certain forms of *folk or traditional art* (and mode of reception) that have been debased elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

In his more recent examination of "The Third Cinema Question" Paul Willemsen calls attention to the fact that the Third Cinema tradition is "not particularly exemplary in the sense of displaying stylistically innovative devices" and he notes that many of the

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<sup>27</sup> Julio Garcia Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema" [1970], *Twenty-Five Years of Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael Chanan, (London: Channel Four Television and British Film Institute, 1983) 32.

<sup>28</sup> Espinosa, 30.

<sup>29</sup> This emphasis on *reception* distinguishes Espinosa's model from primarily textual models of revolutionary film practice, discussed in Chapter One in relation to the 'realism debate'.

practitioners and activists of the late 1960s were influenced by Griersonian social documentary and by the “far from revolutionary” work of Italian neo-realists.<sup>30</sup> Both are examples of low-cost artisanal cinema, operating on a different scale to that epitomised by Hollywood and its “national-industrial rivals”. It is this *artisanal* mode of production, Willemen suggests, which has “allowed, at least in principle, and sometimes in practice, a more focused address of the ‘national’, revealing divisions and stratifications within a national formation ranging from regional dialects to class and political antagonisms”.<sup>31</sup> The work of Quinn and Comerford evidently offers parallels with both an anti-colonial Third Cinema practice and the collective and interstitial modes foregrounded by Naficy. The common thread that runs through these various cinemas is, in many respects, the notion of an *artisanal practice* located at the intersection of the state and the subaltern.

### **Between the Subaltern and the State**

Paul Willemen emphasises that an anti-colonial cinema refuses to “oppose a simplistic notion of national identity or of *cultural authenticity* to the values of colonial or imperial predators”.<sup>32</sup> Yet the artisanal model of practice is in many ways structured by discourses of authenticity. In Chapter One, I highlighted Pam Cook’s critique of ‘self-expression’ in avant-garde practice. Cook notes that the artisanal mode *seems* to lie outside the dominant system but she emphasises the extent to which this type of practice may be dependent upon state subsidy from agencies such as the Production Board of the British Film Institute, forming a component of a national-industrial formation.<sup>33</sup>

A more detailed account of this dependant relation can be found in Thomas Elsaesser’s analysis of the German ‘Autorenfilm’. Elsaesser traces the mobilisation of the Autorenfilm concept from the 1960s to the 1980s, focusing on the discourses of

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections”, *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, (London: BFI, 1989) 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Willemen, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Willemen, 4. [Emphasis added].

<sup>33</sup> Pam Cook, “The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film”, *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 279.

critics, policy-makers and practitioners.<sup>34</sup> State subsidies introduced in the 60s constituted the director, or indeed director-scriptwriter, as legal partner *and* as institutionalised artist. Star directors such as Herzog and Wenders (both of whom explored autobiographical material) came to represent both a means of winning new audiences and a unique marketing opportunity.<sup>35</sup> In terms of production, New German Cinema retained a strong artisanal dimension and, according to Elsaesser, the typical filmmaker operated a workshop in the home, worked as an editor and cameraperson as well as director and writer and had received little in the way of a conventional (industrial) film education, through apprenticeship or film school.<sup>36</sup>

Elsaesser emphasises that the task of the 'public author', within this context, is to mediate between the state and national audience and to provide "a source of value and a context for meaning".<sup>37</sup> Elsaesser highlights the various roles taken by the filmmakers of the New German Cinema; roles such as 'aesthetic expert', 'hero', 'autodidact', 'prophet', 'artisan', 'feminist', 'producer' and 'auteur'. Within the Irish context, the notion of the filmmaker as 'public author' has perhaps given way to a different notion of writer-director as artisan. In the absence of any policy documents dealing explicitly with the notion of authorship, it is possible to gain an insight into this issue through an analysis of various statements issued by Rod Stoneman (director of Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board, 1993-2003). In an article subtitled "the industrial versus the artisanal" Stoneman suggests that "film production practices outside Hollywood [...] can usefully be described as artisanal in contrast to the industrial model".<sup>38</sup> He notes that Hollywood directors are *replaceable* while, in

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Filmmakers had to complete (and distribute) a 'reference' film before they could apply for subsidies. But if their film had acquired quality status or a festival prize they could make low budget work with funding from the 'Kuratorium' fund. This contributed to an emphasis on certain forms of 'art cinema'. Following the restructuring of the Film Subsidy bill in 1974 and the establishment of the Television Framework Agreement, Elsaesser's account suggests that the mediating role of the public author was paralleled, or perhaps augmented, by television.

<sup>35</sup> Elsaesser, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Elsaesser, 101-103.

<sup>37</sup> Elsaesser, 75.

<sup>38</sup> Rod Stoneman, "Under the Shadow of Hollywood: the industrial versus the artisanal", *The Irish Review* 24, (Autumn 1999): 98.

contrast, national-artisanal cinemas “accentuate the highest degree of difference through the stress on the auteur (generally the director but occasionally the writer or producer)”.<sup>39</sup> Stoneman is less concerned with issues of avant-garde practice than with the potential commercial returns from comparatively low-budget ‘artisanal-industrial’ productions like *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992).<sup>40</sup> Much like the subaltern, it would seem that the notion of the artisanal is open to variety of interpretations.

Filmmakers such as Quinn and Comerford can in fact be seen to take up multiple authorial positions, whether in relation to their audiences or state agencies. For example, the work of both filmmakers would seem to articulate a tension between the personal and the communal, between the role of state-sponsored auteur and local storyteller. I have already noted that Comerford distinguishes between *personal* and community-oriented projects, primarily through the use of music. Equally it could be argued that Quinn’s practice also encompasses a more personal current, represented by films such as *Self-Portrait with Red Car*. It is significant, however, that when asked to situate his practice in relation to a tradition of artists’ filmmaking, Quinn instead favours comparison with a critical documentarist such as *Peter Watkins*.<sup>41</sup>

Like Loach and Garnett, and Quinn himself, Watkins produced some of his early work for television. But, as is widely known, his film *The War Game* (1966) was rejected by the BBC as unsuitable for broadcast because of its dramatisation of the consequences of a nuclear attack on Britain. As noted above, Watkins’ interrogation of the conventions of drama and documentary evidently informed the work of Irish filmmakers in the 1960s. But Watkins would also seem to represent an important

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<sup>39</sup> Stoneman, “Under the Shadow of Hollywood”, 100.

<sup>40</sup> More recently, Stoneman has also acknowledged his support for Irish “market-driven auteurs”. Stoneman used this term in his presentation to the 13<sup>th</sup> European Television and Film Forum, Dublin, November 8-10, 2001. For a discussion of Film Board policy in relation to specific Irish filmmakers see Áine Coffey, “Show Me the Money”, *The Sunday Tribune* (Business section), November 25, 2001: 4.

<sup>41</sup> Quinn, interviewed by the author, 7 December 2001.

role model for Quinn, as a filmmaker, precisely because of his oppositional role in relation to the state.<sup>42</sup>

### The Production and Reception of *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire*

*Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire* was described by Ciaran Carty in the *Sunday Independent* as “the most important Irish film in years” and it generated critical debate in journals such as *Film Directions* and *Screen* around representations of nationalism.<sup>43</sup> It has retained a prominent position in historical accounts of Irish filmmaking, and is defined by McLoone (writing in 2000) as “the film that announced the arrival of an indigenous Irish cinema”.<sup>44</sup> *Caoineadh* sets out to explore the opposition between competing models of the national through a complex narrative structure and various extra-textual strategies. The plot centres on the staging of a play by a group of Gaeltacht actors under the direction of an English playwright. The play is a version of an 18<sup>th</sup> ballad, the Lament for Art O’Leary, which recalls the story of an Irish nobleman (a descendant of Gaelic aristocracy) who was killed because of his refusal to conform to the Penal Laws. A considerable proportion of Quinn’s film focuses on the processes of production and reception surrounding the stage *adaptation* and one key sequence focuses on the rehearsal of the English and Irish narration written to accompany a filmed insert.



Figure 17: Seán Bán Breathnach (as Art) in the film-within-a-film sequence, *Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire* (Bob Quinn, 1975) ©Bob Quinn/Cinegae

<sup>42</sup> For further details on Watkins work see Sean Cubitt, “Peter Watkins”, *Museum TV Archives*, Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2003. July 2001.

<<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/W/html/W/watkinspete/watkinspete.htm>>

<sup>43</sup> Ciaran Carty, “A Movie we can be Proud Of”, *The Sunday Independent*, 9 November 1976, 2. Kevin Rockett, “*Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoire*”, *Film Directions* 1.1 (January 1978): 18-19.

Kevin Rockett “Irish Cinema: Notes on Some Nationalist Fictions”, *Screen* 20:3-4 (1978/79): 115-123.

<sup>44</sup> Martin McLoone, 132.

The filmed sequence features a costumed Art on horseback, wandering through the busy streets of a modern-day town. The Director insists that the scene is to be introduced in English so that at least part of the production will be “accessible” to a wider audience. But the actor in the role of Art (a part played by Gaeltacht activist and broadcaster Sean Bán Breathnach) questions the realism of the setting, which substitutes Galway city for Ui Laoire’s native Macroom. The director (who is English and played by real-life playwright John Arden) rejects this critique and a heated exchange between the two characters seems to suggest the continuation of a discourse of cultural colonisation. For Martin McLoone, this scene exemplifies the type of politicised collective reception advocated by proponents of Third Cinema. He states:

[A]s the actors discuss their performances in the filmed sequences and debate the significance of the events they portray, we get a perfect illustration of that key objective of Third Cinema identified by Solanas and Getino – the opening up of debate or ‘the participation of people who, until then, were considered as spectators’.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, in his contemporary review for *Film Directions*, Kevin Rockett critiques Quinn’s allegory of colonial relations. He notes that Arden also plays the role of Art’s English Landlord ‘Morris’ and he emphasises that the distinctions between past and present become blurred in the course of the narrative. He also questions the parallels that are drawn, through the opposition between Art and Morris/the Director, between the contemporary moment and the eighteenth century struggle against colonial oppression.



Figure 18: John Arden as the Director in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* ©Bob Quinn/Cinegae

In a more recent account, Conor McCarthy largely concurs with Rockett’s analysis. He suggests that

<sup>45</sup> McLoone, 132. This scene contrasts sharply with the various representations of Irish cinema audiences in films such as Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (discussed in Chapter Four), *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992) or *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1998).

“while the imperatives of the past are allowed to disrupt and, initially, to alienate the past, the ‘present’ itself is not subjected to the same sceptical scrutiny”. He suggests that the film slides into a “crude anti-imperialism”, positioning it in an “oddly collusive relationship with the revisionism it purports to condemn”.<sup>46</sup> McCarthy explores the factors structuring the commissioning of the film. During this period, he notes, Sinn Féin – The Workers Party was undergoing an ideological shift towards the Left, a move informed by the failure of the 1956-62 Border Campaign. In the process, the ‘Provisional’ IRA split from ‘Official’ IRA and ‘Official Sinn Féin’ subsequently became Sinn Féin – The Workers Party. As McCarthy notes, the new group (which itself later split to form Democratic Left) was also divided over a possible end to the policy of abstentionism.<sup>47</sup>

McCarthy seems to suggest that *Caoineadh* confirms a particular (political) analysis of the present but he does not question whether the same position was actually shared by Quinn and Sinn Féin – The Workers Party. One of the stated aims of the Party during this period was the achievement a “revitalised Irish culture” and to this end it supported Irish language organisations and Gaeltacht civil rights.<sup>48</sup> By 1973 Quinn had established his independent production company (Cinegae) in the Gaeltacht and directed *Oireachtas na Gael*, a film about the emerging civil rights movement. He did not, however, have any direct affiliation with the Party and seems to have been commissioned by Eamon Smullen (a playwright and the organiser of the party’s Film Society) solely because of his record as a critically engaged filmmaker.

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<sup>46</sup> Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000): 189. McCarthy also highlights the film’s admittedly limited engagement with issues of gender.

<sup>47</sup> For an overview of Party policy during this period see various pamphlets (held in the National Library) such as Thomas MacGiolla, *The Struggle for Democracy, Peace and Freedom*, 1975; Eamon Smullen, *The Public Sector and the Profit Makers*, Studies in Political Economy No. 2, 1975, Eamon Smullen, *Tony O’Reilly’s Last Game: A Case History of Irish Capitalism*, 1976; John MacManus *Health Care: the Case for Socialist Health Care*, 1977.

<sup>48</sup> The goals of the party are outlined in *Eolas: International Newsletter, Irish Republican Movement*, (February 1975). For a brief history of the Gaeltacht Civil Rights movement see Nuala C. Johnson, “Making Space: Gaeltacht Policy and the Politics of Identity”, *In search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography* ed. (Brian Graham, London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 184-187.

*Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire* could be considered as a 'sponsored' film, in the tradition of Grierson or the Free Cinema filmmakers, in that its sponsor had an interest in the subject but not necessarily in its treatment.<sup>49</sup> A precedent for 'sponsored' filmmaking had been established by John Grierson within the British context and further developed in the production practices of the Free Cinema, which relied both upon commercial sponsorship and an emerging co-op culture. The latter group were, as John Hill notes, primarily concerned with individual freedom:

[I]mplicit in the Free Cinema formulation were two related conceptions of freedom: on the one hand, a freedom from commercial constraint and, on the other, a freedom to give vent to a personal or unusual point of view or vision.<sup>50</sup>

These aspirations are, in many respects, central to Quinn's practice. As such it is worth considering the extent to which *Caoineadh* extended Quinn's critical project, as manifest in his body of work.

As I have noted, the broadcaster Sean Bán Breathnach plays the double role of Art and present-day actor and he seems to represent the interests of the Gaeltacht civil rights movement. The casting of John Arden in the role of the director is perhaps less straightforward, however. Far from being a representative of colonial oppression, Arden was closely associated with both Irish labour politics and a Brechtian theatrical tradition. In April 1975, Arden and his regular collaborator Margaretta D'Arcy co-wrote and directed the *Non-Stop Connolly Show*, a cycle of six plays that were first presented as a continuous twenty-six-hour-long performance on Easter weekend 1975 in Liberty Hall. It was performed in a non-naturalistic manner, with few props or costumes and received favourable reviews in socialist publications such as *The Irish*

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<sup>49</sup> Quinn notes, in an interview with the author, that the Party had almost no input into the production of the film. When it had been completed, Party members Thomas Mac Giolla, Des Geraghty and Eamon Smullen viewed a rough cut at Quinn's home studio and suggested the inclusion of a quote from James Connolly at the end, an addition which apparently had the full support of the director.

<sup>50</sup> John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963*, (London: BFI, 1986) 128.



*People*.<sup>51</sup> While it would be a mistake to position Arden in relation to an exclusively Brechtian tradition, arguably it may be that within certain contexts, his public profile as an activist would have complicated the alignment between Englishness, professionalism and colonialism foregrounded by both Rockett and McCarthy. Equally it might also be argued that, in casting Arden, Quinn may have sought to *interrogate* the relationship between socialism and Brechtian practice.

Yet, inevitably, the reception of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* was structured by the role played by Sinn Féin – The Worker’s Party in its *distribution*. The Party acted as the main distributor both in Ireland and internationally (producing prints subtitled in English, French and German). It launched the film in Ireland, where it was shown in the Cork Film Festival, before bringing the version with English subtitles to New York, where further prints were struck, in order to save money. The prints were then handed over to “international socialist distributors”, according to Quinn, and the film was screened at Pesaro, Italy (a festival of socialist and national cinemas) and at meetings of student branches, together with other socialist films.<sup>52</sup> *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* did not receive a general certificate from the Irish censor, however, and was never broadcast by RTE. The Party seems to have retained control of the distribution and, at a much later stage, it facilitated the inclusion of a clip in Channel Four’s *Silent Voices* (1983), a series on the British media and Ireland, which was produced by Rod Stoneman.

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<sup>51</sup> See Anonymous, “Standing Ovation for Connolly Play”. *The Irish People*, April 11, 1975: 4. The casting of activist Breathnach and of various playwrights (including John Arden and Margaretta Darcy) is also mentioned in various reviews of Quinn’s film. See Anonymous, “Gaeltacht Film Debut”, *The Irish People*, June 20, 1975: 3. See also Anonymous, “Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire” *United Irishman*, July 1975: 11. For a more detailed account of various dramaturgic strategies employed in the *Non-Stop Connolly Show* see Catherine Graham, “The *Non-Stop Connolly Show*: The Role of a Non-Traditional Audience in A New Theatre Tradition”, in *John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy: A Casebook*, ed. Jonathan Wilke, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995): 129-142. For discussion of a much earlier radical current in Irish political theatre see Lionel Pilkington, “‘Every Crossing Sweeper Thinks Himself a Moraliser’: The Critical Role of Audiences in Irish Theatre History”, *Irish University Review* 27.1, (Spring/Summer 1997): 152-165.

<sup>52</sup> Pádraig Mannion (of The Workers Party) provided an account of screenings in telephone interviews with the author in December 2001. Other details were provided by Bob Quinn.

Following its initial release Quinn's film was also widely promoted in publications such as the *Irish People* and the *United Irishman*. These reviews tend to frame the film within the context of various Party campaigns. For example, the (anonymous) *Irish People* reviewer notes that Quinn's motive was "to provide a counter-attraction to the "blandly repetitious images" churned out by RTE", noting that similar images will be available "on BBC 1 shortly if Conor Cruise O'Brien has his way".<sup>53</sup> The policies of Cruise O'Brien, Minister with responsibility for broadcasting, were a particular focus for criticism in *The Irish People* and the ITGWU at this time, both in relation to censorship and the proposed re-broadcasting of the BBC as a second Irish television channel.<sup>54</sup> During this period the Party's Film Society was also acting as the Irish distributor for the Berwick Street Film Co-op's *Ireland Behind the Wire* (1974). A contemporary review, published in *The Irish People*, defends the film against the type of censorship that serves the interests of "spurious objectivity". The (anonymous) author goes on to point out that a section of the film was included in a programme on internment in the RTE *7 Days* series, a move that apparently "aroused the ire of Conor Cruise O'Brien and resulted in the redeployment of the *Seven Days* team".<sup>55</sup>



Figure 19: Publicity still for *Ireland: Behind the Wire* (© Berwick Street Film Collective, 1974)

*Ireland: Behind the Wire* is composed primarily of footage of street protests, accompanied by voiceover narration that is interspersed with lengthy accounts of torture (delivered

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, "Gaeltacht Film Debut", 3.

<sup>54</sup> Peigin Doyle, "Cut-in-Case Censorship at RTE", *The Irish People*, January 18, 1974: 6 and Anonymous, "O'Brien Faces Clash over RTE", *The Irish People*, May 23 1975: 2

<sup>55</sup> The "general release [of this] film history of Northern Ireland" was announced in "Film on North Released", *The Irish People*, May 2, 1975: 2. But in a statement that is somewhat at odds with the notion of a 'general release' the article concludes with a notice advertising

direct to camera) and interviews with members of the women's movement. The film does include several 'conversation' sequences between unidentified residents of Derry, in domestic settings, in which the causes of republicanism, nationalism and socialism and the various barriers to self-determination in the North and South are debated somewhat self-consciously. These dialogues stand out, suggesting a performance of the process of 'consciousness-raising', but there is little analysis of the political situation or its representation within the media. In this respect the film is clearly at odds with the revolutionary films of Solanas and Getino, which aim to address rather than simply *represent* 'the oppressed'. Yet, despite its limitations, *Ireland: Behind the Wire* signalled a new international attention to Irish politics on the part of international filmmakers and agencies such as the BFI Production Board, an attention that was strongly resisted by both the Irish and the British political administrations.<sup>56</sup>

*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* was not the only indigenous campaign film to be produced or distributed by the party during this period. In the mid 1970s, the Party's Film Society was particularly active in a "resources protection campaign", which sought to conserve natural resources such as oil and gas. *Going, Going, Gone*, a documentary on the decline of natural resources was commissioned and subsequently screened at Project Cinema Club in 1978 but it now seems to have fallen into obscurity.<sup>57</sup> The Party's investment in film production and distribution was to prove short-lived but, given the controversy generated by such film as *Ireland: Behind the War*, it is

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public screenings of the film in Liberty Hall and private hire of the film (from the offices of Senator Mullens c/o ITGWU) for £10.

<sup>56</sup> 1970 marked the return of a Conservative government in Britain and a parallel shift in oppositional film culture towards industrial politics and the civil rights movement in the North of Ireland. Cinema Action's offices were raided in 1971, as were the offices of the London Film Makers Co-op in 1974. See Dickinson, 49. See also Lance Pettitt's discussion of the censored *Radharc* television documentaries on the civil rights movement and of *Ireland: Behind the Wire* and a companion film (also by the Berwick Street Film Collective) entitled *Ireland: The Hour Before Dawn*. Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 82-89.

<sup>57</sup> *Going, Going, Gone* (Sinn Féin – The Worker's Party) was included in the *Film and Ireland* season at Project Cinema Club in 1978. It is described in the *Project Arts Centre Programme*, July-September 1978 (Dublin: Project, 1978, unpaginated) as a "left wing view on what is happening to Ireland's natural resources".

possible that it intensified pressure on the state to implement the subvention measures authorised by the 1973 Arts Act.

Bob Quinn's next project was in fact a polemical call for a very specific form of state subvention, modelled on the work of the National Film Board of Canada. Quinn had long been interested in Grierson's work at the NFB and the Board's *Challenge for Change* scheme actually inspired him to set up Cinegael in 1973.<sup>58</sup> Together with Comerford, he secured free flights from Air Canada to get to Montréal, arriving only with "a mute Bolex and some hundred foot rolls of 16mm" supplied by RTÉ. The NFB, however, provided a sound camera and a studio, interviews with Board personnel and access to the back catalogue of productions. The resulting 40 minute documentary, entitled *A Film Board for Ireland* (1976) was broadcast only once by RTÉ, in March 1979. The film has rarely (if ever) been shown since and is currently inaccessible in the RTÉ archives but it seems to suggest an even more *overt* critique of Irish cultural policy than previous projects such as *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*.

### **Diverse Strategies: *Emtigon*, *Withdrawal* and *Down the Corner***

Joe Comerford's work during in the 1970s appears, at first, to trace a shift away from the overtly formal concerns of *Emtigon* and *Withdrawal* towards *Down the Corner*'s engagement with the conventions of social realist drama. In a 1980 interview for *Film Directions*, Comerford himself states:

The difference between *Down the Corner* and my previous films is one of style. I've made fairly abstract films that try to explore and express people's emotional lives and I've made a film like *Down the Corner* which to me represents the extreme opposite of the approach that I started with. In *Down*

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<sup>58</sup> Quinn, interviewed by the author. The *Challenge for Change* programme was first introduced by the NFB in 1967 and it focused on poverty and on the use of film to achieve social change. See Donald W. Bidd (ed.) *The NFB Film Guide: The Productions of the National Film Board of Canada from 1939 to 1989*, (Montréal: National Film Board of Canada, 1991): xlv. The Board was widely critiqued during the 1960s, however, for its failure to engage with *Quebequois cinema and culture*. See Manjunath Pendakur, *Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990) 142-147. Mary Gillan addressed this issue in "Cultural Duality/Cultural Animosity: Implications" *Cultures in Conflict: DCU Joint-Faculty of Humanities Interdisciplinary Conference*, St. Patrick's College, 22 February 2002.

*the Corner* I concentrated primarily on the actors, the people involved, and was less concerned with aesthetic concepts.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 20: The Chaplinesque central character in *Emtigon* (Joe Comerford, 1972) © Joe Comerford

*Emtigon* is primarily concerned to explore the aesthetic vocabulary of avant-garde film, but it is possible to identify a number of continuities with later work. Filmed in black and white, many of the images evoke the silent cinema of Chaplin or the work of the European Avant-garde (specifically *Ballet Mécanique* and *Entr'acte*) and the plot is simple, yet not straightforward. An old man dressed in a Chaplinesque costume steals the bicycle of a young woman and goes on a trip to the seaside. He later sneaks into her bedroom, resets her alarm clock and leaves with her key, after locking her in. When the alarm goes off the woman awakes in a panic but cannot open the door.



Figure 21: Images from *Emtigon* (Joe Comerford, 1972) © Joe Comerford

There is no dialogue, or sync-sound, and the action is punctuated by a series of formal compositions, from the rotating bicycle wheel to the various objects in the bedroom: the clock, the key, and a playing card depicting the character of the Joker. Although the relationship between the man and the woman remains ambiguous *Emtigon* can be read as an early attempt to explore the relationship between aesthetic form, social relationships and cultural or political trauma. A flashback or fantasy sequence on the beach, featuring air-raid sirens, dead bodies and a portrait of a young woman suggests that the man may be traumatised by the experience of war. The

<sup>59</sup> David Simmons, "Travelling Forward", *Film Directions*, 3.12 (1980): 5

young woman also seems to be associated with some form of political action, as she is seen reading a pamphlet entitled “Revolutionary Movements of the Past”.

Comerford’s next film, *Withdrawal*, is more easily characterised as a ‘story-documentary’ but it extends *Emitigon*’s examination of trauma and displaced sexuality.<sup>60</sup> Based upon a 1965 account of British heroin addicts written by David Chapman, and published under the title *Withdrawal: The Evocation of a Confinement*, Comerford’s film is scripted and narrated by Jimmy Brennan. Brennan subsequently co-wrote the script for *Pigs* (1984) with Cathal Black, who was the assistant director on *Withdrawal* and the parallels between Comerford’s film and Black’s *Our Boys* (1981) are quite pronounced, particularly the mix of documentary interview and dramatic action. *Withdrawal*, however, features little or no sync-sound, relying instead upon off screen voiceover narration by Brennan and an unidentified female patient. The film opens in the grounds of a nineteenth century psychiatric institution and it focuses on the experiences of three characters, apparently suffering from addiction, depression and repressed sexual desire. As narrator, Brennan comments upon the behaviour and motivation of the inmates as well as recounting his own experiences.



Figure 22: Institutionalised alienation in *Withdrawal* (Joe Comerford, 1974) © Joe Comerford

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of this theme in Comerford’s work see Eugene Finn, “Peripheral Visions”, *Film Base News* May/June 1991: 8-12.

He focuses, in particular, on the romantic ideals surrounding marriage and heterosexuality in general. Comerford is clearly concerned to situate his critique within a wider exploration of the national psyche and *Withdrawal* features an excerpt from Denis Johnston's *Guests of the Nation* (1935), which seems to point towards a cultural history of repression. The film also depicts surreal fragments of institutional life and certain scenes (such as the Victorian bathhouse and the patients dancing in the ballroom) specifically recall Frederick Wiseman's celebrated Direct Cinema documentary *Titicut Follies* (1967).<sup>61</sup>



Figure 23: Ballroom sequence, *Withdrawal* © Joe Comerford

The production of *Withdrawal* proved somewhat traumatic and Comerford subsequently sought a film project that would not require the same degree of “personal immersion”.<sup>62</sup> By this point he had become involved with Ballyfermot Community Arts Workshop. The Workshop had been founded in 1972 and during this period it was involved in media training and production, with funding from non-government agencies such as the Irish Foundation for Human Development and the

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<sup>61</sup> Despite its disturbing subject matter (it features an image of an addict injecting heroin) RTÉ broadcast *Withdrawal* and Comerford, interviewed by the author on May 8 2001, notes that they paid a “generous” fee. Interestingly, this period was marked by the critical and commercial success of numerous films dealing with mental illness and institutions, most notably *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975). Michael Dwyer has suggested that cinematic representations of mental institutions may hold a particular appeal for Irish audiences. See Dwyer, “Doctors and their Dilemmas”, *The Irish Times*, March 24, 2000: 13.

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Previous projects had included the use of portable “video television packs”, the broadcasting of weekly programmes on Ballyfermot Community Television, the publication of a newspaper and the delivery of pre-school education programmes<sup>63</sup>. Comerford was initially interested in making a “documentary feature” about life in Ballyfermot but, he notes, the “documentary never happened: no structure emerged that might crystallize the idea into action”.<sup>64</sup> In 1975, however, the Workshop published Noel McFarlane’s *Down the Corner*, a story about “three days in the lives” of five boys, written in language that these boys “could recognise as their own”. Various workshop members became interested in producing a video based upon the book and it was agreed that the film “should be of a standard to be shown to audiences outside Ballyfermot.”<sup>65</sup> At this point, Comerford became involved, along with a number of other filmmakers.

David Simmons’s contemporary account of the production, written for *Film Directions*<sup>66</sup>, emphasises several different processes of collaboration. Noting the involvement of Bob Quinn and Cathal Black, as well as musician Roger Doyle, he suggests that the “understanding of each others work methods and personalities gained from previous productions allowed a real interdependence to develop”. By this point Comerford had worked as cameraperson on *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*, and on Cathal Black’s *Wheels* (1976), while Roger Doyle had composed and recorded sound for Comerford’s *Emitigon* and *Withdrawal*. Simmons also emphasises that the local cast were introduced to the “craft and techniques of filmmaking” and he suggests that this understanding of the production process, together with lengthy rehearsals, enabled the younger actors to improvise and to deliver “unselfconscious performances”. Although the dialogue was scripted it was delivered in local accents and, as such, can be read as a primary site of the film’s address towards an urban working class audience. The issue of accent is also explored within the film, and

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<sup>62</sup> Comerford, interviewed by the author.

<sup>63</sup> These details are included in the BFI press release for *Down The Corner*, a copy of which is held in the Production Board File on *Down the Corner*, BFI Special Collections Archive.

<sup>64</sup> David Simmons, “Down the Corner”, *In Dublin* 121 (December 1977): 4-5.

<sup>65</sup> Simmons, “Down the Corner”, 4. McFarlane was a teacher based in Ballyfermot and he subsequently became an *Irish Times* journalist.



linked with both nationality and class in an encounter between two of the boys and a 'foreign' doctor. In this exchange the doctor asks, "What is your class?" (meaning what class are you in at school) and 'Buller' mutters under his breath "Working class".<sup>67</sup> But this emphasis on 'local' language obviously presented some problems for audiences outside Ireland (and indeed Dublin) and on its release the film was actually subtitled for screenings in Britain as well as Europe and the US.<sup>68</sup>

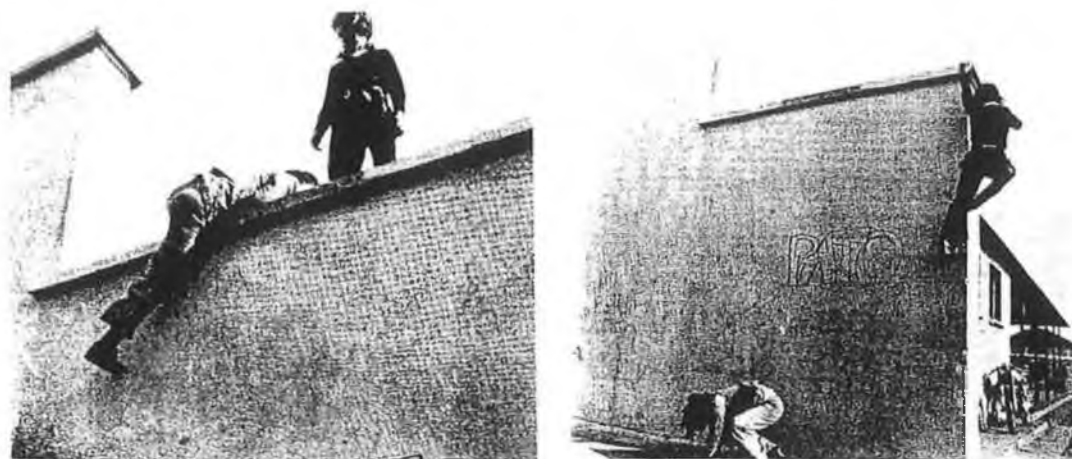


Figure 24: Publicity stills for *Down the Corner* (Joe Comerford, 1978) © Joe Comerford/BFI

As is evident from Simmons's account, *Down the Corner* was politically significant for both the Workshop *and* the wider film community. Although the production preceded the establishment of the Script Award it did receive *some* finance from the state. The 1973 Arts Act had provided for greater investment in the arts on the part of local authorities and the Cultural Committee of Dublin Corporation provided £4000. The remainder was secured from the Arts Council (£4,000) and RTÉ (£5,000). By 1977, however, the Workshop's funds were exhausted and the film remained unedited. But at this point Comerford secured a completion grant of £7,000 from the Production Board of the British Film Institute, which funded both the editing process and distribution. The involvement of the British Film Institute was widely noted at

<sup>66</sup> Simmons, "Down the Corner", 4-5.

<sup>67</sup> For further analysis of the dialogue and use of sound in Comerford's film see Orla Ryan *Screening the City*, (MA Dissertation, Dublin City University, 1998) 19-33.

<sup>68</sup> Some Irish reviewers recommended a similar approach to distribution in Cork, Derry, Limerick, Galway and Belfast. See Anonymous, "Ballyfermot Boys Steal the Corner", *Irish Press* December 2, 1977. See also John Pym, "Down the Corner", *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin*, 45.535, (August 1978): 157.

the time of the film's release, not least because of the fact that the National Film Studios of Ireland (formerly Ardmore Studios) had failed to support the production in any meaningful way.<sup>69</sup> The support of BFI may have further swelled the ranks of those lobbying for the establishment of an indigenous film fund and perhaps contributed to a wider interest in the film on the part of many critics and filmgoers.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of its narrative structure and its use of devices such as flashback and voiceover narration, *Down the Corner* is one of the more conventional of Comerford's films. McFarlane's script focuses on one day in the lives of the five young boys and much of the dramatic action centres on encounters with various adults (in school, at home, on the street) and it culminates in a failed attempt to rob apples from a local orchard. From the outset, however, it is evident that there are at least two different narrative discourses at work. The pre-credit sequence depicts a man working in a steel foundry, operating a series of machines, to the accompaniment of rhythmic industrial sounds. A subsequent shot, accompanied by a voiceover, introduces the five boys. They are pushing a pram loaded with turf along the street and they pass a local pub, in which they encounter the foundry worker, who they recognise as the father of one boy ('Micko'). The man is drinking with his mates but the shot freezes on his face and the close up is marked "REDUNDANT", in the style of a rubber stamp. It becomes apparent that time has passed since the opening shots and in the process the images of foundry labour take on a nostalgic character.

In his review of *Down the Corner*, for *Film Directions*, Kevin Rockett critiques the use of the word REDUNDANT in this sequence, and the connection implied between unemployment and alcoholism, suggesting that there is little room for interpretation on the part of the spectator.<sup>71</sup> Yet it is notable that this graphic is closely followed by a title sequence that features both the production credits and portraits of the five boys.

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<sup>69</sup> Kevin Rockett notes that the NFSI offered only a reduction of £10 on the standard rental fee for an editing bench. See "The Realism Debate and 'Down the Corner'", *Film Directions* 1.2 (1978): 19.

<sup>70</sup> See Tony Butler "British Film Institute Gives Ballyfermot a Leg", *Evening Herald*, November 5, 1977. Ciaran Carty "And I'm not being kind", *Sunday Independent*, December 4, 1977: 31.

<sup>71</sup> Rockett, "The Realism Debate and Down the Corner", 19.

'Buller', 'Pedro', 'Joeboy', 'Jennings' and 'Micko' are all identified by their nicknames and the portraits are superimposed over aerial shots of Ballyfermot. The portrait graphics, used in promotion of the film, are highly reminiscent of iconic images of revolutionaries such as Che Guevara and suggest a kind of comic-book characterisation. Rockett calls attention to a tendency, within Irish socialist discourse, to present the working class in "a heroic manner" but the iconic images of the five young boys in *Down the Corner* seem to articulate a particular address towards the intended audience of McFarlane's original publication; teenage boys. Although the film was shown "on a commercial basis" at the Curzon Cinema in Dublin City Centre it does seem to have generated particular interest among young Ballyfermot audiences.<sup>72</sup>



Figure 25: Portraits of the five heroes, used in the opening sequence of *Down the Corner* © Joe Comerford/BFI

The soundtrack of *Down the Corner* features a number of songs taken from Liam Weldon's album *Dark Horse on the Wind* (1976) and Weldon also plays the part of Micko's 'Da'. In his contribution to the 'realism debate' Kevin Rockett suggests that Weldon's music articulates, and perhaps contributes to, the sense of despair and

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<sup>72</sup> A transcript of an Irish radio review by Pearse Hutchinson (December 10 1977) is held in the *Down the Corner* file, BFI Special Collections. It states: "The house was about three-quarters full and nearly everybody looked to be somewhere between ten and sixteen. When the lights went out again and the opening shots of "Down the Corner" came on the screen there was no mistaking where the lads came from: Ballyfermot to a boy. In the first minute of so, as the camera roams around Ballyfermot, we got superimposed close-ups of the boys in the main parts [...] when Jennings appeared on the screen there was an unmerciful roar from the Curzon audience".

hopelessness that is produced by the film's representation of working class life and this view is supported by other contemporary reviews.<sup>73</sup> Weldon's music is often elegiac and mournful in tone but a number of the songs on *Dark Horse on the Wind* also articulate a certain anger against the treatment of the Travelling Community. For example, "Smuggling Tin" (used in the opening sequence of *Down the Corner*) recounts the story of a group of Travellers on a smuggling expedition from the 'Free State' to the North, a narrative that seems to anticipate Comerford's next film, while "The Blue Tar Road" recalls the clearing of campsites by the Corporation. Within the context of Comerford's practice, Weldon's music seems to reference a wider 'subaltern' culture, suggesting links between the Travelling Community and other disenfranchised groups.

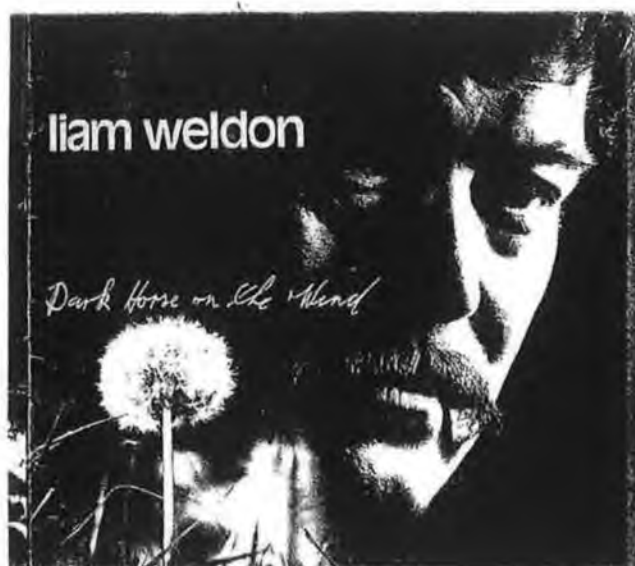


Figure 26: Album cover for Liam Weldon's *Dark Horse on the Wind* (©Liam Weldon/Mulligan Music, 1976).

Both Comerford and Weldon also explore the notion of 'subaltern historiography' more directly. For example, *Dark Horse on the Wind* features a number of overtly political folk songs, such as a lament entitled "James Connolly" and the title song of the album, which calls for a second Rising. Comerford's film takes up this theme and it includes a sequence in which Pedro's Granny entertains the boys with an account of her experiences of "being on the run" in 1916. This story centres on an encounter with a soldier in the alleyway at the back of the house and, as Rockett notes, oral narration gives way to Hollywood *Noir* convention when the events are dramatised in a black and white flashback.<sup>74</sup> But the storyteller's account is prefaced by a number of references to television and to the world of Hollywood stars. This suggests that the

<sup>73</sup> Rockett, "The Realism Debate and Down the Corner", 20. John Pym, reviewing the film for the *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin*, notes "an enveloping tone of vague melancholy", 157.

heavily generic sequence could be an *attempt*, however problematic in its execution, to explore the dominant conventions (borrowed here from the Hollywood gangster film) structuring the storyteller's representation of her own experience. This sequence seems to situate the craft of oral story telling in an ambiguous relation to the mass media, suggesting that it is at the very least *transformed* by processes of industrialisation and commodification.<sup>75</sup>

This exploration of story telling also forms part of a wider engagement with craft or manual work, in the films of Comerford and Quinn. Many of the strategies employed by Comerford suggest an *idealisation* of craft tradition or folk culture and the casting of Weldon as the foundry worker, for example, might be read as an attempt to draw a parallel between the position of the Travellers in Irish society and the fate of blue collar workers within the wider economy, consigning both to the past. But, as I argue in my discussion of *Traveller*, Comerford's work actually *challenges* a prevailing tendency, within both ethnography and Irish literature, to position traditional culture outside history. But before discussing this film in further detail, I will consider the theme of artisanal practice in Quinn's work.

#### **Artisanal Practices in *Cloch*, *Self-Portrait With Red Car*, *Poitín* and *Atlantean***

Two of Quinn's short films, *Cloch* and *Self-Portrait With a Red Car*, are explicitly concerned with the theme of artistic practice. *Cloch*, made in 1975 and screened with *Poitín* in cinemas, was co-produced with the Independent Artists Association group from an idea by the sculptor Cliodhna Cussen and it documents the work of a group of sculptors in the Independent Arts Workshop. Although much of the action centres on sculptor James McKenna the emphasis throughout is on the stone that he chooses to carve. The film opens with a short text:

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<sup>74</sup> Rockett, "The Realism Debate and 'Down the Corner'", 20.

<sup>75</sup> The work of Walter Benjamin (in "The Storyteller" and "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility") remains perhaps the key point of reference within this debate. But the relationship between cinema and folk art is also addressed by Erwin Panofsky in "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" [1934]. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory*

A sculptor found a large stone on a hillside. He began carving. Every few days a postman cycled by. When the piece, a female form, was finished the postman stopped and asked: "how did you know she was in there?"

This is followed by a montage of drawings and photographic stills, interspersing natural and constructed stone formations, and a sequence of shots documenting Christian and pre-Christian stone carvings. There is no commentary, just the sounds of the artists and craftspeople at work in the quarry and workshop, and later the sounds of visitors to the workshop, which forms part of an arts festival. At various points, however, sound is also used to *animate* the carvings, as in a sequence where a breathless female voice accompanies images of 'Sheela na Gig' carvings. This seems to set up an organic relationship between craftsperson, landscape and cultural tradition<sup>76</sup> and it works against any attempt to *demytstify* artistic practice. There are certain points, however, where the soundtrack of *Cloch* suggests a different relationship between the artist and his or her public. As visitors circulate around the sculptures, and artists, fairground music can be heard, suggesting a form of public spectacle and undercutting the dominant (modernist) myth of art practice as personal expression.



Figure 27: Sheela-na-Gig figures and artists at work in *Cloch* (© Bob Quinn/Cinegael, 1975)

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*Readings* eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1974): 151-169.

<sup>76</sup> The 'Sheela-na-gig' figure has generated a certain amount of debate around notions of essentialism, particularly within the context of feminist art criticism. See Hilary Robinson "Reframing Women" *CIRCA* 72, (1995): 18-23.

This exploration of sound is developed further in Quinn's next film, *Self-Portrait With a Red Car* (1976-8), the title of which is apparently a reference to Van Gogh's *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889). This film features camerawork by Comerford and music by Roger Doyle and there is no dialogue other than distorted voice effects in the closing moments. Instead of dialogue, slapstick humour is used to explore the relationship between sound and image. The central role of the painter is played by the artist Brian Bourke, and details from his own self-portraits are incorporated into the title and credit sequences. In the opening scene the painter struggles to set up easel in front of a church on Galway's Shop Street, a location that is also prominently featured in *Caoineadh*. But the artist is soon forced to make way for passing traffic, led by a red car. Returning to his position the painter again attempts to frame an image of the church, repeatedly adjusting his point of view to the accompaniment of a heightened soundtrack of passing traffic, car radios and pedestrians. An abrupt transition finds the artist at work at his easel again, but this time at the side of a quiet country road. But a close-up of the canvas now reveals a representation of the urban church, an image that is entirely at odds with the surrounding landscape.

As the film progresses it becomes clear that the artist can no longer rely on his senses; a horse in a nearby field is pictured as a motorbike, a cottage is mistaken for a skyscraper. In one scene the painter stands at the edge of the empty country road, ready to cross but as he steps forward the roar of traffic causes him to disbelieve his vision and to jump back. Eventually, choosing to ignore the evidence of his own ears, he succeeds in crossing while wearing dark glasses and brandishing a white stick at the invisible traffic, only to be pursued and finally run over by the red car, which is driven by Quinn himself. Quinn's words, the only ones spoken in the film, are incomprehensible. These repeated attempts to frame the landscape (through painting and gesture) call attention to the ontological status of film itself, as two-dimensional representation but *Self-Portrait* also suggests an exploration of *synaesthesia*, the confusion of visual and aural senses that is characteristically associated with

modernity.<sup>77</sup> This theme is developed further, with a different emphasis, in Comerford's subsequent film *Waterbag*, discussed below.

# Poitín



First Irish Feature Film.

# Poitín

The Minister for Education, Mr. John Wilson has awarded the educational certificate for secondary schools to *Poitín* the first Irish feature film.

Directed by Bob Quinn, *Poitín* was shot on location in Connemara and stars three of Ireland's leading actors, Cyril Cusack, Niall Tobin and Donal McCann.

The film has English subtitles and won the Art Council's first ever film script award in 1977.

The story tells of an ageing poitín maker on the Connemara coast who is cheated and then threatened by the two younger locals who sell his poitín at the market. It is a storyline that includes most of the ingredients common to many a commercial feature: humour, violence and even a cops and robbers car chase.

However, the film uses the narrative as skeleton on which to build a picture of community life in Connemara. A traditional way of life undermined by widespread unemployment and continuing poverty.

"Funny, and unblinking" *Irish Times*

"A classic" *Irish Press*

"Nobody walked out anyway" *Bob Quinn*

Also showing

## CLOCH

An Evocation of the  
Art of Stone Carving

Figure 28: Poster and advertisement for screenings of *Poitín* (Bob Quinn, 1978) and *Cloch* (Bob Quinn, 1975) Images © Bob Quinn/Cinegae

Quinn's next film *Poitín* develops this exploration of thwarted craftsmanship through the figure of the poitín-maker. Despite its illegality, the production, trade and consumption of poitín constitutes a socially and culturally embedded tradition, one that seems to have acquired almost ritual significance within the impoverished Gaeltacht community where Quinn's film is set. One of the central characters, the poitín-maker (played by Cyril Cusack) is represented as a skilled artisan who is

<sup>77</sup> See Martin Jay's discussion of synaesthesia, within the context of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*,



deeply concerned with the quality of his work. In contrast, the two dealers (played by Niall Tóibín and Donal McCann) are motivated largely by poverty. Various strategies are employed by the poitín-maker and the traders to evade the law, most notably a system of signs embedded in the landscape itself.

The film opens with an image of a thatched cottage at the edge of a quiet lake, recalling a host of representations in travelogues and Hollywood productions. We subsequently see the poitín-maker rowing across the picturesque lake while his daughter hangs out clothes on the washing line. But a sequence of rapid cuts between father and daughter undermine the sense of tranquillity, and with the sudden approach of a car, the clothesline is transformed into a signalling system. It transpires that the lake itself provides the perfect hiding place for the fermenting poitín and, at a later stage, the bodies of the traders.



Figure 29: Scenic landscape imagery in *Poitín* (© Bob Quinn/Cinegae 1978)

*Poitín* was the first feature-length film drama to benefit from Arts Council Script Award (although actually only 65 minutes in duration) and it also received funding from RTE, Roinn na Gaeltachta, Gaeltarra Eireann, The Ireland Fund and the National Film Studios of Ireland. The film represented a notable departure from Quinn's earlier film *Caoineadh* in terms of its approach to narrative form. In his review for *Film Directions*, David Simmons notes:

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 342-343.

[T]he film's real value is a 'political' one: political in terms of Irish film production, or rather, the lack of it. [Quinn] claims that his chief intention was to show that a *commercial* feature could be made in Ireland on a relatively low budget and still adhere to most of the standard of international productions.<sup>78</sup>

Simmons clearly reads the film in terms of a contribution to a wider debate around 'national cinema' and he notes that "Bob Quinn has, perhaps, unintentionally, made an argument for narrative cinema as a part, through only a part, of an Irish film production. Surely that's a reasonable conclusion in a country where the art of story telling has always been appreciated".

