

IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2012

The Year in Review

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Irish Film and TV Review. Introduction

Roddy Flynn & Tony Tracy

At the Galway Film Fleadh 2012, young Irish film-maker Mark O'Connor released a 'manifesto' entitled: 'Irish Cinema: A Call to Arms.' While the idea of a manifesto seems almost quaint, a hangover from cinema history of the celluloid era, O'Connor's short document offers an interesting perspective from which to consider developments in the Irish Film and TV sector this past year. His point of departure is that an 'Irish New Wave' is 'finally finding its voice':

This is not to dismiss the early work of pioneers as Joe Comerford or Bob Quinn . . . however there is a new movement in Irish cinema which has an emotional truth and it is more exciting than anything that came before. Simon Perry could be seen as the grandfather of this new wave because of the amount of kids he produced. He was the first to encourage personal film-making by supporting first-time writer-directors that he believed in [who make] films that rage against the silence by expressing the innermost feelings about the society we live in . . .

The bombast of youth notwithstanding, this is a provocative declaration. At a time of crushing economic and (as a consequence) social crisis, the prospect of a radical cinema movement offers enormous possibilities, even if the economic contraction seems to militate against such costly arts as film and television. The question is whether O'Connor's assertions reflect current trends or wishful thinking.

The Feature Film in an Age of Digital Reproduction

In the afterglow of the sudden increase in film and (to a lesser extent) television production in Ireland after 1993, a series of state and industry-sponsored reports and conferences were commissioned to discuss how to maintain production momentum. Many of these referred to

the need to maintain a "balanced ecology" within the audiovisual sector, so that the health of a notoriously volatile industry (inherently so, given that production companies are essentially in the business of serial prototype production) was not reliant on success in one particular field. For this to happen it was necessary to encourage development right across the feature film, television, commercial and corporate video production sectors. To a large extent, and despite the economic downturn, this strategy has been put in place and is a success. As a consequence (and along with other factors such as the availability of cheaper digital technology and a broader profile of practitioners), in 2012, we have a far more diverse, complex and varied output from our Film and TV industry than at any time before. This includes new voices across a range of roles (from writing to post-production) and forms (animation, film, TV, computer games).

At one level it is undeniable that (particularly in the wake of the success of *Once* – now a successful stage musical) emerging individual film-makers have begun to find support and expression over the past five years or so. This was certainly the policy of the previous Film Board under which Simon Perry operated and championed early career storytellers such as Brendan Muldowney (*Savage*), Lenny Abrahamson (*Garage*), Ciaran Foy (*Citadel*), Ian Power (*The Runway*), Colin Downey (*The Looking Glass*), Lance Daly (*Kisses*), Ken Wardrop (*His & Hers*) and Carmel Winters (*Snap*) among others. Heading into the future, that kind of broad based support from the IFB will be harder to maintain.

However, at the same time, funding for Irish film and TV has been dramatically cut since the advent of the economic crisis. RTE has seen its advertising revenue collapse from €239m in 2008

to €167m in 2011. Licence fee income has also dropped – with the net effect that RTE lost €16.7m in 2011. The Irish Film Board has similarly watched a capital budget of €20m in 2008 fall to just under €12m in 2012. This decline in funding raises the question of whether the kind of local films championed by Mark O'Connor can be supported at all.

Nevertheless, we have recently seen the emergence of new approaches to no/low budget film-making – from film-makers like the prolific Mark O'Connor himself (*Between the Canals*, *King of the Travellers*) and his contemporary Ivan Kavanagh (*The Fading Light*, *Our Wonderful Home*) among others. Of these, Terry McMahon's *Charlie Casanova* (with a reported budget of just €1,000 and a crew assembled via Facebook) probably attracted the most attention over the past 12 months (albeit more for that film's mischievous selective quotation from an *Irish Times* review than for its awards success at the Galway Film Fleadh and the Melbourne Underground Film Festival). A number of other productions have pursued similar 'low-fi' / DIY approaches: the "privately-funded" sci-fi thriller *Dark By Noon*; *Flats* a crowd-funded, six-part drama series, Cathy Pearson's documentary *Get the Picture* (funded by American website indiego.com) or Donal Foreman's upcoming feature *Out of Here*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, beyond a small number of film festival screenings, such productions continue to find it difficult to find audiences. Although *Charlie Casanova* did receive a limited cinema release in Ireland, *Dark By Noon* does not appear to have been seen anywhere (despite talk of a September 2012 UK and Ireland cinema release) while the fact that *Flats* has been made without broadcaster support raises the question of how/whether it'll ever make our screens.

An Irish Cinema?

Part of our motivation in drawing attention to these shifts and the splintering of production/distribution practices is a reflection on the notable dampening of an Irish national cinema discourse in recent years. Several factors have contributed to this – the diversification in the output of Irish film-makers; the development of Irish film studies away from a narrowly national interpretive lens and the radical trans-

formation and crisis in the Irish national narrative itself. Nevertheless, new approaches such as Debbie Ging's outstanding new book on *Irish Masculinities* suggest exciting new lens' for understanding such fragmentation. In her review of *What Richard Did* for this year's edition, Ging suggests that Irish films are texts that can (perhaps, *must*) be read within a nexus of extra-territorial concerns – in this case class and gender – as local responses to anxieties surrounding white privilege within a shifting global power structure. However, they may also be responses to more local issues. In both *What Richard Did* and *Dollhouse*, the parental figure is literally or figuratively absent, a lacuna mirrored by the apparent absence of any moral or ethical principles which might guide the actions of the youthful protagonists of both texts. It is tempting to read this as a reflection of an era in which the younger generation finds itself hamstrung by the amoral decisions of an older generation who have left them with a life-long financial debt and fatally undermined/corrupted the nation's once unshakable pillars of authority.

The absence of financial security may also undermine the possibility of creating works which interrogate the current crisis and encourage instead a turn to less risky material. In this regard, Craig Simpson notes in his review of *Stitches* and *Grabbers* that the horror genre continues to offer an attractive set of conventions for young Irish film-makers: in addition to *Stitches* and *Grabbers*, 2012 also saw the release of *Citadel* and *The Inside*. Clearly the ongoing popularity of the horror genre (perhaps the dominant genre in Irish film-making) is that it is a relatively cheap and formulaic genre to produce, relying on well established conventions that cut on down script development time and costs. It is also therefore a more attractive proposition for distributors who now that there is an established niche audience (mostly young males) for the product. But as Simpson opines, Irish horror comes in varying degrees of quality and is at its most interesting when it intersects not simply with established conventions but as a means of surreptitiously commenting on social situations.

Big Success on the Small Screen

Traditionally absent from histories of Irish Film

has been TV output. 2012 was a year in which national and international production for the small screen continued to grow in status and significance in terms of employment, production volumes, critical success and cultural impact. When overseas-originated feature film production began to wane after 2003, indigenous television production (in both drama and non-fiction) began to pick up, driven largely by RTE's drive to fulfill its statutory obligations to commission independent work but also by the content demands of TG4. As the 2000s progressed these were again augmented by overseas work (*The Tudors*, *Camelot*, *Ripper Street* and *Vikings*) albeit this work was largely destined for the international marketplace (including Ireland). The presence of such overseas productions has cushioned the sector as a whole against the impact of declines in indigenous funding: *Vikings* alone brought €20m to the Irish economy.

But local production for the small screen has also thrived in 2012 with *Love/Hate* as the outstanding exemplar. Having won more than respectable audiences during its first two series, the third season was an unparalleled success. Over 850,000 viewers tuned in to the season finale in December, a ratings success which in turn drove stellar sales of the box set for seasons 1-3 in the weeks running up to Christmas. Furthermore, the series has also been widely sold overseas and remake rights have been optioned for the US market. Perhaps more surprising is the shift by commercial station TV3, a station hitherto understood as acquisitions-led, towards a far more content-led approach. This was reflected not merely in its ongoing production of relatively cheap non-fiction material but significant investments in drama. Even if the €300,000 invested in the ITV-produced *Titanic* drama constituted only a small proportion of that production's budget, the decision to commission *Deception*, a critically panned but audience-pleasing drama series, demonstrated a new commitment to indigenous production which finally realized the promise of the station when it first received its licence in 1989.

In a similar vein, Irish-originated television comedy translated successfully across the Irish sea. Brendan O'Carroll's *Mrs Brown's Boys* is now the top-rated comedy in the UK (on BBC)

and Ireland (on RTE) and continues to reap awards (notably at the BAFTAs and National Television Awards) despite ongoing critical maulings about its dated mode of address. On Sky One (another commercial channel which has clearly decided on a content production strategy), the apparently unstoppable ascent of Irish comic actor Chris O'Dowd continued as *Moone Boy* (set in Boyle Co. Roscommon and co-scripted by Nick Vincent Murphy who also wrote TG4's *The Running Mate* in 2007) became an instant success, securing a commission for a second series. Perhaps unfairly compared with *Father Ted* with which it shares a certain surrealistic approach, *Moone Boy* mines O'Dowd's Roscommon childhood for comedy gold and has reintroduced a whole generation to *Tico's Tune*, better known to Irish radio listeners of the 1970s and 1980s as the theme from the *Gay Byrne Radio Show*. The success of comedy may also owe something to the current economically depressed epoch: that RTE Television is currently running *three* shows of a satirical bent – the established *Savage Eye* along with newcomers *The Mario Rosenstock Show* and *Irish Pictorial Weekly* – is clearly influenced by the fact that logic-defying events now occur on a weekly basis in Irish society. *Irish Pictorial Weekly* in particular has been outstanding: reviving a format created by former Irish film censor Frank Hall during the 1970s, the figure of the “Minister for Hardship” has been replaced by – inevitably – a German who reports back to HQ in Germany on the activities of the “pixieheads” in Ireland, overtly drawing attention to doubts over where national sovereignty now lies.

The search for international revenues has not been limited to drama and comedy, however. After Irish production Company Good Company Productions sold options on the format for *Feirm Factor* (a reality show based around managing a farm) to six territories in Europe, RTE developed “Format Farm” to generate formats which, in the words of RTE Commissioning Editor Eddie Doyle “can be made to serve both our audiences here and for export”. That a commissioning editor for the national (public service) broadcaster can unabashedly rationalize the resulting decision to produce two of the sixty (!) reality formats submitted (*The Takeover* and *Six in the City* will hit Irish screens as full-fledged

series in 2013) as "an appropriate pro-business response to the commercial and broadcasting environment that we're all in" speaks volumes for how the ongoing crisis has altered priorities in the audiovisual sector.

In conclusion, despite a severe down-scaling in funding opportunities, the Irish audiovisual sector displayed resilience and diversity in 2012. However, the distribution difficulties faced by Irish cinema in part accounts for the fact that feature films now occupy a less significant place in the overall cultural and economic impact of Irish audiovisual output than they ever did. Indeed, it might be argued that Irish TV – *Love/Hate*, *The Savage Eye*, *Irish Pictorial Weekly* – was a more continuous and visible cultural presence in 2012 than even relatively widely distributed Irish films like *What Richard Did* or *Dollhouse*. That said, there is enough film-making practice – particularly at the low-budget and no-budget end of the spectrum – and across forms of short film and documentary – to speak of ongoing and emerging Irish films rooted in the local. (In respect of short films we should note especially the recent success of the charming

short film *Irish Folk Furniture* (Best Animation Short at the Sundance Film Festival) and gesture towards the Irish Film Boards useful short film channel: <http://www.thisisirishfilm.ie/shorts>). In 2012, despite cuts, a substantial and established Irish audiovisual sector working within local and international contexts continued to develop talent and produce a variety of work. Some of this output tells us something about Ireland as a society. But – despite faint traces – it would, we think, be premature to speak of anything like a ‘new wave’ in the traditional use of that term in cinema history; linking the output of a group of artist/film-makers through recognizable thematic and aesthetic concerns linked to social change.

