



**Duncan, Dawn. *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film. Reimagining Ireland*, Vol. 27. Bern: Peter Lang, 2013. 171 pp.**

In *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film*, Dawn Duncan achieved what Yeats has described as bringing “back a little of the old dead beautiful world of romance into this century of great engines and spinning-jennies” (77), while she pinpoints instances of an ancient cultural tradition, whose foundations lie in storytelling, in a set of contemporary Irish films. Her study strikes a new note in the sense that far from focusing on the reductionist and nostalgic view of an idealized Ireland, Duncan shows that there is an ongoing and dynamic interconnectedness between past and present in the form of traditional myths, lores and legends that are revisited and recreated in late twentieth-century Irish cinema. Duncan draws on the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell who, among others, have established the framework of thinking human relationships and personal individuation in a way in which the former’s theory of the “collective unconscious” is reconstructed by the latter in what became known as the “Journey of the Hero” (2). It is also important to underscore that this concept occurs, to her mind, in a postmodern context so that the reimagined journey becomes the backbone to films dealing with images of the Irish whether by Irish or American filmmakers.

Notorious film critics, some of them mentioned by Duncan, such as Martin McLoone, believe these films represent “essentially regressive ideologies... in no way vitiated by the fact that both mobilize aspects of Irish mythological tradition” (120). Nonetheless, this perception is defied by Duncan’s assertion that the purpose of the universal mythical framework has been ignored and the focus has been on the rural versus urban dichotomy. Moreover, the analysis of the films approached in this work challenges what Ruth Barton (1997) terms “Irish heritage cinema” that typically “exoticizes the Celt” and is marked by “[...] a nostalgia for the past, for pastoral innocence; [...] aware of the burden of history, in turn referring to it and denying it” (50). Instead, Duncan indicates how traditional narratives in the shape of myth, lore and legend – that function as the spinal cord of the films – are recreated under different guises and come to the fore in modern-day Irish society.

In the first set of films dealt with in Chapter 2, *Into the West* (1992), *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), and *In America* (2002), the children transcend the theme of innocence, which Barton believes is typically attributed to their role, for they, instead, carry the heavy burden of reaching maturity before their time due to the familial and environmental dereliction that surrounds them. The role of the storyteller, the *seanachai* in the Irish tradition, is crucial to these films, for it is through the stories told to the children by the

older folk, the grandfathers in *The Secret of Roan Inish* and *Into the West*, and by the African Mateo in *In America* that the children get emotionally involved with their past and motivated to search for the root of the problem that caused the dismantling of their families in the present. It is also worth mentioning the way in which the hero journey requires their physical displacement. With the exception of *In America*, in which the family move from Ireland to the United States, the children follow the inverse path of the formation novel that expects the protagonist to be dislocated from the country to the city for the maturity-immaturity cycle to be completed. The child-heroes of *Into the West* and *The Secret of Roan Inish* need to go back to the traditional Ireland their ancestors left behind to recuperate what has been lost in terms of their roots and origins, especially in the latter as the children literally rebuild the Irish cottage that had been shattered and have their families move back to the island in order to have the family reunited. Duncan's conclusion is twofold: in the Jungian universal level the heroic journey the children must undergo is a means of achieving individuation and self-responsibility. On the particular level of contemporary Ireland they become the agents that recover their parents and/or grandparents from the paralysing grief of the past opening for them new paths into the present and the future.

Chapter 3 delves around *The Quiet Man* (1955), an emblematic representation of the homecoming Irish immigrant from America and its more recent counterpart *The Matchmaker* (1997), which, according to Duncan, provides the viewer with a commentary on the Ford film as well as on its own historical moment. Duncan acknowledges that traditional lore changes along the generations, since "adaptation [is] part of the process of folklore", and "Folklorists believe that in order to best understand the cultural expression in which they are interested, they must study it in context, considering the setting in which the item is found or used; in which the behaviour is practiced; in which the behaviour is expressed or in which the story is told" (Sims and Stephens 20, *apud* Duncan 46). The behaviour alluded to in both films is, of course, matchmaking, which is culturally marked by temporality, for in the early 1950s it was tied to tradition, family and church approval, whereas in the 1990s it becomes an individual choice. To Duncan both films challenge the societal structures of their time. On the one hand, the figure of Mary Kate in *The Quiet Man* has helped lead the feminist charge as she rejects her husband's mastery; however, her strong character and sexual fulfilment in the 1950s have become status quo in the 1990s. On the other, *The Matchmaker* presents a twofold satiric aspect, for firstly, it performs a critique of American society obsessed with scandal and technology in which intimacy is excluded as a trait of postmodern society; and secondly, the dismantling of a nostalgic Ireland, which turns out to be, in Duncan's words, "only a tourist's game, an image sustained for gain, Ireland being today as much a part of the postmodern world as Boston" (72).