Simmons also calls attention to an aspect of the production that is relatively unconventional – the absence of a musical soundtrack. He suggests that this has the effect of throwing added weight onto the dialogue, foregrounding the quality and authenticity of the performances of both experienced stage actors and the amateur actors.<sup>79</sup> It could be argued, however, that music (or its absence) is used primarily in order to *undercut* notions of authenticity in *Poitin*. At a key moment in the narrative Tóibín's character switches on the radio and coerces the poitín-maker's daughter into dancing with him, to the sounds of frenetic Arabic music. Although the 'otherness' of



this music seems to go unnoticed by the characters, the intrusion of an apparently alien musical tradition seems to underscore the destruction of traditional home along with the cultural values represented by domestic icons of the Virgin Mary.

Figure 30: Icon of Virgin Mary in the background as the poitín-dealers fight ©Bob Quinn/Cinegae

<sup>78</sup> David Simmons, "Review of *Poitin*", *Film Directions*, 1.3 (1978): 19. [Emphasis added].

<sup>79</sup> Simmons, "Review of *Poitin*", 20. For a different perspective see Ciaran Carty, "A West with Warts", *Sunday Independent* February 26, 1978: 31.

*Poitín* can of course be read as an extension of the critique of regional cultural policy inaugurated by *Oireachtas na Gael* and *Caoineadh*. At one level this critique is broad, in that the idealised rural communities of the West are exposed as impoverished and marginalized. But *Poitín* also seems to engage critically with earlier state-sponsored film works, through its use of sound and its undercutting of romantic imagery. A particularly productive parallel can be drawn between Quinn's practice and the development of Patrick Carey's work.<sup>80</sup> As I have already noted, Carey's landscape films, such as *Yeats Country* (1965), *Mists of Time* (1967) and *Errigal* (1968) were supported by grants from state agencies such as Bord Fáilte. These works are marked by a fusion of picturesque imagery, literary allusion and instrumental music but in subsequent films, such as *Waves* and *Ossian* (both made for the Department of Lands circa 1969) Carey actually moved away from music and spoken commentary towards the almost exclusive use of natural sounds.<sup>81</sup>



Figure 31: Scenic Irish landscapes in *Errigal* (© Patrick Carey, 1968)

Quinn's next work, a series of three documentaries entitled *Atlantean: An Irishman's Search for North African Roots*, develops the critique of nationalist orthodoxy introduced in *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoire*. It seeks to displace Celticism by reconstructing the history of a maritime culture. Employing detached and somewhat

<sup>80</sup> Quinn's film was screened in the *Film and Ireland* season at Project Cinema Club within a "Nature" programme, which also featured Carey's work. There are also a number of intriguing parallels (in setting, cast and theme) between Quinn's film and the sequence entitled "The Majesty of the Law" in John Ford's *The Rising of the Moon* (1957). This was the product of a collaboration between Ford, the Abbey players and Lord Killanin, who was later to become a member of the Film Industry Committee, chaired by Huston. See Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, 111-116.

sarcastic third-person narration (delivered by Alan Stanford) the three programmes document a highly personal investigation of folk cultures, museum artefacts and academic scholarship. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford identifies various precedents for this mode of analysis. She states:

Like Joyce, Quinn uses *analogy* to extend the geographical range of Irishness and to detach it from Celticism and Roman Catholicism. Sean-nós singing sounds like Moroccan or Nubian music, Irish illuminated manuscripts resemble Islamic ones, certain grammatical and lexical features of the Irish language suggest not the Indo-European family but the Hamito-Semitic Group, and the elaborate knitting patterns found on Aran resemble Egyptian Coptic religious art.<sup>82</sup>

Broadcast by RTÉ on Network Two in March of 1984, the *Atlantean* films generated so much public interest that they were re-shown in May of the same year on RTÉ One. To Quinn's disappointment, however, the series and follow-up publication prompted relatively little in the way of academic debate. But, in recent years, the *Atlantean* project has gained an added currency and the series was broadcast again by TG4 (in July 2001) "as a gesture of welcome to asylum seekers".<sup>83</sup>

### **Subaltern Histories and Popular Memory**

The work of Quinn and Comerford, particularly in relation to the representation of traditional or folk cultures, can be situated within the context of wider developments

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<sup>81</sup> Patrick Carey was also the second unit photography on a range of international productions including *Ryan's Daughter*, *Barry Lyndon* and *A Man for All Seasons*.

<sup>82</sup> Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001) 150. Butler Cullingford also highlights the parallels between Quinn's research and that of historian Estyn Evans, whose work Quinn apparently admires. Further parallels could also be drawn between Quinn's project and Richard Kearney's theorisation of "The Fifth Province: Between the Local and the Global". See Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997): 99-107.

<sup>83</sup> Michelle Viney "Atlantean Returns to RTÉ", *Galway Advertiser*, July 5, 2001: 45. Quinn, interviewed by the author, acknowledges that the 1986 publication based on the series was reviewed "fairly and robustly" in *Archaeology Ireland* and in fact, his thesis continues to generate debate within certain circles. See Bob Quinn "Exotica Anonymous", *Journal of Music in Ireland* 3.3, (March-April 2003): 5-8. A follow-up documentary, entitled *Navigatio Atlantean II* was also made by Quinn in 1998. It centres on parallels between Irish music and that of the Upper Volga region. See Diog O'Connell, "Navigatio Atlantean II", *Film West* 32, (May 1998): 69.

in international avant-garde film. In his theorisation of Third Cinema, focusing on the work of African filmmakers, Teshome Gabriel reads folklore as an account of popular memory, because it “attempts to conserve what official histories insist on erasing”.<sup>84</sup> While Gabriel’s project seems to emphasise the articulation of a pre-industrial (if not pre-modern) temporality, a different analysis is developed in Claire Johnston’s reading of *So That You Can Live* (Cinema Action, 1982). This film, which charts the experiences of a Welsh family over a period of five years, generated considerable critical interest at the time of its release and was the opening feature in Channel Four Television’s inaugural season of Independent Film and Video.<sup>85</sup> Johnston situates the film in relation to the wider project of Cinema Action, which she categorises as a determination to “to find an adequate representation for the lived experience of the subjects of their films”.<sup>86</sup> In *So That You Can Live*, this ‘lived experience’ is both the product of and a resistance *against* the historical forces shaping the structure of the family, region and nation.

Johnston’s discussion centres on the various ways the film is motivated and driven, at a narrative level, by a “search to capture simultaneously abstract knowledge in the concrete, the particular in the general”. She suggests that the exploration of contradictions within the pro-filmic event; “the division/separation internal to the image”, is the “forgotten potential” of Cinema Verité.<sup>87</sup> *So That You Can Live* explores the relations between history and popular memory in various ways, through interviews and references to textual histories and local archives. One of the most powerful sequences focuses on a worker’s library, which once belonged to the South Wales Miner’s Union but is now preserved in an archive at Swansea University. A

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<sup>84</sup> Teshome Gabriel, “Third Cinema as a Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics” *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI, 1989) 54.

<sup>85</sup> See Dickinson: 283-4. Noel King reads both the film and its critical reception in terms of a shift away from the ‘formalist’ textual analysis that had characterised *Screen* in the late 1970s. See Noel King, “How Welsh are my Eyes?": *So That You Can Live*, Textual Analysis and Political Cinema”, *Undercut*, 10/11, (Winter 1983): 26-31. Raymond Williams, whose work features within the text, was also associated with the project.

<sup>86</sup> Claire Johnston, ‘So That You Can Live: Popular Memory’, *Framework* 19 (1982): 12 -14.

<sup>87</sup> Johnston, 12. As noted in Chapter One, Paul Willemen has developed this point further in “An Avant-Garde for the 90s”, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994): 141-161.

close-up of a reader's handwritten notes in a copy of Marx's *Capital* provides graphic evidence of a history of education outside the academy.

Johnston's account is also important for the way in which it specifies the articulation of *oral tradition and oral history* within the structure of the narrative. The oral narratives that drive *So That You Can Live* are not located in the past; instead they are continually produced through a dialogue between the family and the filmmakers. Johnston writes:

[The] story in the process of its telling opens up discontinuities, gaps and absences which engender the need for analysis and understanding which lie beyond its 'reality'.

In this way the narrative is structured by a "reciprocal learning process" (a dialogue) between the family and the filmmakers. 'Popular memory' emerges, therefore, not simply as that which is excluded from official histories but rather as that which is produced in and through a lived engagement with historical forces. As Johnston notes, this dialogue gives rise to "new forms of popular political identity", in which nationalism has an important part to play.<sup>88</sup> Johnston's analysis also foregrounds the 'fictionalisation' of one member of the family (Diane, the eldest daughter) in one section of *So That You Can Live*. This play "between person and character" is particularly evident in Diane's performance of reading and learning, during various scenes in which she explores the work of Raymond Williams.

Joe Comerford also employs a form of 'fictionalisation' to explore issues of cultural identity and gender in *Traveller*. Although it was based upon a script by Neil Jordan, which received the second Arts Council Award in 1979, the film did not go into production until funding had been secured from the BFI Production Board, with Comerford as director, Thaddeus O'Sullivan as cinematographer and Jordan initially credited as scriptwriter and assistant producer. By this point the budget was around

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<sup>88</sup> Johnston, 13.

£80,000, the largest yet for any indigenous feature.<sup>89</sup> As with previous productions, Comerford chose to work with a number of non-professional actors and the two lead roles are played by Judy Donovan, a member of the Travelling Community, and Davy Spillane, a well-known Irish traditional musician.

In some respects, the plot of *Traveller* is conventional, suggesting a cross between a melodrama and a road-movie. In the opening scenes, Angela (Donovan) and Michael (Spillane) are matched by their fathers and forced to marry. Following the wedding, they travel from Limerick across the border into the North of Ireland to buy goods for Angela's father. En route, they meet Clicky (played by Alan Devlin, a professional actor), a hitchhiker with a gun and a mysterious Republican past, to whom Angela confides a history of abuse at the hands of her father. On their return to the south, Angela and Michael argue and crash their van. Their cargo is destroyed and Michael impulsively robs a remote post office. They go on the run and, while hiding out in a border town they begin to resolve their differences. When they return to Limerick they are reunited with Clicky and Michael uses his gun to kill Angela's father. At the close, Angela and Michael part and all three leave the country.

"traveller"



Figure 32: Poster for *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981), ©Joe Comerford/Michael Kane.

Despite the appearance of convention, there is little synchronised dialogue in the film. A series of monologues featured in the audio track provide an insight into the actions of the characters but also introduce an alternative temporality, which frustrates the linear development of the plot. These distancing techniques are extended through the use of

<sup>89</sup> Kevin Rockett emphasises that while RTE and the Arts Council contributed to the funding of *Traveller*, the main sponsor and producer was BFI. See Rockett, "...Like an Expedition", *IFT News* 5. 2 (February 1982): 4-6.

visual barriers (such as reflective or distorted glass) and short animation sequences (suggesting movement and mapping). Taken together, these strategies disrupt identification with the central characters and frustrate any expectations of a privileged or 'authentic' insight into Travellers' culture.

The film also includes a number of musical interludes, highlighting the performative dimension to Irish and Traveller identities. A thematic emphasis on performance and a formal exploration of sound synchronisation is evident from the very first scene. The title credit is followed by an ambiguous epigraph overlaid on a shot of a barren field; "An ancient, intimate, and dark connection exists between murder and politics" and at this point the only audible sound is a rhythmic, metallic, beat. Following a cut from the barren field to a wide shot of antique 'Pavee' wagons on a country road, the beat is augmented by a traditional air. But just as the image and sound seem to converge in a celebration of tradition, the separate sources of these sounds are revealed. The beat is provided by a Traveller, or tinker, at work at an anvil, while the music emanates from the uilleann pipe playing of Davy Spillane, seated on the step of the wagon. The two men then exchange a series of looks, and the sound takes on the character of an improvised duet. This sequence serves three obvious functions; it calls attention to the 'true' identity of Spillane, it comments on the conventional representation of the Irish landscape and it suggests an organic relationship between Traveller culture and the traditional economy of tinsmithing.



Figure 33: Images of father and son (craftsman and musician) at the opening of *Traveller* (© Joe Comerford, 1981)



The film's second musical performance takes place at Angela and Michael's wedding reception. In one scene Angela stares at a rotating mirrored ball while the singer Agnes O'Donnell is announced by the master of ceremonies, off screen. O'Donnell launches into the song 'One Day at a Time', the lyrics of which seems to underscore



Angela's lack of autonomy, but as she sings the words "I'm only a woman", we see the singer for the first time. She is revealed as a strikingly androgynous old woman, dressed in a tuxedo.

Figure 34: Agnes O'Donnell's androgynous performance in *Traveller* ©Joe Comerford

As the narrative progresses, Angela emerges as the central character and her memories and dreams are explored in a flashback sequence. Her recollections are prompted both by the discordant notes that Michael plays on a piano they find in a derelict house, and by Angela's discovery of an abandoned family photography album. Even within the flashback, images jar with sounds. Angela is with her mother in the caravan, smiling, but the voiceover states; "Me Ma said men beat you [...] they give you black eyes and bruises where the world can't see them".



Figure 35: Angela's memories of her mother are prompted by photographs and toys found in a derelict house in *Traveller* ©Joe Comerford

The montage includes a shot of her mother's hand, wearing a number of gold rings and this image takes on greater significance at a later stage, when Angela exchanges her own wedding ring for fashionable new clothes. The line between memory and fantasy is also rendered ambiguous through the inclusion of a fleeting image of Angela kissing an unidentified man, who may in fact be Clicky or Michael (or possibly her father). Returning to the 'present', Angela watches as Michael proceeds to smash up the furniture in the house for firewood, knocking the head off the shoulders of a female doll in the process. As Angela looks on, the voiceover narration continues: "I saw you in the trailer, you didn't talk and you didn't move your hands, I didn't want you".

### **Impaired Speech in *Traveller*: Language, Voice and Identity**

In a contemporary review, Kevin Barry highlights the pronounced and deliberate use of "impaired speech, silence and music"<sup>90</sup> in *Traveller* and he reads this in terms of an exploration of disjunctive cultural identity. In fact an analysis of the soundtrack suggests that the difficulty around synchronisation is specifically linked to the representation of the Traveller characters. This is most evident in the marriage ceremony, at the start of the film. Only the priest's face is visible as Angela and Michael have their backs to the camera (and to the congregation).



Figure 36: The Priest speaks the words of the young couple in *Traveller* © Joe Comerford (subtitled here in a print intended for French distribution)

<sup>90</sup> Kevin Barry, "Discarded Images: Narrative and the Cinema", *The Crane Bag* 6 (1982): 45 – 51.

The priest's voice is synched as he poses a series of questions to the couple and delivers the answers in the same monotone:

PRIEST: Have you come here of your own free will and without compulsion to marry each other? We have. Will you love and honour each other in marriage all the days of your life? We will. Are you willing to accept with love the children God will send you and bring them up in accordance with his Church? We are.

His words are spoken straight to camera from the centre of the shot yet they are evidently false, in that he voices the words meant for Michael and Angela. The coherency of Angela's identity is also deliberately disrupted because her voice is openly credited to a professional actress (Marian Richardson). Although Richardson's voice was perhaps more easily understood than Donovan's the use of dubbing was not intended to make the film more accessible to *international* audiences. Richardson delivers her lines in a strong accent and the finished film was actually subtitled in English for distribution in Britain.

Instead, this strategy seems to recall such avant-garde projects as Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972) in which dialogue is misdubbed deliberately in order to "sabotage the fictive unity of voice and image".<sup>91</sup> While Angela's voice is the only one to be dubbed, her father and Michael rarely (if ever) speak directly to the camera, in sharp contrast with Clicky, whose speech does not seem to be 'impaired'. The re-voicing of *Angela's* words also acquires a further significance, with respect to her identity as a member of the Travelling Community, because distinctive speech or accent is one of the primary means used to mark Travellers as 'different' from the settled community.<sup>92</sup> In a recent interview, Comerford has stated that the use of dubbing

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<sup>91</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "The Cinema and Babel: Language Difference and Power", *Screen* 26.3-4, (May/August 1985): 51

<sup>92</sup> For an exploration of language, culture and identity in relation to representations of the Travelling Community see Sinéad Ní Shúinéar "Othering the Irish (Travellers)", *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, eds. Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh, (Belfast: Beyond the Pale, 2002): 177-192. See also Jim MacLaughlin, *Travellers and Ireland: Whose Country, Whose History?* (Cork University Press 1995) and the website of the Irish Traveller Movement [www.imtrav.ie](http://www.imtrav.ie)

(and other 'alienating' devices) was an attempt to articulate the *changes* experienced by Judy Donovan during the course of the production. He notes:

She started changing, she started using lipstick for the first time, she started dressing in a non-traditional way. But this was happening in her life. It wasn't a film. It was happening in her life.<sup>93</sup>

Comerford's approach to the production seems, however, to have prompted disagreement between director and scriptwriter and Neil Jordan eventually requested that his credit as assistant producer be removed.

In their recent analysis of Jordan's work, Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett note that while he "declared himself satisfied with Comerford's film, calling it 'very interesting', Jordan nonetheless adds "it wasn't the film I'd written".<sup>94</sup> They also identify a number of substantial differences between the film and original script, which they describe as a "conscious reworking" of J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907). In Jordan's original script, they note that Angela reconciles with Michael after the killing of her father. This is followed by a shared sexual awakening, "making explicit a theme which runs throughout many of Jordan's films [...] the connection between sex and violence".<sup>95</sup> But unlike the script Comerford's film concludes with the break up of the couple and it seems to privilege *Angela's* quest for self-knowledge.

Keith Hopper has also highlighted the theme of "sexual redemption" in the original script but his account of the adaptation and production process is, on the whole, somewhat dismissive of Comerford's practice.<sup>96</sup> He suggests that Comerford's "social commitment" is at odds with Jordan's "narrative flair", which is articulated in

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<sup>93</sup> Joe Comerford, interviewed by the author.

<sup>94</sup> Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett, *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries*, (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003) 10. For further analysis of the production see also Richard Haslam, "Irish Film: Screening the Republic", *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949-99*, ed. Ray Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000): 137.

<sup>95</sup> Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett, 12.

<sup>96</sup> Keith Hopper "'A Gallous Story and a Dirty Deed': Word and Image in Neil Jordan and Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1981)", *Irish Studies Review*, 9.2 (2001): 179-191.

“a postmodern fusion of traditional Irish myth (*The Playboy*) and an American generic model (the road movie)”<sup>97</sup> and he reads the involvement of the British Film Institute largely as a vote of confidence in the script and its award-winning author. Hopper contends that Comerford’s mode of address is too alienating for most audiences and he compares *Traveller* unfavourably with Jordan’s later films as director, which “performatively explore how our [...] preconceptions of Ireland are embedded in - and limited by - the originary narratives of the nation”.<sup>98</sup> Others have suggested, however, that Jordan’s work may in fact serve to reinstate rather than to interrogate racial, national, and sexual stereotypes and he has been criticised on occasion for representing various ‘others’ as the objects rather than subjects of fantasy.<sup>99</sup> By contrast, Comerford’s approach to the script of *Traveller* seems to explicitly undermine the kind of mythic characterisation that is privileged by Jordan.

Keith Hopper, however, is *critical* of Comerford’s representation of the Travelling Community. Drawing upon the work of Martin McLoone he suggests that, instead of directly addressing the marginalisation of Travellers in Irish society, Comerford’s film invites an “allegorical reading”, whereby Travellers stand for “the dispossessed people of the North”.<sup>100</sup> In the process, he suggests, the ‘real’ marginalisation of the Travelling community is overlooked. Hopper’s critique seems somewhat misplaced, however, as *Traveller* is arguably one of the few Irish films to *interrogate* the reduction of Travellers to the status of symbol. It consistently refuses to essentialise Traveller culture and instead foregrounds a mobile identity, structured by the same historical and social forces that shape settled society. More recently, an emphasis on the indeterminacy of Traveller identities has in fact been echoed in the public communications campaigns devised by Traveller’s rights groups in order to combat discrimination.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Hopper, 188.

<sup>98</sup> Hopper, 189.

<sup>99</sup> See Shantanu DuttaAhmed, “‘I Thought You Knew!’: Performing the Penis, the Phallus and Otherness in Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*”, *Film Criticism*, (Fall 1998): 62.

<sup>100</sup> Hopper, 186.

<sup>101</sup> For a discussion of the *Citizen Traveller* communications campaign see Maeve Connolly, Debbie Ging and Jackie Malcolm, *Report on the Forum on Media and Interculturalism*, Hub Student Centre, Dublin City University, March 2002. School of Communications, Dublin City

There is no doubt that the prejudice faced by members of the Travelling Community is real. Travellers currently suffer significantly higher mortality rates than their settled counterparts and are discriminated against in the areas of housing, employment, health and education. There is, however, a link between modes of representation and the social status of Travellers. In an analysis of nomadism across various national contexts, Aparna Rao has suggested that Travellers' marginal social status actually contrasts with a "high ritual status" and he notes that they often serve as a focus for superstition and myth within settled communities.<sup>102</sup> Within the Irish context this 'high ritual status' can be traced to the ethnographic and literary discourses of the nineteenth century.

Paul Delaney has examined representations of Travellers in both ethnography and Anglo-Irish literature, focusing specifically on the work of Synge and Yeats.<sup>103</sup> He notes that ethnographic discourse (such as that produced by the Gypsy Lore Society) and Irish dramatic literature often tended to employ the convention of an "unseen witness" as an authoritative source on Travellers customs and behaviour. Accordingly, Travellers are repeatedly rendered as "discursively mute", while at the same time they are invested with a talent for rich and imaginative speech. Delaney suggests that the Literary Revival's interest in nomadism may have been informed by contemporary social developments, such as the late nineteenth century consolidation of a rural Catholic peasantry "for whom identity was inseparable from a certain kinship with the land". But he also notes that Travellers occasionally function as a *subversive* presence, particularly in the work of Synge, which betrays an anxiety around the place of Travellers in relation to Irish society.<sup>104</sup> Delaney suggests that, in relation to Synge, "problems relating to the representation of the Travellers prompt

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University, July 2002. <<http://www.comms.dcu.ie/interculturalism>>. See also Debbie Ging's discussion of *Traveller* in "Screening the Green: Cinema Under the Celtic Tiger", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin, (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 177-195.

<sup>102</sup> Aparna Rao "The Concept of the Peripatetics: An Introduction", in *The Other Nomads*, ed. Rao (Cologne: Bohlau Verlag, 1987): 9.

<sup>103</sup> Paul Delaney, "Representations of the Travellers in the 1880s and 1990s", *Irish Studies Review* 9.1 (2001): 53-68.

the question of whether it is possible to recognise and depict another culture as also Irish”.<sup>105</sup>

Focusing on the convention of the ‘brogue’ in Irish dramatic literature, Luke Gibbons provides a somewhat different analysis to that proposed by Paul Delaney. He emphasises that, in Boucciault, colourful and richly imaginative language “does not come across as some kind of ‘natural’ unpremeditated speech” but instead operates as “the linguistic equivalent” of the melodramatic sensation scene. He states:

[T]he subversion of dominant ‘transparent’ or self-effacing modes of communication is achieved not by stepping outside existing codes but by intensifying them to the point of making them *opaque*.<sup>106</sup>

Gibbons argues that in *The Playboy* the “savagery and fine words” of characters such as Christy Mahon are actually constructed as a product of *refinement*, or more precisely, “over-refinement”. This seems to point towards a structural relationship between visual and verbal excess, which may be of particular relevance to the work of Comerford.

### **In and Out of Sync: *Waterbag, Reefer and the Model and Budawanny***

Irish filmmakers are all too aware of the relationship between cinema, language and power. As I have already noted, much of Comerford’s work was subtitled for distribution to English-speaking audiences outside Ireland. This approach was not always welcomed by Comerford, however. In a 1982 letter to BFI distributor Carole Myer, regarding *Traveller*, he asks:

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<sup>104</sup> Delaney, 62.

<sup>105</sup> Delaney, 65. This displacement of cultural anxiety onto the figure of the Traveller is by no means specific to the Ascendancy, however. Elsewhere, Joe Cleary has argued that representations of Travellers in contemporary Irish cinema *continue* to articulate the traumas of modernisation experienced by the settled majority, particularly with regard to changing social and familial structures. See Joe Cleary, “Into Which West? Irish Modernity and the Maternal Supernatural” *Literature and the Supernatural: Essays for the Maynooth Bicentenary* ed. Brian Cosgrave (Dublin: Columba Press, 1995) 147-173.

<sup>106</sup> See Luke Gibbons, “Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema”, *Cinema and Ireland*, 217

Do you think the subtitled print is an aid to screening the film in England? [...] I have reservations about people seeing the film with subtitles, if their first language is English.<sup>107</sup>

It is difficult to assess the number of indigenous films subtitled in English for foreign distribution during this period. Quinn's work may in fact be easier to distribute in English-language markets than Comerford's because it features only a limited amount of spoken English.

The difficulty around language has certainly been read in terms of a critique of imperialism. Dudley Andrew, for example, situates the work of Comerford and Quinn within a "morally elite coterie of alternative films with ad hoc distribution", films that do not "compromise on delicate matters like the brogues that make [them] difficult to screen in the USA". He continues:

After all, language stands as the first line of defense against the enforcement of the King's English, as Quinn understood when he insisted on making *Poitin* with English subtitles. Gaelic and thick accents produce the puns and circuitous tales (the blarney) that comprise the discursive front of resistance to colonization.<sup>108</sup>

Other commentators, however, have suggested that Quinn's use of the Irish language actually offers a certain resistance to censorship at home.<sup>109</sup> Elsewhere, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam provide a detailed analysis of linguistic poetics and politics in cinema, focusing on issues of subtitling, translation and dubbing.<sup>110</sup> They highlight a

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<sup>107</sup> This letter, dated 8 April 1982, is held in the Production Board files for *Traveller*, BFI Special Collections. BFI Production Board files on *Maeve* include a letter from Pat Murphy to Myer, dated April 20, 1983, which states: "You were right, sub-titles are necessary. Even the Irish-Americans found [the character of] Martin Sweeney] difficult to understand". But Murphy, interviewed by the author on August 12 2003, ultimately decided against the use of subtitles.

<sup>108</sup> Dudley Andrew, "The Theatre of Irish Cinema", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 15.1 (Spring 2002): 33.

<sup>109</sup> See Anonymous, "If you want to be obscene do it in Irish", *The Irish People*, October 10, 1975: 4. But despite its use of Irish *Caoinéadh Airt Uí Laoire* actually failed to get a general certificate.

<sup>110</sup> Shohat and Stam, 58. Elsewhere, Antje Ascheid has argued that subtitling and dubbing produce radically altered film experiences and she argues in favour of dubbing a means towards the wider circulation of 'other' cinemas. See Antje Ascheid "Speaking Tongues: Voice Dubbing in the Cinema as Cultural ventriloquism", *The Velvet Light Trap* 40, (Fall 1997): 32-41. For a different perspective, referencing the Irish context, see Eithne O'Connell



range of strategies employed across various oppositional cinemas, from the deliberate ‘mis-dubbing’ in Godard’s *Tout Va Bien*, to the politicised use of French and Wolof in Sembene’s *Xala* (1975). They also examine conflicts around language in Wenders’ *The American Friend* (1977).

Much of this work can be seen to be informed, either directly or indirectly, by the ‘political’ avant-garde tradition theorised by Peter Wollen, and discussed in Chapter One. While Brecht’s practice is obviously a key point of reference for Quinn and Comerford, the exploration of sound synchronisation, dubbing and subtitling in their work may also suggest the influence of Eisenstein. A number of Irish critics, including Kevin Barry, have already called attention to the use of Eisensteinian montage in Comerford’s work, while Keith Hopper reads the casting of non-professionals in *Traveller* as evidence of ‘typage’.<sup>111</sup> Eisenstein inherited this approach to casting from the Commedia dell’Arte and reputedly spent months looking for the person with the right “physiological, particularly facial, characteristics” because he wanted to work with “stock types who are immediately recognised by the audience”.<sup>112</sup>

Eisenstein was also an outspoken critic of *synchronised sound*, particularly in relation to American cinema. Although his own work with sound cinema was to be constrained by both convention and technological limitation, Douglas Kahn notes that Eisenstein was fascinated by alternatives to synchronisation.<sup>113</sup> In the 1928 “Statement on Sound”, (written in collaboration with Pudovkin and Alexandrov) as a response to the international success of *The Jazz Singer* Eisenstein states:

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“Choices and Constraints in Screen Translation”, *Unity in Diversity? Recent Trends in Translation Studies*, eds. Lynne Bowker, Michael Cronin, Dorothy Kenny and Jennifer Pearson, (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1998): 65-71.

<sup>111</sup> See Barry, 49 and Hopper, 185.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: Secker and Warburg in association with the BFI, 1974) 41.

<sup>113</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water Meat: A History of Sound in Art*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999): 147-48.

[E]very adhesion of sound to a visual montage piece increases its inertia as a montage piece, and increases the independence of its meaning – and this will undoubtedly be to the detriment of montage [...] Only a contrapuntal use of sound in relation to the visual montage piece will afford a new potentiality of montage development and perfection.<sup>114</sup>

Kahn emphasises that the statement calls for the use of asynchronisation specifically in order to “diminish the role of speech enough to avoid the reduction of cinema to a ‘filmed play’ and [also] to mitigate against being locked into language-based markets”.<sup>115</sup> As such, Eisenstein’s project is explicitly anti-imperialist (and nationalistic).

Eisenstein was not the only filmmaker to promote the contrapuntal possibilities of sound. Kahn notes that during the late 20s and early 30s both Eisenstein and John Grierson were drawn towards the use of sound in *Disney* cartoons. Kahn suggests that Grierson’s 1935 analysis of Disney offers a number of parallels with Eisenstein’s earlier “Statement”. Grierson states:

Making his sound strip first and working his animated figures *in distortion and counterpoint to the beat of the sound*, [Disney] has begun to discover those ingenious combinations which will carry on the true tradition of film comedy.<sup>116</sup>

In many ways Disney’s work takes synchronisation to its most extreme limit. Kahn notes that, in early Disney sound cartoons, the “music and sound *performed* the visual elements of the film [...] spread out over the bodies of both characters and objects in a new form of homologous puppetry, whether a squeaking elbow joint, fly footsteps [or] flesh ripped off to play a rib-cage xylophone”. This seems to suggest an excess of synchronisation, an exaggeration to the point where it becomes overt.

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<sup>114</sup> S.M. Eisenstein, V.I. Pudovkin and G.V. Alexandrov, “A Statement” [1928] *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, (New York: Meridian Books, 1957) 254.

<sup>115</sup> Kahn, 147.

<sup>116</sup> John Grierson, cited by Kahn, 149. [Emphasis added].

The 1980s witnessed a move, on the part of Comerford, from overtly disjunctive asynchronicity towards an exploration of aural excess that, while not quite comparable to the work of Disney, invites attention. This shift can be traced through a comparison between the short film *Waterbag* and the feature-length *Reefer and the Model*. Although only 7 minutes long, *Waterbag* is a complex work and the production involved many of Comerford's regular collaborators, including Roger Doyle (music), Cathal Black and Bob Quinn (production team) and Thaddeus O'Sullivan (photography). While Comerford had already experimented with animation in *Traveller*, inserting a number of hand-drawn and animated maps and diagrams at various points in the narrative, *Waterbag* employs a variety of newer image technologies to achieve somewhat similar effects. Split-screens are used intermittently and, at various points, the film is marked by colourful blotches, which seem to articulate the emotions of the central characters.

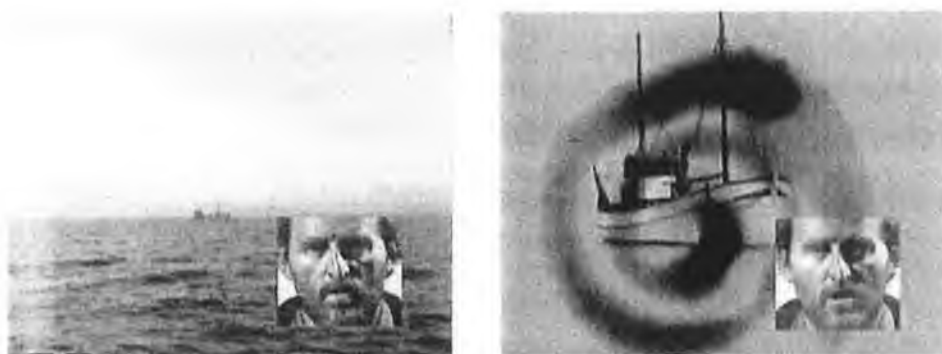


Figure 37: A fisherman (played by Brian Bourke) recounts the story of his marriage in *Waterbag* © Joe Comerford, 1984.

The action takes place both above and below the deck of a dilapidated fishing trawler, which sets out to sea in the opening shots. It is crewed by two bearded middle-aged men, while a lone young woman sits below in the cabin, peeling potatoes. In a black and white sequence one of the men, speaking from a frame in the lower left corner, recounts a story of seduction that seems to take the form of a parable or myth. In the next scene (in colour), when the woman begins to scratch her face with a knife, the film itself seems to record her action, as pink/red blotches appear on the image. A second story is recounted, this time by the other man (played by Brian Bourke). He states:

My wife left me after our honeymoon, she went to the island.  
I could never understand why...

Below the deck, the woman begins to scrape the knife across her belly and shots of her face and body are marked with pink and red blotches. Images of her, a gas heater and a toy puppet are interspersed, to the sounds of a wind-up music box. As the film ends it becomes apparent that she has aborted the baby.



Figure 38: The pregnant woman intent on inducing an abortion, below deck in *Waterbag* © Joe Comerford

*Waterbag* is a profoundly disturbing work and, as Rockett et al note in *Cinema and Ireland*, the Film Board refused to distribute it.<sup>117</sup> But in terms of Comerford's practice, it is perhaps most interesting for the way in which it employs new media technologies to extend exploration of *synaesthesia*. Martin Jay has suggested that synesthetic effects were regarded very differently by Dadaists (such as Clair, Duchamp and Man Ray) and by Surrealists (such as Bunuel and Dali). Dadaists, he notes, rejected the synesthetic ideal because it rendered the audience overly passive, while Surrealists embraced it because they actively sought to immerse their audiences in a dreamlike state.<sup>118</sup> In Comerford's project synesthetic effects are used quite overtly, and they seem to function as a commentary upon the action, calling attention to the relationships between both sound and image *and* between the characters.

<sup>117</sup> Rockett et al., *Cinema and Ireland*, 274.

<sup>118</sup> Jay, 254-5.

The use of these effects also suggests a kind of visual *excess*, recalling the theorisations of melodrama discussed in Chapter One, and perhaps offering a parallel with the verbal excesses theorised by Luke Gibbons. In Comerford's next film, however, overtly disjunctive visual and aural strategies give way to a new emphasis on dialogue. Eugene Finn has noted that *Reefer and the Model* "is the fullest elaboration of the thematic and aesthetic preoccupations discernible in [Comerford's] work from the very beginning".<sup>119</sup> The original script was actually written prior to *Waterbag* and indeed many of the characters, settings and events are familiar from earlier works. The narrative centres on the relationship between an abused woman and a smuggler with Republican associations, and the plot includes a botched robbery, a car crash and an attempted abortion aboard a boat. It is notable, however, that the soundtrack is by traditional musician Jimmy Duhan and not by Comerford's long-time collaborator, Roger Doyle.

In terms of its production *Reefer and the Model* signals and articulates a shift away from the type of collaborative artisanal practice developed by Comerford and Quinn during the 1970s and 80s. It marked the transition to a form of filmmaking that has since become characteristic of medium-budget European cinema, a mode of (co)production involving funding from a variety of national and international sources.<sup>120</sup> *Reefer* was one of the first indigenous Irish films to be made on 35mm and this approach seems to have necessitated a lengthy process of 'script development' or revision. During the period from 1982 (when it received the Arts Council Script Award) until it went into production in 1987 the original three-hour script was shortened and re-drafted *eleven* times.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Finn, 12. *Reefer and the Model* is also one of the few films from this period to include gay characters. For a discussion of this issue see Lance Pettitt "Pigs and Provos, Prostitutes and Prejudice: Gay Representation in Irish Film, 1984-1995", *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, ed. Éibhear Walsh, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997) 252-84.

<sup>120</sup> See Sharon Stover, "Recent Trends in Coproductions: The Demise of the National." *Democracy and Communication in the New Europe*. Eds. Farrel Corcoran and Paschal Preston. (Creskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1995) 97-123.

<sup>121</sup> This process involved the supervision and assistance of script editor Eoghan Harris and producer Lelia Doolan. The final budget of approximately IRE1 million was raised from Channel Four (£250,000), the Arts Council/Irish Film Board (£225,000), RTÉ (£95,000) and various Irish donors and from through the sale of American distribution rights to the British company Hemdale. But Hemdale's subsequent collapse meant that the film was never

There is no attempt to play with temporality in *Reefer* and the pace of the film suggests an oscillation between Hollywood comedy and European art cinema. Yet evidence of Comerford's earlier preoccupations remain. The central characters form a kind of unorthodox family group, headed by Reefer (Ian McElhinney) and Teresa (Carol Scanlan), who is christened 'the model' by Reefer's aging Republican mother.



Figure 39: Production still for *Reefer and the Model* (1988)

Visual echoes of earlier work can also be found in an early scene. Driving along a country road at night, Reefer's face is patterned by reflections on the windscreen, recalling the recurrent use of the same device throughout *Traveller*.

By contrast with Comerford's earlier characters, the Anglo-Irish Reefer exhibits a notable facility with language (and word play). At one stage he and Teresa pretend to be members of an exclusive golf club and on the way in, he warns, "This place is Ascendancy – if there's any talk speak Irish". Later, he adopts the guise of Garda and phones a local station to see if Teresa has a police record. Mimicking a country accent, he repeats the words of the officer on the other end of the line:

Heroin possession... suspected prostitution... scars on the neck...  
vegewhat?... spell it...VEG – E – TAR – I – AN

Throughout the narrative the dialogue is fast-paced, and is often laden with double meanings. For example, the group encounter a pair of islanders in search of drugs:

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commercially distributed in the US. See Mike Collins, "Land Ahoy!", *Film Base News* 8, (August/September 1988): 6 -8. See also Paddy Woodworth, "The Making of a New Irish

Island man: "How's it going there Reefer, any dope?"  
 Reefer [eating chips]: "No citizen, my mouth is full, my memory empty"  
 The Model: "I don't smoke"  
 Reefer [casually]: "She's a heroin"

These verbal excesses serve (like the Irish brogue) to *call attention* to cinema's dominant codes and conventions and, in particular, Reefer's wordplay recalls



the 'hard-boiled' dialogue of classic *Film Noir*. The film also incorporates *visual* references to film history, most notably in the costumes and antics of Spider and Badger, the other members of this accidental family.

Figure 40: Echoes of silent cinema (and Hollywood B movies) in *Reefer and the Model* © Joe Comerford

While Comerford's overtly disjunctive use of asynchronous sound seems to have been tempered by the move towards more industrial modes of production and distribution, Quinn's work in the late 80s continued to explore alternatives to cinema's dominant narrative forms. In *Budawanny* (1986), for example, he employs a range of devices from silent cinema. The film is structured around an extended flashback, exploring the relationship between a priest (played by Donal McCann) and a young woman (Maggie Fegan). This sequence is set on Clare Island and filmed in black and white, with intertitles instead of dialogue. There is no sound other than the music by Roger Doyle and a small number of effects, such as thunderclaps. Critics have noted specific similarities between this sequence and works such as Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, particularly in terms of the shot composition and camera movements.<sup>122</sup> Other references to early and silent cinema can also be identified in the performances and characterisation. For example, McCann's character adopts a

Movie", *Cork Examiner*, August 15, 1988: 8.

<sup>122</sup> Gerry McCarthy "The Bishop's Story", *Film Ireland* 40, (April-May 1994): 25.

Chaplinesque walk for comic effect at one point, and later entertains the local children with simple visual tricks. The Island story is, however, book-ended by colour sequences featuring dialogue. Set on the mainland, these articulate the point of view of the Hierarchy, represented by an Archbishop and his obedient secretary, a young priest. The pointed oscillation between these two very different narrative forms serves as perhaps the most direct expression of Quinn's critical position. The Island is represented as the site of regional resistance to convention, while the Mainland is aligned with dominant modes of representation, which are linked to power and official history.

### **Conclusion: An Esperanto of the Eye?**

*High Boot Benny*, Comerford's most recent feature-length film is set in an 'independent' school, located in a desolate rural area somewhere near the Border. It is based upon an original script by Comerford and like many of his earlier works, centres on a group of social outcasts. But *High Boot Benny* foregrounds the issue of sectarian conflict, a topic only alluded to indirectly in *Traveller* and *Reefer and the Model* and its representation of violence, and exploration of cultural identity, provoked a hostile response from some critics.<sup>123</sup> Although Comerford remains an active participant in Irish film culture he has moved away from feature film production in recent years, towards community video practice and more personal projects. He is one of a number of artists and filmmakers involved in an ongoing film and art programme at Portlaoise Prison and four films developed by prisoners on this programme were screened at the 2002 Darklight Digital Film Festival. In 2002 Comerford also finally secured funding from Bord Scannán na hÉireann to complete *Roughtouch*. This is a short film that re-works footage from earlier projects such as *Swan Alley* and it has been in development for a number of years. Significantly, Comerford has insisted on negotiating a contractual relationship with the Board as an *individual*, in the hope of retaining a greater degree of control over the production.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> See David Butler, "High Boot Benny", *Film Ireland* 38 (December 1993/January 1994): 30-32. For a different perspective see McLoone, *Irish Film*, 134-138.

<sup>124</sup> For a discussion of *Roughtouch*, and Comerford's practice in general, see Comerford, "Opinion", 24-25. Comerford contributed to a broad critique of film policy in a recent public



In 1994 Bob Quinn also returned to an earlier project with *The Bishop's Story*, a new version of *Budawanny*. The majority of the changes relate to the use of dubbing and titling and the new film retains the original silent footage but includes post-synchronised spoken Irish dialogue in addition to the intertitles. The original framing sequence is, however, replaced by a black and white sequence in which the Island priest (again played by Donal McCann, as an older man) recounts his life story to a young priest. At the time of its release Quinn defended the new version but he has since expressed dissatisfaction with the changes, noting that because the time and money was made available to him (by Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board) he “gilded the lily”.<sup>125</sup> Quinn is no longer active in film production but he retains a prominent public profile as an activist, writer and independent filmmaker. He has long been a contributor to debates around broadcasting and in the mid 1990s he became a member of the RTÉ Authority, only to leave in 1998 in protest against the station’s advertising policies.<sup>126</sup>

In recent years, Luke Gibbons has situated the work of certain Irish filmmakers in relation to an “Esperanto of the Eye”, a cinematic exploration of local (and national) cultural idioms within an increasingly ‘postmodern’ media landscape.<sup>127</sup> Writing in 1996, Gibbons questions the extent to which Hollywood’s dominant forms can articulate the experiences of marginalized or subaltern groups, such as the Lakota tribes represented in Kevin Costner’s revisionist western *Dances With Wolves*. Gibbons’ analysis explicitly shifts attention away from a purely linguistic critique towards the notion of ‘opticality’ and he highlights a “willingness to let the image do

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forum addressing the relationship between the Arts Council and filmmaking. For an account of this event see Maeve Connolly, “Green Screen” *CIRCA* 104, (Summer 2003): 22-23.

<sup>125</sup> See Bob Quinn, “The Bishop's Story: Cashing in on Casey?”, *Film West* 14, (Winter 1992): 17.

<sup>126</sup> Quinn’s published memoir, entitled *Maverick, A Dissident View of Broadcasting Today*, (Brandon Press, 2001) provides a personal account of his time on the RTÉ Authority. Quinn continues to argue against an industrial approach to filmmaking, criticising the over-crewing and over-management of short films in particular. See his “Recycled Rants”, *Film West* 42 (Winter 2000): 28.

<sup>127</sup> Luke Gibbons, “The Esperanto of the Eye”, *Film Ireland* 56 (October/November 1996): 20-22.

the work” in recent Irish cinema, citing examples such as Comerford’s *High Boot Benny* (1993), *December Bride* (Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1990), *Korea* (Cathal Black, 1996) and *Ailsa* (Paddy Breathnach, 1994). The Esperanto reference seems particularly appropriate to the work of Comerford and Quinn, given their evident concern with issues of cultural and linguistic difference.

Elsewhere, Miriam Hansen has examined the various theoretical issues surrounding the “contradictory notion” of cinema as a visual Esperanto or ‘universal language’. Citing Christian Metz, she notes:

[T]he notion of film as Esperanto compounds a language system that is ‘totally conventional, specific and organized,’ more linguistic than ordinary languages, with a medium that appears ‘universal’ precisely because of its ‘dearth of linguistics’.<sup>128</sup>

Hansen emphasises that, as taken up by D.W. Griffith, the “myth of universal language” is complicit with “the most advanced forces of expansion and monopolization”. But she also suggests that Griffith’s attempt to translate that myth into *film*, in *Intolerance* (1916), “creates a textual density that effectively *impedes* the myth’s ideological availability”.<sup>129</sup> While *Intolerance* can be seen to inadvertently expose the limits of Griffith’s project, the work of Quinn and Comerford seems to provide a more overt and explicit critique of the universal language myth, in terms of its complicity with cultural imperialism. As I have argued, many of their films articulate a debt to an oppositional model that is variously inflected by Eisenstein, Grierson and the filmmakers of the Latin American and African Third Cinemas. In the process, their work also exposes the *limits* of an ‘interstitial mode’, positioned at the intersection of artisanal practice, state policy and subaltern critique.

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<sup>128</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991) 186.

<sup>129</sup> Hansen, 186. [Emphasis added]

## Chapter Four

### Modernism(s) and Migrant Subjectivities:

#### The Films of Vivienne Dick (1978 – 1988) and Thaddeus O’Sullivan (1974 – 1990)

Tourist Land is always make-believe land in a certain way. [...] You escape into this fantasy land, where everything has to be beautiful and fabulous. If it’s Ireland you see lush green countryside and horses and carts and the Blarney Stone. [...] It’s totally unreal; it’s all memory and myth.

Vivienne Dick, interviewed by Scott MacDonald (1982)<sup>1</sup>

I tend to use speech to express character rather than ideas, which makes it anecdotal, whereas English people will not speak unless they have an idea worked out already. [...] It’s all outside, and has nothing to do with them. Whereas the Irish keep talking in the hope that something will emerge...

Thaddeus O’Sullivan, interviewed by Luke Gibbons (1990)<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

Both Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O’Sullivan first came to prominence within the context of international avant-garde film cultures associated with co-operatives and workshops in London and in New York. Their work shares a thematic concern with issues of migration and identity, and with the representation of memory and the Irish landscape. Initially, both filmmakers relied on improvisation rather than scripted dialogue, and collaborated regularly with other filmmakers. While Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s work has garnered considerable critical attention, particularly in recent years, Vivienne Dick’s practice has yet to be theorised (or even documented) extensively within the Irish context.<sup>3</sup> This is despite the fact that her early films have

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<sup>1</sup> Vivienne Dick interviewed by Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Vivienne Dick", *October* 20, (Spring 1982): 97.

<sup>2</sup> Thaddeus O’Sullivan interviewed by Luke Gibbons in "Fragments in Pictures", *Film Base News* 10, (November-December 1990) 9.

<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Temple Herr provides an in-depth discussion of O’Sullivan’s early work in "Addressing the Eye in Ireland: Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978)", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.3 (2000): 367-374. See also Lance Pettitt, *December Bride* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001). O’Sullivan’s work is also discussed in Martin McLoone’s *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI,

become part of the canon of American avant-garde cinema.<sup>4</sup> My analysis situates the early work of Dick and O'Sullivan in relation to developments within the Irish and international context, focusing upon the critique of modernism articulated in film theory and avant-garde practice during the late 1970s. It also explores the cultural landscape of specific films such as O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) and Dick's *Visibility Moderate* (1981).