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Death of a Superhero (Ian Fitzgibbon, 2012)

Liam Burke

A wimp is humiliated in front of his girlfriend by a “big bully” while at the beach. Frustrated, the skinny teen decides to “gamble a stamp” on a book of “Dynamic Tension” – exercises written by Charles Atlas – “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man”. Later (the passage of time is unclear), the one-time wimp returns to the beach a “real man”, punching the bully and getting the girl. This simple seven-panel comic advertisement, “The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac”, first appeared in pulp magazines in 1928, and ran continuously in comic books into the 1970s. Its durability is no doubt attributable to its synergy with superhero narratives. As Brown notes, these advertisements “revolve around the male daydream that, if we could just find the right word, the right experimental drug, the right radioactive waste, then we too might instantly become paragons of masculinity” (32) with others offering similar readings of the advertisement (“Charles Atlas”; Bukatman 60; Cord 334).



Variations on the comic advertisement for Charles Atlas' Dynamic Tension exercises, “The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac”, regularly appeared in comic books from the early days of the form right into the 1970s.

Comic books and superhero narratives have a long history as vehicles of (usually male) adolescent wish-fulfilment and escapism, which is best articulated in the transition of comic book characters from anonymous “mild-mannered” weaklings to unassailable heroes. These transformations allowed readers to identify with the protagonist’s secret identity while aspiring to their heroic persona. As with “The Insult that Made a Man out of Mac” comic creators and advertisers have played on this identification, with Stan Lee often including aspirational phrases in his comics such as, “the world’s most amazing teen-ager – Spider-Man – the superhero who could be – you” (*The Amazing Spider-Man #9*: February, 1964). As Umberto Eco noted in his oft-cited essay, *The Myth of Superman*, in the manner in which “Clark Kent appears fearful, timid, awkward, near-sighted and submissive, [he] personifies fairly typically the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow man” (14-5).

Released the same summer that Peter Parker went back to high school (*The Amazing Spider-Man*) and *The Avengers* battled *The Dark Knight Rises* for box office supremacy, the Irish drama *Death of a Superhero* (Ian Fitzgibbon 2012) offered a more grounded reworking of these classic comic book archetypes. This Dublin-set film follows 15-year-old Donald Clarke (Thomas Brodie-Sangster), who faces the typical dilemmas of a teenager: school, sex, friends and family, but his difficulties are compounded as Donald has recently developed cancer. Donald’s mother scours the Internet for miracle cures; his father talks of overseas holidays that are never likely to happen; while his friends and older brother attempt to carry on as though nothing has changed. A talented artist, Donald, permanently sporting a beanie hat that hides his hair loss, prefers

to retreat into a fantasy world of costumed-clad adventures, dastardly doctors and buxom babes, realised through animated interludes and superimpositions that recall 1940s Superman serials.¹ Occasionally, Donald gives flight to these characters, rendering them in graffiti across Dublin's south-side.

When Donald is brought home by the Guards after playing chicken with a DART train, his mother (Sharon Horgan) sends him to "shrink No. 6", Dr Adrian King (Andy Serkis), a psychiatrist who specialises in thanatology (the study of death). Donald quickly applies grandiose comic book terms to his new psychiatrist labelling him "Dr. Death", but despite some initial friction, the unorthodox Dr. King wins the angry young man over and they begin to address some of Donald's fears and resentments. Unexpectedly, Donald strikes up a relationship with the new girl at school, the defiant and free-spirited Shelly (Aisling Loftus), and his cancer goes into remission. At this point the comic book fantasies become less prevalent. However, a cooling of Donald's new relationship and a terminal prognosis send him crashing back into his fantasy realm. However, these fictions offer little respite and Donald, aided by his friends, brother and (somewhat implausibly) Dr. King, hire a prostitute so that Donald can lose his virginity ahead of his inevitable demise.

Death of a Superhero is an adaptation of the novel of the same name by New Zealand author and screenwriter Anthony McCarten. The novel's cover blurb promises a "brilliantly original fusion of novel, comic book and film script" suggesting a blending of image and text similar to *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series or at the very least the visual writing techniques of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. However, apart from some emoticons "!*^X?*^@!" (120), and occasional onomatopoeia

"BURRRRRRRRR!!!" (54), there is little attempt to engage with the comic form. Instead, the novel seems to be tailored to the most imagination-deprived Hollywood producer, as much of the text is written in screenplay format, "Int. Church. Day" (15), replete with camera directions, "Cut to... A hospital wing" (12). That the author shifted the setting from Wellington (NZ) to Watford (UK) in the second, revised edition is further evidence of the desire to make it amenable to the screen. Nonetheless the imprint of its sunnier origin is evident, with mentions of a "hot dry season" (23) and "barbecue decks" (52) sitting awkwardly in the south of England.

Despite the author's ambitions the novel did not make it to the screen in a single bound. At one stage McCarten was to direct and write the adaptation in his native New Zealand as a co-production with the German company Bavaria Pictures. Eventually the involvement of Dublin-based Grand Pictures and the Irish Film Board found the story migrate from Wellington to Dublin (via Watford) with Irish director Ian Fitzgibbon (*A Film With Me In It*) taking the reins. Similarly, McCarten is credited with the adaptation, but director Ian Fitzgibbon and Mark Doherty share a "Director's Draft".

Although the international development of the film, and its eventual cast, result in a general lack of cultural specificity (Fitzgibbon's strong use of Sandycove and environs on Dublin's south-side coast notwithstanding) the transition from page to screen is more seamless than the journey from New Zealand to Dublin. The novel cries out for the immediacy of the visual form to give flight to Donald's fantasies and render in nuance what can only be clumsily conveyed on the page. Wordless sequences, such as Donald perilously walking along a footbridge handrail over a busy motorway immediately convey the character's mindset. These sequences are given a heroic lift, as, much like Mac in the Charles Atlas advertisement, Donald re-imagines these moments in superheroic terms. Donald's heroic alter-ego (Miracleman in the book, unnamed in the film) shares his hair loss and introspection, but has a heroic build, invulnerable veneer and "the women go crazy for him". These animated sequences are rendered in the bold lines and sharp colours of graffiti art, and not only provide

1. In the first live-action *Superman* serial (1948), sequences in which the character would fly found actor Kirk Alyn substituted with a cel-animated hero. In modern superhero movies a digitally constructed hero is usually used to carry out the high-altitude heroics – a more convincing, yet no less manually constructed intermediate.

an insight into Donald's world, but deliver some stylistic flourishes in what might otherwise have been a very suburban-set affair.

Like other recent films and television programmes such as *50/50*, *The Big C* or even *Breaking Bad*, *Death of a Superhero* is about living with cancer rather than presenting the disease as a second act reveal or the sum total of a character's personality. In the lead role of Donald, Thomas Brodie-Sangster conveys the conflicting emotions of a teen equally troubled by his virginity as he is by his condition. Brodie-Sangster has retained the youthful features that made him so recognisable as Liam Neeson's son in *Love Actually*. This intertextual link heightens his transition from the precocious sprite of the Richard Curtis rom-com to the gaunt and pale Donald of *Death of a Superhero*. Andy Serkis's Dr. Adrian King seems to have graduated from the Robin Williams' school of psychiatry: hirsute, clad in ill-fitting jumpers and with an office that looks like a book store's bargain bin, he spars with Donald, but ultimately they help each other. Serkis, freed from the pixels that have obscured his most high profile roles, invests this well-worn cliché with genuine pathos and displays a restraint unseen in his more famous creations. Although the story is slight, the committed performances and genuine visual flair of *Death of a Superhero* elevate its source material by realising the story in the medium the

novel was clearly striving to replicate. The beats are expected but controlled, and there is an overall honesty to the film that earns its third act payoff.

Although the film shares some thematic resonances with *50/50*, unlike that comedy the odds to not fall in Donald Clarke's favour. Reaching the fifth stage of grief, acceptance, Donald balks from a third act liaison with a prostitute, opting to spend his final moments with Shelly. Donald's epiphany is appropriately conveyed in animated form, with his monosyllabic alter-ego finally defeating his nemesis, The Glove, with a blinding beam of white light. As fantasy bleeds into reality the now deceased Donald is shown in a hospital bed, bathed in a heavenly glow, surrounded by his family.

In an earlier scene in the oncology ward Donald asks a young cancer sufferer what she is going to be when she grows up. She responds "dancer" to which Donald, only somewhat sarcastically, offers, "I'm going to be a superhero", "No you're not" the girl counters. Although Donald would not enjoy the heroic metamorphosis of Peter Parker, Clark Kent or even Charles Atlas' Mac, *Death of a Superhero* suggests that the superhero's ability to lift one out of reality, if only for a short time, is a special power worth celebrating.

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Dollhouse (Kirsten Sheridan, 2012)

Laura Canning

The tag line “Six lunatics, one night, one secret, no control” seems a curious choice for Kirsten Sheridan’s *Dollhouse* (2012), implying as it does all manner of tightly-plotted narrative intrigue. Instead, we are given an overgrown short film, an experimental narrative that continually seeks to exceed the limits of its own boundaries, but unfortunately rarely succeeds. Late at night, a group of delinquent teenagers break into a luxury seafront house, and embark on a spree of drinking and pill-popping that seems continually poised to erupt into violence. Sheridan seems to be aiming for a tone somewhere between *Skins* (Channel 4, 2007-2013) and *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997), and clearly revels in the energy generated by her young cast’s efforts.

This project, the latest from the director of *Disco Pigs* (2001) and *August Rush* (2007), originates from Dublin’s The Factory, a formerly-derelict Dublin building located in the environs of Google’s Dublin HQ on Barrow Street. Converted by Sheridan along with filmmakers Lance Daly, John Carney and others, the Factory now houses filmmakers, casting agents, music producers and actors. And a co-operative mindset certainly spreads through *Dollhouse*: improvised by a group of young actors – from whom the greater details of a very thin treatment were deliberately withheld by Sheridan – the approach has some charm, but ultimately fails to convince. *Dollhouse*’s main achievement is that it manages to cultivate and maintain an air of unease – often close to genuine menace – throughout, even as the narrative of the film collapses into a series of increasingly disjointed sequences, culminating in a bizarre nativity tableau. However, it lacks any semblance of coherence, and the workshopped nature of the piece creates as many problems as it solves; for

every fresh and unexpected moment the improvisation throws up, it also seems to raise a narrative blind alley.

Colin Downey and Ross McDonnell’s limpid, glowing photography is one of the best things about the film, and indeed illustrates one of the most interesting trends to emerge from Irish cinema in the past few years, the rise of a new generation of talented cinematographers which also includes the award-winning Kate McCullough (*His & Hers* (2009), *Snap* (2010)) and Suzie Lavelle (*One Hundred Mornings* (2009), *Pyjama Girls* (2010), *The Other Side of Sleep* (2011)). Their work lends a lush sheen to Sheridan’s shots, limited primarily – one still morning sea-view sequence aside – as they are to the interiors of her luxurious south Dublin set. Indeed, the choice of location itself, the modernist Dalkey mansion of Sheridan’s parents,¹ seems somehow symbolic of the problems at the heart of *Dollhouse*.

In a recessionary period when acquiring funding for even the most promising film projects is tougher than ever, Sheridan’s track record guarantees her serious consideration in any round of funding decisions by the likes of the Irish Film Board (who did indeed part-fund this project),² and it would be malicious, inaccurate bedrudgery to attribute her success to nepotism. And yet,

1. Sheridan’s father is director Jim Sheridan, known for work such as *My Left Foot* (1989), *The Field* (1990), *In The Name of the Father* (1993), and *In America* (2002).

2. Doll House received a Fiction Development Loan of €15,000 in the April 2010 round of funding decisions, see <http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/decisions.php?type=1&year=2010&date=2010-04-23>.

without wishing to feed into an naively auteurist discourse on the matter, there is something a little discomfiting about the apparent ease with which a ramshackle experimental piece such as this can be produced, distributed and widely reviewed once access to mechanisms of the culture industry is close at hand. Certainly, the ‘let’s put the show on right here’ ethos of the film’s production is entirely in keeping with the workshopped, improvisational aesthetic of the work coming from The Factory. More than that, by virtue of the film’s geographically-restricted nature, the location dictates much of the film’s form and tone.