Chapter 4, about ways of serving society and legend of the rebel in *Michael Collins* (1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), traces the way in which two men embodied as the real historical figure of Michael Collins and as the fictional

character Damien O'Donovan became legends and how, despite taking opposite sides of the conflict both shared the same fate in dying for Ireland. Duncan gives a close explanation of chief historical events, such as the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty sides of the Irish Civil War, that are necessary to enable a thorough understanding of both films. She also draws interesting parallels between the past time depicted in both films and the present time of their release, namely the ceasefire that was taking place in Northern Ireland when at the time *Michael Collins* came out, and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* which reflected the frustration of radicalized elements in Northern Ireland to address issues eight years beyond the Good Friday Agreement as well as the widespread of terrorism. Duncan draws on Ken Loach's assumption that *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* is a way for the British to confront their own imperialist history, and that in telling the truth about the past, one can tell the truth about the present (119). By elucidating the difference between concepts of sympathy and empathy, Duncan implies that it is only in understanding Damien and his cause, that we are able to "slip inside the skin of another" (120) in order to understand those vilified as terrorists.

The controversial aspect in the last chapter, which focuses on the journey of the contemporary anti-hero in *Veronica Guerin* (2003) and *In Bruges* (2008), is summed up by Duncan in the words of Sean O'Faolain who "acknowledges that the anti-hero is not a 'neat and tidy' concept" (125). On one hand, I agree that the anti-hero trajectory of *In Bruges* is subverted, for the hit man Ray as well as his partner gain consciousness about their actual roles in taking people's lives. Nonetheless, I believe that the "anti" aspect of his fleeting heroism must not be put aside, although there is a slight hope that Ray might not have been killed and that he and drug dealer Chloe might begin their lives anew. On the other, I feel somewhat uncertain in relation to Duncan's view on the second film, based on the real life trajectory of Veronica Guerin and the herculean task she undertakes to spot the criminals and reveal the Dublin underworld drug scene. The film does, however, convey that Veronica's *naivité* (that could be taken as carelessness) turns into a powerful self-destructive weapon when combined with her ambition. Veronica is obviously overwhelmed by her sudden celebrity-status, and the scene in which she comments on the bad picture broadcast on the news while she was recovering in hospital after her first assassination attempt clearly demonstrates this point. Yet, at the same time Duncan grapples with the gender complexities that the film has raised, she is critical in relation to her real motivation to pursue such a dangerous investigation while leaving her family aside. Veronica is doubtlessly brave enough to leave the domestic space to which women are normatively confined, whereas if she were a man, the nature of her motivations would hardly have been questioned. I consider her journey as an inner quest that results in her unfortunate death, but which is paradoxically a means for order to be restored in the sense that it became a milestone to Ireland's battle over drugs and that led to the formation of the Criminal Assets Bureau, responsible for inquiring about assets supposedly acquired illegally.

To conclude, in *Irish Myth, Lore and Legend on Film* Dawn Duncan has produced a piece of work that encompasses both the deep research and analysis of a sharp critic as well as the fluidity and clarity of an experienced academic, fundamental to reach both scholarly and popular appeal, or anyone interested in Irish history and cinema. As she states at the outset, while choosing the pronoun “we” to engage and invite the audience to take part in this journey, the reader is left to actively reassess the ways in which each of these at first similarly traditional motifs are present in contemporary cinema under different perspectives and realize how “Time present and time past./ Are both perhaps present in time future./ And time future contained in time past./ If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable” (Eliot 1935, 93)

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### **Works Cited**

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