Finding a Voice:

The Role of Irish-Language Film in Irish National Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Finding a Voice: The Role of Irish-Language Film in Irish National Cinema

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This dissertation investigates the history of film production in the minority language of Irish Gaelic. The objective is to determine what this history reveals about the changing roles of both the national language and national cinema in Ireland. The study of Irish-language film provides an illustrative and significant example of the participation of a minority perspective within a small national cinema. It is also illustrates the potential role of cinema in language maintenance and revitalization.

Research is focused on policies and practices of filmmaking, with additional consideration given to film distribution, exhibition, and reception. Furthermore, films are analysed based on the strategies used by filmmakers to integrate the traditional Irish language with the modern medium of film, as well as their motivations for doing so. Research methods included archival work, textual analysis, personal interviews, and review of scholarly, popular, and trade publications.

Case studies are offered on three movements in Irish-language film. First, the Irish-language organization Gael Linn produced documentaries in the 1950s and 1960s that promoted a strongly nationalist version of Irish history while also exacerbating the view of Irish as a "private discourse" of nationalism. Second, independent filmmaker Bob Quinn operated in the Irish-speaking area of Connemara in the 1970s; his fiction films from that era situated the regional affiliations of the language within the national context. Finally, films

made since the 1990s benefited from generous public subsidies from TG4 (the Irish-language television station) and the Irish Film Board; this funding attracted a large cross-section of filmmakers whose diverse linguistic identities are reflected in the texts of the films themselves. Although historically there have been successful examples of independently produced Irish-language films, current production is dependent on public funding, and the future of Irish-language cinema appears to be very closely linked to policy decisions of both film and language agencies.

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Introduction

"Tá rudaí ann nár cheart go dhéanadh fear dearmad
orthu go deo. A thír, a theanga, agus a chairde.
(Some things a man shouldn't forget.
His country, his language, and his friends.)"
– Jap to Joe in *Kings* (Tom Collins 2007)

Irish national cinema, like Irish national culture more generally, has two linguistic traditions on which it may draw. First, and most obviously, there is the dominant language of English, spoken by virtually all of the island's six million inhabitants.[1] There is also, however, the traditional indigenous language of Irish Gaelic (generally referred to simply as "Irish" or "the Irish language"), now spoken as a minority language on the island but still part of living culture particularly along the west coast. The Irish language, despite having fewer speakers than English, is furthermore the official language of the Republic of Ireland and a recognized minority language in neighbouring Northern Ireland. This unique bilingual situation presents similarly unique opportunities and challenges as Ireland seeks to build a stronger national cinema. The linguistic situation is – as in many European and other nations – complicated by emotional, political and social questions relating to the relative position of each language in the national culture. These types of questions apply equally to debates about national cinema in Ireland and elsewhere.

[1] This figure includes both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. For the purposes of this dissertation "Ireland" will refer to the entire island, while "Republic of Ireland" and "Northern Ireland" will refer to the two separate states, where appropriate. "Irish national cinema" refers to the film culture of the entire island of Ireland; this interpretation of the national cinema is generally accepted by both the Irish Film Board – which funds projects north and south of the border, despite only receiving funds itself from the government of the Republic of Ireland (see chapter 1) – and by scholars: see for example Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (Routledge: London, 2004); Martin McLoone, *Irish Film:The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000); and Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988); all of which include both states within their examination of the national cinema.

This dissertation investigates policies and practices in Irish-language film production over the course of the past century, with particular attention to three movements: the nationalist Gael Linn documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s; the independent films of Bob Quinn's company Cinegael in the 1970s; and the films made in the era of TG4 (the Irish-language television station) and the Irish Film Board, from the mid-1990s to the present.

Many of the films discussed here have been researched in other contexts; for example, Mairéad Pratschke has published several articles on the Gael Linn newsreels and has an unpublished dissertation on the subject,[2] while the Gael Linn films have occasionally been included in scholarly work on Irish documentaries.[3] Bob Quinn's Irish-language work with Cinegael is often evoked in studies of the independent film movement of the 1970s (along with other films made in English)[4] or of community-based media.[5] Furthermore, scholarly work on broadcasting in the Irish language, both on radio and on television, forms a small but growing corpus, and some of that research addresses the films made through TG4, although they are not always the main focus.[6] Yet these

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[2] B. Mairéad Pratschke, "A Look at Irish-Ireland: Gael Linn's *Amharc Éireann* Films, 1956–64," *New Hibernia Review* 9.3 (2005): 17-38; "Resurrecting the Past: Republican Memory in the Amharc Éireann News Film Series, 1959-1964," *National Identities* 9.4 (2007): 369-394; *The Look of Ireland: The Representation of Ireland in Gael Linn's* Amharc Éireann *Film Series, 1956-1964.* PhD dissertation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 2005.

[3] See, for instance, Harvey O'Brien, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[4] See for example "Chapter 5: Irish Independents" in Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema*; "Chapter 6: First Wave Indigenous film in the 1970s" in Martin McLoone, *Irish Film*; or the subsection "Indigenous Experiments" in Chapter 5 of Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*.

[5] For example in Jerry White, *The Radio Eye: Cinema in the North Atlantic, 1958-1988* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009).

[6] Iarfhlaith Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish: Minority Language, Radio, Television and Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003); Ruth Lysaght, "Súil Eile, Dúil Nua (Another Perspective, a New Desire): Short Films in the Irish Language since the Advent of TG4," in *To the Other Shore: Cross-Currents in Irish and Scottish Studies,* ed. Neal Alexander, Shane Murphy, and Anne Oakman (Belfast: Queen's University Press, 2004), 85-94; Eithne O'Connell, John Walsh, and Gearóid Denvir, eds., *TG4@10: Deich mBliana de TG4* (Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2008).

disparate cinematic texts, which emanate from distinct periods in Irish cultural and cinematic history, have not previously been investigated as to how they relate to each other as examples of Irish-language cinema.

By researching the evolution of Irish-language film across these three periods, I seek to explore the changing roles of both the national language and the national cinema and how they intersect in the expression of Irish cultural identity. Furthermore, a historical analysis of what Irish-language film has accomplished leads, in my final chapter, to a theoretical examination of what Irish-language film *might* offer to Irish national cinema in the twenty-first century. At stake in this discussion is the place within Irish cultural identity for the traditional spoken language – which at times has been associated with a narrow nationalism – as Ireland increasingly makes its own voice heard through the modern visual and international language of cinema.

I argue that contemporary Irish-language film complements English-language indigenous production and is crucial to the development of a national cinema in Ireland that expresses the specificity and uniqueness of Irish culture, while also reflecting a national identity that has plural rather than homogenous articulations. This argument is supported by examining theories of both nation and national cinema, which will serve to illuminate the seemingly paradoxical situation of Irish-language film: despite the fact that the language is an integral part of the official national identity, it has been marginalized within the development of an Irish national cinema. The application of theories of national cinema is complicated by the fact that the "national" language is spoken fluently by only a small minority of citizens.

The existing linguistic situation also raises further theoretical questions: new research in the field of translation, for example, has demonstrated that choices in subtitling and dubbing, as in all forms of translation, are not value-neutral decisions. Additionally, theories from the field of sociolinguistics contribute useful insights into the ways that popular culture and modern media help to revitalize a threatened language. Given the unique position of the Irish language with respect to the Irish nation, then, the theorization of Irish language film as part of Irish cinema requires concepts of national cinema to be combined with work from these other disciplines. The theoretical paradigms of national cinema are therefore necessarily extended and renegotiated when applied to the Irish context, as a result of Ireland's cultural specificity and the intersection with concepts from other fields that help to fully engage these dynamics.

As this thesis is an interdisciplinary study, it is important to establish a certain understanding of both Irish cinema (within the context of writing on national cinemas) and the Irish language (within the context of scholarship on linguistic identity) in order to understand their relative functions within Irish culture. The dissertation is therefore divided into two halves. The first half consists of two chapters which provide an overview of relevant history and debates, coupled with theoretical analysis, of Irish national cinema (chapter 1) and applicable linguistic issues (chapter 2). These two chapters provide the background that allows us to understand and evaluate the case studies of several key moments in Irish-language filmmaking, which together form the second half of the dissertation. To contextualize the relevance of my doctoral research, it is useful to provide at least a very brief sketch of the relevant history here before moving forward.

The Irish language

Irish – also sometimes referred to as Irish Gaelic, Gaeilge, or simply Gaelic, although the latter is more commonly used for Scots Gaelic – is the indigenous and traditional language of Ireland. Along with Scots Gaelic and Manx, it forms the Gaelic portion of the Celtic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. While Ireland was never purely monolingual,[7] the Irish language was the principal language spoken on the island for many centuries. The initial decline of the Irish language, beginning in the eighteenth century, can be attributed to English colonial rule over Ireland, as well as a variety of related factors such as emigration to English-speaking countries and better opportunities for English-speakers in Ireland. The decline of the language was greatly accelerated in the mid 1800s by the great famine, which disproportionately affected Irish-speaking regions. The modern revival efforts for Irish are usually traced back to Douglas Hyde and the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. Hyde did not initially associate the language movement with the drive for political independence, but many other Gaelic Leaguers did, and the language soon became an important, if at times symbolic, pillar of nationalist ideology.

After independence was achieved in the 1920s, Irish was constitutionally inscribed as "the national language" and "the first official language" in the young state, with English granted status only as "a second official language."[8] Despite enormous and sustained investment by the government, progress in reversing or even slowing the

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[7] See, for example, Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996).

linguistic shift to English has been decidedly modest. Currently, just under 2% of the population reports speaking Irish on a daily basis outside of educational settings (2011 census).[9] Since the advent of the Gaelic League, other organizations have also been formed to promote various aspects or uses of the language, and the language itself continues to be an important component of national identity, although its place in contemporary life is much debated. Some important aspects of that debate with particular relevance to the issues addressed in this thesis include the following: do the native speakers of the Gaeltacht (rural Irish-speaking areas) have moral authority over the language, or does it belong to the nation as a whole? How does using the language in modern applications (such as film and television) affect its authenticity as a traditional language, often linked to other traditional elements of Irish culture? Is it appropriate for the state to intervene (through subsidies or other policies) in the revival of the language, or should it be left to an apparently natural decline? These questions will be explored in chapter 2, although their implications also underlie the entire dissertation.

Irish cinema

The history of Irish cinema is much shorter than that of the Irish language, but it is equally fraught. In the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, pre-independence Ireland (then part of the United Kingdom) had a thriving film scene which was comparable to that of other Western European nations. The highly nationalist and conservative government that rose to power in 1937, however, treated all forms of

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[8] Article 8 of the *Constitution of Ireland*, 1937. The full text of the constitution is available online through the website of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, at www.constitution.ie [consulted July 21, 2012].

popular culture, and particularly the cinema, with great suspicion. The result was a stunted film industry in Ireland with the majority of production focused on educational reels or documentaries that directly or indirectly supported nationalist ideals (the Gael Linn films discussed in chapter 3 fit into this model). Not only was indigenous film production repressed, but the exhibition of foreign films was heavily censored. McLoone cites that between independence and the 1980s, 3000 foreign films were banned and over 8000 were modified.[10] Such restrictions served to retard the development of a vibrant indigenous community of filmmakers, as well as inhibiting local film scholarship. In the absence of an indigenous film industry, representing the Irish fell to American and English filmmakers. Film scholar Kevin Rockett sums up the scale of this phenomenon: "While less than one hundred feature films have been made by Irish filmmakers in Ireland during the cinema's first century, more than two thousand fiction films have been produced about the Irish outside the country."[11] These foreign-produced images of Ireland established certain tropes that would later be contested by indigenous filmmakers.

A new generation of independent filmmakers began to emerge in Ireland during the 1970s. In part this was due to the dawn of Irish television in the 1960s, as many in this first wave of Irish filmmakers initially honed their skills making programs for the small screen. The independent films from this era explored the contradictions of a changing Irish society and often sought to contest both the foreign representations of Ireland and the traditional, nationalist ideologies that had been encouraged by the state. Bob Quinn was a leader in the independent film movement, and his Irish-language films

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[9] Available online through the Central Statistics Office of Ireland, www.cso.ie. See *Highlights from Census 2011, Part I*. Details on Irish-language use are found on pages 40-41. [Consulted July 30, 2012].
[10] Mcloone, *Irish Film*, 27.

from this decade are emblematic of the era, despite the fact that the other Irish filmmakers overwhelmingly produced English-language films. Quinn's film *Poitín* was also the beneficiary of one of the earliest forms of state-funded support available to Irish film: the script award of the Irish Arts Council. Quinn's company, Cinegael, is the focus of chapter 4. His films can be considered part of a regional (as opposed to simply national) cinema based in the Irish-speaking area of Connemara on the west coast of Ireland.

Although the government had been investing in films as an economic industry since the 1950s, this support almost exclusively benefited foreign film companies using Ireland as a shooting location. The emergent independent film culture of the 1970s demonstrated that the cinema was a powerful tool for exploring Irish life, which served to convince the Irish government to support the cinema as a means of cultural expression. As a result, the government established the Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann (IFB) in 1980. The first Film Board was poorly funded, plagued by controversy, and soon fell victim to government cutbacks. Nevertheless, film production continued on a small scale, and after a few international successes, notably the work of Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, the Irish government revived the Irish Film Board in 1993, this time with adequate funds to begin establishing a national cinema of real significance. The IFB focused almost exclusively on English-language productions until it partnered with the nascent Irish-language television station (which began broadcasting in 1996) to offer dedicated funding programs for Irish-language film production. The policies that underpinned these incentives, as well as the variety of Irish-language short films that

[11] Kevin Rockett and Eugene Finn, *Still Irish: A Century of the Irish in Film* (Dublin: Red Mountain Press, 1995).

have been produced through these initiatives over the past decade and a half, are evaluated in chapter 5.

Public policy

Currently, both the Irish language and Irish cinema benefit from public funds. Virtually every indigenous Irish film produced over the past decade was made with at least some percentage of its budget covered by the IFB or the Arts Council. Activities associated with the Irish language (including publishing, education, translation, and festivals) also rely heavily on government subsidies and support. This dependence on public funds makes both the language and the cinema industry extremely vulnerable to economic changes; indeed, when the Department of Finance released the report of its Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes in 2009,[12] it recommended that both the Irish Film Board and Údarás na Gaeltachta (the agency responsible for the economic, social, and cultural development of the Irish-speaking regions) should be subsumed by Enterprise Ireland, a governmental organization devoted to promoting Irish economic development, with no cultural mandate whatsoever. It is not yet clear whether the recommendations will eventually be implemented, but both the film community and Irish-language organizations have vocally contested the report, particularly since it entirely ignores the cultural importance of indigenous film and language activities. While the current economic crisis is a real consideration, the discontinuation of the IFB, for example, would lead to only €3 million in savings, according to the Special Group's own calculations.

[12] Available online through the Irish Department of Finance, http://www.finance.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=5861 [consulted May 15, 2012]

Language, cinema and culture: methodology

At the start of a period of governmental austerity, with the future of both the Irish language and Irish cinema therefore seemingly in jeopardy, it is a timely opportunity to investigate how these two aspects of Irish culture have intersected in the past, occasionally with (but as often without) state support. The driving question behind my doctoral research, therefore, is as follows: What does the trajectory of Irish-language film production reveal about the changing roles of both the national language and the national cinema in the expression of Irish cultural identity since independence?

The differences between the films under consideration are striking, and raise interesting questions about the commodification of both the language and the cinema over time. When the Irish-language activist organization Gael Linn commissioned *Mise Éire* (George Morrison, 1959) and *Saoirse* (George Morrison, 1961), there was no public funding available for film, and the language was used a medium through which to tell a triumphantly nationalist version of Irish history. In the 1970s, Bob Quinn participated both in the regionally-based Gaeltacht civil rights movement and a national wave of low-budget Irish independent filmmakers; both of these affiliations are evident in his films *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) and *Poitín* (1978). Finally, the availability of public funding for Irish-language films since the mid-1990s has attracted a diverse range of filmmakers, with varying levels of commitment to and fluency in the language; the resulting films display an ambivalence about the contemporary status of the Irish language, particularly as some of the filmmakers have been accused of using the language solely to secure funding and further their own careers within the film industry.

The three periods of Irish-language filmmaking are clearly quite divergent. They invite an examination of the ideologies apparent in the films themselves, the objectives of the filmmakers, and how these are related to greater cultural trends at the time they were made. Furthermore, the immediate reception of these films can be compared to the long-term perception, including how the films responded to or stimulated public debate around larger cultural or linguistic questions. The distinct positions of the various filmmakers with respect to the language also highlight how considerations of insider/outsider representation – long a contested issue within the discourse surrounding Irish cinema due to the large body of American and British films about Ireland – might apply to the representation of a minority culture within the nation.

In order to address my research questions, and to provide a theoretical context within which to articulate their importance to the evolution of academic research in related areas, I make use of a combination of sources. My research is based on personal interviews with filmmakers and policy makers, careful viewing of the films themselves (at the film archives and elsewhere), and a review of existing writing on the subject, including scholarly, popular, and trade publications.

Public and scholarly debates on the issues outlined above do have an impact on policy decisions and on public support of the arts. National policy is particularly important in the case of Irish-language film since virtually all current production is publicly funded, as mentioned above. Informed consideration of the issues, particularly a longer-term view that sees the development and impact of Irish-language film production over several decades, is crucial in preventing public attitudes or policy decisions based only on the most recent successes or failures.

A case study of the Irish situation is also useful to cinema studies more widely, because it provides a clear comparative example for cultural industries in other bilingual nations, with Canada being an obvious example. Therefore, although this dissertation is not a comparative study *per se*, I highlight those elements of my work that can be compared instructively to the Canadian situation.

For example, while Quebecois cinema is often categorized as a national cinema in its own right – demarcated largely along linguistic lines – I argue by contrast that Irish-language films should not be considered as a national cinema separate from English-language Irish cinema. This argument is based on, among other factors, the fact that many Irish film professionals (as well as audience members) work in and watch films in both languages; all of the Irish-language filmmakers discussed in this dissertation have also worked in English. Similarly, actors and crew members rarely make a career working only in Irish, while it is common for Anglophone actors to hone their second-language fluency for the additional opportunities it might bring. There are many advantages to this flow of people across languages that might be productively applied to the English-French divide within the Canadian film industry; for example, casting well-known bilingual actors in films in their second language might help encourage audience members from one linguistic community to watch films in the other official language, thereby strengthening the domestic audience for all Canadian films.

More urgently, my research evaluates the impact of film on language maintenance and revitalization by investigating the successes, the failures, and the missed opportunities in terms of supporting a threatened language. In this sense, the Irish case may provide a relevant model for indigenous-language cinema in Canada (and vice versa)

and can be compared to the work in Inuktitut of Zacharias Kunuk and Isuma Productions, for example. In chapter 2, I will look at the theoretical arguments, as well as some practical examples, for the role of film production and exhibition in supporting minority or threatened languages. Renowned sociolinguist Joshua Fishman makes a convincing argument that any language endangerment issue constitutes a "good problem" in terms of research, because work in that area can also contribute to finding solutions for problems greater than the one initially proposed.[13] For example, work in the field of reversing language shift can also contribute to theories about empowering disenfranchised populations and strategies for preserving alternative systems of knowledge. Therefore, in more general terms, my research into the role of a minority language within a national cinema has implications for the ways that minority cinemas of different kinds – not necessarily defined by language – might variously be framed as part of, or in opposition to, national cinemas in a multitude of contexts.

The history of Irish-language cinema demonstrates that production is possible even in the absence of state funding, but that such funding does have an important impact on the quality and quantity of cinematic activity. Chapter 3 examines the Irish-language organization Gael Linn and their two feature-length documentaries *Mise Éire* (1959) and *Saoirse?* (1961). The independent Gaeltacht-set films of Bob Quinn, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) and *Poitín* (1978) are explored in chapter 4. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the television station TG4 subsidized a variety of Irish-language projects; chapter 5 looks at the station itself and some of the short films, while chapter 6 considers bilingual films, including the feature film *Kings* (Tom Collins, 2007), which was the first Irish film to be

[13] Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1991), 6-7.

submitted to the "Best Foreign Language Feature" category of the Oscars. I will propose some ideas about what bilingualism/biculturalism might mean for Irish cinema; for example, a bilingual film industry allows Ireland to take full advantage of the dominance of English as the language of global entertainment, while also participating in the nationally-specific type of production traditionally associated with prestigious European cinemas.

Ultimately, I argue that by considering the evolution of Irish-language film production over the past century, it is possible to chart how Irish cinema and the Irish language have responded to changing contexts and attitudes relating to regionalism, nationalism, Europeanism, and globalization: Bob Quinn paid tribute to the grass-roots local activism of the Gaeltacht in the 1970s, which contrasted against the kind of Dublin-centric nationalist advocacy of Gael Linn, while the films made through the more recent funding initiatives, for their part, display a range of perspectives which include clear reflections of both mainstream Hollywood influences and concepts of European Art cinema. The intersection of Ireland's national cinema with its national language has resulted in vastly different outcomes in the decades since the first film projectors flickered in Ireland, but the importance of these two elements of Irish culture has not diminished. The fact that both are currently vulnerable due to economic stress means that an examination of their relation to national identity and to each other is more important than ever. Not only is the Irish language a valuable asset to Irish national cinema since it is one way to signal national specificity, but the cinema itself is an important tool in the construction of a plural articulation of Irish national identity.

PART I:

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Chapter 1: Ireland and national cinema

The concept of "national cinema" is alluring in its apparent simplicity. The sheer volume of scholarly work on the subject attests to the enduring appeal of the nation as a lens through which film can be categorized, examined, celebrated and critiqued. The diversity of approaches and opinions belies what might otherwise seem to be an intuitively straightforward concept. It is precisely this lack of consensus that provides fertile ground for new understandings of both the role of cinema in discourses of nationalism and the influence of nationalism in the production and study of film. The purpose of this chapter is to relate contemporary debates on national cinema(s) to the specific context of Irish national cinema. Furthermore, theories of national cinema help to clarify the seemingly paradoxical situation of Irish-language film as it will be discussed throughout this dissertation. The Irish language has been marginalized within the development of an Irish national cinema, which is overwhelmingly produced in English, despite the fact that Irish is an integral part of the official national identity. Irish-language film production has only begun to receive targeted state funding within the past two decades, and most of that funding is in the peripheral market of short-format films. Significantly, the impetus has come not from the Irish Film Board, the agency responsible for promoting the national film industry, but from a specialty minority-language TV station, as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

The first part of this chapter consists of an examination of the concept of national cinema in general, including how it intersects with global, transnational, or regional conceptualizations. Particular attention is given to those themes that are relevant to my analysis of Irish-language film: film policy of nation-states, including both restrictions

against foreign films and encouragement for specific kinds of national production; national and international dimensions of film festivals and other exhibition contexts; and the place of non-film technologies (such as DVDs or television) in the consideration of national cinema. The very important relationship between language and national cinema will be examined separately and at greater length, in chapter 2. The research used to illuminate these particular issues is drawn from a wide variety of academic sources that represent different disciplinary as well as geographical perspectives. This section concludes with an appraisal of the current esteem for theories of national cinema within film studies, and some ideas about future directions.

To understand the importance and special challenges of Irish-language film it is necessary to have not only an understanding of theories of national cinema in general, but also a familiarity with Irish film history in particular. The second part of this chapter therefore provides the necessary context in terms of the history of cinema in Ireland and an exploration of how the various theories of nation and of national cinema can help to illuminate the specificities of the Irish situation.

Concepts of cinema and nation

The beginnings of national cinema

Richard Abel *et al* begin their collection of essays *Early Cinema and the "National"* by asserting that ideas about the nation(al) have provided a means for categorizing films since the very dawn of cinema. As early as 1896, the Lumière brothers organized the films in their sales catalogue by country of origin.[1] Since that time,

[1] Richard Abel, Giorgio Bertellini and Rob King, "Introduction," in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* ed. Abel et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1.

the nation has been employed as a way of grouping films together for various purposes such as festival or awards programs, historical narratives, and film studies curricula. Despite the seeming simplicity of the nation as discrete category, Tom Gunning endorses the idea that "cinema was international before it was national,"[2] pointing out, for example, that the Lumière brothers, as well as filming in exotic locales, chose to exhibit their new technology in major cities across Europe before touring it around their native France after introducing the cinematograph in Paris. This illustrates how cinema had transnational dimensions in production and circulation from the very start. Joseph Garncarz, however, outlines how film culture began to develop in nationally-specific ways in the early 1910s as the countries of Europe displayed preferences for different types of film programs.[3] In an essay from the same collection, Paul Moore presents the case of early cinema exhibition in Toronto to argue that "practices of film-going can be nationalist in character without the films themselves being produced nationally."[4]

Kristin Thompson, for her part, notes that in the context of writing about film history, the concept of national cinemas "emerged during the decade after approximately 1915" and for decades remained one of the most popular ways to categorize films for book-length publications.[5] Stephen Crofts affirms that in academia most writing on film prior to the 1980s adopted "common-sense" notions of national cinema, with various publications on particular national cinemas focusing simply on the history of films produced within a given nation-state. As has been noted by many scholars studying

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[2] Tom Gunning, "Early Cinema as Global Cinema: The Encyclopedic Ambition," in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* 11.
[3] Joseph Garncarz, "The Emergence of Nationally Specific Film Cultures in Europe, 1911-1914," in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* 185-194.
[4] Paul S. Moore, "Nationalist Film-Going without Canadian-Made Films?" in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* 161.

Canada or Ireland, for example, this approach created the perception of a history of absence in countries that had small or marginal histories of film production, even if they may have had very vibrant film-going cultures. Furthermore, nation-based film histories tended to select "great" works or directors over popular forms and often read these films "as expressions of a putative national spirit" rather than analysing the industrial frameworks that influence film production differently in different states.[6]

This apparently unproblematic way of grouping films began to break down in the 1970s and 1980s as the academy turned its attention to auteurs, many of whom moved between countries and languages. By the 1990s, however, film historians began the task of "'rescuing' the concept of national cinemas by striving to retain the useful features of that approach while avoiding past problems."[7] Much of this new work was influenced by Benedict Anderson's publication in 1983 of *Imagined Communities*, as well as the ongoing work of Jürgen Habermas and Eric Hobsbawm among others, which refocused the attention of scholars onto the socially-constructed nature of modern nations and the importance of various media in nation-building projects. In the field of film studies, Andrew Higson's watershed essay "The Concept of National Cinema" was published in *Screen* in 1989. It laid out a theoretical argument for an expanded view of national cinema which took into account not only the point of production (the films made by a certain nation) but also the point of consumption (the films watched by a national audience). Similarly, Toby Miller called for an "overhaul" of "the literature on and

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[5] Kristin Thompson, "Nation, National Identity and the International Cinema," *Film History* 8.3 (1996): 259-60.
[6] Stephen Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema," in *World Cinema: Critical Approaches,* ed. John Hill et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-3.
[7] Thompson, "Nation, National Identity and the International Cinema," 259.

teaching of national cinemas."[8] He argued that "there must be a focus not merely on the texts conventionally catalogued as those of a national cinema but on the actual filmgoing experience of a nation's citizens," including television and video.[9]

Meanwhile, Anderson's emphasis on the popular press and mass literacy as the key factors in fostering the perception of interconnectedness (or "imagined community") was extended by other scholars to include audio-visual media, which similarly has the capacity to create a feeling of shared culture among members of a nation who never meet the vast majority of their fellow citizens personally and may actually have very little in common with them. He pointed out that even for two people in opposite ends of the country, with "no necessary reason to know of one another's existence," the circulation of printed material throughout the nation enabled them to "visualize in a general way the existence of thousands and thousands like themselves."[10]

Anderson's work on nationalism has been so influential within cinema studies as to lead at least one scholar to credit him as "the only writer consistently appropriated by those working on issues of the national in film."[11] This is because in the contemporary context the type of intra-national communion that Anderson discusses also occurs through film and other televisual media now that the technology for producing and consuming them is widely available throughout all developed nations and most developing ones. Wimal Dissanayake confirms that cinema, as a medium, has been implicated in the process of contemporary national myth-making in the non-Western world: "after the popularization of cinema as a medium of mass entertainment in Latin

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[8] Toby Miller, "Screening the Nation: Rethinking Options," *Cinema Journal* 38.4 (1999): 93.
[9] Ibid., 97.
[10] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 77.

America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the role of cinema in this endeavour [nation-building] has come to occupy a significant place."[12] He also stresses the strengths of audio-visual compared to print media by reminding us that "[cinema's] role in conjuring up the imagined community among both the literate and illiterate strata of society is both profound and far-reaching."[13]

In contrast, Ian Jarvie points out that "movies (and television) are not sufficient for nation-building. Indeed, they are not necessary, for the obvious reason that nation-building was accomplished long before the mass media were around."[14] Even more persuasively, Jarvie points to Kristin Thompson's argument that it was *established* European nations (France, Germany, Italy) rather than emergent ones (Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) that first argued for the development of national cinemas in the 1920s. Rather than being nation-building exercises, these national(ist) cinemas were designed to promote "absorption" into a nation that was already clearly defined in the minds of the state's leaders: "well-established nation-states with political systems adapted to nineteenth-century conditions found themselves with the task of socialising those with lesser stakes in the nation into a national consciousness."[15]

While nationalist film policies may potentially serve an agenda of assimilation and homogenization, national cinema can alternatively be envisioned as part of a public sphere which allows a variety of perspectives (political or aesthetic) to come into contact. Filmmakers have at various points in time taken up the pen, as well as the camera, to

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[11] Michael Walsh, "National Cinema, National Imaginary," *Film History* 8.1 (Spring 1996): 6.
[12] Wimal Dissanayake, "Issues in World Cinema," in *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*, 145.
[13] Ibid., 145.
[14] Ian Jarvie, "National Cinema: A Theoretical Assessment," in *Cinema and Nation,* ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2000), 80.
[15] Ibid., 80.

make their voices heard on questions of national cinema. In Britain in 1930, Paul Rotha decried the "hollow foundation" on which British cinema was resting and postulated that "the British film will never prosper, save as a child of the American cinema, until our producers bring themselves to recognise the value of experiment."[16] In Cuba in the 1960s, Julio García Espinosa wrote a manifesto "For an Imperfect Cinema" arguing that the only kind of cinema that would be "culturally meaningful within the [Cuban] revolutionary process"[17] was one which was committed to the everyday struggle of the people; he called for an abolition of "elite" art and stated instead that "the new outlook for artistic culture is no longer that everyone must share the taste of the few, but that all can be creators of that culture."[18] Espinosa was of course influenced by the politics of the Cuban revolution, which was less than a decade old, but the timing of his essay was also a reaction against the new-found "applause and approval of the European intelligentsia" for Latin American films, something that Espinosa rejected as irrelevant for the development of Cuban cinema.[19] In Canada in the mid-1980s, R. Bruce Elder proselytized for a non-narrative, avant-garde "cinema of perceptions" to serve as Canadian cinema.[20] He derided Peter Harcourt and Piers Handling's praise for "New Narrative" Canadian films, stating that the promotion of such films "would thwart the potential of those current developments in cinema which represent the little hope our

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[16] Paul Rotha, "The British Film (1930)," in *Paul Rotha Reader,* ed. Duncan Petrie and Robert Kruger (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 195-96.
[17] Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," trans. Julianne Burton, in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 71.
[18] Ibid., 76.
[19] Ibid.. 71.
[20] R. Bruce Elder, "The Cinema we Need," *Canadian Forum* (Feb 1985): 34.

country now has for reopening the closed system of thought imposed by technique, that is to say, by the U.S."[21]

These examples point to the twin functions of a national cinema. On the one hand, it can reflect back onto its own nation a sense of common identity and shared heritage, as with the nationalist European cinemas of the 1920s or the emerging national cinemas described by Dissanayake. On the other, a national cinema can also define itself by its opposition to, for example, European tastes or American formulas: in the words of Andrew Higson, a nationally-specific cinema can "look out across its borders, asserting its difference from other national cinemas, proclaiming its sense of otherness."[22] Stephen Crofts affirms that – along with the name of a celebrated auteur – the evocation of a national cinematic tradition has influenced how non-Hollywood films are "labelled, distributed and reviewed."[23] In particular, he notes, "as a marketing strategy, these national labels have promised varieties of 'otherness' – of what is culturally different from both Hollywood and the films of other importing countries."[24] The idea of national difference is one of the justifications evoked for the development of state policies in relation to film, as will be discussed below.

The importance of policy in national cinema

Much scholarly work on cinema and the nation alludes to the perceived binary relationship between "Hollywood" and "national cinemas," even if it is for the purpose of questioning the validity of this dichotomy. Ana Lopez, for example, uses case studies

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[21] Ibid., 32.
[22] Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," *Cinema and Nation*, 67.
[23] Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema," 1.
[24] Ibid., 1.

from Latin America to detail various ways that national cinemas have "faced up" to Hollywood, whether it be through imitation, opposition, or co-operation in the form of co-productions. She notes that "the range and depth of the Hollywood industry's historical control over international film markets have forced film-makers aspiring or struggling to produce national cinemas always to have to establish a dialogue with Hollywood."[25] Interestingly, American cinema itself had to face up to France in the earliest years of cinema, when Pathé films dominated the screens even across the Atlantic.[26]

Ian Jarvie, for his part, identifies cultural defence (usually against Hollywood) as one of the three most common arguments for a state-sponsored national cinema, the other two being economic protectionism and nation-building.[27] Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie relate that the public funding of much contemporary European film has informed the "traditional binary model" within film studies – which is nevertheless in the process of being superseded – as one that "pitted an essentially commercial, free-market and internationally oriented industrial model (Hollywood) against a culturally-informed and state-subsidized model (European national cinemas)."[28]

Concepts of nation and state are often used interchangeably in discourses of national cinemas and film policy, revealing an underlying assumption of the paradigmatic western model of the nation-state. Indeed, a certain degree of ambivalence about the two terms is almost impossible to avoid. Michael Walsh explains that while "state" and

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[25] Ana M. Lopez, "Facing Up to Hollywood," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Hodder Arnold, 2000), 423-24.
[26] See Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).
[27] Ian Jarvie, "National Cinema: a Theoretical Assessment," in *Cinema and Nation*, 75-87.
[28] Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, "Introduction," in *The Cinema of Small Nations,* ed. Hjort and Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 9.

"nation" can be analytically separate concepts, they are fundamentally interconnected since discourses of nationhood justify the creation and continued sovereignty of the state while at the same time the established state, "through the control of key institutions, will attempt to influence conceptions of the national."[29] For this reason, state policy is an important part of the development of national cinemas, however they may be defined. Furthermore, medium- or high-budget films targeted primarily at the domestic market are rarely economically viable, except in very large countries such as the United States or India. In smaller countries, even popular films cannot expect to recoup production costs at home. The two options for film producers are either to target their work to a larger international market or to seek public investment. As state bodies remain the principal, and often the only, possible source of such funds, the conceptions of national cinema espoused by the state are clearly of great import to the development of cinema, since they may determine what kind of films get made. However, for a state to involve itself with cinema, it must first be convinced of the importance and influence of film in the life of its citizens.

In the introduction to his edited volume *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives,* Albert Moran affirms that cinema "is a powerful instrument for generating and spreading ideas."[30] As such, cinema triggers certain emotions or behaviours at an immediate level, but moreover – and more importantly in our current discussion on national cinemas – "cumulatively [films] produce a mental landscape, a

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[29] Walsh, "National Cinema, National Imaginary," 5.

[30] Albert Moran, "Terms for a Reader: Film, Hollywood, National Cinema, Cultural Identity and Film Policy," in *Film Policy: International, National, and Regional Perspectives*, ed. Albert Moran (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

world view, a particular way of thinking about reality."[31] Films made in or about particular nations can therefore have an effect on the perception of that nation by both domestic and global audiences. Viewers build up a mental image of Ireland as they watch the films which are set there, regardless of the source of those cinematic representations. In this respect, Roddy Flynn's case study of the relationship between the Irish Department of External Affairs and visiting film production crews in the 1940s-1950s is particularly interesting. While the Irish state did not have any policies in place for the promotion of an indigenous film industry at that time, Flynn uncovers evidence that the government had a policy to "use what limited powers of persuasion it possessed to influence the content and perception of those representations which were assured of finding mass audiences: films produced by Hollywood."[32] This is one example of how state policy impacted the representation of Ireland in cinema, without fostering an Irish national cinema *per se*.

More commonly, however, state policies on film are concerned either with restricting the importation of foreign cinema – for example, through censorship or quotas – or with promoting a domestic film production industry and/or a certain kind of national cinema. While a focus on national cinema leads our attention to policies made at the nation-state level and carried out by organizations such as national film boards or film institutes, it is worth mentioning that some sub-national (e.g. provincial, municipal) and supra-national (e.g. European Union) entities may also enact film policies.

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[31] Moran, "Terms for a Reader," 4.

[32] Roddy Flynn, "Projecting Or Protecting Ireland?: The Department of External Affairs and Hollywood 1946-1960," in *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television.* ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 227.

Festivals and other exhibition contexts

Once films are produced, they are exhibited, distributed, and recognized in different ways. National and international interests intersect at the stage of exhibition and distribution just as they do with production. International recognition of individual films may by association be seen as a mark of prestige not only for the filmmaker himself but also for the producing country. Meanwhile, various national awards organizations recognize the greatest achievements within their own industry, thereby reinforcing and encouraging the national cinema by providing validation of films that might not necessarily receive high box-office returns. The Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television has attempted for over three decades "to unify the country's film industry by honouring and showcasing outstanding achievements in Canadian cinema"[33] with their annual Genie awards (and before 1980, the Canadian Film Awards). The parallel Irish event is a bit younger; the Irish Film and Television Academy gave out their inaugural IFTA awards in 2003. Unlike the Genies which extend eligibility only to Canadian-made films (as defined by CAVCO and/or CRTC criteria),[34] the IFTAs "are open to all talented Irish people working in the film and television industries in Ireland and internationally."[35] The fact that the Canadian academy emphasizes domestic production while the Irish one focuses on homegrown talent, even in the diaspora, is most likely a reflection of the two country's respective strengths throughout recent film history. Nevertheless, it is interesting from the perspective of national cinema that an Irish actor could theoretically win both a Genie and an IFTA for a performance in a Canadian film, while a Canadian performer in an Irish film would be eligible for neither.

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[33] "About the Genies" http://www.genieawards.ca/genie32/infogenie.cfm [consulted Dec 29, 2011].
[34] Ibid.

Alternative systems of exhibition and recognition are very important for Irish-language filmmaking, as we will see in the case study chapters. Just as mainstream cinema distribution may carry the values of global capitalism, however, alternative circuits also demonstrate embedded values or particular agendas. Marijke de Valck contrasts the Oscars – "the ultimate manifestation of Hollywood" – against "the international film festival circuit [which] has a quintessentially European connotation."[36] She explains that the history of film festivals is intertwined with evolving notions of national cinema; the first recurring film festival – Venice, which was inaugurated in 1932 – was an attempt in part by Mussolini to legitimize a fascist national identity for Italy. The fact that fascist countries were winning all the coveted prizes led France to found a counter-festival in Cannes, which retained the format of showcasing films by nation of production. The festival in Berlin was inaugurated in the aftermath of the second world war and also began with a nationalist agenda: not only were communist countries excluded from participating, but the festival promoted Western values by actively attracting audience members from across the border in East Berlin.[37] Despite these politically motivated origins, the contemporary context is even more complex:

> The international film festival circuit combines the local and the global, the city and the nation, and the space of the media with the place of the event in a network configuration that is complex and self-sustaining by

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[35] "The Irish Film and Television Awards" http://www.ifta.ie/awards/index.html [consulted Dec 29, 2011].
[36] Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 14.
[37] Ibid., 52.

offering various film cultures (products and people alike) a variety of ways of plugging in.[38]

As festivals have proliferated around the globe, some have taken the opportunity to promote a national cinema at home alongside a selection of international films. Owen Evans notes that the "Perspective of German Cinema" section at the Berlin festival, which showcases new German filmmaking talent, demonstrates "an element of national specificity rather different from the more internationally orientated Cannes."[39] In some cases, festivals may be devoted exclusively to national cinema; allowing for the national aspirations of Quebec cinema, the *Rendez-vous du cinema Quebecois* may be taken as a pertinent example of this kind of festival.

Hamid Naficy, for his part, looks at the role that themed film festivals may play in constructing diasporic identities. Citing the Asian Pacific American International Film Festival (Los Angeles) and Asian CineVision (New York), he observes that "what is interesting about these festivals is that the process of selecting the films, conducted by committees, has tended to define not only what constitutes the Asian-American media arts but also what constitutes Asian-American identity."[40] Furthermore, the social occasion of festival events encourage networking among film professionals from the same diasporic community, while also influencing public consciousness by showing films to both "insider and outsider audiences."[41]

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[38] Ibid., 18.
[39] Owen Evans, "Border Exchanges: The Role of the European Film Festival," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 15.1 (2007): 24.
[40] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 65.
[41] Ibid., 65.

A parallel exists in the many Irish-themed film festivals in the United States – Boston, Chicago and New York all have long-running festivals – as well as in Canada where the Montreal Irish Film Society is now two decades old and a new Irish film festival was founded in Toronto in 2010. Ireland itself boasts an ever-increasing number of festivals. The oldest is the Cork Film Festival, now in its 57th year, while the Galway Film Fleadh has been in operation since 1988 and has established itself as the most important yearly event for the Irish film industry. Other festivals satisfy regional or niche audiences, such as the Guth Gafa documentary film festival in Donegal, or the Cinemagic festival for young audiences in Belfast.

Stephen Crofts sees the growing attendance for festival screenings as an optimistic sign of "raised interest in cultural specificities"[42] given the usual variety of perspectives on offer at such events compared to those at the local multiplex. While not denying that possibility, de Valck credits the popularity of such celebrated/celebrational events to the "importance of 'experiences' in contemporary culture."[43] Owens for his part sees festivals as a liminal space where the "unequal struggle" of national cinemas is levelled and "the boundaries between the 'cultural imperialist' centre (Hollywood) and the 'colonial margins' (the rest of the world's cinemas) are collapsed, at least temporarily."[44] De Valck also highlights the liminal position of festivals by affirming that they "function as the gateways to cultural legitimization,"[45] particularly given the cultural and symbolic capital associated with festival screenings and awards. In terms of gaining visibility and securing international distribution, this cultural legitimization can

[42] Crofts. "Concepts of National Cinema," 9.
[43] De Valck, *Film Festivals*, 19.
[44] Evans, "Border Exchanges," 26.
[45] De Valck, *Film Festivals*, 38.

be equally valuable for individual films or for the national cinemas that produced them. Proponents of Irish-language film often cite festival and award successes as an important marker of the films' worth, despite a patent lack of profitability at the mainstream box office. At the national level, the success of one film may lead to greater interest in the next film from the same nation, even if it is by a different filmmaker.

Television and other media

Festivals provide high-status exhibition opportunities, often to an exclusive or niche audience. At the other end of the spectrum, television is often seen as low-status yet reaching a wide audience. But does television have any place in a discussion of national cinema? If, as explored above, definitions of "the nation" are in flux, so too are definitions of "cinema." In addition to the ambiguous position of television, Laura Kipnis describes recent articles in *American Cinematographer* as being "permeated with loss and pathos about film's potentially diminished stature in the digital age."[46] Furthermore, and more relevant for the topic of this dissertation, she asserts that much of the related anxiety within academic film studies can be attributed to a disciplinary history that understands film "as a discrete technology." She suggests however that this was only possible by "erecting a somewhat fictive separation between [film] and neighbouring electronic technologies."[47] In other words, the proliferation of moving images across a spectrum of interrelated platforms is not a revolutionary new phenomenon, it is just changing form. Similarly, as has been shown above, the interplay between transnational, national, and regional characteristics of cinema is not a completely

[46] Laura Kipnis, "Film and Changing Technologies," in *World Cinema: Critical Approaches,* ed. John Hill et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 211.

novel state of affairs, although the intersections and flows are constantly shifting and being renegotiated. Kipnis picks up on this similarity and notes that the discourse around changing technology recollects other discourses of "cultural confrontation," for example, where "the 'other' is imbricated into a structure in which dissimilarity is redefined as inferiority, and in which cultural differences are rearticulated as hierarchized oppositions."[48]

The opposition between television and cinema is in many ways as socially constructed as the divisions between nations. Even the supposed fundamental differences of film and television do not hold up to historical scrutiny: "in its early phase of development, film was initially conceived (by pioneers such as Thomas Edison) as a domestic technology, just as television was in turn conceived, and tested (in the form of theatre television) as a public one."[49] Furthermore, film and television technologies are becoming increasingly entwined, both in production and consumption contexts. In an essay on "British Cinema as National Cinema," John Hill provides some surprising statistics about the annual consumption of films in Britain (although the paper was published in 2006, statistics are from 1994):

- 123 million cinema admissions
- 194 million video rentals
- 66 million video retail transactions
- Of the 299 films released in cinemas in the UK, 35 were "wholly" British

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[47] Ibid., 213.
[48] Ibid., 215.
[49] John Hill, "Film and Television," *World Cinema: Critical Approaches,* ed. John Hill et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 223.

- Of the 1910 films broadcast on television, 413 were British[50]

He further adds that the viewing figures for the top ten films broadcast on television matched the *total* admissions for all 299 theatrically-released films.[51] The particular popularity of British films on television leads him to conclude that "it may in fact be the case that a British cinema which is generally regarded as being in decline is nonetheless producing films which are often being seen by as many, and sometimes more, people as films made during the 'golden age' of British cinema."[52] It would be interesting to see how these numbers compare to those in other countries and how they now compare to film-viewing online. Nevertheless, Hill conclusively demonstrates that television is a crucial dynamic in discussing national cinema.

As will be seen in the case studies portion of this dissertation, television has played a major role in the evolution of Irish-language film: the advent of Irish television in the 1960s convinced Gael Linn that their theatrically-distributed newsreels would become obsolete; Bob Quinn began making his Irish-language films after he resigned from the national broadcaster RTÉ, frustrated in part by their lack of bilingualism; and the current renaissance of Irish-language films is largely due to funding from the Irish-language television station, TG4. It is not possible, then, to separate television completely from an analysis of Irish-language film within Irish national cinema. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that film and television are one and the same medium, even if it is difficult to articulate their differences in any kind of absolute way. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be looking at works that are produced using a variety

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[50] John Hill, "British Cinema as National Cinema," *Theorising National Cinema*, ed. Paul Willemen and Valentina Vitali (London: BFI, 2006), 106.
[51] Ibid., 106.
[52] Ibid., 107.

of formats (celluloid film, digital media, etc) but conform to three general criteria that are popularly attributed to films: first, regardless of their respective lengths, each of the films under discussion is coherent as a discrete work, rather than being part of a television series, for example; second, they are each the final result of a deliberate filmmaking process, as opposed to raw footage or live broadcasting, and can therefore be analysed in terms of the filmmakers' decisions; and finally, while they have all been made available in multiple viewing contexts, they have all been shown at least once in a theatrical setting to a public audience, either as part of a film festival or in mainstream cinemas.

Study of national cinema, today and tomorrow

Revisiting his own work a decade after its original publication, Higson calls for the problematization of the study of national cinema that goes even further than he had suggested in "The Concept of National Cinema" in 1989. In his later essay, he points out that one of the fundamental difficulties of using the nation as the basis of scholarly inquiry is that one can ignore or disregard "too many other questions of community, culture, belonging and identity that are often either defiantly local or loosely transnational."[53] The transnational turn in film studies over the past decade has meant that, in the words of Dudley Andrew, "the market value of 'national cinemas' [in academia] took a plunge everywhere" in favour of "one or another 'world systems' model."[54]

But does the study of national cinema within a transnational framework adequately account for the diversity of cinematic cultures across the globe? Mitsuhiro

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[53] Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation,* ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.
[54] Dudley Andrew, "Islands in the Sea of Cinema," in *National Cinemas and World Cinema*, ed. Kevin Rockett and John Hill (Dublin: Four Courts, 2006), 15.

Yoshimoto provides an impassioned argument for the necessity of a re-organization of priorities within the study of national cinema. He begins by noting the curious phenomenon that "'Asian cinema' did not exist as part of the standard vocabulary of film scholarship until the late 1980s. Before that, there were Japanese, Indian and Chinese cinemas, but not Asian cinema."[55] He then explains that this shift to studying pan-Asian rather than national cinema is a result of many factors, but that it has more to do with the changing perspectives within film studies than with any increased transnationalism within the actual film industries of Asia. He strongly criticizes the discipline of film studies for supposing that knowledge of "universal" cinema is more important than specialized knowledge of an area and culture. His argument is worth quoting at some length:

> The object of research in film studies has been the cinema as a medium that exists beyond any particular national and cultural differences. In reality, however, this universal idea of cinema has been taken to be interchangeable with Hollywood and a select canon of European films. In this academic context, once a film scholar manages to master what are assumed to be the fundamental principles of "the cinema," s/he is free to study any particular instantiations of cinema, including Asian cinema, without being required to have any specialised knowledge, except that is, for his or her expertise in "the cinema." As long as this disciplinary structure is maintained, the acquisition of linguistic, historical, socio-

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[55] Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "National/International/Transnational: The Concept of Trans-Asian Cinema and the Cultural Politics of Film Criticism," in *Theorising National Cinema*, ed. Paul Willemen and Valentina Vitali (London: BFI, 2006), 255.

economic or any other cultural expertise will not fundamentally challenge the false universalism that underpins film studies.[56]

Yoshimoto perhaps overstates the degree to which film scholars are indifferent or oblivious to the need to acquire culturally-specific expertise, but his obvious outrage does point to some of the ethical questions that are entangled in the study of national cinemas, given that academic networks are usually transnational in character themselves. In other words, on what authority can a scholar study a national cinema that is not her own?

Paul Willeman provides some guidance on this matter. Following Bakhtin, he gives three possible ways of framing one's relation to another culture. First, one might project one's own values onto a foreign product, for example by judging the videos of Nigeria's Nollywood industry against the production values of Hollywood. Willeman terms this "projective appropriation," the obverse of which is "ventriloquist identification." In this second relationship, the middle-class intellectual is compelled "to pretend to be a mere hollow vessel through which the voice of the oppressed, the voice of the people, resonates."[57] Finally, and most productively, one may avoid either subordinating oneself to or appropriating the other's discourse, by actively seeking a creative understanding: "Creative understanding requires a thorough knowledge of at least two cultural spheres. It is not simply a matter of engaging in a dialogue with some other culture's products, but of using one's understanding of another cultural practice to re-perceive and rethink one's own cultural constellation at the same time."[58] In this way,

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[56] Ibid., 260.
[57] Paul Willeman, "The National Revisited," in *Theorising National Cinema,* ed. Paul Willemen and Valentina Vitali (London: BFI, 2006), 36-37.
[58] Ibid., 37-38.

nationally-specific expertise is indeed crucial to understanding cinema in a transnational context.

As the various issues explored in the first part of this chapter demonstrate, it is clear that ideas of "the national" – disputed as those ideas may be in terms of their specific articulations – still matter in discussions about cinema. The prominence of national markers within international co-productions or transnational film discourse and the different reception of similar texts across national borders belie any claim that national distinctions are irrelevant to contemporary culture. This still allows for the constructed nature of national identity and does not imply essential differences between the citizens of different nations. The existence of regional cinema cultures within state borders only serves to further highlight the continued significance of the national by their very attempt to destabilize or redefine it, whether the effect is to promote a sub-state nation (e.g. "Quebec national cinema") or to reinscribe a marginalized region within a nation-state (e.g. Gallician cinema that positions itself as part of Spanish national cinema). Furthermore, continued state support for film boards, national film schools, and other national institutions for the promotion of cinema demonstrate that the medium itself is also still important to the development of national cultures across the world, even while those institutions are increasingly adopting a broad view of cinema that includes television and other audio-visual platforms.