Although born in Dublin, Thaddeus O'Sullivan trained as a graphic artist at Ealing School of Art in London (from 1966 to 1972). He completed his first film *Picnic* (1969)<sup>5</sup> before entering the Film School at the Royal College of Art (which he attended from 1972 to 1975). At the RCA he completed a number of 16mm works, including *Flanagan* (1974)<sup>6</sup> and two films set amongst London's Irish community: *A Pint of Plain* (1975) and *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978), both distributed by the British Film Institute. The latter film, O'Sullivan's first feature, was also financed by the BFI Production Board. It was followed by *Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories* (1981), a documentary made for the British Arts Council in association with RTÉ

In 1985 O'Sullivan returned to drama with *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable*, a short film based on a story by Sean O'Faolain and funded by the Irish Film Board and by Channel Four. Throughout the 1980s O'Sullivan worked as director of photography on a considerable number of Irish and international films including *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984) Cathal Black's *Our Boys* (1980) and *Pigs* (1984), Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1982) and *Waterbag* (1984), *The Return* (Phil Mulloy, 1986)

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and Pettitt's *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) but Vivienne Dick is not referenced in either publication.

<sup>4</sup>Vivienne Dick's work formed part of two major retrospectives of American avant-garde film: *No Wave Cinema 1978-87* (1996) at the Whitney Museum, New York and *Big as Life: An American History of Super-8 Film* (1999) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>5</sup> *Picnic*, shot at Castletown House in Celbridge, was scripted by O'Sullivan's "best friend" Roy Foster, later to become established as a historian and biographer. These details were provided by O'Sullivan in an email interview with the author, July 4, 2003. O'Sullivan also describes this work in "Fragments in Pictures", 8

<sup>6</sup> This date is estimated. *Flanagan* was rediscovered during the preparation for a screening of *A Pint of Plain* at the UCD Film Conference *Keeping it Real: The Fictions and Non-Fictions of Film in Contemporary Ireland*, Irish Film Centre, April 21, 2002. I am indebted to Sunniva O'Flynn for providing me with access to the Archive's viewing copy.

*Rocinante* (Cinema Action, 1986) and *The Road To God Knows Where* (Alan Gilsonan, 1988).<sup>7</sup> He returned to feature film direction with the critically acclaimed *December Bride* (1990), funded by Channel Four, followed by the more controversial *Nothing Personal* (1995). He has since directed *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (2000), the second feature film to be based on the story of Dublin criminal Martin Cahill and *The Heart of Me* (2002), an adaptation of a novel by Rosamund Lehmann set in London during the 1930s and 40s.

While O'Sullivan has become established as a director of Irish and international features, Vivienne Dick has continued to work within low-budget film and video production. Born in Donegal, Vivienne Dick studied arts (Archaeology and French) at University College Dublin and travelled around India, Europe and Mexico before moving to New York in 1975. While in New York she produced a series of Super-8 films that include *Staten Island* (1978), *Guérillière Talks* (1978), *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978), *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979), *Liberty's Booty* (1980) and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981) and gained prominence as part of the 'No Wave' movement in music and film. Following her return to Ireland in the early 1980s Dick completed *Like Dawn to Dust* (1983), also on Super-8, and became involved in the establishment of a film production course at Rathmines College, Dublin.

In 1984 Vivienne Dick relocated to London and her next film, *Rothach* (1985), was made on 16mm, with funding from the British Arts Council. In the same year *Like Dawn to Dust* was broadcast by Channel Four. In London, Dick became a member of the London Film-Maker's Co-op<sup>8</sup> and completed a number of films, including *Images/Ireland* (1988), *Pobal-Portrait of an Artist* (1988), *London Suite* (1989), *3AM*

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<sup>7</sup> O'Sullivan has also worked extensively in television, directing dramas such as *In the Border Country* (1991), for Channel Four, *Tell-Tale Hearts* (1992), for the BBC, and *Witness to the Mob* (1998), a US television film produced by Robert De Niro's Tribeca Company. O'Sullivan discusses these projects in "A Life Less Ordinary" (anonymous), *Film Ireland 74* (February-March 2000): 20-23.

<sup>8</sup> Vivienne Dick was also a director of the Co-op (primarily because she lived locally and could act as a keyholder) but she was not actively involved in the political shifts taking place within the LFMC during this period.

(1990), and *New York Conversations* (1991).<sup>9</sup> In 1994 her video work *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* was funded by the Arts Councils of Britain and Ireland and by RTÉ. Dick is currently based in Ireland and has recently moved into installation practice with *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2002). This project was supported by both Bord Scannán na hÉireann and the Arts Council, and its funding seems to represent a policy shift on the part of the Film Board, albeit one that has not been widely publicised. This is an issue to which I will return in the Conclusion of this study.

### **Modernism, the Co-op Movements and the Avant-garde**

Both Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Vivienne Dick were influenced by the independent film cultures formed in London and New York and were initially associated with co-operative contexts of production. It is important to site their work at a critical point in the development of international co-op movements, however, a moment that is marked by a reconsideration of modernist film practice. The late 1960s had witnessed the emergence of a new generation of North American filmmakers associated with the New York Film-makers' Co-operative, including Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr and Joyce Wieland. Their work was defined by theorists such as P.A. Sitney as 'structural' and seemed to constitute a shift away from an earlier poetic or "mythopoeic" tradition, associated with the New American Cinema of Deren and Brakhage.<sup>10</sup>

In 1966 the London Film-Makers' Co-op (LFMC) was founded as a "direct spin-off from the New York Film-Makers' Co-operative".<sup>11</sup> This period witnessed an "influx

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<sup>9</sup> Bob Quinn's Cinegael Company produced the Pobal series, for RTÉ. *London Suite* (1989) was funded by Channel Four (as part of the Eleventh Hour 'Experimenta' season) and was broadcast by both Channel Four and RTÉ. *3AM* (1990) was commissioned for the BBC/British Arts Council One Minute Television Series and *New York Conversations* (1991) was funded by the British Arts Council.

<sup>10</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974): 407. Many filmmakers disputed the "structural" label, however, not least because of the fact that it seemed to suggest indebtedness to Saussure or Levi-Strauss.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain 1945-90*, (London: British Film Institute, 1999): 41.

of young Americans into Britain and Europe”,<sup>12</sup> partly as a consequence of the Vietnam War and a number of North American filmmakers, including Michael Snow (a Canadian) and Steven Dwoskin (American), were active in the establishment of the London co-op. But the LFMC soon became the centre of “structural-materialist” film practice, which was primarily associated with the work and the writing of English filmmakers such as Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice.



Figure 41: London Film-Maker's Co-op in the early 1970s (with Malcolm Le Grice seated on the left). © LFMC

Structural-materialism aimed to go beyond a mere emphasis on independent film production, distribution and exhibition, by developing a rigorous critique of the mechanisms of reception.

According to Gidal, structural-materialist practice sought to develop a “non-illusionist” cinema by foregrounding “film/viewer material relations, and the relations of the film’s structure” over “any representational content”.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, however, Gidal acknowledged that:

The assertion of film as material is, in fact, predicated upon representation, in as much as ‘pure’ empty acetate running through the projector gate without image (for example) merely sets off another level of abstract (or non-abstract) associations [...] The viewer is forming and equal and possibly more or less opposite ‘film’ in his/her head, constantly anticipating, correcting, re-correcting<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Mick Hartney, “Landscape/Video/Art: Some Tentative Rules and Exceptions”, *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artist's Film and Video*, (eds) Nina Danino and Michael Maziere (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003) 252.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Gidal, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film” [1976] *The British Avant-garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, ed. Michael O' Pray (Luton: Arts Council of England/John Libbey Media/University of Luton, 1996) 145

<sup>14</sup> Gidal, 174. For an analysis of Gidal's 'anti-narrative' model see D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988): 126-146.

Michael O'Pray has suggested that this emphasis on the material qualities of film was linked to the fact that the LFMC (unlike its New York counterpart) provided all of facilities necessary for film production, including printing. Writing in the 1990s, he describes it as:

[T]he only organisation in which a film can be entirely made, screened and distributed within its walls. Its broad functions as workshop with printing, processing, equipment hire, and cinema and distribution library (one of the best in the world) makes it unique.<sup>15</sup>

These broad functions led, according to O'Pray, to "experimentation in form of a kind decisively different to the 'shape' aesthetic of Sitney". He also calls attention to another, perhaps more important, distinction between the New York and London contexts. Structuralist-materialism set itself against all forms of narrative and against any film theory that privileged "work on the signifier"<sup>16</sup> but nonetheless it managed to "attract wider theoretical and critical attention" in Britain, because of the existence of a "film culture broadly committed to semiotics, psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism".<sup>17</sup> Even a theorist with an overt commitment to narrative cinema, such as Stephen Heath, contributed to the critical elaboration of the structural-materialist project.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Heath was one of a number of theorists to question the notion that 'dominant' cinema could be displaced by an insistence on 'anti-illusionism'. By this time feminist film theory, informed by Lacan and Metz, had begun to highlight the processes of identification that operated even within the anti-narrative project of structuralist-materialism. Constance Penley, for one, critiqued the work of Le Grice

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael O'Pray, "Introduction", in *The British Avant-Garde Film, 1926-1995: an Anthology of Writings*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Gidal, 158.

<sup>17</sup> O'Pray, 52.

<sup>18</sup> O'Pray, 62. See the analysis of Michael Snow in Stephen Heath's "Narrative Space", *Screen* 17.3 (Autumn 1976): 103-104. See also Heath's "Repetition Time: Notes around Structural-Materialist Film" [1977] rpt. in *The British Avant-garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, 171-179.



and Gidal, arguing that because it is “based upon a denial of unconscious processes at the level of vision, image and the apparatus”, the structural-materialist project actually served to “extend, reinforce and finally erect into a set of theoretical presuppositions the idealist and phenomenological bases of dominant cinema”<sup>19</sup>. Instead, in a critique that seems to echo Maya Deren’s writings, Penley advocated “an action at the limits of narrative within the narrative film, at the limits of its fictions of unity”.<sup>20</sup>

This exploration of the limits of narrative, and its ‘fictions of unity’, was developed in various different ways during the late 1970s and early 80s, across theory, practice and education. It found expression in the work of Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Vivienne Dick, and the other Irish filmmakers foregrounded in this study, and can be traced through cultural spaces as disparate as Dublin’s Project Cinema Club<sup>21</sup>, London’s Four Corners production collective and New York’s No Wave Cinema.

### **Vivienne Dick and No Wave Cinema**

New York had been the centre of the American film avant-garde since the emergence of New American Cinema in the post-war period, and the foundation of Amos Vogel’s Cinema 16 film society in the early 1950s. It was home to a number of established institutions, from the New York Filmmaker’s Co-op, Anthology Archives and the Whitney Museum to the alternative venues on the Lower East Side that had witnessed the emergence of Underground cinema in the 60s. The city also served as the privileged symbol, if not the actual centre, of globalised capitalism and remained a focal point for migrants from all parts of the world. New York’s doubled identity,

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<sup>19</sup> See Constance Penley, “The Avant-garde and its Imaginary”, *Movies and Methods: An Anthology 2*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1977): 595.

<sup>20</sup> Penley, 597. Penley is citing Heath’s ‘Narrative Space’ here. See Sylvia Harvey’s critique of the LFMC in “The ‘Other Cinema’ in Britain: Unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929-1984”, *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr, (London: British Film Institute, 1986): 240. Gidal subsequently revised his own position in *Materialist Film*, (London: Routledge, 1989) 146-147.

<sup>21</sup> A selection of structural-materialist films from the LFMC were screened at Project in the late 1970s, but presented within the context of a set of critical debates around feminism and the avant-garde.

as both 'subcultural' haven and global trade centre was, of course, particularly evident in the Lower East Side, because of its close proximity to the Twin Towers. Towards the end of the 70s these contradictory aspects of New York City life became particularly pronounced when rents in the Lower East Side began to rise, driven by a process of gentrification to which artists had perhaps (unwittingly) contributed, through the establishment of studios, galleries and performance spaces.

The No Wave movement emerged out of an attempt to revolutionize (and democratise) American avant-garde film but it also coincided with, and perhaps articulated, a new engagement with the politics of place among filmmakers, punk bands and artists. Vivienne Dick was particularly influenced by the work of the Colab (Collaborative Projects) group. Colab were involved in the organisation of impromptu, and ephemeral, protest events and exhibitions such as the *Manifesto Show* (1979), the *Real Estate Show* (1979), the *Times Square Show* (1980) and also associated with the development of the ABC No Rio Workshop and *Spanner Magazine*.<sup>22</sup>

Vivienne Dick joined the Millennium film workshop following her arrival in New York in 1975 but it was not until she met filmmakers such as Beth B, Scott B, James Nares and Eric Mitchell at Colab that she began to make and exhibit her own work. The Bs, Nares and Mitchell had been categorised as 'No Wave' filmmakers because of their association with Punk or No Wave music<sup>23</sup>, and together with Dick they devised Super-8 narratives for screenings between bands at clubs and bars. The Bs series *The Offenders* (1979-80), for example, was devised as a weekly serial to be

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<sup>22</sup> Vivienne Dick discusses her association with Colab with Stephen Barth in "Not Your Ordinary Dick: An Afternoon with Vivienne Dick", By Stephen Barth, *East Village Eye*, March 1980: 10. Many New York-based artists were politicised by the rent crisis and they participated in benefit gigs, exhibitions and rent strikes. See Craig Owens, "The Problem with Puerilism", *Art in America* 72.6 (Summer 1984): 162-3 and Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification", *October* 31 (1984): 91-111.

<sup>23</sup> Vivienne Dick collaborated with Punk performers such as Lydia Lunch and Pat Place on film and music projects. Details on Dick's musical career can be found in Alan Licht, "The Primer", *The Wire: Adventures in Modern Music* 225, (November 2002): 34-41. For further details on the work of Beth and Scott B see Scott MacDonald, *Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988) 201-221.

shown between sets at Max's Kansas City, a music venue associated with 60s underground cinema. No Wave filmmakers created low-budget film narratives, appropriating the iconography of Hollywood 'B movies', and casting No Wave 'stars' such as the punk poet Lydia Lunch, artist and performer Pat Place and musician Adele Bertei. Many No Wave filmmakers also worked *exclusively* in the inexpensive and accessible medium of Super-8, taking advantage of its relatively new capacity to record sound, by incorporating both retro pop and contemporary punk soundtracks.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 42: 'No Wave jam' at Max's, Kansas City, New York (1978) © Max's, Kansas City

No Wave film culture was also supported by the emergence of new *screening* venues, such as the New Cinema (a temporary storefront cinema on St. Mark's Place, reminiscent of the Nickelodeon era) and workshops such as the Collective for Living Cinema and the Millennium. Vivienne Dick points out that during this period the atmosphere at established venues such as Anthology was "very reverent" (even extending to a ban on smoking). In contrast, she notes, the audiences in bars and music venues would "soon tell you" if they didn't like the work. She emphasises that

<sup>24</sup> J. Hoberman notes the possible influence of the British super-8 film *The Punk Rock Movie* (Don Letts, 1977) during this period. It was blown up to 35mm and screened commercially in June 1978, just before the emergence of the New York No Wave cinema. See Hoberman, *Homemade Movies: Towards a Natural History of Narrow Gauge, Avant-garde Filmmaking in America*, May 1 – June 30, 1981 (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1981) 8n21. Within the

the inspiration for No Wave cinema was “coming from bands” and continues; “we *made* our posters too, just the way the bands did”.<sup>25</sup> No Wave filmmakers also screened their work outside New York and, in fact Dick toured the US with her work during the late 1970s and early 80s, around a national network of film clubs and arts centres.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 43: Handmade poster advertising a screening of *Beauty Becomes the Beast* © Vivienne Dick

Vivienne Dick’s early Super-8 narratives figure New York as a site of conspicuous consumption and waste. One of her first films, *Staten Island* (1978), is actually set in what appears to be a dump. In this short work, an androgynous female figure (Pat Place) investigates various abandoned objects, adopting the manner and wearing the costume of a visitor from outer space. This distinctive No Wave or Punk ‘anti-aesthetic’ becomes more pronounced in later films, through the accumulation of mass-produced goods and the referencing of retro fashion. It seems to suggest a

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Irish context, John T. Davis cemented the link between punk and Super-8 with *Shell Shock Rock* (1978).

<sup>25</sup> Vivienne Dick interviewed by the author, June 23, 2001. Sky Sitney provided a further insight into the ‘reverence’ typical of avant-garde film culture during this period in her paper on a cinema designed by Peter Kubelka, and built in New York in the late 1960s. Sky Sitney, “The Search for the Invisible Cinema”, *Society For Cinema and Media Studies*, Minneapolis, March 9 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Vivienne Dick discusses the distribution of her work in the late 70s and early 80s with Scott MacDonald in “Interview with Vivienne Dick”, 98-99. Dick’s work was the subject of two programs at the Pacific Cinematheque, San Francisco (in 1981 and in 1988) and her films were also shown at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, the ICA in London and international festivals such as Berlin, Genoa and Edinburgh.

convergence of formerly distinct eras, a form of time-space compression that David Harvey has identified as characteristic of postmodernity.<sup>27</sup>

Another early film, *Guérillière Talks*, is composed of a series of unedited improvised monologues (each running the length of a Super-8 roll) interspersed with frames of leader strip. Although it might seem to recall the 'structural-materialist' project



*Guérillière Talks* is less concerned with the material properties of film than with an exploration of performance and identity through the words and the voices of its characters. It references Monique Wittig's 1969 book, an exploration of gender and sexuality entitled *Les Guérillières*.

Figure 44: Pat Place in *Guérillière Talks* (Vivienne Dick, 1978) © Vivienne Dick

According to Judith Butler, Monique Wittig's work is informed by the notion that a "socially constituted asymmetry disguises and violates a pre-social ontology of unified and equal persons".<sup>28</sup> This asymmetry is produced through "historically contingent structures" characterised as heterosexual and compulsory. Wittig argues that the dissolution of the category of 'woman' will (and should) be achieved through the act of speech. Butler writes:

Wittig describes the speaking subject as one who, in the act of saying 'I', 'reappropriates language as a whole, proceeding from oneself alone, with the power to use all language.'<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 147.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, 149. Butler is ultimately critical of Wittig's model, noting that it reinforces problematic notions of presence, authority and universal subjecthood.

In *Les Guérillères* Wittig eliminates any 'he-they' conjunctions and, instead, offers 'she-they' (elles) as standing for the general, the universal. Butler notes that the text is also characterised, like much of Wittig's work, by an emphasis on violence and disintegration. *Guérillière Talks*, with its emphasis on highly self-conscious speech, can be read as an attempt to work through, and extend, these ideas into film practice.

Following *Guérillière Talks*, Dick began to address issues such as abuse, violence and prostitution from an overtly feminist perspective, but often working with a vocabulary borrowed from Hollywood melodrama, pop songs, advertising, fashion and trash television. Dick's next work, *She Had Her Gun All Ready*, is a narrative of obsessive desire played out between two women, the androgynous Pat Place and the 'femme fatale' Lydia Lunch. The story is set against a backdrop of iconic New York settings, such as retro East Village diners and Coney Island fairground attractions and articulates a fascination with the dark side of American culture. *She Had Her Gun All Ready* incorporates fleeting references to serial killers such as Ed Gein and Son of Sam, echoing narratives such as *Taxi Driver*, and it culminates in a frenzied physical attack.



Figure 45: Lydia Lunch and Pat Place in the opening and closing sequences of *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (Vivienne Dick, 1978) © Vivienne Dick

Dick's next film, *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, focuses on a teenage runaway turned prostitute, again played by Lydia Lunch, and develops the theme of violence against women. Much of the action takes place in the contemporary Lower East Side, complete with vacant industrial lots, but this 'realism' is disrupted by the casting of Lunch, by the use of melodramatic flashbacks, which hint at a history of abuse. The

passage of time is indicated through music and pop culture references, rather than by elaborate costuming or period detail, and Lunch's onscreen performance as child and teenager serves to continually disrupt processes of narrative identification.

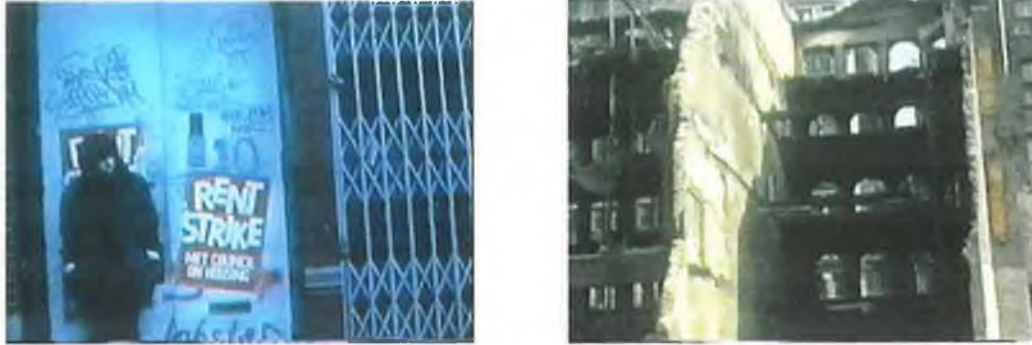


Figure 46: New York cityscapes in *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (Vivienne Dick, 1979) © Vivienne Dick

In April 1981, *She Had her Gun All Ready* was screened together with feminist works such as Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1977) and Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974) during a 'Five-Day Symposium on Issues on Contemporary Film' organized by the Collective for Living Cinema. The Collective aimed to promote a more critical context for avant-garde film and the symposium included presentations on 'Third World and Minority Film Practice' as well as 'Imaging of Women'. As such it addressed issues similar to those informing earlier critical projects within British and Irish film cultures. Vivienne Dick's exploration of performance and 'masquerade' clearly parallels contemporary feminist film theory and practice. Her emphasis on domesticity and transgression, in particular, recalls the work of Carolee Schneemann, a filmmaker and performance artist associated with Fluxus and feminist Body art.<sup>30</sup> The No Wave aesthetic, however, stands in direct contrast to the relative formalism of *East Coast* filmmakers such as Yvonne Rainer<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Unlike Carolee Schneemann, however, Dick rarely appears in her Super-8 film work. Schneemann is perhaps best known for performances such as *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Interior Scroll* (1975). Her film *Fuses* (1964-65) has been described by David Curtis in terms of an extension of the 'anti-moralistic approach to sexuality' associated with filmmakers such as Kenneth Anger and Brakhage, because of its open (although personal and 'impressionistic') focus on sexuality. See Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty Year Evolution*, (London: Studio Vista, 1971): 180-81.

<sup>31</sup> Rainer's *Lives of Performers* was photographed by cinematographer (and filmmaker) Babette Mangolte (as was Akerman's *News From Home*)

and while Dick was acknowledged as a feminist practitioner, her work was also read as a *critique* of feminist orthodoxy. Karen Kay, for example, suggests that *She Had Her Gun All Ready* “could provide a brilliant antidote to Judy Chicago’s ‘Dinner Party’, the almost religious canonization of the cultural stars of feminism”.<sup>32</sup>

No Wave cinema and Vivienne Dick’s work in particular, generated considerable critical interest despite its “unequivocal rejection of structural filmmaking and academic film discourse”.<sup>33</sup> Critics such as J. Hoberman sought to locate Dick’s work within the context of a marginalized American 8mm avant-garde, which encompassed George and Mike Kuchar, Bob Branaman and (briefly) Stan Brakhage. Hoberman has theorized four traditions specific to narrow-gauge film, including the home movie or diary (explored by Brakhage and Ken Jacobs among others), the urban documentary (primarily associated with Bob Branaman), the “ironic spectacle” (exemplified by the work of the Kuchar brothers, Eric Mitchell, and Beth and Scott B) and also the “self-dramatization” of Vito Acconci. These traditions are by no means exclusive, however, and Dick’s New York-based films can be seen to explore elements of spectacle, documentary, self-dramatization and the home movie. A ‘home movie’ quality is reinforced by the repeated appearance of a familiar cast of characters from the No Wave scene, most notably photographer Nan Goldin, performers Pat Place and Lydia Lunch and filmmaker Beth B. This led Hoberman, writing in 1982, to describe Vivienne Dick as the “quintessential narrow-gauge filmmaker of the second wave”.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Vivienne Dick does not explicitly locate her work within an explicitly *filmic* tradition and, in contemporary interviews she emphasises a preference for video over larger gauge film, because of its ease of use

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<sup>32</sup> Karen Kay, “New York Super-8: Edinburgh Event, 1980”, *Idiolects* 9-10, (Winter 1980/81): 9. See also Amy Taubin. “The Other Cinema: Films By Vivienne Dick”, *Soho Weekly News*, June 7, 1979: 94.

<sup>33</sup> J. Hoberman, “A Context for Vivienne Dick”, October 20, (Spring 1982): 104. See also Hoberman’s “No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground”, *Village Voice*, May 21 (1979): 42-43 and “Notes on Three Films by Vivienne Dick”, *Millennium Film Journal* 6 (Spring 1980): 90-94

<sup>34</sup> Hoberman, “A Context for Vivienne Dick”: 104.



and its cheapness. In fact *She Had Her Gun All Ready* features a sequence in which Lunch studies her own image on a video monitor, articulating a certain fascination with the immediacy of video. Dick also expressed support for “Public Access TV and the satellite audience”<sup>35</sup>, and in fact the Colab group had been involved in the production of a programme (with the bizarre title of *Potato Wolf*) for ‘Channel C’ on cable television since the late 1970s. At this point cable seemed to offer the potential for critical and innovative practice and it attracted artists and filmmakers such as Martha Rosler, who had long been engaged in a critique of the modes of address associated with documentary and the news media. In 1982, for example, Rosler collaborated with Paper Tiger Television to produce a video work for cable entitled *Martha Rosler Reads ‘Vogue’*. This is an exploration of various forms of media discourse and consumption and (like Rosler’s seminal *Semiotics of the Kitchen*) it shares Vivienne Dick’s emphasis on humour and pop culture.

Vivienne Dick also acknowledged that Super-8 presented specific problems for distribution and exhibition, not least because of the fact that the film original exists on reversal stock (which can be projected) rather than as a negative (from which multiple prints can be easily made). Dick noted that while she preferred the distinctive ‘look’ of Super-8 it was often a result of inappropriate screening venues, which were intended to accommodate 16mm or 35mm film. She states:

People always complain that the sound and picture are always bad at Super-8 screenings but that’s only because it’s always shown in makeshift auditoriums. If there was a theatre built for super-8, all of these problems would be ironed out in no time.<sup>36</sup>

In practice, some exhibition spaces designed to accommodate Super-8 actually transferred films to video prior to screenings. This was the case with the New Cinema, which seems to have deliberately challenged the conventions of the established avant-garde circuit. Dick’s allegiance to the medium of Super-8 seems to

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<sup>35</sup> Vivienne Dick, “Not Your Ordinary Dick”, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Vivienne Dick, “Not Your Ordinary Dick”, 10.

be rooted primarily in its populist appeal and accessibility. As such, her eventual move towards video production (in the late 1980s) was perhaps inevitable.

### ***Liberty's Booty: Myth and McDonalds***

As her work developed Vivienne Dick also became more explicitly concerned with issues of media representation. *Liberty's Booty*, her next film, deals with various forms of exploitation, primarily prostitution and it is marked by an 'investigative' approach that both recalls and subverts documentary. This film developed out of a series of interviews and many of the participants are not actors. But, like much of Dick's work, it resists easy categorisation as the 'documentary' sections are framed by an animated sequence (featuring a female superhero based upon the Statue of Liberty) and interspersed with some obviously staged elements including appearances by an unconventional 'narrator' who speaks directly to the camera.



Figure 47: Animation sequence, opening credits of *Liberty's Booty* © Vivienne Dick, 1980

Explaining the genesis of the film, Dick has noted that it was partly inspired by the story of the early Christian martyr St. Lucy. Lucy, now the patron saint of virgins, was condemned to be "exposed to prostitution" in a brothel because she refused to marry a pagan. This punishment could not be carried out, however, because she was miraculously rendered unmovable and was instead burnt at the stake. In the final version of *Liberty's Booty*, the story of Lucy seems to have been displaced by a concern with (secular) myths of American liberty and equality.

The scenes in the brothel are resolutely focused on the everyday lives of the women, calling attention to the domestic details and mundane conversations (about shopping and holidays) despite the apparent sensationalism of its subject matter. Frequent cutaways to the streets outside emphasise the disjunction (or perhaps the

interdependency) between the prostitutes and other New Yorkers. The analysis of gender relations in *Liberty's Booty* is also informed by a broader critique of capitalism and consumption. An analogy is suggested, towards the end of the film, between the experiences of the prostitutes in the brothel and workers in McDonald's restaurants.<sup>37</sup>

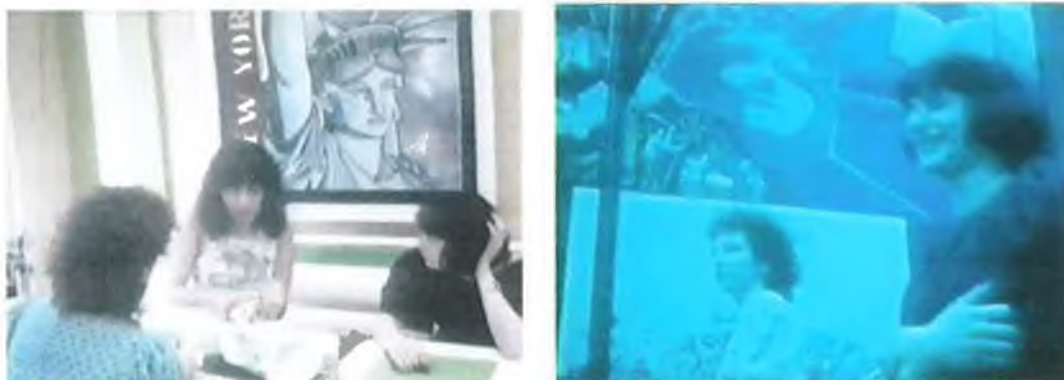


Figure 48: Images of 'Liberty' and prostitution in *Liberty's Booty* © Vivienne Dick

In order to make this point, the film incorporates a relatively oblique reference to a strike by McDonalds workers in *Ireland*, a strike that was apparently broken by "heavies from America". 'Ireland' is initially represented, within the narrative, simply by images of rolling fields viewed from above and by a tourist postcard of Irish dancing. But later, television news coverage of Pope John Paul II on tour seems to reference his 1979 visit to Ireland and to complicate any easy comparison between Irish and American society. A subsequent sequence follows a group of young women on a walk up a steep and rocky hillside, and may have been filmed on Croagh Patrick.

*Liberty's Booty* is not explicitly concerned with the relationship between Ireland and the US. But the references to Catholicism, and the exploration of stereotypes or myths of femininity, call attention to the specificity of gender in *Irish society*, as theorised by Luke Gibbons.<sup>38</sup> He suggests that the experience of colonization may contribute to a conceptualisation of the nation as a literal "body politic", and to the

<sup>37</sup> A fascination with the sex industry, in terms of its relationship to other forms of commerce is also evident in the films of Beth and Scott B, such as *G-Man* and *Black Box* (both 1978), which reveal sado-masochistic desires at the heart of corporate and security agencies.

blurring of boundaries between public and private spheres. At the same time, he suggests, an “alternative ‘feminised’ public sphere (imagined as the nation)” may also turn the colonial stereotype against itself, providing a critique of the official patriarchal order of the state. The instability of divisions between private and public is articulated in many of Dick’s early films. *She Had Her Gun All Ready* and *Beauty and the Beast*, for example, are ostensibly concerned with interpersonal relationships and are initially set within domestic environments. In each of these narratives, however, the action spills over into public spaces such as busy New York diners, the Coney Island fairground or the street. *Liberty’s Booty* also plays with this tension between public and private by revealing an apartment as a brothel and by aligning prostitution with more public forms of exchange and consumption.

Despite Dick’s evident fascination with American culture, her early films also offer a number of thematic and formal parallels with the work of Irish contemporaries. For example, *Beauty Becomes the Beast* and *Liberty’s Booty* both explore memories of abuse, exploitation and violence, as do Cathal Black’s *Our Boys* (1981) and Joe Comerford’s *Traveller* (1981). Dick’s work may lack overt reference to the foundational narratives or myths of the Irish nation critiqued by Black and Comerford but, in *Liberty’s Booty*, the exploration of gender stereotypes is informed by a critique of the mythic tropes through which the *American* nation has been imagined. The figure of ‘Liberty’ becomes a symbol of exploitation, through association with another privileged signifier of globalised capitalism: the golden arches of MacDonald’s. The confusion of public and private in Dick’s work could be read, then, as an attempt to negotiate a relationship between the nation, the state and the female body. Arguably, this project is also informed by the No Wave’s particular investment in New York as both a site of sub-cultural *opposition* and a global symbol of capital.

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<sup>38</sup> See Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996): 21.

Vivienne Dick's fascination with Americana, evident in her appropriation from Hollywood movies and pop culture, has largely been read in terms of a 'postmodern' practice. J. Hoberman, for example, defines the No Wave movement as a "postmodernist repetition" of the American underground cinemas of the sixties.<sup>39</sup> Vivienne Dick's work is clearly characterized by a populist mode of address and by the exploration of 'postmodern' processes of spatial and temporal convergence. The *mise-en-scène* and the music of *Beauty and the Beast*, in particular, articulates Dick's fascination with New York's retro cultures. She notes that in the late 1970s New York was "like an accordion, different periods of time squishing together, people playing different times [...] just the sense of different decades different times, which is now very commonplace but then it wasn't".<sup>40</sup> Television also played a role in this temporal convergence; elsewhere Dick has described one section of *Beauty and the Beast* as "a funny throwback to 1962: Motown and beehives", noting that it "has to do with the TV, too – the way you can switch the channel and you're in another decade".<sup>41</sup>

J. Hoberman, however, compares the No Wave's citing of Underground cinema (and fascination with retro culture) to the "genre pastiches" produced by Hollywood in the late 1970s and early 80s, such as *American Graffiti*, *Star Wars* and *Body Heat*. His analysis of the 'postmodern' is structured by the notion of a definitively, and exclusively, *American* avant-garde tradition spanning the New American Cinema (Deren, Brakhage), the "authentically modernist" work of structural filmmakers such as Michael Snow and Hollis Frampton and the early "postmodern" of the Warholian underground.<sup>42</sup> Hoberman largely dismisses the intersection between American and European avant-gardes, in order to highlight the structuring role of Hollywood. Yet, as Laura Mulvey (among others) has noted, Hollywood has also shaped the

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<sup>39</sup> J. Hoberman, "After Avant-garde Film" *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984): 68-69.

<sup>40</sup> Vivienne Dick interviewed by the author.

<sup>41</sup> Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Vivienne Dick", 92.

<sup>42</sup> Hoberman, "After Avant-garde Film", 64. Anne Friedberg critiques Hoberman's analysis on the grounds that it situates the 'avant-garde' after modernism. See Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993): 166-7.

development of *international* avant-gardes, serving as a shared reference point for successive European and American new waves.<sup>43</sup>

Miriam Hansen has examined an earlier process of cultural dialogue and exchange between Europe and America. She theorises the notion of classical Hollywood as a form of “vernacular modernism”<sup>44</sup> an aesthetic idiom encompassing elements of the American everyday or quotidian, which mediated competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernization. She emphasises that Hollywood film appealed to both “avant-garde artists and intellectuals in the USA and the modernizing capitals of the world” and she notes that Soviet Cinema, in particular, was characterized by a fascination with Hollywood’s “lower genres”, like the detective serial or slapstick comedy.<sup>45</sup> Hansen suggests that the “Americanism” of classical cinema intensified its appeal for European avant-gardes but, equally, her account calls attention to the particular cultural associations of ‘Americanism’ within different social and political formations.

Within the Irish context, a familiarity with American modernity can be seen to predate Hollywood. Mass emigration to America, during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the “disintegration and fragmentation” of Irish society and, as Luke Gibbons notes, it accentuated the “shock of modernity”.<sup>46</sup> While literature and music articulated the trauma of exile, the letters of Irish emigrants also helped to

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<sup>43</sup> See Laura Mulvey, “New Wave interchanges: *Celine and Julie* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*”, *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture and National Identity 1945-95*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci, (London: British Film Institute), 1998: 119-128. P.A. Sitney also emphasises the role of the ‘French Nouvelle Vague’ (itself a response to Hollywood) in mediating the development of the New American Cinema of Mekas and Brakhage. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, viii.

<sup>44</sup> Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism” in *Re-inventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London and New York: Arnold and Oxford University Press, 2000): 332-350. My reading of Hansen’s text is informed by Dudley Andrew’s “Dialects and Dialectics of Cinema in the World”, a paper delivered to the Keough-Notre Dame Centre’s *Irish Seminar* July 5 2002, Dublin.

<sup>45</sup> Hansen, 334. Joyce’s appreciation for cinema extended to his involvement in the management of Dublin’s Volta, an episode that is chronicled in Pat Murphy’s film *Nora* (2000).

<sup>46</sup> Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 6.

structure Irish perceptions of America.<sup>47</sup> Hollywood's subsequent incorporation, and mediation, of images of Ireland and Irishness added a new dimension to this complex relationship between Irish and American modernity<sup>48</sup> and, despite opposition in the form of censure or overt censorship, American popular culture maintained a hold over the Irish imagination in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Vivienne Dick's work can be read, then, as an attempt to navigate a transnational cultural landscape through the borrowed conventions and iconography of classical Hollywood. In this sense, it complicates the genealogy of postmodernism developed by J. Hoberman.

### **Migrant Subjectivities: *Flanagan, A Pint of Plain* and Chantal Akerman's *News From Home***

A somewhat similar engagement with American avant-garde and underground traditions can be found in the work of Thaddeus O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan cites the New American Cinema, Stan Brakhage and Steven Dwoskin among his influences but he trained at the Royal College of Art in London where, as he notes, there was a strong emphasis on structural-materialism, to the extent that "the instinctive part of filmmaking [...] was very unfashionable"<sup>49</sup>. While at the RCA O'Sullivan made a "series of short films, some about being Irish in London, and ending with *A Pint of Plain*". These films are characterised by a "relaxed style – improvised acting, no script – but within a formal structure of shots and camera movements". In some respects this work could be read as an attempt to negotiate a position somewhere between the structural-materialism of the LFMC and the social documentary of a filmmaker such as Philip Donellan. O'Sullivan emphasises, however, that he did not

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<sup>47</sup> See Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 357-361.

<sup>48</sup> For analysis of the relationship between Hollywood and Irish Film Culture see Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema And Ireland*, (London, Routledge, 1988). See also Kevin Rockett, "The Irish Migrant and Film" in *The Creative Migrant: The Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity 3* ed. Patrick O'Sullivan, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994): 170-191.

<sup>49</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan, interviewed in Brian McLlroy, *Ireland: World Cinema 4*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books: 1989): 139. O'Sullivan has commented on the influence of Brakhage and Dwoskin in an interview with the author.

identify with either the work of Donellan or the Irish émigré community in general and in fact found emigrant culture “inward-looking and very nostalgic”.<sup>50</sup>

*Flanagan*, one of O’Sullivan’s first completed films, introduces many of the themes that recur throughout his later work, although it is only ten minutes long. In particular, it focuses on the relationship between image and voice. The film opens with a detail from an engraving of a Madonna and Child, in which the child gazes at his mother. The incorporation of this religious icon and the particular focus on the child’s look frames the action: three interwoven scenarios featuring the actor Derrick O’Connor in the roles of Painter, Dealer and Conceptual Artist. In the first of these scenarios a painter struggles to complete his “masterpiece”, an unseen image of his mother based on a family snapshot. At one point he is pictured on the roof of his studio, engaged in a melodramatic outburst against a backdrop of London tower blocks. The second scenario features a monologue by the dealer, who is dressed immaculately and seated in the back of a limousine. As he explains his relationship with art and artists, describing himself as “the Medici of Minimalism”, his glamorous girlfriend remains silent, seated in the corner slightly out of shot. In the third scenario the conceptual artist is engaged in the production of an ‘Earth Work’ (which appears to be a hole in the ground), accompanied by a sceptical journalist and a similarly silent woman.

On one level, *Flanagan* is a send-up of the British art scene. The different perspectives of Painter, Dealer and Conceptualist are juxtaposed, through crosscutting, to great comic effect and O’Connor’s deadpan delivery accentuates the humour. At one point the conceptual artist advises the journalist: “I don’t normally explain my stuff to the public – if I say its art then its art” and continues, referring to the earthwork, “once the artist loses contact with his hole then the hole won’t respond and the sculpture fails”. In the next shot he is seen attacking the journalist, while

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<sup>50</sup> Thaddeus O’Sullivan interviewed by McIlroy, *Ireland: World Cinema 4*, 138. For an analysis of Donellan’s documentary work in film and radio, see Lance Pettitt, “Philip Donellan, Ireland and Dissident Documentary”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20. 3 (2000): 351-365



Dealer emphasizes that “any kind of publicity is good publicity” and advocates “...a couple of articles by some respected intellectual like Caroline Tisdall”. The reference to Tisdall is particularly significant because of her association with Joseph Beuys, who seems to provide the model for the conceptual artist. In 1974, Tisdall interviewed Beuys about his relationship with Ireland on the occasion of his exhibition *A Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, which opened at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford and subsequently toured to London, Edinburgh, Dublin and Belfast.<sup>51</sup>

Within *Flanagan*, the object of artistic expression is figured as the maternal, both literally and obliquely, through reference to the Earthwork. Although all of the onscreen female characters remain silent, the voice of a woman is heard throughout *Flanagan*, in a series of excerpts from an Irish mother’s letters to her son. The letters open with an accusation, “Dear Brian...everyone says you’re dead son, why don’t you write?” but are filled with mundane details; “sorry about the pencil but I have to catch the four o’clock post”. In terms of tone and content, these letters are strikingly similar to the letters featured in Chantal Akerman’s *News From Home* (1977).



Figure 49: New York city in *News From Home* (© Chantal Ackerman, 1977)

Akerman’s film is composed entirely of actuality footage of New York City streets, which are predominantly under-populated.

<sup>51</sup> Norman Rosenthal notes that Beuys had a ‘special empathy with James Joyce, who can be identified in part as the “secret person” in Ireland’, Norman Rosenthal, “A Note on Joseph Beuys” in *Joseph Beuys: Drawings: The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1999): 15. O’Sullivan, interviewed by the author, notes that while he was interested in Beuys at this time and had read several articles by Tisdall, his interest had “nothing to do with Ireland”. The closing credits of *Flanagan* also include the mysterious statement: “Sorry Bernard Malamud” and O’Sullivan, interviewed by the author, notes that he drew upon various stories by Malamud (the American writer best known for *The Natural*) in developing the film. Another possible reference point for this work could be John B. Keane’s series of “letters”, published in the late 1960s and early 70s and I am indebted to Stephanie McBride for calling Keane’s work to my attention (and for many other insightful observations).

In contrast, the letters to 'Chantal' from her mother in Belgium are filled with stories of friends, relatives and neighbours. These accounts are punctuated by emotional appeals for "news" of Chantal's life and warnings about the dangers of New York. Paul Willemen has suggested that, in Akerman's film, an "oscillation between the use of a narratively motivated setting and the activation of the setting as an autonomous discourse" works to reverse the conventional hierarchy between narrative and setting.<sup>52</sup> *Flanagan* also unsettles this conventional hierarchy, but through voice rather than through image. The mother's voice seems to undermine the image, suggesting that the maternal somehow eludes visual representation.

*A Pint Of Plain*, O'Sullivan's subsequent film, is also characterised by a darkly comic tone. But instead of focusing on the art-world, it is set within London's Irish community and Derrick O'Connor (also credited as co-director) again takes one of the leading roles. The film opens with a group of Irish men playing pool and in the scenes that follow, these men move through a variety of public spaces, such as pubs, parks and London streets. The voices of these characters dominate the film, although their words are often indecipherable, particularly when dialogue competes with ambient sound. But the audio track serves as the link between a series of ten action sequences, as it continues long after each closing shot has faded to black.

The use of 'real' locations, and the absence of any apparent dramatic storyline until the final section, may seem to situate *A Pint of Plain* within the tradition of documentary. Yet the film is actually based, as Lance Pettitt notes, on scenarios devised by the actors in a series of workshops at London's Bush Theatre.<sup>53</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan gave a public interview about his work at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in March 1979 as part of the long-running *Cineprobe*. O'Sullivan noted that, as many of the actors in *A Pint of Plain* were unpaid, it was "very difficult to get

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994) 156. For an in-depth discussion of Akerman's film see Fredric Jameson, "The Existence of Italy", *Signatures of the Visible* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 171-3.

people out of the pub” and as a result “a lot” of scenes planned for other locations were filmed in the pub.<sup>54</sup>

O’Sullivan provides more detail on his approach to the production in a subsequent interview, with Luke Gibbons. He notes:

I made an improvised film about Irish immigrants in London [...] about three Irishmen arriving in London for the weekend. We arranged for them to meet actors in a random kind of way, and one guy would have a through-line, a thought, a speech, a story, which would force the others into a reaction. We shot about ten or fifteen scenes on that basis with a variety of people, all over London. Everything was long takes then, Michael Snow style, where the camera just turned over and we waltzed about with the actors.<sup>55</sup>

Many of the exchanges between characters explore definitions of Irish and English national identity. In an early sequence, for example, one of the characters is embarrassed by another Irishman’s drunken rendition of *The Soldier’s Song*. Later on, an Irish *Socialist Worker* activist at a civil rights rally complains that the “Irish can’t even speak their own language”. Subsequently, an upper class ‘English’ drunk delivers a theatrical attack on the city of London: “Look at it rotting, putrefying in its own excrement [...] Saxons, Normans, Plantagenet Kings”.

This exploration of identity, through voice and language, is exclusively male in emphasis and the film deliberately calls attention to the masculine character of Irish (public) culture in London through the incorporation of a strip-show in a pub. In this scene, a group of men, including several of the central characters, look on as ‘Stripper

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<sup>53</sup> Lance Pettitt, introduction to “A Pint of Plain”, *Keeping it Real: The Fictions and Non-Fictions of Film in Contemporary Ireland*, UCD Film Conference, Irish Film Centre April 21, 2002.

<sup>54</sup> “Public Interview and Questions, An Evening with Thaddeus O’Sullivan”, Monday March 26, 1979 (transcribed by the author from audio tapes held in the MoMA Archive). This interview followed a screening of *A Pint of Plain* and an excerpt from *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (both of which had been acquired by the MoMA Circulating Film Library). O’Sullivan notes that *A Pint of Plain* was scheduled to be shown by the BBC but excluded because of its “language” It seems unlikely, however, that the full frontal nudity in the strip sequence would have been approved for broadcast.

Sue' removes the last of her clothes and takes up a series of 'artistic' poses to the accompaniment of a live rock band. At various points 'Sue' seems to perform directly to the camera but the crowd of men behind her remain in shot, serving as the focal point of the scene. In some respects this shot recalls the 'amateur photographer' sequence in Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967), in which the men are viewed from the model's perspective. Yet *A Pint of Plain* does not constitute a straightforward critique of voyeurism. O'Sullivan emphasises that the strip show was deliberately intended to be "voyeuristic" in order to reflect that fact that "what most Irish kids leaving school expect from London [...] is money and sex [and] one of the first things you do when you get to London is go to a strip show and the second thing you do is go to confession for the last time".<sup>56</sup> As such, his exploration of voyeurism is structured by a narrative emphasis on the *migrant* as both the subject and the object of the gaze.

In terms of its thematic exploration of sexuality, autobiography and subjectivity O'Sullivan's work can be seen to parallel that of Steven Dwoskin. Dwoskin had been involved with the Factory in New York, and his work was often compared to that of Warhol and Jack Smith, because of the way in which his films foreground various forms of "sexualised looking".<sup>57</sup> *Moment* (1964), an early film by Dwoskin, is composed of a single long take of a girl's face and later films retain this insistent gaze and a subsequent work, *Girl* (1975), features a long static take of a naked girl standing on a bath mat. In his analysis of this work Paul Willemen notes that "the girl becomes uncomfortable: she fidgets, tries to cover herself with her hands and arms" until the film runs out, forcing the viewer to "confront the considerable sadistic components present in his or her act of looking".<sup>58</sup> Willemen suggests that Dwoskin's work charts the various modalities of the 'look', within cinema. These include the camera's look as it records the pro-filmic event, the audience's look at the image, the

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<sup>55</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan, interviewed by Luke Gibbons, "Fragments in Pictures", 9. O'Sullivan, interviewed by the author, notes that O'Connor's main role was in discussing the characters with the actors.