The story of Jim Sheridan’s house – with its jacuzzi, sauna, cinema for twenty, private jetty, and so on – constructed in the fading light of property boom in south Dublin’s exclusive Dalkey, and his well-publicised court battle regarding alleged defective work, became something of a staple for Irish newspaper columnists. Here, its gorgeously minimalist rooms are at first objects of wonder, but quickly become the target of an inchoate, aimless teenage rage: defiled by a food fight; defaced by witless marker scribbles; its contents burned outside in the night. One stand-out sequence, airy and dreamlike, gives us a rare moment of collaboration between the young invaders, as they band together to literally up-end the house’s equilibrium, gluing and nailing bedroom furniture and accessories to the ceiling to form a delightfully bizarre mirror image. The house itself constitutes not a ‘simple’ setting, if such a thing could ever be said to exist, but a narrative signifier all of its own – of comfort and domesticity, but also of power and privilege.

Therefore, the use of the Sheridan family home as signifier must be looked at in the context of the film’s attitude to *privilege itself*, as played out in its most problematic aspect: the absolute absence of any consciousness of how class is represented. Sheridan herself tacitly notes the centrality of the class dynamic to the film’s entire premise when she says:

I knew they were going to be gone for months so I just said to John Carney, “we should make a

film, we have a free house” and he said “No, it’s your house, you should make the film.” Then I got an idea of the clash of two worlds; I couldn’t really write about the people who live in Dalkey because it’s not really my world, so I thought I would bring the kids I do know out there³.

However, this consciousness is not reflected in the film itself, which lacks any real feeling for ‘the kids I do know’, or any sense that they have a story to tell.

Indeed, it is curiously free of any real acknowledgement of the manner in which power and authority are distributed, either outside the house, or inside its whitewashed walls. Instead, we are given a miniaturised class war, in which the pristine sanctity of the ultra-modernist Sheridan mansion is apparently threatened by rapacious ‘howyas’ armed with threateningly working-class accents, awash with booze and fistfuls of drugs. It seems unfair to blame the youth and inexperience of the improvising actors for the unsatisfactory manner in which this plays out, but the lack of attention to the ideological or personal politics of the ‘invasion’ leaves a thematic and ethical void at film’s heart. How are we meant to interpret its politics, other than as a not-so-covert warning that the underclass is only ever moments away from an orgy of vengeance and destruction?

As the film progresses, the evidently upper-middle-class characters are made increasingly central, and the – frankly more interesting – others are correspondingly marginalised; this is presented as the ‘natural’ order of things, narratively speaking, in a way that rankles. Sheridan’s attention moves gradually away from confident but physically vulnerable Denise (Kate Stanley Brennan), eternally watchful Shane (Shane Curry, of Lance Daly’s *Kisses* (2008)) and volatile Eanna (Johnny Ward), who teeters on the verge of tattooed, hyper-masculine cliché

3. In interview 06 December 2012 at http://www.movies.ie/interviews/dollhouse_interview_with_kirsten_sheridan, downloaded 19/02/2013.

but pulls back when necessary. Instead, we are invited to focus on the pointedly SoCoDu Jeannie, whose portrayal by Seána Kerslake is oddly disjointed, distanced from psychological and emotional realism in a way that does not suggest theoretical reflexivity or formal experimentation so much as it does a director's abandonment of an inexperienced actor to her own devices. The progressive – but unconvincing – unravelling of her mental state, as well as her back story, is punctuated by the unexpected introduction of Jeannie's old friend Robbie (the charismatic, eminently watchable Jack Reynor, who filmed this before starring in Lenny Abrahamson's acclaimed *What Richard Did* (2012)). This adds a temporary adrenalin jolt to the already tense atmosphere, challenging as it does the group dynamic, but fails to add anything substantial to the storyline.

The film winds to a messy conclusion, culminating in a bizarre nativity tableau-cum-prodigal daughter resolution. In a smarter film, this might have had parodic qualities but here, Jeannie is just another pretty blank-faced cipher

to add to the pantheon of Irish cinematic womanhood: virgin, whore, madonna, but never satisfyingly human. The other characters sneak away into the morning, apparently transfigured – but by their enactment of some kind of post-punk aesthetics of wanton destruction, or simply by their brush with the middle classes, we cannot tell. Where a film like *Funny Games* asks unsettling questions about entitlement, instinct, and privilege, despite the best intentions of its young cast and Sheridan's keen eye, *Dollhouse* gives us instead minor damage as spectacle, vague atmospherics without real intent.

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Seven Psychopaths (Martin McDonagh, 2012)

Joan FitzPatrick Dean

In 2012, Martin McDonagh returned to the big screen with his second feature *Seven Psychopaths*, a film set in Los Angeles and immersed in American culture but hardly devoid of things Irish. Colin Farrell returns as McDonagh's leading man, Marty, here playing a character who has much in common with his creator and director: He's called Marty; he is writing a screenplay; he lives in Los Angeles. Most importantly, he's trying to move beyond the clichés of film violence, to be done with "violence, guns, all the usual bullshit". On occasion, Marty's friend, Billy Bickle (Sam Rockwell), employs a stage Irish dialect in one of the film's forays into self-conscious sentimentality ("Ah, bejesus, sure, you're me best friend"). Charlie derides both Marty's pacifism and his ethnicity: "You don't believe in guns? They ain't fucking leprechauns, you dumb Mick". Perhaps most memorably, Billy cautions Marty about his drinking: "It's part of your heritage.... You're fucked from birth. The Spanish have got bullfighting. The French got cheese. The Irish have got alcoholism."

McDonagh's theatre audiences will recognize features of the plays that insinuate themselves throughout *Seven Psychopaths*. Again, as in *A Behanding in Spokane*, McDonagh portrays interracial couples: Myra (Linda Bright Clay) and Hans (Christopher Walken) as well as Maggie (Amanda Warren) and Zachariah (Tom Waits). Again, we witness horrific violence, including the dismemberment of a corpse with a saw. The badly injured Mairtin in *A Skull in Connemara* averred that "hospitals are for poofs, sure" (62); here Charlie Costello (Woody Harrelson) reports that "Peace is for queers" and Marty is quoted as saying dream sequences in films are "for fags". Just as Mad Pdraig's deepest

love in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* was for his tabby cat, Wee Thomas, the most violent psychopath among many, Charlie, is besotted by his Shih Tzu named Bonny. Like McDonagh's earlier work, *Seven Psychopaths* is structured like a matryoshka doll: smaller stories nest in larger ones. *The Pillowman*, for instance, embeds nine of Katurian's gruesome fairy tales; *Seven Psychopaths* contains flashbacks of Hans and Myra as revenge stalkers and of Zachariah and Maggie as serial killers of serial killers.

McDonagh again creates a dense network of allusions to cinematic history that runs from Takeshi Kitano's *Violent Cop* (1989) back through *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola 1972) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese 1976) to Howard Hawks. He hilariously rejuvenates the clichés of tough-guy dialogue ("Throw your guns down or the alcoholic gets it"). The final shootout, often referred to and anticipated as the final shootout, unfolds in the badlands of Joshua Tree National Park in the Mojave Desert, a landscape and situation visually evocative of John Huston's *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (although Huston's film was one of the first US films shot entirely on location). *Seven Psychopaths* is, from its opening shot of the HOLLYWOOD sign, a movie about movies. When Billy asks what happens to the seven psychopaths at the end, Marty confesses "I don't know what happens to them at the beginning".

Seven Psychopaths ventures into a self-referentiality that explores McDonagh's weaknesses as a writer and filmmaker. On occasion, his characters simply spring from a captivating mental picture: "I just like the image of a Vietnamese guy in a priest's outfit with a snub-nosed 44", says Marty. Although McDonagh's

Irish plays were populated by egg-smashing or rifle-wielding colleens and a savage mother-daughter pairing in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, his women characters in *The Pillowman*, *A Behanding in Spokane*, and *In Bruges* receded in clarity and dimensionality. After perusing Marty's screenplay, Hans describes Marty's women characters as "awful ... they get shot or stabbed in five minutes. Most of the ones I know", says Hans, "can string a sentence together".

Like *In Bruges*, *Seven Psychopaths* has the trappings and baggage of a buddy movie, a term that McDonagh himself has used to describe the depiction of the relationship between Marty and Billy: "decency, love for each other should be palpable throughout" (Interview with Kurt Andersen, Studio 360, National Public Radio, 25 October 2012). Indeed, in a quiet moment as the film nears its conclusion, their friendship is made explicit:

Billy: I love you, man.

Marty: I love you too.

In reading *Billy's Secret Diary: Keep Out Pigs!*, Marty discovers Billy's resolutions to help Marty to drink less and, in a "note to self", not to set fire to the neighbor's American flag. Billy is both a sincere friend bent on self-improvement and the Jack of Diamonds killer, both Psychopath Number One and Psychopath Number Seven. When finally challenged by Marty, Billy says "I killed all those people to spur you on a little bit and give you something to write about", a statement richly resonant of conversations between Michal and Katurian, the brothers in *The Pillowman*.

While the first half of *Seven Psychopaths* is indeed, as Marty says, a perfect set-up for a shootout, its second half dwells on the teleological speculations of its trio of would-be screenwriters: Billy, Hans, and Marty. Billy's moral compass knows only the North Star found in the formulas of film violence ("You don't take the chief fucking villain to a fucking hospital"). In comparison, Hans, whose daughter and wife are both murdered, is positively ruminative. With Myra, Hans hopes that they will again be with their murdered daughter in the afterlife and consoles his wife, "God loves us He's just got a funny way of showing it". The direct

descendant of Ken (Brendan Gleeson) in *In Bruges*, Hans has renounced revenge. Admitting that the pursuit of his daughter's killer was a waste, he endorses Gandhi's belief that "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind". Hans' peyote-fuelled vision of Myra in a grey place challenges his belief in an afterlife, but his dying words suggest something else again. Marty routinely ponders the final questions and acknowledges that his writing gravitates towards Heaven and Hell, both of which are capitalized in the film's subtitles. Of Myra's death, Marty says, "I guess she's in heaven ... I'm not sure what I believe", but over Hans' corpse he makes the sign of the cross.

The opening dialogue, in which two thugs discuss people who were shot through the eye, people like John Dillinger and Mo Green, initiates a concern with distinction between "real life" and the movies, and mirrors the question of the relationship between Martin McDonagh and Marty. McDonagh uses, for instance, "real" serial killers: The Texarkana Moonlight Murderer (1947), the Zodiac killer (1975), but also reaches back to the 1930s to track down the Butcher of Kingsbury Run, now an old man in prison. Looking for a character who is an unlikely assassin, Marty outlines one of his psychopaths as first a Buddhist, then an Amish, and finally a Quaker father driven to violence by the rape and murder of his young daughter. After Marty uses the Quaker's story as his party piece, Billy protests that he told Marty the story months earlier ("there may be copyright issues"). The next time Marty tells the story, Hans undoes its tidy irony by revealing himself as the bereaved father who slit his own throat and corrects Marty: "some of the details aren't exactly right ... our beautiful daughter was black" and Myra worked side-by-side with Hans.

Most of McDonagh's psychopaths respond to the depravity of others: the Vietnamese "priest" to the murders of his family in the My Lai massacre; Myra and Hans to the murder of their daughter; Maggie and Zachariah to her brutal captivity. This pattern is central to the comparison of McDonagh and Quentin Tarantino, whose influence McDonagh acknowledges and whose seventh full-length feature, *Django Unchained* (2012) won the Academy Award for best original screenplay. Commentary on McDonagh almost

invariably links him to Tarantino for their graphic portrayal of violence and their immersion in popular culture, especially film history. (Surely we can anticipate conference papers comparing the second scene of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* with the sequence in *Django Unchained* that features an overhead shot of Django [Jamie Foxx] trussed, upside-down, naked, awaiting castration.) Tarantino's stock-in-trade draws the viewer into empathy with a victim (African-American slave, Jewish child, pregnant woman) of human depravity, so that the viewer welcomes, relishes, and thereby is implicated in violence against Nazis, sadistic slave owners, et al. McDonagh's and Marty's meditation about film violence in *Seven Psychopaths* suggests that, as for Zachariah, delight in violence against the violent offers diminishing returns and that psychopaths become, as Hans says, "tiresome".