Current and future research within film studies will need to take into account transnational, regional and diasporic configurations of cinema and audio-visual culture. In particular, theoretical work must help us to understand how international networks, the flow of culture across borders, and local/global interfaces influence our appreciation of

contemporary cinema. The re-evaluation of national cinemas is central to this project. While still seen by some as the underdog in an unequal struggle against a global film culture controlled by Hollywood, national cinemas as a whole are increasingly being criticized as hegemonic in their own right.

Carole Sklan points out that the assimilationist potential of national cinemas is ironic given that they often promote themselves as defenders of cultural diversity against the homogenizing effects of Hollywood. She elaborates that "notions of 'the national interest', a 'national cinema', 'national artistic excellence', 'national competitiveness', can be mobilized to justify a programme defined and controlled by the centre, which obscures and transcends other competing interests."[59] Toby Miller, for his part, advocates that "no cinema that claims resistance to Hollywood in the name of national specificity is worthy of endorsement if it does not actually attend to sexual and racial minorities and women, along with class politics."[60] The same argument can of course easily be extended to linguistic minorities.

Meanwhile, the idea of the nation itself is under siege within academia. Song Hwee Lim highlights the common slippage from Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community" – meaning a socially-constructed, but nonetheless real, entity – to "imaginary community," implying a fictional entity. He furthermore postulates that this "(mis)appropriation… betrays a collective desire in academia to demystify the national and concomitantly reify a transnational model."[61] Focusing on transnational instead of national cinema recognizes that borders between countries are permeable to ideas, images

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[59] Carole Sklan, "Peripheral Visions: Regionalism, Nationalism, Internationalism," in *Film Policy: International, National, and Regional Perspectives*, ed. Albert Moran (New York: Routledge, 1996), 246.
[60] Miller, "Screening the Nation," 97.

and people; it acknowledges that nations do not exist in isolation. At the same time, however, there is a danger that the transnational model underestimates the very real differences between specific national contexts and therefore assumes a certain equivalence (if not homogeneity) for film cultures around the globe.

While some scholars widen their gaze to an international or global culture, others recognize a loss of faith in the ability of nation-states to resist the globalization of culture and react by looking instead to smaller, more focused sites of resistance. As Mark Shiel articulates in the opening chapter of *Cinema and the City*,

> This recognition has informed the acknowledgment of the growing importance of cities to Sociology and has underpinned recent theorizations of the demise of the power of national governments and structures in the global system. In Film Studies, it has more or less extinguished debate over "national cinema" (that is, the ability of individual nations to achieve cultural self-determination in cinema).[62]

Certainly as well, many of the links between cinema and the nation can also be made between cinema and the city. For example, municipalities may have incentives for film production that complement national policies, and television viewers in most large cities can choose between local stations and national broadcasters.

The fact that nations are contested entities with some limits to their power does not mean that they should be disregarded or dismissed as irrelevant, however. On the contrary, conflicting ideas about "the nation" provide fuel for passionate debates of both

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[61] Song Hwee Lim, "Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans in Transgender?" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 5.1 (2007): 41.
[62] Mark Shiel, "Cinema and the City in History and Theory," in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 13.

political and cultural import around the world. In their quest to understand "the regional" or "the global," film scholars must continue to ask what "the national" brings to the table across the full range of these configurations. In the Irish context, as elsewhere, the cinema has been a recurring factor in debates about national culture, as will be seen in the second half of this chapter.

Irish cinema

A national cinema for Ireland?

It is important to preface a discussion of Irish film and national identity by emphasizing that the relationship between Ireland and cinema can be described as chequered at best. The first introduction of film in the late nineteenth century happened to coincide with a time of nationalist stirring in Ireland, and tensions and anxieties immediately became apparent. The new medium provided very attractive entertainment to the general population, but a large segment of the growing cultural revival movement considered cinema to be a foreign, corrupting influence that was anathema to an Irish cultural revival which emphasized the native language, traditional sports, and a romanticized rural lifestyle.

There is an impressive and growing canon of scholarly work on Irish history and culture which can provide a more thorough investigation of Irish nationhood and identity than there is room for in this dissertation.[63] A brief explanation of the most important

[63] See for example Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*, (London: Allen Lane, 1988); Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006); Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Michael Cronin, eds. *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002); Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Carmen Zamorano Llena, eds. *Redefinitions of Irish Identity: a Postnationalist Approach* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism,*

issues, however, provides some of the background necessary for any discussion of Irish national cinema. The island of Ireland contains thirty-two counties. Twenty-six of them form the Republic of Ireland while the remaining six constitute one part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The population of Northern Ireland is divided by allegiances to either the Irish republic or the British crown, and corresponding notions of identity have led to sustained political violence and over three thousand deaths in the past four decades; although the recent peace process has brought a welcome reprieve from the bloodshed, the foundational disagreements between nationalists and unionists are far from being resolved.

In the view of Irish nationalists, the treaty agreement in 1922, which ended the Anglo-Irish war by partitioning off the North to remain in the UK while the South became a Free State, "has opened up a disjunction between 'nation' and 'state' where there should be a perfect all-island homology."[64] More recently, new waves of immigrants are quickly changing the colour and culture of a country that has for centuries been nearly exclusively white and Christian. These and other issues lead Martin McLoone to note that any attempt "to theorize and understand what might constitute a national culture and a national cinema in Ireland is considerably complicated by the contested nature of Irish identity in the first place."[65] This is not a difficulty that belongs to Ireland alone, of course. Migration, religious or political differences, and territorial disputes are all global phenomena. With this in mind, Higson suggests that one of the

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Catholicism and Construction of Identity, 1760-1830 (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006), to name just a few.

[64] Joe Cleary, "'Fork-Tongued on the Border Bit': Partition and the Politics of Form in Contemporary Narratives of the Northern Irish Conflict," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95 (1996): 235.

[65] Martin McLoone, "Ireland and Cinema," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies,* ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 513.

fundamental difficulties of using the nation as the basis of scholarly inquiry is that it leads one to ignore or disregard "too many other questions of community, culture, belonging and identity that are often either defiantly local or loosely transnational."[66]

Faced with so many inherent questions and complexities, one might be tempted at this point to abandon the concept of national cinema entirely, particularly in a context as fraught as Ireland's. Stephen Crofts, however, reminds us of the clout of national influences in filmmaking, as "it is still state policies and legislation (or lack of them) which substantially regulate and control film subsidies, tariff constraints, industrial assistance, copyright and licensing arrangements, censorship, training institutions, and so on."[67] Thus, an attention to questions of policy now informs any discussion of national cinema, and Steve McIntyre's contention in 1996 that "no one really writes about arts funding and support structures,"[68] if it was ever accurate, is certainly out of date now. In the Irish context at least, the funding schemes that shape cinematic production are regularly evaluated and debated by scholars and cultural commentators, as well as in trade publications such as *Film Ireland*.

In discourses of national cinemas and film policy, the concepts of nation and state are often used interchangeably, revealing an underlying assumption of the paradigmatic western model of the nation-state, as outlined above. The relationship between state and nation is particularly interesting in the Irish context, however, because the Irish government sees itself as representing a nation that extends beyond the political borders

[66] Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2000): 72.
[67] Stephen Crofts, "Concepts of National Cinema," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies,* ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 389.
[68] Steve McIntyre, "Art and Industry: Regional Film and Video Policy in the UK," in *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives*, ed. Albert Moran (New York: Routledge, 1996), 217.

which circumscribe the twenty-six counties of the Republic. This view of the relationship between state and nation is played out in the policy decisions which have defined the development of Irish cinema, especially after the establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1980. We will proceed now to an overview of Irish cinema, with particular attention to issues of state policy (or lack of it) and nationalism.

Irish film history – the beginning

As recently as the mid-1980s there was virtually no scholarship on Irish film history, in part because there was perceived to be virtually no Irish film history to study. The publication of a collective effort by Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, and John Hill (all still among the most active Irish film scholars) in 1987 titled simply *Cinema and Ireland* was followed a year later by Anthony Slide's similarly named *The Cinema and Ireland.* Both books begin by remarking on the paucity of Irish film production and scholarship. For his part, Slide wrote that "to many, the idea of a book devoted to Irish cinema must be comparable to a volume on the snakes of Ireland. There are none of the latter and little of the former."[69] Rockett *et al* expanded on the same sentiment:

> When it was first decided to undertake a study of the cinema and Ireland, it was expected, by friends and colleagues alike, that it would be a brief and undemanding exercise. The cinema and Ireland, it was suggested, was almost a contradiction in terms: a fit subject for a short paper, perhaps, but hardly likely to run to an entire volume. It was an understandable response. Not only have many Irish films been lost or destroyed but the literature on cinema in and about Ireland has been sparse: so sparse,

> indeed, that one commentator was moved to declare that the bibliography on the subject would not match that of a neglected nineteenth-century Irish poet![70]

How things have changed. The phenomenal growth of the indigenous Irish film industry in the last few decades of the twentieth century was matched, if not outpaced, by a corresponding growth in academic interest. There is no longer any shortage of authoritative studies of Irish film or volumes focused on specific aspects such as censorship, documentaries, or actors.

Even if the evolution of film production in Ireland has been uneven, often interrupted, and overall slower than in many other Western European nations, the cinema has nevertheless acted as an important mirror to reflect the cultural (as well as economic, industrial, historic, and literary) debates that accompanied the emergence of a contemporary Irish nation over the past century. Film texts have engaged with and interpreted national sentiments in relation to current events; recent examples include the public shock at the treatment of young girls in convent-run institutions, as depicted in *The Magdalene Sisters* (Peter Mullen, 2002), or the elusiveness of solutions for the poor living conditions of Ireland's traveller population, as shown in *Pavee Lackeen* (Perry Ogden, 2005). Conversely, particular films sparked controversies which revealed assumptions and values hidden only slightly below the surface of Irish society, as when the light-hearted zombie-comedy *Boy Eats Girl* (Stephen Bradley, 2005) was censored for its depiction of suicide, an act that is strongly condemned by the Catholic church. Martin McLoone explores various recurrent themes from Irish cinematic narratives and

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[69] Anthony Slide, *The Cinema and Ireland* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1988), vi.
[70] Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988), viii.

notes that they "interact in surprising ways with the major paradigms that were bequeathed by Irish nationalism itself, sometimes neatly dovetailing with official attitudes and at other times inspiring a hostile response to their more outlandish stereotypes."[71]

Early film in Ireland

In a sense, Irish cinema is older than Ireland itself, since both film exhibition and film production were established on the island before Ireland gained its independence in 1922. The first film screening in Ireland occurred in Dublin on 20 April, 1896, just a few months after the technology had been publicly unveiled by the Lumière brothers in Paris.[72] Moving pictures were a frequent yet transient attraction until 1909 when the Volta opened as the first dedicated cinema theatre, incidentally managed by James Joyce, although he was not particularly successful in that role and soon stepped down.[73] The type of actuality films[74] typical of very early film production (such as the Lumière brothers' famous *Arrival of a Train at a Station* and *Workers Leaving the Factory*) were also being shot in Ireland. The Lumière brothers themselves recorded a series of actuality films in Dublin and Belfast in 1897; at the same time, local people in different parts of the country were making similar items.[75]

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, many people within the growing nationalist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century saw the cinema as foreign

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[71] Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 4.
[72] Marc Zimmerman, *The History of Dublin Cinemas* (Dublin: Nonsuch, 2007), 11.
[73] Ibid., 12.
[74] "Actuality film" refers to the genre of short non-fiction film common in very early cinema; an actuality film would typically capture an event or scene but would not necessarily contain a plot or narrative.
[75] Zimmerman, *The History of Dublin Cinemas*, 108-9.

and degraded, something that should be repressed in favour of traditional Irish pastimes such as music, dancing, and sports. Others, however, saw great potential in the cinema as a new medium through which to spread the nationalist message. Indeed, several examples exist of nationalist filmmakers working in pre-independence Ireland. Irish-Canadian Sidney Olcott, for example, made a series of films in Ireland, including the provocatively titled *Ireland the Oppressed* (1912), while Walter MacNamara's *Ireland a Nation* was first released in 1914 and re-released in subsequent years with added actuality footage of such events as a Home Rule meeting, de Valera's tour of America, and Terence MacSwiney's death on hunger strike.[76] The Irish Republican Army was also involved in film production, and IRA volunteers would reportedly show up at theatres with their own film reels and encourage the projectionist (at gunpoint) to change the evening's program.[77] At the same time, the less-political Film Company of Ireland was making indigenous silent films, mainly of the short comedy genre, and also released Ireland's first feature film, *Knocknagow*, in 1918. Although few early films have survived – a global problem – Denis Condon estimates that "based on the best available information, there appears to have been about seventy fiction films made in the country during the period [before 1921]."[78]

After independence

The thriving film scene in the first two decades of the 1900s only accentuates the subsequent repression of the medium after Ireland gained its independence; Ireland's

[76] Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland*, 13.
[77] Nicholas Andrew Miller, *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory* (Cambridge UK; Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107.
[78] Denis Condon, *Early Irish Cinema, 1895-1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), 8.

promising start in fostering a film industry that welcomed both foreign and indigenous productions was abruptly cut short after the civil war. In the early years after independence, and particularly after the succession to power of Éamon de Valera, the revivalist government "tended to celebrate the high culture arts and to promote the Irish language, sports, and traditional way of life while regarding low cultural art forms as foreign, degraded, and often morally questionable," with film as a medium considered "particularly injurious to public morality."[79]

Kevin Rockett points out that most of the people who assumed positions of power in the new Free State government were "opposed to film *per se* or judged it in purely Catholic-moral terms, as was demonstrated by the speedy passage of the Censorship of Films Act, 1923, one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the Free State Parliament."[80] This Act is significant for two reasons: first, it institutionalizes a *national* policy for film exhibition throughout the twenty-six southern counties, where previously such decisions were made on a municipal level, allowing for variation based on religion or other factors related to the local population; second, it demonstrates that the official attitude to film was one which recognized its power to influence the citizenry but sought to contain that power through extremely restrictive controls rather than use it as a proactive tool for nation building, as was being done in many other European nations in the same decade.

In other words, Irish film policy in the early decades of post-independence Ireland was concerned more with what the nation was permitted to watch than with what it produced. The government was interested in shaping society by imposing a Catholic

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[79] Dervila Layden, "Discovering and Uncovering Genre in Irish Cinema," in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism*, ed. Brian McIlroy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 29.

moral ethos on all realms of life; in cinema, this meant excluding any films that might undermine this project. In *Irish Film Censorship*, Kevin Rockett compellingly outlines the "often dispiriting account"[81] of how the state controlled the exhibition of foreign pictures as well as the very few indigenous pictures that were independently produced. The picture that emerges is one in which the government infantilizes the population. This was literally the case with the first film censor, James Montgomery, who in his seventeen years of service "never once issued a limited certificate, such as the British 'A' for Adults, or 'H' for Horror, but banned or cut films according to his imagined experience of the effect they might have on the youngest child."[82] Furthermore, films were censored to omit any references that might offend Catholic sensibilities, including blasphemy (even substitutes as innocuous as "Jeepers Creepers"), allusions to marital infidelity, representations of priests or nuns that could potentially be interpreted as negative, and any references to birth control or abortion. Scenes were even cut from one film because an advertisement for condoms was incidentally visible in the background.

Ireland's censorship policy was so restrictive that Montgomery banned 1905 films during his tenure, while only 177 films were banned in England during the same period – and none of the latter was even submitted to the Irish censor.[83] Censorship during the Second World War was especially strong in order to promote Ireland's policy of neutrality. Rockett repeatedly illustrates that representations of identities that did not fit comfortably within the bounds of official ideology of nationalism were repressed,

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[80] Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland*, 40.
[81] Kevin Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship: a Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), 13.
[82] Kevin Rockett, "From Radicalism to Conservatism: Contradictions within Fianna Fáil Film Policies in the 1930s," *Irish Studies Review* 9.2 (2001): 158.
[83] Rockett, *Irish Film Censorship*, 89.

demonstrating the homogenizing impulse of the censorship policies. This repression affected religious, political, and sexual identities, so that queer Irish citizens, for example, were as unlikely to find reflections of their lives on the silver screen as were those Irish citizens who chose to join the British or American Armies in the Second World War.

Foreign films

In the absence of an indigenous film industry, a tradition of cinematic representation of the Irish was forged in America and England rather than at home. In many ways, McLoone makes the same points about film that Declan Kiberd makes in relation to Irish literature: most saliently, that Irish emigrants and their descendants played a strong role in constructing notions of Ireland and Irishness.[84] Martin McLoone notes the two contrasting representations of the nation that evolved through these foreign interpretations:

> The American cinema has largely been responsible for a romantic view of Ireland, representing the nostalgic imaginings and nationalist inclinations of the Irish-Americans, while a darker, more sombre view of a violent Ireland has largely emanated from the British cinema, a reflection no doubt of Britain's close political involvement in the affairs of Ireland.[85]

Not surprisingly, the American representations were more welcomed by the Irish establishment, particularly when they reinforced notions of Irishness that were already

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[84] See Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*. While emigrant filmmakers tend to be characterized as having a simplified, nostalgic conception of Ireland, Kiberd takes a different tack with respect to authors: throughout his book on Ireland's greatest writers, he repeatedly emphasizes the "backward look" of writers who went abroad (either permanently or temporarily) and were then able to reflect on their homeland with greater depth and complexity (for example, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw).

being promoted by the nationalist government. Perhaps the most paradigmatic example is Robert Flaherty's 1935 documentary *Man of Aran*,[86] which depicted the heroic struggle of a family of Aran Islanders against the harsh elements. The film benefited from "Irish government approval since it was seen to endorse the dominant ideology of self-reliance and ascetic frugality of 1930s Ireland."[87] Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister)[88] Éamon de Valera himself attended the Dublin premiere – as he would do again two decades later for another nationalist documentary, *Mise Éire* – demonstrating that the government could make exceptions to its general mistrust of the cinematic medium. The film's official reception demonstrates the dominant ideology of 1930s Ireland, where the newly-independent nation reacted against the values of its former colonizer by turning instead to a "veneration of folk tradition" and a "flight from urban, industrial modernity."[89] This flight from urban life was ideological, not actual. Many Irish were in fact abandoning the rural areas in a massive migration towards Dublin, London, and American cities. In other words, the Dublin-based nationalists who praised the film were endorsing a depiction of Irish identity that had little to do with their own lived experience.

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[85] Martin McLoone, "Reimagining the Nation: Themes and Issues in Irish Cinema." *Cineaste,* 24.2-3 (1999): 28.

[86] The status of this film as a "documentary" is somewhat contested; although this was perhaps not fully appreciated at the time of its production, the primitive conditions seen in the film are not a particularly faithful documentation of life in the impoverished West of Ireland in the 1930s. It is now well recognized that Flaherty took many creative liberties in making the film. The cottage in the film was constructed by Flaherty, replicating the authentic pre-existing cottages but placed in a more photogenic and dramatic location. Perhaps most tellingly, while the activities depicted in the film were at one time common on the Aran Islands, some of the practices were already obsolete and so for example "experts had to be hired to teach the native people how to hunt traditionally" (Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000], 78**).** See also George Stoney's documentary about the making of Flaherty's film, *How the Myth was Made* (1976).

[87] Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 80.

[88] The Taoiseach (pronounced TEE-shokh) is the elected Prime Minister and head of the Irish government. The position of President is also elected, but is more ceremonial (somewhat equivalent to the Canadian Governor General, although obviously without the Royal connection).

[89] McLoon, *Irish Film,* 44.

John Ford's most famous "Irish" film, *The Quiet Man* (1952) was also disproportionately influential. The director intended to seek an authentic Ireland, but Martin McLoone, among countless others, concludes that the film is definitively Irish-*American* and that "the power of the exile to embellish memory with fantasy"[90] applies more to Ford himself than to the protagonist Sean. Ireland is depicted as "a mysterious, pre-industrial rural paradise,"[91] and the film can be read as the epitome of postcard cinema. Perhaps because of Ford's Irish-American sensibilities, *The Quiet Man* was – and continues to be – wildly successful among American audiences. MacKillop notes that "it is the single work of Irish or Irish-American literature that [an American] citizen can be expected to know without having met the demand of some required reading list."[92] Nevertheless, McLoone accurately notes that "its popularity, especially among Irish audiences at home and abroad, is often the occasion of some acute national embarrassment."[93]

Man of Aran quite obviously employs what Gibbons terms "hard primitivism" while *The Quiet Man* illustrates a tendency towards "soft primitivism,"[94] with the result that the two films present contrasting but equally romanticized views of Irish life which say more about the Irish-American filmmakers than their Irish subjects. These concepts will be explored in greater detail in chapter 4, in the context of Bob Quinn's reaction

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[90] Ibid., 55.
[91] Ibid., 53.
[92] James MacKillop, "The Quiet Man Speaks," in *Contemporary Irish Cinema: From* The Quiet Man *to* Dancing at Lughnasa*,* ed. James MacKillop (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 169.
[93] McLoone, *Irish Film,* 35.
[94] In *Cinema and Ireland*, Gibbons follows art historian Edwin Panofsky in his differentiation between the two kinds of romanticized primitivism. Soft primitivism presents an idyllic world where "labour and exertion are rendered obsolete in the presence of an opulent, bounteous nature which simply yields itself up to human requirements" (198); in *The Quiet Man* this is manifested in "a rural world divested of material cares and the struggle for survival, in which people spend their time signing, drinking and fighting" (199).

against the romanticization of Ireland. Furthermore, the romantic view that pervades these two films served to set the tone of representations of Ireland for decades to come. While the view of Ireland in *The Quiet Man* is undeniably rooted in Hollywood stereotypes rather than real life, the documentary representation of the Aran Islanders is even more problematic. One newspaper reviewer of *Man of Aran* compared that vision of Irish life to the dominant stereotypical representations and concluded that Flaherty's "lie is the greater, for he can make the romance seem real."[95]

One argument for a publicly-funded national cinema, then, hinges on the idea that Irish audiences deserve to see representations of themselves that are neither designed to support a foreign (and in the British case, often hostile) political agenda nor simply, as Ted Sheehy complains, "Irish [stories] given a US retread and sold back to us as one of our own."[96] Rod Stoneman, former CEO of the Irish Film Board, frames the issue by asking

> How is 'about' linked to 'from' or 'by'? Irish film is part of that debate about national cinemas and the difference of indigenous filmmaking, the ways in which direct speech, from within a culture, offers some resistance to the incursions of global monoculture.[97]

Hard primitivism is a different kind of mythologizing, as in *Man of Aran*: "the everyday grind of work and production is desocialised and transformed into a heroic struggle between humanity and nature" (201).

[95] Quoted in Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 80.

[96] Ted Sheehy, "Lost in Translation," *Film Ireland* 121 (March/April 2008): 16.

[97] Rod Stoneman, "Icons of the Imagination," in Kevin Rockett, *Ten Years After: The Irish Film Board 1993-2003* (Galway: The Irish Film Board, 2003), vii.

Indigenous images

Although representations of the Irish were indeed heavily controlled by foreign interests, there was nevertheless some indigenous activity throughout the middle part of the twentieth century. As James MacKillop notes in the preface to his volume on Irish cinema, "as a people with much to say, often saying it well, the Irish could not be kept from the most resonant medium of this last century."[98] Many of the indigenous filmmaking efforts in early post-independent Ireland were of the documentary variety, which was less expensive to produce. By definition, the documentary form is based in reality or fact, and it is therefore popularly expected to display some degree of objectivity, but a comparison of films from this period quickly illustrates how the documentary medium can be used to provide very divergent and subjective representations of national identity.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation will examine in detail George Morrison's triumphantly nationalistic *Mise Éire* (1959), which was enthusiastically received by the establishment for its celebration of the war of independence. By contrast, Peter Lennon's *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) was an extremely controversial documentary that questioned the legacy of that very struggle in contemporary Ireland: Lennon explicitly positions the film (through his own voice-over) as "a personal attempt to reconstruct for the camera the plight of an island community which survived nearly 700 years of English occupation and then nearly sank under the weight of its own heroes and clergy."

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[98] James MacKillop, "Preface," in *Contemporary Irish Cinema: From* The Quiet Man *to* Dancing at Lughnasa, ed. James MacKillop (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), vii.

While *Mise Éire* implicitly promotes the revival of the Irish language, *Rocky Road* explicitly questions the importance of such a matter when practical problems are of more urgent concern:

> For more than thirty years we've been led to believe that the magic potion which was to restore dignity, identity, and confidence to a mutilated republic was the revival of our ancient tongue, Gaelic. Vast quantities of time and money were spent on this revival. But today, less than three percent of the people speak Gaelic. It became time to live a little less in the folkloric past and do something serious about unemployment and emigration.

Harvey O'Brien notes that despite the film's popularity in France, where it screened at Cannes and circulated among the students involved in the May '68 demonstrations, *Rocky Road to Dublin* had difficulty getting distribution in Ireland due to its controversial perspective:

> The film was never screened in its home country outside of Dublin. Rural exhibitors would not touch it and local distribution networks which screened films in town halls or community centers were often run by the clergy the film so vehemently condemned. [...] The film became a public controversy without ever being seen by the public, and though it was not actually banned, it was cast adrift in a sea of political anger unable to make its voice heard.[99]

[99] Harvey O'Brien, "Documenting Ireland," *Cineaste*, 24.2-3 (1999): 66.

Taken together, Morrison's and Lennon's films demonstrate the first steps in post-independent Ireland towards using the movie camera to spark public debate on issues that resonated with contemporary Irish identity.

The Irish government began to invest in a film industry in the 1950s, but they were not supporting films like Lennon's. Instead, Seán Lemass, first as Minister for Industry and Commerce and later as Taoiseach, instituted policy initiatives that "favoured the establishment of a 'film factory' for the use of foreign film producers, not indigenous filmmakers."[100] The crowning jewel in this scheme was Ardmore Studios, a large film studio near Dublin which opened in 1958 and benefited significantly from state financing. After an initial round of films based on Abbey Theatre plays, however, it contributed little to the national culture. In fact, it did not contribute much in the way of industrial returns either: due to a variety of technicalities relating to financing and distribution, only members of the British film technician's union could be employed on set. The irony, then, was that "Irish state money was helping finance British films made in Ireland from which Irish people were excluded by the [union] agreement."[101]

Cinema after television

The advent of the national public television service, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), in 1962[102] meant that Irish people were gaining experience working in that medium and

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[100] Barry Monahan, "A Frayed Collaboration: Emmet Dalton and the Abbey Theatre Adaptations, Ardmore Studios, 1957-60," in *National Cinema and Beyond*, ed. Kevin Rockett and John Hill (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004), 55.

[101] Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland,* 101.

[102] This is a fairly late adoption compared to Ireland's neighbours; the British Broadcasting Corporation offered a television service in London in 1946 and gradually expanded so that Northern Ireland was included by 1952. Some viewers in the Republic of Ireland were able to receive spill-over signals, but there was no television station explicitly serving the Irish market until RTÉ began broadcasting in the early 1960s.

could then apply these skills to film projects. It also led to a greater availability of equipment and technical resources. In addition, a government act was passed in 1973 to increase funding to the Arts Council and to allow it to fund film projects. The Council eventually put this money towards a Film Script Award, which was first awarded to Bob Quinn in 1978 to support him in making the Irish-language feature *Poitín*. Quinn's films will be discussed in chapter 4.

Quinn found himself at the forefront of a new indigenous film movement in which many, like Quinn himself, moved from producing content for RTÉ to making their own films. These independent filmmakers "began to explore the contradictions of a changing society in a form of culture (the fiction film) in which there was little in the way of a national tradition or precedence."[103] Irish directors such as Joe Comerford and Cathal Black used 16mm film (a less expensive option than 35mm film, which is the standard for theatrical film) to make low-budget features with mainly local and often non-professional acting talent. These filmmakers broke with both the Hollywood and British conventions of depicting Ireland and the Irish, "whether through 'warts and all' depictions of rural Ireland or a new desire to examine urban life,"[104] while also experimenting with alternative filmmaking techniques.

Debbie Ging characterizes the films of Quinn and his contemporaries as the first wave of Irish cinema and argues that "by taking a non-indigenous artform and reappropriating it to articulate national and local concerns, [the filmmakers] demonstrated that embracing the global was not necessarily dependent on a rejection of one's own

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[103] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 131.
[104] Ruth Barton, "Kitsch as Authenticity: Irish Cinema and the Challenge to Romanticism," *Irish Studies Review* 9.2 (2001): 193.

locality or traditions."[105] Furthermore, she concludes that while the films of this period "actively challenged preconceived notions about Irishness, they were also deeply engaged with renegotiating national culture rather than abandoning it in favour of a global, culturally amnesiac identity."[106]

Few of these 1970s indigenous films were commercially successful (admittedly, that was not their primary objective) or were even able to gain significant audiences, but they were an important step in fostering an indigenous fiction film culture and are now remembered for "their iconoclasm in terms of content and form."[107] McLoone rightly argues that a film industry cannot simply develop out of nothing, and that a number of factors had to combine before Ireland could develop the type of national cinema that existed elsewhere in Europe: "Ireland needed not just the economic infrastructure that would allow a film industry to emerge but also the critical and educational infrastructure that would ensure that film *production* happened in a wider film *culture.*"[108]

The era of the Irish Film Board

By demonstrating that the cinema was a powerful tool for exploring Irish life, the emergent independent film culture of the 1970s helped to convince the Irish government to support cinema as a means of cultural expression, as opposed to the purely industrial incentives offered under the Lemass administration in the 1950s. As a result, the government established Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board (IFB) in 1980. It

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[105] Debbie Ging, "Screening the Green: Cinema under the Celtic Tiger," *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 178.
[106] Ibid., 179.
[107] Barton, "Kitsch as Authenticity," 193.
[108] McLoone, *Irish Film,* 87. Emphasis in the original.

was poorly funded and plagued by controversy; for example, the board allotted half of its first annual budget (IR£100,000) to Neil Jordan for his first film, *Angel* (1981).[109] Although Jordan has since proven himself to be an important and well-respected filmmaker, he had no filmmaking experience at the time. Considering that the film's producer, John Boorman, sat on the Board, the choice was politically naïve at best and invited public criticism of the new entity.

Before the IFB had a chance to make a serious impact, it was dissolved in 1987 as part of wider governmental cutbacks, although some funding was still available through the Arts Council, which had a general remit to promote the arts "including the cinema."[110] Nevertheless, filmmaking continued with both independent productions and a renewed interest from foreign investors. A few important films were made in the period between the first and second reincarnations of the IFB, such as Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989), Margot Harkin's *Hush-a-bye Baby* (1990), Alan Parker's *The Commitments* (1991), and Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), all of which received at least some of their financing from England.

In part because of international acclaim for these films, the final decade of the twentieth century saw a change in the government's attitude towards cinema. A number of initiatives were implemented that more comprehensively encouraged film production in Ireland. The 1992 coalition government of Fianna Fáil and Labour appointed Michael D. Higgins (who would later become president) to the newly created post of Minister of

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[109] Rockett et al, *Cinema and Ireland*, 119.
[110] Arthur Flynn, *The Story of Irish Film* (Blackrock: Currach Press, 2005), 170.

Arts, Culture, and the Gaeltacht.[111] As a strong supporter of the film community, he played a leading role in reactivating the IFB in 1993 and implementing tax concessions for both foreign and indigenous filmmakers.[112] The importance of state support was clear as the annual number of indigenous productions increased rapidly after its inauguration: there were three Irish films made in 1992 (the year before the IFB was re-established), twenty in 1997, and over fifty by 1999.[113] Ruth Barton adds,

> ten years after its inception, the Board was able to lay claim to having supported the making of nearly a hundred feature films as well as several hundred short films and documentaries, this in a country that produced 18 feature films during the 1980s.[114]

Furthermore, the resources available through the IFB made it possible for some marginalized communities to express their identity on film, including the queer community, racial minorities, and travellers. The IFB has also demonstrated a liberal and open attitude toward controversial topics including sexuality, drug use, and misconduct within the church; this is a welcome and refreshing reversal of the state's censorial position on film in the early decades of Irish independence.

The exponential growth of indigenous Irish film in the 1990s and into the 2000s has allowed Irish filmmakers to offer an increasing number of intimate, personal stories reflecting the many and varied identities that have always existed in Ireland but have so often been obscured by either the homogenizing nationalist project or the romanticizing

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[111] The Gaeltacht is the collective noun used to denote the regions of Ireland where Irish is the primary language; chapter 2 of this dissertation contains an elaboration of the current and historical issues facing the Gaeltacht.
[112] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 113-16.
[113] Ibid., 116.
[114] Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 105.

view of the foreign filmmaker. Examples include the depiction of gay characters in *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 2003), the immigrant experience in *Once* (John Carney, 2006), drug addiction and homelessness in *Adam and Paul* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2004), and terminal illness in *Death of a Superhero* (Ian Fitzgibbon, 2011).

While contemporary Irish films have occasionally been accused of targeting the lucrative American market rather than the national audience (see in particular McLoone's *Irish Film* for this argument), there is also a sense in which film is being used again as a form of popular education for the Irish nation, as it was in the days of Morrison's *Mise Éire.* Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996) – a historical biopic of a man who played a central role in Irish independence – is perhaps the first high-profile example. The production of such an epic film about a topic of national importance was a coming-of-age for Irish cinema; it was a statement that Ireland "was not just a production facility for small-scale home movies but that it might […] take its place among the filmmaking nations of the world."[115] Furthermore, in the response to this new, larger-budget and state-sponsored cinema we can see echoes of the nation's enthusiasm for earlier films such as *Man of Aran* and *Mise Éire,* as Lance Pettitt notes that

> the whole process became a highly publicised and very public occasion in Irish cinema. Open calls for unpaid extras produced thousands eager to re-enact their country's past and the filming coincided with the "Forum for Peace" meeting in Dublin Castle.[116]

Upon the film's release, the Irish film censor of the time, Seamus Smith, awarded the film a PG Certification in order to make it available to "the widest possible Irish

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[115] Ibid., 141.
[116] Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 258.

cinema audience"[117] with the justification that the importance of the film's story outweighed its violent content. Furthermore, this was a rare Irish film that was targeted squarely at the home market rather than the more lucrative one across the Atlantic. As a result, it suffered a "poor performance at the American box office" but was "an enormously popular film in Ireland, and remains [in 2000] second only to *Titanic* in the all-time box-office list."[118] Jordan's film can also be seen as a homecoming for the director who first benefited from IFB funding in 1981 and then made many films for foreign production companies; with *Michael Collins,* Jordan again benefited from substantial support from the public purse.

A few years later, in 1999, a government-appointed strategic review group assessed the state of the industry and their conclusion revealed the centrality of the Film Board's work: "The main driving force for the strategic development of the industry must be a strengthened and re-structured Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board."[119] While much of the review group's report focuses on the details of infrastructure and funding rather than actual cinematic content, the goals of increasing employment and attracting foreign investment are matched by an appreciation of "the intangible benefits of raising Ireland's international profile and enhancing awareness of popular Irish culture."[120] The promotion of national culture is also reflected in the Irish Film Board's stated criteria for assessing proposed projects. The first criterion is listed as follows:

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[117] Gary Crowdus, "The Screenwriting of Irish History: Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*," *Cineaste* 22.4 (1997): 16.
[118] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 217.
[119] Government of Ireland, *The Strategic Development of the Irish Film and Television Industry 2000-2010: Final Report of the Film Industry Strategic Review Group to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999), 12.
[120] Ibid., 26.

> The Board looks for imaginative, original, compelling projects that have the potential to attract an audience. We are particularly keen to support an Irish cinema which tells stories, both contemporary and historical, that engage specifically, though not exclusively, with the cultures and communities indigenous to this island.[121]

The phrase "indigenous to this island" reveals a number of assumptions about the Irish Film Board's scope. First, the IFB clearly considers itself the promoter of a *national* rather than a *state* cinema; although logistically it operates as a state-funded apparatus of the government of the Republic of Ireland, the mandate to cover the interests of the entire island implicitly includes those of the six northern counties that are under the political jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. In fact, a brief look at the IFB catalogue of productions shows that stories about Northern Ireland are, if anything, overrepresented.[122]

Second, the statement quoted above reflects the IFB's tendency to see as more authentically "Irish" stories about characters who emigrate to America, England, Australia, or other far-off lands bringing their Irish culture with them, than stories about the experience of immigrants who bring new languages and traditions to the Irish isle.

Cinema-going today

Cinema-going in contemporary Ireland is an important cultural activity and a vibrant component of public life. A study commissioned by the Arts Council in 2004

[121] Irish Film Board, *Annual Report for 2004* (Galway: Irish Film Board, 2005), 31.
[122] Examples include *A Further Gesture* (Robert Dornhelm, 1996), *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2001), *Bogwoman* (Tom Collins, 1997), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1998), *Cherrybomb* (Lisa Barros D'Sa, 2009), *H3* (Les Blair, 2001), *High Boot Benny* (Joe Comerford, 1993), *Man about Dog* (Paddy Breathnach, 2004), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (Dudi Appleton, 2000), *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1995), *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004), *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996), *This is the Sea* (Mary McGuckian, 1996).

found that Ireland has an annual cinema attendance rate of 4.5 visits per capita, the second-highest in Europe, and that cinema attendance doubled between 1992 and 2002.[123] While festivals were shown to play a "key role in expanding and extending the diversity of programme choice available to audiences,"[124] film consumption overall in Ireland demonstrates that major international corporations dominate Irish theatrical screens; six distribution companies – all foreign – accounted for 90% of box office takings.[125] More recently, *Film Ireland* reported that the total domestic box office receipts for all Irish-produced films *combined* came to just under €2 million in 2007. This figure represents less than 1.5% of earnings of the total ticket revenue collected in Irish movie theatres that year.[126] While Irish-made films often get privileged slots at Irish film festivals, securing favourable distribution in mainstream Irish cinemas remains a challenge for many native filmmakers. Interestingly, some Hollywood productions with Irish themes do very well in Irish theatres; in 2007, for example, Richard LaGravenese's adaptation of the Cecelia Ahern novel *P.S. I Love You* collected an impressive €3 million at the Irish box office.[127] This is just one example in the long tradition, dating back to the very early years of cinema, of Irish-themed films made by foreign interests.

In part because of this tradition, both global and domestic audiences were already accustomed to seeing Ireland represented in English by British and American movies, so it was perhaps a natural transition for Ireland's newly developing indigenous industry to continue to cater to audience expectations of an English-speaking Ireland. Ron Burnett's

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[123] Arts Council of Ireland, *The Cultural and Economic Trends of Cinema in Ireland and Wales* (Dublin: An Chomhaire Ealaíon/The Arts Council, 2004), 6.
[124] Ibid., 58.
[125] Ibid., 52.
[126] Sheehy, "Lost in Translation," 16.
[127] Ibid., 16.

analysis of Quebecois cultural products can also apply to Ireland when he notes that "specificity as such can best be identified from the outside and that the distinctions which we so arbitrarily use to maintain our sense of identity rarely survive without being affirmed by observers from other cultures."[128] The absence of international awareness about the language has given Ireland little reason to use it as a mark of difference or distinction in the global market, particularly when English presented such a convenient entrance into Anglo-American mainstream cinema distribution.

For Luke Gibbons, however, "A vigorous national cinema must be judged not solely on its economic performance, or in terms of establishing a native film industry (crucial though these are), but also on its capacity to engage with the multiple national narratives preoccupying a society, and its specific ways of telling its own stories."[129] The native Irish language is certainly the medium of (at least) one of Ireland's "multiple national narratives," and although it is quite prominent in discourses of national identity it has played a more peripheral role in the national cinema. In the following chapter, therefore, we will turn to look at the concepts of language, and how they intersect with both cinema and national identity.

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[128] Ron Burnett, "The National Question in Quebec and its Impact on Canadian Cultural Policy," in *Film Policy: International, National and Regional Perspectives*, ed. Albert Moran (New York: Routledge, 1996), 260.

[129] Luke Gibbons, "The Esperanto of the Eye? Re-thinking National Cinema," *Film Ireland,* 55 (Oct-Nov 1996): 22.

Chapter 2: Language, nation and cinema

The last chapter demonstrated that concepts of nation and of cinema have been intertwined in complex ways since the very dawn of motion pictures. Adding to the complexity, language has played an influential role in the development of both nations and cinema, while the world's languages have themselves been reciprocally influenced by nationalism.[1] This chapter explores the consequences of the intersection, in theory and in practice, between language, nation, and cinema.

The first section of this chapter confines itself to issues of language in cinema. It includes a consideration of screen translation – a term which encompasses all the various techniques of language translation used in film and television, such as subtitling or dubbing. Strategies of screen translation often reflect national preferences and in some cases have been used for nationalist agendas, for example during the rise of fascism in Germany. The link between nation and language that becomes apparent when looking at world cinema naturally leads to an investigation into the relationship between language and nation more generally. The second part of this chapter therefore looks at this relationship through an exploration of theory and policy with respect to national languages, minority languages, and endangered languages. Finally, the third part of this chapter will outline concepts of language and nation as they have appeared historically in the Irish situation. The fate of the indigenous language is of course emphasized, with particular attention to its link to early twentieth-century Irish nationalism and to the

[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, the word "language" is, unless otherwise qualified, used to refer to natural human languages (e.g. English, French, Swahili) and not to concepts such as "the cinematic language" as it is put forward by cine-semiologists such as Christian Metz.

perceived binary between English and Irish, as well as the ideologies that have been associated with each language in different contexts.

Language and cinema

It is of course possible to have films without any language in them, but the vast majority of contemporary films do use language to help create meaning. Some form of translation is then needed for a film to travel across linguistic borders. As with all forms of translation, the fidelity or infidelity of linguistic translation can have important repercussions in the way that individual films are received or interpreted by different linguistic communities and can simultaneously serve to either *accentuate* or *obscure* a difference of cinematic norms across industries. Furthermore, a careful consideration of the different strategies that have been employed by various film industries throughout the history of cinema reveals the ways that screen translation has been used to either break down or shore up linguistic and cultural boundaries – boundaries that often also represent national divisions. The choice of original language, as with the choice of translation strategy, can affect the meaning of a film (or a given scene) and influence what type of audience it will attract. The intersections between language and cinema are clearly complex. In this section of the chapter, I have chosen a few pertinent issues to explore: first, strategies of screen translation; second, language and so-called "foreign films"; and third, the aesthetics of language choice. Finally, I will bring these issues together in a brief example of the meaning of language in Irish cinema.

Translation strategies

It is well-recognized in the study of early films that the cinema was never really silent; even in the years before synchronous sound technology, films were generally accompanied by live musicians. Similarly, cinema was entangled in the national politics of language well before the advent of the talkies. The use of intertitles and of live lecturers added a linguistic component to early film exhibition that could be adapted more or less easily to accommodate national and regional variations of language.[2] Nevertheless, the introduction of synchronized sound added spoken dialogue to films and thereby accentuated the difficulty of circulating films beyond their original national territory.

A variety of approaches were tried in the attempt to overcome the new obstacles for exhibiting dialogue films internationally throughout the non-English-speaking world. One innovative solution was to shoot multiple versions of a film, using the same sets but with a new set of actors to repeat the same role in different languages. While an advantage of this technique was that the stories themselves could be adapted slightly for local tastes – German versions apparently tended to be racier than English ones, for example[3] – the time and financial requirements of these multiple-language versions (MLVs) were so high that they soon fell out of favour.[4] Furthermore, given the huge number of languages in the world, it was not practical to film new versions for any but

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[2] See, for example, "Chapter 3: The Voices of the Silents," in Abé Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Daniel Salas, "Spanish Lecturers and their Relations with the National," and Germain Lacasse, "Joseph Dumais and the Language of French-Canadian Silent Cinema," in *Early Cinema and the "National,"* ed. Richard Abel et al. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).
[3] Nornes. *Cinema Babel,* 139.
[4] For an excellent exploration of the usefulness of studying MLVs as a way towards understanding national popular cinemas, see Ginette Vincendeau, "Hollywood Babel: the Coming of Sound and the Multiple-

the largest linguistic communities. As a result, local exhibitors found ways to adapt international sound films for their own local audiences. Abé Mark Nornes describes, for example, how cinemas in Japan either employed magic lanterns to provide Japanese-language side-titles on a separate screen, or they left the sound off and retained the *benshi* (trained dramatic lecturers that had accompanied silent films) to voice the dialogue.[5] These techniques prefigure the two primary strategies of screen translation that have persisted into the contemporary era: subtitling and dubbing.

There are few cinematic *faux-pas* that will incur as great an outcry from Anglo-American cinephiles as screening a classic foreign film in a dubbed version, as Mark Betz found out when he programmed an English-language screening of François Truffault's *La nuit americaine/Day for Night* (1973) at George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. Nevertheless, as Betz goes on to explain, many of the arguments that contribute to the "received wisdom" that subtitling is a superior way of watching films are in fact based on faulty assumptions. He dispels the myth of an "original sound track" given that the dialogue for many European films is postsynchronized – that is, recorded after filming, and not always by the actors who appear on screen and who may not even all be acting in the same language on camera.[6] This process is identical to dubbing, and so complaints about loss of vocal inflection or a flat studio sound can only be attributed to the varying quality, not the essential nature, of dubbing. Furthermore, at least in the case of *Day For Night*, the film was originally distributed in the United States in the

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Language Version," in *Film Europe and Film America: Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939*, ed. Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 207-24.

[5] Nornes. *Cinema Babel*, 127-37.

[6] Numerous examples are given in Chapter 2 of Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009).

English-language version, so there is no reason to ascribe a greater authenticity to a subtitled print that was actually created decades later.[7]

While Betz looks at the debate around methods of screen translation that has coalesced into a "common knowledge that to this day permeates Anglo-American academic film studies" strongly in favour of subtitling,[8] Martine Danan attempts to determine why certain Western European nations prefer dubbing while others prefer subtitling for mainstream cinema viewing. She notes that audiences in France, Germany, Italy and Spain prefer dubbed films while smaller countries all prefer subtitles. The seemingly obvious explanation that subtitling is less costly and therefore more efficient for small markets does not explain why French-speaking areas of Belgium or Switzerland choose subtitled versions over dubbed prints from France, for example.[9] Furthermore, Danan cites a number of studies that suggest individual spectators prefer whichever method is most common in their nation of residence; this allows her to look back at the different histories of the nations for clues on the origins of translation practices that nationally-differentiated communities have "resultantly grown accustomed to."[10]

She outlines how France, Italy, Germany and Spain were all states that "encouraged a national cinema projecting an image of strong national identity."[11] Not only did dubbing practices contribute to the domestic industry by providing work for voice actors and sound studios, but the resulting products also served to downplay the foreignness of the films that the nation was watching. During the fascist period in the latter three of these countries, dubbing was often imposed by law as a way to facilitate

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[7] Ibid., 47.
[8] Ibid., 50.
[9] Martine Danan, "Dubbing as an Expression of Nationalism," *Meta* 36.4 (1991): 606.
[10] Ibid., 607.

the manipulation of film as an ideological tool in the service of the state powers. The dialogue could be edited by censors, and the dubbing would then erase access to the original script. In all four countries, furthermore, dubbing in a standard dialect also served nationalist policies which favoured a single standardized national language and penalized any minority languages or regional dialects. In this context, dubbing is nothing short of "an assertion of the supremacy of the national language and its unchallenged political, economic and cultural power within the nation's boundaries."[12] Superimposing the national language on imported pictures masked the foreign nature of those films.

Language as a marker of foreignness

John Mowitt also picks up on the idea that spoken language supersedes visual representation as a marker of foreignness in cinema, although in his case he is interested in the history of foreign films at the Academy Awards. He discusses the various wordings of the eligibility criteria for the foreign film Oscar, noting that the construction of the rules assumes that "a foreign picture will exhibit its foreignness not by virtue of what it *looks* like, but by virtue of what it *sounds* like."[13] In other words, a film from Mexico (a relatively short drive away from Los Angeles) is considered more foreign than one from Australia (half-way across the globe), simply because of the linguistic difference.

Mowitt also relates that each national state, except the United States, is invited to submit one entry for consideration in this category, although he surprisingly does not

[11] Ibid., 610.
[12] Ibid., 612.
[13] John Mowitt, "The Hollywood Sound Tract," in *Subtitles: on the Foreignness of Film*, ed. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 387. Emphasis in original.

explore the fact that countries, rather than filmmakers, are officially the recipients of the coveted statuette. This has interesting implications for a multilingual country such as Canada: English productions are ineligible for submission to the category, and while French films have occasionally brought home the Oscar, one recent film representing Canada in the competition was Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2006) – a film that was in neither one of the official languages of Canada nor in an indigenous Canadian language, but rather in Hindi. Similarly, in the Irish case, the country's first submission to the category was with the Irish-language feature *Kings* (Tom Collins, 2007), but the submission for 2011 was Juanita Wilson's *As If I am Not There*, which is an Irish production set in Bosnia, and performed in the Slavic language of that region. The foreign-language Oscar category therefore provides an example of the contemporary relevance of the nation-state, at least in practical terms, in the organization of transnational film culture, while simultaneously complicating ideas of language in relation to the unique identity of any given national cinema. It is important, therefore, to examine how different languages produce different meanings, either in relation to films as a whole or within the diegesis of individual films.

The aesthetics of language choice and translation

In his co-edited volume *Subtitles: on the Foreignness of Film,* Canadian film director Atom Egoyan states that his "love of cinema is founded on subtitles."[14] He goes on to explain that "they were my passport to an exotic world, and I loved the feeling of being surrounded in a foreign conversation to which I had access. It made me feel both

[14] Atom Egoyan, "The Sweet Hereafter," in *Subtitles*, 35-36.

exhilaratingly outside and inside at the same time."[15] This comment echoes a common appreciation of film as a window into foreign cultures, with language being one of the more obvious markers of national or cultural difference. The predominant use of English helps mark *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994), for example, as an American production despite its German setting and characters. By contrast, German films such as *Lola Rennt/Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998) and *Goodbye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) employ the natural language of the country while still reaching out to a global audience through subtitled releases.

While these films themselves are interesting, the linguistic choices are easily understood and hardly worth commenting upon. Nevertheless, there are cases for which the choice of language can be interpreted as a clear artistic statement by the director. One recent high-profile example is the use of ancient languages in the films of Mel Gibson. By filming *Apocalypto* (2006) in Mayan and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) in Aramaic, Latin and Hebrew, Gibson clearly broke from the Hollywood convention of portraying biblical and other ancient characters speaking modern-day English. These languages were chosen ostensibly for their historical appropriateness but also for their aesthetic effect. Subtitled films, at least in the English speaking world, are generally marketed more as art films than as popular cinema. Furthermore, they are seen to occupy a niche market, with non-English films representing only 1% of American box office takings.[16] One can easily see the aesthetic importance of language choice by asking oneself how different Gibson's blockbuster film *Braveheart* (1995), which in some ways bears many

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[15] Ibid, 36.
[16] Henri Béhar, "Cultural Ventriloquism," in *Subtitles,* 79.

similarities to his more recent works, would have been if filmed entirely in Scottish Gaelic and Middle English.