<sup>56</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan, "Public Interview and Questions, An Evening with Thaddeus O'Sullivan".

<sup>57</sup> See J. Hoberman "The Joys of Scopophilia", *The Village Voice* May 29, 1978: 46. [Emphasis added]

<sup>58</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 107.

look the characters exchange within the diegesis and a “fourth look”: “the look at the viewer [...] the look which constitutes the viewer as a visible subject”.<sup>59</sup>

O’Sullivan met Dwoskin at the Royal College of Art and became involved in a number of his productions, as an assistant on *Central Bazaar* (1976) and *Silent Cry* (1977) and a cinematographer on *Outside In* (1981),<sup>60</sup> one of a number of works exploring Dwoskin’s experiences as a polio sufferer. Like O’Sullivan, Dwoskin worked extensively with non-professional performers as well as actors and relied upon improvisation. In *Central Bazaar*, for example, Willemen notes that “a group of people, most of whom had no previous acting experience and who didn’t even know each other, were given a multitude of props with which to build their personal fantasy persona”.<sup>61</sup> In fact, *Central Bazaar* documented a ‘Happening’ that, according to Dwoskin, was “worked out for filming in advance, a kind of rough scenario”. At the same time, he acknowledges; “it was still a Happening, it almost got out of control at times”.<sup>62</sup>

Around this time, O’Sullivan also collaborated with Mary Pat Leece, another filmmaker associated with the LFMC. Leece was employed as an organiser at the Co-op but in 1972 she set up the Four Corners production collective with Joanne Davis, Wilfried Thurst and Ronald Peck (an employee of the Other Cinema). According to Carla Mitchell, Four Corners aimed to negotiate between the formalism of the LFMC and the explicitly political objectives of collectives such as Cinema Action and the

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<sup>59</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 107.

<sup>60</sup> Press releases for the MoMA Cineprobe event emphasise Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s association with Dwoskin, and with *Central Bazaar* in particular. It is difficult to clarify his exact role in this production, however. Steve Dwoskin (interviewed via email on April 21, 2002) claims that O’Sullivan played a lead role in a *Silent Cry* but this version of the events is not supported by O’Sullivan (nor is he listed in the credits for *Silent Cry*). Derrick O’Connor did appear in one of Dwoskin’s film, *Outside In*. This was photographed by O’Sullivan and this fact might account for the confusion.

<sup>61</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Steve Dwoskin, “Raymond Durnat interviews Steve Dwoskin”, *Films*, (May 1984): 8. This interview was published on the occasion of a retrospective series of screenings on Channel Four (April-March 1984).

group was later to secure workshop funding from Channel Four.<sup>63</sup> O'Sullivan was never a member of either Four Corners or the London Film-Maker's Co-op, although he attended screenings at the latter. But the BFI Production Board introduced him to Leece and she subsequently became the producer and editor of *On A Paving Stone Mounted*.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Backward Look: *On A Paving Stone Mounted* and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film***

Marc Karlin has theorised *A Pint of Plain* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted* as "reverse" views of exile.<sup>65</sup> He suggests that, in the former film, the *mise-en-scène* of "British Realism" is dislocated by the perspective of the exile or immigrant. In the process, he suggests, "Pub tables, phone boxes, tea cups; film objects [that are] ordinarily so imprisoned in the folds of actors who use or touch them as to become indistinguishable [become] eyes being loosed from gravity"<sup>66</sup>. In contrast, Karlin suggests that *On A Paving Stone Mounted* deals with "the pain that goes with emigration/exile [...] the contradictions opened up by the diaspora".

Financed by the Production Board of the British Film Institute as an exploration of the immigrant experience in Britain<sup>67</sup>, *On A Paving Stone Mounted* opens with an address to a live (but off screen) audience. This address provides an introduction to storytelling in Ireland and sets the stage for a performance by the professional seanchaí Eamon Kelly. But the next shot actually signals a shift in time and place, as

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<sup>63</sup> For details on Four Corners see Carla Mitchell, "How Not to Disappear from that Choice: Four Corners 1972-1985", *Filmwaves* 4 (1998): 10-13 and also Margaret Dickinson, 42. I am indebted to David Curtis for calling my attention to O'Sullivan's association with Four Corners.

<sup>64</sup> During the filming of *On a Paving Stone Mounted* O'Sullivan and his small production crew were based at Ardmore Studios, but they received little practical assistance from Ardmore because of a lack of 16mm facilities. The postproduction for the film was completed in the Four Corners edit rooms in Bethnal Green.

<sup>65</sup> Marc Karlin, "On A Paving Stone Mounted" *British Film Institute Productions 1977/78* ed. Julian Petley. (London: BFI, 1978): 35.

<sup>66</sup> Karlin, 35.

<sup>67</sup> McIlroy, 140. O'Sullivan, interviewed by the author, notes that the film (the dialogue of which was unscripted) was actually intended to be a 30 minute short but expanded to feature length. He later asked the BFI for money to re-edit because of difficulties with its distribution, but they refused. He states: "I made a big mistake. It would have made a really good short".

'documentary' modes of representation give way to subjective camera. A woman peers directly into the camera and says, "come on, Michael", as though addressing a child and a series of ambiguous encounters ensue. This fragmentary and disjunctive character of the action suggests recollection and dislocation, and scenes of urban domesticity are interspersed with images of rural folk rituals.



Figure 50: Publicity still for *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (© Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1978)

In one ghostly, overexposed sequence a group of pilgrims climb Croagh Patrick, their faces as indistinct as the voices speaking Irish on the soundtrack. These ethereal images are juxtaposed with more contemporary scenes of Kilorglin Puck Fair at night. Later, the action shifts again to a suburban London house, populated by friends, neighbours and flatmates, but memories of the Fair, the seaside and school continue to disrupt the narrative. Gradually, the thematic focus on emigration, and on the experiences of the Irish community in London, becomes more evident. Various characters deliver (unscripted) monologues directly to the camera and one figure in particular, played by Stephen Rea, dominates the central section of the film. A key scene, set in a packed theatre, features a complex series of pans between Rea, seated

on a balcony, and Christy Moore, performing onstage. As Moore sings *Lanagan's Ball* and *Patrick was a Gentleman* (from which the phrase "On A Paving Stone Mounted" is taken) the sound of the crowd can be heard. Slowly, the camera traverses the vast dark distance between stage and balcony and Rea recounts memories of his father's funeral, emphasising the pressure to drink whiskey and be his "father's son". He compares the weight of family history with the anonymity of London, a point that is underscored by a rapid transition to a new location in the next sequence.

In the closing section, the seanchaí Eamon Kelly finally appears. In a comic monologue he tells the story of "Mick the Fiddler", who returns to Ireland from New York and is besieged by friends and neighbours for news of loved ones and a graphic representation of the city itself. This section is actually an excerpt from Kelly's stage show 'In My Father's Time' (performed in New York during the late 1970s) but in *On a Paving Stone Mounted* the storyteller's words are subtly looped and repeated. O'Sullivan has noted that he "wanted to suggest that this is an actor at work [...] it's a kind of professional nostalgia".<sup>68</sup> This process underscores the primary focus of the film, its undoing of linear narrative.

In the BFI production catalogue for 1977/8 Steven Dwoskin states "if in writing, the film's story seems linear, the film's way of telling it is never linear" and he praises O'Sullivan's use of "the films own language to tell, to ponder, to question, and, most of all, to understand this one man's story".<sup>69</sup> Not all reviewers were so enthusiastic, however. In the BFI *Monthly Film Bulletin* John Pym suggests, "O'Sullivan shies away from clarifying his point of view and thereby only thickens the mist enshrouding the romantic concept of 'Ireland' – something which, on the surface, his film seems anxious to dispel".<sup>70</sup> In his own contemporary account, O'Sullivan emphasises that, rather than providing the subject of the film, emigration serves "as a *metaphor* for Irish history [and] memory is seen as a polarisation of that history

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<sup>68</sup> O'Sullivan, interviewed by Luke Gibbons, "Fragments in Pictures", 9.

<sup>69</sup> Steven Dwoskin, "On a Paving Stone Mounted", *British Film Institute Productions 1977/78*, 36.



within a moment, its fixing and its undoing". The incorporation of self-consciously romantic images is central to this project of 'undoing'. O'Sullivan writes:

The film is about memories, a patchwork of spare, reduced, cynical memories. Not simply 'the past' but a production of remembrance by the emigrant, of an identity as emigrant of a place elsewhere where one is in place, at home. Hence the typicality of the memories, not personal, of post-card Ireland, like the shots of Skellig's Rock, with its monastic settlement and the romantic beautiful shot over the sea and the mountain.<sup>71</sup>

O'Sullivan acknowledges that the film's engagement with identity and the experience of emigration is limited and he notes: "it can tell only half the story [...] for women, Irish women, are absent". *English* women figure prominently, however, and one overtly middle class character (played by Miriam Margoyles) describes Ireland as the only place "in the British Isles" so poor that children go without shoes. At other points, young confident urban women comment upon, and consume, a certain *performance* of Irishness. One woman enthuses: "that's *so* Irish, you're very good at telling stories" and she seems to represent a form of cosmopolitan 'modernity' from which the central character is excluded.

Vivienne Dick also takes up themes of migration and exile in *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981). This work charts her transition from New York's No Wave film culture towards a film practice based in Ireland, and it also signalled a certain acceptance within the avant-garde establishment.<sup>72</sup> In terms of its critical focus, it explores the difficulty of representing Ireland, and Irish experience, within a wider

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<sup>70</sup> John Pym, "On A Paving Stone Mounted", *Monthly Film Bulletin* 45.536 (September 1978): 179.

<sup>71</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan, "On a Paving Stone Mounted", *British Film Institute Productions* 1977/78, 36.

<sup>72</sup> *Visibility Moderate* (1981) was included in the 1983 Whitney Biennial. Tom Gunning has pointed out, in response to my paper delivered at the *Irish Film Research Seminar* (Trinity College, Dublin, 11 April 2003), that it was not shown in the same Punk venues as Vivienne Dick's earlier films. I am indebted to Gunning because my subsequent research suggests that a shift *did* take place in Dick's approach to exhibition and possibly practice. But it may have happened even before 1981 since, of all Dick's films, only *Guérillière Talks* and *She Had her Gun All Ready* were actually premiered at rock clubs. *Beauty Becomes the Beast* and *Liberty's Booty* were in fact first shown in dedicated film clubs (the Millennium and the Collective for Living Cinema).

context and it inaugurates a new concern, explored in Dick's subsequent 'Irish' films, with narrative genres and landscape. The title is taken from a weather report, overheard at one point on the soundtrack, but the phrase "visibility moderate" also seems to describe Vivienne Dick's own relationship to filmmaking in Ireland.

*Visibility Moderate* is a restless exploration of the perspective of 'outsider', played out through the genres of the home movie, advertisement, documentary and thriller. The pre-credit sequence is staged around the twin towers of the World Trade Center, calling attention to the transnational economic flows structuring cultural and political relations. The first part of the film traces the journey of an American tourist, dressed in fashionably 'retro' clothes, around a series of Irish landmarks that are familiar from postcards and films such as John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952). At one point the 'Tourist' poses in the ruins of Irish monasteries kisses the Blarney stone and travels on a horse drawn cart. The 'tour' is also punctuated by a montage of TV and radio ads promoting well-known Irish and international brands and ranging from the amateurish animation of 'Jack Ryan truck rental' to the slick suburban fantasy offered by *Blueband* margarine. It also includes an encounter with actors on the set of an Irish play and culminates in a dreamlike sequence in which the tourist imagines herself as a 'Celt' running through a mystical rural landscape. These interruptions to the narrative serve to complicate any straightforward critique of the heritage industry.



Figure 51: Fantasy and advertising in *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (© Vivienne Dick, 1981)

As the tour progresses it becomes apparent that the visitor is in fact Irish-American, and her fantasies acquire an even greater resonance. But *Visibility: Moderate* is not

exclusively concerned with cultural tourism, or even ethnicity. The pre-credit sequence introduces a connection between power and vision; the camera pans from the spectacular view over New York City back to the central character. She is slicing a rotten pineapple, a graphic symbol of global trade. This alignment between spectacle and power becomes overt in the second part of the film, which deals primarily with surveillance. The tourist embarks on an alternative journey, through the urban spaces of Dublin and Belfast, where she encounters a series of unlikely characters, from kitsch Catholic performers to labour activists and Hare Krishnas. But the montage is also disrupted by a (somewhat unconvincing) staged sequence, in which one of the tourist's Irish friends is interrogated.

This sequence is followed by an interview with Maureen Gibson, a former political prisoner, and it is shot in an entirely different style, straight to camera. As Gibson describes the ritual humiliations enacted by prison authorities, the discourse of the documentary interview is disrupted by the motion of the camera (slowly zooming in and out) and by the insertion of computerised titles, detailing Gibson's history. The inclusion of a highly visible microphone also recalls Dick's earlier 'interview' film *Guérillière Talks*, perhaps calling attention to the problems of representing the political situation in the North, and Gibson's experience as a woman. So, despite an initial focus on tourism and performative ethnicity, *Visibility: Moderate* is ultimately concerned with a much broader critique of representation.

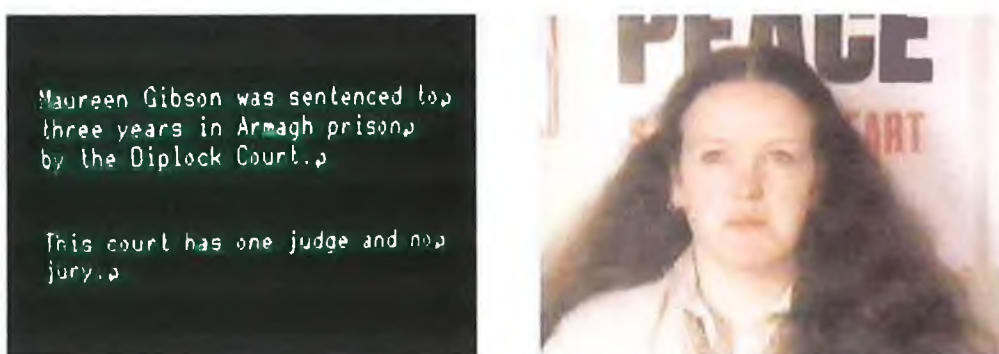


Figure 52: Interview sequence, *Visibility Moderate*. © Vivienne Dick

### Displacement, Autobiography and Performativity in Migrant Cinemas

The performative explorations of exile and identity in *Visibility Moderate* and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* could perhaps be categorised in terms of an extension of 'film autobiography'. P. Adams Sitney has theorised this tradition in avant-garde film, noting that while "the writer has a language fully developed for the substitution of sentences for past events, the film-maker is at a loss to find veracious film images for the foci of his memory."<sup>73</sup> Sitney goes on to argue that "the very quest for a cinematic strategy which relates the moments of shooting and editing to the diachronic continuity of the film-maker's life is the true theme of our avant-garde film autobiographies."<sup>74</sup> He notes that, for a number of filmmakers, still photographs seem to provide the key to this cinematic strategy.

Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1971), which is defined by Sitney as "the *performative* autobiography, par excellence"<sup>75</sup>, highlights the contradictory status of the filmic 'present'. It consists of a series of close-up shots, of photographic stills disintegrating on a hotplate. Each shot is accompanied by a (voiceover) description of the next photograph to be seen, requiring the viewer to perform a number of simultaneous acts of recollection. In Stan Brakhage's *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1968-70), photographs from the family album provide the "external scaffolding of memory" but serve to underscore contradictions between cinematic narrative and memory. By comparison with *Nostalgia* and *Scenes From Childhood*, however, *Visibility Moderate* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted* seem to explore processes of remembering (and forgetting) that have specific *cultural* associations. The notion of performativity also takes a particular significance in relation to works that are explicitly focused on an exploration of national and cultural identity.<sup>76</sup> As such it may be more useful to position the performative autobiographies of Dick and O'Sullivan

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<sup>73</sup> P. Adams Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-garde Film", *Millennium Film Journal* 1, (Winter 1977-78): 60.

<sup>74</sup> Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-garde Film", 61.

<sup>75</sup> Sitney, "Autobiography in Avant-garde Film", 86. [Emphasis added]

<sup>76</sup> For an overview of theories of performativity see Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, "Editor's Introduction" *Film Criticism: Special Issue on Theories of Performativity* (Fall 1998): 1-5. For an analysis of performativity in relation to gender, ethnicity and Irish cinema see Shantanu

in relation to a “cinema of displacement” that is informed by the personal experience of migration and exile, and by issues of diasporic identity.

Working from a postcolonial perspective, Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar have theorised certain spatial features that recur in films about “displacement”. Ghosh and Sarkar exclude the forms of displacement that are associated with the “self-imposed exile of [...] European intellectuals and travellers” and stress that their analysis centres on “the economically challenged peoples of Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and Africa (essentially countries who have undergone colonialism in one form or another)” and on the ‘third world’ populations living within the boundaries of the first world.<sup>77</sup> They suggest that this cinema of displacement is characterised by a set of characteristics, which include the incorporation of certain spatial tropes such as bridges and a high degree of movement. It is also evident in a form of “double-space”, where *mise-en-scène* “evokes an ‘other’ space”, and an example of the latter, they suggest, is provided by the repeated use of “liminal” spaces such as thresholds or balconies.<sup>78</sup>

Several of these characteristics are evident in the work of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O’Sullivan. *Visibility Moderate* clearly addresses the issue of ‘doubled space’ quite directly. In addition to exploring the relationship between Ireland and America, the film moves between the actual and the imagined spaces of home. Dick notes:

Tourist Land is always make-believe land in a certain way. You work most of the year and in America you get two weeks off, only two weeks. [...] You escape into this fantasy land, where everything has to be beautiful and fabulous. If it’s Ireland you see lush green countryside and horses and carts and the Blarney Stone. The tourist in the film is completely vulnerable to leprechaun land. She sees this Broadway stage-Irish scene and she’s

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DuttaAhmed, “‘I Thought You Knew!’: Performing the Penis, the Phallus, and Otherness in Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*” also in *Film Criticism* (Fall 1998): 61-73.

<sup>77</sup> Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar, “The Cinema of Displacement: Towards a Politically Motivated Poetics”, *Film Criticism* (Fall/Winter 1995/96): 103.

<sup>78</sup> Ghosh and Sarkar, 109. My discussion of Pat Murphy’s *Nora* (2000) in Chapter Five highlights the recurrent visual motif of the staircase, another liminal space.

completely taken in by it as if it's the real thing. It's totally unreal; it's all memory and myth.<sup>79</sup>

A sense of imagined space is articulated most forcefully in the dream sequences, in which the Tourist runs through the landscape of the West of Ireland. But throughout the narrative the Tourist is represented as a restless figure, constantly moving and frequently positioned in 'liminal' spaces such as thresholds and balconies. At one point she remains still for long enough to examine a series of postcards but, significantly, this moment of reflection takes place on a *moving train* and it is soon disrupted by a torrent of memories and associations. Like *Visibility Moderate*, *On A Paving Stone Mounted* is constructed through a series of journeys, emotional, metaphoric and physical. These include the pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick and Christy Moore's musical rendition of the story of St Patrick's arrival. Again, the use of liminal spaces is pronounced. As already noted, Rea's character is seated on a theatre balcony in one key scene, while other sequences take place on the communal stairwell of a London house.

Hamid Naficy has also theorised issues of displacement, within the context of his analysis of "accented cinema". He emphasises that accented filmmakers "signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorising, commenting upon, and critiquing *the home and host societies and cultures*" as well as the "deterritorialized conditions" within which production takes place.<sup>80</sup> For Naficy, these deterritorialized identities engender a subjectivity that is "interstitial", rather than postnational. This subjectivity can be manifested through "character types who are split, double, crossed, and hybridised and who perform their identities".<sup>81</sup> Both *Visibility Moderate* and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* clearly incorporate examples of this type of characterisation. Yet, as I have suggested, the roles of "tourist" and "storyteller" performed in these

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<sup>79</sup> Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Vivienne Dick", 97.

<sup>80</sup> Hamid Naficy *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001): 4.

<sup>81</sup> Naficy, 32. This type of characterisation is also pronounced in the work of Joe Comerford. For a different approach to the question of 'border' identities in relation to the Irish context see John Hill, Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth (eds.) *Border Crossing: Film in Ireland*,

films serve as a means through which to explore narrative and generic conventions specific to the national context. While the tourist maps the representation of Ireland in film, television advertising, popular culture and various competing political traditions, the storyteller explores the oral and folk traditions associated with Irish traditional music, theatre, folk custom and Catholicism.

### **Irish Film Culture and the 'Poetic' Avant-garde**

Thaddeus O'Sullivan was actually based in the US from 1979 to 1981 (working primarily as a stills photographer) but he remained very much aware of developments in Ireland during this period. He discussed the funding situation in Ireland at the public interview following the 1979 *Cineprobe* screening of *A Pint of Plain* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. When questioned about the proposed establishment of a Film Board in Ireland, he states:

The situation in Ireland is just about to change [...] I wouldn't like to be there because just to be in a queue like that for that kind of money must be awful, the back-biting is incredible – letters in the paper about how it should be spent, people having to make statements and defend themselves.<sup>82</sup>

Vivienne Dick attended this event and she met Thaddeus O'Sullivan for the first time. Earlier, in 1978, she had made contact with Bob Quinn at a New York screening of *Poitin*.<sup>83</sup> Subsequently, on a brief visit to Dublin in 1979, Dick followed Quinn's recommendation to contact Project Arts Centre. At Project she arranged screenings of contemporary Irish film work (including her own film *She Had Her Gun All Ready*) primarily as a means of meeting other filmmakers.

At this time, as I have already noted, Project was at the centre of a vibrant indigenous film culture, supported by new initiatives in arts policy. But when Dick returned to

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*Britain and Europe*, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies in association with the University of Ulster and the British Film Institute, 1994).

<sup>82</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan, "Public Interview and Questions, An Evening with Thaddeus O'Sullivan".

<sup>83</sup> Vivienne Dick, interviewed by the author, recalls meeting Pat Murphy at a New York screening of *Rituals of Memory* (1977). This film was never shown in New York but it is possible that the two met at a screening of *Maeve*, at the Lincoln Center.

Ireland in 1982 Project Cinema Club was less active and, although the Irish Film Board had been established, facilities for Super-8 and 16mm production remained underdeveloped. Dick continued to exhibit her work at film clubs such as the Ha'penny, and also became involved in running one of Ireland's first film production courses, at the College of Commerce, Rathmines. But she found it difficult to continue her film practice and, in 1984, she relocated to London where, despite an ongoing interest in Irish themes, she remained on the periphery of Irish film culture.

While Vivienne Dick's work has yet to be theorised in relation to the Irish cultural context *On A Paving Stone Mounted* has provided the focus for an exploration of literary and 'visual' traditions within Irish filmmaking. The literary dimension of Irish film culture has prompted discussion among theorists since the early 1980s. For example, in her 1982 analysis of Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (discussed in Chapter One) Claire Johnston identifies an explicit engagement with both the "idea of the literary".<sup>84</sup> Johnston emphasises that, in comparison with its literary counterpart, Irish visual culture remains "weak" and she notes that "modernism has had very little impact on the culture itself, despite the legacy of Joyce".

Johnston suggests that, in films such as *On A Paving Stone Mounted* and *Maeve*, language mobilises the "radical" elements of the national literary culture and offers the "possibility of developing the 'popular' as a radical concept along Brechtian lines". She also considers the historical context for *Maeve*'s radical feminism and mode of address, noting that "within the visual arts, it was largely *women artists* who were influenced by the impact of cubism".<sup>85</sup> In his history of Irish art and modernism, S.B. Kennedy acknowledges the popular association of Irish modernism with women artists such as Evie Hone and Mainie Jellet, both "usually portrayed as valiant souls working amid a sea of apathy and hostility". Kennedy notes a certain tension between nationalism and internationalism within the visual arts during the period from 1880 to 1950, even though he claims that "the overall thrust *in the visual arts, unlike the*

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<sup>84</sup> Claire Johnston, "Maeve", *Screen* 22.4, (Winter 1982): 62.

<sup>85</sup> Johnston, "Maeve", 62 n4. [Emphasis added]



*literary arts*, was [...] inspired by the international Modern Movement".<sup>86</sup> But Kennedy acknowledges that, within the Irish context, Modernism lacked a "revolutionary" character. He notes that no Constructivist art was produced during this period and that "none of the Irish Modernists wrote a manifesto or other declaration of policy", emphasising that Mainie Jellett's writings are the "nearest thing we have to such statements". Kennedy also stresses the fact that Irish modernism (unlike its British counterpart) developed *separately* from the arts and crafts movements, as these were more closely aligned with Literary Revivalism. Kennedy concludes:

[U]nlike their contemporaries elsewhere, Irish artists never saw Modernism as an expression of a socialist utopia; in Ireland the debate surrounding it was smothered by the quest for national identity.<sup>87</sup>

In Kennedy's account, modernism's perceived *internationalism* seems to have positioned it at odds with the revolutionary nationalism of the literary movement. Yet the work of O'Sullivan, and perhaps Pat Murphy, seems to provide a position from which to reconsider the historical relationship between Irish literary and visual culture.

In her discussion of poetry and Irish cinema, Kathleen McCracken identifies "certain self-referential tendencies" in Irish "experimental, 'independent' or 'avant-garde'" film and she argues that these tendencies "bear analogy with the formal and technical conventions of much post-modern and, in some cases, specifically Irish poetry".<sup>88</sup> She finds these "poetic" conventions or strategies in a range of Irish films, including *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoire* (Bob Quinn, 1975), *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981), Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1982) and *Anne Devlin* (1984), Joe Comerford's *Withdrawal* (1974) and *Down the Corner* (1978), John Lawlor's *Sunday* (1988) and *On A Paving*

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<sup>86</sup> S. B. Kennedy, "Introduction", *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies at the Queen's University of Belfast, 1991): 1-3. [Emphasis added]

<sup>87</sup> Kennedy, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Kathleen McCracken, "Aspiring to the condition of Language: Poetry and Irish cinema [Part 1]", *CIRCA* 52, (July/August 1990): 33. See also "Aspiring to the condition of Language 2" *CIRCA* 53 (September/October 1990): 34-37.

*Stone Mounted*. She theorises this 'poetic' current in terms of a critique of an existing 'literary' cinema, exemplified by documentaries such as George Fleischmann's *W. B. Yeats – A Tribute* (1950). She states:

Historically [...] this kind of documentary encouraged the all too frequent impression that poetry enters into film only as images of nature, in visual representations of the *endurance of nature*, or, in an Irish context, *of the nation*.<sup>89</sup>

The new generation of Irish filmmakers, she argues, "have deliberately avoided or sought to subvert this stereotypical iconography" in favour of a "more subtle" engagement with poetry and the Irish literary tradition by transposing "structures and techniques ordinarily thought of as belonging exclusively to poetry".<sup>90</sup> As a result, she argues, their films are "distinguished by a willingness to concede to the visual aspects of the film their rightful and indeed essential supremacy over verbal description and dialogue". This is evident, she suggests, in the grouping and re-grouping of images "in associative and non-associative patterns" in *On A Paving Stone Mounted*.

McCracken's analysis offers a number of parallels with P.A. Sitney's account of the American 'mythopoetic' tradition, discussed in Chapter One. But although she cites various international directors (such as Bertolucci, Bogdanovich, Wenders and Pennebacker) McCracken does not consider 'poetic' currents in international avant-garde practice. Instead, she theorises a highly visual *indigenous* cinema, which has sought to engage with the "extraordinarily graphic nature" of Irish literature.<sup>91</sup> In support of this argument, she cites Luke Gibbons' theorisation of "Word and Image in Irish Culture", which emphasises the "close affinities between Irish writers and the cinema". But Gibbons actually argues that, *despite its graphic character*, Irish writing is defined by a "self consciousness of the language" that serves to "*prevent a relapse*

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<sup>89</sup> McCracken, "Aspiring to the condition of Language: Poetry and Irish cinema [Part 1]", 33. [Emphasis added]. Surprisingly, although she cites a range of 'poetic' works, McCracken does not consider *Yeats County*, a film with various poetic associations.

<sup>90</sup> McCracken, "Aspiring to the condition of Language: Poetry and Irish cinema [Part 1]", 34.

<sup>91</sup> McCracken, "Aspiring to the condition of Language 2", 35.

into vision".<sup>92</sup> This would seem to suggest that a certain difficulty around visibility persists in Irish culture and writing.

Elsewhere, Gibbons has elaborated on the cultural and historical factors structuring the development of Irish art, literature and cinema. He notes that the development of Irish painting and Irish literature is marked by resistance to the realist tradition and to the "mimetic powers of the image".<sup>93</sup> Noting that Irish writers (such as Bram Stoker or Sheridan Le Fanu) achieved prominence in the *Gothic* as opposed to realist genre, Gibbons attributes the prominence of the Irish Gothic not to a "Celtic disposition" or aptitude for fantasy but, instead, to a chronic instability within the body politic associated with colonial rule. He notes, "even if the material conditions of education, patronage and the art market were favourable (which they decidedly were not under colonial rule), there is still a sense in which the available styles and protocols of painting would not have been able to render the extremes of Irish life".<sup>94</sup> He goes on to suggest that Irish art and cinema, in seeking to represent history, may actually recoil from "opticality" in times of stress, leaving only "unresolved narratives buried in language, custom and popular memory".<sup>95</sup>

### **Interrogating Irish Visuality**

Cheryl Temple Herr has also addressed "the persistent belief that the Irish are not a visual people". She argues that, through its exploration of storytelling, *On A Paving Stone Mounted* actually "responds directly to the notion of an Irish nation lacking

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<sup>92</sup> Luke Gibbons, "Word and Image: The Resistance to Vision", *Graph* 2, (1987): 2. [Emphasis added].

<sup>93</sup> Luke Gibbons, "Art and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in Irish Culture", published (in French) as "L'Art et L'Inimaginable" in *L'Imaginaire Irlandais*, (Paris: Hazan 1991): 54-63. My reference is taken from page 4 of the English language manuscript that is held in the *L'Imaginaire Irlandais* file, National Irish Visual Arts Archive, National College of Art and Design.

<sup>94</sup> Gibbons, "Art and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in Irish Culture", 4. For further analysis of Irish Gothic see W.J. McCormack, "Irish Gothic and After, 1820-1945" in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* 2, ed. Seamus Deane (Derry and New York: Field Day Publications, 1991): 831-854.

<sup>95</sup> Gibbons "Art and the Unimaginable: Word and Image in Irish Culture", 17.

visual aptitude”<sup>96</sup>. Drawing upon a postcolonial critique (and on the work of psychoanalyst Vincent Kenny) Temple Herr argues that there is a difficulty around the gaze and spectatorship that is particular to the Irish context<sup>97</sup>. She identifies a “tendency [in Irish culture] towards spectatorship rather than to the exhibition of power” and she attributes this, in part, to a “postcolonial tendency to become the spectator of one’s inner world”. She suggests an analogy between the critique of the “British colonial apparatus” that is articulated in Samuel Beckett’s *Film* and the critique of the gaze, or “visual power relations”, developed by Laura Mulvey. She proposes that *On A Paving Stone Mounted* both extends this critique and anticipates the neo-phenomenological strategies of film theorists such as Vivian Sobchack.

This analysis of “received media discourse” about Irish visuality seems, however, to rely heavily upon a series of interviews with Irish critics and practitioners (such as arts worker Ruairí O’Cuiv, critic Joan Fowler and filmmaker Pat Murphy). In fact Fowler actually rejects the “stereotype of low visibility”, and the attribution of “high verbal skill” to the Irish, as patronizing and ideological. According to Fowler, these stereotypes are perpetuated by the discourses of certain Irish art critics and curators, particularly those associated with the early *Rosc* exhibitions.<sup>98</sup> *Rosc ’67* was the first major exhibition of international contemporary art to take place in Ireland and for this reason it seems to have played a significant role in structuring discourses around Irish art, visuality and identity. Curated by a panel of Irish art critics that included Dorothy Walker, it was widely praised for its innovative design. The exhibition was documented in a film for RTÉ television (scripted, produced and co-directed by Jack Dowling shortly before his widely publicised departure from the station). The film focuses on the role of the curators, although critics and members of the public are also canvassed for their views. But the event also generated criticism because it excluded the work of living Irish artists. Instead, a selection of bronze and stone artefacts from the collections of the National Museum were positioned next to

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<sup>96</sup> Cheryl Temple Herr, “Addressing the Eye in Ireland: Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978)”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.3 (2000): 367.

<sup>97</sup> Temple Herr, 369-70.

international modernist painting and sculpture, suggesting an alignment between the Irish pre-modern and international modernism.<sup>99</sup>



Figure 53: Irish curators and stone carvings in *Rosc '67* (Jack Dowling, 1967). © RTÉ

Tom Duddy has also examined the role of Irish art critics and curators in shaping the popular perception of Irish (non) visuality. He traces this emphasis on place and rootedness through a series of texts, which include Frances Ruane's catalogue essay for *The Delighted Eye: Irish Painting and Sculpture of the Seventies* (which formed part of *A Sense of Ireland: London Festival of the Irish Arts* in 1980), and Brian O'Doherty's catalogue essay for the 1971 exhibition *The Irish Imagination, 1959-71*.<sup>100</sup> O'Doherty, well known for his analysis of the gallery as institution and for his work as an artist under the name 'Patrick Ireland', theorises Irish art in terms of an "atmospheric mode [...] which is largely a response to the Irish landscape and the Irish light".<sup>101</sup> Duddy emphasises that Dorothy Walker's take on Irish art (as articulated in *Rosc '67*) is also explicitly informed by reference to place and landscape. In a 1982 article on "Traditional Structures in Recent Irish Art" Walker notes that Irish painting both "represents frequent weather conditions" and articulates a "paradoxically informal formalism which can be seen as far back as the great

<sup>98</sup> Temple Herr, 369. *Rosc*, meaning 'poetry of vision', first took place in 1967 and was followed at irregular intervals by a series of further *Rosc* exhibitions until 1988.

<sup>99</sup> The strategy of juxtaposing early Irish artefacts with modern (or postmodern) art was taken up in 1994 in the Irish Museum's *From Beyond the Pale* exhibition. See Thomas McEvilley "Here Comes Everybody", *From Beyond the Pale: Art and Artists at the Edge of Consensus* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1994) 7-22 and Hilary Robinson's subsequent critique "Reframing Women" *CIRCA* 72, (1995): 18-23.

<sup>100</sup> Tom Duddy "Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism of the Right?" [1987] *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999): 91.

<sup>101</sup> Brian O'Doherty, "The Irish Imagination, 1971", *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, 270.

carvings at Newgrange”.<sup>102</sup> It would seem, then, that Irish art *criticism* is marked by a stereotypical iconography, which is somewhat similar to that identified by Kathleen McCracken in Irish documentary film.

Duddy contends that the notion of an “elective affinity” between individual artists and certain special qualities immanent in the Irish landscape goes hand in hand with a romantic emphasis on isolation, individualism and physical distance from the urban or metropolitan centre. He argues that this form of localism or nativism is conservative, because of its insistence on a fixed (even “pathological”) mode of expression and because it “fails to acknowledge the crucial roles played by dominant visual ideologies, by centrally-sponsored avant gardes, by the uneven distribution of cultural as well as economic capital, by the uneven dissemination of trend-setting galleries, dealers, critics and art journals”.<sup>103</sup> In place of an emphasis on landscape or weather, he proposes a “materialistic” approach to the analysis of Irish art. He emphasises the restrictions imposed by a limited number of patrons and buyers, which may have forced Irish artists to “mediate creatively between the new pressures from abroad and the guarded receptivity of their patrons at home”. He notes:

In other words, the atmospheric mode, the organic style, and the emergent, residual, or fractured object may be the creative response of an embattled artist caught between a rock and a hard place – between the rock of an avant-gardist international modernism and the hard place of marginalized and underdeveloped local patronage<sup>104</sup>

Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *Flanagan* seems to take a similarly materialist approach to the analysis of art practice, by foregrounding the ‘business’ of art criticism and the role of the dealer or agent. It also calls attention, albeit somewhat comically, to an historical shift within the modernist project, which can be traced to the minimalism of the mid 1960s. Minimalist sculpture, as Hal Foster notes, breaks with the transcendental space of most modernist art, staging an encounter with the viewer in his or her own space. Foster emphasises that “the stake of minimalism is the nature of

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<sup>102</sup> Dorothy Walker, cited by Duddy, 92.

<sup>103</sup> Duddy, 95.

meaning and the status of the object, both of which are held to be public, not private, produced in a physical interface with the actual world, not in a mental space of idealist conception".<sup>105</sup> In this way, minimalism "challenges [the] order of modern aesthetics. It prepares the way for a critical exploration of time, and issues of cultural specificity, in process art, body art, performance and site-specific work."<sup>106</sup>

In *Flanagan*, O'Sullivan seems to reference these minimalist 'transgressions' through the figure of Joseph Beuys but, as the film suggests, Beuys' artistic persona only serves to compound idealist myths of the artist (as storyteller, shaman etc). The work of the Irish artist James Coleman, associated with post-minimalist art, is characterised by a very different engagement with narrative and performance and may provide a more useful perspective on Irish visuality. Coleman's early works, such as *Flash Piece* (1970) and *Slide Piece* (1973) expand upon the Minimalist concern with the interface between subject and object, directing attention towards temporal processes of perception and cognition. Later works, such as *Now and Then* (1981) and *guaiRE* (1985), also incorporate elements of theatrical performance.

Coleman has commented, in an interview with Richard Kearney, upon the relationship between his work and Irish landscape and history. He describes his experience of drawing the landscape, with the aim of offering "an accessible account of my subject to any local passer-by who cared to look". As he looked, "the landscape began to assume a posture – it gradually became a sign of its past and present culture [...] a kind of parody – more a mimesis – of all those forms through which [he] had gained access to its culture: music, poetry and in particular painting".<sup>107</sup> He felt constrained by these forms, which were "mostly created by extraneous interpreters and observers", but in the act of looking itself he had produced a series of apparently abstract marks on the paper. Despite (or perhaps

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<sup>104</sup> Duddy 98-99.

<sup>105</sup> Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism", *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996) 40.

<sup>106</sup> Foster, 42.

<sup>107</sup> James Coleman interviewed by Richard Kearney "Interview with James Coleman", *The Crane Bag* 6. 2 (Autumn 1982): 131.

because) this “drawing” resisted interpretation, Coleman suggests that it “might conceal a secret and hidden perspective, a point in space and cultural time from which [it] could be viewed as a true and faithful representation”. Although predominantly theorised by international critics as a post-structural investigation of subjectivity, Coleman’s work can also be read as post-colonial allegory. Luke Gibbons suggests that *GuaiRE*, set in Dun Guaire castle and featuring elements of video and performance as well as a stage design by Dan Flavin, derives its impact from the resonances between recent and historical events and from the fact that events “take place” within a charged setting.<sup>108</sup> O’Sullivan’s film practice, following *Flanagan*, seems to be informed by a similar engagement with the temporal characteristics of place, as well as an explicit thematic focus on the development of Irish modernism.

Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s documentary *Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories 1871-1957*, (1981) explores the relationship between Irish art and modernism in greater detail. In many respects, *Assembled Memories* is a conventional film biography, which traces the events of Yeats’ life through voiceover commentary, journal excerpts, details of paintings and archive footage. O’Sullivan has noted, however, that in this work he was able to use archive material in the way that he “had always wanted to try – much more subjectively, more emotionally, rather than as something to describe a real event”<sup>109</sup>. In addition to footage of significant events in Irish history (such as the 1916 Rising) *Assembled Memories* incorporates numerous references to popular culture, in the form of circus performers, the races, the nickelodeon, popular magazines and journals. In particular, it highlights Yeats’ work as an illustrator for various publications and, in the west of Ireland, for the Congested Districts Boards.

*Assembled Memories* also complicates familiar representations of Irish rural life. One section, for example, features an animated sequence that is created with a toy theatre.

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<sup>108</sup> Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 129-133. For a different approach to Coleman’s practice see Rosalind Krauss “And Then Turn Away? An Essay on James Coleman”, *October* 81, (1997): 2-33.

<sup>109</sup> McIlroy, 140.



sequence highlights the interplay between cinematic narration and oral storytelling in Jack Yeats' work. In another scene, shots of a contemporary horse market in the west of Ireland are juxtaposed with details from Yeats' paintings. The emphasis on activity and commerce is in marked contrast to the tranquil "atmospheric" mode of representation that seems to dominate both Irish 'literary' cinema and critical discourse around Irish visual art.



Figure 54: *Memory Harbour (Rosse's Point)* by Jack B. Yeats © Jack B. Yeats

#### **Narrative, Genre and the Irish Landscape: the work of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan in the late 1980s**

Thaddeus O'Sullivan's next work, *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985), is a drama featuring lead performances by Brenda Fricker and Bob Hoskins. Set in the Dublin of the late 1930s and filmed in black and white, it focuses on the relationship between a childless couple: a devout Catholic woman (Mary, played by Fricker) and her English husband (George, played by Hoskins). While George clearly longs for a child his wife is more concerned in securing his conversion to Catholicism through prayer. Perhaps in order to attract Mary's attention, George grows a pencil moustache and after a visit to the cinema to see *San Francisco* (1936), Mary begins to notice a

and after a visit to the cinema to see *San Francisco* (1936), Mary begins to notice a resemblance to Clark Gable. The couple return to see the film several times but George remains largely unaware of Mary's delusion, as he is distracted by *San Francisco's* spectacular earthquake scenes.

Clips from *San Francisco* are woven into the narrative at various points, with Gable's distress (in the aftermath of the great earthquake) echoing George's increasing confusion and anxiety. The lighting, production design and camerawork are also highly self-conscious, with particularly suggestive close-ups of reflective objects such as the shaving mirror. As is typical of melodrama, emotion tends to be expressed through image and gesture rather than dialogue. In one scene, set in the Botanic Gardens, the couple are pictured on a walkway high up among the trees of a Victorian Palm houses. Children are playing in the distance but a close-up of the water that is slowly dripping from the palm leaves reinforces the fact that Mary and George are childless and aging. Towards the close of the film, Mary confesses her fantasy to her priest and he actually sanctions her illicit desire, on the grounds that it may help her to perform her marital duties and conceive a child with her husband. Mary is therefore recast as a knowing participant in her delusion. In terms of its use of a period setting and its focus on the desires and experiences of women, *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* can be seen to parallel Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), which was photographed by O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan also worked as director of photography on *Rocinante* (Cinema Action, 1986), which anticipates and contextualises many subsequent explorations of English identity and heritage.<sup>110</sup>

O'Sullivan's subsequent film, *December Bride* (1990) is based upon a novel by Sam Hanna Bell<sup>111</sup> rather than upon historical events or figures but it represents an attempt to revisit history from the perspective of those that are usually marginalized. Set

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<sup>110</sup> *Rocinante* marked Cinema Action's first foray into feature length drama and it develops the critical engagement with subaltern histories, and the politics of place, that is evident in *So That You Can Live* (1982). See Alison Butler "Contextualising *Rocinante*" *Framework* 32/33, (1986): 76-84.

<sup>111</sup> For a detailed analysis of the adaptation and context of production see Lance Pettitt, *December Bride*, 9-47.

relationship between a young female servant (played by Saskia Reeves) and her employers, two brothers (played by Donal McCann and Ciaran Hinds). Again, the domestic setting is paramount and the film foregrounds the manual labour required to maintain the house and farm as well as exploring the sexual tension between Sarah and the two men. The struggle of each character to achieve independence and establish their own place in the world is, typically for a melodrama, bound up with questions of inheritance. By bearing a child by one of her employers but refusing to name the father, Sarah succeeds in controlling both men, and through them, the farm.



Figure 55: Poster for *December Bride* (Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1990)

While *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* is characterised by overt appropriation from Hollywood, *December Bride* suggests an attempt to rework generic convention. Paul Willemen has described the latter film as one of a number of critical works to “share a systematic demarcation from the genres to which they ostensibly belong”.<sup>112</sup> He suggests that (like *Anne Devlin*) *December Bride* exists in tension with a tradition of the female-centred drama. Willemen also situates O’Sullivan within a group of filmmakers that are informed by a position of “outsideness-otherness” in relation to the British context of production.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 202.

<sup>113</sup> Willemen *Looks and Frictions*, 201. [Emphasis added].

*December Bride* seems to take up this notion of outsidership-otherness quite directly, through its focus on a community that has (to a certain extent) evaded representation and through its exploration of the perspective and position of the servant. It succeeds in investing the central drama with a wider significance through its representation of landscape as the intersection of cultural, historical and economic forces, rather than a spectacular or picturesque backdrop. O'Sullivan emphasises that, although they are often confronted by challenges to their way of life, the three central characters are protected from the mainland community because their land can only be accessed through a causeway.<sup>114</sup>

As I have noted, Vivienne Dick's work is also characterised by references to Hollywood. Her practice traces a similar trajectory, from overt appropriation in the 'No Wave' films to a subtler reworking of generic convention in *Like Dawn to Dust* (1983). This film marked Dick's return to Ireland as a filmmaker and it continued the exploration of landscape initiated in *Visibility Moderate*. It introduces a number of oblique references to the Gothic tradition in Irish literature and American popular culture. The opening shots of the film depict a decaying nineteenth century house, bearing the scorch marks of a fire, and these images are accompanied by an off-key piano, recalling stage melodrama or early cinema. The first, and only, character to appear in this landscape is Lydia Lunch, wearing her signature New York 'Goth' make-up and clothes.



Figure 56: Gothic imagery in *Like Dawn to Dust* (Vivienne Dick, 1983) © Vivienne Dick

<sup>114</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan interviewed by Gibbons, "Fragments in Pictures", 11.

It is primarily through Lunch's performance that the film both references and departs from the conventions of the poetic landscape genre. Lunch delivers a monologue, both on screen and in voiceover, to the accompaniment of traditional Irish music and her words call attention to the circularity that is typical of Irish narratives; "the past never dies, it just continually repeats itself." Although this work remains somewhat tentative it does mark a shift towards a different aesthetic.

Following the completion of *Like Dawn to Dust*, Vivienne Dick relocated to London where she secured funding from the British Arts Council for her next film, *Rothach* (1985). Filmed on 16mm, *Rothach* is explicitly concerned with the representation of the Irish rural landscape and it takes up the theme of surveillance introduced in *Visibility Moderate*. Instead of a collage of home movie fragments, however, it is composed of a series of controlled pans across the countryside of Clare and West Cork. At first, the picturesque landscape seems somewhat desolate but evidence of activity and cultivation soon becomes apparent. Various figures appear – a child playing the fiddle, a man cutting turf on the bog. Many of the images are strikingly picturesque and reminiscent of John Hinde's iconic postcards, while others are mundane. The relentless movement of the camera begins to suggest a process of mapping and gradually the soundtrack, which changes from a melody into a series of shifting electronic pulses, undercuts the pastoral scene. One of the figures, a child playing a violin, also acquires an uncanny quality when he reappears at different points within the landscape.