Just as *Pillowman* offered alternative endings and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* provided two endings (depending on whether Wee Thomas ate his Frosties), *Seven Psychopaths* has no fewer than five endings. The first proposed ending, Billy's version, is scripted expressly as a screenplay: "Exterior. Cemetery. Night. The Shootout". In a sequence crosscut between Hans and Marty listening to Billy around a campfire (underscored by Carter Burwell's exquisite music) and Billy's imagined film ending, a bloodbath filled with "money shots": suddenly all the psychopaths "burst out of their graves with a gun in every hand"; Kaya, wearing a wet t-shirt, convulses as "she is fucking mown down. Fucking mown down"; Charlie is shot through the neck with an arrow – a veritable cinematic trope that imdb.com identifies in no fewer than nine films, including Howard Hawks' *The Big Sky* (1952) – just before his head explodes. In Billy's version, Marty grabs two automatic weapons and becomes one of the psychopaths. (Here the seven are the Vietnamese man, Maggie, Zachariah, Hans, the Jack of Diamonds killer, Charlie, and now Marty.) The second version comes from Marty (or Martin McDonagh) as another final shootout is played out against one of the spectacular rock formations in Joshua Tree, the perfect place for a shootout. The violence culminates with a standoff with Charlie ready to shoot Billy who

holds a flare gun to the head of Charlie's beloved dog. Closure in this sequence finds Billy, shot through the head, dying happy as Bonny finally responds to his command "Paw. Paw". And that might have been the end of the film, but Marty drove off to find that Hans left behind a third ending on a tape recorder bearing the message: "MARTY DOES THIS HELP?" Thinking back to the Vietnamese priest and hooker, Hans imagines her, now a Yale graduate fluent in Asian languages wearing a red dress, telling the terrorist priest in flawless Vietnamese: "Desist brother. You know this will not help us." In Hans' ending, the blink of an eye transports the Vietnamese man from a Phoenix hotel to a Saigon street fifty years earlier. Now he is a Buddhist monk, the first to self-immolate in protest against the war. When a fellow monk pleads with him, "Desist brother. You know this will not help us", the first monk whispers "it might" just before striking a match. In the fourth ending Marty's desk has framed photos of Billy and Hans, now both dead. Marty says good-bye to Bonny and walks off with his now-complete screenplay, past the charred remnant of Billy's neighbor's American flag. The music swells, the credits roll. But suddenly the celluloid film stock jams and melts as a phone call to Marty from Zachariah Rigby interrupts the credit sequence. Zachariah reminds Marty that he promised on his life to incorporate a message to his long-lost Maggie in the completed film. Marty realizes his oversight and accepts that Zachariah will come to kill him on Tuesday. Zachariah, however, lets him off the hook: Tuesday doesn't work for him and with that the credits resume. The last of the these endings offers the least closure of any of the five, but a promise in McDonagh is always a promise.

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What Richard Did (Lenny Abrahamson, 2012)

Debbie Ging

Spoiler alert – this review gives away plot twists for *What Richard Did*, Herman Koch's novel *The Dinner* (2012) and Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The Slap* (2008).

Lenny Abrahamson's third feature is something of a departure from the dark, low-key comedy of *Adam and Paul* and the mournful, quasi-spiritual tone and tenor of *Garage*. Interestingly, the director also shifts his focus from male characters more frequently understood as problem social categories than actual people (drug users, marginalised rural men) to a social milieu in which the privileges of white, middle-class masculinity are entirely taken for granted. *What Richard Did* is based on Kevin Power's 2008 novel *Bad Day in Blackrock* which was, in turn, inspired by the Brian Murphy case, in which an 18-year old boy was beaten and kicked to death by school friends outside a Dublin nightclub in August 2000. Reviews of *What Richard Did* were overwhelmingly positive in both the Irish and the British press, and it recently won five IFTA awards out of a total of 10 nominations, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Script (Malcolm Campbell) and Best Actor (Jack Reynor).

Set in an affluent Dublin suburb, the story begins with the somewhat mundane adventures of 'super-rich' kid Richard Karlsen and his friends in the summer between finishing school and starting university. When a fight with Conor, Richard's rival for Lara's affections, ends with the former beaten and left to die alone on the street, however, Richard's moral universe begins to implode as it gradually dawns on him that there will be no punishment or repercussions for what he did. On the contrary, his father and friends immediately move to cover up for him,

and he is packed off to the family beach house until the whole incident blows over. There Richard is left confused and rudderless to contemplate the future which his parents are so desperate to protect.

The film has been read as both indexing and allegorising the moral nirvana of the post-Celtic Tiger era. *Sight and Sound* reviewer Hannah McGill points out that, "The sole offer of help comes to Richard from his Danish father (Denmark helped to bail Ireland out with a €400 million bilateral loan in 2010)", also commenting that, "the film frames this approach not as a reliable lifeline but as temptation to retreat further from hope; Richard's father doesn't help him to do the right thing but encourages him to sidestep justice."¹ Indeed, it may well be Abrahamson's adroit allegorical framing of the financial crisis not just as economic or local but also as moral and universal that explains the film's resonance with audiences both within and beyond Ireland. In this sense, *What Richard Did* displays significant continuities with a particular sub-genre within both cinema and literature that is concerned with the emotional aftermath of and middle-class response to ostensibly random acts of male violence, including Dutch author Herman Koch's best-selling novel *The Dinner* (2012), Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), Christos Tsiolkas *The Slap* (2008) and Christopher Wakling's *What I Did* (2011).

Much of the reviewer commentary around these novels and their filmic / TV adaptations has tended to focus on the dynamics of the middle-

1. Hannah McGill, review of *What Richard Did*, *Sight & Sound*, February 2013.

class (post)modern family and questions of liberal parenting and political correctness. Like *The Slap* (2008) and *The Dinner* (2012), *What Richard Did* is preoccupied with the moral crises experienced by the characters *after* the event rather than with their motivations. And, like *The Slap* and *The Dinner*, it is also a scathing critique of middle-class morality, which shows a level of self-interest and individualism among the bourgeoisie that is practically indistinguishable from pre-democratic feudalism. In this neoliberal scenario, intersectional politics and group solidarity effectively disintegrate when the interests of the nuclear family – and by extension neoliberal capitalism – are threatened. The louder the gutless parental figures of these narratives rant about protecting their young, the greater their exposure as failing/betraying the next generation.²

What Richard Did thus departs significantly from the types of concerns and debates that surrounded the original Brian Murphy case, which focused predominantly on the causes and nature of young male violence. Indeed, audiences in search of sociological explanations for why Richard did what he did may well have been disappointed. There is no smug, port-swilling father bullying him toward alpha-malehood, no botoxed mother on Prozac, no glaring insights into the intensely homophobic (but simultaneously ‘dangerously’ homoerotic) and hierarchical culture in which boys are socialised, no parsing of the dog-eat-dog competitive individualism of schools rugby and none of the casual racism, classism and misogyny that so famously lampoons the Dublin 4 milieu’s crass sense of entitlement in the Ross O’Carroll-Kelly books. By contrast, Richard’s parents are benevolent, bohemian in an impeccably cultured way and as understated as the taupe-inflected décor of their home. The only clue we are given as to why such a seemingly contented young man

went temporarily off the rails is, therefore, the suggestion of his father’s limp liberalism and lack of paternal authority.

This stands out in sharp contrast to the portrayal of the father figures in texts such as *The Slap* and *The Dinner*, beneath whose middle-class respectability anger and the potential for violence constantly simmer. Harry in *The Slap*, we discover, has brutally beaten his wife in the past and is the son of a man who was constantly angry. When he majestically proclaims to his nonplussed son that one day his entire ‘kingdom’ will be Rocco’s, we cannot help but wonder whether this inheritance will also include Harry’s proclivity for violence. In *The Dinner*, we eventually discover that Michel’s father is an unreliable narrator who has been prone to outbursts of apparently inexplicable violence and that, beneath the tolerant veneer, he harbours deep-seated misgivings about what he clearly perceives as the excesses of Dutch liberalism, as well as intense jealousy of his brother’s success as a politician. While this information is subtly woven into the narrative, it helps explain why Michel and his friend burn a homeless woman to death in an ostensibly random act of violence. Dirt and disorder are seen to pose some unspeakable threat to the integrity of the middle-class family, and Michel’s behaviour can only be understood as somehow related to his father’s suppressed loathings.

Violence in these narratives is not linked, therefore, with a violent media culture or associated with populist accounts of ‘youth out of control’ but is attributed rather to dysfunctional patriarchs out of kilter with the modern world. In the case of *What Richard Did*, however, Richard’s father appears to be entirely at ease with modernity and it is the *absence* of paternal authority that seems to be at the root of Richard’s moral dysfunction. Interestingly, this dovetails with a certain type of commentary on masculinity and violence that was prevalent at the time of the Brian Murphy case. Irish psychologist Maureen Gaffney was especially outspoken in attributing the upsurge in this type of male violence to a “collapse of the old authority structures” which, she claimed, allowed young men’s ‘natural’ testosterone-fuelled aggression to go unchecked and untamed:

2. Indeed, there may well be another parallel to be drawn here in terms of how Richard’s problem is ‘resolved’. Just as attempts to ‘fix’ the current economic crisis in Europe (essentially a crisis of neoliberalism) merely seek to inject more neoliberalism into the problem, Richard’s father attempts to ‘fix’ Richard’s moral dilemma, a crisis caused by social privilege, with yet more privilege.

We have forgotten that social structure is what protects males from the volatility of their nature...The young males of all primate species indulge in heart-stopping risk-taking and experimentation...The peak of aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour occurs in the late teens and early 20s, corresponding to the peak of testosterone at that age.³

Jim Sheridan evoked a similar discourse when he commented (in relation to *In the Name of the Father*) that:

The idea behind the film is that the father figure becomes a kind of decimated symbol when you have a crushed culture. Once you destroy the father figure, the figure of authority, then you haven't got a society.⁴

Absent from these accounts – and arguably also from *What Richard Did* – is the possibility that the ‘social structure’ might in fact be responsible for constructing the ‘volatility’ of young men’s ‘nature’. Although the socialisation of the boys is hinted at when the coach draws them together to sing the team’s mascot song, there is little analysis or explanation of this process. In this respect, the film leaves itself open to readings of masculinity as essentially or naturally violent without the stabilising influence of traditional

3. Maureen Gaffney (2004) ‘Inside the Heads of a Generation Living Without Constraints’, *Irish Times*, 28 February.

4. Michael Dwyer (1993) ‘The Shooting of Gerry Conlon’ in *The Irish Times*, 8th May, Weekend Section, p.1

paternal authority. This is a phenomenon which other Irish filmmakers have – almost without exception – savagely critiqued as one of the darkest and most destructive aspects of Irish culture. It is precisely Abrahamson’s lack of step-by-step pedanticism and reliance instead on mood, texture and rhythm that make him the most confident and sophisticated filmmaker in Ireland today. As a class-based critique of middle-class morality, *What Richard Did* is exceptionally sharp, balanced and nuanced. When viewed through the lens of masculinity, however, it is an inconclusive meditation on the nature of male violence which resonates uneasily with essentialist, ‘boys will be boys’ accounts of manhood. Abrahamson’s refusal to explain Richard’s motivations is frustrating, perhaps because – if the film is read more as personal drama than allegory – the spectre of the Brian Murphy case and of current debates about young male violence continue to cast a very real shadow over this work of fiction.

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Whither Now for Section 481?