In some respects, then, the choice of language in film production can be considered an aesthetic choice, somewhat along the same lines as choices in costuming, editing, or music. This is not meant to imply that natural languages as they are spoken by various communities represent only a cosmetic difference between cultures; rather, it is meant to call attention to the importance of language choice as one of many choices to be made by artists working within the aesthetic medium of film. A choice of language may apply to an entire film, as in the examples above, or it can be for a specific character or scene.

Filmmakers making English-language movies have depicted Irish-speaking characters or situations with the assumption that the language itself will carry meaning beyond simply the meaning of the words. Ruth Lysaght, for her part, disparages the use of Irish in popular film, noting that

> Irish is associated with social shame, and treated as a mark of the past in *The Quiet Man* (1952) and *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994). Films set in contemporary times treat the language as a throwaway gag: one line in *The Beach* (2000) and ironic subtitling in *When Brendan met Trudy* (2000).[17]

I would add to her examples the use of the Irish language to identify characters as Republican political prisoners in films such as *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996) and in the opening scenes of *Blown Away* (Stephen Hopkins, 1994). While less politically motivated, the connotation of Irish as the language of the underdog is carried

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[17] Ruth Lysaght, "Pobal Sobail: *Ros na Rún*, TG4 and Reality," in *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television*, ed. Ruth Barton and Harvey O'Brien (New York: Wallflower, 2004), 157.

over into Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), which features a boxing coach (Eastwood) who connects with his Irish heritage by reading Yeats in Irish (despite the fact that Yeats wrote in English) and gives his protégée the Irish moniker "mo cuishle" [sic], a common term of endearment. Writing an editorial about the film in *The New York Times*, Wes Davis notes that "from a cinematic point of view, Mr. Eastwood couldn't have done better than to adopt the endangered language of a culture whose history has been as dramatic as that of his characters."[18] Beyond the inclusion of these Irish-language scenes in English movies, all of the issues outlined above – screen translation, markers of foreignness, and aesthetics – play out in interesting ways in Irish-language film and television.

Translating the national language

The advent of a publicly-funded Irish-language television station in the early 1990s brought to the fore the debate around the treatment of the national language on screen. Cathal Goan recalls that in the early planning stages of TG4, advisory councils were formed by the government. For those people involved with preparing for the establishment of the television service,

> the debate became sharply focused on the choice between a national service available to everyone in Ireland through the medium of the Irish language, or a service devoted exclusively to the Gaeltacht [Irish-speaking

[18] Wes Davis, "Fighting Words," *New York Times,* February 26, 2005. Consulted online at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/26/opinion/26davis.html.

regions]. A consensus emerged that a national service, based in the Gaeltacht, was the preferred option.[19]

Such a consensus did not extend to the entire population, as not everyone agreed with the premise that Irish-language language television should be broadly national rather than primarily targeted at native speakers. However, having decided to market itself to the entire Irish population, and keeping in mind the variable linguistic abilities of its potential audience, TG4 therefore has chosen to subtitle nearly all of its Irish-language programming. Ruth Lysaght welcomes this policy, calling it the station's "most innovative feature" and noting that "people from a non-Irish speaking background can see something of how life may be lived in this language… providing the first real opportunity for one group to communicate with the other on an imaginative and expressive basis."[20] Media theorist Aodán Mac Póilin also applauds targeting a broad national audience, noting that in a more insular broadcasting environment, the "opportunities to influence that [majority] community towards a better appreciation and understanding of the minority culture are decreased."[21]

The policy, however, has drawn fire from minority language activists such as Eithne O'Connell, who argues that the visual linguistic information is privileged over the aural. She points to studies that have demonstrated that "viewers who have no need of subtitles find it hard to avoid reading them."[22] This can have dire consequences in the Irish situation, she claims, because adding English subtitles "critically undermines the

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[19] Cathal Goan, "Teilifís na Gaeilge: Ten Years a-Growing," *New Hibernia Review* 11.2 (2007): 107.
[20] Ruth Lysaght, "Ar Oscailt – New Openings: Short Films in the Irish Language since the Advent of TG4," in *The Representation of Ireland/s: Images from Outside and from Within,* ed. Rosa González (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 2003), 159.
[21] Aodán Mac Póilin and Liam Andrews, *BBC agus an Ghaeilge/BBC and the Irish Language* (Belfast: Iontaobhas Ultach, 1993), 9.

original monolingual relationship between broadcaster and viewer and potentially poses a real threat to the already beleaguered language community of Irish speakers."[23] While O'Connell focuses on broadcast television, the parallels with subtitled films are obvious. In addition to the concerns of reduced value for native-speakers, there are theoretical implications for non-speakers as well. Michael Cronin notes that, in general, the reading of subtitles

> confers a sort of omniscience, as if the all-seeing eye of the camera was paralleled by the all-understanding ear of the reader of subtitles. The spectator takes on the role of interpreter experiencing the joy of connectedness without the pain of connection, the time and effort necessary to master languages. However, the very availability of the subtitles themselves indicates the limits to any omniscience that might be assumed by their readers.[24]

In the Irish context, the twin effects of subtitles both to connect and to distance the viewer from the action onscreen is heightened: for English-speaking Irish viewers, subtitles allow access to cultural products in their own national language while at the same time constantly reminding them of their separateness from that linguistic heritage. The consequence of this is that the cinematic medium has brought a new dimension to the discourse surrounding the official national language, one that brings together Irish speakers on the audio track and English viewers through the visible subtitles, thereby facilitating the kind of intra-national communication that Anderson speaks of. While the

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[22] Eithne O'Connell, "Subtitles on Screen: Something for Everyone in the Audience?" *Teanga* 18 (1999): 87.
[23] Ibid., 88.
[24] Michael Cronin, *Translation Goes to the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 106.

cross-linguistic communication is necessarily mediated rather than direct, subtitling also serves to disrupt any homogenizing view of national identity.

Language and nation

Moving now to the subject of language more generally, I will outline some topics from the discipline of sociolinguistics that contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolution of the Irish language and Irish-language cinema. Just as a given language can change meaning within a film, as explained above, the use of language operates in a similar way in relation to individual or group identity outside of the cinema. This is termed the "indexicality" of language, and Judy Dyer explains the phenomenon as follows: "A whole language or just one linguistic form [e.g. a dialect or accent] can become an index of, or a pointer to, a speaker's social identity, as well as of typical activities of that speaker […] Thus indexicality entails an association of a language or a linguistic form with some sort of socially meaningful characteristic."[25] The link between language and identity is therefore a key factor in explaining the importance of language in national and minority politics, as well as the emotional response to issues surrounding endangered or threatened languages.

The indexicality of language can be used by an individual or group for their own purposes, as is often the case in nationalism. Alternatively, it can be used by those outside a linguistic community for purposes of discrimination, idealization, or stereotyping. Attitudes towards different languages may result in specific policies to

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[25] Judy Dyer, "Language and Identity," in *Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics*, ed. Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany, and Peter Stockwell (New York: Routledge, 2007), 102.

either encourage or discourage the use of a particular language within a particular domain (e.g. in the media, in government, in education). Elana Shohamy points out that

> language policy (LP) falls in the midst of major ideological debates about uniformity and diversity, purity and variations, nativity and "foreign-ness" as manifested in policy documents stating "officiality," language laws, standards, etc, in an effort to affect actual language practices in accordance with these ideological agendas.[26]

These types of official policies towards language, when considered cumulatively and over time within a given context, are termed "language planning." Brian Weinstein notes that "the creation and use of language-planning institutions and procedures is proof that many national and local governments believe that they can make linguistic choices to develop society according to their own vision. The successes demonstrate that they are often right, but the failures caution prudence."[27]

In this section, I will explore three areas where language indexicality, language policy, and language planning are important: in the formation of nations and nationalisms, in minority politics within nations, and in the context of endangered languages.

Theories of language and nation(alism)

Sue Wright explains that "nationalism, with its ideal of a culturally and linguistically homogenous people differentiated from neighbors, has led to more conscious and consistent top-down LPLP [language policy and language planning] than

[26] Elana Shohamy, *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xvi.
[27] Brian Weinstein, *The Civic Tongue: Political Consequences of Language Choices* (New York: Longman, 1983), 37-8.

any other form of governance."[28] It is interesting that she makes this claim; after all, one might expect that colonial modes of governance, certainly known for their top-down policies in other domains, would be more inclined to regulate on language as well. It is the link between language and identity, however, that makes it particularly important to nationalist movements. Language is central to modern nationalism, at least in its European incarnation. Discrete national languages (as opposed to a continuum of unstandardized regional languages) began to emerge out of European vernaculars at the same time that centralized states began to emerge out of feudalism. The effect worked both ways; not only did central governing bodies seek to impose a standard language across a national territory, but the area in which a language (or similar languages) was spoken was also seen as an indication of national territory:

> The philosophy of nationalism spread across Europe, and by the mid-nineteenth century, most of the continent had been touched by the ideology. Fired by the nationalist ideal, elites sharing similarities of language and culture claimed a territorial base, and a new kind of nation-state came into being. […] To be a "nation," a group felt it had to be both cohesive and distinct. A single "national" language could demonstrate this.[29]

Concrete examples are not hard to find. In his book *Language, Community and the State,* Dennis Ager cites France, Spain and Norway as among the nations which most clearly demonstrate "the importance of language loyalty to the creation of the state, and hence

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[28] Sue Wright, "Language Policy and Language Planning," in *Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics,* ed. Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany, and Peter Stockwell (New York: Routledge, 2007), 164.
[29] Ibid., 166.

the centrality of the political factor in it."[30] In this context, of course, Ager means loyalty to a standardized, national language, which was held up by elites as superior to minority or regional languages such as Catalan or Basque. Wright makes the more sweeping statement that "from the Greeks in the south-east to the Irish in the north-west, language was central to the case for independence."[31]

A territorial area that corresponded with a speech community served to enforce ideas of cohesiveness (if not homogeneity) within a nation while also differentiating one nation from the next. Accordingly, this exerted certain pressures that resulted in actual linguistic change toward standardization of European national languages. Many linguists point out that there have always been societal forces that foster differentiation between groups – usually for purposes of cultural identity – and opposing forces that encourage wider communication. These are called centrifugal and centripetal forces by David Crystal, *einbau* and *ausbau* by Joshua Fishman. Centrifugal forces or *einbau* relates to the processes through which a language evolves away from its nearest linguistic neighbours; it explains, for example, how Latin branched off into regional varieties which then evolved into discrete languages. *Centripetal* forces or *ausbau,* on the other hand, indicates the opposing tendency which encourages mutual comprehension within a given group; this limits linguistic variability within a speech community at least sufficiently for all members to understand each other and can be seen in how regional dialects in France, for example, have been moving steadily towards standard French.

These forces operate at the national, transnational, and sub-national levels, and one important effect of the dual functions of language is that it often promotes bi- or

[30] Dennis Ager, *Language, Community and the State* (Exeter: Intellect, 1997), 29.
[31] Wright. "Language Policy and Language Planning," 166.

multilingualism, with one language used for in-group purposes (reinforcing group identity) and another used for wider communication. The development of national languages in Europe did not, despite the wish of some policy-makers, result in monolingualism at the national level. For one thing, a *lingua franca* was needed for international communication; this role is now most often seen to be filled by English and has led to even national languages feeling threatened by the potential for global linguistic domination. It has also resulted in several varieties of "world Englishes," local variants which may serve the need for an in-group identity marker that was previously filled by distinct languages.[32] At the other end of the spectrum, sub-national languages continue to exist in multilingual nations and even in countries with strong centralized language policies.

Minority languages and multilingual nations

While many European citizens accept the existence of their own national language as the norm and multilingual states as an exception, Thomas Ricento reminds us that "the concept of the nation-state as having one national language is not a natural or inevitable fact of human social organization."[33] Stephen May follows up by explaining that just as the standardization of national languages was a deliberate political construction, "so too was the process by which other language varieties were subsequently 'minoritized' or 'dialectalized' by and within these same nation-states."[34]

[32] For a full exploration of how English has become a global lingua franca while also fracturing into a collection of locally-specific Englishes, see David Crystal, *English as a Global Language,* 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[33] Thomas Ricento, "Topical Areas in Language Policy: An Overview," *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Method,* ed. Thomas Ricento (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006), 233.
[34] Stephen May, "Language Policy and Minority Rights," *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Method*, ed. Thomas Ricento (Blackwell: Oxford, 2006), 261.

The existence of more than one language within a nation-state, whether or not it has some kind of official status, is often a source of tension given the prevailing ideology of linguistic unity that is often – but not always – associated with nationalism. In his study of languages in Canada, Pierre Larrivée remarks on the presence of different types of nationalism, each with its own attitude towards Canada's two official languages. While he acknowledges the existence of "a new Canadian nationalism, hostile to linguistic duality and the recognition of special rights for minorities," he also points out that Canada's official bilingualism was itself "conceived as an instrument of national unity for the federal government."[35] He further quotes Kenneth McRoberts in explaining that Canada's "language regime was formulated as the centrepiece within a much larger project: the restoration of Canada's national unity. It was part of a new pan-Canadian nationalism, designed to counter the Quebec variant."[36]

This reference to Quebec nationalism hints at the threat of minority languages spawning sub-state nationalist movements; it also demonstrates why bilingual states are frequently seen as either unstable nations or multi-national states. As will be discussed below, however, Ireland is a rare example of a bilingual state where both the English-and Irish-language communities share an ethno-historical background. Unlike the situation in Canada where official bilingualism is a recognition of the descendants of two colonial nations (England and France), the Irish context is one in which the native population increasingly adopted the language of the colonizers, which also happened to be a powerful world language (English). The process of a population gradually giving up one language in favour of another is called "language shift," and despite the positive link

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[35] Pierre Larrivée, *Linguistic Conflict and Language Laws: Understanding the Quebec Question* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 150.

between the Irish language and Irish cultural identity, language shift continued unabated in Ireland after independence. Many indigenous languages in Canada and elsewhere find themselves in similar situations of accelerating language shift.

May sees this as a correlational effect of viewing languages "as (merely) carriers of 'tradition' or 'historical identity,'" since if the practical, communication-oriented aspect of language is neglected, "minority languages will inevitably come to be viewed as delimited, perhaps even actively unhelpful languages – not only by others, but also often by the speakers of minority languages themselves."[37] When a language is seen as delimited the rate of language shift intensifies, further decreasing the usefulness of the language, which eventually becomes endangered. This self-perpetuating cycle, unless it is somehow interrupted, leads ultimately to an endangered or threatened language dying out forever. The global rate of language death has been accelerating and is currently at an unprecedented level, capturing the attention of not only minority-rights activists but also professional linguists and policy-makers at all levels of government.

Approaches to endangered/threatened languages

When *Language* printed opposing opinion pieces by Kenneth Hale and Peter Ladefoged in 1992,[38] the journal captured two sides of an important debate that was developing in the emerging discipline of sociolinguistics. Professional linguists were becoming increasingly aware of what minority-language activists had been saying for decades; empirical research was confirming the massive scale of language shift, away

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[36] Ibid., 150.
[37] May, "Language Policy and Minority Rights," 257.
[38] Ken Hale, "Language Endangerment and the Human Value of Linguistic Diversity," *Language* 68.1 (1992): 35-42; Peter Ladefoged, "Another View of Endangered Languages," *Language* 68.1 (1992): 809-11.

from many small indigenous languages towards a few languages of wider communication, such as English. By the 1990s, it was well known that language endangerment was a wide-spread phenomenon, even if it was difficult to quantify the exact scale. David Crystal gives some estimated statistics: more than half of the world's 6000 languages are endangered to the point that they are unlikely to survive another century, for example,[39] and 96% of the world's languages are spoken by a mere 4% of the population.[40] Language shift and language death have always been part of human society, but until relatively recently new languages have generally been created at about the same rate, resulting in a fairly stable situation. It is well documented that the enormous scale of the current decline in linguistic diversity is absolutely unprecedented.

Hale and Ladefoged are not arguing about the fact of widespread language death, but rather what professional linguists should do about it. Not incidentally, the same question must be asked of policy-makers. Hale asserts that he and his colleagues have a duty to safeguard linguistic diversity, while Ladefoged holds that responsible linguists need to serve as detached scientists who simply try to establish the facts of the situation without trying to influence speakers on what they should do with those facts. Hale and Ladefoged's articles marked the beginning of what would be a long and productive exchange of ideas within sociolinguistics, and both sides of the debate have their share of well-respected adherents. This section will outline the supporting arguments for both positions – first Hale's, then Ladefoged's – followed by some alternative perspectives that have been proposed.

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[39] See David Crystal, *Language Death* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3-19, for an explanation of how this estimate was reached, including a discussion on the difficulties associated with enumerating the world's languages and with assessing the status of any given threatened language.
[40] David Crystal, *The Language Revolution* (Cambridge: Intellect, 2004), 50.

Hale's main argument for sustaining linguistic diversity is that language is the embodiment of human intellectual accomplishment, and that when a language ceases to be spoken, many aspects of the culture associated with that language are also irretrievably lost. Although he does not make the analogy in this particular essay, he has been quoted elsewhere as saying "Languages embody the intellectual wealth of the people that speak them. … Losing any one of them is like dropping a bomb on the Louvre."[41] Joshua Fishman's seminal volume *Reversing Language Shift* was published just a year before Hale's article and takes much the same position. Like Hale, Fishman draws explicit links between language and culture; many of the case studies in Fishman's volume are examples of language loss and cultural loss being twin effects of the same process, such as colonialism. Fishman therefore focuses on what he calls "language-in-culture," arguing that the traditional culture must be preserved as well as the language. While he states that all local cultures "deserve to be fostered and assisted (not merely 'preserved' in the mummifying sense),"[42] it is difficult to determine exactly where he stands on the issue of modernization for minority languages (I will return to this issue in my discussion of Ladefoged's position). However, he makes a convincing argument that working on language endangerment issues is a "good problem" because work in that area can also contribute to finding solutions for problems greater than the one initially proposed.[43] For example, work in the field of reversing language shift can also contribute to theories on the empowerment of disenfranchised populations and strategies for preserving alternative systems of knowledge.

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[41] Quoted in Burkhard Bilger, "Keeping our Words," *The Sciences* (Sept/Oct 1994): 19.
[42] Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Philadelphia : Multilingual Matters, 1991), 33.
[43] Ibid., 6.

The parallels that Fishman draws between the endangered-language problem and other social problems has since been expanded most dramatically to the ecological model, which posits a strong resonance between sustaining plant/animal biodiversity and sustaining linguistic diversity. This is currently a common (one might even say fashionable) model for illustrating the importance of linguistic diversity to a wider public. The writers who embrace this model most enthusiastically and most literally are Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine in their book *Vanishing Voices*.[44] They illustrate, for example, that the sites of the richest biodiversity, usually in the tropics, are often the areas with the most intense linguistic diversity. They also show that language loss follows some of the same patterns as species loss: an invading species causes a drop in the numbers of an indigenous species, and once that process begins it accelerates since a smaller population has an increasingly difficult time sustaining itself. Also, there is a domino effect in which loss of one species is also accompanied by the loss of neighbouring species.

There are several problems with this model: for example, most language loss is not due to population loss, although this does occur in some cases, for example as part of genocide or disease outbreak. Language shift is more like an indigenous species changing some of its characteristics rather than being replaced by an invading species. Also, in the biodiversity model, predators at the top of the food chain are eventually threatened themselves when the populations of their prey are decimated. The opposite effect is true for languages: "killer" languages such as English are usually strengthened by a shift away from the competing indigenous languages.

[44] Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

There are, however, many extremely valid points which come from the environmental model. First, the analogy of habitat preservation is particularly apt. Like a species that cannot survive without its natural habitat, a language is unlikely to survive when its traditionally-associated culture is threatened. This idea is consistent with Fishman's model of language-in-culture. Furthermore, the environmental model supports Hale's point that simply documenting a language through dictionaries and recordings does not produce a complete picture. Some writers liken the documentation objective as similar to stuffing a Dodo – future scientists may be able to learn a lot about what the animal looked like, but they will also be missing a great deal about how it behaved in the wild.

Ladefoged, for his part, would probably criticize these arguments as being formulated to appeal to our emotions rather than our reason; this, at least, was one of his criticisms of Hale. Ladefoged's position is that linguists are scientists and should act as detached professionals. One of his strongest points is that he sees a trend among linguists to generalize their own attitudes or those of the specific group they are researching and to seek to apply it on a global scale.[45] Certainly, there are ample indications that some writers do subscribe to a one-size-fits-all approach, even if it is well-intentioned. David Crystal, for example, makes the earnest assertion that "language supporters everywhere are on the same side"[46] and calls for better communication so that they can share successful strategies. The absurdity of this statement quickly becomes apparent if one tries to determine what is meant by the exceedingly vague term "language supporters." Fishman similarly notes in a generalizing way that supporters of minority languages,

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[45] Ladefoged, "Another View of Endangered Languages," 809.
[46] Crystal, *Language Death*, 99.

although actively fighting against dominant hegemonic forces, do not seek to be dominant or hegemonic themselves. In this way, he implicitly positions champions of minority languages as "the good guys."

This generalization is easily proven to be false at least in certain cases. Elena Shohamy has repeatedly written about the tactics used to establish Hebrew as the language of Israel (one of the few real language-revival success stories). The promotion of Hebrew not only displayed blatantly dominating and hegemonic discourses but also served to significantly threaten other Jewish vernaculars such as Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, and Judeo-Persian,[47] thereby also falsifying Crystal's claim that "language supporters" were on the same side – supporters of Hebrew were completely at odds with supporters of Yiddish. Similarly, language laws in Quebec which are designed to protect French are most decidedly not intended to support the rights of the minority population of Anglophones in the province. An interesting study on the Quebec situation is provided by R.Y. Bourhis in his contribution to Fishman's collection *Can Threatened Languages be Saved?*. Bourhis discovers an unexpected result of the implementation of laws to protect French: while the shift towards English was reversed as expected, Allophones were found to keep speaking their heritage language for more generations.[48] Bourhis has no clear explanation for this phenomenon.

One reason that Ladefoged discourages linguists from becoming activists is that he feels it is presumptuous for language researchers (usually outsiders, often western or

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[47] See, for example: Elana Shohamy, *Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Bernard Spolsky and Elana Shohamy, *The Languages of Israel: Policy, Ideology and Practice* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1999).

[48] R.Y. Bourhis, "Reversing Language Shift in Quebec," *Can Threatened Languages be Saved?: Reversing Language Shift, Revisited: A 21st Century Perspective*, ed. Joshua Fishman (Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 116-17.

western-educated) to assume they know what is best for the populations they study. In his own example, he prepared a report for the Ugandan government on the country's linguistic landscape. He presented the results of his research but felt it would not be appropriate for him to advise on the relative importance of language loss against the many other important social challenges facing Uganda. Alastair Pennycook offers a similar argument in his contribution to *An Introduction to Language Policy*: he correctly notes that discourse of preserving endangered languages as a matter of human rights generally comes from within the same paradigm as the problem which the adherents wish to critique.[49] Mauro Tosco, in his argument in favour of a "laissez-faire" approach to language planning, expresses a similar attitude. He criticizes linguists who use the human rights argument to promote endangered languages by noting that they do not sufficiently take into account the motivations of the speakers themselves.[50] This critique resonates with Ladefoged's concluding anecdote, in which he meets a Kenyan man who proudly announces that his son only speaks Swahili and not his traditional tribal language. Ladefoged recognizes that for the father, the language shift is an indication that his son will have greater opportunities and will be respected in the community. Ladefoged's final question, "who am I to tell him he is wrong?", points to his perspective that linguists should ultimately defer to the choices of the speakers themselves. Again, policy-makers could be asked the same question; in such a case, it is ultimately a question of whether preserving a communal good outweighs personal freedom of choice.

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[49] Alastair Pennycook, "Postmodernism in Language Policy," *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Methods,* ed. Thomas Ricento (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 60-76.
[50] Mauro Tosco, "The Case for a Laissez-Faire Language Policy," *Language and Communication* 24 (2004): 165-81.

At first glance, it may seem unproblematic to assert that speakers should be able to choose whichever language they feel is best for themselves and their children. The authors of *The Hegemony of English,* however, argue strongly that in most cases speakers do not have access to free choice at all because imperialist social environments favour major world languages, particularly English.[51] Francois Grin also points out that a simple market model should not be applied to language choice.[52] He references the recurring phenomenon where a generation who failed to transmit their language saw their children benefit from success in a dominant language, but their grandchildren mourn the loss of a cultural good which was no longer available to them. At that time it is too late, and again the new generation do not, in fact, have a real opportunity to choose their ancestral language since it is usually no longer used in many domains. Arguing for individual freedom is therefore based on a false assumption of choice. Grin notes that these grandchildren are what would be called an "absent market" in the economic model, since they are unable to exert an influence at the time of their grandparents' choice and yet they are still affected by it. The existence of an absent market is one of the indicators of market failure and therefore justifies outside intervention (e.g. the state or another group can act on behalf of the unborn generations).[53]

The difficulty in determining whether a population is truly able to choose for itself whether or not to keep its own language is the most important point in relation to both Hale and Ladefoged. Certainly, one thing that emerges from all of the various case studies is that language maintenance is impossible without the full support of the

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[51] Donaldo Macedo, Bessie Dendrinos, and Panayota Gounari, *The Hegemony of English* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2003).
[52] Francois Grin, "Economic Considerations in Language Policy," *An Introduction to Language Policy: Theory and Methods,* ed. Thomas Ricento (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 77-94.

speakers. It cannot be done by linguists or policy-makers alone, although they can influence speakers in various ways. Fishman reminds us of the practical reality that for people who are already functioning quite effectively through a dominant language (e.g. English) in all major domains, there is no reason to believe that they will "voluntarily undertake the further dislocation of their lives which transferring to another language entails, even when that other language is ethnohistorically 'their own', unless other, reinforcing incentives are available."[54] This is why policy is particularly important.

Fishman is right to emphasize the amount of time and effort required on the part of individuals in order to master a language, particularly as adults. It is a fact of language that is often overlooked by policy-makers and one which goes a long way in explaining the very common situation in minority communities: a strong positive attitude reported in favour of the indigenous language but a low level of actual use. Furthermore, as Fishman himself admits, although it is rare for a language to survive if its corresponding culture has been extinguished, a culture can survive the transition into a different language, even if there are some associated costs. Fishman in fact cites the Irish context as one where the language-in-culture argument is particularly complex, since as even he agrees "no ethnic distinction separates [the Irish-language community] from the majority or mainstream of society."[55] How this came to pass – the Anglicization of Ireland – is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

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[53] Ibid., 84.
[54] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 237.
[55] Ibid., 139.

The Irish language

Michael Cronin states that Irish, the indigenous language of Ireland, is the oldest written vernacular in Western Europe, with evidence of the Ogham alphabet dating back to the fourth century.[56] While the language did at one point enjoy majority status, Ireland was never properly a monolingual Irish-speaking island. As Cronin notes, "insularity was certainly a geographical fact for the medieval Irish, but as the extent of translation activity indicates, it was not a cultural one."[57] Across known history there has been a nearly constant flow of people both leaving and arriving in Ireland for trade, military, religious or other purposes, and each wave of voyagers brought their own language with them. The Irish language thrived in such a polyphonous milieu for centuries before suffering what seems in hindsight to be a relatively sudden displacement by English. The change was principally a case of language shift (i.e. the Irish-speaking population began speaking English) rather than one of population shift (while there were of course English-speaking immigrants, it was not the case that they grew to outnumber the indigenous population). Nevertheless, the long history of language contact predates the shift from Irish to English by several centuries, and so one must conclude that "the subsequent misfortunes of Irish are not to do with language contact *per se,* but with the context of language contact."[58] This context is of course intricately tied to the history of colonization by the British.

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[56] Michael Cronin, "The Irish Language: Past and Present," *Van Taal tot Taal* 37.2 (June 1993): 80.
[57] Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 36.
[58] Ibid., 19.

The first significant colonial legislation against the Irish tongue was the Statute of Kilkenny in 1366, which also included an indictment of other Irish customs. The statute declared

> It is ordained and established, that every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name […], and if any English, or Irish living among the English, use the Irish language amongst themselves, contrary to this ordinance, and thereof be attainted, his lands and tenements, if he have any, shall be seized into the hands of his immediate lord.[59]

The statute was directed at the English colonials living in Ireland, who had been gradually adopting the local customs. As Tony Crowley points out, "it was not an essay in the eradication of the Gaelic language, but an order to uphold the use of the English language; not so much an attempt to establish an Anglophone Ireland as to preserve English linguistic, cultural, and political identity."[60] Beyond "The Pale" (the area under direct control of the monarchy), the native Irish were "more or less free to use their own language, follow their own cultural customs, and practise their own Brehon code of law."[61] Furthermore, Cronin argues that even for the English the statutes had "little real effect" since "the Anglo-Normans were at that stage well integrated into Irish society and had close relationships with the native Gaelic aristocracy."[62]

The reign of Henry VIII in the sixteenth century – during which the king famously broke from Rome to appoint himself head of the Anglican Church, and with it

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[59] Quoted in Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537-2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.
[60] Ibid., 5.
[61] Ibid., 5.

the Church of Ireland – marked a "new era in Anglo-Irish relations [characterized by] a more interventionist stance by a monarch whose entire political strategy was based upon centralization of power."[63] Government-sponsored language planning in favour of English extended to the whole population of Ireland when a law enacted in 1537 ordered all the Irish to speak only English; the native tongue was forbidden. The king felt the indigenous language was linked to sedition since "almost all Irish-speakers were 'Papists' or Catholics."[64] Even beyond the harsh legal incentives for language shift, English was the language of business, government, and power, and over the centuries of continued British rule many Irish people learned the colonial language in order to improve their individual situation.

Official repression of the Irish language was later compounded when the Great Famine (1845-1852) led to the death of over a million people and the emigration of a similar number, with the Irish-speaking areas in the west of Ireland hardest hit. The fact that English was the language of most emigrants' destinations – England, Canada, the United States, and Australia – helped secure the perception that shifting to English could provide a ticket out of poverty. Although nationalist sentiments were escalating at this time, the language issue did not figure prominently in the discourse surrounding Irish rights until later. Daniel O'Connell provides an interesting example in this respect. O'Connell was known as "the liberator" of Ireland for his role in securing Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and his tireless efforts in Westminster seeking a repeal to the Act of Union. Born in County Kerry, he was a native Irish speaker, but he was "indifferent to

[62] Cronin, "The Irish Language: Past and Present," 80.
[63] Crowley, *Wars of Words*, 13.
[64] Cronin, "The Irish Language: Past and Present," 80.

the Irish language to the point of hostility."[65] He even went so far as to publicly remark on the decline of the language, observing that "the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great, that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish."[66]

There were others, however, who began to be influenced by cultural nationalists elsewhere in Europe, for example in Germany, who linked nationalism to language. In particular, Thomas Davis and the Young Irelanders promoted the Irish language in their journal, *The Nation*. Relating the preservation of the language to the sovereignty of the nation, he wrote in 1846: "A people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories – 'tis a surer barrier, and more important frontier, than fortress or river."[67] Support for the language was slowly building, and the Society for the Preservation of Irish was convened in 1876 and published its statement of aims in 1877. The aims were relatively vague, and in the opinion of David Greene, "entirely utopian" – and this even despite the fact that "it never crossed anybody's mind that Irish should replace English as English had so recently replaced Irish."[68]

The Society's impact was fairly minor except that it served as a precursor to the founding of the much more effective Gaelic League in 1893 by Douglas Hyde, an event which is often seen as the real beginning of the modern revival effort. Hyde, an Anglo-Irish Protestant and future President of Ireland, was committed to restoring the language, but he did not seek to associate the linguistic movement with a push for political

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[65] Richard Killeen, *A Short History of Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2003), 32.
[66] Quoted in Ibid., 32.
[67] Quoted in Crowley. *Wars of Words*, 106.

autonomy. His landmark 1892 address on "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" noted that the language issue "is a question which most Irishmen will naturally look at from a National point of view," but he also explicitly appealed to "the sympathies of every intelligent Unionist,"[69] thereby seeking to include both sides of the political divide. Indeed, according to Crowley, "cultural nationalism was simply the return to the Gaelic cultural past in order to guarantee the continuation of the Irish nation; in that sense it could be promoted as apolitical and a force for unity rather than as politically divisive."[70] The younger members who joined the League, however, soon politicized its mandate and the language became one of the main justifications for the violent push for independence.[71] Patrick Pearse, seen by many as the chief leader of the Easter Rising in 1916, went so far as to publicly state that "I have said again and again that when the Gaelic League was founded in 1893 the Irish revolution began."[72]

This focus on an indigenous national language was in line with nineteenth-century models of nationalism that were prevalent across Europe, as discussed above. Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland comment on the irony of this development: "Just when nationalism demanded the possession of a national language for nationhood, therefore, Irish was on the wane in Ireland, threatening the legitimacy of Ireland's demand for sovereignty."[73] Indeed, organizations such as the Gaelic League would not have been necessary if Irish was not a threatened language. Nevertheless, once independence was

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[68] David Greene, "The Founding of the Gaelic League," in *The Gaelic League Idea*, ed. Seán Ó Tuama (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1972), 16.
[69] Douglas Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland (1892)," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol II,* ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day, 1991), 527.
[70] Crowley, *Wars of Words*, 140.
[71] Cronin, "The Irish Language: Past and Present," 81.
[72] Quoted in Breandán MacAodha, "Was this a Social Revolution?" in *The Gaelic League Idea,* 23.
[73] Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland, "Language and Identity in Twentieth-Century Ireland," *Éire-Ireland* 38.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 5-6.

eventually achieved, Irish was constitutionally inscribed as "the national language" and "the first official language" in the young state, with English granted status only as "a second official language."[74] The fact that the majority of the newly-christened state's inhabitants could barely string together a sentence in their ancestral tongue did not matter: the language was still theirs.

Without referencing the Irish situation specifically, Benedict Anderson highlights a parallel phenomenon in many European countries at the dawn of western nationalism: the elites who formed the leadership benefited from a classical education but portrayed their study of regional vernacular language and customs as "'rediscovering' something deep-down always known,"[75] thereby implying that national traditions are somehow hereditary and inborn. Joshua Fishman also remarks upon the trend of elites searching for meaning among their less-advantaged compatriots:

> It is part of the specific nature of the nationalist (rather than any more generally reformist) stress on authenticity to find it in the lower classes and in the distant past […] if only because the peasantry has hitherto been more isolated from the foreign fads and influences to which others (particularly cosmopolitan intellectuals, estranged upper-class strata and urbanites more generally) are so likely to be exposed or to seek exposure.[76]

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[74] Article 8 of the *Constitution of Ireland*, 1937. The full text of the constitution is available online through the website of the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution, at www.constitution.ie [consulted July 21, 2012].

[75] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006 [1991]), 196.

[76] Joshua Fishman, *Language and Nationalism* (Rowley, MA: Newbury, 1972), 8.

In any case, independence did not solve the problem of the Irish language's decline. The new Irish government sought to gaelicize the nation primarily through the education system, making Irish a mandatory subject in all schools and also mandating that other subjects be taught through the medium of Irish where previously the education system had been overwhelmingly English. The enormity of the task is ably outlined by Valerie Jones in her book *The Gaelic Experiment*; the largest hurdle, of course, was the fact that many of the teachers already working in schools were not able simply to switch to teaching in Irish, and in those cases where there was in fact a community of fluent speakers, not enough of them were qualified to teach other subjects. More importantly, as was soon discovered, knowledge of the language gained through compulsory classes did not translate into an appreciable increase in spontaneous use.[77]

Those families living in the supposedly idyllic rural communities where Irish was still spoken, meanwhile, were in reality plagued by depressing poverty. Native speakers living in those conditions worked hard at abandoning the language in favour of English and the greater opportunities it provided, particularly in England and America. Nevertheless, Irish was idealized by those who had led the revolution for independence and later led the state itself:

> Irish cultural nationalism imagined a version of Irishness which was based on a vision of the Irish as the binary opposite of the English colonists. Using the Irish language as the key to Irish nationality, a type of Irishness

[77] See Valerie Jones, *A Gaelic Experiment: The Preparatory System 1926-1961 and Coláiste Moibhí* (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2006).

> was constructed which was pure, spiritual, largely anti-modern, and Catholic.[78]

Declan Kiberd notes the irony of raising Irish to the level of national symbol when in fact most Irish citizens spoke English, a phenomenon which was paralleled by various other symbols chosen to represent the "authentic" nation; he comments on the "interesting cultural effects" that were the result of "the sanctification of rural Ireland as real Ireland by those who actually abandoned it to live in Dublin as members of the ruling elite."[79]

Despite enormous and sustained investment by the state, the progress in reversing or slowing the linguistic shift even since independence has been decidedly modest. Surveys continually show positive attitudes towards the language, but as sociolinguist Joshua Fishman contends, "the road to societal language death is paved with the good intentions called 'positive attitudes'."[80] The Irish citizenry may appreciate the language and may wish for it to remain vibrant, but unless they find the motivation to actually *speak* it, it will surely be lost. For Crowley, "the people seemed both unprepared to see the language die out and unready to engage in any personal sacrifice to save it."[81] The number of people whose first language is Irish continues to decline, and there are virtually no remaining Irish monoglots. The 2011 census found that while approximately 40% of residents self-reported having some knowledge of the language [no distinction was made regarding level of ability], only 1.8% of the population reported speaking Irish

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[78] Crowley, *War of Words*, 154.
[79] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 495.
[80] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 91.
[81] Crowley, *War of Words,* 180.

on a daily basis and 2.6% on a weekly basis. (Note that these figures do not include a further 12.2% who reported speaking it within the education system.)[82]

Fishman comments on the blow that has been dealt to the confidence of the language movement: "the Irish, living in their own country and apparently the masters of their own fates, expected more from themselves."[83] Reg Hindley qualifies Fishman's evocation of the Irish as "masters of their own fates," suggesting that independence "did not make Ireland an island sufficient unto itself, and socially and economically hardly anyone wished to weaken the links which the Irish adoption of English as effective first language had forged."[84] This linguistic link has been important specifically for the development of the Irish film industry, given that Great Britain and the United States are both such important film-producing nations. The strategic review group for Irish film and television emphasizes that in a small country like Ireland, "non-indigenous production helps to build and utilize capacity and infrastructure, create employment and develop the skills base."[85] Tax breaks help to attract such productions, but a key advantage that Ireland has over other countries that offer similar financial incentives is its "English-speaking status in a primarily English-speaking medium."[86] In addition to bringing foreign producers to Ireland, the linguistic link has also helped Ireland market its own culture to the sizeable international Anglophone audience.

In terms of indigenous cultural production, it is ironically the *success* of Irish culture internationally that has compounded the difficulties of promoting language as a

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[82] Available online through the Central Statistics Office of Ireland, www.cso.ie. See *Highlights from Census 2011, Part I*. Details on Irish-language use are found on pages 40-41 [Consulted July 30, 2012].
[83] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 128.
[84] Reg Hindley, *The Death of the Irish Language: a Qualified Obituary* (London: Routledge, 1990), 195.
[85] Government of Ireland, *The Strategic Development of the Irish Film and Television Industry 2000-2010: Final Report of the Film Industry Strategic Review Group to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999), 17.

key identity marker. The option of representing the national culture through an essentially foreign (British) language "is a very real option indeed in Ireland, and the revival must cope with the awareness that the entire world admires Yeats, Joyce, Wilde and Shaw as 'Irishmen via English.'"[87]

Clearly the tension between the English and Irish languages is both historical and on-going. While the Irish language was an integral part of the nationalist movement that succeeded in gaining independence for (most of) Ireland, the English language continued to displace the indigenous tongue even after the establishment of a self-governing Irish state. In fact, in some respects, the outlook for the language worsened at that point. As Brendan Devlin narrates,

> It is probably true to say that the greatest blow to the Gaelic League, as an organization, was the setting up of an independent State […] it was natural that many of its active supporters should now have believed that the League's work was done and its mission now devolved upon the new State and its institutions, particularly its schools.[88]

As outlined above, the reliance on compulsory education as a means of re-gaelicizing the nation was ill-considered and ineffective. Many of the government's other initiatives were similarly well-intentioned but counterproductive.

After only two decades, it became clear that official efforts towards a revival of the Irish language were not producing results:

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[86] Ibid., 23.
[87] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 129.
[88] Brendan Devlin, "The Gaelic League – A Spent Force?" in *The Gaelic League Idea*, ed Seán Ó Tuama (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1972), 87.

> the truth was that by the late 1940s and through most of the 1950s the language revival, like the Irish economy and Irish society in general was, to put it politely, stagnant; a more frank verdict might be that linguistic, economic, and social policies were causing misery and leading nowhere except to the exit provided by emigration.[89]

Crowley also notes that in this period of apparent failure on the part of the government, there was a sharp increase in the establishment of voluntary bodies (similar to the case before independence). He cites sixteen national organizations which were founded between 1940 and 1963, including Gael Linn, "the most productive and technologically progressive."[90] Where the state had been reluctant to associate the pure Irish language with modern cultural forms, Gael Linn succeeded in producing Irish-language content in a variety of different media. Their film projects form the focus of the following chapter.

[89] Crowley, *War of Words,* 176.
[90] Ibid., 176.

PART II:

CASE STUDIES

Chapter 3: Gael Linn's documentary film projects

The organization Gael Linn has been at the forefront of the Irish language revival for over five decades, and they have historically been a leader in using modern media as part of a multi-faceted approach to keeping the language alive. Beginning in the 1950s, at a time when the national government was reluctant to invest in new technologies, Gael Linn used Irish-language radio and film production as part of a nationalist project that sought to familiarize Ireland with its own history as well as its contemporary development. For instance, they produced regular newsreels on a variety of subjects for distribution throughout the country between the years 1956 and 1964. They also sponsored George Morrison's historical documentaries: *Mise Éire (I Am Ireland)* (1959), which told the story of the Irish revolutionary period, and *Saoirse? (Freedom?)* (1961), a film about the aftermath of independence and the beginning of the Civil War.

In his monograph on Irish documentary, Harvey O'Brien notes that "the historical documentary as it is commonly understood begins in Ireland with *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*"[1] These films are significant for a number of other reasons as well. They were the first feature-length films ever released in the Irish language, not to mention an extremely rare instance of indigenous filmmaking of any kind at the time of their production. They also employed what was then an innovative cinematic technique of compiling archival footage, still photographs, and newspaper headlines. In the words of Irish film scholar Martin McLoone, "the films are of their time in terms of their fairly uncritical national sentiment [...] Yet formally both films are remarkably ahead of their

[1] Harvey O'Brien, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 104.

times in their use of archive material."[2] Furthermore, the recent re-release of the two feature films for home viewing provides a convenient point from which to revisit them and their continuing importance in terms of representing history, using the Irish language, and developing an indigenous film industry.

This chapter analyses the film work of Gael Linn during the 1950s and 1960s and contextualizes it in terms of contemporary trends in both the Irish language movement and the film industry in Ireland. As the first significant instance of Irish-language filmmaking, the films discussed in this chapter are noteworthy for the way they link language, nationalism, and cinema. Clarifying how this is done in these films will allow us to compare the later films discussed in chapters four to six, and determine exactly how far they diverged from Gael Linn's nationalist and artistic vision as well as what elements remained constant. A relatively brief consideration will be given here to the series of newsreels, before moving on to the main focus of the chapter: the feature-length films *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*. The two films will be considered separately in an attempt to illuminate, among other issues, why the first film was a critical and popular success of national importance while the sequel received such a cool reception that plans for a third instalment were reduced to the production of a short film under a different director. I will conclude by analysing the legacy of director George Morrison and Gael Linn's cinematic projects, and how attitudes towards the films have changed over the intervening decades since their initial release.

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[2] Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 17.

The language in the new state

As seen in the preceding chapter, the progress in reversing or even slowing linguistic shift in the decades following independence was decidedly poor despite enormous and sustained investment by the state. In an essay on language planning in Ireland, Michael Cronin highlights six key areas where poor direction or neglect "seriously jeopardised the language's chances of survival."[3] Among other points, he condemns the state for not employing new media technology as it became available for the purposes of promoting the language. He notes that there was no Irish-language radio station until 1972, and at the time of his writing (1993), plans for a television station were underway but somewhat uncertain and, in his opinion, decades overdue.

While the language was officially promoted, the state seemed dedicated to keeping it "pure" from the degrading influences of the mass media. The result was that as Ireland modernized, the Irish language in many ways got left behind. The state highlighted the language as an essential aspect of Irish heritage, but it was seen by much of the public as irrelevant to the everyday business of modern Irish life, and it therefore became increasingly associated with poverty and backwardness.

On the few occasions where the government did support Irish-language filmmaking, the products were either overly didactic (in the case of instructional films) or of poor cinematic quality. An example is the short *Oidhche Sheanchais* (Storyteller's night) (Robert Flaherty, 1935), which depicted a storyteller recounting a sea fishing tale. The film was inspired by the production of *Man of Aran* (Robert Flaherty, 1934), a documentary of Irish life whose premiere was considered a national event despite the fact that the film was produced by a British company and the director was American. The

success of Flaherty's documentary encouraged the Dáil (Irish parliament) to commission and fund the filming of a short Irish-language "talkie" that could be considered an indigenous production.

Oidhche Sheanchais was limited by an insufficient budget of just £200. More importantly, it was based on a script that was put forward by the Department of Education and that was, in the words of filmmaker Liam O'Leary, "utterly devoid of any filmic content,"[4] and consequently received only a "reasonably polite reception."[5] Furthermore, the focus on the traditional art form of storytelling served to reinforce rather than contest the view of the language as an aspect of Irish heritage rather than contemporary progress. Accentuating this perspective was the inclusion of the cast of *Man of Aran* among the story-teller's listeners, drawing a clear link to the film that Luke Gibbons describes as representing "the hard primitivist ideal at its most powerful, elemental level."[6] By hard primitivism, he is referring to Erwin Panofsky's definition of a representation that "conceives of primitive life as an almost subhuman existence, full of terrible hardships and devoid of all comforts."[7] A film like *Oidhche Sheanchais*, which was typical of state-sponsored projects at the time, could hardly be seen then as an appealing representation of the national language in modern Ireland.

The founding of the state-sponsored Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge (a national congress for the Irish language) in 1943 provided a reason for optimism, and in a policy statement prepared in 1947 the new body outlined seven recommendations including the

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[3] Michael Cronin, "The Irish Language: Past and Present," *Van Taal tot Taal* 37.2 (1993): 82.
[4] Quoted in Kevin Rockett, "Documentaries," in *Cinema and Ireland*, Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 73.
[5] Rockett, "Documentaries," 72.
[6] Luke Gibbons, "Romanticism, Realism, and Irish Cinema," in *Cinema and Ireland*, 201.
[7] Panofsky quoted in Ibid., 200.

necessity of film and other media production in the Irish language.[8] Three years later, it published a booklet specifically on the role of cinema, *Films in Irish,* which among other suggestions advocated dubbing foreign-produced material into Irish since the domestic production was so marginal.[9]

Despite the Comhdháil's endorsement of cinema as an aspect of national life that was crucial to the promotion of the language, the government did not invest in filmmaking. The failure on the part of the state to take full advantage of modern technologies for the promotion of the language, as well as the dismal results of a language movement overly dependent on the formal education system, inspired a number of Irish enthusiasts to form a new organization that would demonstrate to the government a more effective path for language revitalization.

Founding of Gael Linn

Gael Linn was, in many respects, a protest organization. Its founder, Dónall Ó Móráin, noted that the language movement had stalled because many of its early leaders "were executed or killed in action [during the war of independence or the civil war] and most of those who survived forsook the cultural for the political movement."[10] In his view, the government had a misplaced confidence that independence assured a Gaelic future and seriously underestimated "the extent of State action which would be necessary to achieve the language ideal."[11] In particular, he was frustrated by the reluctance of the government to fund the Comhdháil's recommended projects, especially the cinema. This

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[8] Dónall Ó Móráin, "Gael Linn: Principle and Practice," *Threshold* 3.3 (1958): 40-1.
[9] Jerry White, "Translating Ireland Back into Éire: Gael Linn and Film Making in Irish," *Éire-Ireland* 38.1-2 (2003): 109.
[10] Ó Móráin, "Gael Linn: Principle and Practice," 37.

is the context in which Gael Linn was founded: "successive governments failed to meet the challenge, turning down numerous proposals for State-funded films in Irish."[12]

Realizing that film production would incur significant expenses and acknowledging that the government had so far proven unwilling to invest, Ó Móráin's next task was to raise the necessary funds. A £100 loan for film from Ernest Blythe, then chairman of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge,[13] was a promising start but far more was needed. Ó Móráin proposed a novel fundraising idea based on the football betting pools that were popular in the United Kingdom but tied instead to the scores of Gaelic games. The key difference between the Gael Linn pools and the ones in Britain was that the former were "not for profit but for the benefit of the language and the communities of the Gaeltacht, [which] appealed to the idealism of many young Irish men and women, who soon became enthusiastic promoters of the new idea." [14]

The betting pools were based on the outcomes of Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) games – this also proved to be an important strategic move. The GAA was already a very strong national association. Founded in 1884, its primary function was the organization of amateur sports leagues for traditional Irish games such as Gaelic football and hurling. All 32 Irish counties have participating teams, and there are clubs in most communities. The organization has a huge following and games are well attended at both the local and inter-county levels. Within two years of its founding, the GAA could boast 400 clubs and 50,000 individual members.[15] Currently, there are 2300 clubs in the

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[11] Ibid, 37.
[12] "About us / 1950-1959," Gael Linn website, http://www.gael-linn.ie/default.aspx?treeid=257 [consulted May 22, 2012].
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] See Neal Garnham, "Accounting for the Early Success of the Gaelic Athletic Association," *Irish Historical Studies* 34.133 (2004): 65.

association and the often-sold-out stadium in Croke Park holds 82,000 spectators for high-profile games.[16] By developing its fundraising strategy around Gaelic games, Gael Linn was able to tap into the GAA's existing popularity and benefit from an established network of fans. Furthermore, the GAA and Gael Linn had many aims in common. The GAA was never simply a sports organization; rather, it explicitly sought to promote traditional Irish sports *and culture*. This included a provision for the promotion of the Irish language, so the association between Gael Linn and the GAA was a natural fit.

Like the GAA, Gael Linn was a community-based, volunteer-led organization. It is important to note that Gael Linn's ideological position was never that the responsibility of supporting the language lay with the general population; rather they felt that it was the state's responsibility but that the government was doing an inadequate job of fulfilling its sworn duties in that area. Ó Móráin founded the organization in order to raise funds and invest in projects that would "pressurise [sic] the Irish government to take a more pro-active role in promoting the Irish language and associated culture."[17] He hoped that by providing successful examples of effective language-promotion initiatives, the government would then see fit to take over the financing or to fund similar ventures.