Figure 57: Landscape imagery in *Rothach* (Vivienne Dick, 1985) © Vivienne Dick

The cinematography, sound, setting and title of *Rothach* is highly reminiscent of Michael Snow's *La Region Centrale* (1971), a monumental work filmed in the barren landscape of northern Canada and defined by P.A. Sitney as a "metaphor for consciousness".<sup>115</sup> *La Region Centrale* uses a unique camera apparatus (devised by Snow) to record a series of movements around a central point along various axes. The film spans sunset and daybreak but is devoid of any sign of human presence, other than the shadow of the camera apparatus on the ground. Bill Simon emphasises that, because of the way in which it describes the relationship between the land mass and the orbit of the planet, *La Region Centrale* actually destroys "the spectator's ability to imagine himself or herself standing on the land".<sup>116</sup> This "macro-cosmic" view of landscape has been described by Stephen Heath as "an impossibly uncentred narrative in which the apparatus (the camera), sole 'character' in the film, serves to disjoin the subject-eye, to open gaps between sight and seen, overturning the technological 'yield' of cinema".<sup>117</sup>

For Michael O'Pray, however, *La Region Centrale* is both an "ontological" exploration of the "very existence of things" and an examination of the way in which "events construct and are in turn constructed by place".<sup>118</sup> An interrogation of the relationship between event and place is also evident in *Rothach* but Dick seems to posit a mode of spectatorship at odds with that invoked by Snow's film. The final sequence of her film features a recitation of Sean O'Riordáin's Irish language poem "An Roithleán"<sup>119</sup> a text that describes the dream-like state between sleep and waking but remains inaccessible to some audiences. The inclusion of Irish language poetry might seem to position *Rothach* within the literary tradition critiqued by Kathleen

<sup>115</sup> P. A. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, 423.

<sup>116</sup> Bill Simon "A Completely Open Space: Michael Snow's *La Region Centrale*", *Millennium Film Journal* 4-5 (Summer/Fall 1979): 100.

<sup>117</sup> Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space" *Screen* 17.3, (Autumn 1976): 103. Snow is not the only filmmaker to experiment with tripod attachments. More recently, the London-based Irish artist Michelle Deignan has also employed similar devices in installation based video works.

<sup>118</sup> Michael O'Pray, "Framing Snow", *Afterimage* 11, (Winter 1982/83): 64. Another possible point of reference for *Rothach* is Maya Deren's *At Land*, in which the protagonist (played by Deren) reappears at different points in the landscape, apparently within the same shot.

<sup>119</sup> "An Roithleán" (meaning the cycle or twist), is included in Sean O'Riordáin's collection *Eireaball Spideoige* (1952; Baile Atha Cliath: Sáirsceál, O'Marcaigh, 1986): 53.

McCracken. Yet it could also represent an attempt to engage with 'generic setting', as theorised by Willemen in relation to *Maeve* and *So That You Can Live*. Willemen foregrounds the mobilization of landscape "as a layered set of discourses, as a text in its own right", an approach that contrasts with conventional representations of landscape. He writes:

In conventional narrative [...] a tourist's point of view is adopted as opposed to the point of view of those whose history is traced in [the landscape], or for whom the land is a crucial element in the relations of production that govern their lives. The tourist sees in the landscape only mirrors or projections of his/her own phantasms.<sup>120</sup>

These 'phantasms' seem to populate the landscapes of both *Rothach* and (in a more literal sense) *Like Dawn to Dust*.

Willemen also notes that this mobilization of location as text may be paralleled by a splitting of narrative between story and 'generic setting', which is understood as "the inscription into the narration of a history of discursive practices".<sup>121</sup> Vivienne Dick's recourse to the Irish language, and the poetic mode, in *Rothach* can be read as an attempt to engage with generic setting, because it foregrounds the historical relationship between community, language and landscape. In this context, it suggests a continuation of the project initiated in *Visibility Moderate*: the search for a filmic vocabulary adequate to the representation of Irish experience.

### **Conclusion: Diverse Trajectories**

Although based in London, Vivienne Dick continued to explore Irish themes and subjects throughout the 1980s, in films such as *Images Ireland*, a collage of home movie images accompanied by a distorted electronic pulse. This film hints at a relationship between political violence and Irish familial structures, as domesticity gives way to political protest. It was included in *A Sense of Ireland: London Festival of the Irish Arts* (1988) an event that seems to mark the first instance of institutional

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<sup>120</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 156.

<sup>121</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 157.

support for Dick's work, from an *Irish* agency. In subsequent 16mm films, such as *London Suite* and *New York Conversations*, both made while she was based in London, Dick reflected upon her networks as an artist and exile, and on her own practice. The emphasis on performance in these films, and on the experiences of other women, also seems to mark a return to the concerns explored in *Guérillière Talks*.

In 1994 Vivienne Dick returned to her family home in Donegal to make *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy*, the title of which refers to a childhood dream. The film explores her relationship to her siblings and parents and also reflects upon her own concerns and development as a filmmaker. It is Dick's most overtly autobiographical work and includes a sequence, filmed on Super-8, in which she records her dying sister and recalls the earlier loss of her mother. The film incorporates elements of onscreen (handwritten) text and is characterised by a homemade quality that is perhaps integral to both video and Super-8.



Figure 58: Images of childhood and family in *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (Vivienne Dick, 1994) © Vivienne Dick

In parallel with a number of other filmmakers, Dick has slowly gravitated towards a gallery-based installation practice in recent years. Her most

recent work, *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2002), is a three screen video piece, with sync sound presented on six speakers. *Excluded by the Nature of Things* incorporates a number of motifs familiar from earlier work, such as scenes of tourism and 'Gothic' imagery but it also recalls a wider history of Irish avant-garde practice, through references to the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage and Celtic mythology. *Excluded* also extends Dick's exploration of gender through the use of three screens, setting up



a 'third space' to be negotiated by male and female performers within the narrative, and it is informed by the work of Luce Irigaray.<sup>122</sup> In recent years, Dick's early Super-8 work has also re-entered the gallery space, through screenings in the Whitney (1996) and London's Whitechapel Gallery (2002), organised in tandem with exhibitions of Nan Goldin's photography.

Goldin documented the New York No Wave scene in the late 1970s and her photographs are populated by many of the same 'Stars' as Dick's films. As such, it could be argued that this mode of exhibition serves to contextualise the work of both practitioners, by calling attention to their shared association with the No Wave movement. At the same time, an emphasis on the characters and style of No Wave culture shifts attention away from the politics of cultural production and exchange that were particular to New York in the 1970s. If, as I have argued, Irish avant-garde practice derives its resonance from an engagement with international avant-gardes *and* the institutional discourse of 'national cinema', certain forms of exhibition may work against this wider critical resonance. Equally, however, it could be argued that a project such as Dick's *Excluded by the Nature of Things* has the potential to bring Irish cinema into the domain of the gallery in a productive way.



Figure 59: Production still for *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1995)

In recent years, Thaddeus O'Sullivan has emerged as perhaps the most prolific of the five filmmakers discussed in the study but his characteristic engagement with issues

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<sup>122</sup> Vivienne Dick cites Irigaray's work as central to the avant-garde project, defining it as a "reinterpretation of everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic", in "Experimental Cinema", *Film West* 41 (Autumn 2000): 39.

of representation has become less evident since the early 90s.<sup>123</sup> He has completed three features since *December Bride* but few have generated a similar degree of critical acclaim. *Nothing Personal* (1995, originally titled *Fanatic Heart*) is set in Belfast during the IRA ceasefire of 1975 and moves between a group of Loyalist paramilitaries and their Catholic and Protestant victims. O'Sullivan rejects any suggestion that it "uses Northern Ireland as a backdrop"<sup>124</sup> and in fact cites Pontecorvo's revolutionary classic *Battle of Algiers* (1965) as a point of reference, but *Nothing Personal* is not marked by the critical reflexivity that defined his earlier work.

O'Sullivan's transition towards an apparently more conventional form of narrative filmmaking seems even more pronounced in *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (2000). Although scripted by Irish filmmaker and screenwriter Gerry Stembridge, *Ordinary Decent Criminal* features an unconvincing lead performance by Kevin Spacey in the role of 'The General' Martin Cahill and seems oriented towards an international, rather than Irish, audience. O'Sullivan has not worked from his own scripts since the 1970s and it may be that, in terms of funding, his work has suffered from an Irish institutional (and cultural) emphasis on the filmmaker as writer-director.<sup>125</sup> But O'Sullivan's most recent work, an adaptation scripted by Lucinda Coxon and entitled *The Heart of Me* (2003), suggests the possibility of a return to form, particularly in its thematic emphasis on memory and desire and its careful reworking of the conventions of period drama.

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<sup>123</sup> For a particularly scathing (albeit fleeting) critique of O'Sullivan's recent work see Gerry McCarthy, "Light Heavyweights", *Sunday Times*, culture supplement, August 10, 2003: 16-17.

<sup>124</sup> Thaddeus O'Sullivan interviewed by Nicky Fennell in "Fanatic Heart", *Film West* (July 1995): 18. See Shane Barry's review, "Fanatic Heart", *Film Ireland* 48 (August-September 1995): 30. For a different perspective see Richard Kirkland, *Identity Parades: Northern Irish Culture and Dissident Subjects*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000) 51-58. Channel Four funded *Nothing Personal*, but it was not widely distributed. For further details of the problems surrounding the film see Thaddeus O'Sullivan, interviewed in "A Life Less Ordinary", 21-22.

<sup>125</sup> It is worth noting that O'Sullivan actually received relatively little support a director from either Film Board, until Bord Scannán na hÉireann funded *Nothing Personal* in 1995.

The work of both Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan has been shaped by the experience of migration and by the interaction between Irish and international film cultures during the late 1970s and early 80s. Through their very different negotiations of Hollywood myth and iconography, and through an engagement with performativity, autobiography and landscape, both have contributed to a critique of the institutional modernism associated with the co-operative movements of New York and London. This critique could be defined as 'postmodernist', in that it is informed by a renewed emphasis on narrative and the specifics of place, but ultimately their work calls definitions and genealogies of modernism and postmodernism into question. Their divergent career trajectories also seem to map the possibilities open to Irish filmmakers in an era marked by profound shifts within Irish and international contexts of production.

## Chapter Five

### Feminism, History and Narrative:

#### Theorising the Spectator in the films of Pat Murphy (1981 – 2000)

I grew up looking at American and European films, which I loved, but I never or rarely ever saw Ireland represented on screen in a way I could relate to or recognise. In fact I didn't know there was an Irish cinema until I was working on *Maeve*, and saw films by people like Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn.

Pat Murphy, interviewed by Niamh Thornton (2002).<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

Pat Murphy's work has generated extensive critical debate, with specific attention focusing on her engagement with nationalism and feminism and her refiguring of narrative form through the representation of place.<sup>2</sup> These debates extend beyond the boundaries of Irish cinema studies, across international avant-garde practice. Paul Willemen situates Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), for example, within the context of an historical revision of modernist aesthetics, a revision informed by questions of reception.<sup>3</sup> In their analysis of film theory, Lapsley and Westlake also position Murphy's work at a critical juncture in the development of avant-garde practice.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Richard Kearney categorises *Maeve* (1981) in terms of a critical departure from "the uniform narratives of classical realism which encourage the viewer to

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<sup>1</sup> Niamh Thornton, "Interview with Pat Murphy", *Film and Film Culture* 1 (2002): 8.

<sup>2</sup> For analyses of the representation of place in Pat Murphy's work see Claire Johnston, "Maeve", *Screen* 22.4 (1982): 54-71 [Incorporating an interview with Murphy]. See also Luke Gibbons, "The Politics of Silence: *Anne Devlin*, Women and Irish Cinema" *Framework* 30/31, (1986): 2-15 and "Lies that Tell the Truth: *Maeve*, History and Irish Cinema", *The Crane Bag* 7.2 (1983): 149-155. Both rpt. in *Transformations in Irish Culture*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996). See also Paul Willemen, "An Avant-garde for the 90s", *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1994): 141.

<sup>3</sup> This return to narrative extends beyond feminist practice, to encompass the work of collectives such as Cinema Action. See Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question", *Looks and Frictions*, 196-203 and also Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, (London: Macmillan, 1984): 106-7.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988): 206

identify with heroic characters in an unbroken linear plot” and from the “avant-garde work whose codes are understood only by a film elite”.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I want focus on the issues of reception raised by Murphy’s work and on her renegotiation of narrative form. I argue that her work explicitly addresses a number of different constituencies and, in the process, it articulates and interrogates a changing relationship between the avant-garde, feminism and national cinema. My analysis highlights a recurrent thematic emphasis on critical spectatorship in *Maeve*, *Anne Devlin* and *Nora* (2000) and in Murphy’s work across performance, theatre and the visual arts. In the course of my discussion I draw upon published interviews with Murphy, documents relating to the distribution of *Maeve*, contemporary reviews, feminist critiques of spectatorship and theorisations of ‘literary film’. My approach is informed by reference to contemporary developments in Irish feminist film and art practice and by the work of international feminist practitioners such as Lizzie Borden, Yvonne Rainer and Sally Potter.

### **Journeys To and From Belfast: Pat Murphy’s Education as Filmmaker**

A critique of identity, with respect to nation, community and gender runs throughout Pat Murphy’s work and it appears to have been shaped by her own early experience. In the late 1960s she moved with her family from Dublin to Belfast and, after the outbreak of the ‘Troubles’, they relocated to a predominantly Catholic area. Subsequent migrations to London and New York also brought other significant structuring experiences. In the 70s, Murphy left Belfast to study at Hornsey College of Art (now part of Middlesex University) in London and began to work with photographs drawn from her family album. These formed the basis of a slide installation and, later, a film entitled *Rituals of Memory* (1977). She has described this as “an autobiographical work about the tension between private and public memory”, which was influenced by Joyce.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988): 190.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, “Interview with Pat Murphy”, 7. The art works for *Rituals of Memory* were made while Murphy was at Hornsey and the film was made at the RCA. Attempts to locate a copy



Figure 60: *The Street* (1975), performance by Theatre of Mistakes © Theatre of Mistakes/Anthony Howell



Figure 61: Poster for *The Parade of Innocence* (Dublin, 1989)

While at college Murphy also became involved with the *Theatre of Mistakes*, a performance group founded in 1974 by Anthony Howell and Fiona Templeton. Murphy was one of the core members and she helped to devise events such as *The Street* (1975) a public work in Kentish Town, London, which involved 60 performers.<sup>7</sup> This early experience seems to have informed a later involvement in political street theatre, most notably as the director of the *Parade of Innocence* (1989) and the *River Parade*

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of the film proved unsuccessful, and it would appear that a complete print no longer exists. The parallels with Kieran Hickey's *Faithful Departed* (1967), an evocation of Joyce's Dublin (as it would have appeared on 16 June 1904) are intriguing. Hickey's film is also composed entirely of photographs, drawn from the National Library's Lawrence Collection.

<sup>7</sup> The group published a manifesto and teaching manual derived from the work of members. It features a brief but suggestive analysis of the relationship between "high art" and "low art", which theorises a common root for performance, painting and theatre in aspects of religious practice. See Anthony Howell and Fiona Templeton, *Elements of Performance Art*, (London: Ting Books, 1977) 18. Details of *Theatre of Mistakes* productions (which toured to the UK, Canada and the US) can also be found on Howell's website at <http://www.anthonhowell.org/perf1.htm>

(1990). These events were devised to celebrate the release of the Guildford Four and to raise the profile of the Birmingham Six case.<sup>8</sup>

Murphy's rejection of traditional media in favour of time-based and performance work was informed by contemporary developments in international film and art practice. By the late 1960s, a range of New York-based artists and performers emerging out of Pop and Minimalism, such as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Mel Bochner, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Yvonne Rainer had begun to explore time-based media. North American painters such as Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland had begun to work with slides and film, within the context of a transition towards sculpture and installation practice.<sup>9</sup> Along with Snow, the dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer was among the first of these practitioners to move into feature length film production with *Lives of Performers* (1972), an exploration of "the complex relationships developing among performers during a period of rehearsal".<sup>10</sup>

In 1977, Murphy moved to New York to attend the Whitney Independent Study Program, which was prominently associated with both Rainer and film theorist Annette Michelson. As I have already noted with respect to the work of Vivienne Dick, New York was at the centre of the No Wave movement in music and film. No Wave film culture was dominated by strong female artists and performers and, given her background in performance art, Murphy might have gravitated towards the

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<sup>8</sup> See Pat Murphy, "Interview with Pat Murphy", 7. See also Carol Coulter, "10,000 Celebrate in 'Parade of Innocence'", *The Irish Times*, Monday December 11, 1989: 2.

<sup>9</sup> These developments, and in particular the use of slide and film, are documented in the Whitney exhibition *Flashing into the Shadows: The Artist's Film in America 1966-76* (December 2000 - March 2001) curated by Chrissie Illes and Eric de Bruyn. For a feminist critique of New York avant-garde film and art during this period, focusing on the work of Joyce Wieland, see Lauren Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 187-194.

<sup>10</sup> This complexity is articulated through, among other devices, the staging of a series of tableaux drawn from Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1928). See Annette Michelson, "Yvonne Rainer: Lives of Performers", *New Forms in Film* August 3-24, (Montreaux: Lausanne Museum of Modern Art and Corbax, 1974): 95. Yvonne Rainer (like Maya Deren and subsequently Sally Potter) had moved from dance and performance into film, and this trajectory seems to be of particular significance with respect to Murphy's work.

movement. But No Wave filmmakers tended to work with poets and performers, rather than with professional actors and Murphy became interested in a different model of practice. She states:

While [at the RCA] I still saw myself very much as an artist who made films: I worked with a performance art group and never saw myself working with crews or actors. [At the Whitney] I met a group of women filmmakers, including Lizzie Borden, and began to realise that I *did* want to work with actors in a particular kind of politicised film-making. I stayed there about two years, and then decided that although New York gave me an identity as a film-maker, the film scene there was so bound up with the music and art scenes, and with a particular kind of style, that I couldn't make the kind of films in which I was most interested. So I decided to go back for my last year at the RCA where I had a budget to make a film.<sup>11</sup>

By the time she returned to the Film School at the Royal College of Art in 1979, Murphy had already written a script for *Maeve* but the subsequent development of the project was shaped by a very specific experience as spectator. Murphy attended a course on oppositional cinema, run by David Glynn at the RCA, which included a series of films dealing with the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. She notes that even the ostensibly "sympathetic oppositional films" included in the course seemed to take an "anthropological" or ethnographic approach to the subject, with "outside people going to Belfast or Derry to do field work".<sup>12</sup> Two fellow students on Murphy's course, John Davies and Robert Smith, shared her critique of these 'ethnographic' representations.<sup>13</sup> They had already begun to explore the representation of place in *City Farm* (1979), a film that now seems to have fallen into obscurity. When Murphy

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<sup>11</sup> Pat Murphy interviewed by Julian Petley in "State of the Union", *BFI Film Monthly* 53. 624 January 1983: 32. See also Pat Murphy, interviewed by Trisha Fox, "Culture and the Struggle", *IRIS* (June 1984): 29. Murphy would subsequently feature as a central performer in New York filmmaker Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, discussed below.

<sup>12</sup> Pat Murphy, "Culture and the Struggle", 29. John Davies' subsequent film *Acceptable Levels* (1983), made in collaboration with the Belfast Film Workshop, focuses specifically on the contradictions inherent in the production of a 'sympathetic' representation. *Maeve* is, perhaps, less concerned than *Acceptable Levels* with the workings of the media than with broader issues of representation.

<sup>13</sup> For a critique of the "anthropological eye" see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). As noted in Chapter Three, Bob Quinn's work has also been theorised in terms of an anti-ethnographic practice. Conor McCarthy compares *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* and *Maeve*, with a particular



secured funding from the Production Board of the British Film Institute, they joined *Maeve* as co-director/production manager (Davies) and as director of photography/production manager (Smith). Murphy emphasises, however, that while Smith and Davies used improvisation and a non-professional cast in *City Farm*, *Maeve* was “incredibly well worked out and storyboarded”.<sup>14</sup>

### **Inside/Outside: The Artist and the Spectator in *Maeve***

*Maeve* is a thinly veiled autobiographical drama that follows its central character (played by Mary Jackson) on a return visit from London to her family in Belfast. It explores her relationships with her parents, younger sister Roisín (Brid Brennan) and ex-boyfriend Liam, a Republican (John Keegan). Maeve’s conflicted relationship to home and family, as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, is dramatised through the interplay between melodramatic and documentary modes. In terms of plot and characterisation, the parallels between Maeve’s story and Murphy’s biography are fairly pronounced, in that Maeve has also left Belfast for London to pursue her study of painting and photography. Her attempts to negotiate new relationships with her family and community also echo Murphy’s own trajectory towards collective modes of practice, such as performance and film. Maeve’s central dilemma is a staple of melodramatic narrative in that it concerns the struggle to be both ‘oneself’ and ‘at home’ and it is partly through the appropriation of melodramatic form that it addresses broader questions of national and cultural identity.

In his analysis of *Maeve*, Richard Kearney highlights the interplay between foundational myths of the nation, articulated by the state and its opponents, and the myth of Hollywood stereotype. Drawing upon Luke Gibbons’ analysis of the film, he foregrounds its feminist critique and emphasises that “we are never allowed to forget that the inherited versions of history – as narrated by Maeve’s father and boyfriend for example – are governed by a male vision of things”.<sup>15</sup> Maeve ultimately rejects

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emphasis on the politics of ‘revivalism’ and ‘antiquarianism’ in *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969-1992*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000): 165-196.

<sup>14</sup>Pat Murphy interviewed by the author, 12 August 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Kearney, 186.

the passivity represented by her father and the circumscribed role for women within the Republican movement, choosing instead to align herself with the feminist project, and specifically with the local strategies that Roisín and her mother have developed.

In terms of its thematic focus on memory and exile, and its disjunctive narrative form, *Maeve* can be compared with Vivienne Dick's *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981) and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978). All three films incorporate references to tourism and heritage culture, myth and spirituality. One of the opening scenes in Murphy's film is an encounter between Maeve and a fellow airline passenger, a touring academic who is writing about Irish megalithic sites for the "Journal of Lost Knowledge". This meeting prompts a flashback recalling Maeve's first visit to her boyfriend's flat, located above the meeting rooms of a Celtic spiritual society. As Conor McCarthy points out, this scene posits a connection between spiritual, cultural and political revivalism, which is developed as the narrative unfolds.<sup>16</sup> Yet in contrast to *Visibility Moderate* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted*, Murphy's film is structured by a feminist critique of Hollywood melodrama.<sup>17</sup>

*Maeve* announces itself as melodrama primarily through devices such as flashback and voiceover and Maeve's return journey to Belfast is punctuated by a total of twelve flashbacks. These are structured around specific events such as conversations with her Republican ex-boyfriend, her family's traumatic move into a Catholic area, a childhood visit to the countryside with her father, stories told in the local pub, harassment by British soldiers, lessons in school and the aftermath of a violent protest. Luke Gibbons notes that these flashbacks are "inserted into the narrative without the usual demarcating devices of blurred focus or dissolves - as if to say, in Maeve's own words, that 'the more you focus on the past, the more reality it

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<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of 'revivalism' in McCarthy, 191-192.

<sup>17</sup> *Maeve* also explicitly engages with the tradition of the melodramatic *television* play, which, as Murphy notes, tends to feature "stoic people and people falling in love across the barricades". See Pat Murphy, Interview with Joanne Hayden, "My Life with Nora", *Sunday Business Post* (Agenda section) April 9, 2000: 36.

gains”<sup>18</sup>. A dissolve *is* actually used in one of the first transitions but many of the subsequent temporal shifts are not clearly identified, signalled only by subtle changes in costume and hairstyle or by the appearance of a younger actress in the role of Maeve.<sup>19</sup> These flashbacks occupy a deliberately ambiguous place in relation to the diegesis, serving to “interrupt but also irrigate what could be (mis)taken for a realist drama”<sup>20</sup> and providing what Lance Pettitt terms “an interrogative rather than an identificatory position for the viewer”.<sup>21</sup> This mobilisation of different modes of address might seem to differentiate Maeve from *Anne Devlin* and *Nora* but, as I will argue in the latter part of this chapter, *all* of Murphy’s films are characterised by a sense of conflict, in terms of theme and mode of address.

### ***Maeve and the Melodramatic Mode of Address***

Maeve’s physical and metaphorical journey is framed (and perhaps prompted) by a letter from her father, Martin. In the opening sequence Martin is seated in the front room, watching a war film on television, but he is ordered to move to the back of the house by British soldiers because of a bomb alert. Alone in the patently unfamiliar space of the kitchen, Martin begins a letter with the words (enunciated in voiceover): “My Dear Maeve, I’m taking this opportunity to write to you...”. In the next shot, a young woman picks her way through the crowd at a party in an urban loft or studio space and is introduced in conversation as ‘Maeve Sweeney’. This use of voiceover is, of course, heavily loaded, and from the outset an opposition between Martin’s voice and Maeve’s mobile presence is suggested.

Luke Gibbons suggests that the letter written by Martin in the gendered space of the kitchen is an attempt to usurp or pre-empt “alternative female versions of reality”.<sup>22</sup> Developing this theme, he emphasises that in subsequent scenes, Martin is forced to

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<sup>18</sup> Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 119-120.

<sup>19</sup> When *Maeve* was broadcast as part of Channel Four’s *Silent Voices* season in 1983 the presenter referred to images of Maeve as child, teenager and young woman to signal the use of flashback.

<sup>20</sup> Willemsen, *Looks and Frictions*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 105.

<sup>22</sup> Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 120.

address the camera directly, calling attention to the fact that his is just one discourse among many. This is particularly evident in a sequence towards the end of the film, set within the circular walls of a ring-fort. In this scene, Gibbons suggests that Martin's attempts to narrate history are undercut by Maeve's continuous movement around the periphery and her eventual abandonment of the ring fort (along with all that it represents). A critique of the centre, from the periphery, is also signalled at an earlier stage in a tableau, during which the camera slowly circles the kitchen table and comes to rest on Martin. He is in full flight as narrator, while his wife and daughter sit quietly on either side, facing each other.



Figure 62: A family tableau, with Martin at the centre, in *Maeve* (© Pat Murphy, 1981)

This destabilising circular motion also recurs in the Cave Hill sequence, as the off-screen voice of the adult Maeve describes the landscape depicted in a 360-degree pan. By comparison with Martin's discourse, her narration is open-ended. According to Gibbons:

[Maeve's narration] intones a series of word associations that address themselves directly to this underlying matrix of landscape, narrative and memory: 'a centre, a landmark...a space for things to happen, a technique, a way in, a way out, a celebration, a guide, a release, a lie, a truth, a lie that tells the truth, a projection, a memory'.

By the closing sequence of the film, Gibbons notes, the male voice has been relegated to the margins. On a visit to the Giant's Causeway with her mother and Roisín, Maeve is approached by a stranger, who begins to preach fire and brimstone. But she

turns away and he is left without an audience. Meanwhile, at home, Martin continues to recount obsessively the story of his arrest and detention at Castlereagh, addressing the camera in the absence of any other audience.

The framing of Maeve's narrative through reference to a letter seems to recall both the classic melodrama *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948) and Chantal Akerman's avant-garde work *News From Home* (1977), discussed in Chapter Four. In an analysis of Ophuls' film, Tania Modleski suggests that while Hollywood narratives tend to give the impression of a "progressive" narrative development, melodrama often suggests a "ceaseless returning to a prior state" and an "excess" of repetition.<sup>23</sup> She notes:

Melodrama [...] seems to be concerned with what Julia Kristeva calls the 'anterior temporal modalities', these modalities being stereotypically linked with female subjectivity in general (with the 'cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature')<sup>24</sup>

This conception of time is, according to Modleski, "indissociable from space" and opposed to the dominant Western model of linear, progressive time. As such, it seems to offer striking parallels with the cyclical camera motion employed at various points in *Maeve*.

At first glance, Kristeva's model might seem to suggest a problematic essentialisation of femininity, at odds with Murphy's project and with feminist discourse. But Modleski emphasises that, in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, Lisa's fascination with repetition is *conscious* because it "demonstrates an allegiance to the imagination which she considers superior to lived experience".<sup>25</sup> Modleski suggests that it is

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<sup>23</sup> Tania Modleski, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film", *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (London: BFI, 1987): 330. For various discussions of melodramatic excess see Thomas Elsaesser, Laura Mulvey and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*.

<sup>24</sup> Modleski, 330. Elsewhere, Homi Bhabha opposes Kristeva's model (and the postcolonial critiques of Fanon among others) to dominant modes of national narration in "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in *Nation and Narration* ed. Homi Bhabha, (London: Routledge, 1990): 303-305

<sup>25</sup> Modleski, 334.

*Stefan*, the male object of Lisa's unrequited love, who actually suffers from excessive (hysterical) reminiscence and is doomed to continually repeat his experiences with women because he does not recognise the object of his desire. Modleski emphasises that, for women such as Lisa, "repetition and memory are manifestations of another relationship to time and space, desire and memory" and she concludes that it is this very "difference" that *Letter From an Unknown Woman* articulates.<sup>26</sup>

Murphy's film seems to go beyond the mere articulation of difference, however, by suggesting that Martin and Liam are positioned as hysterical *in relation to the political formation*. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that Martin has retreated from the Republican machismo of the pub to the domestic sphere and many of Maeve's encounters with Liam also seem to highlight a crisis around gendered public and private space. Each encounter takes place in a different location (the bedsit above the spiritualist society, the pub, Cave Hill, Maeve's borrowed London apartment, the cemetery) but the couple fail to find a space for their relationship as equals, partly because Liam suspects that Maeve's departure is linked to his impotence in the face of harassment from the British Army. By the close of the film Martin and Liam have both resorted to repetition – Martin is lost in reminiscence and Liam is following in his father's footsteps. In contrast, the three women at least openly acknowledge and embrace their 'hysterical' attachment to place.



Figure 63: Liam and Maeve on Cave Hill in *Maeve* © Pat Murphy

As both Gibbons and Paul Willemen have noted, *Maeve's* peripheral critiques derive their force from the use of culturally loaded locations such as the ring-fort and Cave

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<sup>26</sup> Modleski, 336.

Hill, historically associated with the United Irishmen.<sup>27</sup> Almost every location in the film is codified or regulated by historical associations or by the presence of sectarian gangs or security forces. The movements of Maeve and her family are continually restricted and both she, Roisín and Martin are repeatedly harassed in the course of their journeys to and from work, home or school. Even the towns that Maeve travels to with her father provide no escape. In one scene, set in a village outside Belfast, the young Maeve is questioned by a local about the “Free State” licence plates on her father’s van, while the reflection of a Union Jack flutters ominously in the corner of the windscreen.

The interiors of each domestic space, from Maeve’s London apartment to her family home and Liam’s bedsit, are also loaded with significance. While the London apartment is decorated with posters of *The New Yorker* and boasts an impressive panoramic view of the city, Liam’s flat is a cold decaying Georgian tenement “filled with other people’s smells”. Maeve’s mother is the only person to *openly* stake a claim on a domestic space, through her collection of kitsch ornaments and religious icons. But even she will not use the ‘good room’ other than to dust, because she has reserved it as a “courting” space for her daughters.



Figure 64: Ornaments and souvenirs, gathered and displayed by Maeve’s mother © Pat Murphy

Other social spaces such as the pub, Maeve’s school and even the taxi are also regulated, by sectarian divisions. One possible exception is the hospital, where Maeve recuperates after a protest march and hides from the visiting nuns. There she is

<sup>27</sup> Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 121. Willemsen, *Looks and Frictions*, 141.

comforted by an elderly woman, also a patient, who sings the Anglican hymn 'Abide With Me' in a gesture that both underscores her difference from Maeve and suggests the possibility of reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> As Murphy herself notes, this scene articulates the way in which "Catholic and Protestant women retain a kind of fantasy about the way the other lives [...]. There is an oddness, a kind of exoticism about the meeting between Maeve and the old woman".<sup>29</sup>

Through the various encounters with Liam, Roisín and her father, Maeve evaluates and explores various possible analyses of her situation. She consistently takes up the position of critic in relation to her surroundings and the discourses of others. This is evident in both her narration on Cave Hill and in her commentary on Liam's romantic fantasy, when they share a bottle of wine by firelight. By suggesting that his fantasy is moulded by his surroundings, she critiques the construction of the cinematic image itself, in terms of its lighting and composition and the arrangement of their bodies begins to seem highly constructed. Later, Maeve's detachment (exemplified by the fact that she is reading a book) also undercuts another intimate scene with Roisín, in which both sisters are naked<sup>30</sup>.

It would be a mistake, however, to read Maeve *solely* as a privileged commentator or spectator within the text. In fact, the scene that takes place in her borrowed apartment exposes her own problematic investment, as woman and modern subject, in the metropolitan centre. While she celebrates the possibilities offered by London, as "centre of energy", Liam emphasises that this energy is drawn from the periphery.

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<sup>28</sup> "Abide With Me" (written by Henry Francis Lyte) is associated with the Anglican tradition but has acquired a much wider cultural significance. It is reputed to have been Gandhi's favourite Anglican hymn and was popular as a football chant on the English terraces during the interwar years. See Jeffrey Hill "Cocks, Cats, Caps and Cups: A Semiotic Approach to Sport and National Identity" *Culture, Sport, Society* 2.2, (1999): 1-21 and N.J. Demerath III "In a Minor Key, Religion, Politics and the State in India" in *Religion on the International News Agenda*, ed. Mark Silk (Hartford, Connecticut, Trinity College, 2000) 3-16. More recently it has been referenced, as a symbol of tolerance, in debates around Unionism and the Orange Order. See Richard Holloway "The Past is Orange" and Ruth Dudley Edwards "View From the Ranks", both published at [www.sundayherald.com](http://www.sundayherald.com) July 6, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Pat Murphy interviewed by Claire Johnston, "Maeve", 70.



But the close of the film *Maeve* has defined her own position in relation to both Liam and her family. She acknowledges her difference from those women who have stayed in the North, telling Liam that he is “closer to the women here because they [too] are fighting for freedom”, but she foregrounds the fact that such allegiances are not fixed. She emphasises, in particular, the changing position of women in the North, in relation to nationalism and concludes: “the time when women were spectators is long gone...”.

### **The Distribution and Reception of *Maeve***

In the credits and the initial publicity campaign for *Maeve*, Pat Murphy, John Davies and Rob Smith are jointly credited (in that order) as filmmakers. But an analysis of the BFI Production Board files for *Maeve* suggests that, in practice, the film was promoted as the work of a female director and scriptwriter.<sup>31</sup> In addition to emphasising the involvement of a local woman filmmaker the promotional campaign also emphasised the film’s use of urban and non-urban locations. The poster includes an image of *Maeve* as a schoolgirl, framed by a ‘Remember 1690’ Loyalist mural, and the tagline “filmed on location in Belfast, on the Antrim Coast and in Co. Down”. *Maeve* was widely shown at home and abroad. It was screened at the Cork Film Festival, where it won Best Irish Film and at the Irish Film Theatre’s ‘Winter Film Festival’. It was included in a festival of ‘Independent Film in Britain’ at Berlin in May 1982 (along with Cinema Action’s *So That You Can Live*, Derek Jarman’s *Jubilee*, Garnett and Loach’s *Days of Hope*, Potter’s *Thriller* and Mulvey/Wollen’s *Amy!*) and became the first BFI feature to be screened at Venice Film Festival (out of competition).<sup>32</sup> In addition, it received a relatively high profile theatrical release,

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<sup>30</sup> As I have already noted, Martin McLoone has compared the use of long takes in this scene to the strategies employed by Godard in *Numero Deux* (1975). See McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of Contemporary Cinema*, London: BFI, 2000: 145.

<sup>31</sup> A letter from Production Board distributor Mary Jane Walsh to critic Caroline Tisdall (dated March 31 1982) notes “*Maeve* is the only feature film made by a woman in the UK to date (we have another in production)”. See Production Board File on *Maeve*, BFI Special Collections. Although much of the publicity information focuses on Pat Murphy (and incorrectly identifies her as a member of the Northern Ireland Film and Video Maker’s Association), Murphy herself emphasises that all three were involved in promotion.

<sup>32</sup> Patsy Murphy, “*Maeve*”, *IFT News*, 5. 4, (April 1982): 4.

opening in April 1982 at the Edinburgh Film House, the ICA in London and the IFT in Dublin and later broadcast by RTÉ and by Channel Four.

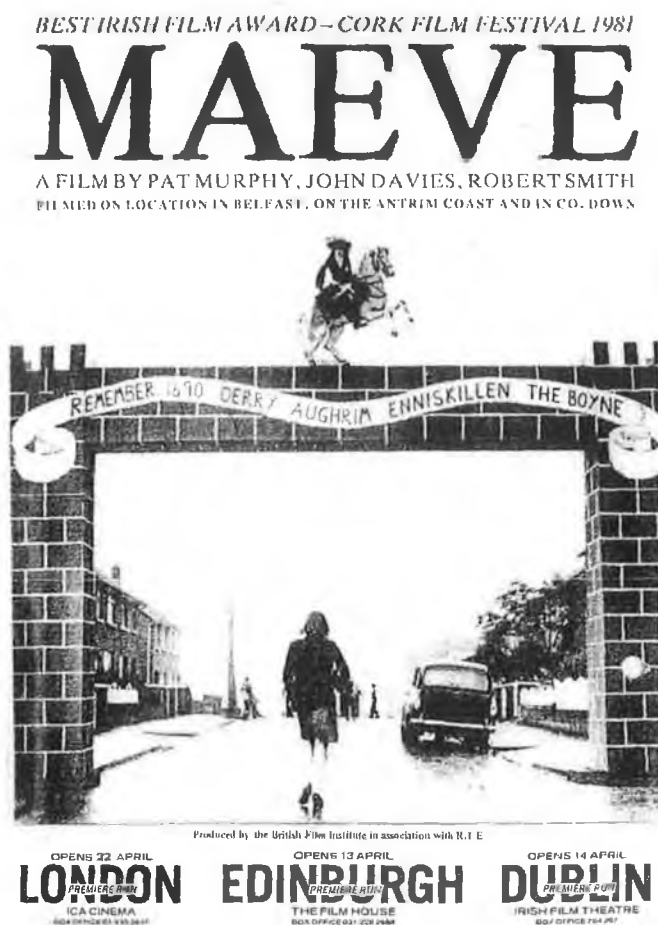


Figure 65: Poster for *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1981) © Pat Murphy/BFI

In terms of its exhibition, *Maeve* was repeatedly framed by reference to traditions of representation in Irish and Irish-themed cinema. The Edinburgh programme for April 1982 included *The Informer*, *The Quiet Man*, *The Beneficiary* (Carlo Gebler, 1979), *Over Here* (Carlo Gebler, 1980), *On a Paving Stone Mounted* and *Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories*, while the ICA presented it alongside a programme of

documentaries and dramas dealing with the North and the Troubles and entitled *Ireland Behind the Fiction*. The organiser of this programme, Chris Rodley, notes in a letter to the BFI distribution team that “the Ireland approach is the most interesting”. He continues; “I would hope to include Michael Whyte’s ‘Creggan’ and an episode or two of Thames’s ‘The Troubles’ as interesting updates since we last covered Ireland two years ago”.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> In the event, however, the programme did not feature *Creggan* or *The Troubles* but instead included earlier work such as Arthur McCaig’s *The Patriot Game* (1978), one of the films that prompted Murphy’s anti-ethnographic project in terms of its mode of address. See Johnston, “Maeve”, 69.

Press coverage in response to these various screenings varied from the sympathetic to the openly hostile, with Alexander Walker dismissing the film as “a tedious celluloid lecture about the Republican cause in Ulster”.<sup>34</sup> The term “lecture”, in particular, is used repeatedly and derogatively by critics (even in otherwise favourable reviews) to describe the key scene on Cave Hill. Many reviewers, even those writing for film publications, seem to have resisted the use of direct address in the film or, perhaps more precisely, the shift between *different* registers of discourse. Robert Brown, in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, argues that because its narrative “shuffles between melodrama, political history, documentary and fairy-tale [*Maeve*] falls in to the same trap of circular argument as its subject”.<sup>35</sup> Chris Rodley actually suggested the removal of the Cave Hill and cemetery scenes, in order to increase the film’s appeal at the ICA.<sup>36</sup>

Interviewed by Claire Johnston at the time of *Maeve*’s release, Murphy notes that these points of transition between “realistic drama” and “abstract dialogue” were less problematic for Irish audiences than their British counterparts. She attributed this, in part, to the persistence of an “oral culture” within the Irish context but also noted “Ireland doesn’t have an economy which could sustain the separations that exist in Britain in the Independent Film Movement”.<sup>37</sup> In the same interview, Murphy and Johnston discuss the reception of *Maeve* amongst women’s groups in the North of Ireland and Johnston makes the point that in the film the discourse of feminism seems to come from outside the North. She suggests that this aspect of the film may be “insulting” to groups such as the Belfast Women’s Collective who “have been trying to develop a critique of republicanism along vaguely similar lines”.<sup>38</sup> In defence,

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<sup>34</sup> Feature pieces such as Caroline Tisdall, “Memories of a Survivor” *Guardian*, April 22, 1982 and David Castell, ‘Growing Up in Belfast’, *Sunday Telegraph*, April 25, 1982 are relatively positive but reviews by Gavin Martin, *New Musical Express*, April 24, 1982, Nigel Andrews, *Financial Times*, April 23, 1982 and Alexander Walker, *The Standard*, September 10, 1981 are predominantly negative.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Browne, *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin* 48. 575 (December 1981): 251. A different position is articulated by Janet Hawken in “Maeve”, *Undercut* 6, (Winter 1982-83) 8-10.

<sup>36</sup> A letter from Chris Rodley to the Production Board is included in the BFI Special Collections Production Board file on *Maeve*.

<sup>37</sup> Murphy interviewed by Johnston in “Maeve”, 71.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy interviewed by Johnston in “Maeve”, 69.

Murphy emphasises that Maeve is not presented as a character deserving of unequivocal support and that the (less vocal) character of Roisín is intended to fulfil the role of the Republican woman. She notes that “the structure of the film denies a certain homogeneity which allows the audience to experience *uncertainty*. Contradictions are set up which are not resolved in the narrative”.<sup>39</sup> She also points out that, through the character of Maeve, the film explicitly addresses itself towards a “real divide in the Irish Women’s Movement”, between “those who deny that any attention can be paid to republicanism at all and the Women Against Imperialism position which basically says that women’s liberation will be the result of a United Irish Socialist Republic”. The notion of a *divided* audience is in fact central both to the work of Murphy’s feminist contemporaries and to developments in reception studies during the 80s.

#### **Redefining Pleasure: Feminist Film in the Late 70s and Early 80s**

Murphy’s work anticipated a critical renegotiation of cinematic pleasure, in reception studies, in the work of the feminist film avant-garde and in popular film and television studies. In an attempt to move away from theories of spectatorship structured around the cinematic apparatus, many feminist theorists focused on changing modes of address and reception. For example, in a 1988 discussion of *Coma* (Michael Crichton, 1977) and the *Cagney and Lacey* television series Christine Gledhill argues for a mode of analysis that “relates commonly derided popular forms to the conditions of their consumption”, specifically in order to “counter more negative cine-psychoanalytic views of female spectatorship”.<sup>40</sup> In her discussion of the “woman’s film”, Maria LaPlace explores the structures of production and reception that were specific to the 1940s and 50s. She situates the genre within a

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<sup>39</sup> Murphy, interviewed by Johnston in “*Maeve*”, 71. [Emphasis added]. Johnston’s own work with Paul Willemsen on the reception of *The Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1975) also highlighted divisions across the British feminist movement. See Claire Johnston and Paul Willemsen “Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)”, *Screen* 16.4, (Winter 1975/76): 101-118. See also Meaghan Morris “‘Too Soon, Too Late’: Reading Claire Johnston, 1970-81”, *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, ed. Caitriona Moore (St. Leonard’s, N.S. Wales: Allen and Unwin in association with Artspace, 1994) 127-138.

<sup>40</sup> Christine Gledhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations”, *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deirdre Pribram, (London and New York: Verso, 1988): 64.

circuit of female discourse encompassing “mass female audience novels and non-fiction books, stories and articles in women’s magazines, and even women’s associations”.<sup>41</sup> This discourse was “largely originated *by and for women*” and it served as both source and context for the woman’s picture, despite the mediation of patriarchal institutions in film and publishing.

Writing in 1982, Charlotte Brunsdon notes the emergence of a new form of women’s cinema in the 1970s, a cinema structured by an address towards a contradictory femininity. She focuses on the recurrent figure of the independent heroine or “Cosmo girl”, in films such as *Alice Doesn’t Live Her Anymore* (Scorsese, 1974), *Three Women* (Robert Altman, 1977) and *An Unmarried Woman* (Paul Mazursky, 1978).<sup>42</sup> She describes this heroine:

White, youngish, heterosexual and an aspirant professional [...] Moving into the 1980s Cosmo Girl has opinions and makes choices. However her new subject position is potentially contradictory, retaining femininity, while moving into traditionally masculine roles.<sup>43</sup>

A similar concern with themes of contradictory femininity seems to inform Barbara O’Connor’s analysis of the representation of women in independent Irish film. With reference to the Irish context, O’Connor notes the parallel emergence of both a “New Woman’s film” (referencing the examples cited by Brunsdon) and a feminist counter cinema. She highlights Kieran Hickey’s *Exposure* (1978) as one of a number of independent films that “play a role in emphasising gender relations in Irish society and the oppression which was and still is taking place”.<sup>44</sup> The central character of Hickey’s film is very much a model of ‘independence’ in that she is a photographer

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<sup>41</sup> Maria LaPlace, “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film: Discursive Struggle in Now, Voyager”, *Home is Where the Heart is*, 139.

<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, “A Subject for the Seventies”, *Screen* 23. 3-4, (1982): 20-29.

<sup>43</sup> Brunsdon, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara O’Connor, “Aspects of the Representation of Women in Irish Film”, *The Crane Bag*, 8.2, (1984): 79. O’Connor elects to focus not on avowedly feminist work, such as *Maeve*, but on a broader range of representations in Irish independent cinema.

working alone on an assignment, subjected to harassment by a group of Irish men.<sup>45</sup> She is a visitor to Ireland, however, and her economic and sexual independence contrasts sharply with the socially circumscribed roles of *Irish* women who (with the exception of a puritanical landlady) are absent from the narrative.

An overt engagement with forms of popular cinema and with questions of cinematic pleasure is also evident in a range of feminist avant-garde films from the late 70s and early 80s. In particular, *Maeve* can be situated in relation to Chantal Akerman's *Toute un Nuit* (1982), Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), Sally Potter's *Thriller* (1979) and *Gold Diggers* (1983), as well as certain films by Yvonne Rainer and Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen. As Patricia Mellencamp notes, many of these films contest "the simple binarism which sets avant-garde films against commercial narrative films."<sup>46</sup> I would also suggest that, through the exploration of multiple mode of address, much of this work also serves to figure an *audience* structured by conflict and contradiction. This engagement with questions of reception and narrative might seem to characterise these practices as 'postmodern', but this term does not fully specify the way in which feminist film engages with questions of sexual difference.<sup>47</sup>

The films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen map an historical shift from modernist aesthetics towards a more explicit concern with issues of reception. As Wollen notes, their practice operates from within a critique of the *structuralist avant-garde*:

Up to this day many avant-garde filmmakers persist in refusing visual language or reducing it to a minimal and epiphenomenal role [...] In fact,

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<sup>45</sup> Two of the men are married, and the photographer has a relationship with the third, a younger single man. The married men, who are threatened by the photographer and by the relationship, vandalise her room.

<sup>46</sup> See Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video & Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990): 149. An overview of this feminist current is also provided in Peter Wollen's "Counter-Cinema and Sexual Difference", in *Difference on Representation and Sexuality*, ed. Jane Weinstock, (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985): 36-39.

<sup>47</sup> Both Peter Wollen and Teresa De Lauretis differentiate between feminist counter-cinema and 'postmodernism'. See Wollen, "Counter-Cinema and Sexual Difference", 39 and De Lauretis *Alice Doesn't*, 188.

however, it is precisely the interface between image and word which concerns us. It is here that sexual difference, the subject of our films, takes shape.<sup>48</sup>

Wollen emphasises that *Penthesilea* (1974), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and *AMY!* (1980) “all attack a single set of problems which are at the same time political, psychoanalytic, and semiotic”<sup>49</sup>, by addressing the discourses of myth, psychoanalysis and Hollywood, through which female subjectivity is constructed. This project, particularly in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, goes beyond critique to imagine the “prospect of change”.