Roddy Flynn

I propose to extend the film tax relief scheme to 2020; reform the operation of the scheme by moving to a tax credit model in 2016 so as to ensure better value for taxpayers' money and eliminate the need for high income investors to provide the funding for the scheme; and enhance the scheme so as to make Ireland even more attractive for foreign film and TV productions. These changes will rectify the anomaly by which investors received a disproportionate amount of the tax relief as opposed to the funds going to production. (Michael Noonan, Minister for Finance, introducing the 2013 Budget on December 5 2012).

Since 1993, Section 481 of the Finance Act has been a key element of Irish film policy. Introduced in the 1987 Finance Act, the tax break for investments in film and television production initially generated unspectacular results, raising just £IR2.3m per annum in the five years up to 1992. However, the 1993 decision to amend the tax break to make it available to individual investors (having previously been the exclusive province of corporations) opened the floodgates: in 1993 £IR11.7m was raised, a figure which shot to £IR42.5m in 1994 and which continued to climb through the 1990s and 2000s. As early as 1995, the idea that the survival of the Irish film industry depended upon the retention of Section 481 had become an article of faith for the entire Irish film industry.

Despite this, the demise of Section 481 has been foretold on a number of occasions over the past few decades. The most serious threat came in December 2002, when the then Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy, announced that the tax break would not be extended beyond 2004. In this regard, he was influenced by the deliberations of the Tax Strategy Group within the Department of Finance which from 1999 onwards had argued that Section 481's retention could no longer be justified on the basis that it

was supporting an infant industry. McCreevy's announcement prompted a year-long campaign co-ordinated by Screen Producers Ireland (with the support of the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism), which argued that Section 481 was a key element of the Irish audiovisual financial infrastructure without which large-budget overseas productions in particular would have little incentive to contemplate shooting in Ireland. Even the MPAA Head, Jack Valenti, when visiting Ireland in October 2003 was pressed into service to call for the retention of the tax break:

I do not pretend to give advice to prime ministers but in this modern world not to have a film tax incentive is to leave a country impotent ... If you repeal this you leave Ireland barren.

Duly impressed, in December 2003, McCreevy not merely reversed his decision but granted an extension of at least five years to the operation of the Tax Break and increased the ceiling on the amount of Section 481 money which could be invested in individual projects.

However, we live in different times. As Ireland enters the fifth successive year of recession, all state expenditures and tax reliefs have been subjected to close scrutiny. When the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (better known as the McCarthy Report after its chairman), submitted its report in Autumn 2009, it identified potential savings of over €20m by transferring the functions of the Irish Film Board to Enterprise Ireland, effectively abolishing the Board. That recommendation was not followed through but, like every other state body, the IFB has seen its funding whittled away since then. Having received €20m in capital funding in 2008, this figure has fallen by 41% to €11.89m for 2013.

In this context, and given that the annual cost

to the state of Section 481 relief had grown to “almost €50m” by 2011, the break was unlikely to escape further scrutiny. In May 2012, the Department of Finance published a consultation paper, the framing of which must have raised concern within the film industry. While inviting submissions from interested parties as to the retention or otherwise of Section 481 after 2015, the paper noted that a previous Indecon review of Section 481’s operation in 2007 found that “the benefits of the scheme to the Irish economy were ... low and declining”. More pointedly the paper pointed to Indecon’s finding that, on average, “for every €100 raised under Section 481, the exchequer cost was €34 but that only €19 accrued as a subsidy to the producers with the balance being returned to investors or accounted for in administration costs.” These figures were altered somewhat by the decision after 2007 to allow investors to write off 100% of their investment at the marginal rate of tax relief as opposed to the 80% that was permitted in 2007. As a consequence as of 2012, every €100 raised through Section 481 was costing the state €41 of which only €28 went to the production company. In other words the difference between the cost to the state and the benefit to the production company – €13 – was leaking back to the investors and the financial intermediaries who actually set up Section 481 investments. Ominously for those who asserted that the very existence of the industry was predicated on the existence of Section 481, the consultation concluded by suggesting that:

Alternative forms of intervention by the State, either through a lower tax relief, or the use of a credit based system may achieve the same outcome for the production company but at a lower cost to the State.

Moreover, retaining Section 481 had become increasingly difficult to defend in political terms. In 2009 the Commission on Taxation questioned whether access to Section 481 investment was fairly distributed amongst those on lower incomes. As the Department of Finance would point out in December 2012, Section 481 was effectively skewed towards benefitting “high income individuals”. 74% of those who availed of the scheme in 2010 had incomes in excess of €100,000 and the structure of the tax break

effectively limited it to individuals who had “a substantial portion of their income at the higher rate of income tax” (Department of Finance, 4), a fact which the Department overtly described as “inequitable”.

Thus in their assessment of Section 481, the Department recommended moving towards “a producer led tax credit model based on the net benefit to producers under the current scheme” which would simultaneously end the leakage of money raised under Section 481 away from producers and “remove high income individuals from the funding model, thereby improving equity.” Most damningly, the Department concluded that had such a model been in place in 2011 it would result in a “32% exchequer saving” reducing exchequer cost from €46.5m in tax foregone to €32m.

The recommendation clearly ran in the face of the expressed wishes of the film industry. When, as part of the consultation process begun in May 2012, Amarach Research (in conjunction with chartered accountants BDO) surveyed production companies as to their views on Section 481, there was an almost blanket defence of the scheme in its present form. 86% of respondents suggested that in the absence of Section 481 local productions would be cancelled (although only 57% felt that its absence would have a similar impact on international productions). Production companies ranked the source of production funding as the second most important factor influencing the decision to film Ireland, only just behind the fact that their productions were actually set in Ireland. But perhaps most strikingly, only 11% of respondents identified the fact that their company was actually based in Ireland as a primary reason suggesting that, under a different financial regime, Irish companies might be willing to consider shooting outside the state.

Furthermore, with regard to the proposed replacement for Section 481, three-quarters of those producers surveyed by Amarach/BDO argued that a tax credit would not seamlessly replace Section 481. The primary reason for this relates to cash-flow problems: Section 481 finance is particularly appealing for producers because it is available on day one of shooting. The

value of a typical tax credit, by contrast, would only become available at the end of the tax year in which the production was shot. Thus, for example, in the UK which in 2007 switched from the investor-led Film Partnership Relief system to the producer-led Film Tax Relief system, expenditure on film production is “explicitly crafted as a repayable tax credit”. Under the UK system, investment in film-making can be claimed as a deduction at the end of the tax year when film production companies come to calculate their taxable profits. In the event that the application of the deduction leads to a tax adjusted loss (i.e. a firm has spent £UK30m on production but only had profits of £20m) that tax adjusted loss can be surrendered to the Inland Revenue for a payable tax credit.)

Irish producers acknowledge that the delay in realizing the benefit of a tax credit is less problematic for international productions which are typically financed by companies with the capacity to self-fund (in other words who could afford to wait for the benefit of the tax credit to become available). However they stress that the delay is potentially critical for indigenous productions, especially in a changing banking context. From a situation less than five years ago where banks were heavily engaged in film finance (most notably Anglo Irish Bank and Allied Irish Banks) through Section 481 schemes, as of 2012, the banking sector is “not interested in cash-flowing production finance”. (Amarach/BDO, 26)

Nonetheless, film-maker protestations aside, Michael Noonan unsurprisingly went with the advice of his officials. The industry response was pragmatic, welcoming Noonan’s statement that a tax relief would be extended until 2012, even if the precise structure of it after 2015 remains opaque. In part this was due to the decision to retain the current structure until 2015 thus allowing a gradual transition. It may also be that

industry concerns have been mollified by the Department of Finance suggestion that in order to maintain a similar level of benefit and avoid the need to discount the relief by borrowing against the [tax] credit from a financial institution, a payable credit could be delivered by Revenue after a minimum level of expenditure is complete.

In other words, not only would producers be able to avoid relying on banks to advance a loan against the tax credit but they would have to wait until they filed a tax return to realise the benefit of the credit.

Regardless, it may be that by 2015, other factors will step in to influence the precise structure of the new Section 481. The announcement by the UK before Christmas 2012 that from April 2013 the Film Tax Relief would be extended to high budget (£UK1m per hour) television production must raise concerns in Ireland, given (as noted by Flynn and Tracy in the opening section of this year’s Review) the substantial number of UK television productions which have shot here since 2012 (the weakening of sterling against the dollar in recent months will augment the attractiveness of this initiative). Happily, the kind of large-scale production activity originating from the US (from *The Tudors* through *Camelot* and onto *The Vikings*), is probably less vulnerable to international competition given the relationships established by Octogan Pictures in particular with US cable channels (Showtime and others). Nevertheless even the best business relationship may not be able to withstand the logic of the bottom line.

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Beyond the Multiplex: Contemporary Trends in Film Exhibition in Dublin

Eileen Leahy

The last few years have seen the proliferation of small, specialised cinema events in Dublin that can be understood as a counterpoint and community-based response to hegemonic patterns of cinema exhibitionism an era of global consumerism.

Cinema attendance in Ireland has remained one of the highest per capita, even with reductions brought on by the recession (Gordon 2011). Nevertheless how and where we view films has changed significantly. As Kevin and Emer Rockett's recent history of film exhibition attests (Rockett and Rockett 2011: 366-454), cinema attendance was a vital part of community and social life for the Irish during the twentieth century, with a cinema (or 'picture house') found in most local areas as well as metropolitan centres. Today, however, most films on the big screen are seen at the multiplex; a generic consumer experience encompassing an 'event' movie, retail 'opportunities' and fast food at interchangeable large suburban complexes (ibid:196-197). Social interaction is limited and social distance is maintained in the multiplex design, layout and norms (Hubbard 2003:262) as well as through the requirement for travelling to and from the cinema in the private car.

Notwithstanding healthy cinema attendance in Ireland, the home is now the place where most films are watched, with an array of technologies facilitating home viewing, from digital home theatres to internet streaming and piracy (Klinger 2007:77, Allen 2011:42-44). Following international patterns and increased affluence, home viewing has greatly increased in Ireland the past decade, with an exponential rise in the ownership of home cinema technology (Central Statistics Office 2012:34), DVD rentals and

purchases (International Video Federation 2011:13-14) and video on demand (VOD) subscriptions (Wreckler 2013). This switch to home viewing consolidates cinema as a dominant consumer culture (Klinger 2006: 38, 47, 55) and can also be found to detach cinema from its earlier social and communal function.

While Dublin offers a variety of multiplexes¹ and provides a limited but generally strong arthouse cinema scene,² and although there has been a substantial rise in home viewing, there would appear to be a demand for a more diverse cinema culture in Ireland's cosmopolitan capital. Since 2005 there has been a notable increase in small, alternative and minority film festivals, such as the Polish film festival, Kinopolis (2005-) and the Temple Bar Film Festival (2006-2007) that focused on recent Irish cinema. Minicinefest (2006 to 2008), Pintsized Film Festival (2007) and Eat My Shorts (2010-) have each provided outlets for short films and there has been an annual Sunday Times Outdoor Cinema Festival since 2007. The Indian Film Festival of Ireland and Underground Cinema Film Festival both launched in 2010, the Blackrock Animation Film Festival in 2011 and the Fingal Film Festival, the Freshly Squeezed International Student Short Film Festival and the UCD Science Film Festival launched in 2012, to name just some of the many small festivals that have come to form part of the

1. Multiplexes can be found in Dublin's city centre, as well as the suburbs, including Blanchardstown, Coolock, Dundrum, Dun Laoghaire, Liffey Valley, Santry, Stillorgan and Tallaght.

2. The Lighthouse, the Irish Film Institute and the Screen cinemas all offer independent and art-house films.

annual cinema calendar in Dublin. It is notable that these events don't all happen within a cinema setting: many take place in hotels, bars, clubs, galleries and warehouse spaces; a phenomenon facilitated by digital technologies and the affordability of projection equipment.