Thus was born Gael Linn, whose name can appropriately be translated as either "Gaelic with us" or "Gaelic pool." The profits from the sports pool were invested into projects to promote the Irish language and culture. In order to announce the results of the pools, Gael Linn secured a weekly radio spot during which the organization also broadcast traditional Irish music and Irish-language news reports. The content of the

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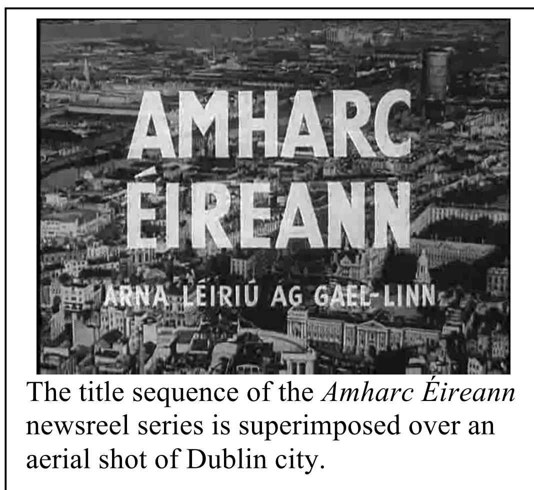
[16] "About the GAA," Gaelic Athletic Association website, http://www.gaa.ie/about-the-gaa/ [consulted May 21, 2012].
[17] "About us / 1950-1959," Gael Linn website, http://www.gael-linn.ie/default.aspx?treeid=257 [consulted May 22, 2012].

radio broadcasts can be seen to presage both the organization's later establishment of a music publishing division – still an important and vibrant branch of the business today – and its production of Irish-language news materials. More generally, it also demonstrates Gael Linn's embrace of modern technology and mass media for the benefit of the language.

The pools soon became popular throughout the country. Although Ó Móráin describes the early profits as "very small,"[18] there was enough money raised to set up a scholarship scheme to send individual students to the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking region) for several months at a time (this was in comparison to the shorter-term, large-group programs supported by the state, which Gael Linn thought to be ineffective).

The scholarship was the first project funded by Gael Linn. The second was the production of Irish-language newsreels for national distribution.

Amharc Éireann: Gael Linn's first film project



The title sequence of the *Amharc Éireann* newsreel series is superimposed over an aerial shot of Dublin city.

Before the founding of Gael Linn, says current CEO Antoine Ó Coilleain, "there was no association of Irish with film or recordings … [Gael Linn] brought Irish culture to the cities, and to Dublin in particular."[19] The urbanization of the Irish language by the Dublin-based Gael Linn stands in stark contrast to the traditional association between the language and the rural

[18] Ó Móráin, "Gael Linn: Principle and Practice," 42.

Gaeltacht areas, an association that was both prevalent at the time and a central feature of the Bob Quinn films which will be examined in the following chapter. What is significant to note in Ó Coilleain's statement, however, is that recognition of the importance of cinema was not an incidental feature but in fact part of the foundational drive of the Gael Linn project.

Gael Linn's film work began with the production of a series of Irish-language non-fiction short films from 1956 to 1964. These films began as monthly, single-item short documentary films and in 1959 became weekly, multi-item newsreels. The producer of the series, Colm Ó Laoghaire, clarified that although the films were presented in a newsreel format, they were in fact "pocket documentaries," explaining that while a newsreel "is an objective record of events," the purpose of a documentary by contrast "is to explain a viewpoint or put forward an argument on some topic of social interest."[20]

Although the different episodes of the series did present a variety of comments on social issues, their primary purpose according to Ó Laoghaire was to "encourage the public to accept Irish in the cinema as something normal and everyday (no more, not even to teach a few words)."[21] He also stresses the importance of ensuring the technical quality of the films and the interest of the subject matter in order to "counteract audience prejudice against films in Irish."[22] This posture of defensiveness of minority-language filmmakers, whether due to real or perceived prejudices, is one that will come back repeatedly in this thesis as we examine Irish-language films from different decades. Nevertheless, Ó Laoghaire does recognize the practical realities of the linguistic

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[19] Quoted in Catherine Foley, "Caoga Bliain ag Fas: The First Half Century," *Irish Times,* May 21, 2003, 30.
[20] Colm Ó Laoghaire, "Gael Linn 'Vest Pocket' Documentaries," *National Film Quarterly* 1.1 (1957): 9.
[21] Ibid, 9.

competencies of his potential audience: "as knowledge of Irish varies from fluency to almost nil, it is essential for success that the items should explain themselves visually and not rely on the soundtrack."[23] In the same breath, then, he is extolling the importance of using the Irish language while also limiting the importance of *what* is being said in that language, given that few viewers will understand it. In essence, the language is used for ideological purposes rather than for communication. Again, this situation will recur as we look at different examples and strategies of Irish-language filmmaking in subsequent years.

Máiréad Pratschke explains that by using the Irish language in film, Gael Linn was linking the language to "a form of modern media associated with popular entertainment and success" and was attempting "to eliminate the link between the Irish language and rural poverty in the public consciousness."[24] While the medium may have been modern, it should be noted that the subjects of the majority of the films were in keeping with traditional nationalist views, with many films profiling traditional industries such as turf cutting, fishing, or beer brewing. Other reels showcased Irish cultural events such as traditional music festivals or dance competitions, while many more recorded commemorations of republican heroes and martyrs. Some also looked at international issues, such as the anti-apartheid movement for South Africa,[25] and one surprising entry is titled "The Beatles Pay Unwelcome Visit," although the film record of cheering Dublin crowds belies the sentiment expressed in the title.[26]

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[22] Ibid, 9.
[23] Ibid, 9.
[24] B. Máiréad Pratschke, "A Look at Irish-Ireland: Gael-Linn's *Amharc Éireann* Films, 1956-64," *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 9:3 (2005): 38.
[25] *Amharc Éireann: Issue 256* (May 2, 1964).
[26] *Amharc Éireann: Issue 232* (Nov 16, 1963).

Two examples of *Amharc Éireann* newsreels

Issue 54: "Fleadh Ceoil na hÉireann"
("Irish Music Festival")
June 1960

[unnumbered]: "Lectriú Chonamara"
("Electrification of Connemara")
June 1957

The Irish Film Archives in Dublin now houses the *Amharc Éireann* collection, which numbers approximately 350 issues in total and is available for consultation. Although a collaborative web-based research project based on these archival holdings was announced by An Foras Feasa (The Institute for Research in Irish Historical and Cultural Traditions) and the Irish Film Archives in 2008,[27] the results have not yet been made available. The most detailed examination of the individual newsreels to date has been done by Pratschke, who submitted a PhD dissertation on the subject and published several articles; readers who are interested in a comprehensive look at the way that Irish culture and identity of the time were reflected through these short subject documentaries will find it in her work.[28] In general, she found that the short subject documentaries and newsreels were

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[27] "Amharc Éireann News Reel Project," *Digital Humanities Observatory.* http://dho.ie/drapier/node/145 [consulted April 15, 2011].

[28] In addition to "A Look at Irish-Ireland," see for example: "The *Amharc Éireann* Early Documentary Film Series: Milled Peat, Music, and *Mná Spéire*," in *Ireland in Focus: Film Photography and Popular Culture*, ed. Eóin Flannery and Michael Griffin (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 17-34; and "Resurrecting the Past: Republican Memory in the *Amharc Éireann* News Film Series, 1959-1964," *National Identities* 9.4 (2007): 369-394; as well as her PhD dissertation, *The Look of Ireland: The Representation of Ireland in Gael Linn's Amharc Éireann Film Series, 1956-1964*, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, January 1, 2005.

> a national morale-building exercise, a means of illustrating the great potential that Ireland had, of praising government efforts in some areas and of criticising it for its lack of effort in neglected sectors such as the Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas from which emigration was most marked [...] The films were anything but objective news reporting.[29]

She further argues that the shorts "aim[ed] to inspire confidence in Ireland's capacity to produce valuable goods, to promote its own development, to compete internationally, to sustain its population, and to reassure the Irish of their collective self-worth."[30]

While the subject matter focused on Irish issues, the target audience was also decidedly national: the reels were projected in cinemas across the country by the British J. Arthur Rank Organisation beginning in 1957, alongside Rank's own newsreels, and were seen by an estimated three quarters of a million people each month.[31] Rank discontinued their British newsreels by 1959, when widespread television watching in the UK rendered them obsolete. As there was still no television in Ireland, however, Gael Linn stepped up production to fill the gap, producing on a weekly, rather than monthly, basis.[32] Ó Móráin notes that even in Northern Ireland where no formal distribution strategy was in place, the films were "in very great demand as 16mm issues for showing at concerts, etc."[33] They were not exported off the island, and indeed the un-subtitled Irish-language narration would have made them difficult for foreign audiences to follow even where there was enough interest in the content. Looking back on the films now, Sunniva O'Flynn of the Irish Film Archive commends the intention to "rejuvenate the

[29] Pratschke, "Resurrecting the Past," 372.
[30] Pratschke, "The *Amharc Éireann* Early Documentary Film Series," 20.
[31] O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 105.
[32] Pratschke, "*Amharc Éireann* Early Documentary Film Series," 19.

Irish language."[34] She also adds more generally that "the importance of the indigenous newsreel providing images of Ireland for Irish people cannot be overestimated,"[35] given that it was in fact the only Irish newsreel to be produced since the General Film Supply company briefly produced the *Irish Events* series in the late 1910s.[36]

Gael Linn's attempt to "introduce Ireland and various aspects of its culture to its own population hitherto divided by geography or ignorance"[37] clearly resonates with Benedict Anderson's theory that popular media can facilitate an imagined community between strangers who happen to inhabit the same geographical territory. The newsreels can be seen as part of a nation-building project that foreshadows the more overtly nationalist content of George Morrison's feature documentaries that Gael Linn would subsequently commission.

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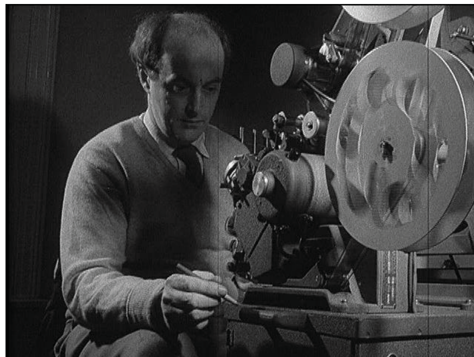
[33] Ó Móráin, "Gael Linn: Principle and Practice," 43.
[34] Quoted in Catherine Foley, "Reeling Back over the Years," *Irish Times*, May 21, 2003, 32.
[35] Ibid., 32.
[36] O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 29.
[37] Pratschke, "A Look at Irish-Ireland," 21.

In concert with Gael Linn's larger goals, the newsreel project was designed to "shame the government into paying more attention to the fate of the Irish language."[38] It is not surprising, then, that some of the episodes highlighted the way that the economic and infrastructure needs of rural, Irish-speaking Ireland were being dangerously neglected by the government of the time. The newsreels were also used to publicize Gael Linn's own projects for promoting the language. For example, three newsreels were produced about George Morrison's two films: one which gives a behind-the-scenes look at how the first film was compiled from archival material, and two celebrating the premieres of the films, including footage of important figures who attended. These newsreels are included with the recent DVD releases of the two films.

Amharc Éireann newsreels promoting *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*



Issue 35: "Mise Eire: Making Ireland's First Historical Film."
5 February 1960
George Morrison editing on the Movieola

Issue 125 "Premiere of Historic Film"
26 October 1961
The Regal Cinema in Dublin

The *Amharc Éireann* series lasted until 1964, when it was felt that the newly established national television service would make the projection of newsreels in cinemas redundant. The advent of television in Ireland will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, including Gael Linn's unsuccessful bid to manage the national station, as

[38] Ibid, 17.

well as the ultimate failure of the public broadcaster to adequately represent the Irish language despite a government mandate to do so.

***Mise Éire* (1959)**

The success of the newsreel series inspired Gael Linn to pursue more ambitious film projects. The organization commissioned documentary filmmaker George Morrison, who had already been working at finding and preserving early footage of Ireland, to produce a feature-length film about the events leading to the 1916 Easter Rising, the defining watershed moment of Irish Republicanism. The Rising was an armed uprising by a group of Irish rebels who occupied several strategic buildings in Dublin and defiantly read out a Proclamation of the Irish Republic at the entrance of the General Post Office. Although the Rising was a military failure (the rebels were soon forced to surrender), the event is generally seen as the beginning of the successful modern push for Irish independence. In part this is because the British authorities treated the insurgents to the most extreme punishment, jailing thousands and executing fourteen of the leaders, thereby providing martyrs for the nationalist movement and unwittingly changing the tide of public opinion. The men of 1916 would become among the greatest heroes in Irish nationalist mythology, a stance that we will see reflected in Gael Linn's historical documentaries.

While Gael Linn commissioned and funded the film, it was actually the director George Morrison who first approached the organization, rather than the other way around. Morrison wanted to make a film out of actuality material he had been collecting, but there

were few opportunities for filmmakers in Ireland at that time. He explains that he approached Gael Linn because they

> were already making Amharc Eireann [...] They'd got something on the road, it was modest but it was an important stage in Irish filmmaking. I approached them about making a 15 minute film, then talked them into one that would run for 30 minutes, and finally into three thirty-minute films.[39]

This was eventually presented as one 90-minute feature film in three chapters: "Múscailt" (Awakening), "Éiri Amach" (Rising), and "Fáinne an Lae" (Daybreak). While Morrison wrote the script for the film, the decision that it be presented through the Irish language was a stipulation of Gael Linn rather than a preference of the director. Morrison was in fact keen to release the film in English, as will be discussed below, but Gael Linn was adamant on the language question. Despite their differences on the linguistic issue, the subject matter appealed equally to Morrison – as archivist and historian – and to the nationalist ideals of Gael Linn, whose newsreels first foreshadowed and then continued to echo the perspective on history and commemoration that would dominate the feature film. As Pratschke notes in relation to those newsreels that dealt with historical commemoration, "the representation of Ireland's political history in the *Amharc Éireann* series in terms of the apostolic succession of national martyrs and their sacrifice for the cause of freedom was entirely in keeping with republican mythology."[40]

This mythology was given a feature-length treatment in the triumphantly nationalistic vision of history, *Mise Éire,* which was released in the same year (1959) that

[39] Morrison quoted in Emmanuel Kehoe, "Mise Morrison!" *Sunday Press,* February 4, 1979, n.p. [available in the Irish Film Archives library, press clippings files, "Mise Éire" folder].

Éamon de Valera made the transition from Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) to the more ceremonial role of President. Given that de Valera had held the top post in Irish government for over two decades (albeit with two short gaps) following his own participation in the Easter Rising and civil war, his stepping down as Taoiseach could be seen – and generally was seen – as a real changing of the guard for Irish governance. As his successor Seán Lemass began to take the country in a new direction, it was a fitting time to celebrate the chapter of Irish history which de Valera, along with many others, had authored. Furthermore, as film scholar Harvey O'Brien notes, the film and its sequel

> pandered to the Irish obsession with recent history embodied in the teachings at school and the idolatry practised through commemorative public monuments and plaques since the establishment of the Republic, and provided ample material for national self-definition. They proffered a credible mythology of Ireland's past which shielded the Irish people from the ravages of change during the subsequent traumatic period of social and economic re-definition.[41]

Michael Gray notes that although the film was not actually commissioned or overseen by de Valera's Fianna Fáil party, who were in power at the time of its production, the end product "was perceived by many Irish people as blatant propaganda by the ruling party."[42] Besides flattering de Valera and his colleagues, the film also presented a heroic and unproblematically unified view of the Irish people themselves and as such was, according to Harvey O'Brien, "a crowd-pleasing portrait of centuries of struggle against

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[40] Pratschke, "Resurrecting the Past," 391.

[41] Harvey O'Brien, "Projecting the Past: Historical Documentary in Ireland," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.3 (2000): 336.

[42] Michael Gray, "*Mise Éire* [Review essay]," *Cineaste* 32.2 (2007): 77.

English occupation."[43] Indeed, the introductory scenes span several centuries in a matter of minutes and establish the tradition of colonial struggle in Ireland. Included, for example, are the siege of Enniskillen castle in the late sixteenth century and the Battle of the Boyne in the seventeenth. The respective dates are not given, however, so the events merely occupy a vague and misty past. O'Brien accurately describes the manner they are presented as "devoid of any nuances of economy, culture or society … totally devoid of an awareness of metahistory, or even the parallel history of Northern Ireland."[44]

From that point on, the biases of the film are so obvious that they are hardly worth commenting upon. Republican violence is depicted always as a reaction to specific acts of the English, while the reverse is rarely true. Furthermore, regret is expressed at any negative side effects of Republican actions; for example, the burning of the Custom House by Republican rebels is accompanied by the narration, "The volunteers did not set out to destroy a beautiful building; their aim was to destroy the centre of English rule."[45] By contrast, the narration accompanying the surrender from the GPO states that "the English had reduced the city centre to rubble." No mention is made of the fact that most Dubliners did not at that point support the rebels and would likely have blamed the Volunteers – who instigated the fighting, after all – for this very destruction. Conor Cruise O'Brien confirms that "Dubliners, and Irish people generally, were at first almost unanimous in condemning the revolt," and that it was only after the executions that

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[43] Harvey O'Brien, "Ghosts of Empire: *Mitchell and Kenyon in Ireland* and *Saoirse?* on DVD," *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008): 254.
[44] O'Brien,"Projecting the Past," 337-8.
[45] Note: all translated quotations from both *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse* are from the subtitles provided on the DVD versions.

"feeling very rapidly changed into one of veneration for the fallen leaders and respect and support for their surviving comrades."[46]

There is a near-complete lack of any mention of sectarian divisions, which is curious. Even when referencing the violence in Belfast, the narration specifies only "Christians fleeing from each other in terror." The fact that the confessional divisions are elided in the narration in favour of an exclusive analysis of political allegiances serves a number of purposes. First of all, it allows the film to represent Ireland as essentially united against England. If any mention had been made of the association between Irish Protestantism and Unionism, even in the North, it would have necessarily raised questions about the unity of a post-independence Southern Ireland which still included a sizable minority Protestant population. There is an assumption underlying the entire film that all Irish people supported independence, and words such as "the people" are used to make sweeping statements about nationalist sentiments. Gael Linn explicitly acknowledge their unified view of the Irish citizenry in their press release for the film, claiming that "as far as Gael-Linn is concerned, there is only one Ireland, only one Irish people and in our work for the cultural, economic and other advancement of that people, we seek the co-operation of every person who says 'I am Irish and proud of it,' without reference to creed or class."[47]

At least one viewer did take exception to the perspective presented by the film, drawing attention to the "tumultuous welcome accorded the 1916 men on their return

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[46] Máire and Conor Cruise O'Brien, *A Concise History of Ireland* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 141.
[47] Gael Linn, "Press Release," March 3, 1960. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].

A controversial scene from *Mise Éire*

from English prisons."[48] In a letter to the editor, the anonymous spectator contests, "I have no recollection of any scenes of enthusiasm in Dublin on such occasion. True, the hostility which marked their departure was absent, but my recollection is of tiny bands of women waiting patiently at the North Wall each morning, in the hope of greeting some relative or friend on his return. If history is to benefit future generations, it should be truthful and not fanciful."[49]

The final shots of the film drive home the perspective of a nationalist Ireland united against colonial England, showing headlines proclaiming "Saoirse!" ("Freedom!") in reference to the election of a majority of Sinn Féin (the nationalist party) representatives, followed by footage of waves crashing against rocks. The absence of the religious dimension to the story can also be illuminated by the fact that Morrison himself was from a Protestant family. His grandparents had been staunch Unionists but his parents converted to Republicanism, while maintaining their denominational faith.[50] His film amply demonstrates that his religious affiliation did not prevent him from being as ardent a nationalist as any member of the Catholic community.

Looking back now, the film may seem slow and ideologically heavy-handed, but it is important to remember that the use of archival footage linked by photographs and

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[48] "Return of 1916 Men [letter to the editor]," *The Evening Mail,* October 9, 1959, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[49] Ibid.
[50] Katrina Goldstone, "George Morrison--the Father of Irish Film," *World of Hibernia* 6.4 (2001): 88.

newspaper headlines was "a format that was novel at the time."[51] While it was certainly novel for Irish filmmaking, O'Brien is quick to point out that it had two important precedents: first, the Soviet montage movement including Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov but especially Esfir Shub's archival compilation documentary *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927); and second, the National Film Board of Canada short *City of Gold* (Wolf Koening and Colin Low, 1957) which used archival still photographs as the sole visual accompaniment to Pierre Burton's recollection of the Klondike gold rush, a film which Morrison may have seen when it screened at the Cork Film Festival.[52] Morrison echoed and combined these techniques in his own filmmaking, which was nonetheless completely novel in terms of Irish cinema.

In order to find the source material for his projects, Morrison searched for archival newsreels in collections across Europe. He began this project in 1952 after attending a meeting of the International Federation of Film Archives at Amsterdam where he became aware of the existence of material relating to Ireland in foreign archives.[53] He then began visiting film archives across Europe, and came to a sobering conclusion: "I came to realize the plight of the Irish actuality material, which was rotting quietly here, there and everywhere. And very rapidly, too."[54] Realizing that much of this perishable nitrate stock was in danger of degrading beyond use, or faced being simply discarded, he successfully lobbied Éamon de Valera (Taoiseach at that time) for funds to repatriate the reels and have them properly preserved at the National Library.[55] This move can be seen

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[51] Gray, "*Mise Éire,*" 77.
[52] O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 107-8.
[53] O'Brien, "Projecting the Past," 340.
[54] Morrison quoted in Gerry McCarthy, "George Morrison, Pioneer of Irish Film, Isn't Stuck in the Past," *Sunday Times* (Culture section), February 15, 2009, 14.
[55] Martin Doyle, "Reel Hero of Irish History," *Irish Times*, January 4, 2008, 12.

as the first step in Morrison's lifelong project to establish a national film archive, discussed in the final portion of this essay.

Mise Éire was a great success, both commercially and critically. The *Irish Press* announced that the film had attracted capacity audiences in its first two weeks at the Regal cinema and that the run would be extended.[56] In a typical contemporary review, Terry O'Sullivan of the *Evening Press* effused that "it is almost impossible to be objective about this, the greatest Irish family album ever made [...], and it took me some time to calm down after seeing the film at the private show yesterday morning."[57] The *Irish Times* similarly praised the film, drawing attention in particular to its technical achievement compared to previous indigenous efforts: "The few native products we have had, have been both clumsy and amateurish. Now at last comes a picture which is, above all, professional."[58] The review goes on to outline some of the interesting cinematic techniques used to retell Irish history and concludes with the endorsement: "Do not miss it!"[59] The Irish Film Society, for its part, named the film the "outstanding event of the past year in the Irish cinema"[60] in its annual report, although it hinted there was not much competition for the title when it further added that "the only other work worthy of note is that of Mr Colm O Laoghaire, whose short films and newsreels [the *Amharc Éireann*

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[56] "*Mise Éire* retained," *Irish Press*, February 19, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[57] Terry O'Sullivan, "The Sight and Sound of History Fills the Screen in *Mise Éire*," *Evening Press*, February 6, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[58] Anonymous ("Cinema Correspondent"). "*Mise Éire*: a Native Film that is Professional," *Irish Times*, February 8, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[59] Ibid.
[60] "*Mise Éire* Top Film of the Year," *Irish Press*, July 2, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].

series also promoted by Gael Linn], although necessarily circumscribed in scope, are always cinematic."[61]

In addition to breaking ground in terms of cinematic achievement for Irish film, *Mise Éire* also provided the very first example of orchestral scoring in indigenous Irish film.[62] Much of the acclaim for the film was indeed directed to Sean Ó Ríada's score, which combined the composer's love of traditional Gaelic folk music with the impact of full symphonic orchestration. The score can be seen as a further example of Gael Linn's overall project of using the full advantages of modern technology for the exaltation of Ireland and its traditional culture. The musical soundtrack of the film continues to be a bestseller for Gael Linn, and Michael Gray goes so far as to claim that "the lasting impact of *Mise Éire* on the Irish psyche is due not to the monochrome moving images that lift the nation's founders out of the pages of history, but to the emotive soundtrack that accompanies them."[63]

While the music accompanying the film was the object of fairly unanimous praise, the voice-over portion of the audio track has attracted much popular and scholarly debate. In a letter to the editor, one viewer (who identified himself as a "speaker of Irish") questioned the lack of subtitles, noting that the content is too important to be denied to the majority of the audience. He noted that eight out of ten audience members "can only feel annoyed and aggrieved that their lack of facility in being able to follow the Irish commentary was not catered for. *Language is primarily a human, not a national,*

[61] Ibid.
[62] Doyle, "Reel hero of Irish history," 12.
[63] Gray, "*Mise Éire*,"77.

function."[64] He was, however, quick to make it clear that he supports the language, proclaiming, "God hasten the day when we will be an Irish-speaking nation again."[65] Reviewers, for their part, tended to mention the language issue but simultaneously dismiss it. O'Sullivan commented that he strained hard to understand all the narration at the beginning of the film, but that "after a little while, the sound was incidental to the sight, and the commentary receded into the background."[66] In a similar sentiment, another reviewer admitted that, "no great hand at the native tongue myself, I never found it difficult to follow."[67]

Not surprisingly, the language question caused more consternation in Unionist-led Northern Ireland. The Belfast Corporation Police Committee, who were in charge of film censorship for the city, sought to ban the film. They did so on the grounds that it was "in a language they did not understand" and could therefore not properly assess, although "a Unionist spokesman stressed that there were no political reasons for their decision."[68] The decision was in any case reversed by a margin of just one in a later vote by the committee, but only after a series of protests from the nationalist community and the provision of an English version of the commentary to committee members.[69] Incidentally, popular protest against the film among the loyalist community focused squarely on content rather than language, as evidenced by a poster advertising a "major demonstration" against a screening in Lisnaskea, County Fermanagh, which describes the

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[64] Anonymous ("Speaker of Irish"), "Why No English Sub-titles in *Mise Éire*? [letter to the editor]," *Evening Mail*, February 11, 1980, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder]. Emphasis added.
[65] Ibid.
[66] O'Sullivan, "The Sight and Sound of History," n.p.
[67] "*Mise Éire*: a Native Film that is Professional," n.p.
[68] "*Mise Éire* Ban Move: 'Not a Valid Reason' Says Alderman," *Irish News*, September 9, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].

film as “Papist propaganda in an attempt to mislead and poison the mind’s [sic] of our youth, and an insult to Protestant Beliefs. [...] NO SURRENDER.”[70] It is unlikely that these loyalist protesters would have understood (or even seen) the film before making their judgement, but the fact that the Irish language was so closely linked to (Catholic) nationalism surely played a large role in their assessment of the film’s status as “Papist propaganda.”

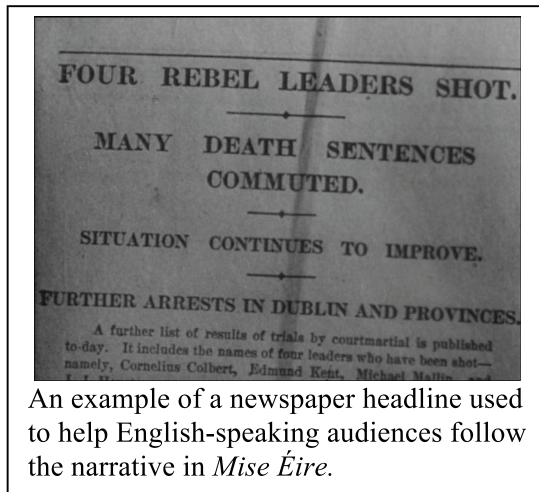
With the benefit of temporal distance and a less heated environment, recent academic criticism has been able to bring a more considered approach to the analysis of the linguistic question. Jerry White is critical of the unproblematized use of Irish-language narration, noting that “the complex ideology and history of the decline of the Irish language is smoothed over and obscured.”[71] White’s comment is curious given that the domestic audience at the time of the film’s release would have necessarily been well aware that the country was in fact overwhelmingly English-speaking, both at the time of production as well as of the events depicted. There would therefore have been no danger that the film would leave its original viewership with any misconceived ideas about the contemporary status of the language (as indicated in the quotations above).

Interestingly, the film itself does not diegetically explore the language question beyond a very brief mention of the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. It is quite possible that audiences and reviewers saw *Mise Éire* primarily in the context of the Irish language movement, making the language choice quite obvious and natural, rather than as a deviation from cinematic trends of the time as, perhaps not surprisingly, is the main

[69] “*Mise Éire* Ban Lifted in Belfast,” *Irish Press*, October 4, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, “Mise Éire” folder].
[70] Undated and uncredited poster, advertising protest for June 9, 1960 [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, “Mise Éire” folder].

perspective of film scholars. The film itself was publicized as a Gael Linn production to a nation that was already quite familiar with the *Amharc Éireann* series and Gael Linn's other initiatives in support of the language. Having repeatedly argued on behalf of the language elsewhere, then, it is understandable that the organization did not find it necessary to emphasize it again within the feature film.

Mise Éire, like the Gael Linn newsreels, can therefore be seen to promote a normalized view of the language while being well aware that an Irish-speaking nation was a distant goal rather than a contemporary reality. White again comments on the disjunction between the confident Irish-language narration and the reality of an Anglicized nation by suggesting that the English-language newspaper headlines shown in the film demonstrate that the use of the Irish language "was historically incongruent with the central events of the struggle as such."[72] While it is certainly true that Irish was in decline – though not complete disuse – by 1916, Martin Doyle puts forward a more convincing explanation for the use of English newspaper headlines. He proposes that it was a cinematic device chosen intentionally "so as not to alienate non-Irish speakers" in a film that was presented without subtitles yet targeted to a broad national audience.[73] Martin McLoone further points out that exhibitors often had to hand out a written summary of the narration to accompany the film. Even so, he argues, the films exacerbate the view of Irish as a "private discourse"



FOUR REBEL LEADERS SHOT.

MANY DEATH SENTENCES COMMUTED.

SITUATION CONTINUES TO IMPROVE.

FURTHER ARRESTS IN DUBLIN AND PROVINCES.

A further list of results of trials by courtmartial is published to-day. It includes the names of four leaders who have been shot—namely, Cornelius Colbert, Edmund Kent, Michael Mallin, and

An example of a newspaper headline used to help English-speaking audiences follow the narrative in *Mise Éire*.

[71] White, "Translating Ireland Back into Éire," 114.
[72] Ibid, 116.

of nationalism, and the choice of language "severely curtailed the impact that the films could have made, especially in Britain and America, where they have a particular cultural resonance."[74]

In fact, Gael Linn refused for decades to strike subtitled prints in any language, thereby effectively making any international distribution impossible. Given the subject matter of the film, and particularly the anti-English bias, it is difficult to determine whether this stance was a purely ideological one related to the language question, or if it in fact had more to do with reserving these nationalist images for domestic consumption only. This decision was made by Gael Linn, not by Morrison, who actually did want to release an English-language version. Along with his first wife Theodora FitzGibbon, Morrison met with Irish actor Peter O'Toole to discuss the possibility of the *Lawrence of Arabia* star narrating a new version: "Theo and I spent a fortnight planning this at [O'Toole's] house in Hampstead, and Gael Linn refused to reply to him at all. That was a great disappointment."[75]

Despite these challenges, the record indicates that there were a few international screenings of the film including one at the Cinémathèque Française in conjunction with the 1960 International Theatre Festival in Paris,[76] and a screening on Italian television (with commentary in Italian) in 1963 in honour of the "Year of Europe."[77] Short excerpts were also shown on American television, as part of a "Twentieth Century" history series

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[73] Doyle, "Reel Hero of Irish History," 12.
[74] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 17.
[75] Morrison quoted in McCarthy, "George Morrison," 15.
[76] "*Mise Éire* for Paris Showing," *Irish Press*, July 8, 1960: n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder]. Whether the film was presented in French, and if so what method of screen translation was used, is not mentioned in the brief notice in the paper.
[77] "Uair a Chloig de *Mise Éire*, *Saoirse?* ar an Teilifís san Iodáil," *Inniu,* November 15, 1963: n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].

on CBS in 1961.[78] The film also screened in the United Kingdom, first in Scotland at the request of the Glasgow branch of the Gaelic League,[79] and then later at the British Film Institute where it was presented in the context of a series of compilation films and was "accompanied by an English translation of the commentary over the theatre's earphone system."[80] It is clear, however, that these international screenings were exceptional, and the re-release of the films onto DVD for home viewing, as will be discussed below, was therefore particularly significant as it also allowed for optional English subtitles, finally making the films available to a much wider audience.

***Saoirse?* (1961)**

After the success of *Mise Éire*, George Morrison repeated his documentary formula for a treatment of the years between the election of the Sinn Féin party and the start of the Irish Civil War in 1922. The public reception this time, however, was decidedly less enthusiastic. Michael Gray points out that *Saoirse?* "failed to captivate the cinemagoers of Ireland the way that the doomed heroic struggle of *Mise Éire* had done a year earlier."[81] Harvey O'Brien, for his part, puts the contrast in much starker terms: while *Mise Éire* was "released to such aplomb in 1959 that it became the official history of the Irish state for more than a generation afterward," he describes *Saoirse?* as "a cinematic *bete noir* in Irish film history."[82] The divergent audience responses to two films which followed the same aesthetic formula and were shaped by the same director is

[78] "Parts of *Mise Éire* Film to be Televised," *Irish Times,* November 24, 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[79] "*Mise Éire* for Glasgow," *Irish Times,* April 1960, n.p. [From Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[80] "Gael Linn Film in London," *Irish Times* [no date marked, from Irish Film Archive library press clipping files, "Mise Éire" folder].
[81] Michael Gray, "*Saoirse?* [Review essay]," *Cineaste* 33.2 (2008): 70.

instructive in understanding how the Irish public remembers two different periods in its own history. O'Brien reiterates this point, stating that "it is still hard to escape the fact that [*Saoirse?*] is formally, stylistically, and emotionally much the same film as its predecessor: only the history is different."[83]

Like *Mise Éire, Saoirse?* includes beautifully restored archival footage. In fact, the second film is in many ways aesthetically superior: the technology for recording moving images was continually being improved and becoming more common throughout the 1910s and 1920s, so Morrison presumably had more and better original footage from which to choose. Michael Gray commends the film for showing both Éamon de Valera and Michael Collins "at the peak of their oratory powers addressing street rallies,"[84] and certainly any student of Irish history cannot help but be impressed as these two iconic figures come to life on screen.

Here, however, is where the language issue becomes particularly interesting in a film made by an organization dedicated to promoting Irish but which never once mentions the importance of the language itself (in comparison with the previous film and its very brief mention of the foundation of the Gaelic League). The scenes of de Valera and Collins addressing their supporters, as with all the other scenes, are accompanied by an Irish-language voice-over, which in this case reads out transcripts of the speeches. The purported quotations are in fact translations from the original English, and although this is never explicitly stated, at some points it is clear to see that the leaders are mouthing the words contained in the English-language subtitles rather than the Irish narration. In part, this can be excused by the fact that synchronous sound-film recordings

[82] O'Brien, "Ghosts of Empire," 254.
[83] Ibid, 254.

would have been technologically impossible in any case at the time of these events. The recording of sound onto phonograph discs, however, was well established and so it seems curious that apparently no effort was made to find and include archival sound material along with the painstakingly restored visual artefacts. The net result is that the English language is effectively omitted from the soundtrack, although it is still visually present in the headlines of newspaper articles included in the film.

The crowd scenes are also interesting in the contrast they create between Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera. The divide created by the signing of the treaty between the pro-treaty Freestaters (represented by Collins) and the anti-treaty Republicans (represented by de Valera), which led to the civil war, is depicted as a difference of personality more than of ideology between the two leaders. O'Brien describes the "not accidental" favouring of the contemporary president in the film, noting that the footage of de Valera's public addresses "evokes memories of similar footage of Lenin and Hitler in the propaganda films which had accompanied their respective rises to power"; Collins, by

Contrasting representations of national leaders in *Saoirse?*

Éamon de Valera

Michael Collins

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[84] Gray, "*Saoirse?*" 70.

contrast, is depicted as a "sad, lonely man" whose crowd scenes are plagued by "arguing or protesting individuals." [85]

Maintaining some semblance of objectivity was never an aim of the intentionally nationalist *Mise Éire*, but proved to be a major difficulty in the production of *Saoirse?*. One particularly controversial scene from the civil war documents the Free State army firing on Republican volunteers who were occupying the Four Courts in Dublin, thereby destroying the historic building. The Free State soldiers are depicted here as puppets of the English government; the narrator remarks that the British supplied the guns "but they wanted the Irish to fire the bullets." On this subject, Morrison comments on the difference in political background between himself and Gael Linn chairman Dónall Ó Móráin, who requested that the Four Courts scene be omitted: "You must remember that Ó Móráin's family background is a Free State one … My own family on both sides was Republican."[86] Martin Doyle's explanation that Morrison refused to delete the scene because he "had spent a decade scouring Europe to source the rare and decaying newsreel footage,"[87] is somewhat unconvincing given the fact that, as Doyle himself points out earlier, the combined running time of the two films (approximately three hours) was a distillation of over seventy hours of total available archival footage – surely some other compelling footage had to be left out as well. The political resonance of the scene was clearly important to Morrison; furthermore, the destruction of the national records at the Four Courts undoubtedly had a special resonance for a dedicated archivist.

The material of this second film would naturally have been more uncomfortable for an Irish audience in which the divisions of the civil war were still felt, as opposed to

[85] O'Brien, "Projecting the Past," 342.
[86] Doyle, "Reel Hero of Irish History," 12.

the events represented in *Mise Éire* which could be looked back on with pride. Furthermore, glorifying the deaths of the heroes of Irish freedom becomes much more problematic when the killers as well as the victims are Irish. As Harvey O'Brien perceptively notes, "the ghosts of the Empire are passive martyrs, but the ghosts of the Civil War are nobody's fault but our own."[88] The soundtrack of this film, while of equal calibre and by the same composer as that of *Mise Éire,* also failed to secure a sizable audience. Gray explains that the subject matter of the second film "inspired a surfeit of atonal clanging on the harpsichord that jarred with the sentimental expectations set by [Ó Ríada's] earlier work."[89] Like the film itself, the recording of the *Saoirse?* soundtrack proved far less popular that its precursor.

The audience's lack of interest may also retrospectively point to a certain amount of tokenism in the praise of the first film: *Mise Éire* was the first feature-length film in the Irish language as well as a rare example of a domestically-produced feature of any genre and was therefore applauded for breaking important ground for both the language and the film industry, but the sequel essentially offered no new innovations in that respect. Critic David Nowlan created some amount of controversy after publishing an unflattering appraisal of *Saoirse?* in the *Irish Times* and was forced to defend his own position by speaking out against "the narrow, nationalistic and parochial extreme of having to praise all native products simply because they are Irish." He continued by appealing to the nation to "develop some sense of proportion in the essentially international world into which we are moving."[90]

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[87] Ibid., 12.
[88] O'Brien, "Ghosts of Empire," 254.
[89] Gray, "*Saoirse?*" 70.
[90] Quoted in Rockett, "Documentaries," 88.

After *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*

A third film in the Gael Linn trilogy was originally planned to deal with the unfolding of the Civil War itself, but given the poor public reaction to *Saoirse?*, the project was abandoned. Some speculated the decision was based in part on the difference of opinion between Morrison and Ó Móráin about the Four Courts footage, for example, but the director himself postulated that "Gael Linn took fright when they realised it would come up near the present day, and they chickened out."[91] Another more pragmatic issue may have been a disagreement over payment for the film. Despite the enormous success of *Mise Éire*, Morrison was only paid a total of £425 for his work. He had been expecting to receive a share of the profits, but Gael Linn argued that the film had been funded by the organization's own pools and was never intended as a commercial venture.[92] These financial discrepancies are something that Morrison apparently still "remembers with a sense of grievance."[93]

After parting ways, neither Gael Linn nor George Morrison saw fit to complete a film on the civil war, although Morrison eventually published a book of historical photographs. The director did complete other film projects, including the government-sponsored *Irish Rising 1916* (1966) which took some of the same source material as *Mise Éire*, repackaged it for international distribution in English, and added some contrasting footage of modern Dublin. In the same year, Gael Linn also revisited the Rising on the occasion of its 50th anniversary: *An Tine Bheo (The Living Flame)* (Louis Marcus, 1966), however, bears little resemblance to either of the two earlier films. It uses new footage of commemorations rather than archival documents from the events themselves, and the

[91] Doyle, "Reel hero of Irish history," 12.
[92] Ibid., 12.

bilingual soundtrack is a mix of Irish-language narration and English-language interviews with survivors. Nevertheless, it was included with *Mise Éire* when it was released on DVD in 2006 for the 90th anniversary of the Rising. Gael Linn continued to make documentary films for both theatrical and television distribution, although on a fairly sporadic basis and never again reaching the scale of Morrison's films. Interestingly, they relaxed their stance on the language, producing films containing material in both Irish and English, and some Irish-language films were even re-versioned into English for international (although not domestic) distribution.[94]

Controversial though Morrison's films may have been, his dedication in restoring and preserving important archival footage unfailingly attracts the highest praise. Jerry White, for example, describes his work as "nothing short of heroic, a literal form of reclaiming Ireland's history."[95] Morrison's lifelong campaign for a national film archive was finally rewarded in 1992 at the Irish Film Institute. His most important contribution as an archivist, furthermore, was his dedication to preserving actuality film, including news footage and other non-fiction filming. Katrina Goldstone claims that "if Morrison had not set out on his lonely crusade, 90% of the Irish actuality film up to 1920 would probably have disappeared."[96]

Morrison's impact on Irish film culture is so great that the influential documentarian was himself recently the subject of a documentary film. Filmmaker Ciarin Scott, who had worked with Morrison on several projects, felt it important to

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[93] Ibid., 12.
[94] For more details on Gael Linn's subsequent film production, particularly the work of Louis Marcus such as the Oscar nominated short docs *Fleá* (1967) and *Páistí ag Obair* (1973), see O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 161-9.
[95] White, "Translating Ireland back into Éire," 120.
[96] Goldstone, "George Morrison," 88.

“reintroduce him to a new generation”[97] and to capture some behind-the-scenes footage of his mentor, who was still active in the film industry well into his eighties. *Waiting for the Light* premiered in 2008 at the Irish Film Institute’s “Stranger than Fiction” festival for documentary cinema and was accompanied by a retrospective of Morrison’s lesser-known films and an exhibition of his photographic works.[98] Morrison was presented with the “Industry Lifetime Contribution Award” at the 2009 Irish Film and Television Awards, where the feature documentary prize was also renamed in his honour.[99]

The re-release of the films for home viewing

The fiftieth anniversary of Gael Linn sparked a retrospective of the organization’s works at the Irish Film Centre in Dublin in 2003. Sunniva O’Flynn, curator of the Irish Film Archive, organized a two-day festival which included screenings of many of the *Amharc Éireann* newsreels as well as some of the group’s other documentaries, in a celebratory tribute to the enormous contribution of Gael Linn to the indigenous film industry in Ireland.

O’Flynn singles out the continuing importance of the footage contained in the Gael Linn newsreels; the carefully preserved reels act as a record of many aspects of Irish life – public, private, cultural, industrial, and political – from a pre-television time when there were very few other indigenous organizations involved in filming these types of activities. This in itself is an important contribution to the continuing development of the

[97] Ciarin Scott, “George Morrison Retrospective,” *Film Ireland* 124 (2008): 39.
[98] Ibid., 39.
[99] McCarthy, “George Morrison, Pioneer of Irish Film,” 14.

Irish film industry: the archived newsreels are in fact "the most heavily used of all film material by contemporary documentary makers."[100]

The re-release of Morrison's two documentary films, however, has more to do with the changing political climate than with the celebration of Gael Linn's anniversary or even the technological advancements that facilitated the restoration of the film and the release of home viewing versions with optional English subtitles. (The films were previously released on VHS, but with no subtitles.) To understand the timing of the DVD release, it is important to consider the legacy of the 1916 rising.

Michael Gray notes that it is not surprising that the re-release of *Mise Éire* did not occur earlier given the wider trends around remembering the Easter Rising and other aspects of the Republic's birth. For example, he notes, the 75th anniversary of the Rising was not the object of much public commemoration. By contrast, the 90th anniversary in 2006 was "celebrated by the Irish government with greater fanfare than any other during the previous four decades."[101] He looks north for an explanation, affirming that "the escalating violence in Northern Ireland in the last thirty years of the twentieth century had dampened the nation's enthusiasm for dead heroes who chose armed conflict over political resolution."[102] Indeed, there are many events depicted in both films that, to modern viewers, share clear and sometimes uncomfortable parallels with more recent events in the six counties, including bombings, assassinations, unstable ceasefires, and hunger strikes. Furthermore, for those who espouse an all-island Ireland, the triumphant tone of the films rang hollow while unrest in the North signalled the incomplete nature of the republican project. With the signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, however,

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[100] O'Flynn quoted in Catherine Foley, "Reeling Back Over the Years," *Irish Times*, May 21, 2003, 32.
[101] Gray, "*Mise Éire*," 77.

and what appears to be a steady ceasefire on both sides, it becomes easier to consider the events of 1916 separately from the immediate concerns of the nation.

News coverage of the modern troubles resulted in a growing international interest in Irish history, which ironically may also have contributed to the decision to re-release the films. Michael Gray reminds us that the optional English subtitles – which he considers "terse enough to lose much of the poetic richness of the original language, but helpful nonetheless"[103] – make the films available to a global audience. He further asserts that the success of blockbuster *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006) demonstrates the international appetite for historically-based Irish films. While it is certainly true that the Gael Linn films depict some of the same events, audiences who were absorbed by the award-winning acting and high production values of Loach's work may find the subtitled montages of grainy images somewhat disappointing. Indeed, according to Gray, what was "a novel approach in documentary filmmaking forty-eight years ago" is now "all too commonplace."[104] Furthermore, the way the history is presented in both *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?* assumes a certain amount of pre-existing familiarity with the historical narrative: "inexpert scholars could use a little help as to who the dozens of minor Irish protagonists, cited without elaboration in the film, actually were. Household names they may have been in Ireland in 1922, but not elsewhere, or since."[105] Neither is any explanation provided for most of the historical events. Victories and defeats are both presented with a kind of assumed inevitability, and ideological positions are not contextualized; the splintering of Sinn Fein into pro-Treaty and anti-

[102] Ibid.
[103] Gray, "*Saoirse?*" 69.
[104] Ibid., 69.
[105] Ibid., 70.

Treaty factions is chronicled in *Saoirse?,* for example, but the specific provisions to which de Valera objected (i.e. the oath of allegiance to the crown, and the partition of the island) are never even mentioned.

For an international audience, then, the films hold neither the popular aesthetic value nor the explanatory power of more recent historical feature films such as *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* or *Michael Collins* (Neil Jordan, 1996). In other words, the contemporary appeal of the films as works of cinema is not particularly high. The value of the films as historical artefacts, on the other hand, does increase over the decades. For those who are interested in Irish history (both political and cinematic), the DVDs represent a tremendous opportunity to be able to view, and review, early documentary footage without having to make the trip to an archive or risk damaging fragile original prints.

The images presented in George Morrison's films are not, however, simply neutral historical material. As has been discussed above, the footage is selected, compiled, and narrated to fit a specific agenda, leading the modern viewer to "inevitably question the nature and role of cinema as an agent of history."[106] The language is of course one aspect of the packaging of that history, and given the sociolinguistic circumstances of twentieth-century Ireland, it is a significant one. O'Brien notes that "the *emotive effects* of an Irish-language narration [...] supplemented the films' reading of history, which, reflecting and contributing to the ethos of the time, was largely nationalist."[107] Rather than detracting from the worth of the films, however, the ideologies and biases evident in the films' production make them historically interesting

[106] O'Brien, "Ghosts of Empire," 254.
[107] O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 106.

on two different but equally important levels. The raw material included in the films provides an invaluable visual record of the events that unfolded in the years leading up to the establishment of the Irish Free State. If *Mise Éire* was "accepted in 1959 as an unfiltered record of 'absolute' history,"[108] there is certainly no longer any danger of that. A modern reading of the films which is attentive to both the tone of the films and the contemporary popular reaction to them serves to document the prevailing acceptance of a certain kind of romantic nationalism in the years that the films were released.

Conclusion

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to criticize the *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?*, as O'Brien does, for their "simplification of culturally complex issues in favour of the construction of a historical mythology of the nation amenable to the needs of its sponsors."[109] Despite any controversy surrounding their ideological perspectives, however, George Morrison's films have left a very important legacy for the Irish film industry. Not only did the films clearly demonstrate that the Irish language was amply suited to the medium of cinema and that there was an appetite among the Irish people for domestically-produced films, but the critical success of the film's production techniques (including, importantly, the majestic orchestral accompaniment) also helped to build confidence in an indigenous film industry. Furthermore, the fact that the films were commissioned by Gael Linn rather than the government "established the necessary link to non-state funding and proved that financial return on investment was possible for private

[108] Ibid., 110.
[109] O'Brien, "Projecting the Past," 338.

enterprise."[110] Some might argue that this is a lesson that is in dire need of being relearned in contemporary Ireland. At the same time, of course, the fact that the films were made outside a state funding system did not at all mean that the director had complete artistic freedom. Gerry McCarthy references Morrison's disgruntlement over the limiting nature of the Irish-language stipulations to note that "as [Morrison's] experience with Gael Linn had shown, such funding as might be obtained from cultural bodies came with awkward strings attached."[111] In this case, as with those which we will examine in the following chapters, the source of film financing does play a substantial role in shaping the finished production.

Nevertheless, the fact that Gael Linn has now decided to release the films for home viewing on DVD is in keeping with their ongoing mandate to take full advantage of modern technology for the dissemination of the Irish language. The optional subtitling which accompanies the films in their most recent release may also signal a new openness to critical engagement with the films by a wider non-national audience. Half a century after the initial release of these two significant milestones in Irish documentary cinema, *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?* still provide a fascinating window into Ireland's cinematic and political history for both national and international viewers. Furthermore, their focus on nationalism, history, and technical cinematic accomplishment provides an interesting foil against which to consider the regionally-focused, contemporary, and low-budget film projects of Bob Quinn and his Connemara-based company Cinegael, which are the focus of the next chapter.

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[110] Ibid., 342.
[111] McCarthy, "George Morrison, Pioneer of Irish Film," 15.

Chapter 4: Bob Quinn and Cinegael

After Morrison's *Saoirse?* in 1961, Bob Quinn's films in the 1970s were the next significant contribution to Irish-language cinema. Quinn is a Dublin-born filmmaker and television producer who began his career working at the national broadcaster, RTÉ. In the 1960s, he resigned from his post and moved with his family to the Connemara Gaeltacht on the west coast of Ireland, where he established his own film company, Cinegael. This chapter will look at two of his films, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) and *Poitín* (1978), both of which are fiction films of approximately an hour in length. Although Quinn himself is not a native Irish speaker, he learned the language to a high level of fluency and became involved in the Irish-speaking community, which was at the time organizing a civil rights movement for the Gaeltacht. He saw the language as a means of natural communication, rather than as a school subject or a nationalist emblem. This stance is reflected in his films which are set in the Connemara community where he lived, highlighting the regional (as opposed to national) affiliations of the Irish language. In terms of aesthetics, production context, and distribution, his films also demonstrate many of the characteristics of the first wave of independent, indigenous filmmakers working in Irish cinema, as will be discussed below. Both films were seen primarily at festivals in Ireland and abroad; they were also shown at the Irish Film Theatre, a membership-based cinema founded in 1977 to offer films that "would not normally secure commercial release" in Ireland.[1]

Quinn's commitment to regional cinema included exhibition as well as production. He converted his new house, an abandoned factory, into a local movie theatre where he

[1] Ray Comiskey, "Changing Scene," *Irish Times,* April 21, 1978, 10.

projected a variety of films ranging from his own iconoclastic work to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters. The informal, independent spirit Quinn displayed in his filmmaking was manifest in his theatre operation as well, since he circumvented the regular distribution networks and neglected to secure a license. When he was eventually brought to court for running an illegal cinema, he argued that the law he was breaking was an obsolete public safety act left over from the pre-independence era of nitrate film.[2] This incident happens to provide us with a link between Quinn and George Morrison, who was eager to act as a witness for Quinn's defence (although the charges were eventually dropped):

> Delighted to illuminate the general ignorance about film, [Morrison] had prepared some old nitrate film which he intended to let off as a stinkbomb in court. He would thus graphically illustrate the difference between the nitrate material which was governed by the ancient British act and the new safety film, which was not.[3]

While this anecdote indicates that the two men were friends and seem to have shared a certain mischievous tendency, their films have few similarities.