At a structural level, *Riddles...* foregrounds disparate modes of address, which include the mise-en-scene of melodrama as well as the use of inter-titles, voice-over and special effects. “Louise’s Story”, the central sequence constructed through thirteen slow 360 degree pans, presents Louise as simultaneously the object of cinematic inquiry, (recalling Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*) and a privileged subject of psychoanalytic and melodramatic representation: a woman who is “too close” to her child. As Wollen notes, the film explores the interplay between the voice of the filmmaker, the Sphinx (introduced first as image and later through the ‘riddle’ that Laura listens to), and the voices of women such as Louise who are “placed within the diegesis and the symbolic order”.<sup>50</sup> It also presents a fourth voice, that of theorist Mary Kelly, whose artistic practice offers a counterpoint to Louise’s own story and whose work Louise encounters as a *spectator* within the text. With *AMY!* (and their 1983 film *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*) Mulvey and Wollen shifted focus towards the territory of biography and feminist historiography. *AMY!* foregrounds the visual processes (newspapers, photography, mapping etc) through which Amy Johnson’s flight is “rewritten in the form of legend, based once again on male fantasy”. The key speech is a montage of fragments from a number of texts and it attempts to counter the “fetishized emblem within the museum-morgue of patriarchal legend”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Wollen, “The Field of Language in Film” *October* 17, (Summer 1981): 54.

<sup>49</sup> Wollen, “Field of Language”, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Wollen, “Field of Language”, 57.

<sup>51</sup> Wollen, “Field of Language”, 58.

Mulvey and Wollen's next film, *Crystal Gazing* (1982), seems to represent a logical extension of this critique of myth to the wider social and political sphere. The film explores the interconnection between spectacle and speculation across the worlds of art, science and finance and features a disparate group of characters: illustrator, academic, musician, financial forecaster and shady businessman. It transpires that each of these individuals is in some way embedded in an emerging knowledge or information-based economy. Much of the action takes place in domestic settings within London but the 'soap opera' format is disrupted by the avoidance of close-ups and by the incorporation of a number of performative scenes, including a bombastic monologue by Keith Allen and a puppet show based on the story of *Puss in Boots*. This latter section forms part of a PhD thesis, according to which 'Puss' is recast as an anti-Oedipal 'trickster' figure because of his ability to transform language into power. But as the narrative progresses, *Crystal Gazing* articulates a predominantly pessimistic account of the global information economy and highlights an attendant crisis in metropolitan academic, artistic and political discourse. At the close of the film the academic commits suicide, the illustrator is accidentally and pointlessly killed at a women's labour protest and the musician 'sells out' with a song entitled "No More Fiction".

In contrast, the work of Lizzie Borden is characterised by a certain utopian optimism. *Born in Flames* is set in the US in the "near future", on the tenth anniversary of a socialist revolution that has failed to improve the lives and status of the majority of women. In addition to offering a number of parallels with *Maeve* in terms of its overt concern with questions of political activism, *Born in Flames* actually features a performance by Pat Murphy, as the editor of a socialist youth newspaper. Murphy may have been cast because of her own status as a feminist filmmaker, because one of her co-editors is played by Kathryn Bigelow, director of *The Set-up*, *The Loveless* and subsequently the Hollywood feature *Blue Steel*.<sup>52</sup> Partly assembled from found

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<sup>52</sup> Pat Murphy, interviewed by the author, suggests that "Lizzie just put everyone she knew in the film" but the presence of Murphy and Bigelow in key roles remains



footage of street protests, and punctuated by television and radio broadcasts, Borden's film follows the formation of a broad coalition of women in response to the death of the iconic leader of a black lesbian separatist movement. This coalition eventually expands to include a group of white women (including Murphy's middle-class journalist) who had formerly categorised the violent tactics of the separatist movement as "counter-revolutionary". In the final scenes this disparate group of women take up arms in order to carry out a series of illicit broadcasts and stage a terrorist attack against the World Trade Center, as a symbol of institutionalised male power.



Figure 66: Pat Murphy, playing a feminist activist and intellectual in scenes from Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) © Lizzie Borden

Patricia Mellencamp has analysed the reception of *Born in Flames* at a 1985 conference on feminism, noting that many of the audience members (primarily black women) reacted strongly against the film's representation of black women as anarchists and separatists. She suggests that this reaction was structured both by the narrative of *Born in Flames* and by the mode of its presentation. In what she terms as a "rhetorically logical" movement, the audience shifted their critique away from the film and towards the position that the panellists seemed to represent; "middle-class, white, intellectual feminism, a 'branch' of feminism lampooned and 'corrected' in the film".<sup>53</sup> She identifies this moment as a critical shift within feminism:

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intriguing - particularly since they represent the position of the 'liberal' intellectual within the narrative.

<sup>53</sup> Mellencamp, 156.

[A moment] conducted in the gap between representation and experience – between the film and the audience, image and spectator, belief and action [...] Paradoxically, like the film which upset so many viewers, differences among (and within women) in the audience were additive, combative, and positive; *difference* was not to be feared; *differences* were productive.<sup>54</sup>

Like *Maeve*, *Born in Flames* seems to deliberately invoke difference and contradiction. But unlike Murphy's work, *Born in Flames* celebrates New York's particular history as a site of underground film culture. Janet Staiger has examined issues of spectatorship particular to underground cinema in the 1960s and she theorises this film culture as a structuring force in the development of New York's gay community. She emphasises that the term "underground" had connotations, for many New Yorkers, "not of the hidden, but of alternative communities and political activism".<sup>55</sup> She also highlights a productive interplay between text and context, noting that while the underground derived much of its aesthetic force from this alternative community, "the *joy and play* overrunning the seriousness underpinning [underground cinema's] representations likely helped to bind the community and spread it to a larger scene".<sup>56</sup>

*Born in Flames* would appear to be a pivotal film, for many feminist critics, in terms of the way in which it explores conflict and contradiction. In an analysis of female spectatorship and women's cinema,<sup>57</sup> Teresa De Lauretis notes that the film created a certain "discomfort" for reviewers because its heterogeneity cannot be aligned with discursive boundaries of any one "spectator-subject". She suggests that the originality of the film's project is, instead, its representation of woman as a social subject and a "site of differences; differences which are not purely sexual or merely racial, economic or (sub)cultural, but all of these together and often enough in conflict with

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<sup>54</sup> Mellencamp, 157.

<sup>55</sup> Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics", in *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 135.

<sup>56</sup> Staiger, 149. [Emphasis added] Staiger also notes that exclusion from this scene prompted some women filmmakers to create works such as *Fuses* (Carolee Schneemann, 1964/67).

<sup>57</sup> Teresa De Lauretis "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema", *Female Spectators*, 174-195.

one another”.<sup>58</sup> De Lauretis reads *Born in Flames* as emblematic of “a shift in women’s cinema from a modernist or avant-garde aesthetic of subversion to an emerging set of questions about filmic representation”. She notes:

[T]here has been a shift from an aesthetic centred on the text and its effects on the viewing or reading subject – whose certain, if imaginary, self-coherence is to be fractured by the text’s own disruption of linguistic, visual and/or narrative coherence – to what may be called an *aesthetic of reception*, where the spectator is the film’s primary concern – primary in the sense that it is there from the beginning, inscribed in the film-maker’s project and even in the very making of the film.<sup>59</sup>

De Lauretis emphasises that Borden’s non-professional actors and her characters are “part of her intended audience”<sup>60</sup>.

Patricia Mellencamp expands upon the pleasures of feminist film, and on the re-definition of a narrative avant-garde, in her analysis of the reception of Sally Potter’s *The Gold Diggers* (1983). She notes that, by contrast with the “whoopla” surrounding *Thriller*, Potter’s next film was perceived by some critics as “puritanical” and “formally ascetic”.<sup>61</sup> Mellencamp suggests that *Gold Diggers*, which features Julie Christie in the leading role, attempts to re-imagine or to “salvage” psychoanalytic theory for women, largely by shifting focus onto the woman as both subject and object of the gaze. She notes that, unlike *Thriller*, *Gold Diggers* draws its references from early cinema rather than literature or myth. In fact it evokes a privileged period

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<sup>58</sup> De Lauretis, “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory”, 186. A similar emphasis on questions of difference can be found in an earlier overview of developments in British and European feminist film culture by Claire Johnston. Johnston writes that ‘feminist film practice can no longer be seen simply in terms of the effectivity of a system of representation, but rather as a production of and by subjects already in social practices which always involve heterogeneous and contradictory positions in ideologies. See Claire Johnston, “The subject of feminist film theory/practice” *Screen* 21. 2, (Summer 1982): 30

<sup>59</sup> De Lauretis, “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory”, 188. [Emphasis added]. De Lauretis’s critique of the notion of a ‘feminine aesthetic’ position can be compared with D.N. Rodowick’s analysis of sexual difference in *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory*, (Berkeley: University California Press, 1988): 221- 270.

<sup>60</sup> De Lauretis, “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory”, 194-5 n24.

<sup>61</sup> Mellencamp, 160-161. The film is described as a “political fantasy about the circulation of women and money” in the (anonymous) programme notes for *Sexism, Colonialism, Misrepresentation: A Corrective Film Series and Conference*, (Collective for Living Cinema, New York: April 25-May 8 1988) where it was shown immediately after *Maeve*.

in film history, marked by the intersection of the popular and the avant-garde. Mellencamp is at pains to distinguish between the formal pleasures of a film such as *Gold Diggers* and an elitist mode of address that might privilege the discourses of “high art”, but she acknowledges that the film offers different pleasures to those theorised in relation to classical melodrama and the woman’s picture.<sup>62</sup> Instead, she emphasises that *The Gold Diggers* offers and in fact deliberately solicits “intellectual” or “collective” identification rather than the primary forms of identification (associated with “being” and “having”), which are privileged by Freud, film theory and narrative cinema. She notes:

[U]nlike Freud’s (and later Lacan’s) analysis of identification which *assumes* an identity, and individuality, [*The Gold Diggers*] *constructs* identities which are historical, over time, which is history.<sup>63</sup>

This concern with history and changing modes of address is also central to Chantal Akerman’s work. In an analysis of Third Cinema (which also makes reference to *Anne Devlin*) Paul Willemen highlights the way in which Akerman’s *Toute un Nuit* (1982) historicises contemporary questions of subjectivity and representation, primarily through repetition and the employment of “historically concrete and precise settings”.<sup>64</sup> If *News From Home* explicitly withholds the images of domesticity suggested by the letters to ‘Chantal’, *Toute Un Nuit* seems to explore an *excess* of urban interiors and exteriors. In the process, it extends the critique of narrativity to encompass the city as historic site of melodrama.

A similar extension can be traced through Yvonne Rainer’s work, and in fact De Lauretis has even suggested that Akerman and Potter continue to “re-elaborate”

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<sup>62</sup> Mellencamp 162. See Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” [1973] rpt. in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods: An Anthology II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 208-217.

<sup>63</sup> Mellencamp, 171. See also Sally Potter’s theorisation of feminism and performance in “On Shows”, *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968-2000*, ed. Hilary Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 446-453. [Originally published in *About Time: Video Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists*, eds. Catherine Elwes, Rose Garrard, Sandy Nairne, London: ICA, 1980]

<sup>64</sup> Willemen, “An Avant-garde for the 90s”, 158.

Rainer's work, particularly *Film About a Woman Who...*(1974).<sup>65</sup> It is *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (Yvonne Rainer, 1979) that seems to bear closest comparison with *Maeve*, however, in terms of its mobilisation of place as a site of cultural and political resonance and its address towards the various constituencies (feminist or otherwise) invested in the notion of a revolutionary cinema. *Journeys...* interweaves a series of public and private discourses, dealing with themes of violence and revolution. The narrative includes a conversation on revolutionary violence between a man and woman, a rolling text relating the story of the Baader-Meinhof gang and a disjunctive therapy session that recalls a dream scene. The other visual elements include aerial footage of Stonehenge (accompanying excerpts from a young girl's diary) and the Berlin Wall, occasional exterior shots of London and New York and interior tracking shots along a mantelpiece crowded with memorabilia.

Scott MacDonald reads *Journeys From Berlin/1971* as an allegory of East/West Berlin's divided status as symbol of both oppression and freedom and he emphasises that it was made during Rainer's residency in Berlin, on a fellowship from the German government.<sup>66</sup> Like *Maeve*, *Journeys...* seems to explore the disjunction between the lived experience of a particular place and its status as political and cultural symbol. But MacDonald notes that, in this film, Rainer "positions herself about as far from the conventional cinema as it is possible to go – at least in one direction".<sup>67</sup> Unlike *Maeve*, (or indeed *Crystal Gazing* or *Born in Flames*) Rainer's film does not appropriate the conventions of melodrama to engage with questions of reception. But it would be a mistake to suggest that it does not interrogate the historical processes through which subjects are formed. In fact, Rainer explicitly figures autobiography, historical biography and therapy as sites of narrativity, positioned between the public and the private. The various female figures within the text, including the 'revolutionary' Meinhof, are all positioned as subjects of psychoanalysis through the ambiguous therapy sequences, which include a series of

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<sup>65</sup> De Lauretis, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory", 192.

<sup>66</sup> Scott MacDonald, *Avant-garde Film: Motion Studies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 166-7. Rainer's film was also funded by the Production Board of the British Film Institute.

tableaux performed by Rainer's regular collaborators. The incorporation of these sequences and the casting of Annette Michelson as (variously) therapist and patient, suggests that ultimately *Journeys* offers a reflection on Rainer's own position as feminist filmmaker.

Pat Murphy's work can be situated, then, in relation to a renegotiation of cinematic pleasure and narrative form in the international feminist filmmaking of the late 70s and early 80s. *Maeve* explicitly addresses an audience constituted through contradiction and questions of difference. As Willemen and Gibbons have noted, *location* also emerges a crucial issue in *Maeve*, where it is figured as a function of narrative. In *Anne Devlin*, her next film, Murphy extends this exploration of place and contributes to a wider project of revisionist feminist historiography.<sup>68</sup>

#### ***Anne Devlin: Inside and Outside History***

*Anne Devlin* and *Nora* both draw upon historical sources<sup>69</sup> but Murphy explicitly rejects any notion of fidelity to these original texts, stating: "it's the job of film *not* to fulfil the inherited weight of expectation, but to come at the material from a different angle [even though] a big part of the audience knows the 'story' and may be disappointed".<sup>70</sup> She cites a critical tradition of film biography, encompassing Peter Watkin's *Edvard Munch* (1974), Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) and Scorsese's *Kundun* (1997) but points out that the genre is often regarded as impure or "debased". This is despite the fact that most narrative films are biographies, "in the sense that they trace the unfolding of the character's lives". She states:

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<sup>67</sup> MacDonald, 159.

<sup>68</sup> The term is used here to refer to a 're-visioning' of the past specifically in order to accommodate perspectives and experiences marginalized by dominant (canonical) versions of history. David Lloyd acknowledges the particular importance of feminist *biography* in documenting resistance to the formation of conservative Catholic state. See David Lloyd, "Outside History and the 'Subalternity Effect'", *Ireland After History*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999): 77-88. See also Cliona Murphy "Women's History, Feminist History, or Gender History?", *Irish Review* 12, (Spring/Summer 1992): 21-26 and Clara Connolly, "Culture or Citizenship? Notes from the 'Gender and Colonialism' Conference, Galway, Ireland, May 1992", *Feminist Review* 44, (Summer 1993): 104-111.

<sup>69</sup> *Anne Devlin* is based partly upon Anne's published journals while *Nora* is informed by Brenda Maddox's *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce*, (London: Hamilton, 1988).

<sup>70</sup> Murphy, "Interview with Pat Murphy", 9.

[C]inema presents the subject as hero/heroine, or as *heroically unified subject* and the arc of a human life doesn't always fall naturally within the narrative logic of a folktale. And it is this narrative logic which increasingly drives most mainstream cinema. This can restrict or deny the complexity of life as it is experienced and raises questions of what audiences expect in terms of identification.<sup>71</sup>

In fact a critique of the heroically unified subject seems to constitute a central theme of Murphy's work, and can be traced through *Maeve*, *Anne Devlin* and *Nora*.

Murphy's film foregrounds Anne Devlin's experiences as a revolutionary and as a woman but it *complicates* rather than simply *corrects* the myths that have developed around Devlin, Robert Emmet and the 1803 Rebellion. Bríd Brennan's central performance is a model of restraint, and it is underscored by the cinematography, which was influenced by *Barry Lyndon* in particular.<sup>72</sup> As in Kubrick's film, the camera tends to remain at a distance, with few lingering close-ups. Murphy emphasises that "the audience is both inside Anne's story, and at the same time, has a kind of "cold eye" in the sense of being aware of watching a film".<sup>73</sup> This mode of address provides a space for reading and for popular memory and for this reason Paul Willemen situates *Anne Devlin* within the context of a Third Cinema project, "which summons to the place of the viewer social-historical knowledges, rather than art-historical, narrowly aesthetic ones".<sup>74</sup> Kevin Barry also suggests that *Anne Devlin* risks a "communal" approach to the production of meaning than *Maeve*, by introducing a "new set of images which cannot yet be ideologically defined".<sup>75</sup> Yet

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<sup>71</sup> Pat Murphy, "Interview with Pat Murphy", 9. [Emphasis added].

<sup>72</sup> Pat Murphy interviewed by the author.

<sup>73</sup> Pat Murphy, "Interview with Pat Murphy", 9. But the fact that camera stays with Anne during the Rising led at least *some* contemporary critics to identify a 'hole' in the narrative. See Kevin Dawson, "Cinema Review: Anne Devlin", *Magill* March 7 (1985): 43.

<sup>74</sup> Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, 201. In this respect Murphy's work could be seen to parallel the critical art history of Michael Baxandall, among others, which is concerned to interrogate the social and historical structures through which images acquire meaning. See Michael Baxandall, "The Period Eye", *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* [1972] 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 29-108. The more recent work of historians such as Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey also represents a development of this approach.

<sup>75</sup> Kevin Barry, "Intersections: Cinema and Feminism: The Case of Anne Devlin", *The Furrow* 36.4 (April 1985): 249

the film does reference the art-historical canon, albeit in the form of images that have long since acquired a place within popular consciousness.

The pre-credit sequence is particularly significant as it introduces many of the film's central themes, through framing, choreography and use of colour. In the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion, Anne works in darkness with a group of women to gather the bodies of the dead for burial. At sunrise the women are challenged by 'redcoats' at a barricade and Anne (driving the wagon) mirrors the stance of the soldiers in order to assert her right to pass. This "unashamedly ecstatic"<sup>76</sup> image has been interpreted as an echo of Delacroix's 1830 *Liberty at the Barricades*, linking Anne's struggle with broader European and feminist revolutionary projects. Significantly, however, the filmic version of the *Barricades* pose includes not only the women but also their opponents, the soldiers, and in this way the iconic original is framed as highly subjective. The image of the soldiers, dressed in bright red uniforms, also acquires greater significance as the film progresses. Later, Anne finds one of the green uniforms designed by Emmet and points out that it is simply a "green version of the redcoats uniform". Concerned that the uniform will identify the men too easily, she states, "we are ourselves - we should rebel as ourselves".

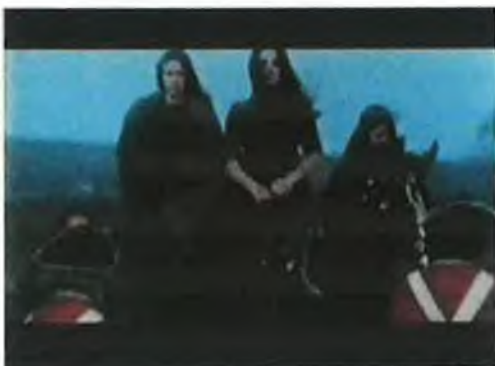


Figure 67: Anne confronts the soldiers in the opening sequence of *Anne Devlin* (© Pat Murphy, 1984)

As the narrative progresses, costume, colour and music often substitute for verbal expression, providing a commentary on the

<sup>76</sup> Verina Glaessner, "Anne Devlin (review)", *BFI Monthly Film Bulletin* 53.624 (January 1986): 3. Glaessner suggests that Murphy's film forms part of a 'new historical genre established by the theoretical/historical work of Foucault, and the films of the Taviani brothers, among others', a genre defined by an emphasis on 'lost documents' (such as Anne's journals) and a contradiction between official and unofficial histories. For a discussion of the 'Barricades' image see David Will, "New Strategies for the Anti-colonial Cinema", *Cencrastus* 19, (Winter 1984): 39.



action.<sup>77</sup> The wagon is greeted by hordes of young girls dressed in *white*, suggesting some ritual celebration of purity, in scenes that seem to prefigure Anne's ultimate incarnation as unwilling martyr. Anne's youngest sister, a witness to Anne's torture, also wears a white dress that stands out in the moonlight. When she is finally arrested, Anne is forcibly dressed in white as a prisoner and advised by the female warden to play the role of martyr: The warden entreats: "Don't let them break you" but Anne simply replies: "There's nothing to break". This commentary on martyrdom and iconography becomes even more pronounced when, following her brother's death, Anne is represented in the position of the 'Pieta' (cradling her dead brother's body in her arms).<sup>78</sup> Sarah Curran *also* wears white, but her costume and hairstyle suggest a different form of purity, echoing the neoclassical sculptures that decorate the gardens through which she and Emmet stroll.



Figure 68: Robert Emmet and Sarah Curran stroll amongst the statues in *Anne Devlin*. © Pat Murphy

<sup>77</sup> Luke Gibbons also highlights this musical and visual 'excess', reading it in terms of an opposition between narrative and spectacle. See *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 115.

<sup>78</sup> This image was read by some reviewers as "all too familiar – virginal, saintly and suffering". Deborah Philips dismissed the politics of the film as "like the framing of its images, soft-focus". See Philips, "Anne Devlin", *Women's Review* 4, (February 1986): 26. But, as Luke Gibbons notes, "the simulated or counterfeit nature of Anne's status as mother is borne out when her menstrual periods cease" in the next scene. See *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 113.

Murphy's film also foregrounds the persistence of the male gaze, and the constructed character of femininity. For example, in one scene Anne's sister Julia brushes her hair outdoors in order to signal to her cousin (the rebel leader Michael Dwyer) that the coast is clear. Later, while Dwyer warns the family that their precautions may not protect them from those who suspect them as collaborators, Julia's father asserts his authority over his daughter's bodies by ordering one of Dwyer's men to "take his hands off her". Although Anne may desire to escape from her father's watchful eye, she unwittingly becomes an object of display as a member of Emmet's household. This role is signalled on the occasion of their first meeting with Emmet. He watches as she moves, unaware of his presence, around a room laden with maps, microscopes and weapons, lit by the light from a single circular window.



Figure 69: Robert Emmet (standing out of shot) discovers Anne in his study © Pat Murphy

Despite her highly visible status, Anne is figured as a critical commentator within the text, partly because she acts the part of unpaid servant (whose help, Emmet notes, "is *freely* given"). Her ambiguous position gains significance as James Hope and Emmet argue about the true beneficiaries of the rising: the workers or the middle classes. Anne is often positioned on the margins of these debates, alongside Hope's wife Rose, recalling key scenes in *Maeve*.



Figure 70: Anne listens as the men discuss politics in *Anne Devlin*. © Pat Murphy

Anne also occupies a double role as both witness and suspect in relation to the state. Immediately after the burial of the recovered bodies, in

the opening sequence, she discovers and reports the dead body of a rent collector. She does this in order to deflect suspicion away from her own family but is promptly interrogated. This is just the first of a series of scenes confirming the opposition between local knowledge and a colonial system founded on notions of rational objectivity. Contradictions between these two systems emerge in the courthouse scene where Anne's father appeals to the judge (whom he knows well) for a "character" to counter the accusations of a notoriously corrupt prosecution witness. This critique of authoritative realist narratives is developed in the latter part of the film, through the parallels drawn between the various 'scientific' practices of Emmet, Major Sirr and Doctor Trevor, the abusive prison doctor.

Anne's *gendered* position within the colonial system, as the "female state prisoner" also becomes ever more apparent. Emmet, Sirr and Trevor all attempt to manipulate, cajole or coerce her through reference to her gender. In one interrogation scene, recalling Anne's first meeting with Emmet, she and Sirr are seated at opposite ends of a table with a candle placed between them. Anne's once white dress is now dishevelled and dirty but Sirr offers to restore her 'innocence'. He asks her to be "a good girl" and continues, "You are a Catholic, you know what confession means, and forgiveness", promising her a "fine dowry" if she cooperates. But when Anne resists he threatens to keep her in Gaol as a warning to "all the women like you". As Anne's

health declines, these references to Catholicism take on a greater significance. The architecture of the prison, complete with cruciform motifs on the heavy iron doors, seems to suggest a conspiracy between different forms of social regulation.

Luke Gibbons emphasises that Anne's persistent silence functions as a form of *resistance*, and he suggests that "it is in the light of this dichotomy between passivity and action [that she] lived on in popular memory".<sup>79</sup> At the close of the film, an excerpt from the journals provides a context for Anne's sacrifice, which suggests that her silence actually gave her a kind of power. In one of the few instances of voiceover she states:

After my liberation at the end of 1806 I met with some of the former prisoners in the street [...] Although I was homeless and friendless I never troubled them with my distress, although I had held the life of more than fifty of them in my hands.

The final image of the film, recalling Sirr's warning to Anne, is a dedication to "the women forgotten by history, the women who worked for freedom and who are imprisoned for their belief".

### **Feminism and the Emergence of Irish National Cinema**

*Anne Devlin* was funded by the newly established Irish Film Board but also secured an unprecedented private investment of IR£250,000 and, as such, it was the focus of a certain amount of media attention. Some contemporary reports on the production highlighted the use of historically and culturally significant locations such as Strokestown Park House, Roscommon (later to house the Famine Museum), as well as Dublin Castle and Kilmainham Gaol.<sup>80</sup> Following its release, reviewers in the UK foregrounded its 'national' significance, noting that it was the "first feature film to be

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<sup>79</sup> Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, 108.

<sup>80</sup> The film also received funding from the Arts Council and RTE. See Michael Dwyer, "The Shooting of Anne Devlin", *Sunday Tribune* (Inside Tribune section), October 2, 1983:14 and also Brian McLroy, *World Cinema 4: Ireland*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1988) 71. The film represented Ireland at a number of international festivals, including Edinburgh, Moscow, Chicago, Toronto and London and was well received by Irish audiences. See Kearney, 190.

entirely financed cast and crewed in Ireland”.<sup>81</sup> But the production and promotion of *Anne Devlin* was not marked by an overt display of these national credentials. In fact, in an interview for a British feminist journal, Murphy defines the film as a deliberate attempt to counter a tendency amongst Irish broadcasters to “produce reactionary images of Ireland that are acceptable to the British, like the *Irish RM*”.<sup>82</sup>

While *Maeve* was received in the UK primarily as an ‘Irish’ film, *Anne Devlin* was framed as a feminist work because of its subject matter *and* because it was distributed by the feminist organisation Cinema of Women.<sup>83</sup> The specialist approach to distribution was highlighted in the January 1986 issue of the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which featured an interview with Murphy, a review of the film, and an article on feminist distribution, with contributions from members of both Circles and Cinema of Women.<sup>84</sup> At this point, these two organisations may have exemplified a specialist model that could be extended to other contexts.

- Earlier, in 1984, Murphy was interviewed about the limited possibilities for the distribution of feminist or avant-garde work in Ireland. She states:

Feminist filmmakers are not simply producing films, but producing audiences [...] there was no audience for the films Circles distribute until that audience was built up and it’s going to be the same here.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See Glaessner, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Pat Murphy, Interview with Sarah Gellner, “At a Cinema Near You,” *Women’s Review*, March 1986: 34. *The Irish R.M.* is among a range of British-Irish co-productions referenced in Chapter Two.

<sup>83</sup> Cinema of Women subsequently merged with another feminist distribution group, Circles, to form Cinenova. Circles had been established in the early 80s at the Nottingham Midland Group and Pat Murphy actually collaborated with Jane Clark to produce projections for one of the first events. See Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-85*, (London and New York: Pandora, 1987) 38.

<sup>84</sup> See Jo Imeson’s interview with Eileen McNulty of Cinema of Women and Felicity Sparrow of Circles in “Breaking Down the Myths: Feminist Film Distribution Today”, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 53. 624 (January 1986): 6-7 and Julian Petley’s interview with Murphy, “State of the Union”, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Murphy, Interview with Patsy Murphy, “Interview - Film and Feminism”, *The Irish Feminist Review*, (1984): 78.

Murphy was later to become directly involved in aspects of film distribution and exhibition, in curatorial project such as *Reflections from the Roof of the World* (1993), *From Beyond the Pale* (1994) and *The Event Horizon* (1996-7). But in the mid 1980s *production* seems to have been the key issue for Irish feminist filmmakers. In fact, *Anne Devlin* can be seen to have inaugurated a wave of new feminist work, much of which is concerned with issues of historiography.

*Mother Ireland* (1988) by the Derry Film and Video Collective (DFVC) is a documentary exploring the nationalist icon of the suffering mother. It features interviews with a range of women from the North and South of Ireland, including Pat Murphy and historian Margaret McCurtain and a range of republican (and feminist) activists and former prisoners. The structure of the documentary is relatively 'straight', with a voiceover used to frame contributions from female academics and activists. This narrative aims to offer a corrective to the official histories of nationalism and republicanism, by foregrounding the work of Cumann Na mBan in particular. Although the image of Ireland as suffering mother (or, at times, vulnerable virgin) is traced through nineteenth century popular culture as well as more recent representations, there is little scope within the programme for any discussion of the particular way in which these images function.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately *Mother Ireland* fails to go beyond (or even match) Murphy's analysis of iconography in *Anne Devlin*.

The DFVC shifted from documentary to drama with their next work, *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (1989). It centres on the experience of a young girl, in the nationalist community, who is facing an unplanned pregnancy in secret. The setting is contemporary and the story is ostensibly one of personal rather than public significance. But through various strategies, this story is revealed as part of a wider hidden history, now only gradually coming to light. Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford points out that Seamus Heaney's poem 'Limbo' is reclaimed in *Hush-A-Bye Baby*, as

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<sup>86</sup> See Brenda Loftus, "Mother Ireland", *CIRCA* 44, (March/April 1989): 33-34. For a broader discussion of 'myth criticism' in Irish history see Sean Farrell Moran "Images, Icons and the Practice of Irish History" in *Images, Icons and the Irish Nationalist Imagination*, ed. Lawrence W. McBride, (Dublin: Four Courts Press), 2000: 166-176.

a “crucial emotional focus for the film’s concern with gender and reproduction” (even though its representation of landscape seems to fall within the terms of the DFVC’s own earlier critique). Elsewhere Luke Gibbons highlights the way in the film’s oblique visual and aural details work to open up spaces of popular memory.<sup>87</sup>

Two short film dramas from this period, *The Visit* (Orla Walsh, 1992) and *After '68* (Stephen Burke, 1994), also foreground the experience of women in the North, by representing historical events such as civil rights protests and the hunger strikes from an ‘unofficial’ perspective. *After '68* restricts the use of synchronised sound and instead employs gesture and a soundtrack of show-band hits to articulate the experience of its young narrator and her mother. Together, these strategies provide a commentary on the familiar iconic images of the Troubles, borrowed from newsreel footage.<sup>88</sup> *The Visit* seems less overtly concerned with the representation of history, as its narrative centres on the experience of a prisoner’s wife who remains largely at a remove from the sphere of overt political struggle. But, through flashback, references to political events such as the ‘blanket’ protests of the early 80s are recalled. The woman’s history gradually emerges as a counter-point to official narratives of nationalism. Like *Maeve* and *Mother Ireland*, *The Visit* highlights and questions the symbolic role played by the suffering, but supportive, woman. As Lance Pettitt notes, the film also suggests parallels between the state’s mechanisms of social control and the forms of surveillance operating within the nationalist community.<sup>89</sup> But Walsh relies heavily upon iconic images (such as nationalist murals) in order to set the scene and advance the narrative, and in this respect the critique of iconography is perhaps

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford “Seamus and Sinead: From ‘Limbo’ to Saturday Night Live by Way of Hush-a-Bye-Baby”, *Ireland’s Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001): 236. For an analysis of the representation of the abortion debate within this film see Luke Gibbons, “On The Beach”, *Artforum* (October 1992): 12-13.

<sup>88</sup> The influence of Cathal Black can be seen in both *After'68* and *The Visit*, primarily in terms of the way in which they employ photographic stills, newsreel footage and radio to recreate past events and oppose discourses of documentary ‘reality’. Another project of historical revision, with respect to the experiences of women in Derry, is undertaken in Tom Collins’ *Bogwoman* (1998).

<sup>89</sup> See Pettitt, 122-23.

subordinated to the central drama.<sup>90</sup> The dramatic resolution is withheld, because the film ends before the final 'visit', but the narrative seems to set up a somewhat problematic opposition between the symbolic function of the prisoner's wife and the lived 'reality' of her pregnancy.

Many of these dramas have already generated considerable critical interest within the context of Irish film studies, where they have been theorised in terms of an important (although perhaps marginal) critical current within Irish film culture.<sup>91</sup> But the 80s and early 90s also witnessed a parallel negotiation of dramatic and narrative form within Irish feminist arts practice, particularly in moving image work developed for the gallery. The work of Alanna O'Kelly, in particular, seems to share Murphy's concerns with regard to the representation of landscape and memory. O'Kelly's 1992 video installation *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* forms part of an ongoing series of works dealing with the famine, entitled *The Country Blooms - A Garden and a Grave*. While this work traces references to the famine through archival material, poetry and literature, its primary goal is to 'embody' history. This project finds its most direct expression in the visual correspondences between the female body and the landscape, suggested by the images. But it is also present in the audio track, which is composed of breath sounds, murmurs and keening, the traditional form of lament. Elsewhere, O'Kelly has attempted to reclaim keening as a form of political protest rooted in the body but in *No Colouring...* it contributes to the essentialisation and mystification of femininity. Although it would be unfair to dismiss this complex work as simply reactionary, it is clearly at odds with the critique elaborated in Murphy's practice.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> In a subsequent film, *Blessed Fruit* (1999), Orla Walsh explores issues of iconography, albeit in a lighter tone. She restages the Immaculate Conception within a contemporary urban setting.

<sup>91</sup> See Pettitt, 120-124. Martin McLoone situates the work of the DFVC in relation to the indigenous practices of the 70s and 80s and highlights the short as an important sphere for 'plural vision', in *Irish Film: The Emergence of Contemporary Cinema*, (London: BFI, 2000): 131-162. The work of Gerry Stembridge, and particularly the television drama *The Truth About Claire* (1990) also merits attention.

<sup>92</sup> In terms of its concern with the reclamation of specifically female traditions this work can also be compared to Vivienne Dick's 2002 installation *Excluded by the Nature of Things*. Significantly, however, Dick avoids explicit associations between the Irish landscape and the female body. For an analysis of Alanna O'Kelly's work see Catherine Nash "Embodied



Pat Murphy has also explored memories of the Famine, but from a very different perspective. Murphy was commissioned to produce a video for inclusion in an audiovisual display at the Famine Museum, established at Strokestown Park in Roscommon in 1994. Like the Museum itself, this narrative approaches Strokestown as a place that is both representative of a wider catastrophe and loaded with specific meanings and associations. It functions primarily to provide information about various workhouses (at Castlereagh and Ballymahon) and carefully interweaves aural references to personal testimony with data taken from documentary sources. While O'Kelly's work seems to locate the trauma of the Famine within the Irish landscape, and the feminine body, Murphy develops a materialist analysis that is largely in keeping with the wider discourse of the Famine Museum. Her video is approximately 14 minutes long and it is presented on a monitor, rather than as a projection. Murphy states:

Luke Dodd, who curated the Museum, asked me to make the film. It was intended almost as a kind of found object, an artifact without titles.<sup>93</sup>

As in *Anne Devlin*, the detached camerawork (by Seamus Deasy) offers a space for reflection. Many of the shots fade to black, lending an episodic and fragmentary quality to the narrative (reminiscent of Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted*). There is little in the way of any conventional pictorial 'evidence' of the famine and there are no interviews or onscreen presenters. Instead the camera moves through a series of depopulated spaces, from the decaying workhouse to the carefully preserved interior of Strokestown House. Only the occasional shots of the rural landscape (seen through the windows) provide signs of human activity. Hints of a feminist critique also emerge at certain points in the voiceover narration, particularly

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Irishness: Gender, Sexuality and Irish Identities", *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography* ed. Brian Graham, (London: Routledge: 1997) 120-122. For a useful overview of Irish media practice, and criticism (including reference to feminist work by O'Kelly, Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh) see Shirley MacWilliam, "Screen and Screen Again", *CIRCA 100*, Summer 2002: 42-48.

<sup>93</sup> Pat Murphy interviewed by the author.

when a female narrator (Rita Ann Higgins) points out that in the 1800s epidemics were not recognised unless male victims outnumbered women and children.

### **Tableaux Vivants and Excessive Female Bodies in 'Literary' Film**

Pat Murphy's work represents a feminist contribution to a broader exploration of historiography within Irish cinema. This extends from Bob Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoire* (1975), through Tommy McArdle's *Its Handy When People Don't Die* (1982), Pat O'Connor's television drama *Ballroom of Romance* (1982) and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *December Bride* (1990) and perhaps finds its most consistent expression in Cathal Black's work.<sup>94</sup> In recent years, however, the debate around history in relation to national cinemas has been dominated by questions of *heritage*. The term is closely associated with the work of Andrew Higson in relation to British cinema and it refers to:

[A] group of contemporaneous British films which [...] are the product of a culture and an economy in which the heritage industry – the commodification of heritage, the commodification of the past – has become highly visible.<sup>95</sup>

Higson's initial analysis of the British heritage cycle of the 80s focused primarily on the films of Merchant/Ivory/Jhabvala and identified a number of key formal, thematic and industrial characteristics.<sup>96</sup> These include an emphasis on craft and authorship, literary adaptation, a display of 'heritage properties' (such as those conserved by the British National Trust), a pictorial visual style, elaborate period costumes and a cast of well-known English actors, often drawing upon a theatrical tradition. Higson's

<sup>94</sup> Cathal Black's *Our Boys* (1981), *Korea* (1995) and *Love and Rage* (1998) are all explicitly concerned to disrupt official historical narratives through reference to personal memory. In 1988, Pat Murphy also co-wrote and co-directed (with Tiernan MacBride) a two-part documentary entitled *Sean MacBride Remembers*, which documents political events from a distinctly personal perspective.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Heritage Film and British Cinema", *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson, (London: Cassell, 1996) 234. For an exploration of history and 'heritage' in Irish cinema see Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*, 136-114 and Ruth Barton "From History to Heritage: Some Recent Developments in Irish Cinema", *The Irish Review* 21 (Autumn/Winter 1997): 41-56.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film" *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started* ed. Lester Friedman (London: UCL Press, 1993), 109-29.

account was criticised, however, for its perceived failure to engage with the melodramatic mise-en-scene of the period drama, and its capacity to articulate 'marginalized' historical perspectives.<sup>97</sup> In response Higson shifted attention to the context of reception, and the various discourses circulating around these films at the time of their release. He notes that such films are often directly associated, within the print media, with the promotion of consumer goods such as property, furnishings, clothing, make-up and food, while at the same time prompting debates around history and national identity.<sup>98</sup> I will return to these issues at a later stage, with respect to the reception of Pat Murphy's *Nora*, but first I want to examine aspects of the 'literary' film as it has developed during the 1990s.

The 1990s witnessed a pronounced engagement with historical drama on the part of feminist filmmakers, a further extension of the shift towards narrative in avant-garde practice, theorised by Mellencamp and De Lauretis. Some of the most prominent examples of this trend include *Orlando* (Sally Potter 1992), *The Piano* (Jane Campion 1993), *The Portrait of A Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996) and *Mansfield Park* (Patricia Rozema 1999).<sup>99</sup> But these films can also be situated in relation to a wider development: the emergence of the "postclassical" literary film, which invokes a popular knowledge of the past and goes beyond official literary history. Belén Vidal Villasur argues that the postclassical mode is not necessary defined by adaptation, but instead extends "the use of the term 'literary' to different reinterpretations of a cultural past modelled after the plastic, literary but, above all, *cinematic legacy*".<sup>100</sup> She cites a heterogeneous transnational group of films including *The Piano*, *Orlando*, *Carrington* (Christopher Hampton, 1995), *Ridicule* (Patrice Leconte, 1996), *William*

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<sup>97</sup> Higson explores the opposing arguments developed by Richard Dyer and by Claire Monk in "The Heritage Film and British Cinema", 240-241.

<sup>98</sup> Higson, "The Heritage Film and British Cinema", 242-244

<sup>99</sup> Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore* (1975) actually provides an important precedent for much of this work. For a discussion of critical resistance to this project see Lauren Rabinowitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, 184-215. Derek Jarman's work also represents an important (and explicitly 'national') contribution to the avant-garde exploration of gender in historical drama. See Colin MacCabe's "A Post-National European Cinema: A Consideration of Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* and *Edward II*", *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, 191-201.

<sup>100</sup> Belén Vidal Villasur "Classic Adaptations, Modern Reinventions: Reading the Image in the Contemporary Literary Film", *Screen* 43.1, (Spring 2002): 5.

*Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996), *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) and *The Governess* (Sandra Goldbacher, 1998).

By defining these works as postclassical, Villasur aims to differentiate them from both classical heritage dramas and from “the modernist auteur film”. She points out that, with the exception of *The Portrait of a Lady* (which features a short film-within-a-film) most of these works reinforce narrativity and, therefore realism. But she also notes the emergence of an *auteurist* current within the new generation of literary films, exemplified by *The Age of Innocence* (Martin Scorsese, 1993) and *The House of Mirth* (Terence Davies, 2000). She describes both films as “exemplary classic adaptations in terms of their handling of literary realism” but, drawing upon Roman Jakobson’s notion of ‘literariness’, she suggests that the ‘literary’ may also operate as an intertext that opens “paths to the work of memory *in* the film text”.<sup>101</sup>



Figure 71: Newland Archer dreams of Ellen Olenska in *The Age of Innocence* (© Martin Scorsese, 1993)

In her discussion of these two films Villasur highlights the use of period painting, as a cultural sign that triggers the memory of the literary past, and the use of *tableaux vivants* to complicate narrative realism and closure. These strategies foreground

<sup>101</sup> Villasur, 8. This list could be extended to include a range of recent films including *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002).

intertextual allusion over the “illustrative style” that is typical of heritage film. In a key scene in *The Age of Innocence*, for example, Newland Archer (Daniel Day Lewis) finds Ellen Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer) alone on the pier. This image is almost static, but for the excruciatingly slow movement of a boat across the frame. Newland watches but fails to approach Ellen, waiting instead for her to turn and see him. Later, when he has resigned himself to the fact that he has lost her, the image recurs and in his imagination Ellen *does* turn. This departure from Wharton’s novel is read by Villasur as an auteurist rewriting of Newland’s past, an image that suggests “a movement without resolution, a narration without ending”.<sup>102</sup>

By comparison with the immersive and fluid narrative space of *The Age of Innocence*, Villasur notes that *The House of Mirth* favours long takes and slow pans. As might be expected from the director of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) Terence Davies’ film also incorporates a number of tableaux at key points. In one scene, the heroine Lily Bart (played by Gillian Anderson) poses in the role of Watteau’s *Summer* for guests assembled at a party. This display underscores Lily’s value within the marriage market but it also signals the waning of her power to secure a suitor (and financial security). For Villasur, it articulates the film’s ‘structure of feeling’ by prefiguring a second tableau, the final scene in which Lily’s still dead body is displayed. She further suggests that the “excessive” feminine body, and specifically the ‘televisual’ body of Gillian Anderson, “dissolves into citation, functioning as a token of literary memory”.<sup>103</sup>

Villasur’s analysis raises a number of significant issues with respect to *Anne Devlin* and *Nora*, particularly in relation to the use of tableaux vivants and female performance. While *Anne Devlin* references, and critiques, iconic images of revolutionary and martyred femininity, *Nora* actually incorporates a series of scenes structured around the painting of a portrait, as well as several dream or memory images that are uncannily similar to the closing sequence of *The Age of Innocence*.

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<sup>102</sup> Villasur, 13.

<sup>103</sup> Villasur, 17.

### ***Nora: Beyond Historical Spectacle***

Before proceeding with my discussion of *Nora*, I want to briefly consider a number of factors structuring its reception, partly in order to account for the lack of critical attention received by the film to-date, by comparison with Murphy's earlier work.<sup>104</sup> The long-delayed film was eagerly anticipated and numerous interviews and articles focusing on the production process were published prior to its release. For a film with a complex shooting schedule the budget was relatively low (enabling only eight weeks of filming) and was raised from a variety of sources, including Bord Scannán na hÉireann, RTÉ, Eurimages and the European Script Fund (as well as other Irish, German and Italian government agencies). As one commentator noted, Pat Murphy "spent ten years cobbling together \$9 million to create the film. She was going to make *Nora* at all costs".<sup>105</sup> The reviews in *Film Ireland* and *Film West* acknowledge these difficulties and simultaneously conclude that the film was "well worth the wait".<sup>106</sup>

Another issue of relevance to the reception of the film was, of course, its contested status as a 'literary' film and its position in relation to the wider literary (and 'heritage') culture around James Joyce. *Nora* is based upon Brenda Maddox's 1988 biography and draws heavily upon the deeply personal letters that Nora Barnacle exchanged with Joyce. But unlike the biography, Murphy's film deals only with their relationship between 1904 and 1914. Inevitably, Joyce's writing also provides a further series of 'original' texts against which the film must be measured even though, because of restrictions imposed by the Joyce estate, the film could not include direct quotations from these works.

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<sup>104</sup> A book about the film, by Gerardine Meaney is forthcoming from Cork University Press in 2003.

<sup>105</sup> An unidentified co-worker cited by Joanne Hayden in 'My Life With Nora' (interview with Pat Murphy), *The Sunday Business Post* (Agenda Section) April 2, 2000: 35. They include the dissolution of the Film Board during the period from 1987 to 1992 and the death of original producer Tiernan McBride (to whom the film is dedicated). Eventually the film was produced by Ewan McGregor's Natural Nylon Company.

Murphy's own position as an avowedly feminist filmmaker (combined with Maddox' explicitly 'revisionist' feminist agenda) may also have structured the reception of *Nora*. Yet Murphy has repeatedly resisted attempts to reduce the film to a feminist critique of Joyce. In an interview with Ruth Barton she states:

What's important about the film is that it's not a feminist re-reading of Joyce. It's not saying that [Nora] would have written his work or that he prevented her from making work. What it's saying is that her presence affected his work. And that they loved each other. His work was about daily life and that's one of his great contributions to twentieth century writing, that the ordinary is important. I think he was affected by that relationship with her to do that. [...] *It's not a film about James Joyce but about this relationship.*<sup>107</sup>

Many reviewers have, however, focused on the parallels and disparities between Murphy's film and Maddox's biography. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, Kevin Maher argues that the "driving narrative momentum" of the book is undermined by Murphy's *sympathetic* portrayal of Joyce and by the imposition of an "arbitrary" timeframe.<sup>108</sup> Even when praising the film for avoiding the "syrupy eulogies" and "creative clichés of the tortured-genius subject" that predominate in contemporary biopics such as *Wilde* (Brian Gilbert, 1997) or *Surviving Picasso* (Merchant/Ivory/Jhabvala, 1996) Maher seems unable to come to terms with the fact that the subject of the film is Nora and not Joyce. Elsewhere, Peter Bradshaw describes the film's recourse to original correspondence and other primary source material as "both a blessing and a curse", suggesting that it "soon grows indigestible [...] dampening and deadening the drama".<sup>109</sup> Other critics were dismissive of the film simply because of its *association* with Maddox. Declan Burke, writing for the Irish edition of the *Sunday Times*, critiques the representation of Joyce "as a villain

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<sup>106</sup> Desmond Traynor, "Nora", *Film Ireland* 75, (April/May 2000): 43 and Paula Shields, "Nora", *Film West* 40, (Summer 2000): 58.