These factors may also account for the spread of small film clubs and various other film events that seem to create a more personalised, social and heterogeneous cinema experience than that available at the multiplex. Indeed, a 2012 'chick-lit' novel by Irish writer Brian Finnegan *The Forced Redundancy Film Club* taps into this zeitgeist and its title suggests the recession as a contributory factor in the popularity of such gatherings.³ The book's main theme, that of a group of employees who seek to remain in contact after being made redundant, also speaks to the community-building potential of this trend against the backdrop of classic movies. Its pleasures notwithstanding, the novel might also be a portent of the mainstreaming of film clubs, which, until recently, were cliquish and underground.

Interactive film events and clubs have also become commonplace as part of Dublin's nightlife. Recent examples include a *Big Lebowski* (Joel Cohen, 1998) drinking game at The Button Factory venue and a *Liz & Dick* (Lloyd Kramer, 2012) game at the bar 4 Dame Lane. Whilst the *Big Lebowski* was a celebration of the film itself, the *Liz & Dick* event was ironic, demonstrating how these events can be a comment on the film as well as a means of displaying or acquiring cultural capital (Thornton 1995). Other film events such as midnight screenings of *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) at Spy club and at The Sugar Club music venue rely on the kind of interaction that characterised *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and tap into an international cult following.

Some film clubs screen films not widely available elsewhere, like short independent films, student films or niche alternative films. Others transform film screenings into special events,

whilst some revolve around fandoms or specific genres. Many clubs don't rely on a particular venue but move from one location to another, and some screen their films in other types of non-cinema locations.

'Hacienda Nites' is one such film club that has hosted film screenings in a variety of settings from bars to artist studios, with a concentration on offbeat documentaries that are rarely commercially screened. There is a great deal of effort put into creating a social ambiance. On the evening I attended their screening of *Crazy Love* (Dan Klores and Fisher Stevens, 2007), for example, a row of tea-light lanterns led through the warehouse courtyard to the Stoney batter Guild studio, where tea and cakes were served in vintage china and the audience mingled before and after the film. This creation of a screening as a retro event offers more than just a film, by including the intangible 'old fashioned' values of taste, belonging and community.

'Underground Cinema' is a more formal organisation with an agenda to showcase Irish filmmakers. Launched in 2008, it champions outsider films made without national film industry support. The club is based in Dun Laoghaire, originally at the Kingston Hotel, but now at the Eblana Club. Monthly screenings offer filmmakers the chance to show their work and audiences the opportunity to see recent, unavailable films. 'Underground Cinema' also creates a strong network of filmmakers, both professional and amateur, through creating a social space and actively encouraging social interaction. Since its foundation other associated services have been offered, the organisers have toured their programme, launched a festival, initiated various film services and provided an online networking forum. Thus, from its beginnings in monthly screenings, 'Underground Cinema' has expanded to provide resources to filmmakers and to create a community of filmmakers outside of the established Irish film industry sector.

The range and diversity of film clubs and events among the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay Bi-sexual, Trans-gender, Queer) community testifies to the heteronormativity of commercial cinema culture in Dublin and demonstrates a grassroots response to the exclusion of this section of the

3. Admission prices to film club screenings are usually substantially cheaper than that charged by commercial cinemas.

population from the screen. Pantibar's 'Movies in her Living Room, a series programmed by actor and screenwriter Mark O'Halloran (*Adam and Paul, Garage*), defined cinephilia for Dublin queers. 'Oscar's Movie Night' offered a gay homage to Hollywood in Wilde's bar. Queer themed documentaries got an outing with Outhouse's 'What's the Story' series, programmed by documentary maker Anna Rodgers, whilst radical queer group, Queer Thing, focused on film and political action in Seomra Spraoi, Dublin's anti-capitalist social centre. *Film Qlub*, launched in 2010 by cultural scholar, Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka, and film editor, Ferran de Juan, screens series of little-known, significant queer films. Its first season of silent era films celebrated LGB art and activism of the early twentieth century. The second series concentrated on another golden age of gay activism in the 1980s, while the 2012-2013 series concentrated on little-known gay films from the 1940s to the 1960s. The dedicated social space, discussion and interaction at the *Qlub's* New Theatre setting foreground community and sociality as the club sets out to reclaim lost and overlooked lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered cinema histories.

Other clubs specialise in specific kinds of films or film events. 'Film Fatale' is a bi-monthly event at The Sugar Club venue that relies on nostalgia for the glamour of classic cinema through an immersive experience, involving dressing-up, cocktails and a nightclub themed on the film being screened. 'Morb' screens horror films at secret, unusual and atmospheric venues around the city, which have included a warehouse, a disused convent and an abandoned gallery. The emphasis is on mystery by keeping the film a secret and by gathering members together at a designated location before bringing them to the clandestine venue. Some clubs allow

members to select films, such as 'The Workman's Den' where film titles are entered into a draw and the winning film screened at The Workman's Club. There are also clubs with a social or political agenda; 'Auntie Underground Cinema', for example, runs twice-monthly screenings of worldwide, political, anarchist films at Seomra Spraoi. 'Open Cinema', the London based film club, which aims to the homeless access to cinema culture, expanded into Dublin during 2012, with its weekly screenings of films, followed by discussion, at the collective arts centre, Exchange Dublin.

This small sample of film events, clubs and groups around Dublin in 2012 hints at the reconstruction of cinema as a unique, local and communal experience. Film clubs can be said to supplement commercial cinema by offering a range of features lost in the on-going globalisation process. A wider and more diverse range of films, curated by knowledgeable programmers, is one such feature. Sociality and community is another, with dedicated social spaces and activities built into club events and with almost all of the film clubs relying on sociality and belonging to sustain membership. These clubs offer a different experience of cinema than that available in the multiplex, with the possibilities of inclusivity through belonging to a particular group and the exclusivity of insider knowledge both of the group and of the particular films or film genres on offer. Whilst film clubs have had a long history in Ireland as an alternative to the dominant hegemony, recent incarnations of the film club in Dublin feature mainstream as well as alternative versions. With the growing availability, and affordability, of screening equipment and films, and with film screenings an attractive option for pubs and clubs to attract clientele, this is a trend that looks set to continue in coming years.

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Nuala (Patrick Farrelly, Kate O'Callaghan, 2012)

Stephanie McBride

Fade up from black, to glowing lights on a control desk, faders, a coil of twisted cables, coming to rest on a microphone. A radio studio – Nuala O'Faolain's chosen medium to reveal her deep anguish, fears and defiance about cancer and death. Her story, told with tears, insight and courage to her friend and colleague Marian Finucane in April 2008, captivated a nation and prompted a cascade of responses from listeners – a reminder of the potency of both radio and of a lone voice speaking directly and unsentimentally to reach so many.

O'Faolain spoke with raw honesty about her reflections, her relentless questions and concerns at the prospect of death – a subject she knew was fraught, sidelined or denied in society's master narratives, which tend to eclipse and elide those awkward areas, despite the strong history of wakes and funeral customs in Irish life. "As soon as I heard I was going to die, the goodness went from life," she said, explaining her decision to refuse chemotherapy. A month later, O'Faolain was dead.

In 2012, *Nuala*, a 90-minute TV documentary presented and produced by Finucane, directed by Patrick Farrelly and Kate O'Callaghan, opens with O'Faolain's radio interview and captures her life and her death. Mixing interviews with friends, colleagues and relatives, the documentary comes across as an Finucane's enquiry into, a quest for and a memorial of her friend's life and times. This is established early on, as we follow Marian visiting her friend's homes and family, probing motives, and piecing together the threads, the back-stories and subtexts.

This very personal and intimate excavation of a life is well served by cinematographer Kate McCullough's measured rhythm and visual poetics. Skylines of New York, Dublin, Paris, Madrid and Berlin rub shoulders with suburban streets and

stretches of rural road. Post-diagnosis medical images are juxtaposed with images of New York's city life carrying on in all its vibrant, messy, mocking vitality.

A view of her cottage window in Co Clare gains poignancy as O'Faolain speaks of her "sourness with life". Objects become charged with memory, desire and value – a slow pan across her bookshelves, a last glimpse of yellow silk curtains in her New York home, the heartbreaking, fragile and tentative hold on life through objects she had lovingly gathered and chosen. "Objects contain absent people," noted Julian Barnes in *Metroland* and here they are blended into a nuanced and textured portrait, with the elegiac elegance of the visuals, onscreen text, snatches of glorious arias, phrases of more restrained scored music and O'Faolain's quiet, husky voice.

As might be expected in a biography, family photographs are featured throughout. The family snapshot genre, with its images of happy harmony and the suggestion of cohesive units, is itself an idealised construct – an edited, sentimentalised narrative imposed on less ideal realities and telling only a partial "snapshot" of a story. Photographs punctuate the film, tagging the domestic fault lines of her early family life – a prominent journalist and philanderer father, a sad, alcoholic mother and their nine neglected children.

The reality of their domestic lives was made very public through her 1996 memoir *Are you Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman*, showing the gap between the public facade and the reality where the family lived in near destitution behind closed doors.

Toward the end of the documentary the family portrait makes another appearance, this time with fewer siblings and without their parents. Yet this "damaged little bunch" seems more adjusted, even

happy, and the portrait is a more authentic one – with a renewed grasp of intimacy and even joy perhaps, especially in the face of death, revelations and loss.

"My own life began when I first made out the meaning of a sentence." All her friends describe how books and reading provided her escape from a grim home life. Reading and intellectual discovery marked her days at the St Louis boarding school in Monaghan before her time in university. Ireland in the late 1950s and early 1960s suggested parallel universes – on one side, a highly conservative society dominated by the ethos of the Roman Catholic church; and on another, a bristling intellectual and hedonistic pub life in which O'Faolain embedded herself – a time in which she notes that "thousands and thousands of lives were ruined, quite casually, by the rules the patriarchy set for young women".

As O'Faolain negotiated her troubled way between passion, desire and bohemian excess, the film also identifies her yearning for love and high romance – of a grand operatic sweep.

There is a continuing sense of the rifts between her intellectual energy, romantic passion and the untidiness of her relationships. The film identifies how she frequently felt emotionally insolvent and often reveals her as petulant, peevish and casually cruel. This is especially marked in her relationship with John Low-Beer and his daughter. Home movie sequences in their New York apartment illustrate the fiercely combative nature of her attachment and neediness. And though Nell McCafferty's glinty smiles beam brightly in several photographs, her absence from the documentary, despite having been O'Faolain's lover of 15 years, testifies to troubled and contradictory impulses.

Perhaps disappointing in this portrait is the relatively scant attention given to her professional life, such as her work as an Open University/BBC producer in the 1970s and later with RTE. There was her weekly Irish Times column in which she constantly prodded, pricked and probed the injustices, smugness and complacency in Irish life. Through her broadcasts and writings, she gave value, substance and significance to ordinary lives, and her *Plain Tales* television series won a Jacob's Award in 1985. She made an eloquent and spirited critique of the first Field Day Anthology that had excluded

women writers and it remains a charged moment in Irish literary history.

. . . it is immensely wounding. And I hope that other people will protest with me, so that the next time an anthologist bends to his task, he won't be able to forget that there are watchful women out there. . . While this book was demolishing the patriarchy of Britain on a grand front, its own, native, patriarchy was sitting there. Smug as ever.¹

And while gossipy tittle tattle is frequently a lure, one wonders whether a man's dalliances and lovers would be given such free rein. Colm Tóibín palpably delights in her romantic and sexual conquests – those glamorous intellectuals with whom she was involved. Of course the documentary-portrait is a delving into her complex personality and, at times, her tortured situation and search for love; nonetheless, for many it is O'Faolain's fearless and independent voice as a feminist and champion of unheard voices that remains her legacy.

In a sequence late in the film, sentences from her final emails pulse across the screen, phantom messages and signatures from her final days, a haunting presence and absence, like a ghost in the machine. Throughout the film her voice provides a delicately-charged presence but more significantly it is the voice of the departed, percolating through with the urgency and energy of her last contact.