When comparing the precise, authoritative documentary work of Gael Linn to Quinn's somewhat experimental fiction films, it is hard to see at first glance how the latter might have taken up the torch from the former. The two sets of films have in common the objective of normalizing Irish-language cinema, but they could not be more different from each other in terms of aesthetics, tone, genre, production context, or

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[2] He also argued that he was operating a "club" rather than a cinema, and that the fee paid at the door was not an admission price but rather a "subscription." Nonetheless, police noted that the premises were not licensed as a club either and there was no evidence of membership records. See "Unlicensed Film Show Charge Dismissed," *Irish Times*, December 15, 1976, 7.

intended audience. What happened in the intervening decades that explains the differences between two bodies of films that shared a similar goal but sought to realize it in such different ways?

The missing link between Gael Linn and Cinegael is in fact found outside the cinema – in television. Some Irish residents could catch spill-over signals from the United Kingdom throughout the 1950s, and Northern Ireland got its own station in 1959, but television broadcasting in the Republic of Ireland began on New Year's Eve 1961. The advent of a national Irish television station impacted the fledgling native film industry in various and unpredictable ways, which included launching Bob Quinn's career. It also directed Gael Linn's energy away from the cinema towards other pursuits.[4] The dawn of Irish television thus marked a key turning point in the evolution of Irish-language film, and it is important to take a brief look at the impact of this new medium before moving on to an analysis of Quinn's films.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Gael Linn stopped producing their *Amharc Éireann* newsreel service in 1964, under the assumption that theatrical newsreels would become obsolete with the introduction of television to Ireland. Lance Pettitt outlines the origins of Irish television and notes that by the late 1950s – which was already a time of political transition in Ireland – some policy leaders felt that a "television transmission

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[3] Bob Quinn, *Maverick: A Dissident View of Broadcasting Today* (Dingle: Brandon, 2001), 74.
[4] It should be noted that Gael Linn did continue to sponsor some Irish-language documentary activity, which was occasionally exhibited theatrically but more often shown on television. However, they never again reached the intensity or the scale of production that they displayed with the *Amharc Éireann* series, *Mise Éire*, and *Saoirse?* Furthermore, bilingualism was tolerated in the later films, and English versions were made available for international distribution. For an excellent overview of Gael Linn's film and

'invasion' from Britain and Northern Ireland made an Irish television service an imperative to counter the flow of images and ideas that that would tarnish Ireland's unique culture."[5] Others meanwhile argued for television because they "felt that Ireland was isolated in comparison to other western European countries by not having a national broadcasting service and that it was a matter of national prestige to have television."[6] It seems, therefore, that there was general agreement about the desirability of a national broadcaster, but the shape that such a broadcaster would take – including, not incidentally, issues of language – did not enjoy such unanimity of opinion. Pettitt explains that various foreign companies (from England, America, and France) offered to set up a station, but these proposals were all rejected on the grounds that too much control would rest with non-Irish organizations. Gael Linn, one of the few indigenous organizations with long-standing experience in audiovisual production, also submitted a formal proposal to run the service. They were the only wholly Irish organization to do so, but they were nonetheless rejected. Pettitt maintains it was because they "did not have the broadcasting experience or finance to be a serious contender,"[7] but Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin claims the decision-makers "feared that Gael Linn would use the television exclusively in pursuit of their own political aims in favour of language revival, whereas the committee assumed that the Irish people wanted light entertainment."[8]

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television production in the 1960s and 1970s, see Harvey O'Brien, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 39-69.

[5] Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 145.

[6] Ibid., 145.

[7] Ibid., 146.

[8] Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, "Irish Language Broadcast Media: The Interaction of State Language Policy, Broadcasters, and their Audiences," *Minority Language Broadcasting: Breton and Irish,* ed. Helen Kelly-Holmes (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 18.

A decision was finally reached, and the Broadcasting Authority Act was passed in 1960, thereby setting up a public service television broadcaster under Raidío Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), a semi-state entity that was also responsible for the national radio service in operation since the mid 1920s. RTÉ was mandated to "establish and maintain a national television and sound broadcasting service" and was bestowed "all such powers as are necessary for or incidental to that purpose."[9] The new television station would be financed by both license fees and advertising revenue, and the executive board would be appointed by the government. Despite the fact that Gael Linn was turned down on their offer of running the station, an official nod was given to the importance of the native language: section 17 of the approved Act states that "in performing its functions, the Authority shall bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture and shall endeavour to promote the attainment of those aims."[10] At the dawn of Irish television, it appeared that the Irish language had finally secured its place on the screens of the nation. After a few years, however, it seemed that the restoration of the Irish language was more of an afterthought for RTÉ programmers, rather than it being "constantly in mind," as will be discussed shortly.

First, however, it is important to consider how the establishment of indigenous television production and broadcasting contributed significantly to indigenous film production. The television industry offered a space in which a new generation of creative people were trained to use the camera as a means of exploring issues that were relevant to

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[9] Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960, Section 16.
http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1960/en/act/pub/0010/sec0016.html#sec16.
[10] Broadcasting Authority Act, 1960, Section 17.
http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1960/en/act/pub/0010/sec0016.html#sec17.

the domestic audience. The advent of television furthermore coincided with a number of upheavals in Irish national culture. Ruth Barton notes, for example, that the 1960s saw an increasing percentage of the population leaving traditional rural agrarian lifestyles to find work in the major cities; the decade was also punctuated by the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising (an "occasion for some national introspection"[11]) and ended with the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, which also significantly fuelled debates over Irish nationalism on both sides of the border. Television facilitated nation-wide discussions of these issues through the broadcasting of news footage, interviews, and current affairs programs.

Furthermore, images of other countries were being beamed into the nation's living rooms. This invited the Irish public to reflect on the social revolutions unfolding elsewhere, such as the sexual revolution and American civil rights movements. At the same time, live images of Belfast rioting were being broadcast globally, thereby drawing popular attention to Ireland's representation abroad. It was a heady time to be involved in television production at a national service that was still experiencing its own growing pains.[12]

Television not only acted as a technical training ground for filmmakers, but also helped to shape the kind of introspection and critical reflection on questions of national identity that would be expressed subsequently in the cinema. A boom of independent,

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[11] Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 85.

[12] Former chairman of RTÉ, Farrel Corcoran, now a professor at Dublin City University, published a useful history-cum-analysis of the national broadcaster and its place in the Irish public sphere, particularly the relation between the broadcaster and the state. He notes, among other points, that "with a wider reach than all newspapers combined, RTÉ provides the dominant pictures of the world by which we make sense of life around us" (1). Farrel Corcoran, *RTÉ and the Globalisation of Irish Television* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2004). For more on RTÉ's shaping of public discussion on national and international issues, see also John Horgan, *Broadcasting and Public Life: RTÉ News and Current Affairs 1926-1997* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2004).

indigenous filmmaking occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, including the two works under consideration here as well as English-language works such as *Down the Corner* (Joe Comerford, 1977), *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981), and *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1982). The surge in production was led by filmmakers who, like Bob Quinn himself, were introduced to production through the television station's trainee programs. The indigenous films of this period were "marked by a desire to deconstruct received notions of Irish images and themes as they had appeared on screen up to this point and to confront the issues that were emerging within Irish society as modernisation took increasing hold."[13] As a result, the films offered new perspectives on issues as diverse as the Northern Irish troubles, the Catholic church, and women's role in Irish society.

This is not to imply that Irish television itself was a hotbed of critical national self-reflection and formal experimentation. Indeed, many of the filmmakers who originally worked in television left it precisely for the greater freedom of perspective that would be offered in independent film. It is quite plausible that they would have been inspired, at least in part, by Peter Lennon's documentary *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968), a controversial film that questioned the leadership of Ireland's political elite and clergy, as well as its media (although the focus is less on television than on print journalism, Lennon's own usual métier). The film met with critical acclaim at the Cannes film festival and was especially popular among members of the French student protest movement that developed in 1968. It is an indication of RTÉ's conservatism, however, that it refused to show the film for over 35 years, a point that Lennon stresses in the documentary *The Making of the Rocky Road to Dublin* (Paul Duane, 2004).[14]

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[13] Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 85.
[14] It was eventually broadcast on RTÉ in 2006, after the Irish Film Board invested in restoring it.

Bob Quinn was among several RTÉ staff members and producers who disagreed with the Broadcasting Authority's views on programming. He eventually reacted by quitting his post at the organization. In a characteristically eloquent but venomous letter addressed to "Friends and Colleagues," he begins:

> Over the past couple of years it will have become apparent to the more perceptive among you that RTÉ (hence-forth to be known as the Factory) has been developing along certain regrettable but inevitable lines. […] The Factory, as we are all aware, has grown into a large organisation. Organisations are not run by people. They are run by systems which people invent to avoid the business of thinking.[15]

He goes on to list the various problems he sees with RTÉ, particularly with respect to commercialization and with the homogenizing impulse of the national service. He ends with the following:

> And what do I propose to do about it? Mine is a personal philosophy of responsible irresponsibility. It attempts to counter the organisation's pseudo-philosophy of irresponsible responsibility. If you follow me. I propose to get a boat and sail off, Charlie-Bubbles-like, into the setting sun. All contributions will be tolerated, and appreciated if they're in the form of moral support.[16]

This letter is included as an appendix in a book written shortly after his resignation, which Quinn co-authored with two other disgruntled former RTÉ producers, Lelia

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[15] Lelia Doolan, Jack Dowling, and Bob Quinn, *Sit Down and Be Counted: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station* (Dublin: Wellington, 1969), Appendix III, xxxiv.
[16] Ibid., Appendix III, xxxv.

Doolan and Jack Dowling. This book, *Sit Down and Be Counted*, contains an introduction by Raymond Williams stressing the importance of freedom:

> Free communications begin with the freedom of professional communicators. Their direct interest in doing their work in their own way can be easily dismissed as a sectional demand or even as personal selfishness. But it is undoubtedly the case that on their freedom the quality of a whole culture comes to depend.[17]

After this introduction, the bulk of the book consists of a two-hundred page polemical essay about RTÉ called "A Cautionary Tale: The Cultural Evolution of a Television Station." The essay highlights the marginal position of the Irish language, among other issues: it is explained that despite the provisions of section 17 of the Broadcasting Authority Act, "the Authority had not uttered a word on its policy on the language" before 1966, when a statement was issued *For the Guidance of Staff in Regard to the Use of the Irish Language in Broadcasting*.[18] The document laid out a weak policy that encouraged but did not demand greater visibility of Irish on RTÉ. Furthermore, a recommendation was included that "localised vocabulary and pronunciation would be avoided;"[19] this effectively gave priority to the standard dialect learned at school over the regional dialects used naturally by native speakers. Doolan, Dowling and Quinn note that "those who loved the language despaired; those who were indifferent shrugged."[20]

A series of short chapters appears at the end of the book, including one in Irish (with no translation) titled "Droch-Bholadh sa Tigh Againn" ("We Have a Bad Smell in

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[17] Ibid., xi.
[18] Ibid., 71.
[19] Ibid., 72.
[20] Ibid., 73.

the House").[21] It begins by stating the statistic that in 1961 (when RTÉ television began) there were more people who could speak Irish (716,420) than there were television sets (444,000) in Ireland. Readers are reminded again of section 17 and told how RTÉ has utterly failed Irish-speakers, particularly in the native-speaking Gaeltacht regions, which the authors felt were being overlooked in favour of second-language Irish speakers from Dublin. In response to this state of affairs, a proposal is made for Irish-language programming that would be "daonlathach" (democratic) and a management style that is described as "den tsort seo go nádúrtha sa Gaeltacht" (natural to the Gaeltacht).[22] This proposal is followed up with the authors' opinions that

> we also believe that it won't be long before the people of Ireland in general start asking themselves, "why don't we have something similar in the national service?" We believe that the salvation of RTÉ is intertwined with the salvation of Irish on RTÉ, and that the salvation of Irish depends on the people of the Gaeltacht.[23]

The Dublin-born-and-raised Quinn, at least, took this issue seriously enough that after quitting RTÉ he moved to the rural Gaeltacht of Connemara on the west coast, where he emphasized community engagement in both film production and spectatorship among the local Irish-speaking population.

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[21] Ibid., 291-99.
[22] Ibid., 299.
[23] Translation mine. Original quote: "Creidimid chomh maith nárb fhada go mbeadh muintir na hÉireann I gcoitinne ag cur ceist orthu féin, 'cén fáth nach bhfuil a leithéid againn sa tseirbhís náisiúnta?' Creidimid go bhfuil slánú RTÉ fite-fuaite le slánú na Gailge ar RTÉ agus go bhfuil slánú na Gaeilge ag braith ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta." Ibid., 299.

Quinn in Connemara

Quinn's video work after he moved to Connemara was explicitly tied to the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement (Gluaiseacht Chearta Sibhialta na Gaeltachta). This was a regionalist movement rather than a nationalist one; the rights being sought were for the communities of the Gaeltacht, the *geographic area* where Irish was still spoken as a first language, rather than the rights of individuals across the Island to use the language. As Quinn and many others saw it, the language had been hijacked by nationalists in the political centre and authority over the language no longer lay with those who actually spoke it. Jerry White explains that the leaders of the movement "were either uninterested in or explicitly opposed to the nationalist vision of the restoration of the Irish language as the vernacular of the entire country."[24] He goes on to quote Desmond Fennell, one of the leading intellectuals of the time, who argued that language maintenance "would look after itself if the community which actually spoke it were stabilised through self-government."[25] Media activism was an important part of the broader political agitation, and indeed one of the successes was the establishment of Raidió na Gaeltachta in 1970. Quinn was heavily involved in both documenting the efforts of the movement and using film and video as a means of creative self-expression for the local community.

While he was influenced by the local political movement, in terms of artistic practice the independent features he made in the 1970s were also part of a growing movement of Irish filmmaking, although other filmmakers worked in English. Ruth Barton estimates that Quinn's *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* in 1975 is the bookend that marks the beginning of a national cycle of independent films that extended to the late

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[24] Jerry White, *The Radio Eye: Cinema in the North Atlantic, 1958-1988* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 122.

1980s and ended with the establishment of the second Irish Film Board.[26] Martin McLoone similarly cites *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* as "the film that announced the arrival of an indigenous Irish cinema."[27] In addition to Quinn, the filmmakers who began producing in the 1970s included Joe Comerford, Cathal Black, Pat Murphy, and Thaddeus O'Sullivan, among others. For the first time since Irish independence there were enough filmmakers working in Ireland that they could be characterized as a "wave," rather than simply isolated examples as was the case with George Morrison or Peter Lennon. Barton characterizes this first wave of independent production as "something of a golden age of Irish filmmaking, distinguished by a level of formal experimentation as much as by its political engagement."[28] Bob Quinn's practice perfectly embodies this combination of stylistic and political rebellion, and is in many ways emblematic of a generation of Irish filmmakers who "sought to inflect their films with a critical engagement with both social and filmic discourses in Ireland."[29]

Many of these first-wave films screened at the Irish Film Theatre, which opened in Dublin in 1977. The IFT was open only to members and guests (thereby circumventing censorship requirements) and offered an annual season of films that "would not normally secure commercial release" in Ireland, including mainly European films as well as certain non-mainstream American and British productions which ranged from independent art films to low-brow science-fiction films.[30] The IFT screened

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[25] Quoted in Ibid., 122.
[26] Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 87.
[27] Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 131.
[28] Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 87.
[29] Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988), 129.
[30] Ray Comiskey, "Changing Scene," *Irish Times,* April 21, 1978, 10.

Caoineadh Airt UÍ Laoire in 1975 as part of a program of Irish-themed films.[31] *Poitín* was shown on a double bill with Joe Comerford's *Down the Corner* for a five-day run in 1978, as part of a European film season.[32] The increase in indigenous production also allowed for specialized Irish film events, for example the "Weekend of Modern Irish Cinema" organized at McGee College in Derry City[33] in 1979 as part of the city's Festival Fortnight. Quinn attended the event to present his *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*, which "provoked a favourable response from the 50-odd people in the audience."[34]

Quinn's Connemara-set films made during this period strongly contest the image of Irish-speaking communities that had been promoted by the state; that is, a romanticized notion of rural villages in the Gaeltacht as repositories of an ideal essence of Irishness. Consequently, his films were also shown in concert with regional events (including at his own cinema) or at Irish-language affairs: examples range from a screening of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* as the opening event of the 1975 Oireachtas na nGael (an Irish-language festival),[35] to a viewing of *Poitín* being offered as part of a Connemara holiday experience which also included a day trip to the Aran Islands, traditional music, special seafood dishes and a ceili dance night.[36]

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[31] "Memoranda," *Irish Times,* July 16, 1975, 10.
[32] "Spring at the IFT," *Irish Times,* April 1, 1978, 17; "Poitin for IFT," *Irish Times,* April 17, 1978, 10.
[33] Northern Ireland's second-largest city is called either Derry or Londonderry (or Doire in Irish), depending usually on the political affiliations of the speaker. In the absence of a politically-neutral name, and for the sake of simplicity, I will use the name "Derry" throughout this dissertation as it is the name used by virtually all of the sources I cite and by the filmmakers I interviewed.
[34] David Simmons, "Films on the Foyle," *Irish Times*, October 31, 1979, 10.
[35] Michael Finlan, "Culture Blossoms despite a Prelate's Refusal," *Irish Times,* September 17, 1975, 9. It should also be noted that the 1975 Oireachtas na nGael was a Gaeltacht-centred counter-festival to the annual Oireachtas na Gaeilge, which was sponsored by the Dublin-based Conradh na Gaeilge. The distinction between "Gael" – referring to people – and "Gaeilge" – referring to language – was a tension that was felt in many areas, including in the establishment of Irish-language television as will be seen in the next chapter. Thanks to Jerry White for pointing out the importance of this historical context in relation to the screening of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*.
[36] "Post-Oyster Festival Party in Connemara Hotel, Carraroe [advertisement]," *Irish Times*, September 3, 1979, 24.

His decision to work outside Dublin was very intentional, and he revels in his position on the literal and figurative periphery of Irish cultural life:

> Instead of aiming for the broad canvas, I have been making notes, sketches, miniatures, documenting small places and small people. Instead of dealing with eternal human verities as understood by a homogenous audience of popcorn eaters, I seem purposely to have been making my oeuvres as obscure as possible, in a language little known outside Ireland, in a community equally rather despised by progressive Irish people. What kept me going was [John] Grierson's perception of the importance of the local. Homer based the Illiad on a local squabble.[37]

My analysis will focus on his bilingual *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (1975) and his Irish-language *Poitín* (1978). Both are narrative fiction films of approximately an hour in length, 57 minutes and 65 minutes respectively. They grew out of Quinn's community-based video practice (for example, using non-professional local actors), but they also straddled the line with more mainstream productions because they were shown publicly at festivals and were reviewed in the national press. They are the most significant of his films in terms of their impact on the trajectory of Irish-language work within the national (as opposed to purely regional) cinema.

Of course, these two films provide only a narrow window onto Quinn's total oeuvre, and much can – and indeed has – been said about his other work. His other important projects include, for example, community video work which he modeled in

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[37] Bob Quinn, "Recycled Rants," *Film West* 42 (2000): 27.

part after Canada's Challenge for Change program[38] and a three-part television documentary *Atlantean* (1983, with an epilogue filmed in 1998), which presents Quinn's theory that elements of Irish culture, including certain features of the Irish language, can be traced back to Northern Africa rather than Europe.[39] Similarly, in the following chapter, I will look at the films but not the television programmes made under the aegis of TG4, since broadcast serials and other such programming invite a new set of theoretical and practical research questions, many of which are addressed in other scholarly studies[40].

An argument could also be made for including Quinn's 1994 film *The Bishop's Story*, which is a bilingual reframing of his 1983 black and white silent film *Budawanny* with added bookending scenes in colour. Both films are about a priest who impregnates his housekeeper and then seeks understanding from both his own congregation and the church hierarchy. In the 1994 version, some of the black and white scenes are given dialogue in Gaelic. This dialogue was added after the fact (Quinn admits "I simply invented dialogue in Gaelic and dubbed it onto the film"[41]), and text in these scenes is left in English, for example when the woman leaves the priest a note that says "It's my life too." Dana Och comments that the Irish language "is presented in distant and faint form, essentially as an echo," while the retention of silent-film-style intertitles "highlight[s] the

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[38] This work is work is ably detailed in White's *The Radio Eye* (particularly Chapter 5, "Cinegael and the Newfoundland Project").

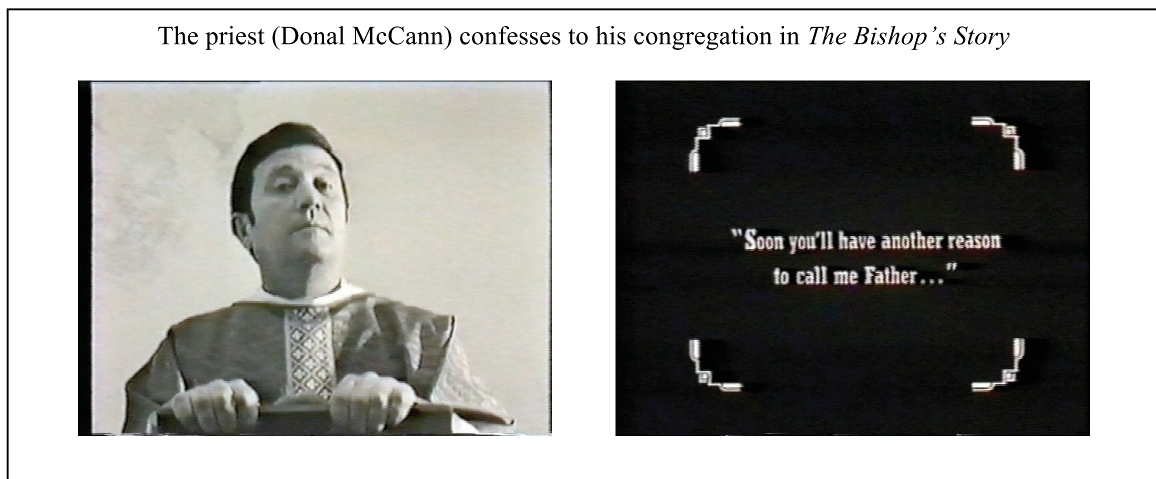
[39] See Dana C. Och, *"The World Goes One Way and We Go Another": Movement, Migration, and Myths of Irish Cinema*, PhD diss. University of Pittsburgh, 2006, especially Chapter 3: "Not Irish, Not Celtic: Migrating Myths in Bob Quinn's *Atlantean*." See also O'Brien, *The Real Ireland,* 194-203.

[40] See, for example, Eithne O'Connell, John Walsh, and Gearóid Denvir, eds., *TG4@10: Deich mBliana De TG4* (Conamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2008); Iarfhlaith Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish: Minority Language, Radio, Television and Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003); Helen Kelly-Holmes, ed., *Minority Language Broadcasting: Breton and Irish* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001).

[41] T.L. Reid, "Bob Quinn: The Accidental Filmmaker," *Legacy Viewsletter* 11.3 (May 1996): 2.

disappearance of the Irish language."[42] It is true that the film makes an interesting statement on the decline of Irish, but the use of language is still fairly minimal within the film. Furthermore, the film was released at around the same time that the inauguration of the Irish-language television station TG4 was beginning to change the face of Irish-language cinema, as will be seen in chapter 5, and therefore does not fit into the investigation of the state of Irish-language cinema in the 1970s, which is the focus for this chapter.

The priest (Donal McCann) confesses to his congregation in *The Bishop's Story*



In other words, Quinn has continued to work in both English and Irish during the current era of state film subsidies, but the two films under discussion in this chapter fit neatly in our chronology between Gael Linn and the Irish Film Board and therefore allow us to look at the impact of national policy at an important time (the 1970s) in terms of both cinema and language. Furthermore, the two films provide a tidy dichotomy in terms of their approach to issues of the Irish language: *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* addresses the language question directly and in explicit political terms, while *Poitín* simply takes the language as a given, with no diegetic comment on the subject (that is, within the text of the film). I freely confess that limiting my analysis to *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* and

[42] Och, *"The World Goes One Way,"* 92.

Poitín is in part an attempt to reduce Quinn's prolific and unwieldy body of work to a more manageable sample and one that fits coherently into an examination of the trajectory of Irish-language cinema. Nevertheless, it is also true that these two films stand apart from Quinn's other work in terms of their lasting influence and prominence within discourses of Irish national cinema, as will be seen in the concluding section of this chapter.

Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire (The Lament for Art O'Leary) (1975)

The film *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* grew directly out of Quinn's community video practice. In terms of production context, he worked collaboratively and used mainly local, amateur actors: "the Irish-speaking parts in the film are taken by Connemara people, all of whom live within a few miles of each other, and none of whom had any film or professional acting experience."[43] Quinn felt that the process of filmmaking was as important to the West of Ireland as the cinematic representation that would result from his work, as he says in his notes for the film:

> This film was written, produced, directed, shot, recorded and edited in Connemara by Cinegael. This fact, which might indicate that film-making doesn't necessarily have to be concentrated in urban areas, is regarded by Bob Quinn as more important than any faults or virtues this particular film might have.[44]

Like the community videos made by Cinegael, then, the film *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* is proudly rooted in the Connemara region. It also highlights issues important to

[43] *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* publicity material. [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*" folder.].

the nation at large, even beyond Quinn's point that audiovisual work need not always originate in the metropolitan centre. First of all, it was sponsored by a national (and nationalist) political party, Sinn Féin The Workers' Party.[45] Furthermore, reviewers at home and abroad welcomed it as a sign of what an indigenous Irish national cinema could offer, as will be seen below. Finally, the film's critical approach to history was one with broadly national implications, presenting a regional story of oppression but with multiple allegorical parallels across Irish history.

The title and the basis for the film come from the *Lament for Art O'Leary*, an eighteenth century Irish-language poem composed by Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill after the murder of her husband at the hands of a British officer in 1773. Throughout the film, verses of the original poem are read, sometimes in voice-over. From the outset, the film pays tribute and draws a direct connection to a Gaelic past and a tradition of high culture. The people of the contemporary Gaeltacht community are shown to be the heirs of a more broadly national heritage.

The plot of the film follows an amateur drama group putting together a film-and-live-performance version of the lament under the guidance of a British director. During rehearsals, the actor playing Art (Seán Ban Breathnach) clashes with the director (John Arden) in ways that make a clear analogy to the events of the eighteenth century, particularly in terms of the native challenge to an imposed foreign authority. As the film progresses, the constant shifting between past and present, rehearsal and real life, becomes less and less clear, climaxing in the scene where Art is shot at the command of

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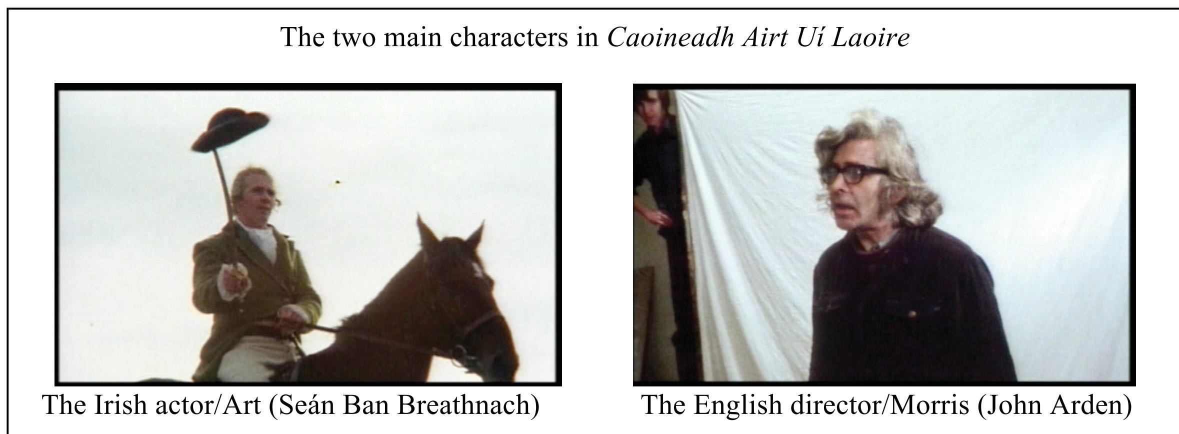
[44] Ibid.

[45] Later to become named simply "The Workers' Party," this Marxist political party was the result of a recent split within Sinn Féin, and should not be confused with the more hard-line republican branch of Sinn Féin that remained linked to the Provisional IRA, particularly active in Northern Ireland.

the English Morris (also played by Arden). McLoone concisely sums up the complex form of the film: "we have a poem within a film, within a play, within a film that, from a contemporary perspective of reappraisal and reconsideration, refers back and forwards across two hundred years of history."[46] In the original lament, Art is killed for refusing to sell his horse to the Englishman in accordance with the Penal Laws which were in effect at the time. The actual eighteenth century laws applied specifically to Catholics, but in the film they are explained as applying to "the native Irish." This is a slight shift in meaning, given that most of the native Irish were indeed Catholic, but for a 1970s film it reinforces an "us against them" mentality in a decade when religion was beginning to fade as a primary signifier of national belonging.



The two main characters in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*

The Irish actor/Art (Seán Ban Breathnach) | The English director/Morris (John Arden)

As discussed in the preceding chapter, *Mise Éire* sought to present a smooth cohesive account of the dominant narrative of Irish history, which portrayed the events leading to Irish independence as a completed project; *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* by contrast offers a fractured and multilayered representation of a less well-known and more distant history and then ties it quite explicitly to contemporary issues of identity, including the then-raging "troubles" of Northern Ireland. In the former film, language

[46] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 132.

was used as a emblem of nationalism, while in the latter it is an indication of a specific regional setting.

The issue of language is central to the film's action in a way that it wasn't in the Gael Linn films. In part, this is because it is set in an Irish-speaking region, while the Gael Linn films simply superimposed Irish-language narration over montages that could just as easily have been explained in English. But the issue of language is even more prominent in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* than it would be in Quinn's later *Poitín,* which is also set in Connemara. *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* alternates between Irish and English dialogue in a way that interrogates both languages' relationship to place, identity, and power. This is a strategy that returns in recent Irish/English bilingual films, as will be discussed in chapter 6. The link between national language, history, and politics is also highlighted in the publicity material for the film; the program notes, sent to potential distributors and festival programmers, begin with a lengthy quote from James Connolly (a socialist/republican Irish leader executed after the Easter Rising of 1916). Among other points, Connolly puts forward that

> Ireland at the same time as she lost her ancient social system, also lost her language as the vehicle of thought of those who acted as her leaders. As a result of this twofold loss the nation suffered socially, nationally and intellectually from a prolonged arrested development.[47]

In the film itself the opening credits are followed by another famous quote from Connolly, in which he asserts: "Fortunately, the Irish character has proven too difficult to press into respectable foreign moulds." The evocation of such a national hero further emphasizes the national, as well as regional, scope.

The then-president of Sinn Féin The Workers' Party, Tomás Mac Giolla, commented that the film was "not another exercise in futile probing of myths, but essentially a comment upon reality in the present Ireland of 1975."[48] Rather than focussing on the disadvantaged populations of the west of Ireland, however, he directs his attention to the relevance that Art's final act of martyrdom has for the situation in troubled Northern Ireland:

> He made his final gesture as a free man but it was a futile one. We are accustomed now to daily accounts of more deaths with all the horror and bitterness of a hopeless and apparently insoluble conflict. This has been variously posed as a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, between Irishmen orange and green, or at times a venting of irrational anti-Britishness. Yet it is now and always has been essentially about conquest and robbery. [...] The hard reality that must be faced in Ireland is that there is an exploiting class and an exploited class. Romantic acts of heroism or defiance may inspire people, but will never organize them.[49]

In the film, the Gaeltacht residents are clearly represented as part of the exploited class, and their drama production is shown to be a creative form of organized resistance.

The use of the Irish language itself is also a strategy of resistance, operating on at least two levels. First, in the diegesis of the film, the Irish language is used by the characters as a way to undermine the monolingual English director's control. For

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[47] *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* publicity material.
[48] Ibid. The publicity material for *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* includes a long statement from Thomás Mac Giolla, representing Sinn Féin the Workers' Party, who sponsored the film. It is not clear to what extend the publicity material itself was put together by the Party, Quinn, or the two in collaboration, although the contact details are for the Party rather than Cinegael.
[49] Ibid.

example, the actors discuss and debate amongst themselves in Irish in the presence of the director, thereby threatening his sense of authority since he can't understand them or contribute his own opinion. Art, in particular, switches to Irish whenever he wants to say something that contravenes or criticizes the director's vision for the project. The director himself is defensive and dismissive of the language, calling it a "quaint patois." He also makes reference to the culture of dependency by reminding them all that he was required to use Gaeltacht actors because the project was funded by a Gaeltacht grant, the implication being that the actors and the production are both sub-par by mainstream English standards. His attitude is reinforced by his statement, "let's face it, we're not doing Shakespeare". Furthermore, he hints at the irrelevance of Irish to the rest of the population when the narrator suggests that his lines should also be in Irish like the other actors. The director responds, "No. English, of course. Some part of the show has to be comprehensible to the audience." This can also be read as a self-referential joke in the context of the film's own bilingual script.

Second, in a more general sense, making a film in the Irish language is Quinn's strategy of resistance against both a Dublin-centric Irish cinema and Anglo-American cultural imperialism more broadly. Quinn's entire career was in fact a statement that cinema could be practiced at the periphery. When he travelled to St. Louis, Missouri ("sister city of Galway, Ireland"[50]) to screen a selection of films at Webster University, he was interviewed by an American journalist. The journalist remarked "I was rather amazed to learn that you are the first filmmaker to use the Gaelic language in your work." It is not clear whether the journalist was surprised that anyone would want to work in that

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[50] Deborah Peterson, "Ireland from an Irish Eye," *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 16, 1996 (page number not visible). [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Poitín*" folder].

language, or that no one had done it earlier. Quinn does not contest the question, although he would be aware of the Gael Linn films, and instead answers obliquely: "I'm the only one who ever lived in a place where they speak Gaelic. No other filmmaker has ever lived in this area. If you were living in France, you would make your films in French."[51] This is an interesting statement, given that France has a fairly damning history of oppressing regional languages – might Quinn's hypothetical French double not make his films in Breton, or Basque, or Provençal? Quinn then adds, somewhat ingenuously, "If you're living in a place where people speak Gaelic, you make your films in Gaelic. It's as simple as that. Nothing ideological or anything about it."[52] It is unlikely that any Irish film scholar would see it that way. Rather, the very ideological drive of Quinn's work is what helped to establish him in the vanguard of Irish independent cinema in the 1970s. One possible explanation for his comments is that he is attempting to normalize the idea of Irish-language cinema by acting as if it is *already* normal, despite being aware that it is still very much the exception. Even within the context of the Gaeltacht, where the Irish language is at least theoretically a community language and therefore not exceptional, film and television was and is generally produced and consumed in English.

As mentioned above, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* was one of the first films in a new wave of indigenous films. Harvey O'Brien describes it as Quinn's "most important fictional work," and "a clarion call for an indigenous, engaged and independent Irish cinema."[53] Because indigenous features were so rare at the time, it received much more attention in the Irish press than a similar low-budget film might today. Ciaran Carty of the *Sunday Independent* led the championing of the film upon its release, describing it as

[51] Reid, "Bob Quinn: The Accidental Filmmaker," 2.
[52] Ibid., 2.

> an absolutely stunning movie, rich in spontaneous humour, vibrating with the authentic sound and feel of the West, the sound and feel of Ireland. [… It] is the breakthrough that I, at least, have been waiting for – the first completely native-produced film that seems capable of holding its own with the best of the world's new cinema.[54]

Carty was not the only one to see in the film the beginnings of a new national cinema; a reviewer from New York also stated, "here is the basis for the Irish Film Industry people have been talking about for fifty years."[55] Indeed, the film was distributed and marketed internationally with subtitles available in English, French and German, and was interpreted as somewhat of an ambassador for the country at international film festivals. One Italian reviewer, whose "curiosity immediately [gave] way to the warmest sympathy," commented that the film's depiction of Irish subjugation at the hands of the British also explained "better than an article in a newspaper the roots of the events of which we read almost daily in reports from Belfast and Derry."[56]

Although the reviews were almost universally positive, Kevin Rockett took exception to the lack of real critical engagement with the film and furthermore asserted that the bewilderment and confusion felt by most audience members was not reflected in the reviews. In an article in *Film Directions,* he argued that the tiny size of the Irish film industry meant that "for too long we have treated the few Irish films made (independent, not commercial) as being too sacred to criticize. This in my view is dangerous. It is

[53] O'Brien, *The Real Ireland*, 195.
[54] Promotional material (quote is from a review by Ciaran Carty in *The Sunday Independent*, on November 9, 1975). [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*" folder.]
[55] Promotional material (quote is from a review by Sean Cronin in an unnamed "New York" publication, on January 26, 1976). [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*" folder.]
[56] Promotional material (quote is from a review in *Messagero*, Italy, by an unnamed reviewer, dated only 1976). [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*" folder.]

unlikely that the resilience of people like Bob Quinn will be dented by criticism of their work."[57] This position echoes that of *Irish Times* critic David Nowlan, discussed in the previous chapter, when he objected to the universal praise for *Mise Éire* and *Saoirse?* based not on cinematic merit but on "the narrow, nationalistic and parochial extreme of having to praise all native products simply because they are Irish."[58]

One of the sources of Rockett's frustration with *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* is its "complex though ultimately confusing form."[59] Nevertheless, despite the arguable clumsiness and opacity of Quinn's cinematic style (or his brilliance, depending on one's taste), he should be applauded for his attempt to demonstrate that Irish history is more complex and contestable than earlier films such as *Mise Éire* would have the national audience believe. Rockett later acknowledged that Quinn's narrative techniques lead to "a questioning of the reality of historical truth."[60] The interchangeability of actors (such as the director/Morris) between the present and the past, as well as the multi-layered unfolding of the narrative, may be disorienting, but it also "invites the audience to participate in uncovering [the film's] meaning."[61]

Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire self-consciously undermines any simple interpretation of the past and its relevance to the present, featuring numerous instances of disagreements between characters over the "correct" version of history. An important example from the film is the horse race between Morris and Art. Before filming the scene, the director instructs, "Forget the tradition that O'Leary won the race. It's only a

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[57] Kevin Rockett, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*," *Film Directions* 1.1 (1977): 18.
[58] Quoted in Kevin Rockett, "Documentaries," in *Cinema and Ireland*, ed. Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 88.
[59] Rockett, "*Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*," 19.
[60] Kevin Rockett, "Breakthroughs," in *Cinema and Ireland*, 139.
[61] Ibid., 138.

myth and it's highly unlikely, and we all know how unreliable folk memory can be." The race begins, with the crowd cheering for the actor playing O'Leary, who does eventually win. This upsets the director, as much for having lost as for having his authority undermined. The lament itself is part of folk memory, and the exact wording of the original is no longer known. Quinn emphatically does not see this as a failing and remarks in his notes that the oral transmission of the lament "resulted in the addition of many verses, add[ing] to the richness of the poem."[62] There is therefore no definitive version of the poem. Similarly, the film illustrates the idea that history itself exists in several competing versions. Quinn makes this statement through both his fractured cinematic style and his multilayered narrative.

Poitín (1978)

Cyril Cusack, Niall Toibín, and Donal McCann in *Poitín*.

If Quinn offered a critical assessment of nationalist history in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire,* he was to perform a similar questioning of the romanticization of Ireland's rural landscape in *Poitín*. The latter film is much more formally conservative than the former: it has a straight-forward chronological narrative and a relatively smooth, unobtrusive cinematic style. *Poitín* also departs from Quinn's previous modus operandi in other ways. For example, he uses well-known actors in the lead roles, including Cyril Cusack, Niall Toibín and Donal McCann, all of whom had featured in numerous

[62] *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* publicity material.

television programs and British films and are described in the press release as "three of the most admired film and stage actors in Ireland."[63] Many of the supporting actors were indeed local people but had experience performing for the theatre.

Cusack plays the poitín-maker (that is, a distiller of illegal home-made liquor). Toibín and McCann are his devious and untrustworthy selling agents, who are intercepted by the police. After having their bottles confiscated, they manage to steal them back from the police station, go on a drunken spree, and then return to the poitín-maker's cottage looking for more alcohol. They terrorize the old man and attempt to sexually assault his daughter. Cusack's character ultimately has his revenge when he sends them out to the middle of the lake to retrieve the hidden store of poitín, only to find there a bag containing the corpse of their own murdered dog. As they attempt to row back to shore, they tumble out of the leaky boat they were given and drown.

Beyond this relatively simple plot, however, the film is at its core an exploration of the rural landscape and of the Irish-speaking community that inhabits it. Rural Ireland features almost as heavily in Irish nationalist ideology as does history. Rockett explains:

> As Raymond Williams remarks, "country" and "city" are "very powerful words." However, in the Irish context, treated as binary oppositions, their ideological resonance is even more pronounced than elsewhere. The "country" as represented within mainstream nationalist historiography, and in much of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and the visual arts is the site of authentic Irishness.[64]

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[63] Press release, "*Poitín.*"

[64] Kevin Rockett, "(Mis-) Representing the Irish Urban Landscape," in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, eds. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 217.

The question of authenticity is always vexed, and the term "authenticity" is often used without clarification although it has multiple definitions. Denis Dutton describes it as a "dimension word," that is, a "term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about."[65] He gives several examples of things that are simultaneously authentic and inauthentic. A simple cinema-related illustration might be the lightsaber used by Mark Hamill in *Star Wars*: it is at once an authentic movie prop (as opposed to the replicas made for sale to fans), but it is not a genuine weapon from a galaxy far, far away. Authenticity is therefore highly context-dependent.

Dutton divides authenticity into two types: "nominal authenticity" which is simply the correct identification of origin, as opposed to a forgery, and the more complex "expressive authenticity," which is an evaluation of a piece of art's "character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs."[66] The two films under discussion here are certainly nominally authentic both as products of Bob Quinn and examples of Irish film. It also seems to be true that Quinn as an individual was able to express himself authentically, given that he had control over all aspects of production. It is a much more complex question, however, to determine whether the result is an authentic representation of "society's [Ireland's] values and beliefs."

The search for an authentic Ireland as well as an authentic Irish cinema are, in one sense then, both futile exercises, since criteria for authenticity are constantly shifting and are ultimately subjective and ideological. The continual self-questioning that such searches entail, however, can be very productive in the evolution of cultural identity. On the other hand, such a process can lead to the dismissal or obfuscation of some equally

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[65] Denis Dutton, "Authenticity in Art," *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 258.

valid perspectives within a given culture. For example, Bob Quinn often complains that the latest generation of filmmakers are too influenced by Hollywood style and too interested in money, and the films they produce are therefore not sufficiently Irish – in other words, the films are inauthentic.

Luke Gibbons' work on the urban/rural dichotomy within Irish nationalist thought reveals a similar privileging of rural Ireland as the *only* authentic Ireland. The problem with this ideal, as he points out, is that it

> ignores the extent to which idealizations of rural existence, the longing for community and primitive simplicity, are the product of an *urban* sensibility, and are cultural fictions imposed on the lives of those they purport to represent … It was urban-based writers, intellectual and political leaders who created romantic Ireland, and perpetrated the myth that the further west you go, the more you come into contact with the real Ireland.[67]

As the urban environment became increasingly modernized, those living in the city created a contrasting but sentimentalized view of rural life that was characterized by an uncomplicated lifestyle and a pristine landscape. Bob Quinn obviously doesn't subscribe to the romanticization of the west of Ireland in any kind of a postcard-cinema sense. He does, however, seem to adhere to the belief that the people who live there are somehow more Irish than those citizens who live in the city; this is evident from his perpetual critique of the commercialization and Anglo-American influences he felt overwhelmed the urban centre and by extension Dublin-based entities such as RTÉ. He usually

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[66] Ibid., 259.
[67] Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 85.

presents his own Gaeltacht lifestyle quite matter-of-factly, and if he does not deny his own city origins he certainly does not highlight them.

Given Gibbons' statements above, it is interesting to consider how much of Quinn's view of the West is shaped by living there and how much of it is "the product of an *urban* sensibility" that would have permeated his formative years growing up in Dublin and working for RTÉ. Quinn himself never hints at this kind of romanticization on his own part, but his former wife Helen does allude to it. In the documentary *Cinegael Paradiso*, made by their son Robert Quinn in 2004, she explains how they chose Carraroe as their new home: "I suppose one of the things that brought us here, really, was that we were looking for our roots. This was a place where people were, you know, intrinsically Irish. They had their own language, which we didn't have, and which we actually craved, I think."[68]

If Quinn felt this kind of nostalgic longing, he hides it well in his films. *Poitín* in particular is a deliberate de-mystification of rural Irish life and is a direct response to previous cinematic representations. McLoone notes that "its study of the grim realities of rural life, including its endemic criminality, is neither Flaherty nor Ford."[69] It is indeed important to take a moment and look at both Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) and John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), which together still provided the dominant cinematic representations of Ireland at the time, in order to understand the type of imagery against which Quinn was rebelling.

Man of Aran is a celebration of the heroic struggle of the Aran Islanders against the harsh elements. As mentioned in chapter 1, this film received a very positive

[68] Helen Quinn speaking in the documentary *Cinegael Paradiso* (Robert Quinn, 2005).
[69] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 133.

reception in America and from the Irish government when it was released. Nevertheless, Quinn describes it as "the least popular film" that he showed at his own theatre in Connemara in the 1970s.[70] Indeed, the Dublin-based nationalists who praised the film at the time of its release were endorsing a depiction of Irish identity that had little to do with their own lived experience or even that of the actual Islanders. Quinn argues that "the reason locals are bored by it is that it is a fiction and they know it, but not a 'real' fiction like James Bond."[71] Although the film was billed as a documentary, it is now well recognized that Flaherty took many creative liberties in making the film. For example, the stars of the film are not actually a real family: Flaherty instead individually selected "the most attractive and appealing characters we can find, to represent a family, and through them tell our story."[72] The cottage in the film was constructed by Flaherty, replicating the authentic pre-existing cottages but placed in a more photogenic and dramatic location. Most tellingly, while the activities depicted in the film were at one time common on the Aran Islands, some of the practices were already obsolete and so for example "experts had to be hired to teach the native people how to hunt traditionally."[73]

It is tempting to read Flaherty's Irish ancestry as the source of his romanticized view of Ireland, but on the other hand the film bears many resemblances (both in process and in finished product) to Flaherty's earlier ethnographic documentaries, such as *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926). Pettitt argues, for example, that Flaherty "unconsciously deployed a colonial discourse in representing native Irish people,

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[70] Quinn, "Recycled Rants," 26. The most popular film he showed was the Bruce Lee vehicle *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973), which was a new release at the time.
[71] Ibid., 26.
[72] Quoted in Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 78.
[73] Ibid., 78.

undifferentiated from Inuits and Polynesians."[74] The heroic struggle of man against the elements in all of these films displays a tendency towards what Luke Gibbons describes as "hard primitivism." Gibbons argues that, despite the harsh conditions portrayed in the film, Flaherty still subscribes to the prevailing impulse to romanticize the Irish landscape. Indeed, *Man of Aran*'s tendency towards hard primitivism is used "not as a means of challenging romanticism but, on the contrary, as a way of authenticating it, of adding credibility to what are otherwise characteristically romantic situations."[75]

John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, by contrast, displays a tendency towards the more common "soft primitivism," which Gibbons describes as a communion with the natural world rather than a struggle against it: "In soft primitivism, nature is not apprehended in a raw primeval condition but it is rather overlaid with social accretions, attesting to the intervention of culture and community."[76] In *The Quiet Man,* Ireland is depicted as "a mysterious, pre-industrial rural paradise,"[77] and the film can be read as the epitome of the kind of postcard cinema aimed at an (Irish-American) tourist's gaze. Furthermore, America is a "continuing unseen presence"[78] in the film; in the bourgeoning relationship between the two romantic leads, for example, there is a constant comparison between the way things are done in the new world and the way they are done in the old country. At one point, the impatient American returned-emigrant, Sean, complains that "Back in the States, I'd drive up, honk the horn, the gal'd come running," to which the Irish Mary Kate retorts angrily "Come a-runnin'? I'm no woman to be honked at and come a-runnin'!"

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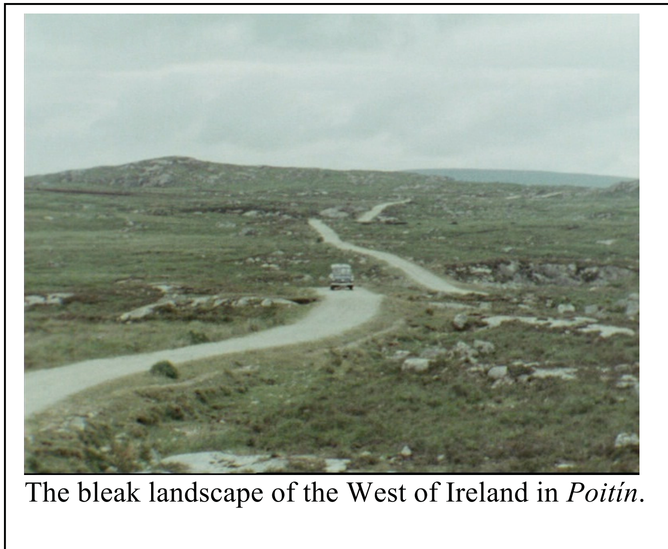
[74] Ibid., 80.
[75] Luke Gibbons, "Romanticism, Realism, and Irish Cinema," *Cinema and Ireland*, ed. Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 200.
[76] Ibid., 202.
[77] McLoone, *Irish Film,* 53.
[78] James MacKillop, "The Quiet Man Speaks," *Contemporary Irish Cinema: From* The Quiet Man *to* Dancing at Lughnasa, ed. James MacKillop. (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 173.

There is an ongoing tension here between the primitive beauty and natural innocence of the Irish and the more liberal and authoritative Americans, which in some ways parallels the uncomfortable gender politics of the film. In the end, of course, the American is able to tame the impetuous Irish woman and live in his picturesque cottage without giving up any of his own American characteristics.

The significance of both *The Quiet Man* and *Man of Aran* to Irish film is heightened by the fact that "their success with audiences for over half a century has meant that, more than any other cinematic visions of Ireland and the Irish, it is these which have stood as markers for a general 'Irishness'."[79] Ironically, both films led to tourist industries in the "pure" traditional Irish locations they depicted and therefore served "to accelerate the contamination of the culture for which both Irish-American [directors] professed so much admiration."[80]


The bleak landscape of the West of Ireland in *Poitín*.