<sup>107</sup> Pat Murphy, interviewed by Ruth Barton, "Portrait of A Lady", *Film Ireland* 75 (April-May 2000): 14. [Emphasis added]

<sup>108</sup> Kevin Maher "Nora", *Sight and Sound*, (June 2000): 49.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Bradshaw, 'Sister Act Five', *The Guardian* (Friday Review), May 19, 2000: 5.

with few redeeming features". But in order to substantiate this position he references a "website concerning Maddox's biography of Barnacle" rather than the film itself.<sup>110</sup>

Many reviews also position the film in relation to the 'heritage' genre, albeit in quite different ways. Declan Burke, although dismissive of the overall project, notes approvingly that the cinematography "gives the production a Merchant Ivory fidelity to its period detail" and Paula Shields describes it as "a beautiful period piece, with fittingly sumptuous costumes".<sup>111</sup> Desmond Traynor, however, states:

There is something a bit suspect, even cheesy, about making an historical movie, with the attendant dangers of falling into the heritage trap. But Pat Murphy circumvents this potential pitfall [...] Yes, the costumes and design are wonderful, but the most striking thing about this reading of the material is how well it captures the prevailing religious, political and social forces of the time.<sup>112</sup>

But although Traynor highlights the critical potential of heritage cinema (with respect to the representation of social repression) he fails to make a connection between this critique and the *form* of *Nora*. According to Pat Murphy, the elaborate and flamboyant costumes in *Nora* were an attempt to *counter* rather than to replicate the type of production design that is commonly found in British costume drama. Rather than confirming the 'authenticity' of the period setting they were intended to express Nora and Joyce's actual interest in fashion and to function "as a kind of narrative", articulating their rootless-ness and defiance in the face of poverty.<sup>113</sup>

The use of costume as narrative subtext is not the only departure in *Nora* from 'heritage' convention. For example, the lead actors are drawn from film and television rather than from theatre. The narrative also features a number of flashbacks, including one that is complicated by the inclusion of images from a silent

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<sup>110</sup> Declan Burke, "A Not-so-Fine Romance", *Sunday Times* (Culture supplement), February 13, 2000: 8

<sup>111</sup> Shields, 58.

<sup>112</sup> Traynor, 43. These reviews could be usefully compared with Andrew Higson's account of the reception of British heritage film. See Higson, "The Heritage Film and British Cinema", 242-244.

<sup>113</sup> Pat Murphy, interviewed by Ruth Barton, 13.



'Italian' film. *Nora* is also sexually explicit by comparison with much period drama (actually linking the written word with masturbation and sexual release) and the cinematography (by Jean Francois Robin) makes limited use of immersive 'movement-images', other than at key moments. Overall, in fact, *Nora* seems to be characterised by a 'reflexive gaze'. According to Villasur, a reflexive gaze is invoked in both *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* through thematic references to painting and display, and through the incorporation of tableaux vivants. These strategies call attention to the issue of spectatorship and are explicitly at odds with heritage cinema's characteristically "illustrative style", a style "that places the spectator in the position of the time-tourist".<sup>114</sup>



Figure 72: Nora, watched by Joyce, just before their first meeting. © Pat Mruphy

The relationship between fashion, spectacle and urban modernity is foregrounded from the moment of Nora and Joyce's first meeting on a busy Dublin street. Nora (Susan Lynch) is contemplating both her

reflection and the display of goods in a shop window when she overhears Joyce arguing with his sister Eva. When he notices her, Joyce (played by Ewan McGregor) assumes Nora to be an innocent country girl distracted by the spectacle of the city and offers to "show" her the city (even though *she* is likely to be the object on display). The contrast between their relative positions as urban subjects, in terms of class and gender, soon becomes evident and in the course of the narrative Nora becomes more and more the object of the male gaze, with the be-spectacled Joyce assuming the role of observer.

<sup>114</sup> Villasur, 9.

The three different settings, Galway, Dublin and Trieste, also function to articulate the interior worlds of the central characters, and the state of their relationship. Many of the Dublin scenes are filmed at night and the daytime scenes tend to feature little in the way of any historical ‘spectacle’. Murphy acknowledges that “its almost impossible to make a period film in Dublin without a vast amount of money” but she also notes that “people think of Dublin and Paris as Joycean cities and often don’t take into account how much of [Joyce and Nora’s] lives were actually based in Trieste”.<sup>115</sup> One of the few extended street sequences is deliberately dreamlike. Joyce (wearing a dishevelled coat and tails) and Nora (wearing her maid’s uniform) are pursued by a herd of cattle and take refuge in the stairwell of a dilapidated building until Nora drives the cattle away.



Figure 73: Joyce and Nora, walking Dublin streets at night in *Nora* (© Pat Murphy, 2000)

Many of the establishing shots are perfunctory, with a static shot of the Dublin quays and Four Courts reused at various points within the narrative, and ‘Galway’ signalled simply through

an oversized sign in a railway station. A number of key Dublin scenes are set in dank lanes and alleyways and Joyce and Nora only find sunshine and privacy when they rent their first apartment in Trieste. But at key moments the film *does* occasionally deliver the kind of spectacular imagery usually associated with costume drama.

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<sup>115</sup> Pat Murphy interviewed by the author.



Figure 74: Nora, about to get her first glimpse of Trieste in the sunlight in *Nora* © Pat Murphy

On their first morning together in Trieste, Nora opens the shutters to reveal the busy market in the square below, an image that recalls any number of painterly cityscapes. As she enjoys this spectacle, however, Joyce revels in the sight of *her*. Lying on the bed, he addresses her for the first time in Italian (which she does not understand): “welcome to your new life my beautiful mistress”. This signals his full possession of her in this new environment.



Figure 75: Nora poses for her portrait © Pat Murphy

Murphy acknowledges that, at various points, Nora’s state of mind is represented by the interior spaces of the apartments that she and Joyce occupy.<sup>116</sup> For example, when Joyce returns to Dublin to set up the Volta Cinema, Nora

<sup>116</sup> Pat Murphy, “Portrait of a Lady”, 13.

retreats into her bedroom, leaving her daughter Lucia hovering at the edges of the room or banished outside. In their next apartment, a more lavish “palace”, Joyce is a far more dominant figure. Their home is now organised around entertainment and public display and Nora seems to have little in the way of any privacy. She poses, semi-dressed, for a portrait under the watchful eyes of both Joyce and Signor Prezioso, an admirer whose respectful attentions are misunderstood by Joyce. The painting of the portrait makes Nora’s status as ‘muse’ overt and it also calls attention to subsequent, more fleeting, painterly quotations. For example, towards the close of the film Nora looks over her shoulder at Joyce before leaving the room and her posture and costume (an embroidered green shawl over a white gown) seem to echo the iconic image of Hazel Lavery as “Cathleen Ni Houlihan” (ca. 1923).



Figure 76: Shot of Nora gazing over her shoulder (in *Nora* © Pat Murphy) recalling John Lavery’s iconic portrait of Hazel Lavery as Cathleen Ni Houlihan (image © Central Bank of Ireland)

The narrative of *Nora* is marked by various forms of *repetition*, including flashbacks, several physical return journeys and recurrent visual motifs. Both Nora and Joyce seem to suffer from reminiscence, like the characters in classical film melodrama. At one point, Joyce is drawn to visit the hotel where Nora worked. Later Nora also returns, to Galway and to the scene of her first love affair. The images and sounds of a steam locomotive are also used, at various points, to signal temporal and spatial

shifts, a strategy read by some as possible evidence of “budgetary constraints”.<sup>117</sup> These transitions, however, call attention to the privileged relationship between trains, modernity and cinema<sup>118</sup>, and form part of a broader exploration of cultural memory within the film.

The image of the train is not the only visual motif repeated in the course of the narrative. Nora’s initial flashback incorporates an unidentified subjective shot of the action, from a position at the top of the stairs. Nora’s uncle beats her, ignoring the cries of her mother, who is also visible in the shot. This image of helplessness is recalled often as the narrative progresses. For example, following their encounter with the rogue cattle herd, Nora and Joyce are watched by an old woman, who stands at the top of the stairs. Nora is frequently shown descending and ascending stairs to her bedroom in the servant’s quarters of the Dublin hotel where she works, a room that is later visited by Joyce in one of the film’s most pronounced ‘returns’. Much later, in Trieste, the Joyces’ daughter Lucia is found abandoned on the landing, gazing down at her uncle Stanislaus from between wrought iron banisters.



Figure 77: Recurrent images of stairs in *Nora* © Pat Murphy

Another recurrent image is the silhouette of Nora and Joyce strolling arm in arm, engaged in a fashionable and highly self-conscious ‘promenade’. This image comes to serve as an index of their relationship and in a key scene, set on the pier, Joyce disrupts the promenade to attack the innocent Prezioso in front of Trieste’s

<sup>117</sup> Maher, 6.

<sup>118</sup> See Lynne Kirby *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).

bourgeoisie. Later, when Nora and Joyce have reconciled, this image is revisited as the film's closing shot. This time they are both dressed in white and Nora walks towards him, with her back turned to the camera. This image is strikingly similar to the shot of the pier at the close of Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* in terms of its setting and like Newland Archer's dream of Ellen it seems to be located somewhere between memory and fantasy.



Figure 78: Nora walks forward to join Joyce at the close of Murphy's film, in an image that recalls the closing sequence of *The Age of Innocence* (© Martin Scorsese, 1993)

The other key memory sequence is even more ambiguous. In the opening scene of the film, Nora recalls her last glimpse of Michael Furey, standing on the street below her bedroom window. We also see Michael's image of *her*, a reverse view that complicates any reading of this sequence as a straightforward flashback. These memories are subsequently stirred by Nora's viewing of an Italian film melodrama. This film-within-a-film<sup>119</sup> opens with a spiralling logo (reminiscent of Duchamp's

<sup>119</sup> Murphy notes that the choice of Irish films was relatively arbitrary. See "Portrait of a Lady", 14. The credits of *Nora* list *Quo Vadis* (Vitagraph, 1909), *An Easy Way to Pay the Bills* (Italia, 1909), *The Colleen Bawn* (1911, Kalem), *Rory O'More* (Kalem, 1911) and *Ireland: A Nation*

*Anemic Cinema*) and by the sounds of a whirring projector and a typically melodramatic classical score. In this context, the spiralling image seems to suggest entry into a trance-like state. The first scene of the film-within-a-film features a romantic encounter between a young couple. Following a close-up of Nora's rapt face in the flickering light of the projector, we see the hero alone and desolate. But in the next shot, the melodrama is interrupted by the image of *Nora* from the first flashback. But when Nora looks down at Michael this time, he slowly turns and walks away. In the melodrama, meanwhile, the music reaches a crescendo as the young woman weeps for her dead lover and lays flowers upon his grave.



Figure 79: Michael walks away in the film-within-a-film in *Nora* © Pat Murphy

On her way home from the cinema, lost in a reverie, Nora meets Joyce and recounts the story of her lost love, the story that was to become part of *The Dead*. The cinema seems, then, to provide the catalyst for Nora's recollection, functioning to *mediate* Joyce's subsequent literary exploration of personal and popular memory. The section of *Nora* has been read by Ruth Barton as a commentary on other cinematic representations of Joyce's work, such as *The Dead* (John Huston, 1987) but Murphy emphasises that it developed partly as a means of circumventing direct quotation from Joyce.<sup>120</sup> Other parallels with Huston's film also surface, however, through the incorporation of *The Lass of Aughrim*, the ballad that Nora and Joyce perform

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(Gaelic Film Company, 1914). At least some of the clips listed, however, are shown in the scenes of Joyce at the Volta Cinema.

together. This song, which provides the closing soundtrack to the film, recalls the story of young peasant woman whose lover (Lord Gregory) has abandoned both her and their child:

Well if you be the Lass of Aughrim, as I suppose you to be;  
Come give me the last token between you and me.  
Oh, Gregory, don't you remember that night on the hill?  
When we swapped rings off each other's hands, surely against my will.  
Mine was of the beaten gold, yours but black tin.  
Yes mine was of the beaten gold, yours but black tin.

Luke Gibbons notes that, in Huston's film, *The Lass of Aughrim* is "invested with an unresolved political as well as personal sense of loss", through its association with conquest and failed rebellion.<sup>121</sup> In *Nora*, it seems to reinforce a possible opposition (or perhaps dialogue) between visual and oral memorial forms: cinema and the ballad. Joyce and Nora actually debate the opposition between the word and the image in Irish culture somewhat comically, addressing themselves to the 'foreigner' Prezioso:

JOYCE [adopting a rural accent]: You see I know so little about painting, coming as I do from an oral culture.  
NORA [posing for her portrait]: And it suits him, Signor Prezioso, it's so much easier to lie with words than with pictures.

The reference in *The Lass of Aughrim* to a ring of 'beaten gold' subsequently takes on a greater significance, when Nora has to assume the appearance of a married woman for her return to her family home. In this context, the ballad seems to underscore both Nora's social and economic vulnerability *and* her cultural status as creative muse. But unlike the 'Lass' Nora is not a victim. At the close of the narrative she *chooses* to return to her life with Joyce.

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<sup>120</sup> Pat Murphy, interviewed by Ruth Barton, "Portrait of a Lady", 13.

<sup>121</sup> Luke Gibbons, "The 'Cracked looking Glass' of Cinema: James Joyce, John Huston and the Memory of 'The Dead'", *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.1 (Spring 2002): 142.



The exploration of the ballad form may be somewhat peripheral to *Nora* but it is central to Murphy's broader engagement with subjectivity, the national and the public sphere. David Lloyd, drawing on the work of Luke Gibbons, has emphasised the way in which ballads such as *The Lass of Aughrim* articulate an "oscillation" between residual and emergent modes of understanding, referring to an actual historical figure but also suggesting a refunctioning of traditional allegories. Lloyd notes that the fading of the allegorical mode of understanding is linked to the "accession of the subject to the symbolic modes proper to the representative histories of the nation-state formation".<sup>122</sup> Lloyd emphasises that while popular social formations (he cites agrarian movements and "women's culture") may be occluded by the rise of dominant or elite formations, these popular spaces are constituted "in simultaneity with, and difference from modern civil society".<sup>123</sup> He emphasises that it is their very *discontinuity* in historiographical terms that furnishes evidence of the persistence of these alternative social formations.

Elsewhere, in an argument that offers some possible points of intersection with Lloyd's model, Paul Willemsen has theorised the persistence of diverse "regimes of subjectivity", structuring cultural practices from cinema and public assemblies to national festivals. He argues that the *feudal* scopic regime can, in fact, be seen at work in all those practices where "exposure to the gaze of authority is a significant component of social activity".<sup>124</sup> This oscillation between (or coexistence of) apparently opposed modes of understanding or regimes of subjectivity seems in fact to be characteristic of Murphy's work; *Maeve* negotiates between representations of place, *Anne Devlin* explores the relationship between Catholicism and the colonial penal system and *Nora* juxtaposes memorial forms.

My analysis has highlighted a number of parallels between *Nora* and the 'postclassical' literary films theorised by Belen Villasur but, before concluding my

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<sup>122</sup> Lloyd, 83-84.

<sup>123</sup> Lloyd, 84.

discussion, I want to emphasise a pronounced and significant *difference* between Murphy's film and those of Scorsese and Davies. In contrast to *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, Nora appears to *reclaim* the (archetypal) excessive female body from "literary citation". The performance of Susan Lynch, as Nora, is central to this project. Pat Murphy notes that, by comparison with her earlier films, she employed a more collaborative approach to working with actors in *Nora*. In particular, she allowed "scenes to develop organically in rehearsal, rather than working every detail out in advance".<sup>125</sup> Both *Maeve* and *Anne Devlin* elaborate a critique of psychological realism. For this reason, the performances (particularly by Mary Jackson and Bríd Brennan) are not entirely naturalistic. Even when their bodies are on display, as in the key scenes that I have highlighted, a certain self-consciousness remains and this is reinforced at the level of narration.

In place of this kind of detachment, the performances, framing, lighting and costuming in *Nora* conspire to suggest a form of bodily *excess* on the part of Lynch's character. The physical contrast between the two leads is also striking as while Joyce's features remain somewhat indistinct, the lighting, costuming and extreme close-ups continually accentuate Lynch's pale skin, red lips and dark hair (in particular, her dark eyebrows and underarm hair). Lynch also tends to adopt a deliberately slouched posture and sullen expression as though refusing to conform to social and class norms of 'ladylike' behaviour.<sup>126</sup>

Much of the narrative also centres on the *sexual* relationship between Nora and Joyce and, as I have noted, certain scenes are relatively explicit. Initially, Nora would appear to be more sexually experienced and 'liberated' than Joyce but as Joyce's career progresses (and Nora becomes more economically dependent) the balance

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<sup>124</sup> Paul Willemen, "Regimes of Subjectivity and Looking", *The UTS Review* 1.2 (1995): 126. Brian Hand has examined residual 'feudal' regimes within the Irish context. See Brian Hand, "Audience to Ourselves", *CIRCA* 92 (Summer 2000): 34-37.

<sup>125</sup> Pat Murphy, Interview with Helen Meany, "For Love of Music, Hats and Jimmy", *Irish Times* (Dublin Film Festival Supplement) April 1, 2000: 4.

<sup>126</sup> For an in-depth analysis of female performance, focusing partly on costume drama, see Christine Geraghty, "Crossing Over: Performing as a Lady and a Dame", *Screen* 34.1, Spring 2002: 41-56.

shifts. When Joyce returns to set up the Volta in Dublin he becomes obsessed with Nora's sexual history and begins to taunt her with accusatory letters. She is drawn into his fantasies and seems unable to extricate herself from the role of the "dirty girl" that he has written for her. She only persuades him to return when she threatens to have the children baptised and so is forced into a quite different role, one with which she clearly has little sympathy.

Nora subsequently takes on the role of the dutiful mother (and daughter) and returns with her children to Galway, and the family that once rejected her. By this point she has adopted a more restrained, although still fashionable, mode of dress and her hair is hidden. When Joyce eventually finds her, she is seated on the sand beside the children, in an image of familial harmony. She has taken up smoking, however, and this provides some evidence of her resistance to this role. Later, when they are together in her old bedroom, Nora's body language and appearance remains somewhat restrained. Instead of reacting to Joyce's provocations with her customary verbal outbursts she walks away from him, and stands outside on the street (where Michael Furey stood). But, in sharp contrast to earlier scenes, her posture is upright and her subsequent return to the bedroom, and to the relationship, can be read as a deliberate choice.

### **Conclusion: Making the National Collective**

My discussion has highlighted questions of reception that are specific to feminist avant-garde practice in the late 70s and early 80s and to recent literary cinema. Drawing upon an analysis of contemporary theory and practice, I have argued that *Maeve*, *Anne Devlin* and *Nora* are all concerned, at a formal and thematic level, with issues of spectatorship. I have also noted Murphy's own involvement in film programming, exhibition and performance and emphasised the extent to which her practice responds to, and engages with, changing structures of reception within the Irish context. Although she has worked within the conventions of film melodrama and biography, her practice actually functions as a commentary on the ongoing

development of national cinema: from ethnographic documentary to historical and literary drama.

Judith Mayne has suggested that national cinema studies have largely failed to engage with the feminist critique of spectatorship, noting that this serves to “reinforce the sense that the apparatus is a peculiarity of classical filmmaking”.<sup>127</sup> Some issues of spectatorship *have* perhaps been taken into account in analyses of literary genres, but Mayne’s critique does call attention to a certain bias within the field. As Lance Pettitt points out, “the existence of a national cinema has [traditionally] been predicated on the extent to which a country creates and controls the means to its own film *production*” and this emphasis may leave less room for the analysis of modes of spectatorship particular to the national context.<sup>128</sup>

Where studies of national cinema *do* foreground the issue of reception it is often solely in order to highlight the elusive character of the ‘national audience’ or public. Tom O’Regan, for example, considers the existence of various different “publics” for

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<sup>127</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, (London: Routledge, 1993): 63. Mayne notes an exception to this in Noel Burch’s *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema*, ed. Annette Michelson, (London: Scolar Press: 1979). Mayne also references Thomas Elsaesser’s analysis of Fassbinder in “Primary Identification and the Historical Subject: Fassbinder and Germany” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986): 535-549.

<sup>128</sup> Pettitt, 29. [Emphasis added]. John Hill considers the issue of national cinema audiences in “British Cinema as National Cinema: Production, Audiences and Representation”, *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London: BFI, 2001) 208-210. Philippe Meers notes an overall lack of research into European cinema audiences in “Look who’s watching! A brief reflection on European cinema audiences”, *Mediasalles Research Library*, 2000 (website) [http://www.mediasalles.it/crl\\_meers.htm](http://www.mediasalles.it/crl_meers.htm). Andrew Higson points out the insufficient attention is paid to the films circulating within a particular culture in “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, *Cinema & Nation* eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, (London: Routledge, 2000) 67. There are exceptions, however. See Nicolas Andrew Miller’s analysis of the Irish reception of Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in his *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 97-126 and Helen Byrne’s “Going to the Pictures: The Female Audience and the Pleasures of Cinema” (88-106) and Barbara O’Connor’s, “Gender, Class and Television Viewing: Audience Responses to the *Ballroom of Romance*” (63-87) both in *Media Audiences in Ireland: Power and Cultural Identity*, (Dublin: University College, Dublin, Press): 1997. See also the personal accounts of Irish cinema-going in Stephanie McBride and Roddy Flynn (eds.) *Here’s Looking at You, Kid!: Ireland Goes to the Pictures* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1996).

Australian cinema, which may intersect with or perhaps reinforce each other.<sup>129</sup> O'Regan suggests that the continued maintenance of a state-supported national cinema relies upon the mediating and translating activities of these various 'publics' so that cinema is "made *collective* on a continuing basis".<sup>130</sup> Arguably, however, certain forms of practice *also* play a mediating and translating role. Pat Murphy's work seems to me to perform this function because of its overt engagement with issues of audience and reception.

Murphy notes that her work is shaped by "a kind of energy which moves through cultures at different times, which is expressed and even sometimes led by film".<sup>131</sup> Elsewhere, she states, "When you're a director, people have a view that you're making the films that you need personally to make sometimes, but in fact you're part of an audience and part of a general move and a culture. Maybe you're a bit ahead of it".<sup>132</sup> With her first two feature length films Murphy did seem to be 'ahead' of developments, within both the national context and the wider avant-garde culture. In the early 1980s *Maeve* was singled out as evidence of a new avant-garde rooted in the regional and, subsequently, *Anne Devlin* was at the forefront a new wave of feminist historical dramas. By contrast, *Nora* seems to belong to an earlier moment and it perhaps articulates not only a response to developments within the literary genre (as I have argued) but also the difficulty of *maintaining* a critical Irish film practice within the current context of production.

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<sup>129</sup> Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 10-27.

<sup>130</sup> O'Regan, 26. [Emphasis added] His analysis also highlights the fact, however, that the international audience functions as another 'public', which exerts a pressure on both the production and the distribution of national cinema. See Stephen Crofts, "Re-imaging Australia: Crocodile Dundee Overseas", *Continuum* 2:2 (1989): 129-142.

<sup>131</sup> Murphy, "Interview with Pat Murphy", 8.

<sup>132</sup> Murphy, "Portrait of a Lady", 12

## **Conclusion**

### **Towards a Critical Context For Irish Avant-garde Film, Past and Present**

This 'archaeology of Irish cinema' set out to address a number of specific questions; what factors influenced and informed the critical film practices that emerged in the 70s and early 80s? To what extent were these practices shaped by developments in the international avant-garde? How have these critical currents been theorised and historicized in relation to Irish cinema? I sought answers to these questions in three key areas: theory, policy and practice. A summary of the main findings is provided below, but my research has also raised many new questions with respect to developments since the late 1980s. How do theories of the avant-garde, developed in relation to the film cultures of the 70s and 80s, inform analysis of recent practice? Is the emergence of subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures within the Irish context specific to the 70s and 80s or is it possible to identify continuities within contemporary practice? I will explore these and other issues in the latter part of my discussion.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Chapter One documented the revival of avant-garde critique in theory and practice during the 70s and 80s, noting a renewed emphasis on issues of narrative form and questions of audience, and a self-reflexive engagement with the conventions of genre. My research has also highlighted a number of specific intersections between Irish practice and international film theory during this period, primarily around issues of place and cultural specificity. In the latter part of Chapter One I considered the critical reception of avant-garde film within Irish cinema studies. I provide evidence of a tendency to foreground issues of production, sometimes at the expense of an in-depth study of distribution, exhibition or reception, and my research indicates that such an emphasis does not always allow for an analysis of diverse or marginal modes of practice. In some instances this leads to an emphasis on the formal characteristics of avant-garde film, an emphasis that may counter the avant-garde project of

institutional critique. My study argues for an archaeological approach to film practice and film culture, which foregrounds the relationship between avant-garde works and the wider social and cultural context.

In my study of 'inter-national' circulation, in Chapter Two, I identified the period from the 70s to the early 80s as a privileged moment for Irish avant-garde filmmaking, a moment characterised by important developments in Irish arts policy and by unprecedented support for Irish film on the part of international agencies. In particular, my research has highlighted the contribution of international agencies to Irish film culture, agencies such as the Production Board of the British Film Institute, the Other Cinema and the Circulating Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art. My study of this period extends to questions of audience and access and it highlights a number of critiques advanced by filmmakers and critics with respect to the perceived elitism of Irish film clubs and societies. But my research suggests that, on the whole, Irish cinema benefited from this interaction between national and international structures of production, distribution and exhibition.

It would appear, however, that these structures have undergone a series of pronounced shifts since the late 1980s. It is clear that, in recent years, the gallery and the cultural festival have emerged as privileged, and relatively distinct, sites for Irish film exhibition. I also note a growing emphasis on the curated film show in international practice, in place of the modes of distribution associated with the co-operative model. More significantly, for the Irish context, my research suggests that the development of separate spheres for avant-garde and 'national' cinema may work against the kind of critical dialogue that energised Irish filmmaking in the 70s and 80s.

In Chapter Three I theorised the 'subaltern' as a focus for cultural and political critique in the work of Joe Comerford and Bob Quinn. My research highlights a number of shared thematic emphases in their films: a focus on traditional arts such as music and storytelling; a rejection of official modes of representation; a critical

engagement with issues of cultural, ethnic and linguistic difference. Quinn and Comerford also share an allegiance to artisanal production but, although they privilege collaboration with other practitioners and local communities, my research suggests that neither filmmaker subscribes to a fully 'collective' mode of practice.

My study has addressed the local and regional discourses structuring the distribution and reception of specific films by Comerford and Quinn but I note that both filmmakers were also informed, and supported, by developments in international film practice. Their work has been theorised by others primarily in relation to parallel currents in Third Cinema, critical ethnography and European 'art cinema'. But my analysis of the interaction between sound and image in films such as *Self-Portrait With Red Car*, *Poitín*, *Traveller* and *Waterbag* calls attention to *another* key point of reference: the historical Avant-garde's exploration of sound synchronisation and synesthetic effects. My research suggests that, for Quinn and Comerford, the subaltern functions as a site from which to interrogate cinematic realism itself and this project is articulated through a combination of visual, temporal and aural strategies, drawn from avant-garde practice *and* from Irish cultural tradition.

Chapter Four explored issues of migration and migrant identity in the early films of Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan. Both filmmakers emerged within the context of international avant-garde film cultures (centred on New York and London) and drew upon a personal experience of migration in the late 1970s in order to explore issues of subjectivity, voyeurism and cultural identity. While O'Sullivan's work has generated considerable critical attention within the context of Irish cinema studies, Dick's practice has remained largely on the margins of Irish film culture. My study calls attention to a number of parallels between their early work, most notably in the exploration of performativity, visuality and autobiography in *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted*. I also trace a shared concern with Hollywood myth and iconography.



My research situates the work of Dick and O'Sullivan within the context of an avant-garde critique of modernist film aesthetics. This critique is overt in the No Wave movement, which marked a clear departure from the modes of production and exhibition associated with New American Cinema and 'structural' film. O'Sullivan's practice is less easy to position in relation to any specific movement but it appears to have been informed by a shift away from structural-materialism in the work of Steven Dwoskin and the Four Corners collective. My study suggests that the early films of Dick and O'Sullivan cannot simply be defined as 'postmodernist', despite their attention to narrativity and the specifics of place. Instead both practices call existing definitions and genealogies of modernism and postmodernism into question.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I explored issues of reception in relation to Pat Murphy's practice and in the work of the international feminist avant-garde. My analysis highlights a recurrent concern with conflict and critical spectatorship in Murphy's work, across various contexts of production. Her films often feature central characters that are subjected to surveillance, but also serve as privileged observers or witnesses within the narrative. *Maeve* and *Anne Devlin* both deal explicitly with colonial structures of observation and representation and this exploration of the gaze is informed by contemporary developments in feminist film theory and practice, to which Murphy's work contributes and responds. My study also theorises Murphy's film *Nora* as a critical renegotiation of literary adaptation, a dominant mode of production in recent Irish and British cinema. By comparison with Murphy's earlier work *Nora* has generated relatively little critical interest but my analysis suggests that it develops a reflexive critique of the 'heritage' genre through its central performances, its representation of place and sexuality and its exploration of memory and cultural trauma.

To what extent can these subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures be considered together? Although my study calls attention to the diverse contexts structuring the development of these practices, I have noted a number of parallels between all five filmmakers. These include a widespread critique of the conventions structuring the

representation of landscape<sup>1</sup>, a self-reflexive exploration of autobiography and authorship (particularly in *Maeve*, *Visibility Moderate*, *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy*, *Flanagan* and *Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories*) and an emphasis on cinema as a site of memory. Few of the films discussed in the study are explicitly 'historical' in terms of their subject matter (apart from obvious exceptions such as *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoghaire*, *Anne Devlin*, *December Bride* and *Nora*) but many explore memorial process through music and storytelling and through the appropriation and re-working of narrative conventions such as voiceover and flashback.

I have also highlighted the literal representation of cinema audiences in films such as *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoghaire*, *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* and *Nora*.<sup>2</sup> As I have noted, *Caoineadh* models a form of collective viewing that is specifically associated with oppositional cinemas. In contrast, *The Woman who Married Clark Gable* presents *classical* cinema as a site of desire and fantasy and *Nora* explores the public and private dimensions of early cinema's narrative space. Despite their diversity, these images of spectatorship highlight a powerful interplay between cinema and cultural memory.

Images of the audience are not particular to the films of the 'First Wave'. In fact *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986), *Into the West* (Mike Nichols, 1992) and *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1998) all feature pivotal scenes of cinema or television viewing. Each of these narratives, however, references Hollywood cinema in the *post-classical*

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<sup>1</sup> Although some films discussed in the study are explicitly concerned with aspects of the urban landscape a greater number focus on *rural* Ireland. For example, Bob Quinn's *Poitín* and *Self-Portrait with Red Car*, Joe Comerford's *Waterbag*, *Traveller* and *Reefer and the Model*, Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted*, *Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories*, *December Bride*, Pat Murphy's *Maeve*, Vivienne Dick's *Visibility Moderate*, *Like Dust to Dawn* and *Rothach*.

<sup>2</sup> Other forms of spectatorship, associated with live performance, are foregrounded *Visibility Moderate* and *On A Paving Stone Mounted*. This focus on the spectator is most pronounced in the strip sequence in O'Sullivan's film, which shifts attention towards the predominantly male audience

period.<sup>3</sup> In the process, these works foreground cinema as the privileged sign (and site) of globalisation and inter-cultural exchange. By comparison, the sequences that I have highlighted in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* and *Nora* articulate a concern with cinematic subjectivity and the cultural processes shaping reception. This situates these works in relation to the avant-garde film cultures of the 70s and 80s, and the theoretical debates documented in Chapter One.

### **New Contexts of Production and Reception: Developments Since 1987**

My study has focused on the period from 1973 to 1987 and it is beyond the scope of this discussion to address fully the cultural, social and economic forces shaping Irish contexts of production and reception since then. But I want to highlight a number of key developments that are of particular significance for critical film practice. The dissolution (and the subsequent reestablishment) of the Irish Film Board invites analysis and I will return to the issue of film policy in due course.

The 1990s also witnessed an expansion of the independent audio-visual production sector, with the launch of TG4 and TV3 and the enforcement of quotas for independent production at RTE. Although TV3 has not yet made a substantial contribution in terms of commissioning, TG4 *has* supported the production of a diverse range of Irish-language shorts.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these ongoing forms of direct and indirect subvention, Irish cinema has benefited from the establishment of various international initiatives in the areas of film production and video distribution.

Many of the most profound shifts in Irish film culture, however, relate to *perceptions* of Irish cinema at home and abroad. As Martin McLoone has noted, the 1990s marked the emergence of Irish cinema on the world stage, within the context of a

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<sup>3</sup> These films feature clips from *Roustabout*, an Elvis musical, *Back to the Future III*, a post-Western sequel and *The Brain from Planet Arous*, a 50s Sci-fi B movie.

<sup>4</sup> See Roddy Flynn, "Broadcasting and the Celtic Tiger: From Promise to Practice", *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy*, eds Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002): 160-176. For a discussion of Irish language shorts see Ruth Lysaght "Oscailt, Lasair and Contemporary Irish Language Film", *Film Ireland 90*, (January/February 2003) 36-37,

cultural renaissance in music, literature and theatre.<sup>5</sup> By comparison with 1987, Ireland now offers a far greater range of film production courses, facilities and employment opportunities and Irish cinema enjoys much higher *international* profile, partly because of the critical and commercial successes of Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, and a number of younger directors (such as Conor McPherson, Paddy Breathnach, Damien O'Donnell, Kristen Sheridan and Mary McGuckian).<sup>6</sup> The past sixteen years have witnessed a parallel expansion of Irish cinema studies, most notably in terms of publishing and cultural events such as festivals and conferences. Much of this research has been supported by the education and preservation activities of the Irish Film Institute (IFI), and the establishment by the IFI of the Irish Film Centre in 1992.

My research suggests, however, that the period since the late 1980s has also been marked by a certain *contraction*, in terms of the modes of film practice that are supported and (perhaps more significantly) acknowledged within the national context. My study of subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures supports the view, advanced by various theorists of Irish cinema and discussed in Chapter One, that the current political and cultural context does not support the type of critical practice that flourished during the 70s and 80s. The reasons for this are complex and in the course of my study I have highlighted developments across theory, policy and practice, as well as national and international cultural and economic shifts. But at this point I want to focus specifically on Irish film *policy*.

My study has examined the modes of production and the models of authorship that were particular to Irish avant-garde practice in the 1970s and 80s. Filmmakers such as Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn may have emerged within different contexts but they all developed collaborative

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<sup>5</sup> See Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000) 2.

<sup>6</sup> The profile of Irish cinema has also been raised by a number of Irish-themed works by British directors (including Alan Parker's *The Commitments* and *Angela's Ashes*, Stephen Frears' *The Snapper* and *The Van*, Peter Mullan's *The Magdalene Sisters*) and by the work of a number of Irish film actors.

approaches to filmmaking during this period. Most had links to Irish and international production or distribution collectives and were directly involved in the exhibition of their own work. These practices were supported by Irish agencies such as the Arts Council and, subsequently, the first Irish Film Board.

By comparison with the BFI Production Board and Channel Four, the Film Board would seem to have prioritised a relatively conventional approach to filmmaking. Yet it did fund a number of important and critically engaged works, many of which I have highlighted. The Board also appears to have supported *different* approaches to financing during its relatively brief term of active existence. For example, Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984) was funded primarily through state subsidy (and by a substantial private donation) and it was distributed internationally by a feminist collective. In contrast, Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* (1988) was partly funded through commercial investment, which was raised through the advance sale of international distribution rights. This suggests that the Board did not necessarily prioritise a particular model of production.

As is widely known, a change of government (and the high-profile critical and commercial success of certain Irish filmmakers) prompted the reinstatement of the Film Board in 1993, as Bord Scannán na hÉireann. Since then a range of schemes for film and digital video have been established and the Board has contributed funding to over 76 features. But to what extent has the revived Film Board supported a diversity of modes of production? An in-depth analysis of the Board's funding policy is clearly beyond this scope of this study, but my research indicates that its establishment has coincided with (if not actually encouraged) a shift away from the modes of collaborative and artisanal practice documented in my analyses of subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures. I have highlighted a commitment to 'artisanal' practice in various statements and publications by Rod Stoneman (Chief Executive of the Board,

1993-2003).<sup>7</sup> But I have also noted a certain disparity between Stoneman's model and that favoured by filmmakers such as Quinn, Comerford and Murphy.

Bob Quinn has been particularly vocal in his criticisms of Film Board policy, noting that even the short films financed by the Board are 'over-produced' and 'over-crewed'.<sup>8</sup> In place of partial funding for 35mm feature production, Quinn has advocated the *full* financing of a small number of low-budget 16mm works, some of which could be transferred to 35mm for screening. In 2002, perhaps by way of a response to these and other criticisms, the Board announced a shift in focus towards low-budget and 'micro-budget' work. Two new schemes have been established and one offers up to 60% of the funding for 'Low Budget' features (with a ceiling of 1 million Euro) while the other scheme provides 100% funding (between 25,000 and 100,000 Euro) for "projects of a more experimental nature [...] shot on digital formats".<sup>9</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Bord Scannán na hÉireann funds only *one* type of filmmaking. In April 2003 the Board celebrated ten years of activity and it marked this anniversary with a film season, entitled *New Irish Cinema, 1993-2003*, at the Irish Film Centre and the Cinemobile. The screening programme was accompanied by a publication entitled *Ten Years After: The Irish Film Board, 1993-2003*, written by Kevin Rockett. In his introduction, Rockett notes that approximately three quarters of the Board's funds (a total of 65 million Euro between 1993 and 2003) tend to be invested in feature production and television drama, leaving the remainder for allocation to other types of filmmaking, such as documentaries,

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<sup>7</sup> Rod Stoneman emphasised the importance of "market-driven auteurs" in his contribution to the panel on "The Film Industry in Europe", 13<sup>th</sup> *European Television and Film Forum*, European Institute for the Media, Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin. 9 Nov. 2001. For a discussion of Film Board policy in relation to specific filmmakers see also Áine Coffey, "Show Me the Money", *The Sunday Tribune* (Business section), November 25, 2001: 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Quinn, "Recycled Rants." *Film West* 42 (Winter 2000): 28.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Linehan, "Any More Goldfish, Harry?", *Irish Times*, July 19, 2002: 12. The development of these new production initiatives suggests a belated response to the policy critiques developed by filmmakers such as Bob Quinn, Pat Murphy and Joe Comerford and it seems apt that one of the first feature productions to benefit from this new approach is *Dead Bodies* (2003), directed by Quinn's son Robert.

developments, short films and, more recently, Irish-language filmmaking and animation.<sup>10</sup> The publication documents completed projects in the areas of television drama, Irish and English language short film, 'Short Shorts' (3 minutes in length), documentaries, film animation and digital Flash animation, as well as over 76 feature length dramas. Despite the broad scope of the Board's activity, however, the *New Irish Cinema* screening programme focused *exclusively* on feature films.

*Ten Years After* also documents the Film Board's support for a number of artist's film and video projects that could perhaps be classified as 'avant-garde'. One section, entitled 'Other Short Films', includes Clare Langan's film series *Floodlight, Too Dark for Light* and *Glass Hour*, (2000-2002) and a 16mm film by the artists group Blue Funk, entitled *C Oblique O* (1999). This section also lists Vivienne Dick's "video triptych" *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2002), a three screen installation piece that was presented at the Limerick City Gallery and the Galway Arts Centre. Most of the projects listed in the 'Other Short Films' section would have been produced on a relatively small budget (raised from various forms of state-subsidy) with a limited crew and exhibited in galleries or in festivals. None would have received the type of commercial investment that is typical of national-industrial filmmaking. Could it be that these works represent a continuation of the type of critical avant-garde practice foregrounded in my study of the 1970s and 80s?

I will explore this issue in the final part of this study, but for the moment it seems highly significant that the Board has not publicly promoted its investment in this type of practice.<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that, in the *New Irish Cinema* programme, the Board needed to focus attention specifically upon its achievements in feature production

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Rockett, *Ten Years After: The Irish Film Board 1993 – 2003* (Dublin: Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board, 2003) ix.

<sup>11</sup> The Board's financing of installation practice would appear to represent a change in policy, but if so this change has not been widely advertised. To the best of my knowledge *Excluded by the Nature of Things* and Paddy Jolley's *Burn* (2002), also listed under 'Other Short Films', are the first multi-screen gallery installation works to be funded by Bord Scannán na hÉireann.

because of ongoing uncertainty around state subvention for the Irish film industry.<sup>12</sup> In practice, however, this exclusive emphasis on feature production contributes to the marginalisation of avant-garde practice. The recent establishment of the Film Board's new scheme for 'experimental' work is highly significant in this context, because it might provide a greater profile for this type of practice.

The other key area of Irish film policy that invites analysis is the role of the Arts Council. Since the late 1980s, moving image work has become an increasingly important component of Irish arts practice, supported by developments in film education and media technology. Several multidisciplinary arts spaces (often echoing the model developed by Project Arts Centre) have been established since the late 80s and they provide an important context for the exhibition of Irish media art. Yet the Arts Council has largely failed to develop a coherent film policy in response to these developments.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1970s and 80s the Council provided funding for projects such as Quinn's *Poitín* (1978), Comerford's *Waterbag* (1984) and the Derry Film and Video Collective's *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (1989) under the Film Script Award and the subsequent Film and Video Award. These schemes raised the profile of Irish filmmaking and often enabled filmmakers to secure other grants or investment. In recent years, however, the dedicated Arts Council award has been replaced by a range of other schemes (including the multidisciplinary 'Projects' fund, the Frameworks animation award and the general arts bursaries).

In March 2003 the Arts Council staged a retrospective season at the Irish Film Centre, in collaboration with the Film Institute of Ireland. This event, entitled *30*

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<sup>12</sup> The Board itself was apparently under threat in late 2002. See Ted Sheehy, "Saved From 'Bord Snip'", *The Irish Times*, December 20, 2002: 16. Rod Stoneman also announced his departure as CEO of the Board in April 2003 and this may have contributed an added urgency to debates around the future of the film industry.

<sup>13</sup> The Arts Council continues to support aspects of Irish film culture, as a source of funding for festivals, 'cultural cinema' organisations like Access Cinema and training workshops such as Filmbase but its film section would appear to be under-resourced as the film officer has been appointed on a part-time basis in recent years.



*Years On: The Arts Council and The Filmmaker* marked the 30th anniversary of the 1973 Arts Act. The programme highlighted the diversity of work funded by the Council, from arts documentaries such as the *Heritage of Ireland* series (Louis Marcus, 1978), research-based projects like Amanda Dunsmore's video work *Billy's Museum* (2002) to short and feature-length dramas such as *After '68* (Stephen Burke, 1993) and *All Soul's Day* (Alan Gilsonan, 1997).

The project also explored the pivotal role played by the Council in production, both prior to and after the establishment of the first Film Board. At the *30 Years On* Public Forum, Colm O'Briain (a former Director of the Arts Council) noted that in the 70s and 80s the Council had often acted as an unofficial producer by helping to provide access to facilities, as well as initial funding.<sup>14</sup> This may overstate the Council's role but it is worth noting that, like the Production Board of the BFI, the Arts Council provided awards to *individuals*. In contrast, both of the Film Boards have tended to distribute the bulk of their funds to production companies, and it has been suggested by some filmmakers that this emphasis on a corporate structure (often headed by the *producer*) works against an artisanal approach.<sup>15</sup> *30 Years On* was intended to provide a context for debate around the Arts Council's future policies in the areas of production, exhibition and preservation. But it seems to have been under-resourced in terms of promotion, and it would appear that the screening programme and Public Forum failed to generate the same level of media or public interest as the Film Board's *New Irish Cinema* season.<sup>16</sup>

The *30 Years On* event was highly significant as a research project, however. The organisers (curator Ted Sheehy and Gráinne Humphreys of the IFI) traced all of the

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<sup>14</sup> Colm O'Brian was speaking at the *30 Years On* Public Forum, Irish Film Centre, March 30, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Filmmaker Johnny Gogan raised this issue during his presentation at the *30 Years On* Public Forum, Irish Film Centre, March 30, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> The entire *30 Years On* season included 45 films, screened in 23 separate programmes, but total admissions were just 352 for the entire event. I am indebted to Gráinne Humphreys of the IFC for providing box office details. Box Office figures for *New Irish Cinema* are unavailable but I have been advised by Máire Horgan that many of the screenings were sold out. The Film Board Forum (held on April 11, 2003) was also fully packed.

film and video works funded by the Arts Council under its film schemes since 1973 and the *30 Years On* catalogue<sup>17</sup> includes a comprehensive directory of projects and contact details. The project also served the needs of researchers through the establishment of a temporary viewing collection. The vast majority of the films included in the screening programme and the directory have yet to be released on video and many are unavailable to view even in the Irish Film Archive. But, for two days during the event, a library of over 100 videotapes was set up in an administrative office.

In Chapter Two, drawing upon the work of Julia Knight, I noted that library collections were once a standard feature of avant-garde distribution. Knight emphasises that these facilities do not form part of the emergent 'curatorial' model of distribution.<sup>18</sup> By taking up this aspect of an earlier distribution model, the *30 Years On* project highlighted the need for a permanent viewing collection within the Irish context. A permanently accessible library of artists films, perhaps modelled after the British Film and Video Artists Study Collection, would provide a vital resource for researchers and practitioners. In particular it would support the work of those seeking to expand existing definitions and models of Irish film practice.

### **Continuity and Change: Developments in Practice since 1987**

Do recent moving image works by Irish artists represent a continuation of the modes of production foregrounded in my analyses of subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures? Is it possible to identify *other* areas of critical film practice within the Irish context? Some evidence of continuity (and perhaps repetition) can be found in a recent revival of 16mm and 8mm filmmaking, following its decline during the 1980s. As I noted in Chapter Two, the 80s and 90s witnessed a move from 16mm to video in

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<sup>17</sup> The publication does not, however, include all of the artist's moving image works funded by the Council through bursaries or general awards. See Maeve Connolly, "Green Screen", *CIRCA* 104 (Summer 2003): 22-23. Ted Sheehy's catalogue essay also provides considerable insight into the circumstances surrounding the extension of the Arts Council's remit to film in 1973. This essay, together with full programme details, can be located at <http://www.artscouncil.ie/news/docs/30years.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Julia Knight, "Reaching Audiences: The Role of the Distributor," paper delivered at *Experimental Film Today*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, July 6, 2003.

'independent' production and distribution. In keeping with these developments, the five filmmakers foregrounded in my study all gradually abandoned 16mm and 8mm for video or for 35mm film. Thaddeus O'Sullivan, for example, has maintained a focus on 35mm production since the mid 1980s and, in 1994, Bob Quinn actually remade his 16mm *Budawanny* (1986) on 35mm, as *The Bishop's Story*. Pat Murphy also continues to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to 35mm film and her most recent work is actually a 3-minute 35mm film funded by the Film Board under the 'Short Shorts' scheme.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, both Vivienne Dick and Joe Comerford have gravitated towards digital video. Comerford is currently reworking footage from his 16mm film *Swan Alley* (1969) for a digital video project entitled *Roughtouch*. Vivienne Dick maintains an involvement in 16mm exhibition<sup>20</sup> but her most recent work is the three screen video installation *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2002).

Yet just as vinyl records have outlasted newer media, 8mm and 16mm film continue to retain an appeal for some Irish practitioners. This may be because older formats offer both a link to an established cultural tradition and an aesthetic quality unmatched by digital video.<sup>21</sup> Recent years have witnessed the emergence of two key areas of narrow gauge filmmaking internationally: the Film Lab<sup>22</sup> movement (which can be read as an extension of the co-op model of production) and the artist's film (which is sometimes screened on DVD). This latter mode of practice will provide a

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<sup>19</sup> This work, entitled *What Miro Saw* (2002), is not currently available from either the Film Board or the Irish Film Archive. The Board's website describes it as "a dialogue between Robert Janz, an artist trapped in his Lower Manhattan loft by the disaster of September 11th, who faxes drawing[s] of what he sees through his window to a friend in Dublin". Murphy is also developing a 35mm feature, entitled *Dark Matter*.

<sup>20</sup> To coincide with the Galway Film Fleadh in July 2001 Vivienne Dick curated a programme of 16mm avant-garde films (many sourced from Cinenova) entitled *Marginal Movies*.