Her own memoir resisted any sentimental notion of family life. That intensely honest portrayal involved her sisters too, despite one of her sister's caution to "tone it down". Nor does this documentary tone down its portrayal of its subject; Finucane, O'Callaghan and Farrelly resist any flat matt veneer and present a powerful and compelling narrative of a life lived large, the forging and reinvention of her identity as she frequently renewed her embrace of life and tackled it afresh after setbacks, failed romances and disappointments. The incisive and arresting insights from her sisters and friends Evelyn Conlon and Patsy J. Murphy as well as intense

1. Nuala O'Faolain (column), in *The Irish Times* (12 Nov. 1991) cited in "Testimony to a flowering", Catriona Crowe. *The Dublin Review* issue No.10 Spring 2003 (accessed online: 7/2/2013)

probing by Finucane anchor the portrait in a candid authenticity.

Richly textured and at times abrasively blunt, this documentary-epitaph presents a suitably uncompromising focus on one woman's life – and confirms the value of a tale told with the sound and fury, the agonies and excesses of a somebody.

Nuala

Director: Patrick Farrelly, Kate O'Callaghan

Producers: Patrick Farrelly, Marian Finucane, Kate O'Callaghan

Editor: Jordan Montminy, Will Harris

Cinematographer: Kate McCullough

Music: Michael Fleming

Accidental Pictures

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**“Too much quiet would drive a fellow mad:”
Landscape and Nostalgia in *Silence* (Pat Collins, 2012)**

Aimee Mollaghan

Given the complex relationship that the cinematic landscape has enjoyed in Irish cinema it is, perhaps, surprising that it has taken so long for a film to contend not only with its visual impression but also its acoustic properties. Blending fiction and documentary, *Silence* (2012) documents the fictional pilgrimage of Irish sound recordist Eoghan (Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde) from his adopted city of Berlin to his childhood home in Donegal as he attempts to capture the sonic signatures of the quietest places in Ireland, preserving them for future generations. By endeavouring to capture the sounds of an acoustic environment being steadily trespassed on by the noise of increasing industrialisation, Collins’ film weaves visual and sonic textures into a dense cinemascapes in order to examine notions of nostalgia for a lost Ireland. By not only confronting the Irish landscape and the weight of associated history, it also directly engages with the soundscape, allowing for an arresting psychogeographical journey through the contemporary rural landscape.

Landscape carries a certain cultural significance within Irish Cinema, offering itself up as a utopia or balm to the ills of modernity. Martin McLoone posits that the iconography of landscape became symbolic of Ireland’s aspirations for nationhood, writing that Ireland’s cinematic landscape “perfectly encapsulates the way in which the West of Ireland now exists as kind of ideal regenerative environment for the trouble and worried kind of modernity” (McLoone, 2008: 95). Cultural critics such as David McWilliams have asserted that the Celtic Tiger years saw the Irish middle class essentially come to disavow their *Irishness*. Tellingly when we first encounter Eoghan, he is living and working in Berlin and is reluctant to return to

Ireland. He is however, haunted throughout the film by the recurring image from what eventually transpires to be his childhood home. Furthermore, as Ruth Barton points out, “Nostalgia for the past is often an unwillingness to come to terms with the present; in a society in which the reporting of child abuse, murder and marital violence is now a daily occurrence, there is a good argument for retreating into an illusory state of grace...” (Barton, 1997: 43). It is not surprising therefore, that in the wake of economic collapse there would be an attempt to seek out the utopian values that got lost along the way within the Irish landscape. As Martin McLoone asserts, “Now that Irish culture reflects the dominant values of secular, consumer capitalism, the deeplying romantic promise of the landscape seems increasingly attractive (McLoone, 2008: 94). Although McLoone was referring to films such as *Into the West* (1992) and *The Field* (1990), which were produced just before the Celtic Tiger economy, his contention is all the more pertinent in the existential vacuum currently pulling on the Irish psyche.

Silence is a highly ambiguous, narratively episodic film. Time is not wasted in exposition as Collins constantly plays with layers of authenticity. Even though it appears that Eoghan is working within landscapes untainted by human intrusion, the sound reveals otherwise; for instance the sound of a rock breaker interfering with his attempts to capture the pastoral soundscape of rural Cork. Although Eoghan’s odyssey and his conversations with the figures that he encounters seem to indicate nostalgia for the past, Collin’s intercutting of documentary footage is often bleak or brutal. We are subject to images of island families carrying their belongings to boats bound for the mainland, of a

dog being taken out to sea and drowned. But by listening so intently to the sound emanating from the natural landscape, it as though Eoghan is attempting to commune with nature, to listen to Gaia, to capture a past that no longer exists as the siren sound of landscape draws him ever further north. The intangible atmosphere of the film conjures up the dreamscape of an aising. Eoghan is listening to Ireland and lamenting her woes.

Although *Silence* appropriates many of the themes and subjects traditionally explored in Irish cinema, it also has provenance in British travelogue films such as *Gallivant* by Andrew Kötting and Patrick Keiller's *Robinson* trilogy. Much like Kötting and Keiller in their picaresque perambulations through the British landscape, Collins uses the conceit of the journey in order to reveal something about or comment on the country and the people who live in it. In this respect *Silence* also owes a certain debt to the situationists, setting up and presenting situations that allow us, the audience, to critically examine our day-to-day lives in order to recognise our desires. Eoghan is like an acoustic *flâneur*, enjoying a *dérive* through the cinemascap, his journey directed by the undulating geography of the film as he strives to encounter an authentic experience free from the noise of modern life. By focusing on the psychogeography and soundscape of the Irish rural scenery, Collins allows the landscape and sound to express Eoghan's emotion rather than resorting to dialogue or cinematic cliché for explication. The interweaving of environmental sounds, voice and music creates a connection between the past, present and immanent as in the work of Kötting, Terence Malick and Andrei Tarkovsky.

Just as psychogeographers believe that the geography of an environment had a psychological effect on the human mind, proponents of acoustic ecology hold that humans are affected by the sound of the environment in which they find themselves. Practitioners of acoustic ecology, seek to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape that facilitates a harmonic relationship between the manmade and the natural acoustic environment. By recording and cataloguing soundscapes in order to preserve and document the changing landscape they examine the extent to which

soundscapes can be shaped by human behaviour. Of all of our senses, sound, in particular has the capacity to stimulate our memories, activating associations between fragments of thoughts. The diffuse qualities of sound have the ability to envelop us. Although we hold the ability to block out sound, we do not possess the physical means to do so. Our ears are always open and regardless of the quality of our hearing we can still respond to the physical vibrations produced by sound. Reflecting the fact that sound is particularly affective, filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti writes "Pictures are clear and specific, noises are vague... that is why noise is so useful. It speaks directly to the emotions" (Cavalcanti 1985: 109).

Sound can stimulate a feeling, a mood. Walter Murch contends that sound enjoys a primacy over the other senses by virtue of being the first sense to be activated after we are conceived. While in the womb we are immersed in a reservoir of sound, encompassing the rhythmic sounds of our mother's voice, her breathing, her heartbeat interwoven with the tumultuous bruit of the outside world. It can give us the sense of a shared collective consciousness, a sense of connection to the landscape and each other. Its diffuse palimpsestic qualities allow for a mediation between dreaming and waking states, blurring boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness. Collins uses sound as way of negotiating temporalities. Through his use of asynchronous sound and his strategy of allowing sound to bleed across scenes he provides a way of moving between the past, present and future. The acousmatised voices carried on the wind provide a link to the past, while also foreshadowing events in the future.

Eoghan in his capacity as acoustic documentarian is a passive protagonist. He does not allow the sublime romanticism of the Irish landscape to overwhelm him. He strives to be an impartial observer, who is trying not to impose his presence on the cinemascap, visually or aurally. Yet, nonetheless he is an interloper, his very presence with his electronic equipment signifying the intrusion of modern world upon this natural environment. Eoghan finds it increasingly challenging to document an acoustically *pure* soundscape untouched by the encroachment of industrial noise. It is also

difficult for him to escape from other people. Eoghan is drawn into conversations with unnamed characters that he encounters on his travels, allowing them to not only reveal something about themselves and a lost heritage but something about himself as the film progresses. He comes more talkative and forthcoming the further north he travels, particularly when conversing in Irish.

Silence is a quiet elegiac film, affording the audience time to ruminate on our own relationship with the landscape. It opens up space for thinking. Although initially resistant to the idea of returning to Donegal, Eoghan, who for unexplained reasons has not returned home for fifteen years allows us, the audience, to experience the Irish landscape and its associated sounds anew. This is a unique film in its attempts to re-appropriate the Irish cultural landscape. Rather than using landscape as a physical space

for the locus of action, Collin's representation of landscape allows him to move towards an engagement with the aesthetic effects of landscape on the psychological state of his protagonist. The psychogeography is reflecting Eoghan's psychological journey as he attempts to reconcile his mental and emotional journey home with his actual physical journey. It demonstrates a shifting dynamic in Irish film. By withholding information from us, it does not allow for a contextualising of history in the typical sense. Collins allows for ambiguity in order to allow us to make up our own minds. It is not an outright rejection of modernity, nor is it a lament for an Ireland of yore but perhaps it is significant that Eoghan, the exiled Irish son, finally finds silence, calm and authenticity on his arrival to his childhood home at the close of the film.

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Men at Lunch / LónsaSpéir (Seán Ó Cualáin, 2012)

Denis Murphy

Men at Lunch is the story of one of the better-known photographs of the 20th century. Usually attributed to the photographer Charles Ebbets, the image depicts eleven steelworkers taking a lunch break astride a steel girder 800 feet above the streets of midtown Manhattan, oblivious to the perilous drop below. The ubiquity of this 1932 group portrait has made it a focal point in the creation myth of the American nation. To many, it depicts the casual heroism of the “huddled masses”, encapsulating, as one of the film’s contributors puts it, “the moment where America ceased to be the America of the Mayflower and became instead the America of Ellis Island”.

Given the iconic status of the subject photograph, one of the most extraordinary things about director Seán Ó Cualáin’s engaging yarn is that the film had not been made before. For apart from the intrinsic interest of the image itself, a number of enduring questions suggest that here is a story ripe for the telling. Is the photograph real or was it faked? Who took the picture? And who are the men on the beam?

The solving of these mysteries provides *Men at Lunch* with much of its narrative energy. The filmmakers travel to the vast underground warehouse where the original glass plate negative is housed in a high-tech, climate-controlled environment reminiscent of a James Bond film. We learn that the photograph is one of the best-selling pictures in the Corbis archive. The company archivist provides reasonably compelling evidence that the glass plate negative is indeed an original (although he fails to address the more common contention that the image was staged, or is at best a forced-perspective optical illusion). We are told that the beam on which the men are perched is part of 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

building’s in-house photographic archive and discover a number of contemporary images that cast doubt on the claim that Ebbets was the photographer.¹

In relation to the third question – the identities of the men on the beam – the story remains murky. Such is the iconic power of the image that it has become something of an American cliché to claim descent from one of these steelworkers. The filmmakers go to some lengths to establish this fact, but then – seemingly unaware of the irony – advance a decidedly dubious theory that two of the men are emigrants from the tiny Galway village of Shanaglish.

Seán Ó Cualáin has stated that the film derives from a chance encounter with the photograph in a Galway pub (Ó Cualáin 2012). Given this starting point, it is hardly surprising that his film builds towards an examination of this theory, which is based on the claims of two elderly Irish Americans. While there is little doubt about the personal conviction of these Shanaglish descendants, they present precious little evidence for their case. Indeed the connection between Shanaglish and these Manhattan steelworkers seems to be based on a highly debatable physical resemblance, and little else but an intuitive hunch. “You don’t grow up to the age I am now without knowing who you are and who your father is”, claims one of the would-be descendants, and who are we to argue? For we do not know either, nor could we from the evidence presented.