Poitín is a self-conscious rejection of both the hard and soft approaches to romanticizing the Irish landscape. Our first indication of this is Quinn's choice to shoot the film inland, away from the picturesque mountains or the crashing sea, and in drab colours

[79] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 34-35.
[80] Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 79.

that bear no resemblance to the bright greens of Ford's *The Quiet Man* or the beautifully stark black and white of *Man of Aran.* Nonetheless, Quinn describes the area as "the most bleakly beautiful part of the West of Ireland."[81]

The film's press release specifically describes *Poitín* as "a belated attempt to counter the stage-Irishism of *The Quiet Man* which was made 25 years ago in the same area and seems to dominate people's idea of life there."[82] The film is based on a short story by Colm Bairéad and benefited from the first Arts Council Film Script Award, thereby signalling some modest steps towards a state-financed indigenous cinema. Joe Comerford, who also worked on the film, comments on the significance that the award was a grant, rather than a loan, because it meant that the film "was made without any expectation that it had to enter the marketplace and make its money back."[83] This is in contrast to the Irish Film Board, which awards loans rather than grants, although they generally only recoup about 10%-15% of money invested.[84]

Unlike the bilingual *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire, Poitín* is filmed completely in Irish. It premiered at Quinn's own home cinema in Carraroe, County Galway, and at that initial screening it was shown without subtitles. A Dublin premiere was subsequently planned as the finale of the Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish-language week) celebrations in the capital, but had to be postponed when the film failed to arrive at the cinema on time.[85] As we saw with *Mise Éire*, a lack of fluency did not deter reviewers from pronouncing on

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[81] Quinn, "Recycled Rants," 26.
[82] Press release, "*Poitín,*" undated. [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Poitín*" folder.]
[83] Joe Comerford in *Cinegael Paradiso.*
[84] See Irish Film Board website, "funding" page, http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Overview/32. The details of repayment are as follows: "The IFB Production and Completion Funding is offered in the form of a repayable loan. The IFB will expect to recoup pro rata and pari passu with any other equity investors and to receive an ongoing net profit share once recouped." http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Funding_Programmes_FAQs/76
[85] "Dublin Premiere," *Irish Times*, March 1, 1978, 11; "Film Postponed." *Irish Times,* March 16, 1978, 14.

the film and implicitly or explicitly downplaying the importance of being able to understand the dialogue. One reviewer, who praised Quinn's "relentlessly cinematic eye," noted at the end of his article almost as an aside, "The version I saw was in Irish, which I don't speak, but that hardly mattered because the tone of the voices said more than the actual words."[86] While it's true that the dialogue in *Poitín* is fairly sparse, it is hard to imagine a professional reviewer making a similar statement about a French, Swedish or Japanese film in the 1970s.

While language is not explicitly highlighted as an issue in *Poitín* as it was in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*, there is a clear link between the representation of this particular landscape and the Irish-speaking community that inhabits it. In contrast to the earlier film, which depicted a conflict of authority between an English-speaking interloper and an Irish-speaking local population, in the later film everyone speaks the same language and belongs to the same community, including the ostensible protagonist, his double-crossing agents, the supporting figures in the pub, and police officers as the forces of authority. The representation is hardly flattering, though: none of the characters is particularly likeable, with each of them only looking out for himself. Similarly, in *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire,* the English director is clearly set up to be loathed, but Art himself is equally arrogant and obnoxious; the only reason he would be the hero is because he is the underdog, not because he has any redeeming personal traits. The village as a whole in *Poitín* is likewise shown in a fairly negative light – there does not appear to be much to do by way of entertainment, beyond the dreary pub, and there is no sense of the tight-knit community of neighbours we see in other representations of small-

[86] "A West with Warts," (unlabeled newspaper film review). [From IFA library press clipping files, "*Poitín*" folder.]

town Ireland ranging from *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (Robert Stevenson, 1959) to *Waking Ned Devine* (Kirk Jones, 1998), or even Quinn's own *The Bishop's Story* which is set on Clare Island.

Local response to this unflattering representation was far from uniform. Joe Comerford commented that the depiction of the community was "quite brutal in places," and that as a result

> it didn't take long before even people here locally in Connemara – some people – began to resent the portrayal. To feel, for example, that the dog shouldn't have been killed, to feel that there shouldn't have been an attempted rape. And then there were people that felt very strongly that this is exactly what we should be doing in our storytelling.[87]

This comment by Comerford, one of the celebrated first-wave Irish filmmakers, ties together how the search for an authentic Ireland is related to the search for an authentic Irish cinema. There is a very clear parallel between the way that the rural areas were held up as essentially Irish even as their inhabitants were migrating in droves to Dublin or emigrating altogether, and the way that film commentators (if not popular audiences) privileged a specific kind of cinematic storytelling regardless of whether or not it was how the local population wanted to see itself.

Here we may ask ourselves whether Quinn's involvement in the Gaeltacht Civil Rights Movement and his video work with the Gaeltacht community were sufficient to qualify him as a Gaeltacht insider. Perhaps he was not quite an outsider any more, but rather had some transitional status of aspiring insider. It is also possible that he saw his own role as a self-appointed spokesperson within the community quite differently than

did those around him. These questions have no definitive answers, but they do invite further questions about Quinn's right to represent that population and whether he had any more authority or ownership over their image than Ford or Flaherty had, given that both of those filmmakers also thought of themselves as tied to that land in some way.

These questions are rarely raised within film scholarship, and Och reminds us of Quinn's place within appraisals of Irish national cinema: "Frequently, Bob Quinn is invoked in the criticism as an emblematic 'authentic' Irish director, with the new directors failing in comparison."[88] This, she says, is related to an underlying assumption that "only Irish directors operating within the strict Irish funding scenario and dealing with 'unique' Irish subjects are authentic, while directors working within an international funding scheme are pandering to international pressures."[89] She insightfully concludes, "beyond making a virtue of necessity, the funding and distribution problems that plague [low-budget indigenous] filmmakers have become fetishized as a sign of 'authenticity'."[90]

We see this kind of fetishization in McLoone, for example, when he praises the "Third Cinema" model of oppositional filmmaking put forward by Argentinians Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. Their essay, "Towards a Third Cinema,"[91] was very influential at the time that Quinn and the other first-generation Irish independent filmmakers began their careers, and its ideas are apparent in their work. McLoone goes so far as to equate a Third Cinema sensibility with authenticity:

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[87] Joe Comerford speaking in *Cinegael Paradiso*.
[88] Och, "*The World Goes One Way,*" 119.
[89] Ibid., 118-19.
[90] Ibid., 121.
[91] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," in *Movies and Methods. An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 44-64.

> The most significant films, and therefore the most "Irish" films, are those that operate in a Third Cinema sense of exploring the complex realities of contemporary Ireland, challenging cinema audiences by challenging dominant and sedimented notions about Ireland and the Irish. […] The judgment here, however, is a critical, not an ethnic or an economic one, informed by aesthetic and political concerns about the films' relationship to dominant representations of Ireland and the socio-political complexities of contemporary Ireland.[92]

In terms of production context, the films McCloone is referring to are low-budget films, often by new directors, and are "relatively unknown outside the country and, with the exception of a few individual films, largely unseen in Irish cinemas either."[93] Again, we can see a clear parallel between the nationalist ideology that held rural Gaeltacht areas to be repositories of an essential Irish identity and a prescriptive view of national cinema that sees the type of work that Quinn was doing as the only kind of essentially Irish filmmaking.

In both cases, there is an underlying assumption that to keep the Gaeltacht or Irish cinema pure, it must also be kept poor. We have already seen that this did not work very well in the linguistic field – it is now widely agreed that the best way to ensure the survival of Gaeltacht communities is through economic development that incorporates traditional industries with newer ones (such as film and television). Similarly, if filmmakers are given the choice between making unprofitable films that are seen by a very small regional viewership and larger-budget ones that reach an international

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[92] McLoone, *Irish Film*, 127.
[93] Ibid., 127.

audience, one would expect that only a few self-described "mavericks" would choose the pauper's life. And if that were the only kind of cinema that could be made in Ireland, then it would not be surprising if talented and ambitious filmmakers would simply emigrate. It also calls to mind Andrew Higson's question, "what is a national cinema if it doesn't have a national audience?"[94] Surely, if a nation can have more than one language it can also have more than one kind of filmmaking; there need not be a monopoly on authenticity.

Quinn's legacy

By making his independent films *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* and *Poitín,* Quinn simultaneously participated in discourses of regional, national, and international cinema. In terms of Irish national cinema, he contributed to the first wave of indigenous Irish filmmaking. He was the only one of these filmmakers to work in Irish and to depict the Gaeltacht community, but other directors of this era also sought to represent previously marginalized groups of Irish citizens; Pat Murphy's feminist films *Maeve* (1982) and *Anne Devlin* (1984) are complementary examples. Quinn's films situated the regional affiliations of the Irish language within the national context, while also contesting the romanticization of the rural landscape in the west of Ireland. He exhibited his films in his own home cinema, but they were also seen on the national and international circuit, either at festivals or other cultural events.

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[94] Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30.4 (Autumn 1989): 46.

In his own estimation, Quinn "always remained on the periphery of mainstream critical consideration and by now has a status analogous to the smile of a Cheshire cat."[95] This is cute but not entirely true, since he received such mainstream accolades as a lifetime achievement award from the Irish Film Institute in Dublin.[96] He was also the first filmmaker to join the Aosdána – a sort of "Irish Parliament of Artists" – which comes with eligibility for an annual stipend funded by the Arts Council to "assist [the artists] in concentrating their time and energies in the full-time pursuit of their art."[97] Quinn currently receives the stipend of approximately €17,000 (as does George Morrison, incidentally).[98] Membership in the Aosdána is limited to 250 artists across all disciplines and is bestowed by peer nomination and election; Quinn's membership can therefore be seen as acceptance by perhaps the most prestigious organization of artists in Ireland, as well as securing ongoing financial support from the public purse.

It is nevertheless clearly part of his own self-promotional strategy to posit himself as a completely unique quantity who operates outside the same frameworks as other filmmakers and artists. His writing displays an egocentric tendency, almost to the point that it becomes hard to imagine how he was able to work collaboratively. One book reviewer wryly noted, "Bob Quinn's autobiography may be called *Maverick*, but he seems less a television gunslinger than an inflated ego shooting blanks … very quickly the reader discovers that *Maverick* is little more than a marketing campaign for Quinn's view of himself as a brave but doomed hero."[99] If we focus less on Quinn's self-

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[95] "Biography," Cinegael website, http://conamara.org/index.php?page=biography [consulted May 14, 2012].
[96] Michael Dwyer, "Life Achievement Awards from IFC," *Irish Times,* November 20, 2000, 4.
[97] Aosdána website, aosdana.artscouncil.ie [consulted May 14, 2012].
[98] Ibid.
[99] Liam Fay, "You Ain't Seen Nothing like the Mighty Quinn," *Sunday Times,* October 21, 2001, 6.

aggrandizing propaganda and more on the actual films, it becomes clear that is it a strength, not a weakness, that they in fact corresponded to national and international cinematic trends of the time. Unlike Gael Linn's Irish-language films discussed in the previous chapter, which were truly isolated examples of indigenous Irish filmmaking, Quinn's two films fit very squarely into an important movement of independent filmmaking which emerged in Ireland in the 1970s, and they are most often discussed in this context.[100]

Quinn continues to work today, but what he produces is no longer representative of contemporary Irish cinema, which for the most part is characterized by a new generation of filmmakers who are eager to work within the structures of the Irish Film Board or various co-production agreements and are equally eager to secure an audience for their films, whether it be on the festival circuit or in mainstream cinemas.[101] His most recent feature-length work is the semi-documentary musical film *Vox Humana* (2008), for which he refused the €100,000 offered to him by the IFB and which he describes as principally a "home movie" which only won the audience award at the Galway Film Fleadh because the 70-member choir featured in the film was also present at the screening.[102] In that sense at least he really has become the industry outsider he has always claimed to be. Film scholars and filmmakers today seem to look back to his

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[100] See for example "Chapter 5: Irish Independents" in Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema*; "Chapter 6: First Wave Indigenous film in the 1970s" in Martin McLoone, *Irish Film*; or the subsection "Indigenous Experiments" in Chapter 5 of Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*.

[101] Oft-cited examples of films that demonstrate the vitality of contemporary filmmaking in Ireland include the following: *Adam & Paul* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2004), *Disco Pigs* (Kirsten Sheridan, 2001), *Garage* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2007), *The Guard* (John Michael McDonagh, 2011), *In Bruges* (Martin McDonagh, 2008), *Goldfish Memory* (Liz Gill, 1996), *His and Hers* (Ken Wardrop, 2009), *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003), *Kisses* (Lance Daly, 2008), *Once* (John Carney, 2007), and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006).

earlier work for inspiration rather than to eagerly anticipate his next offering. Quinn blames this not on any personal failing on his part, of course, but rather on the zeitgeist of our times, which values youth over experience; he notes sourly, "Gawd be with the oul days when Goethe could finish *Faust* in his old age. Buñuel and Fellini did great work from relative zimmerframes, Huston made *The Dead* wearing an oxygen mask."[103] These days, he goes on to muse, "for veteran filmmakers [presumably referring to himself], the phone rings less frequently, and then only from students doing theses."[104]

In addition to valuing older filmmakers, he calls for valuing older Irish films. After counting the films being screened in Dublin one month in 2004 – and noticing that there were no indigenous films on offer, "not even at the National Film Institute" – he suggested that the IFI show "a continuous repertory of the by now substantial backlog of Irish film," arguing that "a good film has no sell-by date."[105] He should be pleased, then, that his own early work does continue to attract some attention. As with the Gael Linn films discussed in chapter 3, both of the films discussed in this chapter have also recently been re-released. They are also now publicly available on DVD through Quinn's website. The site also lists the Irish public libraries where the films can be borrowed for free by those not willing or able to pay the relatively steep purchase prices.[106]

Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire was digitally restored in 2010 and then featured as part of "The Moderns" exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. In this context it was shown alongside sculptures, photographs, music, architecture and other

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[102] Quinn's brief but illuminating essay on the film's production and (lack of) distribution, titled "How not to make a fillum," is available on the Cinegael website: http://conamara.org/index.php?page=how-not-to-make-a-fillum [consulted July 13, 2012].
[103] Bob Quinn, "Degeneration Gap," *Film Ireland* 100 (Sep/Oct 2004): 19.
[104] Ibid., 19.
[105] Ibid., 19.

artistic works. IMMA director Enrique Juncosa explained that the purpose of the exhibit was "to present visual culture in relation to other art practices – none of them, after all, were developed in isolation – and to analyse contexts and aesthetic development and changes."[107] Juncosa further notes on modern art in Ireland that, "clearly a lot of the best art produced here demonstrates a knowledge of international ideas of the period, even if those were filtered or tinted with local myths, beliefs, traditions, history or politics."[108] White similarly argues in *The Radio Eye* that Quinn's practice can in many ways be better understood in relation to certain transatlantic media projects (including Canada's Challenge for Change) than it can be when compared to mainstream Irish cultural products.

Poitín was digitally remastered in 2007 and additionally benefited from a new soundtrack scored by Bill Whelan of *Riverdance* fame. Both the Irish Film Board and the Arts Council contributed funds for a new print of the film, which was shown at the 2007 Galway Film Fleadh.[109] We can also come back full circle to the topic of television by mentioning *Poitín*'s television screenings. The inaugural broadcast was on RTÉ on Ireland's national holiday, St Patrick's day, in 1979.[110] For all of Quinn's complaints about RTÉ equating the nation with the metropolitan centre, this choice of programming can be seen as an endorsement of *Poitín* as part of national audio-visual culture. *Poitín* screened again in 2009, this time on the Irish-language television station TG4.[111]

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[106] Information on the mastering of the films is taken from "Films" section of the Cinegael website, www.conamara.org, where the DVDs are also available for sale [consulted May 14, 2012].
[107] Irish Museum of Modern Art, "The Moderns: The Arts in Ireland from the 1900s to the 1970s," Press release, September 30, 2010. http://www.imma.ie/en/page_212293.htm [consulted January 26, 2012].
[108] Ibid.
[109] "Remastered version of *Poitín* to screen at Galway Film Fleadh," *IFTN news* [online print-out], May 7, 2007 [IFI library clippings, folder "Poitín"].
[110] Ibid.
[111] Copy of television listings [IFI library clippings, folder "Poitín"].

TG4 itself can also be considered an important part of Quinn's legacy, given his role in Gaeltacht media activism and also his tireless campaigning for a separate Irish language station when he was on the board of the national broadcasting authority.[112] Quinn's vision for Irish-language television was again primarily regional rather than national. When he helped set up a pirate transmitter in 1987, they called it "Teilifís na Gaeltachta." This has quite a different connotation than the eventual Teilifís na Gaeilge that was sanctioned in the early 1990s. Although the two names sound very similar, the nuance is important; the former is television of/for the Irish-speaking region, while the latter is simply television in the Irish language. In Quinn's view, the primary obstacle to Irish-language media was never those who didn't care for the language; rather,

> the real enemies of the project were the Dubin Gaelic Revivalists, who seemed to me to be saying, "why should we have pictures of Conamara people gathering seaweed imposed on us sophisticated Dublin people?" It seemed not to occur to these critics that Conamara people for thirty years had had images, equally irrelevant to their lives, imposed on them. The revivalist mindset never lost sight of the goal of imposing a veneer of halting Irish on the entire nation.[113]

As we will see in the following chapter, the Irish-language television station that was eventually established in the 1990s did not take the shape that Quinn and other Gaeltacht activists might have preferred. It nonetheless did lead to a real and sustained investment in Irish-language film, particularly in the short film genre. Furthermore, the availability of funding attracted filmmakers from across the spectrum of fluency to make films in

[112] See for example the chapter "The First Language," in Quinn, *Maverick.*
[113] Quinn, *Maverick*, 27.

Irish. This in turn resulted in a cadre of short films representing a corresponding spectrum of perspectives towards the language and its place in Irish society, as well as a diversity of cinematic styles and genres. Teilifís na Gaeilge and the films it supports form the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Irish-language film in the era of TG4 and the IFB

If Bob Quinn was a lone wolf working in Irish-language cinema in the 1970s, he was suddenly joined at the turn of the twenty-first century by a litter of pups making short films in Irish. This was due in great part to the establishment of a number of Irish institutions that together helped to provide a sustained infrastructure for indigenous filmmaking. First, a new resource centre for emerging filmmakers opened in Dublin in 1986; this centre, Filmbase, was funded primarily by the Arts Council and provided equipment, training, and funding for low-budget short film projects. Second, the re-establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1993 led to a dramatic increase in indigenous filmmaking, as detailed in chapter 1. Finally, after decades of Gaeltacht activism, an Irish-language television station was inaugurated when Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG) took to the air waves on Halloween day, 1996. TnaG was rebranded TG4[1] in 1999 to reflect its position on the dial. For the sake of simplicity, the latter acronym will be used to refer to the station at all periods of its existence.

Just as the foundation of Radio Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) led to a wave of indigenous filmmaking, a new generation of filmmakers working in the Irish language emerged a few years after TG4 began broadcasting. These later filmmakers were not acting out against the television station but were rather being actively encouraged by it. Indeed, TG4 has been the strongest force facilitating the current sustained activity of film production in Irish. When asked where film (as opposed to television) fit into TG4's vision of Irish-language media, Deputy CEO of TG4 Pádhraic Ó Ciardha replied that

[1] Some changes to policy also occurred at the same time that the station re-branded itself as TG4 rather than TnaG. For example, the station began purchasing English-language programs as "filler" to expand their schedule from the previous Irish-only broadcasting.

> it is clearly a badge of honour or a symbol of maturity in a minority-language broadcaster, in any broadcaster really, that you make film, and drama particularly[…]. When we were founded in 1995 our ambition was, like our Welsh cousins,[2] to make a feature film that would show that the language was alive, could deal with the narrative form, could come alive in that art form.[3]

In addition to commissioning its own television programs, the station has also partnered with other institutions in order to promote Irish-language film projects. The *Oscailt*[4] funding scheme for short films was launched in 1998 as a co-operative effort with the Irish Film Board. Two years later, Filmbase and TG4 introduced the complementary *Lasair*[5] initiative, which supports Irish-language shorts shot in digital formats.

It is worthwhile reiterating how these projects participate in the national cinema as *films*. As technology has evolved, the distinction between film, television, and other audiovisual media has become blurred, particularly when not all "films" are made on actual celluloid film, and funding for shorts comes from both film agencies and broadcasters. What qualifies as a film is not as straightforward as it was in the time of *Mise Éire,* and definitions must take into account cultural as well as technological criteria. Nevertheless, these short films do conform to the traditions that developed around celluloid films. For example, they are all discrete works rather than episodes in a series,

[2] He is referring here specifically to the film *Hedd Wyn* (Paul Turner, 1992) which was nominated for an Oscar for best Foreign-language film.
[3] Interview between the author and Pádhraic Ó Ciardha, Deputy CEO of TG4, Tuesday, July 28, 2009, Galway City, Ireland.
[4] Pronounced "OSS-cultch," it translates as "opening."
[5] Pronounced "LA-sir," it translates as "flame."

and the stories they depict, as well as the aesthetic styles they exhibit, are the original creations of the production teams rather than the broadcaster. While they have all been broadcast on television they have also screened publicly at film festivals and occasionally in mainstream theatres and cannot therefore be regarded as simply made-for-TV movies. A more thorough exploration of the particularities of the short film format (in any language) is outlined later in this chapter.

To date, over fifty films have been produced through the *Lasair* and *Oscailt* initiatives combined (see list of titles at the end of this chapter). TG4, IFB, and Filmbase select from submitted proposals rather than dictate subject matter or cinematic approach. Only a handful of filmmakers have made more than one film through either program; in other words, there are now dozens of filmmakers who have produced work in the Irish language, and they have done so in a variety of genres. The most striking difference between these films and the very ideologically focused works of Gael Linn and Cinegael is the diversity of perspectives that become apparent with this plurality of voices.

This chapter will explore the short films that came out of the funding schemes set up by TG4, in particular by examining the various strategies filmmakers have used to integrate the Irish language into their films, as well as their motivations for doing so. While I wish to focus on these films rather than any of the television programs commissioned by TG4, it is important first to examine the history and ideology that underlies the broadcasters' operations, since this is reflected in the film projects in some important respects. For example, one question that was hotly debated at the time of TG4's founding was whether it would be a regional service targeted to Irish-language communities or rather a national service catering to a population with mixed levels of

fluency. The decision in favour of the latter and the concomitant policy of subtitling have also influenced the film projects supported by the TV station. In other words, both production and consumption of Irish-language films are no longer restricted to the Irish-speaking community but rather include people across the full spectrum of fluency. It is also instructive to look at the sociological impact of minority-language television; sociolinguistic research is much more common with respect to television than to cinema, but it suggests many concepts that are also applicable to film.

This chapter is therefore divided into two parts. The first will look at the history of TG4, including a detailed investigation of the sociological role of minority-language broadcasting. The second part will focus on the short films that were made through both the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* schemes, beginning with a discussion of the role of short films in general and followed by an exploration of general themes and trends in Irish-language short film, with an analysis of a small selection of individual works. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on how these *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films, when taken cumulatively, fit into the larger trajectory of Irish-language cinema. In the case of both television and film, it is necessary to look beyond the finished products themselves in order to determine how they have contributed to both the national language and the national cinema. This chapter offers an expanded view that also considers for example how film and television production functions as a site of professional training and employment, as well as the distinct modes of exhibition for Irish-language work, particularly in the educational sector.

Irish-language television

The laborious birth of TG4

While the history of the Irish language is in many ways unique, the foundation of the Irish-language television station is paralleled in many other European nations that are home to what the EU calls "lesser-used languages."[6] Niamh Hourigan notes that as minority-language rights became a major issue throughout Europe in the later part of the twentieth century, the increasingly pervasive nature of the mass media was seen as both a constant threat and a potential tool. She notes that because of this, "the creation of own-language media, particularly television, has now become the primary goal of many of these language movements."[7]

Irish-language television, like many other minority-language stations, began as a grassroots movement. Various attempts at pirate transmissions occurred in the late 1980s, although the low-budget equipment emitted a weak signal reaching a radius of only about fifteen miles.[8] This followed the example of a station in the Faroe Islands, which sent out pirate signals for five years until the Danish government recognized the service and provided it with some operating funds.[9] In the late 1980s and early 1990s there were many protests organized by Irish-language activists in both the rural Gaeltacht and urban areas. Some activists, for example, refused to pay their television licence fees in protest of RTÉ's neglect of the Irish language. This was an illegal act, and Íte Ní Chionnaith was the first to be imprisoned, spending seven days in Mountjoy Women's Prison. In an

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[6] The European Union uses this term to denote both regional and minority languages (even if they are national languages), such as Welsh, Irish, Basque, Frisian, Catalan, etc.
[7] Niamh Hourigan, "New Social Movement Theory and Minority Language Television Campaigns," *European Journal of Communication* 16.1 (2001): 90.
[8] Iarfhlaith Watson, *Broadcasting in Irish: Minority Language, Radio, Television and Identity* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), 84-87.
[9] Hourigan, "New Social Movement Theory," 86.

account of her activism, she lists fourteen other protesters who were jailed on similar charges for two to fourteen days, and notes that many others were convicted without serving time.[10] These activists were outraged by the utter failure of RTÉ, as the official national broadcaster, to fulfill its government mandate to "bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and developing the national culture," as set out in the Broadcasting Authority Act.[11] Similar protests in Wales during the early 1980s, including several high-profile arrests and the threat of hunger strikes, led to the establishment of the Welsh-language television station Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C) which was launched in 1982 and continues to broadcast, now operating both a bilingual analogue station and an all-Welsh digital station.[12]

Activists in Ireland were advocating improved Irish-language programming and had been doing so since the inception of RTÉ. While early efforts sought a more bilingual national broadcaster, RTÉ's obvious lack of commitment left Irish-language programming in a precarious position, subject to the whims of RTÉ management. This led activists to strongly support the foundation of a separate station, based in part on the successful Welsh model mentioned above and on the model of the Irish-language radio service Raidió na Gaeltachta which had begun broadcasting a decade or so earlier. The general public, however, did not completely support the project. Cathal Goan, who was involved in the establishment of the station, explains that the most popular argument against the initiative "contrast[ed] the dire needs of a health service in crisis with the

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[10] Íte Ní Chionnaith, "Realising a Dream – Reminiscences and Thoughts of a TV Campaigner," *TG4@10: Deich mBliana de TG4*, ed. Eithne O'Connell, John Walsh, and Gearóid Denvir C(onamara: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2008), 181.
[11] Broadcasting Authority Act of 1960, available online through the Office of Attorney General, Irish Statute Book. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1960/en/act/pub/0010/index.html [consulted June 6, 2012].
[12] Muiris Ó Laoire, "Language Policy and the Broadcast Media: A Response," in *Minority Language Broadcasting: Breton and Irish,* ed. Helen Kelly-Holmes (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 65.

sinful extravagance of establishing a television channel in a 'dead' language."[13] In absolute numbers, the public funding for the new station was hardly "extravagant," as it initially received just IR£4 million in start-up funds and a promise of IR£10 million per annum and had to operate under the statutory umbrella of RTÉ. Initial public scepticism notwithstanding, TG4 attracted a growing audience from around the country and ultimately became an independent statutory entity on 1 April 2007 (although it continues to receive government funding, in the amount of €35.75 million in 2012).[14]

In addition to economic negotiations, another topic that featured prominently in the early stages of planning was the desired target audience of the station, as well as where in the country it would be based. As explained earlier in this dissertation, TG4 caters to viewers of all levels of fluency across the country, but locating the headquarters in a Gaeltacht region was nevertheless understood to be an important part of the project. It may have been more economical to base the new station in Dublin, where much of the infrastructure was already in place, but if the station provided economic development in a disadvantaged Gaeltacht area, the government could use that as an additional justification for financially supporting the project.

Having decided to market itself to the entire Irish population, and aware of the variable linguistic abilities of its potential audience, TG4 presently subtitles all of its original Irish-language programming into English except for live broadcasts. As discussed in chapter 2, there are supporters of subtitles and the cross-community communication it facilitates, and there are also critics who worry that subtitles undermine

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[13] Cathal Goan, "Teilifís na Gaeilge: Ten Years a-Growing," *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 11:2 (Summer 2006): 108.
[14] Figure posted on "TG4 Corporate: Background" http://www.tg4.ie/en/corporate/background.html [accessed 19 May, 2012].

the relationship between native speakers and cultural production in their own language. There are some, however, who are sceptical of the benefits of minority-language film and television whether it is subtitled or not.

The sociological impact of minority-language television

We have seen with both Gael Linn in the 1950s and Bob Quinn in the 1970s that Irish-language activists have believed strongly in the power of modern media to help their cause of language revitalization. Within the academic study of sociolinguistics, however, opinion is divided about the effectiveness of such media in actually promoting the use of a threatened language. I will turn now to the work of Joshua Fishman, whose seminal book *Reversing Language Shift* essentially founded a sub-field of sociolinguistics dedicated to studying not only how languages die but also how they may be saved.

Fishman repeatedly expresses doubt about the effectiveness of television as a strategy in reversing language shift (RLS).[15] He asserts that the expense involved in producing television is an inefficient use of the limited resources available for threatened languages; he makes this point both in general terms and in relation to specific initiatives in Basque, Frisian, and aboriginal Australian languages. Writing in 1991, at a time when plans for an Irish-language station had just been announced, Fishman commented that Irish-language shows would be unlikely to compete successfully with "either the amount or the diversity of constantly available English television."[16] He further argued that "the advisability of concentration on such competition, rather than on more urgent and more intergenerationally transmissible [familial, literacy and educational] enterprises, is

[15] Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 1991).

questionable indeed."[17] Fishman is right to foreground intergenerational transmission as the key to saving a threatened language. Indeed, most of the theories he developed in relation to reversing language shift were sound and have contributed enormously to maintaining global linguistic diversity. Nevertheless, he is not a media scholar, and I believe he underestimated the potential role of the media – particularly film and television – in influencing language shift. Using the example of TG4, I will demonstrate here the sociological impact of minority-language television.

In 1996, a few years after Fishman published *Reversing Language Shift*, TG4 began broadcasting. It represented an important new direction in Irish-language planning. Formal, state-sponsored policies to reverse language shift had been a priority for Irish governments since independence was achieved in 1922, as outlined in chapter 2, but despite this official support and substantial public spending, the language continued to decline. Following this rocky history of language planning, TG4 has continually emphasized high production values and a positive, trendy view of life in the Irish language. Not only has the programming been of consistently high quality, but the station has also succeeded in attracting a relatively large audience across the nation, including Anglophones. By the station's tenth anniversary in 2006, audience share peaked at just over 3% (see graph below).[18] By way of comparison, in the same year the highest share was held by RTÉ 1 at 25%, while TG4 performed about the same as BBC 2 and significantly better than Sky 1 and Sky News.[19]

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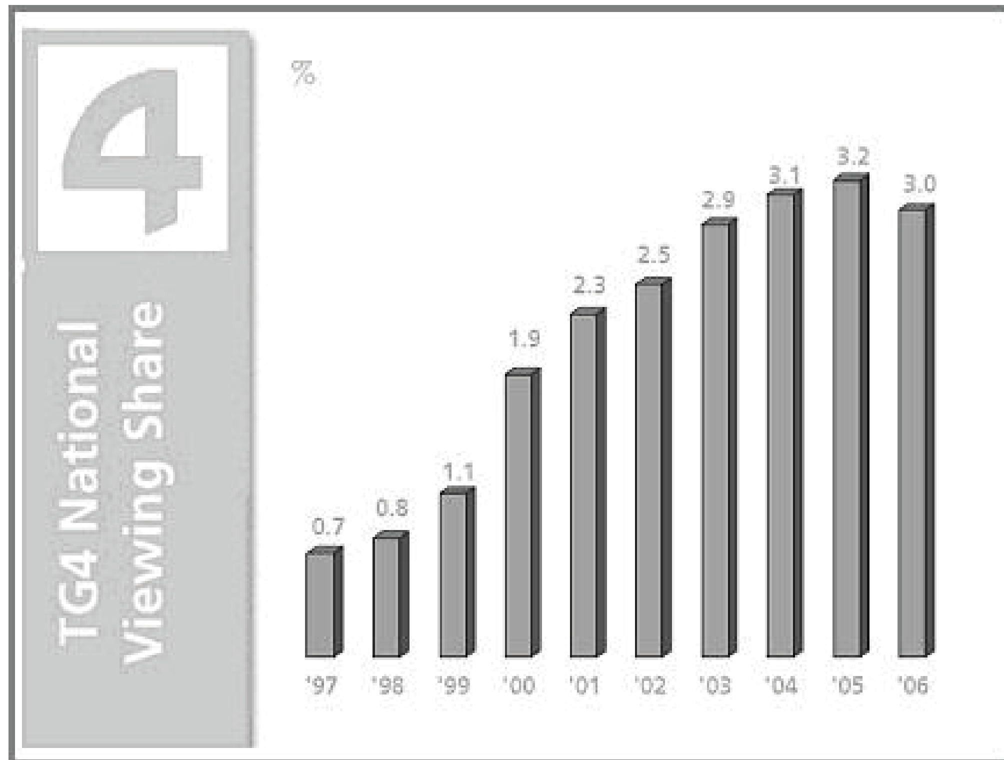
[16] Ibid., 141.
[17] Ibid., 141.
[18] Graph is taken from *TG4 Annual Report 2006*, 5.
[19] Ibid., 6.



TG4's share has since dropped to 2.1%, in great part because of an increase in available channels, but the number of viewers for TG4 still reaches an average 650,000 per day in the Republic of Ireland.[20] TG4 has also attracted an international audience on their website, which offers streamed and archived Irish-language programming and was viewed by nearly one million unique visitors in 2010.[21] TG4 programmes and personnel have also been successful in terms of awards, in particular proving to be strong competition for English-language programs at the Irish Film and Television Awards and at the annual Celtic Media Festival. Overall, the station has managed to integrate the Irish language fully into the mainstream Irish broadcasting landscape.

Ruth Lysaght, in an analysis of the station's development, comments on the uphill nature of its central project. She notes in particular that the new television station "had to

[20] Figure and graph are taken from the "Corporate: Background" section on the TG4 website, http://www.tg4.ie/en/corporate/background.html [consulted July 14, 2012].

take on the almost completely negative image that was the heritage of the Irish language,"[22] but she ultimately concludes that the television station has successfully reversed this negative image. Indeed, its impact has been such that Dublin's *Sunday Independent* credited the station with single-handedly changing the language's image from "scary to sexy, backward to modern, conservative to chic."[23] This echoes other more general studies which link language status to the media; in his article "Mass Media and the Linguistic Marketplace," for example, Richard Popp uses various examples to demonstrate how "mass media's institutionalised role in showcasing linguistics systems allows them to greatly influence language ideologies."[24]

Fishman, however, places little value on such changes in attitude, claiming that "the road to societal language death is paved with the good intentions called 'positive attitudes'."[25] His main criticism against television is that it does not directly contribute to intergenerational mother-tongue transmission, and given its high cost it is therefore an inefficient use of limited resources. This is the main focus of all of Fishman's arguments, and early in his introduction he hammers home the point that "over and over again pro-RLSers must remind themselves that it is intergenerational mother-tongue transmission that they are after, rather than merely 'good things (or impressive symbolic splashes) for [the threatened language]'."[26]

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[21] *TG4 Annual Report 2010*, 22.
[22] Ruth Lysaght, "Súil Eile, Dúil Nua (Another Perspective, a New Desire): Short Films in the Irish Language Since the Advent of TG4," in *To the Other Shore: Cross-currents in Irish and Scottish Studies,* ed. Neal Alexander, Shane Murphy, and Anne Oakman (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona/Queen's University Press, 2004), 88.
[23] Andrea Byrne, "The Cupla Focal's Conquest," *Sunday Independent,* May 13, 2007: 16.
[24] Richard Popp, "Mass Media and the Linguistic Marketplace: Media, Language, and Distinction," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30.1 (Jan 2006): 7.
[25] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 91.
[26] Ibid.,12.

Fishman is not wrong to conclude that television (and the mass media in general) cannot, on their own, reverse language shift; positive attitudes, unless they are accompanied by concrete actions, do little to save a language. I do, however, question Fishman's underlying assumptions about the role of television in society. Fishman's remarks imply that the sole contribution of television is entertainment. He contends that minority-language productions cannot compete with the more sophisticated and plentiful programming available in the dominant language and that therefore the scarce resources available for language revitalization should not be directed towards such an expensive and hopeless project. His logic is flawed: film and television production provides more than just entertainment, and it contributes to the wider language revitalization project in concrete areas *beyond* the status considerations tied to the entertainment value of the media.

I will outline here three ways that TG4 contributes to language maintenance, using Fishman's own arguments about what priorities are most important for strengthening endangered languages. First, film and television both operate as industries, providing jobs for the minority-language community as well as an economic incentive for second-language speakers to retain or improve their fluency. Second, despite Fishman's claims that television does not support mother-tongue transmission, the domestic nature of television makes it an integral part of home life, particularly for young children in their language-acquisition years. Finally, film and television can (and in the Irish case, do) strengthen almost all of the aspects of "language-in-culture" that Fishman emphatically supports.

Jobs and industry

As mentioned above, the significant economic opportunities that a Gaeltacht-based production centre would bring to the Irish-speaking community were used as part of the justification for public expenditure on the proposed television station. Today, the broadcasting industry offers a variety of highly desirable jobs in which speaking Irish is a bankable skill; previously, only the teaching and translation professions could offer the same. (A certain level of fluency is required for all public service jobs, but although there is a compulsory test for all applicants, it is often remarked that public servants rarely use Irish in the daily execution of their duties.) Furthermore, the TG4 headquarters is in Connemara, on the west coast of Ireland, which helps to build an alternative to the Dublin-based media industry and thereby possibly stem the flow of skilled Irish speakers from the Gaeltacht to the English-dominant city.

As TG4 has grown, so too has its contribution to economic development in Irish-speaking communities. A 2004 report from Screen Producers Ireland (SPI) evaluating TG4's impact on the independent television production sector concluded the following:

> On the basis of the most recent employment data for this sector in the Gaeltacht and its estimated employment in the rest of the economy, [TG4's] job creation alone contributes at least €12.71 million per annum to the overall economy (using conservative assumptions); of that value, at least 54% (€6.83 million per annum) is generated in the Gaeltacht. In addition, its use of other goods and services adds at least €2-3 million to national income annually.[27]

[27] "Analysis of the Independent Television Production Sector as it Applies to TG4," report from Screen Producers Ireland, 2004, 7.

Furthermore, after accounting for the work produced for stations other than TG4, and even allowing for an "optimism bias" in the reporting of Gaeltacht producers, the SPI report concludes that TG4's commissions provide the equivalent of 154 full-time jobs in the independent production sector in the Gaeltacht, as well as the equivalent of 185 full-time jobs in other parts of the country. These jobs are in addition to the 174 full-time (mostly Gaeltacht-based) positions at the station itself.[28] These figures form an integral part of the SPI's overall endorsement of the economic and cultural importance of the station.

The "economic development" argument has also been used by activists in other countries. Mike Cormack notes that intensive lobbying for increased Gaelic-language programming in Scotland has focused not on issues of cultural defence but on "the value to the Gaeidhealtachd of the investment in television, both in terms of finance and in terms of an increased local self-confidence."[29] Jobs for which language competencies are a genuine benefit are crucial in enticing native speakers to maintain their skills and encourage learners to arrive at a level of real fluency. Fishman reminds us of the practical reality that when people are already functioning quite effectively through a dominant language (e.g. English) in all major domains, there is no reason to believe that they will "voluntarily undertake the further dislocation of their lives which transferring to another language entails, even when that other language is ethnohistorically 'their own', unless other, reinforcing incentives are available."[30]

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[28] Ibid., 29.
[29] Mike Cormack, "Problems of Minority Language Broadcasting: Gaelic in Scotland," *European Journal of Communication* 8 (1993): 112.
[30] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 237.

The possibility of a rewarding and desirable job is one of the better examples of such a "reinforcing incentive." A good illustration of this concept can be found in television presenter Manchán Magan's narration of his own relationship with the Irish language:

> The only reason I speak Irish is because my grandmother went to the trouble of learning it 90 years ago as a weapon in the struggle for an Irish republic. She then bribed me as a child with sweets and treats to go on speaking it when I realised that none of my friends did. In fact, I had almost discarded it, regarding it as a dead weight around my neck, until TG4 [...] was set up in 1996 and I started making travel documentaries for it.[31]

Just as TG4 provides desirable jobs for fluent speakers, it similarly acts as an incentive for others to master Irish in order to gain exposure for themselves on television. For example, Member of European Parliament Jim Higgins relates that he hated Irish at school and never felt any great use for the language until he was "arm-twisted" by a fellow politician to appear on an Irish-language current affairs program and defend recent health policies. Armed with pre-prepared notes, he struggled through the interview. When the segment was over, the presenter suggested that if he were able to improve his Irish he would have significantly more media opportunities and thereby further his career. This he did, and by becoming more involved in Irish-language media he also came to "genuinely love the language."[32] This anecdote illustrates that the external incentive

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[31] Manchán Magan, "Cá bhFuil na Gaeilgeoirí?" *The Guardian,* January 5, 2007, 57.
[32] Jim Higgins, "The Tide has Turned," in *The Soul of Ireland*, ed. Joe Mulholland (Dublin: Liffey, 2006), 154.

provided by television can start an individual on a path leading to the kind of internalized, self-motivated commitment to language that is crucial to reversing language shift.

While knowledge of Irish is a definite asset for those seeking fame on the small screen, some debate still surrounds how much Irish is actually spoken behind the scenes. The SPI report reminds us that "there is a need to ensure that independent producers of Irish Language programmes use Irish-speakers, not just 'in front of the cameras' but also in support roles, such as sound technicians, camera persons, etc."[33] One of the challenges of working in a minority language, of course, is that there is by definition a smaller pool from which to draw when looking for potential employees, especially if the job also requires specialized training.

This is an issue that is often brought up in relation to Irish-language film as well as television, and it is common to all minority-language broadcasting initiatives. In Ireland, the identified need for more qualified Irish-speaking technicians has resulted in certain institutions, such as the Waterford Institute of Technology, waiving tuition fees for students studying through the medium of Irish. This and other initiatives funded by Údarás na Gaeltachta, the authority responsible for the cultural and economic development of the Gaelteacht regions, have helped to train a cohort of highly skilled workers for all facets of media production and management. This in turn contributes to the vitality of the national film and television industry as a whole.

Language of the home

Throughout his book, Fishman repeatedly emphasizes the importance of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission, and his dismissal of television hinges

partly on his view that even the most effective programming does not directly contribute to this goal. It is true, of course, that television is not a replacement for parent-child interaction in any language, but television can offer support to those families who are raising their children in Irish. Richard Popp cites the statistic – perhaps discouraging to some, but useful in promoting minority-language television – that "preschoolers watch more television than any other children's demographic."[34] Popp's own work focuses on programs with an explicit objective of teaching linguistic competencies to this age group, such as the English-Spanish bilingual series *Dora the Explorer*. He explains that this and some other Disney programs are based on Howard Gardner's "multiple intelligence theory," which emphasizes a well-rounded development including linguistic and kinaesthetic competencies rather than a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy.

While Gardner himself has cautioned that one has to retain "a healthy scepticism"[35] about the teaching power of television shows, it seems reasonable to conclude that the television watched by preschoolers will have some effect on their language acquisition, even if it is simply reinforcement. Furthermore, hearing the minority language spoken in the domestic sphere, even if it is spoken on the television instead of by the parents, discourages children from developing the perception that the language is simply a school subject with no usefulness outside of that formal domain. This is particularly important as an increasing number of parents (including many with a poor mastery of Irish themselves) are enrolling their children in Gaelscoileanna, or Irish-immersion schools. These parents are grateful that television can help to reinforce their children's learning at home. Cathal Goan, for his part, sends his gratitude in the opposite

[33] Screen Producers Ireland, *Analysis of the Independent Television Production Sector*, 29.
[34] Popp, "Mass Media and the Linguistic Marketplace," 11.

direction by praising burgeoning Gaelscoileanna for providing "fertile recruiting ground for TG4 viewership in the future."[36]

The contents of the various television programs also provide a model of how Irish can be used in a wide range of formal and informal situations, which is particularly important for viewers living in communities where English is the dominant language across all the domains. This has implications for corpus development as Irish is depicted being used in situations such as business meetings, doctor's offices, grocery stores, romantic encounters, etc. It also effectively broadens the public's acceptance of the suitability of the language for modern life. The influence of television in this respect should not be underestimated. A model of everyday life in the Irish language was formerly not easily available for families living outside the Gaeltacht.

Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin quotes Bourdieu's comments that "television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think."[37] Ó hIfearnáin, for his part, further insists that television cannot be separated from contemporary culture in Ireland, and it follows that "if a major part of the population never hears nor sees a minority culture on their televisions, it ceases to be a part of their reality."[38] If culture is ordinary, to borrow from Raymond Williams, then television is now a firmly entrenched aspect of Irish culture and must be considered in those terms, rather than as something foreign which can be compartmentalized apart from other aspects of cultural development.

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[35] Quoted in Ibid., 11-12.
[36] Goan, "Teilifís na Gaeilge," 114.
[37] Tadhg Ó hIfearnáin, "Irish Language Broadcast Media: The Interaction of State Language Policy, Broadcasters, and their Audiences," *Minority Language Broadcasting: Breton and Irish,* ed. Helen Kelly-Holmes (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2001), 8.
[38] Ibid., 8.

Language-in-culture

Fishman points out that "parts of every culture are expressed, implemented, and realized via the language with which that culture has been most intimately associated."[39] In other words, a language is very closely tied to the culture in which it developed. Furthermore, a language is most likely to survive where other elements of indigenous culture are also preserved. When linguistic diversity is compared to biodiversity, the relevant analogy is that a given species' survival is closely linked to the preservation of its habitat. Fishman sees language and culture as intertwined and concludes that "RLS and language maintenance are not about language *per se*; they are about language-in-culture."[40] The question of whether TG4 contributes to language-in-culture is complicated by the complexity of the Irish situation, which is different from other post-colonial situations where there may be a clearer cultural divide between indigenous communities and European descendents. In Ireland, much of the same cultural heritage is shared between the two linguistic communities.

The station has always commissioned programs that were felt to have the broadest appeal across the nation, rather than solely in the Gaeltacht. It has not shied away from contemporary, modern themes and has often presented controversial material, including the first gay kiss broadcast on Irish television.[41] Andrea Byrne of *The Independent* notes TG4's success with the coveted young male demographic (invaluable for attracting advertisers) and gives the credit for this to "those TG4 weather babes, who even if they

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[39] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 24.
[40] Ibid., 17.
[41] Ruth Lysaght, "Pobal Sobail: *Ros na Rún*, TG4 and Reality," *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television*, ed. Ruth Barton and Harvey O'Brien (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 148.

said there was a tsunami on the way would have male viewers still sitting there contentedly anticipating them stretching across the screen to reach Louth."[42] This tactic has, perhaps not surprisingly, attracted its share of sceptics. Some critics have argued that such a glamorized vision of the language does not represent actual native speakers. The same criticism is often levelled against film projects, as will be seen in the second part of this chapter.

Fishman advocates initiatives that get the public "directly and actively involved"[43] in using the language, and this is accomplished on TG4 through reality television and game shows. There are many examples of participatory programs, including the *Déis Roc* program for indie rock bands who must present at least one song in Irish, the *Glas Vegas* talent competition, and the *Paisean Faisean* make-over reality show. Furthermore, these and other TG4 programs create what Lysaght describes as "shared references"[44] among the Irish-language community, whether they are native speakers or in the process of learning. Echoing this sentiment, Welsh activist Ned Thomas argues that because the minority-language community in Wales (as in Ireland) is no longer relegated to isolated villages but rather spread across a wider geographic area, it "requires broadcast media in order to remain cogent and cohesive" as a community.[45] While this effect might not fit into Fishman's original conception of language-in-culture, the station undeniably links the Irish language to a version of Irish culture that is no less authentic for being modernized.

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[42] Byrne, "The Cupla Focal's Conquest," 16.
[43] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 132.
[44] Lysaght, "Pobal Sobail," 152.
[45] Quoted in Hourigan, "New Social Movement Theory," 82.

Television as a component of language planning

In summary, although Fishman is a critic of minority-language television, many of the strategies and priorities he puts forward elsewhere can in fact be applied to film and television to show that this sector can indeed be crucial to reversing language shift. For example, he mentions an overarching guiding principle that it is preferable for RLS initiatives to be "facilitatory and enabling rather than compulsory and punitive."[46] In this respect, TG4 certainly stands out against Ireland's language-planning heritage of hiring quotas and compulsory grammar courses.

Moreover, Fishman's intense focus on language activism sometimes leads him to neglect the bigger picture of cultural production. Minority-language television does not necessarily use up resources that would otherwise go to alternate (and in his view more deserving) language initiatives, as he repeatedly implies. In the Irish case, at least, much of the public money (e.g. from licensing fees) is already directed into media production. If it did not go to Irish-language production, it would still be used for making television and would simply go to English-language broadcasts.

Cathal Goan makes the point that a minority-language station fills an identifiable need within the national media sector as well. He claims that from the beginning those setting up TG4 "shared a conviction that we were to be a professional television service that broadcast in the Irish language, rather than a language initiative that would broadcast on television."[47] Cillian Fennell, head of programming for TG4, confirms that as the station has matured it still "sees itself first and foremost as a television station, not a

[46] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 82.
[47] Goan, "Teilifís na Gaeilge," 109.

language revival movement."[48] TG4 prioritizes producing quality television over conforming to government-led aspirations for the national language, so Fishman's assertion in 1991 that employing the mass media toward reversing language shift is an effort "replete with tokenism"[49] cannot be said to apply to the Irish situation.

Whether or not the station sees itself as part of a language revitalization movement, the contributions that it has made – and continues to make – demonstrate that it is one of the most effective tools in maintaining the vitality of the Irish language. Its influence has reached far beyond the limited role of entertainment as assigned by Fishman. The arguments outlined above emphasize the role that television has in three areas that are crucial for reversing language shift: providing desirable jobs and economic development, strengthening the language in the home, and preserving the link between language and culture. Most importantly, TG4 has proven that Irish-language television can carve out a successful niche for itself, confidently coexisting with the dominant English language. This is a hopeful sign that the language itself, within the context of Irish society, will be able to do the same.

Now we will turn our attention to television's sister medium, film. As outlined above, TG4 has experienced steady growth and has become accepted as a genuine option on the television dial. Although the station began as an affiliate of the national broadcaster RTÉ (which did have and continues to have a very small Irish-language component), it has since established itself as a separate, independent station. It is significant, then, that for the medium of film, TG4 is very willing to partner with national organizations such as the Irish Film Board and Filmbase. Irish-language films are

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[48] Quoted in Kelly-Holmes, *Minority Language Broadcasting,* 58.
[49] Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift*, 141.

produced within the same infrastructures as English-language films, which has actually helped to consolidate them within Irish national cinema rather than relegate them to a parallel regional or minority cinema. To date, most of the Irish-language film work has been in the short film format. The following section examines the partnerships between TG4, the Irish Film Board, and Filmbase, as well as the resultant films.

Shorts films *as Gaeilge*

Irish-language short films have been alternately criticized or celebrated by film scholars and the popular press, with the nature of critiques generally depending on which of the films were assessed. In particular, criticism has centred on a perceived lack of quality – and in some cases, quantity – of Irish-language dialogue within the films, or on complex questions of outsider representations of the Irish-speaking community. I argue that despite the shortcomings of some individual films in terms of linguistic integrity, funding initiatives have overall made a substantial contribution to both the language movement and the national cinema.