<sup>21</sup> DVD remains unsuitable for the distribution of certain avant-garde works because avant-garde imagery often exceeds the limits of compression technology. This point was made by Pip Chodorov (of Re:Voir video distribution) in "The Difficulties of Promoting/Distributing a Non-Commercial Art Form: A History of Avant-Garde Film Co-ops and Independent Distribution." *Experimental Film Today*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston on 6 July 2003.

<sup>22</sup> In fact recent years have witnessed something of a renaissance within lower gauge film production (supported by the distributing of new film stock) and this is evidenced by the growing number of festivals dedicated to Super 8 film. See <http://www.super8filmmaking.com/s8fest.htm>. An account of the French film lab movement was provided by Pip Chodorov in his presentation at *Experimental Film Today*, 6 July 2003.

key point of reference in my discussion of recent Irish filmmaking but I make no attempt to provide a survey of the intersection between Irish art and film.<sup>23</sup> Instead I want to highlight a number of *different* areas of practice on the margins of feature film production, across artists' film and video, documentary and television drama. My discussion focuses specifically on explorations of place, memory and identity, and on themes of spectatorship and authorship, all of which I have identified as central to Irish avant-garde practice in the 1970s and 80s.

In the first part of my analysis I will consider the persistence of the 16mm and 8mm tradition amongst Irish women filmmakers. As noted in Chapter Five, many feminist filmmakers turned their attention towards narrative cinema, and the conventions of literary and historical drama, during the 1980s and 90s. In sharp contrast, a small number of Irish women gravitated towards a *materialist* aesthetic. I will focus on two Irish filmmakers associated with the London Film-Maker's Co-op (LFMC) during the late 80s and early 90: Moira Sweeney and Orlagh Mulcahy.

Moira Sweeney was born in the North of Ireland and she studied Fine Art in Newcastle before moving to London, where she worked as a programmer at the LFMC and published articles on film in journals such as *Undercut* and *Variant*.<sup>24</sup> Her *Imaginary* series (winner of a Certificate of Merit at Cork Film Festival in 1990) explores Irish themes and imagery, using an optical printer to intensify qualities of light and colour. *Imaginary I, II and III* (1989) opens with a panoramic shot of a rural Irish landscape, taken from the window of a small house. The highly mobile camera shifts from the landscape to explore the textures of glass objects gathered in front of the window. The theme of the frame recurs in the second part of the series, when

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<sup>23</sup> In particular my discussion excludes the area of site-specific work as well as the practices of artists such as Willie Doherty, Paddy Jolley, Grace Weir and Anne Tallentire. For a comprehensive account of new media practice within the Irish context see Shirley MacWilliam, "Screen and Screen Again", *CIRCA 100*, Summer 2002: 42-48. In the same issue, see also the more extensive list of artists working with new media (a list that includes my own name) in "Naming Names: Artists who have engaged in technological processes and are cited in *CIRCA* Issue 1-99": 49.

<sup>24</sup> During this period Moira Sweeney also curated *An Eye for Ireland* (1987), a retrospective of independent Irish film at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, featuring films by Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn, among others.

multiple screens are used to distance the representation of physical intimacy. The final part of the series explores a sunlit Mediterranean landscape, rather than the dark and sensual interior world, and it features images of children and family. As her practice developed, Sweeney was drawn towards “more accessible and larger-scale work”<sup>25</sup> and her next film, *Coming Home* (1994), was co-funded by Channel Four for broadcast. Nicky Hamlyn notes that (unlike her earlier work) this piece employs *voiceover* to deliver a personal account of her “traumatic memories of growing up in Northern Ireland in the sixties and seventies”.<sup>26</sup> *Coming Home* was one of Sweeney’s last completed films and she subsequently returned Ireland, to work in broadcasting.

Like Sweeney, Orlagh Mulcahy worked as a programmer at the LFMC in the late 1980s and employed optical printing extensively throughout her work. Her films are not concerned with the representation of the Irish landscape, however, and she actually rejects categorisation as an ‘Irish filmmaker’. Instead, she cites *American* filmmakers such as Brakhage, Frampton and Ken Jacobs as formative influences.<sup>27</sup> She also dissociates her work from feminist practice, even though many of her films explore themes of desire and voyeurism. The influence of Jacobs is evident in her film *Printer Starlet* (1993), which appropriates from the erotica of early cinema and specifically recalls *Tom, Tom the Piper’s Son* (1969). This work also seems to suggest a project of historical ‘re-vision’, in terms of the way in which highlights its female subject’s knowing ‘looks’ to the camera. *In Narcissus Pool* (1988), an earlier work by Mulcahy, also appears to be concerned with scopophilia. The central sequence features a naked man, absorbed in the contemplation of a dead animal and suggests a kind of ritual performance. With *Hide and Seek* (1990) Mulcahy moves outside the studio to everyday locations such as a laundry and the city streets. This work has a fairy-tale quality, not least because its central character wears a formal gown in mundane surroundings, and its introspective monologue (voiced by an Irish woman) hints at an autobiographical exploration of alienation.

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<sup>25</sup> Nicky Hamlyn, “Moirá Sweeney”, in David Curtis (ed.) *A Directory of British Film and Video Artists*, Luton: Arts Council of England/John Libbey Media/University of Luton, 1995:186.

<sup>26</sup> Hamlyn, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Orlagh Mulcahy interviewed by the author, March 19, 2003.

This concern with the materiality of 16mm and Super-8 film can also be found in the work of a younger generation of Irish women artists and filmmakers, including Mairéad McClean, Jaki Irvine and Moira Tierney.<sup>28</sup> Like Mulcahy and Sweeney, Moira Tierney gravitated towards the culture of the film co-op. She is currently working at Anthology Film Archives in New York and her films are distributed by the New York Film-Maker's Co-op. In contrast, Irvine and McClean are more closely associated with the gallery context. Irvine first came to prominence as a member of the artist's group Blue Funk, before going on to produce a series of reflexive and loosely autobiographical film works exploring themes of obsession and desire, memory and nostalgia. In her review of the exhibition *The Hottest Sun, The Darkest Hour*, Jane Tynan describes Irvine's films as "grainy, minimalist [...] less about conveying sense through narrative than style", and she suggests that they "conform to the aspirations of conceptual art".<sup>29</sup> I would argue that Irvine's exploration of fantasy and desire is more evocative of *Maya Deren* than 'conceptual art', but in any event her work is highly self-conscious in its referencing of earlier traditions of artist's film.

Moira Tierney's films also echo the 'poetic' aesthetic of New American Cinema but her work is perhaps less reflexive in terms of its engagement with the history of artist's film.<sup>30</sup> In *You Can't Keep a Good Snake Down* (made with Masha Goodavannaya, 2000) Tierney reworks images of snakes from various B Movies, allegedly by way of a riposte to the myth of St. Patrick. The use of assemblage in this film recalls aspects of Mulcahy's *Printer Starlet* but Tierney's work is characterised by a much lighter comic touch and it expresses an enthusiasm for the popular that echoes the No Wave.

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<sup>28</sup> Irish filmmaker Julie Murray, currently based in New York, was also active within London co-op culture in the early 1990s. Her films *Mantilla* (1991), *Conscious* (1993), *Anathema* (1995) and *If You Stand With Your Back To The Slowing Of The Speed Of Light In Water* (1997) are distributed by the New York Film Maker's Co-operative.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Tynan, "Art on Film", *Film West* 38 (Winter 1999): 72.

<sup>30</sup> Moira Tierney trained at the Film School in Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design (now Institute of Art, Design and Technology) and she is credited as a member of the production team on Kevin Liddy's *Horse* (1993).

Tierney has also documented aspects of Irish urban culture and her short 16mm film *Tiger, Me Bollix* (2000) features performances by Traveller children in a city centre encampment. *Ride City* (1999), an earlier work, employs split screens to represent Smithfield's horse market and the protests against its regulation and demise and it is perhaps Tierney's most complex work to date, particularly in its use of sound. The soundtrack, which was produced with composer Giles Packham, is composed of a collage of traditional music and incidental sound. It accompanies rhythmic images of blacksmiths, traders and children and, although it lacks the same degree of reflexivity, it parallels Joe Comerford's exploration of synchronisation in *Traveller*. Recently, Tierney has received Arts Council funding for a new work dealing with the life of Wolfe Tone's widow, Mathilda



Figure 80: Fragmentary images of home in *Movements Recollected* (© Mairéad McClean, 1999)

Like Tierney's short narratives, Mairéad McClean's work includes elements of dark comedy. Her 16mm film *Movements Recollected* (1999) documents a young woman's journey from the North of Ireland to London and Venice, following the discovery of a mysterious suitcase. A voiceover by McClean, which is delivered in the third person, provides a commentary on the character's actions and motivations. Much of McClean's practice is concerned with memory and migration and her video work *Home Thoughts From Abroad* (1997) is particularly interesting in that it documents her experience of a residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. It focuses specifically on issues of cultural and linguistic difference and employs a succession of male and female voiceovers. Another video work, *Her Story* (1997), is an altogether darker piece, which uses distorted sound (and fragments of super 8) to explore violence and the representation of childhood memory. McClean's work, together with that of Sweeney, Mulcahy, Tierney and Irvine, forms part of a revival of 16mm and 8mm

work, in artist's film and in the co-op movement, that is in marked contrast to the feminist practices theorised in Chapter Five.

### **An Avant-garde for the 90s and Beyond: Critical Perspectives on Recent Practice**

How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters *conservative tendencies in the present* and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace *customary ways of working*?

Hal Foster, (1994).<sup>31</sup>

Can this revival of 16mm and 8mm filmmaking be read in terms of a *continuity* of critical tradition? My analysis of the avant-garde has underscored the fact that critical practice is rooted in the reflexive interrogation of institutional discourse as it structures processes of production, exhibition and reception. As such, the avant-garde project is always characterised by *contingency*, rather than by a fixed allegiance to a particular form, medium or mode of presentation. It may be that, within certain contexts, the return to 16mm or 8mm film actually constitutes an ahistorical and unreflexive *pastiche*.



Figure 81: Super-8 sequence in *All Soul's Day* (© Alan Gilsonan, 1997)

For example, Alan Gilsonan's *All Soul's Day* (1997) employs Super-8 imagery in

several key sequences, in order to represent the dreams, memories and interior life of certain characters. This feature length drama takes place on a day when, traditionally,

<sup>31</sup> Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", *October* 70, Fall (1994): 5. [Emphasis added].



past and the present are supposed to collide. The action concerns an encounter between a middle-aged woman and the man imprisoned for the murder of her daughter.

Gilsenan's film juxtaposes various modes of address, including Super-8 'memory sequences' and a series of scenes in which prisoners 'perform' for the camera. These discursive strategies, and the pace of the film, would seem to suggest an indebtedness to avant-garde film or Cinema Verité. But, as reviewer Nicky Fennell points out<sup>32</sup>, *All Soul's Day* actually replicates many of the clichés of dominant cinemas in its representation of women. So although it attempts to co-opt some of the 'cultural capital' of Super 8 filmmaking (its association with autobiographical, artisanal practice) Gilsenan's work cannot be easily defined as 'avant-garde'.

Paul Willemen has problematised the emergence of a superficially 'experimental' aesthetic in another recent Irish film: Nicola Bruce's *I Could Read the Sky* (1999). Produced with the assistance of the British Film Institute, this film seems to have achieved canonical status as an avant-garde text, within the context of Irish cinema studies.<sup>33</sup> It is based upon a fictional autobiography (told in words and images) of an Irish labourer living in London and, according to Willemen; it "presents itself, with all the hallmarks of an avant-gardist discourse, as a narration by an Irish worker recalling scenes from his life". In order to suggest a collage of memory fragments, Bruce relies heavily upon digital imaging techniques. Willemen is highly critical of this use of digital technology, however. He notes:

The images and recollections triggered by the labourer-speaker are transformed, digitally, in such a way as to disconnect the memories from the

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<sup>32</sup> Nicky Fennell, Review of *All Soul's Day*, *Film West* 31. (Spring 1998): 62.

<sup>33</sup> In a recent paper Jerry White situates *I Could Read the Sky* in relation to the work of Irish filmmakers such as Comerford, O'Sullivan and Murphy and also draws a favourable comparison with *The Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Co-op, 1976). See Jerry White "I Could Read the Sky: Irish Cinema's Vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Avant-garde", *Keeping it Real: The Fictions and Non-Fictions of Film and Television in Modern Ireland*, UCD School of Film/Centre for Film Studies, University College Dublin and the Irish Film Centre, April 19 – 21, 2002. See also Gerry McCarthy, "Light Heavyweights." *Sunday Times*, Culture supplement. August 10, 2003: 16-17.

remembering character [...] removing them from any position that can be construed in relation to a body in actual, historical space.<sup>34</sup>

He concludes with the ominous statement that *I Could Read the Sky* “is a genuinely avant-garde product in the sense that it shows us ‘things to come’ [and] demonstrates how to exploit the ‘mental’ residues of people’s lives, the things industrialists did not find it easy to turn into a profit”.<sup>35</sup>

*I Could Read the Sky* can be contrasted with another, and very different, recent representation of Irish migrant experience, also based upon a memoir and partly funded by the MEDIA programme. *The Hard Road to Klondike* (Desmond Bell, 1999) employs found footage and interviews to tell the story of Michael MacGowan, one of the very few 19<sup>th</sup> migrant labourers who managed to make the journey home. MacGowan’s story was first recounted in Irish to a folklorist as ‘Rotha Mór an tSaol’ (The Great Wheel of Life) and Bell’s film relies heavily upon voiceover narration as well as archival footage. But the process of adaptation complicates the filmic representation of memory in various ways. The work of the folklorist, in mediating MacGowan’s story, is highlighted and MacGowan’s words are often undercut by the images. In one scene, for example, the voiceover states: “The work never stopped” but we are presented with scenes of an overgrown disused railway. The narrative also interweaves references to early cinema with commentaries by academics such as Kerby Miller and folk historians, which offer different perspectives on MacGowan’s experience. Unlike *I Could Read the Sky*, *The Hard Road to Klondike* actually foregrounds the various social, cultural and economic forces structuring MacGowan’s story.<sup>36</sup>

Themes of dislocation and migration are also explored in *As Láthair/Absent* (Paul Rowley, 2002), a feature length digital video work funded by the Arts Council. Like

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Willemen, “Of Mice and Men: Reflections on Digital Culture”, *292 Essays in Visual Culture*, ed. Andrew Patrizio, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Projects, 2000) 13.

<sup>35</sup> Willemen, 14.

<sup>36</sup> For further analysis see Muiris MacChonghail, “The Hard Road to Klondike”, *Film West* 36, (Summer 1996): 24-25.

Nicola Bruce, Rowley employs an overtly ‘experimental’ aesthetic, but he also borrows from the iconography of the Hollywood (and ‘Spaghetti’) Western to stage an allegorical drama of pursuit and conquest. The film is set in a largely depopulated Mexican desert, except for one key urban sequence, and its cinematography foregrounds the exoticism of the desert landscape. The soundtrack features voiceover narration by an Irish woman, which intersperses quotes from theorists such as Paul Virilio<sup>37</sup> with references to Irish folktales and features. In places this voiceover actually recalls Alanna O’Kelly’s exploration of famine and cultural trauma, discussed in Chapter Five. But by comparison with *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* (Alanna O’Kelly, 1992), *As Lathair* is characterised by a notably open-ended exploration of gender identity. The costumes and postures of the central characters are reminiscent of iconic post-Westerns such as *Johnny Guitar* and *Westworld* and are so excessive as to suggest a performance of masculinity.



Figure 82: The climactic duel in *As Lathair/Absent* (© Paul Rowley, 2002)

Paul Rowley is not the only Irish filmmaker to produce highly mediated images of ‘other’ landscapes. Clare Langan is one of the most prominent of the new generation of Irish artists working with 16mm and she has recently completed a trilogy, composed of *Forty Below*, *Too Dark for Night* and *Glass Hour*. The first film was shot (partly underwater) in Ireland and Iceland, the second was filmed in a “post-industrial” town on the edge of a Namibian desert and the third is set in a “deserted

<sup>37</sup> In addition to Virilio’s *Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Rowley draws upon Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker’s *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London and New York: Verso, 2000)

and industrial wasteland".<sup>38</sup> One would, however, have to rely on the press release for these location details, because there is little scope within these works for any exploration of historical or social context.



Figure 83: *The Glass Hour* (© Clare Langan, 2002)

These landscapes are all largely unpopulated but *Forty Below* introduces a central opposition between a lone female figure and the inhospitable environment, a theme that is taken up in *Too Dark For Night* and *Glass Hour*. In their focus upon the 'wandering' figure, Langan's films seem to draw upon Romantic landscape painting, rather than on the critical landscape tradition in Irish and international film.<sup>39</sup> In particular, her films evoke aspects of Caspar David Friedrich's work, in particular, but there is little attempt to comment on this tradition in terms of its transposition outside a European context. Only the last film in the series, which concludes with a montage centring on the figure, seems to move beyond spectacle towards an engagement with the constructed nature of these images.

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<sup>38</sup> Press release, *Clare Langan: A Film Trilogy*, RHA Gallagher Gallery, Dublin, February 14 - March 30, 2003

<sup>39</sup> This tradition encompasses not only specific films by Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Bob Quinn and Joe Comerford, discussed in this study, but also key works by international filmmakers such as Michael Snow, Phil Mulloy, Chris Welsby and Cinema Action, not to mention the particular engagement with place in American independent film. See Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

Although Langan studied sculpture at NCAD much of her early work is photographic, employing hand-painted filters and lens attachments. Her films, which are made on 16mm and then transferred to DVD for exhibition, are produced in much the same way. When exhibited within the gallery context, they are identified as limited edition pieces and displayed alongside large photographic stills. When interviewed about her films, Langan is at pains to emphasise their status as artworks. She states:

The intention is to immerse the viewer in the film. The screen is huge, and the viewer is really in the film. There are no credits shown as in a film screening, so they are really art objects.<sup>40</sup>

Her press releases also note that “all manipulation of the image is done in-camera”<sup>41</sup> and this would suggest that, even though they are presented on DVD, her films are promoted as handmade and *artisanal* in character.



Figure 84: Ardnacrusha Power Station, in *C Oblique O* (© Blue Funk, 1999)

A very different approach to the representation of landscape can be found in the work of the (now defunct) artist's group Blue Funk. Their film *C Oblique O* (1999) employs various different modes of address (including medical lectures and dramatised references to science fiction and

<sup>40</sup> Kieran Owens, Gallery Interview: Extreme Nature", Dublin Event Guide, 19<sup>th</sup> February – 4<sup>th</sup> March, 2003: 4. A parallel work, *Floodlight* (2000), seems to explore the immersive quality of film in a more literal sense. Installed in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, as part of the 2000 Glen Dimplex Awards, *Floodlight* (featuring similar imagery to *Forty Below*) was projected onto a mirror coated with a film of rippling liquid. The image was reflected onto the ceiling above, with the ripples adding to the illusion of depth but also redirecting attention to the mirror and the two-dimensionality of the image.

<sup>41</sup> Press release, *Clare Langan: A Film Trilogy*.

fantasy) and refuses any straightforward reading. Instead it suggests possible points of intersection between the body of the nation and the subject of medical discourse. The 'national' is figured through images of the hydroelectric turbines at Ardnacrusha and of an ESB worker, whose body is used to conduct electricity. The medicalised body is that of Evelyn, a member of the group and a cystic fibrosis sufferer who died before completion of the film. The soundtrack provides the point at which these discourses (and bodies) seem to converge, through recordings of the electrical current and through Evelyn's critique of medical and psychiatric practice.

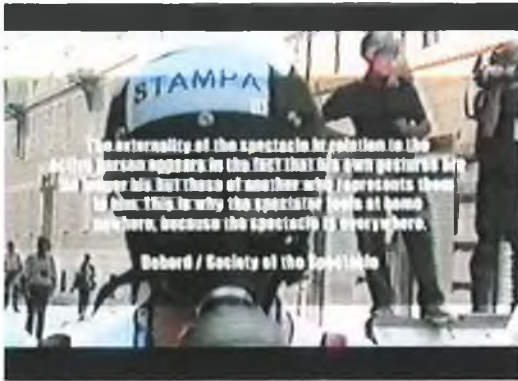


Figure 85: Quote from Guy Debord in the closing sequence of *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* (© Eamonn Crudden, 2002)

Another work that invites analysis for its representation of public space is Eamonn Crudden's *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* (2002).

This piece might be appropriately described as a form of media activism because it is a digital video diary documenting the repression of anti-capitalist protest at the Genoa G-8 summit but it extends beyond this immediate focus to address a range of issues relating to the representation of the body politic. *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* develops a complex analysis of the relationship between media, power and spectacle through reference to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and it questions the notion that it is possible to provide an authoritative account of the events at Genoa. Crudden's focus on media representation, his exploration of theory and his reliance on collaborative modes of production and distribution clearly situates this work in relation to earlier traditions of avant-garde practice.

The 16mm films of artist Gerard Byrne, which include *Why its time for Imperial Again* (2001) and *A Crime Dramatically Reconstructed, Again* (2002), also evince a concern with issues of spectatorship and the representation of public space. In

*Imperial...* Byrne employs a National Geographic ‘advertorial’ for the 1981 Chrysler Imperial as the script for an open air dialogue, which is restaged several times across a post-industrial landscape complete with rusted railway tracks and scrap yards. The two characters in this dialogue, Frank Sinatra and Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca, take up a series of mock-adversarial positions, suggesting a performance of corporate masculinity that must have been somewhat anachronistic even in 1981. When shown within a gallery context, the film is often screened on a monitor that is surrounded by framed photographs of the National Geographic on library shelves. This mode of exhibition highlights the contrast between the disused film’s industrial locations and museum interior, calling attention to the displacement of manufacturing by the information economy. Byrne’s work, like that of Crudden and Blue Funk, suggests an extension of the exploration of place and context developed in many of the Irish film practices of the 70s and 80s.



Figure 86: ‘Lee Iacocca’ and ‘Frank Sinatra’ in *Why it's Time for Imperial, Again* (© Gerard Byrne, 2001)

In *A Crime Dramatically Reconstructed, Again* Byrne shifts his focus from the urban landscape to the exploration of spectatorship and desire. This silent 16mm film is projected as a film, with musical accompaniment in the form of a recording of Caruso (in *La Tosca*). The narrative centres on an act of acoustic voyeurism, which is compulsively staged and re-staged for the camera in a series of ‘takes’. A young man wearing medical scrubs enters an empty space, plugs the (‘male’) phono connection on a set of headphones into a hole in the wall and listens to the voice of Caruso. The drama is punctuated by ambiguous shadows that are gradually revealed as a hand over the lens and this repeated movement, producing a momentary loss of vision, is intended to recall the

self-inflicted blindness of Oedipus.<sup>42</sup> But rather than simply returning to the scene of the Oedipal drama in narrative terms, Byrne's project adds a historical dimension to the exploration of psychoanalytic and aesthetic codes. The moment of plenitude experienced and lost in "A Crime..." can be read as an idealised unity of sound and image, an imaginary moment before the birth of cinema. Both of Byrne's films also highlight processes of *repetition*, within the context of psychoanalytic theory and in relation to economic development.

I want to conclude this analysis by referencing examples of Irish practice drawn from television drama. Johnny Gogan's surreal comedy drama *The Bargain Shop* (1992) was one of the first films to highlight the negative side of the Celtic Tiger economy. It critiques processes of gentrification in Dublin city by charting the transformation of an antique shop into a bargain outlet and in its reworking of narrative convention it recalls aspects of *Poitin* and *Reefer and the Model*. Gogan's subsequent feature films, *The Last Bus Home* (1997) and *Mapmaker* (2002), also provide evidence of a critical perspective on contemporary Irish society although the latter film is perhaps less successful in its negotiation of generic convention. Paul Mercier has explored somewhat similar territory in another short television drama, *Before I Sleep* (1998). The narrative centres upon a middle-class man (played by Brendan Gleeson) who is struggling to conceal his redundancy from his wife and children. The film follows a day in his life, charting a fruitless journey into the hills of west Dublin in search of an old business contact who may or may not have a job to offer. The representation of place is particularly striking, as Gleeson's character moves through a succession of equally featureless interior and exterior spaces, underscoring a growing sense of dislocation and isolation.

It would appear that the newer generation of filmmakers, working within the contexts of artist's film, television drama and documentary are informed by a concern with the representation of landscape. This engagement with landscape takes very different

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<sup>42</sup> Gerard Byrne provided background information on this piece in an email exchange in June 2002. See Maeve Connolly, "A Crime Dramatically Reconstructed, Again", *Greyscale/CMYK*, (eds.) Kate Davis and Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt (Glasgow: Tramway, 2002), 22-23.



forms, however. While *The Bargain Shop* and *Before I Sleep* both highlight the changing character of Irish urban spaces and social structures, artists such as Clare Langan, Gerard Byrne and Paul Rowley have focused their attention on spaces *outside* Ireland. This exploration of the 'other' can lead to a certain exoticisation but, in the case of Byrne's *Why Its Time for Imperial Again*, it can also open up space for the exploration of broader economic and social developments. In this respect, despite an alternative mode of address, Byrne's project echoes Vivienne Dick's exploration of New York as the privileged site of globalised capitalism.

It is also possible to identify *other* areas of continuity between the past and present. The relationship between landscape, memory and migrant identity was a key issue for 'First Wave' filmmakers such as Pat Murphy, Vivienne Dick and Thaddeus O'Sullivan. It resurfaces in *I Could Read the Sky*, *All Soul's Day* and *The Hard Road to Klondike* (as well as in the film and video practices of Moira Sweeney and Mairéad McClean). Again, however, this attention to memory and subjectivity does not guarantee continuity with earlier critical practice, and it can instead constitute an appropriation of cultural tradition.

There is also some evidence to suggest an ongoing concern with subalternity in the work of the newer generation. Moira Tierney's *Ride City*, for example, echoes Joe Comerford's interest in Traveller's culture while *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* documents popular resistance to globalisation. Few of the works examined in this overview seem to be directly concerned with *feminism* but the politics of gender are explored in *As Lathair* and in the work of Jaki Irvine. Critiques of spectatorship, associated with feminist theory, can also be seen to inform *C Oblique O* and *A Crime Dramatically Reconstructed, Again*.

This brief discussion of recent practice suggests that, despite profound shifts within production and reception, many Irish filmmakers and artists continue to develop critical and self-reflexive practices. Their work does not, however, benefit from the kind of public profile that defined Irish cinema in the late 70s and early 80s. Instead,

my research indicates that these practices are underrepresented within Irish film festivals and publications. It may be that, as I have argued, they are not promoted by state agencies such as the Irish Film Board and the Arts Council. Yet it must also be noted that a number of these practitioners are based outside Ireland and are not active as lobbyists or critics within the national context (in contrast with filmmakers such as Comerford, Quinn or Murphy, during the 70s and 80s). In any event, much of this work currently remains on the margins of public, institutional and academic discourse around Irish cinema.

### **Possibilities for Further Research**

I want to conclude this archaeology of Irish cinema by signalling some possible areas for further research. As I have already noted, national cinema studies has tended to foreground aspects of production over the analysis of films circulating within the national context. My discussion of Irish film societies and clubs has focused on avant-garde film exhibition within a relatively narrow timeframe, but a more extensive and detailed account of the society movement would clearly be worthwhile. My research also indicates that a more expansive analysis of Irish artist's film and video (and of the curatorial practices shaping its development and exhibition within the national context) is needed.

Perhaps the most obvious area for future research is the extension of this study to include those film practices that I have referenced but not considered closely, particularly the work of Cathal Black, Kieran Hickey, John T. Davis and Patrick Carey. My research demonstrates the need for ongoing *cultural* analyses of filmmaking and this project could be extended to contemporary feature film production processes, particularly those informed by collaborative or artisanal approaches.<sup>43</sup> In the course of my research I have also noted the emergence of a

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<sup>43</sup> Johnny Gogan's film *Mapmaker* might make a useful starting point for this project as it apparently involved a more collaborative approach than is currently the norm within Irish feature filmmaking.

number of *diasporic* practices within US and this development invites closer analysis.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, in the course of my research, a number of filmmakers and archivists have suggested that the Irish Film Society movements of the 1940s may have provided an early context for formal experimentation within the national context.<sup>45</sup> These experiments would appear to be relatively tentative but further study of this period might provide an opportunity to extend this archaeological approach to an earlier intersection between Irish and international modernisms.

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<sup>44</sup> In the course of my research into avant-garde practice I have encountered a small number of Irish-American film works, often exploring issues of identity, such as Jim Lane's short film *Background Action* (2000).

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Eugene Finn for providing me with details of film fragments held in the Irish Film Archive and to Orlagh Mulcahy for calling my attention to the work of the School of Freedom of Student Expression.

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### **List of Research Interviews**

- Joe Comerford, filmmaker. Telephone interview. 8 May 2001.
- Vivienne Dick, filmmaker. Personal interview. 23 June 2001.
- Steve Dwoskin, filmmaker. Email interview. 21 April 2002.
- Michael Dwyer, former administrator of the Federation of Irish Film Societies. Email interview. 5 June 2002.

Pádraig Mannion. Former member of Film Society of Sinn Fein – The Worker's Party. Telephone interviews. December 2001.

Orlagh Mulcahy, filmmaker. Personal interview. 19 March 2003.

Pat Murphy, filmmaker. Email interview. 12 August 2003.

Thaddeus O'Sullivan, filmmaker. Email interview. 4 July 2003.

Sunniva O'Flynn, curator of the Irish Film Archive. Personal interview. 28 March 2001.

Bob Quinn, filmmaker. Email interview. 7 December 2001.

Kevin Rockett, former Director of Film, Project Arts Centre. Email interview. 5 September 2001.

Bill Sloan, former administrator of Circulating Film Library, Museum of Modern Art. Telephone interview. 14 February 2001.

### **Archives of Print Materials**

Museum Archives. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Federation of Film Societies files. Access Cinemas, Dublin.

Filmmaker files. Irish Film Archive, Dublin.

National Irish Visual Arts Library, National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

Production Board files for *Maeve, Traveller, Down the Corner*. BFI Special Collections. National Film and Television Archive, London.

Project Cinema Club files. Personal collection of Kevin Rockett.

Vivienne Dick Filmmaker files. Anthology Film Archives, New York.

Vivienne Dick, Steve Dwoskin and Moira Sweeney Artist files. British Artist's Film and Video Study Collection, Central St. Martin's School of Art, London.

## Filmography

### Film and Video Collections Consulted

British Artist's Film and Video Study Centre, Central St. Martin's School of Art, London. (BAFVSC)

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York. (EAI)

Film-Maker's Co-op, New York (NYFMC)

Irish Film Archive, Dublin. (IFA)

Lux Distribution, London. (LUX)

Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA)

National Film and Television Archive, British Film Institute, London. (BFI)

Radio Telefís Éireann, Dublin. (RTÉ)

### Filmography: Joe Comerford

*Swan Alley* (1969)

*Emtigon* (1972): IFA

*Withdrawal* (1974): IFA

*A Film Board For Ireland* (with Bob Quinn, 1976): RTÉ

*Down the Corner* (1978): IFA, BFI

*Traveller* (1981): IFA, BFI

*Waterbag* (1984): IFA

*Reefer and the Model* (1988): IFA, BFI : Video distribution: Vistionary Comms (UK)

*High Boot Benny* (1993): IFA: Video distribution: Imagine Home Entertainments (UK)

*Roughtouch* (work in progress)

### Filmography: Vivienne Dick

*Staten Island* (1978): IFA, MoMA

*Guérillière Talks* (1978): IFA, MoMA

*She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978): IFA, MoMA

*Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979): IFA, MoMA

*Liberty's Booty* (1980): IFA, MoMA  
*Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981) : IFA  
*Trailer* (1986): LUX  
*Loisaida* (1983)  
*Like Dawn to Dust* (1983) : IFA, BFI  
*Rothach* (1985) : IFA  
*Images/Ireland* (1988): LUX  
*Pobal-Portrait of an Artist* (1988): RTÉ  
*London Suite* (1989): IFA, BFI  
*Two Pigeons* (1989)  
*3AM* (1990): BAFVSC  
*New York Conversations* (1991): IFA  
*A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994): IFA  
*Excluded by the Nature of Things* (2002)

**Filmography: Pat Murphy**

*Rituals of Memory* (1977)  
*Maeve* (with John Davies 1981): IFA, BFI  
*Anne Devlin* (1984): IFA, BFI  
*Sean MacBride Remembers* (with Tiernan MacBride,1988): IFA  
Untitled work for Famine Museum, Strokestown House (1994): IFA  
*Nora* (2002): IFA: Video distribution: Andora (USA), Advanced (Germany),  
Momentum Pictures (UK)  
*What Miro Saw* (2002)

**Filmography: Thaddeus O'Sullivan**

*Picnic* (1969)  
*Flanagan* (1974): IFA  
*A Pint of Plain* (1975): IFA, BFI, MoMA  
*On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978): IFA, BFI, MoMA  
*Jack B. Yeats: Assembled Memories* (1981): IFA, MoMA

*The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985): IFA, BFI  
*December Bride* (1990): IFA, BFI : Video distribution: British Screen (UK)  
*In the Border Country* (1991): BFI  
*Tell-Tale Hearts* (1992): BFI  
*Nothing Personal* (1995): IFA: Video distribution: Trimark (USA)  
*Witness to the Mob* (1998): Video distribution: Vidmark/Trimark (USA)  
*Ordinary Decent Criminal* (2000): IFA: Video distribution: Icon (UK), Buena Vista/Miramax (USA)  
*The Heart of Me* (2002): IFA: Video distribution: BBC (UK) ThinkFilm (USA)

### **Filmography: Bob Quinn**

RTÉ documentaries 1964-68: *The Island; Missing, Believed Dead; Inside the Outsider; The Flowerpot Society; Shadowy Horses; Silent World; Puck Fair; Many Hands Make Life Work; Why Don't They Shoot People*  
Miscellaneous Bob Quinn/Cinegaele documentaries (dates unknown): *The Master Musicians of Jajouka; The Isle of Man; A Jehovah in Galway; Vet on the Rocks; Turf Boats of Kinvar; An Bealach Eile/Immigrants to Conamara; Fág an Bealach (Coláiste na bhFiann)*  
*Oireachtas na nGael* (1973)  
*Caoineadh Airt Ui Laoire/Lament for Arthur O'Leary* (1975): IFA  
*Cloch* (1975): IFA, MoMA : Video distribution: Cinegaele  
*A Film Board For Ireland* (with Joe Comerford, 1976): RTÉ  
*Self-Portrait with Red Car* (1976-78): MoMA  
*Poitín* (1978): IFA: Video distribution: Cinegaele  
*Listen* (1978)  
*The Family* (1978): IFA  
*Hooker Music* (1979)  
*Lillipup* (1980)  
*Last Days of the Gaeltacht* (1981)  
*Atlantean Trilogy* (1981-84): IFA  
*Budawanny* (1986): IFA



*The Bishop's Story* (1994): IFA  
*Graceville* (1997)  
*It Must be Done Right* (1999)  
*Pobal in London* documentary series (1987): RTÉ  
*Pobal in Boston* documentary series (1990): RTÉ  
*Pobal in Deutschland* documentary series (1992): RTÉ  
*Navigatio Atlantean II* (1998): IFA  
*Splanc Deiridh na Gaeltachta/The Last Spark of the Gaeltacht* (2000)  
*Damhsa na Deori/The Emigrant Dance* (2002)

**Film/Video/Artworks Cited: Irish and Irish-related**

*Acceptable Levels* (Belfast Film Workshop, 1983)  
*After '68* (Stephen Burke, 1993)  
*Ailsa* (Paddy Breathnach, 1994)  
*All Soul's Day* (Alan Gilsean, 1997)  
*Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1981)  
*Angela's Ashes* (Alan Parker, 1999)  
*Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1985)  
*As Láthair/Absent* (Paul Rowley, 2002)  
*Background Action* (Jim Lane, 2000)  
*Ballroom of Romance, The* (Pat O'Connor, 1982)  
*Bargain Shop, The* (Johnny Gogan, 1992)  
*Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975)  
*Before I Sleep* (Paul Mercier, 1997)  
*Beneficiary, The* (Carlo Gebler, 1979)  
*Berlusconi's Mousetrap* (Eamonn Crudden, 2002)  
*Beyond The Pale* (George Bazala, 2000)  
*Billy's Museum* (Amanda Dunsmore, 2002)  
*Blessed Fruit* (Orla Walsh, 1999)  
*Burn* (Paddy Jolley, 2002)  
*Butcher Boy, The* (Neil Jordan, 1998)

*C Oblique O* (Blue Funk, 1999)  
*Caught in a Free State* (Peter Ormrod, 1983)  
*Colleen Bawn, The* (Kalem, 1911)  
*Coming Home* (Moirá Sweeney, 1994)  
*Commitments, The* (Alan Parker, 1991)  
*Conscious* (Julie Murray, 1993)  
*Courier, The* (Frank Deasy, Joe Lee, 1987)  
*Creggan* (Mary Holland, Michael Whyte, 1980)  
*Crime Dramatically Reconstructed, Again, A* (Gerard Byrne, 2002)  
*The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992)  
*Dance, Girl, Dance* (Dorothy Arzner, 1940)  
*Dead , The* (John Huston, 1987)  
*Dead Bodies* (Robert Quinn, 2003)  
*Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986)  
*Errigal* (Patrick Carey, 1968)  
*Exposure* (Kieran Hickey 1978)  
*Faithful Departed* (Kieran Hickey, 1967)  
*Film* (Alan Schneider/Samuel Beckett, 1966)  
*Flash Piece* (James Coleman, 1970)  
*Floodlight* (Clare Langan, 2001)  
*Forty Below* (Clare Langan, 1999)  
*Glass Hour* (Clare Langan, 2002)  
*Going, going, gone* (Sinn Fein: The Worker's Part, 1976)  
*guaiRE* (James Coleman, 1985)  
*Guests of the Nation* (Denis Johnston, 1935)  
*Hard Road to Klondike, The* (Desmond Bell, 1999)  
*Her Story* (Mairead McClean, 1997).  
*Heritage of Ireland* (Louis Marcus, 1978)  
*Home Thoughts From Abroad* (Mairead McClean, 1997)  
*Horse* (Kevin Liddy, 1993)  
*Hottest Sun, The Darkest Hour, The* (Jaki Irvine, 1999)

*Hush-A-Bye Baby* (Derry Film and Video Co-op, 1989).  
*I Could Read the Sky* (Nicola Bruce, 1999)  
*If You Stand With Your Back To The Slowing Of The Speed Of Light In Water* (Julie Murray, 1997)  
*Imaginary* (Moirá Sweeney, 1989)  
*In Narcissus Pool* (1988)  
*Informer, The* (John Ford, 1935)  
*Insurrection* (Louis Lentin/RTÉ, 1966)  
*Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992)  
*Ireland: Behind the Wire* (Berwick Street Film Co-op, 1974)  
*Ireland: A Nation* (Gaelic Film Company, 1914)  
*Irish R.M., The* (Robert Chetwin, 1983)  
*Its Handy When People Don't Die* (Tommy McArdle 1982)  
*Joyriders* (Aisling Walsh, 1987)  
*Korea* (Cathal Black, 1995)  
*Last Bus Home, The* (Johnny Gogan, 1997)  
*Lost Cause* (Desperate Optimists, 2000)  
*Love and Rage* (Cathal Black, 1998)  
*Magdalene Sisters, The* (Peter Mullan)  
*Man for All Seasons, A* (Fred Zinnemann, 1966)  
*Man of Aran* (Robert Flaherty, 1934)  
*Mantilla* (Julie Murray, 1991)  
*Mapmaker* (Johnny Gogan, 2002)  
*Mark, The* (Guy Green, 1961)  
*Mise Éire* (George Morrison, 1959)  
*Mists of Time* (Patrick Carey, 1967)  
*Mother Ireland* (Derry Film and Video Collective, 1988)  
*Movements Recollected* (Mairead McClean, 1999)  
*Hide and Seek* (Orlagh Mulcahy, 1990)  
*Night in Tunisia* (Pat O'Connor, 1983)  
*No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* (Alanna O'Kelly, 1992)

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*Ossian* (Patrick Carey, 1969)  
*Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981)  
*Outcasts* (Robert Wynne Simmons, 1982)  
*Outside In* (Steve Dwoskin, 1981)  
*Over Here* (Carlo Gebler, 1980)  
*Patriot Game, The* (Arthur McCaig, 1978)  
*People Of Ireland!* (Cinema Action, 1973)  
*Pigs* (Cathal Black, 1984)  
*Playboy of the Western World, The* (Brian Hurst, 1961)  
*Price, The* (Peter Smith, 1985)  
*Printer Starlet* (1993)  
*Quiet Man, The* (John Ford, 1952)  
*Rosc'67* (Jack Dowling, 1967)  
*Return, The* (Phil Mulloy, 1986)  
*Ride City* (Moira Tierney, 1999)  
*Rising of the Moon, The* (John Ford, 1957)  
*Road to God Knows Where, The* (Alan Gilsenan, 1987)  
*Rocky Road To Dublin* (Peter Lennon, 1968)  
*Rory O'More* (Kalem, 1911)  
*Ryan's Daughter* (David Lean, 1970)  
*Seat Amongst the Stars, A* (1984)  
*Shell Shock Rock* (John T. Davis, 1978)  
*Slide Piece* (James Coleman, 1973)  
*Snapper, The* (Stephen Frears, 1993)  
*Sometime City* (City Vision, 1986)  
*Tiger, Me Bollix* (Moira Tierney, 2000)  
*Too Dark for Night* (Clare Langan, 2001)  
*Troubles, The* (Thames, 1982)  
*Turning Point, The* (Grace Weir, 2002)  
*Ulysses* (Joseph Strick, 1967)

*Van, The* (Stephen Frears, 1996)  
*Visit, The* (Orla Walsh, 1992)  
*Waves* (Patrick Carey, 1969)  
*Wheels* (Cathal Black, 1976)  
*Why its time for Imperial, Again* (Gerard Byrne, 2001)  
*Year of the French, The* (Michael Garvey, 1982)  
*Yeats Country* (Patrick Carey, 1965)  
*You Can't Keep a Good Snake Down* (Moira Tierney and Masha Goodavannaya, 2000)

**Film/Video/Artworks Cited: International**

*A Bout de Souffle* (Godard, 1960)  
*After Lumiere* (Malcolm Le Grice, 1974).  
*Age of Innocence, The* (Martin Scorsese, 1993)  
*Alice Doesn't Live Her Anymore* (Martin Scorsese, 1974)  
*All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)  
*American Friend, The* (Wim Wenders 1977).  
*American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973)  
*AMY!* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen 1980)  
*An Easy Way to Pay the Bills* (Italia, 1909)  
*Anathema* (Julie Murray, 1995)  
*Anemic Cinema* (Marcel Duchamp, 1926)  
*At Land* (Maya Deren, 1944)  
*Back to the Future III* (Robert Zemeckis, 1990)  
*Ballet Mécanique* (Dudley Murphy and Fernand Leger, 1924)  
*Battle of Algiers, The* (Gillos Pontecorvo, 1966)  
*Behindert* (Steve Dwoskin, 1974)  
*Big Flame, The* (Ken Loach and Tony Garnett/BBC, 1969)  
*Black Box* (Beth B and Scott B, 1978)  
*Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990)  
*Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981)

*Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983)  
*Brain from Planet Arous, The* (Nathan Hertz, 1957)  
*Carrington* (Christopher Hampton, 1995)  
*Central Bazaar* (Steve Dwoskin, 1976)  
*City Farm* (John Davies and Rob Smith, 1979)  
*Cool World, The* (Shirley Clarke, 1962)  
*Crystal Gazing* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, 1982)  
*Culloden* (Peter Watkins, 1964)  
*Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990)  
*Days of Hope* (Ken Loach, 1975)  
*Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988)  
*Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969)  
*Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998)  
*Enigma of Kaspar Hauser, The* (Werner Herzog, 1974)  
*Entr'acte* (Rene Clair, 1924)  
*Days of Hope* (Tony Garnett and Ken Loach, 1975)  
*Edvard Munch* (Peter Watkins, 1974)  
*Exorcist, The* (William Friedkin, 1973)  
*Far Shore, The* (Joyce Wieland, 1975)  
*Film About a Woman Who...* (Yvonne Rainer, 1974)  
*Fortini/Cani* (Jean-Marie Straub/Danielle Huillet, 1976)  
*Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen 1983)  
*Fuses* (Carolee Schneemann, 1964-67)  
*Girl* (Steve Dwoskin, 1975)  
*G-Man* (Beth B and Scott B, 1978)  
*Gold Diggers* (Sally Potter 1983)  
*Gone Are the Days* (Ossie Davis, 1963)  
*Governess, The* (Sandra Goldbacher, 1998)  
*Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Collective, 1986)  
*Harlan County, USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1976)  
*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alan Resnais, 1959)

*History Lessons* (Jean-Marie Straub/Danielle Huillet, 1973)  
*Hour of the Furnaces, The/Hora de los Hornos* (Solanas and Getino, 1968)  
*House of Mirth, The* (Terence Davies, 2000)  
*Interior Scroll* (Carolee Schneemann, 1975)  
*Intolerance* (D.W. Griffiths, 1916)  
*Intruder, The* (Roger Corman, 1961)  
*Take It Like A Man, Ma'am* (Knudsen, Rygaard, Vilstrup, 1975)  
*Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975)  
*Jazz Singer, The* (Alan Crosland, 1927)  
*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce 1080, Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975)  
*Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1953)  
*Journeys From Berlin/1971* (Yvonne Rainer, 1980).  
*Jubilee* (Derek Jarman, 1978)  
*Kuhle Wampe* (Stan Dudow/Bertolt Brecht, 1932)  
*Kundun* (Martin Scorsese, 1997)  
*Le Mandat* (Ousmane Sembene, 1968)  
*Bleak Moments* (Mike Leigh, 1971)  
*Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948)  
*Life and Times of Grizzly Adams, The* (Richard Friedenberg, 1975)  
*Lives of Performers* (Yvonne Rainer, 1972)  
*Loveless, The* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1983)  
*Mansfield Park* (Patricia Rozema 1999)  
*Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'* (Martha Rosler, 1982)  
*Meat Joy* (Carolee Schneemann, 1964)  
*Miners Film, The* (Cinema Action, 1975)  
*Mirror Phase* (Carola Klein, 1978)  
*Moment* (Steve Dwoskin, 1964)  
*My Ain Folk* (Bill Douglas, 1973)  
*News From Home* (Chantal Ackerman, 1977)  
*Nightcleaners, The* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1975)  
*Nostalgia* (Hollis Frampton, 1971)

*Numero Deux* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1975)  
*Offenders, The* (Beth B and Scott B, 1979-80)  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975)  
*Orlando* (Sally Potter 1992)  
*Penthesilea* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen 1974)  
*Piano, The* (Jane Campion 1993)  
*Portrait of A Lady, The* (Jane Campion, 1996)  
*Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971).  
*Queimada!* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969)  
*Quo Vadis* (Vitagraph, 1909)  
*Rocinante* (Cinema Action, 1986)  
*Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982)  
*Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, 1977)  
*Ridicule* (Patrice Leconte, 1996)  
*Roustabout* (John Rich, 1964)  
*San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936)  
*Scenes From Under Childhood* (Stan Brakhage, 1968-70)  
*Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Martha Rosler, 1975)  
*Set-up, The* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1978)  
*Silent Cry* (Steve Dwoskin, 1977)  
*So That You Can Live* (Cinema Action, 1982).  
*Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977)  
*Territories* (Isaac Julien, 1984)  
*Themroc*, (Claude Faraldo, 1972)  
*Three Women* (Robert Altman, 1977)  
*Thriller* (Sally Potter 1979)  
*Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967)  
*Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs, 1969)  
*Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972)  
*Toute un Nuit* (Chantal Akerman, 1982)  
*Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967)



*Unmarried Woman, An* (Paul Mazursky, 1978)

*Van Gogh* (Maurice Pialat, 1991)

*Vertical Features Remake* (Peter Greenaway, 1976)

*War Game, The* (Peter Watkins, 1966)

*Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973)

*William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996)

*Xala* (Ousmane Sembene, 1975)