A more likely motivation for the Irish-American connection might be found in the

1. The Corbis website now lists the photographer as “Unknown”.

requirements of the funding bodies that contributed *Men at Lunch's* production budget. The film, commissioned by TG4, received a €50,000 Irish Film Board production loan (IFB 2011) and €80,000 from the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland's Sound & Vision Fund (BAI 2010). The stated intentions of both of these funding bodies reflect the prioritisation of film and television project that fulfil certain general cultural objectives. In the case of the Film Board, projects must "tell Irish stories, drawing on and depicting Ireland's culture, history, way of life, view of the world and of itself" (IFB 2013a). In a similar vein, the Sound & Vision fund targets new television programming on "Irish culture, heritage and experience", including history, the Irish language, and "the Irish experience in European and international contexts" (BAI 2010: 3). It is difficult to see how the filmmakers could have fulfilled these eligibility requirements without embracing this Irish "angle" (tenuous though it may be) to the story of the famous photograph.

Within the limitations imposed by this cultural requirement, it is to Ó Cualáin's credit that he has made a film of international appeal, as is obvious from the film's reception on the festival circuit, where at the time of writing it is still doing the rounds. Indeed the production company, Sónta Films, found the resources to produce separate Irish- and English-language versions, fulfilling the requirements of its (Irish language) host broadcaster yet making the film more festival friendly, especially in the Anglophone markets where, given its subject matter, it might be expected to have the most impact. Following its Irish premiere at the 2012 Galway Film Fleadh, the film was warmly reviewed at the Toronto International Film Festival and DOC NYC. Its appeal to the American audience appears to be ongoing, with a sale to the US public service broadcast network PBS possibly in the works.²

There is little doubt that the international appeal of *Men at Lunch* is bolstered by the film's refusal to limit itself to the smaller story of its

mooted Irish angle. The photo's history allows Ó Cualáin to weave in an appealing, if romanticised, tapestry of contextual narratives. There is the American immigration story, where the fusion of disparate immigrant experience contributed to the extraordinary explosion of American popular culture. There is the tale of the heroic labour, ingenious design and technological innovation that produced the skyscraper – "a city of industry soaring up to the sky, a monument to human endeavour", in the words of Fionnuala O'Flanagan's voiceover, eloquently written and sensuously delivered (in both language versions). And there is the story of the Depression-era American steelworker, for whom the cruel statistic of "one dead worker for every ten floors" underscores the human suffering that lay beneath the upward trajectory of the celebrated skyline.

A dependence on talking heads is a feature of this kind of film, and their inclusion rather undermines the film's otherwise unexpectedly cinematic qualities. Nevertheless *Men at Lunch* was praised by *Variety* for its "impressive" production values (Leydon 2012), no mean feat for a television documentary emanating from the typically low-budget environs of TG4. The film is notable for its extensive use of striking, carefully chosen period photography and archive footage. The most notable visual element, however, is a rostrum effect in which the iconic photograph is animated in the "virtual 3D" style pioneered in the 2002 US documentary *The Kid Stays in the Picture*. The effect is well executed, and it is clear that its intention is to add a fresh perspective to a familiar image. But it still feels overused, detracting from its other intended purpose, to avoid an overdependence on the original version of the image.

This is a pity, because otherwise Ó Cualáin and his Director of Photography Réamonn MacDonncha have taken commendable pains to avoid the pitfalls of filming in what Ó Cualáin (2012) knows to be "the most photographed location on earth". The production team spent an extended period in New York researching and then shooting *Men at Lunch*, and the resultant familiarity is evident from the way they have filmed the city. Thankfully, there is little footage of Times Square (it is there, but so perfectly

2. A PBS sale was mentioned during a public interview following the film's Dublin premiere at the Irish Film Institute (Feb 1, 2012).

contextualised that its visual excess fades into insignificance). One of MacDonncha's most inspired decisions is to film the city from the Roosevelt Island Tramway, avoiding the perhaps more tempting (and more expensive) use of helicopters and cranes. This resourceful vantage point – a relatively little-known location providing unusual city views from an elevated position – is one of which the “mad photographers” who braved the heights of 30

Rockefeller Plaza would undoubtedly have approved

LónsaSpéir

Director: Seán Ó Cualáin

Producer: Éamonn Ó Cualáin

Script: Niall Murphy

Narrator: Fionnula Flanagan

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The Horror: *Stitches* (Conor McMahon, 2012), *Grabbers* (Jon Wright, 2012)

Craig Simpson

The second feature film from Irish director Conor McMahon (who made his promising feature length debut in 2004 with *Dead Meat*) deals with that horror staple: fear of clowns. Or, to give it its medical title: Coulrophobia. While some suggest this fear arose from negative experiences we may have had as children with these apparently harmless figures of fun (and indeed that's where *Stitches* seems to land on this), popular culture has embraced the clown as something that manages to stoke our deepest, darkest fears. In music, bands like *Slipknot* and *Insane Clown Posse* have cultivated their image based on this theme while Stephen King did for clowns what Peter Benchley did for sharks with the publication of his novel *It* (1986) – later made into a TV film (1990). It was King who set the benchmark for all contemporary malevolent clown incarnations with *It's Pennywise*: a sadistic inter-dimensional predator who terrorises a group of children by preying on their individual phobias.

In American cinema, B-movies like *Blood Harvest* (1987) and *Killer Clowns From Outer Space* (1988) have attempted, in ways that were often tongue in cheek and camp, to add to this growing mythology of the 'evil clown'. Even in the real world the figure of the clown became synonymous with evil after it emerged that the serial killer John Wayne Gacy worked as a children's clown at charity events and children's parties.

Stitches therefore enters into an established horror sub-genre but, unfortunately, seems to have little to add to it. McMahon's film recycles a whole set of horror tropes without originality or ingenuity and overall is a disappointing effort that fails to deliver on the early promise of his debut zombie feature *Dead Meat*.

The plot of *Stitches* could not be simpler. A child's party in what appears to be a contemporary house in rural Ireland goes horribly wrong when the drunken, cigarette smoking clown 'Stitches' (played by popular English comedian Ross Noble) manages to fall face first onto a protruding knife from perhaps that most banal of middle class appliances, the dish washer. In an effect that is used extensively throughout the film, blood sprays in jets all over the face of protagonist Tom (played by young English actor Tommy Knight) thereby establishing the film's 'traumatic event' and serving as the reason for *Stitches'* vengeful return from the grave.

A transition introduces us to the kids '6 years later', now all teenagers in the full pangs of puberty, a distance in time unsubtly rammed home by a match-cut involving a squeezed zit and a cracked egg (you get the idea). From here, *Stitches* takes the standard route of most teenage horror films by establishing the group's hierarchy with the stereotypes that we expect: 'the stoner', 'the horny jock', 'the promiscuous girl', 'the nice but geeky protagonist' and so on. Every box is ticked by McMahon but without any real cleverness or deftness of touch. Borrowing heavily from American teen films like *Mean Girls* and TV shows like *Glee* we even have a camp figure in Tom's friend 'Bulger' (Thomas Kane Byrne) though this never amounts to more than cheap mimicry of a 'gay' screen stereotype.

Stitches then begins to work through scenes that 'homage' successful horror films but without adding anything original or remotely clever. The classroom dream sequence for instance – in which Tom's teacher in clown make up tears off a pupil's genitals and ties them

to a balloon, invokes Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* – is neither shocking or disturbing, but rather (unintentionally) comical. Another scene in the gym echoes De Palma's *Carrie*, complete with tracking camera shot, all of which only serve to illustrate that while McMahon is clearly well versed in the classic horror cannon merely quoting his favourite films is not enough to hold a film like *Stitches* together.

Indeed this non-descript referencing of American classics of the genre points up one of the films central problems – a lack of clearly defined place or indeed any sense of real 'Irishness', something that made his earlier Leitrim-set feature *Dead Meat* so entertaining and original. While the setting in *Stitches* appears to be a generic country town in Ireland, there are regional dialects in the 'community school' (ranging from 'north-side' to 'D4') that seem out of place, while Tom (who seems to be channelling a teenage Hugh Grant) speaks with a posh English accent, which is never really explained. While there is nothing wrong with this cosmopolitanism on the surface here it seems hastily cobbled together and comes across as unrealistic and forced. Even the music and slang used by the characters seems outdated and suggests that some kind of research into the average life of the contemporary Irish teenager may have helped with what is overall a poor script from writers Conor McMahon and David O'Brien.

Once the figure of a resurrected 'Stitches' arrives at a second party organised in Tom's house (a kind of reunion of all those who had been at the original) things get very silly, very fast. Noble makes a game effort as the sneering villain but the script only gives him one-liners that aren't really bad enough to be good (this was one of the major appeals of Freddy Krueger in *The Nightmare on Elm Street* series) while the FX for the 'death scenes', including the aforementioned jets of spraying blood, are wildly over-used. One of the films more memorable images is the sight of Stitches chasing Tom and his love interest Kate (Gemma-Leah Devereux) on a mini tricycle into a grave yard but by this stage the film has petered out, culminating in a crescendo of gore for Stitches' own messy, predictable demise.

Grabbers (2012)

This 'creature feature' from Belfast-born director Jon Wright will instantly remind many aficionados of the American comedy-horror classic *Tremors* (1990). Successfully mixing 'buddy film' tropes with those of comedy, sci-fi and horror, *Tremors* set the benchmark for this genre, particularly in its use of fast paced action scenes and social commentary. We find such elements transferred to an Irish context in *Grabbers*, producing a highly entertaining piece of genre filmmaking (it even has 1950s sci-fi 'fades' between scenes) that also manages to poke fun at a whole number of Irish cinematic stereotypes.

After opening with an attack on a fishing boat by a tentacled monster we cut to a panoramic shot of Ireland's beautiful coastline (accompanied by a 'twee' musical score) that would make the Irish Tourist Board proud. Borrowing from Spielberg's *Jaws*, *Grabbers* sets out to establish that this pastoral sleepy town will soon have its peaceful façade breached by an unknown enemy. After a number of dead whales wash up on the beach (another *Jaws* reference?) and a number of locals are attacked and killed it soon becomes clear that there is something dangerous lurking offshore.

Grabbers is self-consciously parodic, allowing for some humorous send-ups of parochial stereotypes. When one local is asked by investigating Garda Lisa (Ruth Bradley) if she knew a storm was coming because the 'seagulls were flying low' she remarks 'no, I saw it on the telly'. Another good example of *Grabbers*' socially-attuned script is a scene where Lisa admonishes alcoholic colleague Ciaran (Richard Coyle) for his drinking. After offering up the standard defense by saying he is just 'a social drinker' she sarcastically replies 'sure you are'. While some might argue that the central premise of the film – that the monster won't attack the community if everybody's drunk – only exacerbates 'paddywhackery', I think there is enough in *Grabbers* to see it rather as clever b-movie inspired satire on our own perceptions of drinking culture and idealizing of rural community.

Ultimately, *Grabbers* signals something much

healthier on the horizon for Irish horror. Unlike *Stitches*, it manages to transcend over-familiar genre conventions by smuggling in some social commentary and giving the viewer a real sense of place in terms of its Irish setting. This lends it an identity and originality all of its own, something much Irish horror fare has sorely lacked over the last decade. While there have been some genuine attempts during this period at giving Irish horror its own voice (*Isolation*, *Dead Meat*) too many of the films in the genre (*Boy Eats Girl*, *Shrooms*) cannot escape the shadow of their far more successful American counterparts. 2012 also saw the release of ‘found footage’ horror *The Inside* but, as is often the case with

Irish film, we seemed to have jumped on a bandwagon that’s already showing signs of exhaustion.

One of the most appealing aspects of making horror films, for emergent film-makers is that they can be made on a shoestring budget and still retain a certain degree of quality (see the recent *Monster* and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise in America). But by and large the industry in Ireland needs original ideas and scripts with a greater consistency in order for that horror films to become successful overseas. Finding our own identity in this genre will be a major challenge; yet, as *Grabbers* demonstrates, it would be premature to see this as an unreachable goal.

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