The two funding schemes for Irish language short films, *Oscailt* and *Lasair*, are administered by the Irish Film Board and Filmbase, respectively, in partnership with TG4. Both schemes are competitive; that is, individual filmmakers or production companies submit proposals and only certain projects are selected to receive funding. Furthermore, both schemes exist alongside similar funding initiatives for English-language shorts, although there is so far no dedicated funding program for feature-length films in Irish. Consequently, the bulk of contemporary Irish-language production is in the short film format, and I will begin by looking at the particularities of that format. I will then

consider the output of the two dedicated funding schemes, with particular attention to general trends in cinematic approach that become apparent. I will conclude with a look at the distribution context in which the films have arguably had the greatest impact: the education sector.

The short film format

In the beginning of cinema, all films were short films. As George Clark has put it, however, "those first films were not considered short, in the same way that they were not considered to be silent, until other forms existed."[50] As feature length *talkies* have become the dominant form of cinema, short films have been pushed to the margins of dominant theatrical exhibition practice. James Bell, writing for *Sight and Sound,* found that watching short films is of little interest to the average movie-goer, and "once you'd weeded out the film-makers' friends, relatives and colleagues from any screening audience there often wouldn't be enough people left to drain a teapot."[51] Nevertheless, as demonstrated below, short films still serve an important purpose, both in terms of production (for example, as practical training for aspiring feature filmmakers) and exhibition (as a way of showcasing national talent, among other things).

Currently, the primary site of public exhibition for short films is at festivals. Many film festivals offer some shorts alongside the usual feature-length films. In addition to this, there are over 300 dedicated shorts events globally each year.[52] Possibly the biggest of these is the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in France,

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[50] George Clark, "Letter from… Cork: Short Film Symposium at Cork Film Festival," *Vertigo* 3.1 (2006): 45.
[51] James Bell, "Eat My Shorts," *Sight and Sound* 14.5 (2004): 24.
[52] Gareth Evans, "Shorts Circuit," *Sight and Sound* 12.7 (2002): 5.

which selects from more than 4000 submitted short films annually,[53] and often has to turn away spectators when the 1400-seat Jean Cocteau Theatre sells out.[54] The internet has also become a prime site for distributing short films. Some websites, such as YouTube or Vimeo, allow filmmakers to upload their own films. Alternatively, some agencies post films which they have funded: in Canada this includes the National Film Board and other initiatives such as Bravo!FACT (Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent) which funds and showcases short films. Still other sites are curated, presenting films chosen by an editor or selection committee, such as the "Short Film of the Day" at filmschoolrejects.com.

While it is true that the paradigmatic idea of cinema is now the full-length feature rather than the short, there is a healthy number of filmmakers working in the more abbreviated format. There is also an audience for those films, even if it is arguably a niche one. The question to ask, then, is who is making these short films, within what infrastructure, and to what purpose? Short films often function as training ground or as a calling card for emerging filmmakers and also as an experimental space for new and experienced artists alike. The films are made in a variety of different contexts, although normally within some sort of publicly-funded infrastructure since there are few commercial opportunities for short films.

The Irish situation provides an interesting example of how the short film format has contributed to national cinema. In *Irish Film,* Martin McLoone notes a sharp rise in short film production in the late 1980s and early1990s, which he credits to the fact that colleges began offering filmmaking courses, particularly the Dun Laoghaire School of

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[53] Ibid., 5.
[54] Tristan Bancks, "The 'Cannes' of Short Film Festivals," *Metro: Media & Education Magazine* 140 (2004): 143.

Art and Design, and the College of Commerce at Rathmines.[55] Student work continues to be a locus for much contemporary short film production. Around the same time that the college programs were established, shorts were also being made with the resources available through Filmbase, which opened in Dublin in 1986 with funding from the Arts Council. Many of the founders of Filmbase were part of the same generation of independent filmmakers as Bob Quinn, including the likes of Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy, Cathal Black and Lelia Doolan. Filmbase distributed some of its Arts Council money directly to filmmakers by establishing grants for emerging artists to make shorts, in partnership first with broadcaster RTÉ and later with TG4. The first round of funding was in 1987, with just one award of IR£3,500.[56] Along with workshops and short courses, the award was seen as fulfilling the centre's training mandate.[57] Both the number of awards and the amount of each award have grown substantially over the past two and a half decades, although grants have continued to be targeted to aspiring rather than established filmmakers. Similar programs followed when regional film centres were established, also funded by the Arts Council, in Galway and Cork.

Finally, when the Irish Film Board was re-established in 1993, it built on these existing short film initiatives by offering its own funding scheme for shorts. As at Filmbase, the IFB short film scheme was seen as a training program; the CEO of the board at the time, Rod Stoneman, commented that it was "an attempt to help provide an extra stage of experience for directors (and producers, writers and crews) before

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[55] Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 151.
[56] Stephen Kane, "Filmbase 25: 25 Years Supporting Irish Film," *Film Ireland* 137 (2011): 35.
[57] Ibid., 35.

embarking on a first feature."[58] Since the start of the Short Cuts program in 1993, the Film Board has expanded and readjusted its shorts programs. It currently offers funding for short films on a competitive basis through six different schemes, including live action, documentary, and animation.

Filmmaker Damien O'Donnell jokes that "today you can make a short film by pushing the wrong button on your mobile phone."[59] But despite the increasing availability of low-cost equipment, it still takes time, energy, creativity and professionalism to make the kind of short film that can launch a career – and public funding is often essential. The current generation seems to be up for the challenge. Between the IFB, Filmbase, the regional centres, and the increasing number of college and university training programs, the quantity of short films produced annually in Ireland is much higher than that of features. The quality of many of these shorts is also very high; recent Irish shorts have been immensely successful, earning recognition at festivals and award shows such as the Oscars. Despite the impressive quantity and quality of Irish shorts, mainstream distribution practices and discourse on national cinema both still generally marginalize short films.

One explanation is that regardless of whether they are made as part of a college course, or through a Filmbase or IFB initiative, short films are often thought of as simply a training exercise for filmmakers who would eventually like to make feature films. In other words, the overwhelming dominance of the feature leads many people – including, often, filmmakers themselves – to think of the short as significant only as a gateway to greater things. This attitude is immediately problematic, since filmmakers are then less

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[58] From the 1994 IFB Annual Report, quoted in McLoone, *Irish Film*, 153.
[59] Damien O'Donnell, "The Element of Surprise," *Film Ireland* 124 (2008): 14.

likely to engage with the specific strengths of the short genre. If we look to literature, for example, short stories and novels are each valued for their own merits. There are established outlets for the publishing of short stories (for example in journals, anthologies, or single-author collections) that allow writers to work in the short format on a professional basis; indeed, many authors go back and forth between short stories and novels, using the format that best suits their chosen subject matter. The situation in the film industry stands in stark contrast, as short films are virtually never profitable, and only a handful of filmmakers make short films after establishing themselves as directors of commercial features.

This is not to say, of course, that the short film is not without merit as a training exercise. What I would like to argue, however, is that thinking of short films *only* as a form of training leads to two very serious problems from the perspective of national cinema. First, the training function shifts the focus onto the careers of individual filmmakers (rather than the film culture or industry as a whole), and second, this kind of paradigm paralysis – a short as a path to a feature – might lead to a neglect of the potential advantages that the short film has over the feature or to a denial of its legitimacy as a form of expression.

We may begin by looking at the focus on the individual filmmaker. Nearly all of the bodies that support short films are publicly funded, whether the films are supported by the Irish Film Board, the Arts Council, the public broadcasters, or the various educational institutions. If the short film is indeed simply a training exercise or an opportunity to make a demo that might attract potential feature-film producers, we can think of this public money as an investment in the future of Ireland's film industry.

As mentioned earlier, however, there are far more short films being made in Ireland than features, and so there simply is no room for all those filmmakers to graduate from the shorter form to the longer and stay at home. As a result, many of them – usually the most promising ones – leave for London or Hollywood. This situation is accentuated in the special case of Irish-language production, where there are incentives for making short films in Irish but no dedicated support for features. In effect, the policies in place tend to foster an Irish film industry that trains filmmakers for export and does so at Irish taxpayers' expense. Another, more efficient option would be to invest more heavily in indigenous features, so that established filmmakers might be able to stay and work in the country. The training of emerging filmmakers could be accomplished by providing apprenticeships on those feature films, rather than by funding short films.

I am not advocating that feature filmmaking replace shorts entirely. My point is that if short film funding is intended as an investment toward something bigger, that investment is often lost, if not in a stalled career then in the emigration of talent. A targeted strategy for distributing those short films is a way of capitalizing on the investment. Part of the strategy would be to shift the emphasis away from individual filmmakers and towards the future of the national film culture as a whole. The mainstream Irish cinema-going audience, like the mainstream Anglo-Canadian one, tends to choose Hollywood films over indigenous productions at the box office. This can possibly be blamed on a residual perception that domestic films are inferior productions, but the quality of Irish feature films has increased to such an extent that this is no longer true, if it ever was. The problem, however, is inducing audiences to give Irish films a try.

Short films have been used as part of a strategy to generate interest in all manner of indigenous film production. A key advantage of the short is its very brevity, which allows it to be easily added to an evening's program. When he was CEO of the film board, Rod Stoneman commissioned Paddy Breathnach and Rob Walpole to make a 90-second short film that was a montage of clips from Irish feature films, serving as a kind of a trailer for Irish cinema in general. While it was a success, he says,

> we realised we couldn't just go on making trailers, what we had to do was make really short films that worked as a trailer, and so that's how the Short Shorts scheme was conceived. … And the idea was to put the Short Shorts precisely *not* with Irish features, but with American films, because that's where we had to get to the audience that perhaps hadn't clocked what Irish cinema was.[60]

One of the goals of the Short Shorts, which have to be under three minutes, is to also get experienced filmmakers involved. They are still a calling-card, in a sense, but for Irish cinema as a whole rather than individual filmmakers. It is these types of projects, which see the value of short films in and of themselves, that will encourage the best kind of short film production. Valued for their own artistry and used as well to promote Irish feature films, short films become an integrated part of the national cinema, not simply a personal training exercise. This can only lead to an increase in the vitality and quality of Irish films of all lengths.

Oscailt and *Lasair*

If short films can operate as a calling-card for a national cinema in general, they can also be used to stimulate interest in a subset of that cinema, whether defined by genre (such as animation) or by cultural criteria (such as language). As a result, short film schemes at institutions such as the Irish Film Board are often targeted to a specific genre or format, such as documentary. Within the past decade and a half, two national funding schemes were established for Irish-language short films, and they have served as a catalyst for an unprecedented level of filmmaking activity in that language.[61] As described in the introduction to this chapter, TG4 partnered first with the IFB to launch the *Oscailt* funding scheme in 1998, and then with Filmbase to launch the complementary *Lasair* initiative in 2001.

The differences between the two schemes parallel the differences between Filmbase and the IFB: Filmbase has more of a training mandate, while the Film Board awards are intended for filmmakers who have already proven their potential and are ready to work at a more professional level. Filmbase *Lasair* awards are therefore targeted to filmmakers – often new college graduates – willing to shoot cheaply on digital media; budgets for the first round of funding averaged around IR£8000.[62] *Oscailt* projects in the same year could get up to IR£60,000 if they proposed a 26-minute film (the maximum length) shot on celluloid in 35mm, the dominant format for theatrical

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[60] Personal interview with Rod Stoneman, former CEO of the Irish Film Board (1993-2003), current director of the Huston School of Film & Digital Media, National University of Ireland, Galway. July 30, 2009, in Galway, Ireland.

[61] Some short films in the Irish language are also made through training schemes or college courses, but these are outside the purview of this dissertation.

[62] "Digi-scannáin," *Film Ireland* 79 (2001): 6.

distribution.[63] *Oscailt* was set up as an annual competition; *Lasair* was less consistent, inviting applications only when resources (both financial and human) allowed.[64] Both schemes were meant to encourage projects that subscribed to TG4's motto "súil eile" ("another eye/perspective"), so the differences between the two schemes had to do with format and production context rather than storylines or subject matter. In the words of the *Oscailt* guidelines, the funders were looking for "original fiction credible in the Irish language and which takes a fresh look at Ireland."[65] Beyond that suggestion, there are no specific requirements in terms of subject matter or intended audience. Neither scheme requires directors to be fluent in Irish, only to be resident in Ireland.

At the time of writing, 39 short films have been made through the *Oscailt* scheme and 18 through *Lasair* (a list of titles is provided at the end of this chapter). They represent a small, but not insignificant, fraction of the short film activity in Ireland.[66] Among them are films set in every part of the country, including the rural Gaeltacht (*Tubberware*), urban Dublin (*Mac an*

Irish-language short films span all genres including animations such as *Cuilin Dualach* (Nora Twomey, 2004)

[63] "Oscailt guidelines, 2001-2002" [available in the Irish Film Archives library, press clippings files, "Shorts – awards, competitions, schemes" folder].
[64] Personal interview with Clare Clare Creely, Project Administrator of the Lasair scheme. July 6, 2009, at Filmbase, Dublin, Ireland.
[65] "Oscailt guidelines, 2001-2002."
[66] It is impossible to give an accurate snapshot of the total number of short films, including student films, made in Ireland in any given year. However, to help put these figures in context, we can look at the projects funded by the Irish Film Board. Taking 2008 as a representative year, funding was provided to 29 short films, including 4 Irish-language and 4 animation. The IFB also funded 18 features, most of which were co-productions including 5 in foreign European languages, and 21 documentaries of varying lengths (*Irish Film Board Production Catalogue 2008-2009*).

Athair), and Northern Ireland (*Limbo*), and as far away as Argentina (*Tango*). The protagonists range from children (*An Teanga Runda*) to teenagers (*Lipservice*), middle aged housewives (*Clare sa Spéir*), and grandparents (*Rolla Saor*). The films span the genres of comedy, drama, horror, science fiction, historical drama, and experimental film. Action occurs on trains (*Cáca Milis*), planes (*Gafa*), and boats (*Dillusc*). Plots deal with summer love (*Iníon an Fiaclóra*) and Christmas heartbreak (*Nollaig Shona*). There are period pieces set in the sixteenth century (*Rogairí*), the mid-1800s famine years (*Ocras*), and the 1960s (*Marion agus an Banphrionsa*). Both the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* schemes have included animations: *Cuilin Dualach* and *An Fiach Dubh*, respectively. In short, the films supported by the two funding initiatives are as varied as the filmmakers who made them.

Former CEO of the Irish Film Board, Rod Stoneman, explains that in terms of quality, the Irish-language films are roughly on par with those made in English:

> *Oscailt* immediately managed to establish itself as having the same success ratio as any of [the IFB's short film] enterprises: there are a few films that really ring the bell as being brilliant, there are quite a lot that are rather good, and there were a few that unfortunately did not work so well, but that's how it goes anywhere.[67]

My argument is not that all of the Irish-language short films are individually great works of cinema, although a few of them are excellent. Rather, their importance lies in the cumulative contribution they have made to both the national cinema and the maintenance of the Irish language.

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[67] Interview with Stoneman.

There are many ways that the cadre of films produced through these two parallel initiatives could be categorized and analysed. For the purposes of this dissertation, it seems obvious that the most relevant way to approach the films is in terms of their use of the Irish language. Three categories immediately suggest themselves: first, a small number of films have very little language at all to the point that they can hardly be considered to be "in Irish" in any practical sense; second, the vast majority of the films use the language as simply a medium for telling a story; and finally, some films take the opportunity within the plot to comment on the place of the language in Irish society. This third category almost by definition consists of bilingual works and is discussed in chapter 6. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, will be devoted to selected examples of the first two categories. These examples were chosen to provide a representative window on the types of films that are made through *Oscailt* and *Lasair*; in some cases, I have also favoured films about which the filmmakers were interviewed, in order to better understand their motivations and their experience participating in Irish-language filmmaking. I will examine not only the films themselves but also the discourse surrounding them, with a particular view to highlighting how the contemporary situation differs from that outlined in the previous two chapters.

"Irish-language" films with minimal dialogue

Spota (Brian Reddin, 2006), made through the *Oscailt* scheme, begins with a mix of Irish and English exclamations that can be clearly understood from the context in which they are spoken. A man sitting on a bench is trying to get a stray dog to leave him alone by waving him off and saying, "*Imigh leat.* Shoo. Go on, piss off. *Fucáil leat.*

Ceart go leor. Slán!" The next ten minutes feature similar examples of the man occasionally talking to the dog, who continues to follow him. Again the intentions behind the words are clearly understood by the accompanying actions. In the last three minutes or so, the dialogue does pick up slightly as the man has short conversations first with the dog-catcher and then with a friend in the pub. The use of the Irish language is not justified by the story, however, since the man apparently lives in an English-speaking community, as evidenced by the English "Found Dog" posters he distributes.

The visual cues in *Spota* indicate an English-speaking community,
and no explanation is given for the characters' use of the Irish language.

The *Oscailt* film *Bua* (Sonya Gildea, 2007) is an even starker example of a nearly dialogue-free film. The film opens on a distressed young girl riding a white horse. Flashbacks hint that her mental state is due to inappropriate touching from an older man. There are only twelve lines spoken in the 13-minute film, and all of their meanings can be fully understood by visual cues alone. For example, the girl yells "Go tapaí, go tapaí!" ("Faster, faster!") to her horse as she rides him harder and harder, and at the end she slips off the horse's bridle and whispers "Tá tú soar anois" ("You're free now") as he runs off. This film is primarily a mood piece, and appears to be more concerned with visual effect than with dialogue. In that sense, the low dialogue comes off as a sort of art-film

aesthetic, one that works well with the frequent use of lingering close-ups (on the older man's hand on the girl, for example, or the horse's hooves) and of slow-motion footage.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with making a short film with minimal dialogue. Just because a film is in the Irish language does not mean it has an added responsibility to include more lines than a comparable project in English. There is the possibility, however, that a film such as *Bua* only included dialogue at all in order to meet the funding obligations. The short film *The End is Night* (James Cotter, 2007) presents an interesting illustrative case. The story involves a farmer who finds a magical amulet that can turn the sun on and off and is told mostly through visual representations. The director submitted applications to both Filmbase's *Lasair* scheme (under the Irish title *Dorcha*, which simply means "dark") and to the IFB's Short Shorts scheme. When accepted by both funding programs, Cotter chose to make his film through the IFB because it provided a higher budget.[68] The final version contains only a little dialogue: the panicked reactions of people around the world when the sun suddenly goes dark. Most of these are in English, but there are also snippets of Chinese and French (and penguins squawking in Antarctica). There is not a word of Irish although the IFB scheme certainly would not have prevented it. It is quite clear, then, that if the film had been made under the *Lasair* initiative, the Irish language would only have been added in order to help the filmmaker get funded; there was no other connection with the story he wished to tell. One of the most frequent criticisms of Irish-language cinema is that it simply attracts translated scripts, rather than fostering the cultural expression of native Irish-speakers. This issue will be discussed at greater length below.

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[68] Interview with Clare Creely.

The trend of low-dialogue "Irish-language" arty shorts was even parodied on a popular TG4 comedy series, *An Crisis*. The series is set in a fictional government-funded language agency, and each episode deals with a different and often questionable project to champion the native tongue. In one episode, the agency's director awards his nephew money to make a short film in Irish. The office employees all attend the première screening of the film and are shocked by both the film itself and the complete lack of dialogue. The film is a prototypical black and white art film, and the nephew explains it depicts a serial killer who "believes the only way to increase the number of Irish language speakers is to decrease the number of English language speakers," although the film is so opaque that the plot is not at all obvious. Only the title is in Irish, and even that is misspelled – *La Eile* instead of *Lá Eile* ("Another Day"). Suggestions to add a voice-over by a famous actor who can speak Irish – Brendan Gleeson, Gabriel Byrne, or "that skinny, spindly fella" from *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* – are met with contempt by the nephew who does not want to give over artistic control.[69] Clearly, the television program is spoofing the actual situation, but it works as comedy precisely because the audience knows that similar short films do exist in reality.

The categorization of art film is a complicated one, particular in the context of a small national cinema such as Ireland's. Barbara Wilinsky provides an excellent exploration of the varied and changing definitions of the concept "Art film," noting that both the textual properties and the industrial context must be considered.[70] She surveys a number of various and often contradictory criteria, and concludes that the only "characteristic generally agreed upon is that art films *are not* mainstream Hollywood

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[69] From episode of *An Crisis*, watched online on TG4.com on April 16, 2010.

films."[71] In this sense, the qualification of "art film" could apply to all Irish films, regardless of aesthetic style. On the other hand, some film writers still see "art film" as something obvious and not context-dependent. Consider, for example, the following comment by Bob Shelton:

> One does not confuse the work of Norman Rockwell or Charles Schulz with a Matisse or Rauschenberg; one does not confuse Burt Bacharach with Bartok; and one does not confuse Stephen King with Thomas Mann. Film publications however continue to compare Spielberg and Lucas with Antonioni and Herzog. It just doesn't make sense. Their aims are completely different, and often diametrically opposed.[72]

Leaving aside the rebuttal that "art" is not as clearly defined in the visual, musical, or literary media as Shelton seems to suppose it is, it is significant that he chose two Americans to contrast against two non-Anglophone Europeans. It is hard not to assume that language and nationality played an important part in his supposedly intuitive appraisal of what is and is not art. Simply by virtue of being in a "foreign" language, films are often perceived as belonging to the genre of art film.

Lysaght explains that the very fact of being in a language other than English inevitably marks the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films as exceptional and invites closer inspection from spectators: "The exploration of any theme through an unfamiliar medium (here an ancient language used in narrative film) is exciting and new, and affords a fresh look at

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[70] Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
[71] Ibid., 15.
[72] Bob Shelton, *A Cultural Study of the Art Film* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2003), 9.

issues that may have been exhausted in other media."[73] This, of course, can be either appealing or alienating, depending on the particular tastes of the viewer.

The low-dialogue films described above are by far the minority of *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films, even if they serve as a focal point for critics who worry about the waste of resources that are intended for promoting the language. It is more common that films made through both schemes do indeed include a reasonable amount of Irish-language dialogue and are stylistically closer to popular film than to art film. These films present the language as a matter of fact, and the issue then becomes the quality rather than the quantity of the Irish language. Additionally, critics have argued over how well these films represent the actual Irish-speaking communities given that many of the filmmakers are not fluent speakers and have no connection to the Gaeltacht.

The Irish language as a matter of fact

Some *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films critically or comically explore the Irish language itself, but most of them are simply in – rather than about – the language. This section explores those films that treat Irish-language dialogue as a matter of fact. These films can be further subdivided into two groups: those in which the use of Irish makes sense because of either the geographical or historical setting, and those in which the Irish language is artificially imposed on a setting where it is quite implausible. The latter are often made when a filmmaker translates an English script for funding purposes, without making any changes to the story. They often seem to be the films that are linguistically poorest, representing what filmmaker Marina Ní Dhubhain calls a "bizarre new form –

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[73] Lysaght, "Súil Eile, Dúil Nua?" 27.

films set in a parallel Ireland where everybody, everywhere speaks Irish, yet nobody seems able to pronounce it."[74]

With a little effort, stories can be slightly altered so that the speaking of Irish is more plausible. The easiest way, of course, is to set the story in one of Ireland's Gaeltacht regions. Cecilia McAllister, whose film *Féileacán* (Oscailt, 2008) is a touching portrait of a mother's depression, did just that. Her film is set in the Donegal Gaeltacht, near where she grew up, even though she is not herself a native Irish speaker. McAllister had already made films in English, but she decided to have this script translated and submit it to the *Oscailt* scheme. Although it was accepted, it took two further attempts at translation before the Irish-language version of the script was considered adequate by TG4.[75] She mentions having some trouble casting actors who could work naturally in the regional dialect, but she eventually decided that casting an actor with a different accent for the lead role could suit the story since the already insecure mother character might feel "even more of an outsider in the community," thereby amplifying her isolation.[76]

Anne Crilly also confirms that the script of her short film, *Limbo* (Oscailt, 2001), was originally written in English. She did not have it translated into Irish until a friend suggested applying for *Oscailt* funding after the script had been rejected by a few other funding schemes. The setting was also altered to include the Donegal Gaeltacht as well as the original setting, Derry City in Northern Ireland. While Crilly does speak some Irish – modestly describing her level as "a bit rusty" – she also adds, "but I always said I

[74] Quoted in Rebecca Kemp, "The Rise and Rise of the Irish Short," *Film Ireland* 114 (2007): 25.
[75] Personal interview with Cecilia McAllister, writer/director of *Féileacán*. July 11, 2009 at the Galway Film Fleadh, Galway, Ireland.
[76] Ibid.

would have made it in Lithuanian [if that's what it took] to get it made."[77] Producer Edwina Forkin of Zanzibar Productions, a bilingual production company, echoes this sentiment: "If somebody gives me, say, eighty thousand to make a film in Irish or Swahili, that certainly helps my craft. It doesn't matter what language it's in. It's about the story, and getting that across."[78] Forkin subsequently lived up to her word by co-producing a film in Portuguese (a language she doesn't speak at all).

Critics such as media scholar Fidelma Farley have argued that since many of the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* scripts originate outside of the Irish-speaking community, they don't represent actual native speakers. She insists that

> Merely grafting Irish on to "universal" stories might appear to be an act of modernizing the language, but in actuality has the opposite effect – by removing Irish from its context it becomes increasingly isolated and irrelevant to contemporary Irish life.[79]

Ruth Lysaght more precisely expresses the frustrations of many native Irish-speakers when she complains that "English-speakers make their *Oscailt* in order to break through into the [film] industry in general, and disregard the language as a tool for expression."[80] This comment accuses some filmmakers of the cynical mis-use of the funding programs. More significantly, Lysaght hints at allegations of cultural appropriation, raising doubts about the premise that the national language belongs to all members of the nation. It is a common complaint among those with vested interests in

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[77] Personal interview with Anne Crilly, writer and director of *Limbo*. December 4, 2007, at the Foyle Film Festival, Derry, N. Ireland.
[78] Personal interview with Edwina Forkin, producer of *Limbo*, *Clare Sa Speir, Deich gCoisceim,* and *Iníon an Fhiaclóra*. November 30, 2007, at the Foyle Film Festival, Derry, N. Ireland.
[79] Fidelma Farley, "Breac Scannáin/Speckled Films: Genre and Irish-Language Filmmaking," in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism,* ed. Brian McIllroy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 174.
[80] Lysaght, "Súil Eile, Dúil Nua," 89.

building a sustainable Irish-language media industry or in the broader revitalization of the language itself. Although Irish is officially the national language for all citizens, there is still a real difference between those who speak the language and those who do not. This fact raises complex questions about the right of non-native speakers to represent the Irish-speaking community or indeed to work in the language at all.

While the ambivalence displayed by some filmmakers towards the language is understandably frustrating to native speakers and language enthusiasts, the move to discourage non-native speakers from the production of Irish-language film and television is counter-productive both to the language movement and to the Irish film industry. Forkin, for example, observes, "I've actually probably learned more Irish by making films than I ever did in school."[81] Not only does Irish-language film production help the language skills of those directly involved, as in Forkin's case, but the prospect of desirable jobs in the media industry also provides an incentive for aspiring filmmakers or actors to improve their linguistic abilities in order to make them more competitive in the job market.

Institutes of higher education also acknowledge the advantages their graduates will have if their technical skills are complemented by linguistic ones. Screenwriter Hugh Travers (*An Cosc*, Vincent Gallagher, Lasair, 2009) is a recent graduate of the Dublin Institute of Technology's Media Arts program. As part of the degree, students are expected to take a language course, and Irish is a very popular option. After his training, says Travers, "I had a proficiency [in Irish] but not a fluency."[82] Although he still needed some help in translating his script, his linguistic knowledge and his familiarity with

[81] Ibid.

previous Irish-language shorts gave him the confidence to apply successfully to the *Lasair* scheme: "I think certain people feel completely blocked off from those funding schemes because they have no Irish, whereas because I had some Irish, I was aware and clued-in and would follow where the money was going."[83] In his case, he had an eye on the Irish-language funding scheme from the very early stages of development, and chose a story where the language would make sense. The title *An Cosc* ("the ban") refers to the Gaelic Athletic Association's practice of banning members who play or even watch "foreign" sports such as soccer or rugby. The film itself is a brilliant and beautiful short about two friends in small-town Munster in the 1930s. The seed of the story is true, but Travers then let his imagination follow it to a more sensational conclusion:

> Well, there was a story of two friends who got each other banned for attending the same [rugby] match together, and it struck me as a very odd and particularly Irish thing to do – cutting off your nose to spite your face in sheer bitterness at the guy next door. And that story fascinated me. And then I just imagined, what if that story had led to the president getting banned? And it is one of those urban myths that could easily go around, if someone just started saying, "did you hear about those two boys who got the president banned…" That's what intrigued me about the story: the two friends, the thematic possibilities, and what it said about the Irish psyche.[84]

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[82] Personal interview with Hugh Travers, scriptwriter for *An Cosc*, June 15, 2010, at the Irish Film Institute, Dublin.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

The subject matter and setting of *An Cosc* both make the Irish language a natural medium through which to tell the story.

The subject matter is particularly apt, given that the president in question was Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League.

In choosing the style, Travers decided to write the film as a fake documentary, with interviews of contemporary "experts" (actually actors) as well as "historical" footage of the 1930s:

> I thought then because we were already playing with a mix of fact and fiction, it would be interesting to also play with the styles of fact and fiction, documentary and narrative, as well. … We wanted it to be succinct, and not spend ages on lingering shots and that sort of thing. We just thought this is a really fascinating story, whether it's true or not, and we should just tell it simply and let the story then speak for itself.[85]

Another film which extrapolates from a true story is *Marion agus an Banphrionsa* ("Marion and the Princess") (Melanie Clark Pullen, Oscailt, 2006). On a visit to Monaco, writer/director Pullen discovered a photo of Princess Grace Kelly's visit to Ireland in 1961. It showed the Princess with a little girl in her communion dress, and it was

[85] Ibid.

accompanied by a letter written when the girl grew to be a woman. The woman wrote that she had stood in front of the Princess's car as it passed through her small town, in order to get her to make an unplanned stop. Pullen explains,

Marion agus an Banphrionsa has Princess Grace Kelly visiting the Kerry Gaeltacht but the story "*could* have happened anywhere."

> I kind of fictionalized a story out of that. I loved the whole idea with fairy tales, and children making up their minds to do something. She [the original Marion] is not an Irish speaker, but I really had always wanted to make the film in Irish. ... And Princess Grace did travel to the Gaeltacht so it *could* have happened anywhere in Ireland.[86]

Like Hugh Travers, Melanie Clarke Pullen included Irish in her formal training, doing a joint degree in Irish and Drama at Trinity College Dublin. Although she is not a native speaker, she has perfected her Irish well enough to be able to teach it in schools, and she is also involved in Irish-language theatre. In her case, then, the commitment to the language extends beyond her film career. Despite her interest in the language, and although she had always imagined telling Marion's story in Irish, she very emphatically did not want to make a film *about* the Irish language.

> I wanted to make a film that was a story about a little girl who wanted to meet a princess and who then grew up and got to continue that journey as

[86] Personal interview with Melanie Clark Pullen, writer/director for *Marion agus an Banphrionsa*. June 17, 2010, at the Irish Film Institute, Dublin.

an adult. And I wanted it to just happen to be in Irish; it could have been in any language. It really could have been in any country, even.

There is no particular reason that this story had to be told in Irish. The point, however, is that there is also no particular reason that it should *not* be told in Irish. Pullen – and other filmmakers like her – illustrate that minority languages are as suitable story-telling vehicles as dominant languages and that some aspects of culture can be well understood across linguistic lines.

Cumulative impact of *Oscailt* and *Lasair*

The representative films described above demonstrate that the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films displayed a range of approaches to the language. While in some respects the films made positive contributions to the language movement, for example by encouraging filmmakers to improve their Irish, they also attracted criticism from language activists who felt that they predominantly represented outsider perspectives on the Irish-speaking community. Stoneman explains that the issue of translated scripts in particular was aggravated over time. The quality of submissions to *Oscailt* actually declined as the program became more established, and after about five rounds of funding, "it was becoming kind of a second safety net for people who hadn't got into [the English-language] Short Cuts."[87] IFB short film executive Fran Keveaney confirms that many of the scripts that were rejected for Short Cuts would reappear on her desk a few months later when the *Oscailt* submissions were due, since there was a general perception that

[87] Interview with Rod Stoneman.

competition in the latter scheme was not as strong.[88] Stoneman strongly believes that "all forms of cultural diversity are healthy and productive, and therefore, bilingualism and minority languages must be given sustained support,"[89] but he nevertheless acknowledged that the tailoring of scripts purely to increase chances of being funded was "problematic."[90]

The Irish Film Board eventually discontinued the program in 2007. As reported in *Film Ireland*, the major trade publication for the Irish cinema industry:

> Concerns about the Irish language short being "ghetto-ised" have resulted in the dedicated scheme Oscailt being discontinued. Instead, all five short schemes have been opened up to Irish language submissions. The thinking behind this is to give those writing *as Gaeilge* as much scope as possible and also to discourage shorts being translated purely for the purpose of funding.[91]

This statement is somewhat misleading, as the other schemes (e.g. documentary or animated shorts) were never limited to English-language submissions. Furthermore, although the IFB actively encourages applications in Irish, in fact applications in that language have "plummeted "[92] since the cancelling of the *Oscailt* scheme. Keveaney confirms that proposals in Irish would be in a more favourable position compared to similar-quality proposals in English, because there are fewer Irish-language submissions. In the year following the cancellation of *Oscailt*, however, only two out of a total 180

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[88] Personal interview with Fran Keaveney, Short Films Executive, Irish Film Board. July 27, 2009, at the IFB offices, Galway, Ireland.
[89] Interview with Rod Stoneman.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Niamh Creely, "Schemers," *Film Ireland* 119 (Nov/Dec 2007): 16.
[92] Interview with Fran Keveaney.

applications for short-film funding were in the Irish language, and neither was considered to be of sufficient quality for acceptance.[93]

Similarly, although it was done without any fanfare, the *Lasair* funding also lapsed into inactivity. As mentioned previously, the *Lasair* fund was never as regular as *Oscailt*. Seven films were completed in association with the 2001 round of funding; six were funded in 2003; four in 2004, and there have been no films produced since the three funded in 2007.

From the perspective of building a national cinema, the question remains of whether these *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films have contributed anything that could not have been achieved as effectively if they were made in English. In terms of visual style, the Irish-language short films more or less match the films made through the comparable English-language schemes of the IFB. There is a great deal of variety within both languages in terms of aesthetic objectives and technical accomplishment, but the differences are really only apparent between individual filmmakers rather than between the two linguistic systems. Overall, the narrative style is fairly conservative; in the most comprehensive appraisal of Irish-language shorts to date, Lysaght concludes that "the Oscailt films evince little formal innovation."[94] Ruth Barton agrees that the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films "have been notable for their refusal to relegate Irish-language culture to the cinematic margins,"[95] in terms of style and subject matter, if not exhibition. In that sense, the recent films differ substantially from the projects of Gael Linn and Bob Quinn, which in both cases broke new ground in terms of cinematic techniques. Furthermore, while

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[93] Email correspondence with Fran Keveaney, September 3, 2009.
[94] Ruth Lysaght, *Súil Eile, Dúil Nua? TG4 and the Oscailt Short Film Initiative – A New Perspective on the Irish Language,* M.Phil dissertation, Trinity College Dublin. 2002, 72.
[95] Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 182.

Gael Linn and Quinn were ideologically driven in their filmmaking, the new generation of filmmakers represent a variety of different agendas and offer no unified political message.

The fact that these films represent a diversity of perspectives on language helps to avoid a situation where the films appeal only to spectators with the same ideological view, thereby essentially preaching to the converted. Indeed, many of the films are self-consciously ambivalent about the Irish language, inviting discussion rather than trying to enforce any particular moral agenda. On the other hand, the films cannot quite be considered mainstream, even within the short film sector, as the language still creates an automatic distinction from the rest of cinema seen in Ireland, which is predominantly Anglophone.

Irish-language shorts are certainly perceived as an alternative to mainstream English-language films, and their circulation naturally reflects this. They have been widely used in educational settings, for example, and this is probably where they have done the most to advance the causes of both Irish cinema and the Irish language. Since at least 2004, the Irish Film Institute has been including Irish-language short films in its educational program. Alicia McGivern of the Irish Film Institute explains that these films are used in a similar way to French, German, and Spanish-language screenings at the IFI, that is, "as an ideal vehicle for language development, follow-up oral work, vocabulary building, etc."[96] She adds that interest has been shown equally from Irish-immersion schools and from regular schools where the Irish language is one subject among many.[97]

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[96] Alicia McGivern, "IFI Education: Gearrscannáin Ghaeilge," *Film Ireland* 98 (2004): 48.
[97] Ibid., 48.

The IFI, in partnership with the IFB and TG4, also produced a DVD compilation of nine Irish-language shorts and distributed it to every secondary school in Ireland, along with an accompanying Education Guide to help teachers use the films in the classroom.[98] The guide includes some linguistic information, such as difficult vocabulary used in the films, but it also includes quotes from filmmakers about their work, and exercises that have to do with other, non-language-related aspects of the films. For example, the suggested discussion topics for *Cáca Milis* (Jennifer Keegan, Oscailt, 2001) include a question about the casting of well-known actor Brendan Gleeson as a blind, asthmatic passenger on a train and his performance in this role. The suggested written exercise is about the film's representation of disabled people.

Irish-language short films are therefore not only assisting language instruction, but also inviting students to critically engage with Irish cinema in more general terms. These students may not otherwise be exposed to much Irish cinema, if they do not actively seek it out at specialty cinemas (given the domination of Hollywood fare in mainstream theatres) or if teachers in other subjects do not make a special effort to include it. For the young-adult audience, the selected shorts provide excellent examples of how cinema can be used to creatively explore a variety of aspects of Irish culture, of which the language is only one element.

Nevertheless, the films which diegetically investigate the role of the Irish language have been particularly welcomed by those working in educational settings. McGivern observed that the films which produce the most engaged responses from students are those that use humour or show unconventional perspectives on language

[98] Films on the DVD are *An Leabhar*, *Aqua, Cáca Milis, Clare sa Spéir, Fillean an Feall, Iníon an Fiaclóra, Lipservice, Tubberware,* and *Yu Ming is Ainm dom.*

politics: “In contrast with the use of language in the more traditional art forms of literature and poetry, these films often take an irreverent approach, poking fun at the culture or questioning the relevance of the Irish language in everyday life.”[99] The impact of these bilingual films is examined in chapter 6.

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[99] McGivern, “Gearrscannáin Ghaeilge,” 48.

Films made through *Oscailt* and *Lasair*

Oscailt

Cosa Nite (Dearbhla Walsh, 1998)
Lipservice (Paul Mercier, 1998)
Aqua (Edel O'Brien, 1998)
Deich gCoiscéim (Pearse Lehane, 1999)
Dillusc (Dearbhla Walsh, 1999)
Iníon An Fiaclóra (Jacqueline O'Neill, 2000)
An Leabhar (Robert Quinn, 2000)
Filleann an Feall (Frankie McCafferty, 2000)
Dallacán (Cóilín Ó Scolaí, 2000)
Óstán na gCroíthe Briste (Ciaran O'Connor, 2000)
Limbo (Anne Crilly, 2001)
Clare sa Spéir (Audrey O'Reilley, 2001)
Tubberware (Paul Mercier, 2001)
Cáca Milis (Jennifer Keegan, 2001)
As na Ráillí (Paddy Hayes, 2002)
LSD '73 (Paul Duane, 2002)
Ocras (Sean McGuire, 2003)
Ciorcal (Collette Cullen, 2003)
Tango (Sean Cooney, 2003)
Ros (John Norton, 2003)
Cuilin Dualach (Nora Twomey, 2004)
An Díog is Faide (Hugh Farley, 2004)
Fluent Dysphasia (Daniel O'Hara, 2004)
Idir Dha Chomhairle (Mary Crumlish, 2004)
Fíorghael (Macdara Vallely, 2005)
Rógairí (Thomas Cosgrave, 2005)
20 nó 22 (Conor McDermottroe, 2005)
An Teanga Runda (Brian Durnin, 2005)
Gafa (John Gleeson, 2006)
Spota (Brian Reddin, 2006)
Marion agus an Banphrionsa (Melanie Clark Pullen, 2006)
Rolla Saor (Cathal Watters, 2007)
An Créatúr (Peter Foott, 2007)
*An Teanga (*Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhride, 2007)
Bua (Sonya Gildea, 2007)
Nollaig Shona (Orla Murphy, 2008)
Féileacán (Cecilia McAllister, 2008)
An Ranger (PJ Dillon, 2008)
Foireann Codladh (Danann Breathnach, 2008)

Lasair

Eireville (James Finlan, 2001)
Fómhair Searbh, Geimhreadh Geal (Ruth Meehan, 2002)
Drum (Mikel Murfi, 2002)
Tá Schumacher ar a Bhealach (Brian Timmons, 2002)
Olive (Neasa Hardiman, 2002)
Pádraig agus Nadia (Kester Dyer, 2002)
An Cruthaitheoir (Damon Silvester, John Wallace, 2002)
An Té Nach Bhfuil Láidir (Samira Radsi, 2002)
Yu Ming is Ainm Dom (Daniel O'Hara, 2003)
An Cuainín (Chris Roufs, 2003)
An Dúil (Cathal Watters, 2003)
An Fiach Dubh (Declan de Barra, 2003)
Pandora (Paul Farren, 2005)
Space Raiders (Ann Marie Brennan, 2005)
Fáilte go hÉireann (Graham Cantwell, 2005)
Mac an Athar (Colm Bairead, 2005)
An Cosc (Vincent Gallagher, 2009)
Finscéal Pháidí (Colm Bairéad, 2009)

Chapter 6: The language in context – Bilingual films

Eric Canuel's 2006 *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* partnered an Anglo-Ontarian police officer with a French-speaking Québecois one, and much of the film's comedy hinged on the differences between the protagonists' ethno-linguistic cultures. The film was widely celebrated as Canada's first fully-bilingual feature film and also – somewhat unexpectedly – broke all box-office records to become the highest grossing domestically-produced film in Canadian history. What should be surprising is not that it gave equal screen time to English and French, or even that it found receptive audiences across the country, but that bilingual films are not made more often in this bilingual country. Instead, English and French communities seem to operate as "two solitudes," to borrow the title from Hugh MacLennan's 1945 novel, at least on screen if not in real life.

As Suzanne Romaine points out in the opening to her book *Bilingualism,* it would be odd to find a book titled "monolingualism," since monolingualism is taken as the assumed, unmarked case that doesn't require explanation, despite the fact that people who speak only one language are in fact in the minority in the global context.[1] Even in a bilingual country such as Canada, there still seems to be a perception among the general public that languages, and even language communities, are completely separate from one another. One of the explanations we might consider for the fact that the English and French production industries are so discrete in Canada is that they are geared to what are seen as distinct English and French audiences.

The Irish situation is quite different, given that there no longer remain any monoglot Irish-speakers and that there is a greater overlap of cultural and ethnic heritage

between Irish- and English-speaking citizens. Pádhraic Ó Ciardha elaborates on that fact in reference to the mixing of languages on TG4:

> The two languages interact all the time. It is not possible to find a rock anywhere in the Atlantic where it is now possible to live your life solely through Irish or Welsh. … You can put a positive spin on it, which I like to do, and say: these two languages have been interacting for six hundred years and enriching one another.[2]

Indeed, the interaction between languages provides very fertile ground for narrative fiction either in Canada, as with *Bon Cop, Bad Cop*, or in Ireland, as with the films to be discussed in this chapter.

The possible storylines that emerge in a bilingual setting are not limited to those that reinforce stereotypes and shore up linguistic divides, like in *Bon Cop, Bad Cop*. Sherry Simon's investigation of hybrid texts demonstrates the ability of bilingual writers to "highlight their position between cultures, creating a new site of individual and collective expression."[3] In other words, a creative exploration of two linguistic communities does not necessarily need to set up a fixed dichotomy separated by an empty void but can instead open a vibrant and interesting space in the middle.

Of the filmmakers who were attracted to the funding available for Irish-language production, many responded to the challenge of filming in Irish by creating narratives that put the language in context, which usually also meant producing bilingual films. Interestingly, these films are among the most successful of the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films in terms of critical attention and awards. They are also the most popular in educational

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[1] Suzanne Romaine, *Bilingualism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 1, 6.
[2] Interview with Pádhraic Ó Ciardha, Deputy CEO of TG4, Tuesday, July 28th, 2009, Galway City, Ireland.

settings since they explicitly invite discussion about the role of the language in contemporary society.

This chapter investigates various strategies filmmakers have used to comment on the state of bilingualism in contemporary Ireland. In the first part of this chapter, I will analyse three pairs of short films that creatively explore the Irish language in the following contexts: the educational or language-learning domain; the imagined role of Irish in a fantastical, parallel Ireland; and finally the Irish-speaking outsider in English-dominated Dublin. In the second part of the chapter, I will turn to a case study of Tom Collin's *Kings*, which takes the language outside of Ireland entirely to follow a small group of Irish-speaking émigrés in London. *Kings* is particularly interesting as it is the only full-length Irish-language feature to secure funding from the Irish Film Board in addition to TG4 and other funders. The added visibility of a mainstream release further increases the importance of the depiction of the language in this film. My analysis of the film focuses on the meanings that were created when the script was translated from an English-language play to an Irish-language film.

Language in context: Short films

Fidelma Farley explains that in any contemporary film set outside the Gaeltacht, the use of the Irish language will be jarring; however, the best of the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films manage to use that jarring effect productively. She praises those films where a keen awareness of social context is used to produce comedy "by a deliberate and conscious

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[3] Sherry Simon, "Cultural and textual hybridity," *Across Languages and Cultures* 2.2 (2001): 217.

*mis*placement of Irish in incongruous settings and situations."[4] This section analyses six short films that creatively explore the real or potential role of the Irish language in society by doing just that. *Lipservice* (Paul Mercier, *Oscailt*, 1998) and *Fíorghael* (Macdara Vallely, *Oscailt*, 2005) highlight the challenges of language-learning, particularly the issue of motivation; *Eireville* (James Finlan, *Lasair*, 2001) and *Pádraig agus Nadia* (Kester Dyer, *Lasair*, 2002) are both set in fictional parallel Irelands where the language has a very different role than it does in reality; and *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (Daniel O'Hara, *Lasair*, 2003) and *Fluent Dysphasia* (Daniel O'Hara, *Oscailt*, 2004) both chronicle the difficulties of trying to communicate in the Irish capital without recourse to the English language. These films are not the only ones to deal with the language question directly; altogether about a quarter of the films from both schemes contain some commentary on this issue, although all of the major themes are represented in the selected films. A more comprehensive look at this particular issue could also include, for example, the following films: *Mac an Athar* (Colm Bairead, *Lasair,* 2005), about a man raising his son as an Irish-speaker in Dublin; *An Teanga Runda* (Brian Durnin, *Oscailt*, 2005) about a child who uses the Irish language to keep secrets from his mother; or *Rógairí* (Thomas Cosgrave, *Oscailt,* 2005), which is set in the eighteenth century, allowing the director to use misunderstandings between languages to add "a richness to the story which gave it more historical context."[5]

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[4] Fidelma Farley, "Breac scannáin/Speckled Films: Genre and Irish-Language Filmmaking," in *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism*, ed. Brian McIllroy (New York: Routledge, 2007), 170.

Education and language-learning

Lipservice is set in a Dublin high school on the day of the Irish oral exam.

The first round of *Oscailt* funding in 1998 resulted in one stand-out hit: Paul Mercier's *Lipservice*. As a former high-school teacher, Mercier was well aware of the anxiety that students feel when faced with the compulsory Irish oral exam, and felt that it would make an interesting context for a short film. *Lipservice* is set in a north-side Dublin high school on the day of the exam, and much of the film consists of framing shots of the inspector with a student in the examining room, followed by alternating point-of-view shots that depict the inspector's increasing bemusement at the students' incompetent responses. One student's vocabulary is so poor that he can't even find the word for "pen" or "window" ("Jaysus, that's desperate," as he himself says), while another actually confuses his subjects and responds to all the questions in French. The humour in the film appeals both to high-school students still looking forward to this rite of passage and to adult audiences who can laugh with relief that their own exam is behind them.

At first glance, the film appears to be simply highlighting the failure of the education system by satirizing the abysmal standard of fluency at many non-Gaeltacht schools. There is a deeper and more complex argument here as well. Reviving the Irish language is not a priority for any of these young adults, and Mercier is not saying that it should be. Rather, he is questioning the usefulness of compulsory Irish; he wanted to make a film that reflected his own experience teaching Irish "in a world where the

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[5] Rebecca Kemp, "The Rise and Rise of the Irish Short," *Film Ireland* 114 (2007): 25.

language really has no relevance or when it does have relevance it's forced. On one day, everybody pays lip-service to the language."[6] His disillusionment is not with the students themselves, or even the teachers, but with "those who make policy decisions and comment on falling standards in Irish but who are nevertheless completely out of touch with the realities of teaching."[7]

Mercier is sympathetic both to the students and to the examiner. He is attuned to the pressures felt by urban Irish youth, particularly those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and these come through in various ways in the film. The pressure to do well in school is evident at the very beginning of the film, while students are smoking in the lavatories and nervously helping each other cram for their upcoming test. We later become aware of other issues that may be interfering with their academic success through their answers to the examiner's questions. One student, who mentions a baby at home when discussing her family, is requested to clarify in Irish whether it is a brother or sister. She shakes her head: "*m'iníon*" (my daughter). Another talks about her mother going to the post-office to pick up a welfare check. The final student to take the exam reveals he's been skipping school out of embarrassment over his parents' recent divorce, at the time still a cause for stigma in Ireland.

It is to Mercier's credit that he portrays the examiner sympathetically as well. He could have sought easy laughs by casting the examiner as a villain, but instead he is simply a man from a different culture, baffled by what he finds. Mercier explains that "the students have communicated to him in a way, on their own level… They're socially different. Their socio-economic background is different. They think about different

[6] Joanne Hayden, "Paul Mercier," *Film West* 34 (1999): 66.
[7] Ibid., 66.

things."[8] One example of such a cultural misunderstanding is when the examiner asks each of the students what they would do to increase the use of Irish in their own community; this is intended as a serious question by the examiner, but it is clearly a preposterous and irrelevant proposition from the students' perspective. One girl answers that they should put up signs in Irish at the pub, and the examiner assumes she likes to drink. He bumps into her later at the pub and realizes in fact that she thought of that establishment not because she frequents it as a customer, but because it is where she has to work to support herself. There is also an inherent comment in the film on the changed class associations of the Irish language; while the language is still identified with rural traditional Ireland, it is also the domain of the educated and administrative class. In other words, the language that was once restricted to the peasantry is now in many important ways a language of privilege. The linguistic difference between the examiner and the working-class students works to both reflect and perpetuate the class difference between them.

Given the subject matter, this film is a popular choice for educational screenings, particularly at the high-school level. Furthermore, like all *Oscailt* and *Lasair* films, *Lipservice* was broadcast on TG4. It was also shown in Irish cinemas before the feature film *Sweety Barrett* (Stephen Bradley, 1998), thereby reaching a wider audience than usual for an Irish short film. One thing that sets this film apart from other Irish-language films, however, is that it was shown without subtitles; the level of Irish was basic enough that most of the national audience would be able to follow, and if they could not it would only drive the point home more convincingly.

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[8] Ibid., 66.

Rod Stoneman, then CEO of the Film Board, was delighted to have such a "tremendously successful" film in the first round of funding, thereby securing the perception of *Oscailt* as a legitimate project. Furthermore, he found himself personally convinced by the film and praised Mercier's tackling of the language issue: "[*Lipservice*] takes a very clear, modern approach to the language existing at this point in time, and it points at the damaging effects of an anachronistic approach which had paradoxically stopped people speaking Irish."[9]

Lipservice accurately portrays how the educational system is failing to motivate inner-city students to embrace their national tongue. *Fíorghael* ("ultra-Irish"), on the other hand, is based on the premise that many adults have lost whatever school Irish they once had. The film is set in a psychiatrist's office, where the receptionist blithely chats away on the phone. Assuming that the waiting clients cannot understand a word of her Irish, she feels safe mocking them to her friend at the other end of the line. The clients admit to each other that it is "a beautiful language" but that they never learned it because of "terrible teachers at school." Nevertheless, their curiosity and increasing suspicion about the receptionist's inscrutable comments motivate them all to learn Irish, and eventually to stand up to her with a perfectly fluent rebuttal. It is at this point that the film takes a twist to reveal that the receptionist was in fact an undercover agent, on a mission to increase the number of Irish speakers, one waiting room at a time.

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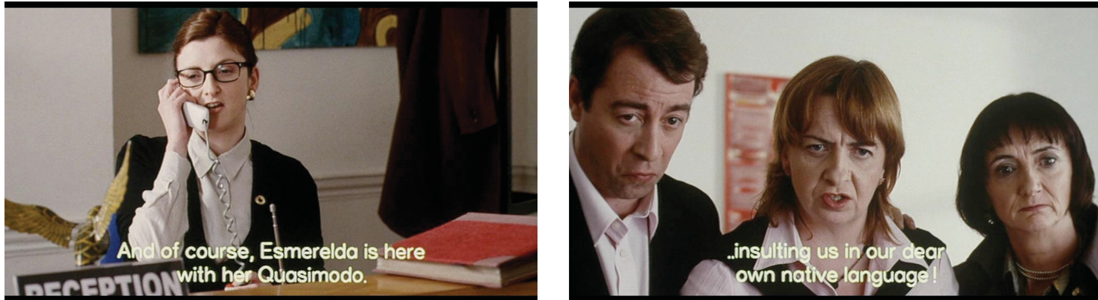
[9] Personal interview with Rod Stoneman, former CEO of the Irish Film Board (1993-2003), current director of the Huston School of Film & Digital Media, National University of Ireland, Galway. July 30, 2009, in Galway, Ireland.

In *Fíorghael*, clients in a psychiatrist's waiting room are motivated to learn Irish in order to decipher what the receptionist is saying about them.



Fíorghael won second prize at the Foyle Film Festival in Northern Ireland and also screened at festivals across Ireland, the United States, and Europe. While the film comments specifically on Irish language politics (the setting of a psychiatrist's office is a not-so-subtle indication of the director's view on the insanity of contemporary language policy), the humour of the film works even for audiences without an Irish background. Indeed, the idea of one character mocking another in a language they do not understand would work in any multilingual context.

The film uses mainstream genre conventions to help portray the twist ending. When the receptionist leaves the office near the end of the film, we see her quickly change her hair and makeup and stuff part of her outfit in a public garbage bin. Her appearance does not change drastically, but these actions clearly mirror those of an undercover agent who has completed her mission and is disposing of her disguise. The nod to the action-film genre is completed by the soundtrack, with music that echoes *James Bond* or *Mission Impossible*. The film therefore uses comedy and cinematic techniques that appeal to a broad audience, while also carrying a deeper layer of commentary aimed specifically at the Irish audience.

Irish in a parallel reality

As films such as *Lipservice* and *Fíorghael* eloquently illustrate, Éamon de Valera's dream of a Gaelic Ireland is no closer now than it was at the dawn of Irish independence. Both are tongue-in-cheek narratives about the cultural nationalist's dream of gaelicizing the Irish citizenry: while *Lipservice* uses the conventions of realism to depict a very plausible storyline, *Fíorghael* uses elements of the spy-thriller genre to make its point in a humorous way. Ruth Barton points out that other Irish short films also turn to the fantasy genre to critique the vision of pastoral Gaelic Ireland expressed both by nationalist leaders such as de Valera and by filmmakers like John Ford. In particular, she references de Valera's legendary 1943 Saint Patrick's day address,[10] which in her estimation "fused two foundational paradigms: the dream of republicanism and the (exile's) dream of return."[11]

Barton looks at short films in both English and Irish and finds that genre films provide a fruitful outlet for critique of social policy in a variety of areas:

> The idea that the dream has become a nightmare informs any number of Irish [Science Fiction] and fantasy shorts. This intense pessimism is articulated via a number of themes, primarily the critique of official

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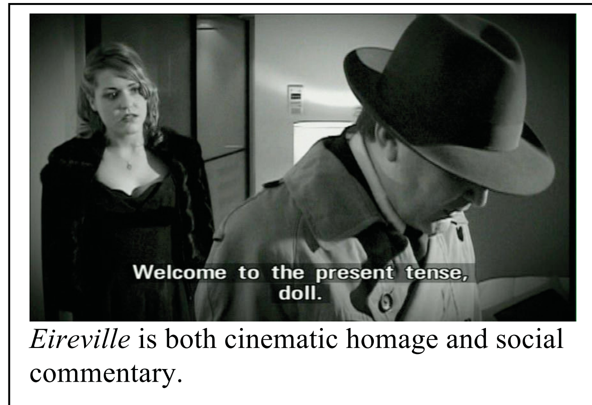
[10] An audio version of the address is available on RTÉ's online archives. "Look and Listen: de Valera as leader." http://www.rte.ie/laweb/ll/ll_t09b.html [consulted June 29, 2012]. The relevant portion of the speech is as follows: "The Ireland that we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live."

[11] Ruth Barton, "The Ireland They Dream of: *Eireville, Coolockland* and the Appropriation of Science Fiction and Fantasy Narratives in Short Irish Filmmaking," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 29.2 (2003): 42.

policies, a distrust of government, and a revisionist attitude towards republican history.[12]

James Finlan's *Eireville* is the clearest example of this pessimism within the Irish-language sector.

Eireville is at once an homage to Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and a critique of the more extreme homogenizing inclinations of Irish cultural nationalism. Like the original film, *Eireville* is set in an alternate present that is simultaneously futuristic and historical. Fidelma Farley notes that "the use of Irish adds considerably to the deliberately confused temporality of the film,"[13] since a purely Irish-speaking nation exists only in the distant past or possibly some hypothetical future but certainly not in the real present. Furthermore, as in *Alphaville,* the restriction of language is shown to be one strategy of a totalitarian regime. In the original film, words describing emotions are banned; in Finlan's version all the inhabitants of Eireville can speak only in the past tense and do not recognize words such as "*anois*" ("now") or "*amárach*" ("tomorrow"). In addition, the only numbers they may use are 1, 9, and 6, after the monumental year 1916.



Eireville is both cinematic homage and social commentary.

The Eireville depicted in the film is a dystopian state run by Patrick von Pearseman, an allusion to both Professor von Braun of *Alphaville* and the executed leader of the 1916 rising, Patrick Pearse. While Finlan was "anxious to make it clear that his

[12] Ibid., 42.
[13] Farley, "Breac Scannáin," 171.

primary intention was to make audiences laugh,"[14] and his fascination with totalitarian states stems more from his film-school training in communist Moscow than his experience in Ireland, the social critique is quite clear. Farley calls the film "the dark underside of the revivalist's dream, a place that is forever arrested in 1916, where everyone speaks Irish and visitors must 'prove' their Irishness."[15] Finlan's choice to reference *Alphaville* – a film which itself was influenced by American film noir – makes his message especially ironic, since his chosen cinematic style as well as his narrative content are direct rebuttals to the kind of cultural purity sought by de Valera and other early leaders of the Irish republic.

A more subtle critique of minority-majority language politics can be found in Kester Dyer's *Pádraig agus Nadia* ("Pádraig and Nadia"). On one level, the film is a Romeo-and-Juliet tale of love across a cultural divide. Pádraig speaks Irish, the dominant language within the Ireland depicted in the film (no explanation is given for this circumstance) while Nadia in the neighbouring apartment does not speak at all. Their landlord explains to Pádraig that Nadia's family is from the (fictional) island of Tayeul, where the native language "was wiped out by invadors a long time ago."

Rather than adopt the language of the invadors, Tayeuls have developed a kind of telepathy that allows them to communicate without vocalizing. Because of their difference, Tayeuls are discriminated against by the mainstream Irish-speaking community. As a result, Nadia's father forbids her from dating Pádraig. Pádraig himself suffers ridicule at the hands of his friends, who call his new girlfriend a "gypsy" and make jokes about how she must be the perfect woman since neither she nor her mother

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[14] Barton, "The Ireland they Dream of," 43

[15] Farley, "Breac Scannáin," 170-71.

can talk back to him. The turning point in the film comes when Pádraig sees Nadia's little brother being beaten up for refusing to speak, then steps in to save him while staying silent in solidarity. Alicia McGivern comments that *Pádraig agus Nadia* was a perfect match for the Irish Film Institute's education initiative, since not only did it invite discussion about the Irish language but also more broadly "about the nature of communication, racism and intolerance."[16]

Animated thought bubbles are used to indicate the Tayeul's telepathic communication in *Padraig agus Nadia*.

By making Irish the majority rather than the minority language, Dyer illustrates the fact that there is nothing intrinsic about the language itself that causes Irish to be a minority language. The use of a fictional language as the minority language is also an important strategy. The Tayeul culture, not being real, does not illicit any specific prejudices or emotional attachments from the audience. Such would not be the case if Dyer had chosen to depict a reverse of the actual situation and used English as the minority language in the film, for example. Finally, the silencing of the Tayeul language is an original and effective strategy to illustrate language death. The film would not be nearly as poignant if Nadia simply spoke the langauge of whatever colonial power invaded her native land. While the Tayeul family members are generally represented silently, occasionally the audience is privy to their communication through the help of

animated thought bubbles, which act as subtitles and allow Dyer to inject some comic relief in the form of inter-linguistic miscommunication.

Pádraig agus Nadia was the first of Dyer's short films; he subsequently made *Call Girl* (2003) in English and *L'écouteur* (2007) in French. He admits that the only reason his first film was in Irish was that the *Lasair* deadline happened to come around the time he was looking for funding.[17] Dyer had been studying at University College Dublin, and one of his professors had suggested applying for what was at the time a new funding initiative. The director had seen some of the previous *Oscailt* shorts and had already been mulling over story ideas that might be thematically linked to the question of language.

As a Montreal native with both English and French roots, Dyer is well versed in language politics and can offer a fresh perspective on the Irish situation. He also confirms that during the application process, TG4 was always more interested in his film's potential than in his personal credentials as an Irish-language activist: "I'm not Irish, I don't have an ounce of Irish blood, I don't speak Irish, and they never made me feel uncomfortable. It was always very positive: they asked me about the script."[18]

Dyer's experience supports Padhraic Ó Ciardha's claim that TG4 truly wants to open up Irish-language media beyond the Gaeltacht: "We are a national TV station and we welcome *everybody*." From his perspective, the objective of the short film schemes is to "bring the best talent that you can to your audience, to develop the sector that can engage with the audience. […] And to show that this language isn't dead yet."[19] In fact,

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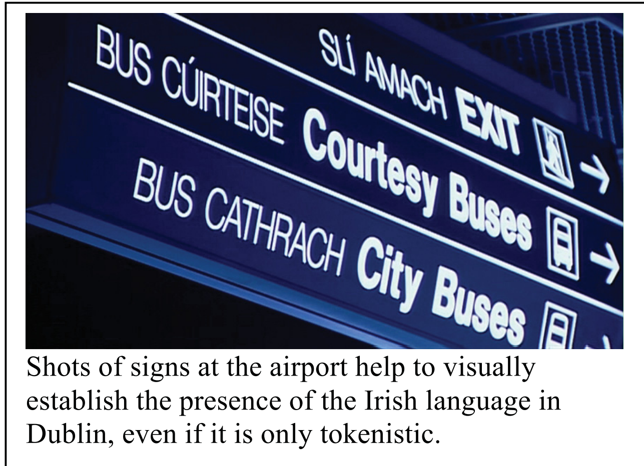
[16] Alicia McGivern, "IFI Education: Gearrscannáin Ghaeilge," *Film Ireland* 98 (2004): 48.
[17] Interview with Kester Dyer, writer/director of *Padraig agus Nadia,* May 15, 2009, in Montreal.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Interview with Pádhraic Ó Ciardha.

the most-awarded film of all the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* shorts – *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* – was also conceived by someone with no Irish-language background but with a playful curiosity about what life would be like for an Irish-speaker in the capital city.

The Irish-speaking outsider in Dublin



Shots of signs at the airport help to visually establish the presence of the Irish language in Dublin, even if it is only tokenistic.

The most celebrated of the Irish-language short films to date is Daniel O'Hara's *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (*My Name is Yu Ming*), which took both the Best Irish Short and Best First Short awards for its debut screening at the Galway Film Fleadh, and then went on to win several other awards at international festivals and an IFTA (the Irish equivalent of an Oscar). The film also received a surprising amount of attention for a short film, including several reviews and feature articles in the Irish press and a coveted interview for cinematographer Fergal O'Hanlon in *American Cinematographer*.[20] Clearly there was something in the story and in the filming that appealed to audiences in Ireland and abroad.

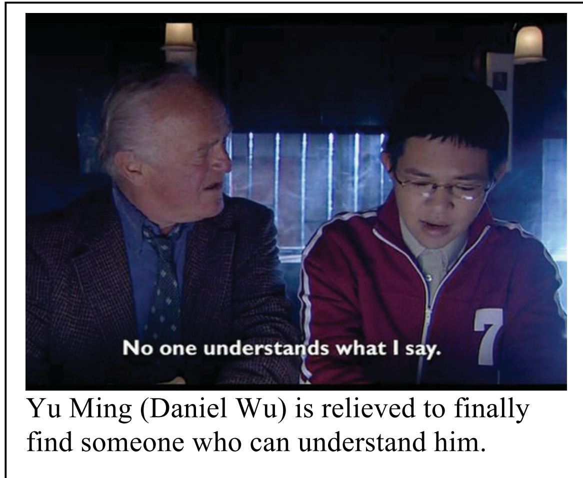
The narrative follows a young Chinese man (Yu Ming, played by Daniel Wu) who randomly chooses a country to visit (Ireland) and diligently studies what the encyclopaedia informs him is the national language of that country (Irish). When he arrives in Dublin, he has no trouble reading the bilingual signs but believes his poor

[20] Stephanie Argy, "Short Takes: Southern Siblings and a Chinese Irishman: Fish Out of Water," *American Cinematographer* 85.2 (2004): 88-90.

command of Irish is to blame when no one understands him. As film scholar Melanie McMahon accurately describes it, the conceit of the film "is that of an innocent who takes the state at its word."[21] Through Yu Ming, O'Hara is calling the government's bluff about the "official" status of Irish in the Republic, since in any other context one might reasonably assume that an official national language is also one that is legitimately in use by the citizenry. Yu Ming, therefore, is not at fault in his misunderstanding of the linguistic situation. Eventually, an old man at a pub (Frank Kelly) overhears Yu Ming trying unsuccessfully to communicate in Irish with the bartender. The conversation proceeds as follows (in Irish):

> YU MING: I arrived yesterday from China.
>
> MAN: Yesterday? And you speak Irish?
>
> YU MING: I learned the language because I wanted to live in Ireland. But my Irish is not good. No one understands what I say. […] I spent six months learning Irish, but I think it was a mistake. Maybe it wasn't a good idea.
>
> MAN: You have better Irish than most people in this country.
>
> YU MING: I don't understand.
>
> MAN: English is spoken here.
>
> YU MING: English?
>
> MAN: English. From England.
>
> YU MING: Irish isn't spoken?
>
> MAN: It isn't.

[21] Melanie McMahon, "Irish as Symptom: The Short Films of Daniel O'Hara," *Irish Studies Review* 19.2 (2011): 213.



Yu Ming (Daniel Wu) is relieved to finally find someone who can understand him.

YU MING: But on every sign…

MAN: Well, the language is there, but it's not spoken except for a few regions in Ireland.[22]

The punch line comes when the bartender brings them their pints and, noticing his regular customer conversing with the newly-arrived immigrant in what to him is an indecipherable tongue, he remarks incredulously to his friend, "Here, did you know ol' Paddy could speak Chinese?!" This scene, and indeed the film itself, draws attention to the tokenistic, cosmetic use of the Irish language in modern Ireland: its status as the official language and its use on signs, for example, while it is not spoken or perhaps even recognizable in its oral form to natives of the capital city. Furthermore, by having Yu Ming speak Irish with a Chinese accent, O'Hara exoticizes Irish and paradoxically also normalizes it, since it is clearly a language like any other and can be learned by a willing and able student, without necessarily being weighed down by all the associated cultural and historical baggage.

The film balances a deliberate departure from traditional representations of the Irish language against the current reality in Ireland; in the words of director Daniel O'Hara, audiences responded to the film because "so much of the drama in Irish had either been set in the Gaeltacht or, if it was set in Dublin, everyone was speaking Irish and it was unrealistic."[23] The film uses gentle humour to make its point. It also pays

[22] Translation is from the subtitles.
[23] Ross Whittaker, "Short Film Fluency," *Film Ireland* 101 (2004): 21.

tribute to the survival of Irish as a living language, however, as our protagonist settles happily in the Gaeltacht at the end of the film.

O'Hara's success with *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* led to a second short film, *Fluent Dysphasia,* in 2004. In this film, Oscar-nominated actor Stephen Rea[24] plays a man ("Murph") who suffers a head injury that leaves him unable to speak or understand English, yet he is now miraculously fluent in Irish. As in his first film, O'Hara again gently questions assumptions about – and attitudes towards – the Irish language. After the accident, for example, Murph's monolingual friend believes him to be possessed and speaking in tongues. Meanwhile, when the camera adopts Murph's point-of-view, his friend's English is rendered as unintelligible gibberish. With this effective cinematic technique, O'Hara reminds us that English and Irish are linguistically equidistant, and it should theoretically be no harder for an English-speaker to learn Irish than vice versa. Some hope for linguistic survival is also provided by younger characters; the two men are able to communicate through their daughter and nephew, respectively, who have mastered the language at school.

Use of a fish-eye lens helps characterise Murph's (Stephen Rea) state of mind when he awakes after a big night out in *Fluent Dysphasia*.

Most importantly, both *Yu Ming* and *Fluent Dysphasia* use the visual medium of film to explore, through humorous fictional narratives, the role of Irish for different segments of contemporary Irish society – Dubliners, foreign visitors, Gaeltacht residents,

[24] Rea was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of "best actor in a leading role" for his work in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992).

and students of the language. Each of these groups has a different linguistic identity with respect to Irish, and it is one of O'Hara's strengths to be able to bring them together creatively within his short films.

Beyond the thematic continuity between the two films, O'Hara also cast comedian Paddy Courtney both as the unilingual bar man in *Yu Ming* and as Rea's uncomprehending friend in *Fluent Dysphasia*. Courtney and O'Hara subsequently collaborated to develop the character further; the two men are co-writers of the TG4 series *Paddywhackery* which follows Paddy, an English-speaking Dubliner struggling with Irish (played by Courtney), as he tries a variety of ill-fated schemes in order to secure lucrative grants available for promotion of the Irish language.

The fact that O'Hara evolved his ideas into a television series rather than a feature film is significant. While English-language shorts initiatives are often seen as a pathway to making longer films, the close involvement of TG4 in the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* schemes may serve to steer emerging talent towards Irish-language television instead. Paul Mercier, who made the short film *Tubberware* (*Oscailt*, 2001) as well as *Lipservice*, also created a new series for TG4. He drew again on his experience as a high school teacher to develop *Aifric*, the first teen-oriented fictional program to be produced in Ireland in any language.[25] Clearly, the short film can serve as an incubator for projects that might be expanded upon in the context of Irish-language broadcasting, even if they have not yet led to much activity in the sector of Irish-language feature films. Indeed, only one bilingual feature has so far been supported by the Irish Film Board, Tom Collins' *Kings* (2007), which despite its English title and London setting is almost entirely in Irish, with only occasional passages in English.

Kings (2007)

When funding for *Kings* was announced by the IFB, it was described as "the first Irish-language feature film to be produced in Ireland."[26] As we know, this is not quite accurate even within the realm of fiction film, given Bob Quinn's *Poitín* in 1978. Nevertheless, *Kings* was released at a crucial time for Irish-language cinema, since 2007 was also the year that the IFB decided to discontinue the *Oscailt* program with the justification that filmmakers were simply translating scripts for funding purposes. Given that rationale, it is particularly interesting to see the treatment of two Irish-language feature projects submitted for Film Board funding in that year. The adaptation of one of the most celebrated Irish-language novels – Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* – by Robert Quinn, son of Bob Quinn and a veteran of the *Oscailt* initiative, was rejected. It was subsequently made for television broadcast on a much lower budget, without Film Board assistance. *Kings,* however, which is based on a translation of Jimmy Murphy's English-language play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*, was accepted. Film Board CEO Simon Perry explains that the decision with regards to *Cré na Cille* "was about whether we believed the film had theatrical potential and we didn't."[27] While I do not intend to question the validity of commercial considerations as one factor in funding decisions, Perry's treatment of the two feature films necessarily colours his claim that the dedicated scheme for Irish-language shorts was being scrapped simply to save the language from translated English scripts.

Director Tom Collins' involvement in Irish language media goes back to at least the 1980s, when he brought a television camera down from Derry to assist Bob Quinn in

[25] Interview with Pádhraic Ó Ciardha.
[26] IFB news, Feb 24, 2006, online print-out [IFI library clippings, folder "Irish Film Board – 2006"].

his pirate Teilifís na Gaeltachta broadcasts.[28] His interest in the language continued, and in 2002-03 he filmed seven Irish-language poems being read by prominent poets (collectively titled *Amhairghin*). Most of his work, however, is in English, including his best known films, *Bogwoman* (1997) and *Teenage Kicks: The Story of the Undertones* (2001).

Kings is Collins' highest-profile and biggest-budget film to date. The €2.2 million budget[29] came from five public sources: TG4, the IFB, the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, the Northern Ireland Film and Television Commission, and the (Northern Irish) Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF). Importantly, two of the five funders have a specific mandate to promote Irish-language media, and the film almost certainly would not have been made without the early support of TG4 in particular. The funding from the ILBF is also significant; the fund was established after the 1998 Belfast Agreement which contained a commitment on the part of the British government to promote the Irish language within Northern Ireland, including financial support for film and television production.[30] *Kings* was the first, and so far the only, feature film to be supported by this fund.[31] Although the film is technically a UK/Ireland co-production, all of the funding came from sources based on the island of Ireland rather than from England,

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[27] Tony Tracy, "Interview with Simon Perry," *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008): 262.
[28] Bob Quinn, *Maverick: A Dissident View of Broadcasting Today* (Dingle: Brandon, 2001), 23. Collins would work with Quinn again, for example, when he served as producer on the Quinn-directed TV documentary *It Must Be Done Right* (1999) about Donal McCann, which was completed and aired shortly before the actor's death.
[29] "*Kings* Irish Selection for Foreign Language Oscar," *Irish Film and Television Network News* Sept 12, 2007.
http://www.iftn.ie/actors/whoswho/?act1=record&only=1&aid=73&rid=4280636&tpl=archnews&force=1 [consulted June 30, 2012].
[30] Tony Crowley, *War of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1537-2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.
[31] Interview with Áine Walsh and Brendan Hehir, Irish Language Broadcast Fund, at Northern Ireland Screen offices, Belfast, July 24, 2009. Walsh explained that the ILBF has a commitment to produce 70

despite the London setting. There is no diegetic reference to Northern Ireland, but the director is a native of Derry city and much of the film was shot in Belfast.

The plot concerns six men who came from rural Ireland to London in their youth. We meet up with them thirty or so years later when the five surviving friends get together to mourn the death of the sixth. None of them has found the life they dreamed of in the big city, and most of them are battling their own personal demons.

In *Kings*, six young men come to London from Connemara.
Thirty years later, the five surviving friends reunite to mourn the sixth.

The fact that the script was indeed translated from an English-language original invites an examination of what meanings are produced by a film that features characters that are living in England but speaking in Irish. I would like to offer three possible – and not mutually exclusive – interpretations of how the language issue is represented in the film. First, the Irish language is a way for the main characters to reinforce their identity and sense of group belonging, as well as their difference from the host community. In other words, the language creates both inclusion and exclusion. Second, the fact that these immigrant characters are speaking Irish rather than English invites comparison to other marginalized immigrant communities, and in particular it creates a more obvious parallel with new immigrant communities now living in Ireland such as the Polish or

hours per year of material, and that films are simply too expensive and do not contribute enough to their

Romanians. Finally, the translation of the play into Irish can lead the entire film to be read as an allegory for the precarious state of the language itself in contemporary Ireland, as will be demonstrated below.

Given the relative novelty of feature films in Irish, it is not surprising that the language features heavily in discussions *about* the film, but there is only one very short discussion of language *within* the film. It occurs when the two men who have stayed close friends (Jap and Git, played by Donal O'Kelly and Brendan Conroy, respectively) meet up with the one who has become the most successful (Joe, played by Colm Meaney). While Git and Jap are alcoholics and borderline homeless, Joe is now the wealthy owner of a construction company but carries a lot of guilt about refusing to give jobs to his unemployed friends. In terms of social status and financial success he has left his old friends behind, but just as they find solace in the bottle, he is dependent on "the rich man's drink," cocaine. (In the transcript that follows, passages in italics are delivered in Irish, while the rest is in English):

> JOE: Sorry I missed the service.
>
> GIT: Mass, Joe, mass.
>
> JOE: I had a bit of trouble at one of the sites. (…)
>
> JAP: *We thought you'd forgotten about us.*
>
> JOE: Me? Forget the old gang? Ah.
>
> JAP: *In Irish, Joe. You know our pledge. Always in Irish.*
>
> JOE: You still talk in the Irish!
>
> JAP: *There are some things a man shouldn't forget. His land, his language… and his friends.*

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yearly production quota.

JOE: Well I didn't come for a discussion about the language. I'm here for Jackie, God rest him.

JAP: *God rest him.*

GIT [raising his pint]: Fair play to the Paddies.

JAP [raising his]: Up the Paddies!

JOE: Fuck the Paddies.

[They all pause, then Joe laughs to break the tension.]

JOE [raising his pint]: *To the old gang!*

GIT AND JAP: *To the old gang!*[32]

This scene comes almost exactly half way through the film, when the audience has already been following the Irish-speaking protagonists for three-quarters of an hour. In other words, the filmmakers clearly did not perceive a need to explain the choice of language at the start of the film, and the audience is given a chance to make their own interpretations about what the use of the language might mean for the characterization of these men. Nevertheless, it is already clear at this point that the language signals inclusion within the group of friends and also serves to exclude anyone else.

Jap reminds Joe of their pledge to speak Irish.

In this scene, however, the role of the language in their small group is made explicit: the language is part of a pact – their "pledge" – that is intended to strengthen their

[32] Translation is from the subtitles.

mutual bonds and solidify their group identity. It is also something that makes them different from the Londoners around them. Not only is the bartender (also present in the scene described above) kept out of the conversation, but the language may have been an obstacle against bringing other people into their circle. At least two of the men are married, and surely they would have also made other friends in London, but this particular brotherhood is kept separate from any of the other social circles they may belong to. No one else is welcome in the gang. We can see that both the inclusive and exclusive effects of the language make Joe somewhat uncomfortable, as he has weakened his ties to his former friends and also tried the hardest to assimilate to English culture.

Director Tom Collins explains that "the guys are trying to hang on to their Irishness – their language is all they have – they have no property, they have rough clothes, they're losing their sense of identity and all they have left is the language and that for them is the last bastion of survival."[33] He also makes a point of explaining that he had met such Irish-speaking men in Kilburn, so the story is not implausible.[34] Indeed, TG4 had previously sponsored a short documentary called *Idir Dhá Shaol* ("Between two lives") about Connemara man Willie Walsh who left Ireland in 1968 and ended up homeless in London. The 20-minute documentary seems to have a lot in common with the fictionalized story-line of *Kings*; according to the film's description, it is "the simple, painful and heart-rending story of a forgotten side of the Irish Diaspora. The film tells Willie's story in his own words and in his own language – Irish."[35]

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[33] Gary Quinn, "The Kingmaker," *Irish Times Advance,* October 3, 2007: 28.
[34] See, for example, "Tom Collins and Colm Meaney on *Kings*," *Irish Film and Television Network News,* September 20, 2007. http://www.iftn.ie/?act1=record&only=1&aid=73&rid=4280663&tpl=archnews [consulted 2 July, 2012]
[35] The exact quote is from the program for the 2006 Irish Studies Film Series at Boston College, although similar descriptions can be found in other festival programs, for example the 2006 Galway Film Fleadh, where it won the best short documentary category.

The choice to film *Kings* in Irish rather than English did present some casting difficulties, and producer Larkin notes that it was not possible to simply engage the cast that had been performing the stage version, since not all of the actors were able to make the linguistic transition. Only Brendan Conroy was retained from the stage cast, and he changed roles from Shay to Git. Colm Meaney – familiar to international audiences for his role as Miles O'Brien in the *Star Trek* franchises – is clearly the highest-profile actor, although he also has the poorest command of the language. He admits that although he had taken Irish in school, he had to work through the lines phonetically, and "I soon discovered that my vocabulary wasn't half as good as I thought it was … a lot of the pronunciations surprised me."[36]

Eithne O'Connell, in her article "The King's Irish," meticulously outlines the linguistic flaws in the film and accuses the production team of not paying "much attention to what sort of Irish was used and [not attaching] much importance to linguistic authenticity and regional variations."[37] Nevertheless, she does approve of the premise that these men would use Irish amongst themselves. She agrees that their choice of language "is entirely credible and in no way contrived. Thus there is nothing gimmicky about the decision to tell this story through Irish and this move towards authenticity in Irish cinema is novel and refreshing."[38] Again, this is a particularly important point since the film came out just as the *Oscailt* scheme was being cancelled, ostensibly to prevent the translation of scripts for the purpose of funding. At the same time, however, O'Connell's position is very limiting, since she essentially advocates a restriction of the

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[36] Paul Byrne, "King for a Day: Interview with Colm Meaney,." *Event Guide* (Dublin), September 26, 2007, 15.
[37] Eithne O'Connell, "The King's Irish: Dialogue, Dialect, and Subtitles in *Kings*," *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008): 227.

filmic voice by tying it to particular concepts of authenticity and realism. Her suspicion of “gimmicky” uses of Irish and her concern for linguistic accuracy in terms of dialect and accent are most likely symptoms of the power inequality between English and Irish: since Irish is a minority language and there are relatively few examples of Irish-language film, it is important in her view that they be held to a high standard both cinematically and linguistically.

While the decline of the Irish language over the past centuries clearly points to historical power struggles, new challenges are also threatening the language’s special status in the Republic. Within the past two decades, Ireland has gone from a site of net emigration to one of net immigration and has therefore suddenly become home to diverse linguistic communities. This has challenged the concept that the principal concern of language policy in Ireland is the English-Irish dichotomy; Michael Cronin notes that the changing linguistic geography raises questions that “will help to shape Ireland’s relationship not only to its language future but to its language past.”[39] Furthermore, discourses of minority language rights must now take into account the relative importance of both the national and immigrant languages. Cronin remarks that “if Irish is simply one language among others, it follows that it is more difficult to argue for special status for the language within the Irish state, a point that underlines the urgency of new thinking on the maintenance of Irish and the rethinking of state bilingualism in a multilingual polity.”[40] Educational programs that seek to integrate immigrants into the dominant language complicate policies that seek to revitalize Irish, while at the same time

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[38] Ibid., 227.
[39] Michael Cronin, “Babel Átha Cliath: The Languages of Dublin,” *New Hibernia Review* 8.4 (2004): 10.
[40] Ibid., 21.

the official requirement of Irish in certain sectors acts as a barrier to employment for new immigrants in important fields such as nursing and teaching.

Producer Jackie Larkin links the choice of language in *Kings* to the issue of immigration in contemporary Ireland. She says, "these guys left Connemara as a gang; the Irish language for them was their first language. So when they stuck together, they spoke it as a way of maintaining their identity, as we see every day here with the Polish [immigrants] in Ireland."[41] The fact that they are not speaking English accentuates their foreignness and also might lead an Irish audience to see a greater parallel with the minority-language communities now becoming established in Ireland's own cities. Seán Crosson agrees that "*Kings* effectively utilizes the Irish language to accentuate the marginalized positions of the characters depicted."[42] In essence, this theme of marginalization is relevant for immigrants in every country.

This effect is especially significant, given the history of Irish-language film production outlined in chapters 3 and 4. Both the Gael Linn documentaries and Bob Quinn's Gaeltacht-centric work were very specifically about Ireland, even if they may have had international influences. It is quite striking, then, that rather than making *Kings* more nationally-specific, the translation of the script from English to Irish actually makes it easier to generalize the characters' experience to that of all immigrants who undergo a linguistic as well as geographic dislocation. Furthermore, for English-speaking Irish people in particular, a non-English script encourages them to identify as much or more with the host community as with the immigrants, thereby also encouraging them to

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[41] Quoted in Basil Al-Rawi, "Irish Ways and Irish Words," *Film Ireland* 118 (2007): 17.
[42] Seán Crosson, "From *Kings* to *Cáca Mílis*; Irish Film and Television as Gaeilge in 2007," *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008): 219.

reconsider their own position and their affinities not only with the Irish emigrants who have gone abroad but also with immigrants who have come to Ireland.

Both of these points – that the language acts as a kind of bond between the main characters, and that a non-English script creates a closer parallel to other immigrant communities – have been advanced by the production team as a justification for translating the story to Irish, even if those justifications may have come after the fact of funding considerations. Nevertheless, films in Irish are still rare enough that making a film in that language is also seen as making some kind of statement about the language. I would also like to suggest, therefore, that the translation creates – perhaps unintentionally – another layer of meaning in which the choices faced by the different characters act as an allegory for the challenges facing the Irish language itself in contemporary society.

In the film, the different characters react differently to the challenges of adjusting to a new urban environment. Joe has essentially abandoned his past for the better economic opportunities offered by modern London life. He has the trappings of success but has paid a great personal price. He has lost his sense of himself, he suffers from paralysing guilt for not hiring his friends, and he is certainly not happy. He could be seen to represent an Ireland that is too intent on the future and is too quick to dismiss the national language as backward and old-fashioned.

Jap and Git, on the other hand, represent the other end of the spectrum, as they are mired in their past. Although they are very firm about their identity and have held on to their grandiose dreams, both of these things only serve to hold them back. They are happy only when they are drunk and thereby able to believe in their own delusions. Similarly, the recently deceased Jackie (Seán Ó Tarpaigh) only realized the hopelessness

of his situation when he gave up drinking; suddenly aware of the disparity between his grand dreams and his dismal reality, he felt he had no other alternative but to end his own life. These three characters could be seen to represent those who are still intent on a Gaelic Ireland where the language regains its place as the common vernacular spoken fluently by all the citizens, a goal which is slipping further and further out of reach.

The most viable option, however, is represented by Shay (Donncha Crowley), who carries his identity with him but accepts that the past is in the past. In the film, he has chosen to moderate his dreams, forgoing pie-in-the-sky ideas of coming home rich, and instead running his own modest fruit and vegetable stand. He is also shown to have the greatest ease in connecting to the past, as he is the one who is most comfortable dealing with Jackie's elderly father who has come to take the coffin home to Connemara. In short, he is realistic about the future while also honouring the past. He realizes there is a time and a place for each facet of his identity, and he is adept at balancing them. There is a clear parallel here to the idea that the Irish language can still survive and indeed thrive in Ireland, but that English is also a necessary part of Ireland's contemporary identity.

Kings was relatively well distributed; it received a general release (that is, in mainstream theatres) in Ireland and played at festivals world-wide. In the national context, it also stimulated public discussion. The twin themes of identity and community in the Irish diaspora in London are clearly present in the original English-language play; the translation into Irish, however, creates new meanings as it amplifies certain aspects of those themes and also suggests links to the fate of the language itself. The Irish press ran several high profile interviews and articles in relation to the film, thereby helping to

incite national discussion on the themes of language, emigration, and national cinema, as well as generating interest in the film itself.[43]

Kings was nominated for fourteen Irish Film and Television Awards, of which it won five, and was also submitted to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for consideration for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, as mentioned above. It ultimately failed to secure an Oscar nomination, but what is significant is that this was the first time *ever* that Ireland submitted a feature film to the Oscars in what is officially its national language. This is a sign both of the acceptance of *Kings* as an ambassador for Irish film, and of the maturity of the Irish film industry in general. The process for Academy Award consideration requires the participation of a national association, in this case the Irish Film and Television Academy, since each eligible country is only permitted to submit a single film.[44] IFTA convened an independent jury, including such big names in Irish film as Neil Jordan and Daniel Day-Lewis, who then made their recommendation to IFTA, which officially submitted the film for consideration.[45]

The national film industry itself did not have the infrastructure to organize such an official submission process when George Morrison made *Mise Éire* or Bob Quinn made *Poitín.* In any case, neither film would have been eligible at least under the current rules: the stipulation requiring accurate English subtitles would have disqualified *Mise Éire*, and Quinn's community-based exhibition strategy meant that *Poitín* would not have fulfilled the requirement that the film "be first publicly exhibited for at least seven

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[43] All of the major Irish papers ran reviews of the film, and many also included interviews with either Tom Collins or Colm Meaney, often focusing as much on funding and production context as on the film's content. The *Sunday Tribune* also did a human-interest story featuring real Irish immigrants in London whose lives resembled those of the characters in the film (Conor McMorrow, "London-Irish 'Kings' Stranded with No Homeland," *Sunday Tribune,* September 30, 2007, 7.)

[44] "Special Rules for the Best Foreign Language Film Award," Rules & Eligibility, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, www.oscars.org [consulted 3 July 2012].

consecutive days in a commercial motion picture theater for the profit of the producer and exhibitor."[46]

Kings then is not only the first Irish-language film to be submitted for consideration for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language Film; it is in fact the first film that *could* be submitted. Its commercial exhibition in Ireland as well as its official endorsement by a jury of top Irish film industry people represent a high-water mark for Irish-language film within Irish national cinema, as a moment of official institutional sanction. After that peak, however, the tide seems to be receding, as there have been no further Irish-language feature films in the five years since *Kings* was released, and funding for short films in Irish has also been jeopardized, as discussed in the previous chapter. The concluding section of this dissertation will consider the uncertain future of the Irish language within the national cinema, while also recognizing the historical context and ongoing influence of past Irish-language films.

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[45] "*Kings* Irish Selection for Foreign Language Oscar," *Irish Film and Television Network News*
[46] "Special Rules for the Best Foreign Language Film Award."

Conclusions: The past, present, and future of Irish-Language cinema

The Irish language, despite its official status, remains a minority language constantly threatened by the domination of English. Irish cinema, despite its recent advances, remains a small national cinema compared to many other European film cultures. Consequently, the films examined in this dissertation are a minor subset of a relatively minor cinema. Nevertheless, it is important to study them for a number of reasons. Cinema is a significant and recognized component in the expression of identity in Ireland as it is elsewhere, and as Ireland has slowly gained control over the production of its own cinematic representation, it is instructive to see how the national language has featured in that expression. Irish-language films collectively demonstrate how cinema has been used to negotiate multiple narratives of national belonging, both through their similarities to and differences from the majority English-language films produced in Ireland. In general terms, these films are a case study for the participation of a minority perspective within a national cinema.

The study of Irish-language film is also crucial to understanding the role of cinema in language maintenance and revitalization. I have demonstrated an expanded appreciation of the function of films in society, beyond simply the film texts themselves; film production can contribute to language advancement by promoting economic development, providing employment, solidifying regional identity, enhancing the prestige of the language, and facilitating education. Finally, it is important to recognize that in each case, filmmakers made a choice to use Irish rather than English. This choice added certain connotations to their films – of nationalism, for example, or of a particular

cinematic genre – and also reflected the filmmaker's motivations, whether they were related to linguistic activism or to funding opportunities.

Three movements in Irish-language film

Reviewing the trajectory of Irish language film production, it appears as though there is a fresh start approximately once every generation. First, in the 1950s, Gael Linn began producing newsreels and then commissioned the documentaries *Mise Éire* (1959) and *Saoirse?* (1961). Second, the independent films of Bob Quinn, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* and *Poitín,* were both released in the 1970s. Finally, beginning in the mid-1990s, the television station TG4 subsidized a variety of Irish-language projects including short films and the feature-length *Kings* (Tom Collins, 2007). Although there are genuine links between each of these projects, particularly in relation to the ongoing importance of television, the course of Irish-language cinema has been characterized by bursts of productivity rather than a smooth, continuous evolution. Each era of Irish-language filmmaking is met with initial public excitement that soon wears off and is then followed by a lull in production until, in the words of Bob Quinn, "somebody is fool enough to make the next 'first feature film' as Gaeilge."[1]

The three movements examined in this dissertation were products of very distinct production contexts and demonstrate diverse strategies for integrating the traditional Irish language with the modern medium of film. Gael Linn was primarily a language organization that also used cinema to further its goals, and the resulting films superimpose an Irish-language voice over a nationalist retelling of Irish history. Gael Linn demonstrated the potential of Irish-language film but, by refusing to provide

subtitles, they also exacerbated the view of Irish as a "private discourse" of nationalism.[2] Bob Quinn was an independent filmmaker who made the decision to move to an Irish-speaking area and collaborate with the local community. His films therefore situate the regional affiliations of the language within the national. Films made since the 1990s have benefited from generous public funding which triggered a corresponding interest from a large cross-section of filmmakers. These directors had varying relationships to the Irish language, and the diversity of linguistic identity is reflected in the texts of the films themselves, which explore the role of Irish for different segments of contemporary society. In some respects, the IFB-funded films made positive contributions to the language movement, but they also attracted criticism for perpetrating outsider representations of the Irish-speaking community.

Distribution and exhibition contexts were also distinct across the three eras. Gael Linn exhibited their newsreels and documentaries in commercial theatres and reached large audiences within Ireland, although it was extremely rare for their films to be shown outside the country. Bob Quinn was primarily concerned that his films be seen by the Connemara population they depicted, so he projected them to local audiences in his own home cinema. His films also circulated at international film festivals and at Irish-language or regional cultural events within Ireland. Finally, the more recent short films have been seen in a variety of contexts, including at festivals, on broadcast television, and online. In select cases, they have also been screened in commercial cinemas when paired with a feature film. The most distinctive element of their distribution is their use in educational contexts; as I have demonstrated, they are used not only to assist with

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[1] Bob Quinn, "Degeneration Gap," *Film Ireland,* 100 (Sep/Oct 2004): 20.

language instruction, but also to invite students to critically engage with Irish cinema in more general terms. The feature length *Kings* received a commercial release in Ireland and also circulated internationally on the festivals circuit.

Despite their differences, there are some similarities across all these movements. All were met at some phase of production, distribution or exhibition with a certain anxiety-cum-ambivalence about the national language. For both *Mise Éire* and *Poitín*, reviewers praised the language even when they could not understand it, and downplayed the importance of linguistic competence for enjoying the film. The ambivalence is amplified in the more recent films; many of the contemporary filmmakers have a poor command of Irish, and yet they feel comfortable simultaneously stressing the significance of the language to their film while dismissing their own inability to speak it as unimportant. Even Tom Collins, a fluent speaker who is quick to underline the legitimacy of the national language, is just as quick to undercut it by making comments like "[*Kings*] is really accessible to everyone and that's what matters, not the language."[3] Daniel O'Hara echoes this sentiment in terms of his short films by postulating that at festival screenings, "I don't think the language makes much of a difference, since international short film audiences see films from all over the world in different languages."[4] Given these types of comments, it is not surprising that Irish-language films are often discussed even in Ireland in the same category as other foreign-language (particularly European) films.[5]

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[2] Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 17.
[3] Gary Quinn, "The Kingmaker," *Irish Times Advance,* October 3, 2007, 28.
[4] Rebecca Kemp, "The Rise and Rise of the Irish Short," *Film Ireland* 114 (2007): 25.
[5] See, for example, Alicia McGivern, "IFI Education: Gearrscannáin Ghaeilge," *Film Ireland* 98 (2004): 48, for how films can be used in any kind of language education, or Al-Rawi, Basil, "Irish Ways and Irish Words," *Film Ireland* 118 (2007): 16-20, for the argument that "Irish-language drama has as much of a

Ireland's relationship with the Oscars is a case in point. The submission of *Kings* for consideration could finally be seen as an acknowledgement of Ireland's Europeanness, at least in the realm of cinema, given that the foreign language category is so often dominated by European films. However, English remains the majority language in Ireland, and Irish films in English have traditionally done relatively well in other categories of the Oscars, competing as equals alongside American and other English-language films.[6] The Irish film industry's liminal position between the European and Anglo-American industries could be a source of opportunity. In terms of film production and film culture, Ireland is well placed to participate in both commercial and alternative circuits, satisfying diverse audiences at home and abroad. Rather than promoting only one kind of film, policy leaders need to outline a clear strategy that supports a broad spectrum of filmmaking practices and treats Ireland's bilingual status as an asset rather than a liability. Furthermore, by fostering production in both languages, Ireland can develop a vibrant national cinema that nonetheless recognizes a plural articulation of national identity.

Culture and industry

Current film policy focuses primarily on the commercial or economic aspects of the film industry, rather than its cultural importance. In 1999, a government-appointed Film Industry Strategic Review Group published a report evaluating the effectiveness of

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place on our screens as the multitude of subtitled foreign-language films that regularly grace our cinemas." (17).

[6] Examples include *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan 1989) which received five nominations and won for best actor and best supporting actress, *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan 1992) which received six nominations and won for best screenplay, *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan 1993) which received seven nominations, *Six Shooter* (Martin McDonagh 2004) which won for best short, and *Once* (John Carney 2006) which won for best original song.

existing funding schemes and incentives for filmmaking in Ireland and making recommendations for future actions.[7] The Strategic Review Group recognized the importance of public policy in shaping Irish film and stressed that “a strong partnership between the State and the industry is critical into the foreseeable future.”[8] They focused primarily on suggestions for making Irish film more commercially viable and economically productive, rather than culturally distinct. Their recommendations included the advice that due to Ireland’s small population, “producers must focus early on growth in the international market.”[9] With that premise, the report lists as one of Ireland’s greatest competitive advantages “its English-speaking status in a predominantly English-speaking medium.”[10] In the more recent report *Creative Capital: Building Ireland’s Audiovisual Creative Economy* (2011),[11] language does not feature at all in the recommendations – there is no discussion of either the uniqueness of the Irish language or the benefits of global English. TG4 is mentioned briefly in the context of improved relationships between film and TV, but receives much less attention than RTÉ.

The fact that Ireland is predominantly English-speaking supports the development of commercial film production, including co-productions. Popular films in English cater to both the lucrative Anglo-American market as well as a domestic audience that watches mainly Hollywood films, and does so unmediated by dubbing or subtitling as is often the case elsewhere in Europe. The danger with this, of course, is that Irish cinema risks

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[7] Government of Ireland, *The Strategic Development of the Irish Film and Television Industry 2000-2010: Final Report of the Film Industry Strategic Review Group to the Minister for Arts, Heritage, Gaeltach and the Islands* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999).
[8] Ibid., 11.
[9] Ibid., 16.
[10] Ibid., 23.
[11] Audiovisual Strategic Review Steering Group, *Creative Capital: Building Ireland’s Audiovisual Creative Economy.* Report prepared for the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. April 2011.

becoming simply a copy – and, given its small size, quite possibly a lesser copy – of English or American cinema. It also risks being subsumed into those larger and more powerful industries, thereby losing any markers of a distinctive national cinema.

On the other hand, production in a lesser-spoken European language allows Ireland to assert its uniqueness and to align Irish cinema with other small European cinemas. It can also complement the commercial aesthetic often associated with English-language production, by tapping into an alternative or art-house aesthetic more commonly associated with so-called foreign-language films. There is a potential advantage to the art-house association, including a certain prestige that Irish cinema has often found elusive. Of course there is also the risk of marginalization that comes with subtitled films particularly in Anglophone markets – which for Ireland also includes the domestic market. Further research could investigate how Irish-language films conform to specific narrative or stylistic conventions in order to succeed on the festival circuit; alternatively, scholarly work could examine whether the popular television genres that have successfully been adapted by TG4 (including children's programs and reality shows) might serve as a model for a truly popular Irish-language cinema. Similarly, comparative studies with other minority-language cinemas could be instructive. Throughout this dissertation, I have raised some similarities and differences with the Canadian context, but there are many other cinemas with which the Irish example might be productively compared, in particular with respect to public policy.

The impact of public funding

Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation studied the products of publicly-funded initiatives promoting Irish-language film. The most striking difference between these films and those that came before is the dramatic increase in diversity, both in terms of cinematic style and attitude toward the language. Despite the critique that some filmmakers were opportunistic in their participation, the funding initiatives can only be considered a success, in the sense that they encouraged filmmakers to consider and employ the Irish language as a valid means of expression. Many of those filmmakers went further and actively used the opportunity to imagine creative narratives about the language itself.

The funding schemes have not resulted in a self-sustaining Irish-language filmmaking sector, however, and graduates of the short films have not gone on to careers making Irish-language features. If present trends continue, the future of Irish-language cinema appears to be very closely linked to the whims of the various public funding bodies.

The future looked uncertain indeed when the *Oscailt* program was cancelled in 2006, the *Lasair* project lapsed, and the IFB failed to support a second Irish-language feature. The year 2011-12 brought new hope, however. Filmbase resurrected the *Lasair* program after five years of inactivity, inviting submissions in January 2012 and promising an average of €10,000 for selected films, plus the use of equipment and post-production facilities.[12] The IFB also unveiled a new Irish-language scheme in 2011, calling it *Gearrscannáin,* which simply means "short films." It is a much smaller-scale

[12] "Filmbase and TG4 Announce Lasair 5 deadline." http://www.filmbase.ie/awards/lasair5.php [consulted July 4, 2012].

initiative than *Oscailt* was, since only two films will be funded each year, with a length of approximately 8 minutes (compared to the 40 minute maximum for *Oscailt*) and a maximum budget of €10,000. The IFB has also addressed the issue of script translation by stipulating that "short films already submitted to the IFB in English will not be eligible."[13] When asked about the impulse behind the new scheme, IFB short films executive Fran Keveaney explained,

> We decided to make some films for the schools programme and the subject that was crying out for content was the Irish language programme. The films are doing really well and will be up on the education section of our website with study guides very soon.[14]

The scheme therefore targets a specific audience, and selected films must be appropriate for viewers under the age of 15.[15] These films are directed at a new generation of filmgoers, some of whom may themselves be inspired to become filmmakers and may even choose to lead Irish-language cinema in new, unforeseen directions.

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[13] "Gearrscannáin." Irish Film Board funding programmes. http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Gearrscannain/83 [consulted July 4, 2012].
[14] Personal e-mail correspondence with Fran Keveaney, , Irish Film Board. January 26, 2012.
[15] "Gearrscannáin."

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Áine Walsh and Brendan Hehir, administrators of the Irish Language Broadcast Fund for Northern Ireland Screen.
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