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Peter Mullan

Although he has written and directed only three feature films to date – *Orphans* (1998), *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Neds* (2010) – there is a strong case for seeing Peter Mullan as the most prominent and provocative figure within contemporary Scottish cinema. Mullan's visibility stems in significant part from his identity as a creative polymath, an artist widely acclaimed both for his work behind the camera as writer/director and his activities in front of it as an actor. He has won no fewer than 21 major international awards (including the European MEDIA Prize and the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion) in the former capacity and eight (including Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival and the Special Jury Prize at Sundance) in the latter. The provocative nature of his small but distinguished directorial oeuvre is similarly multi-stranded. On one hand, we might point to the challenging nature of many recurring themes within Mullan's movies: dispossessed, damaged and borderline psychotic masculine identities and the moral corruption and hypocrisy of socially respected institutions, to name but two. But on the other, the works in question are also markedly (and deliberately) confrontational at aesthetic and tonal levels, delighting as they do in an unlikely and exuberantly imaginative fusion of social realist filmmaking traditions with surrealist and blackly comic counterparts. Nearly a quarter of a century on from his silver-screen debut in *The Big Man* (David Leland, 1990), Mullan's position within his native film culture is contradictory and central in equal measure: he somehow manages to be Scottish cinema's *eminence grise* and its *enfant terrible* at one and the same time.

Orphans is the story of four Glasgow siblings who endure a long dark night of the soul, both literally and figuratively speaking, during the hours before their recently deceased mother's funeral. It represented a remarkably ambitious and assured feature debut, one that quickly established a range of key aesthetic characteristics and thematic concerns also discernible within its maker's subsequent work. To take one representative example of this, *Orphans* instantiates a notably emotional and quasi-autobiographical form of filmmaking: Mullan spoke at the time of the film's British theatrical release of the project's roots in his own experience of overwhelming grief after his own mother's death. Autobiographical or testimonial sources proved similarly important to the development of both *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Neds*. Their writer/director conducted extensive interview fieldwork with surviving victims of the Madgalene laundry system in mid-twentieth-century Ireland when researching the former, and drew extensively upon his memories of growing up as a working-class teenager in gang-ridden early-1970s Glasgow while writing the latter. Yet despite the intensely personal nature of the individual human stories at the heart of all three films, Mullan goes to conspicuous lengths to frame those narratives in ways that consistently stress their wider socio-political resonance. The bereaved family of *Orphans* represent an entire social class within contemporary urban Scotland, one profoundly disorientated by the loss of individual and collective certainties embodied within a range of increasingly defunct and disregarded public institutions. The latter include the post-1945 British Welfare State, the Roman Catholic Church and the heavy industries that once dominated the social and economic life of cities like Glasgow. The four abused young women who are the central protagonists of *The Magdalene Sisters* speak not only for thousands of their forgotten or ignored real-life counterparts, but also of the conspiratorial

corruption between church and state that influenced many aspects of Irish life during the twentieth century's middle decades. Rather than simply telling the story of one good boy gone bad, *Neds* highlights the extent to which individual access to educational and emotional opportunity within the Scotland of recent decades was – and, perhaps, continues to be – inequitably determined by considerations of socioeconomic class.

Pronounced aesthetic and tonal affinities also link *Orphans*, *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Neds*, with the earliest of those films again setting a precedent for those that came after. *Orphans'* highly distinctive treatment of its main characters' bewildered and bewildering emotional responses to the experience of bereavement leaves viewers uncomfortably caught between solicitous empathy with and scathing laughter at those they see on screen. Religious eldest sibling Thomas does not allow his self-important nocturnal vigil over his mother's coffin and cadaver to be interrupted by the small matter of a storm that tears the roof from the church within which dead parent and devout child await the former's interment. Meanwhile, Thomas's brother Michael nearly kills himself in the course of a pathetically inept attempt to fake a workplace injury in order to claim financial compensation. He succeeds only in loading physical anguish on top of an already-existing psychological equivalent. A comparable authorial impulse to treat socially and emotionally serious narrative material in blackly comic and surreal ways also manifests itself in both *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Neds*. The former reaches a scabrous satirical peak when the imprisoned female inmates of a brutal Magdalene laundry are forced, as an ostensible respite from their endless backbreaking physical labours, to sit through a screening of the black-and-white Hollywood movie *The Bells of St Mary's* (Leo McCarey, USA, 1945). The ironic contrast between a beatific American fiction of Catholic institutional charity and a horrific Irish real-life experience of the same phenomenon is so savagely underscored that the viewer hardly knows whether to laugh, cry, or engage in both at once. *Neds* possesses a range of similarly surreal set piece scenes: in one of these, central protagonist John's anger-and-angst-filled alienation becomes intense enough to goad a graven image of Christ down from its Cross in order to engage in a no-holds-barred knife fight.

Much else can and should be said within any remotely comprehensive textual analysis of a directorial oeuvre as audacious and ambitious as Peter Mullan's. But the remainder of this essay attempts another way of approaching its subject's filmmaking career to date. While it would be perverse not to acknowledge the unusual aesthetic, emotional and intellectual complexity of his three movies as writer/director, there is a critical danger inherent in fixating exclusively upon those works and their distinguished qualities. Clearly, Mullan is an unusually talented artist, internationally acclaimed to a degree that the vast majority of his local contemporaries can only envy. But still, we ought to resist the critical temptation to set his work definitively above (and thus, apart from) the wider body of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first Scottish filmmaking. The development of Mullan's career specifically illuminates much about the contemporaneous evolution of Scottish cinema more generally: both phenomena have been comparably defined and directed by a complex amalgam of obstacles and opportunities. Firstly, as an actor Mullan was associated with several of the mid-to-late 1990s features that initially brought Scottish filmmaking to sustained critical and commercial prominence in an international context. Eye-catching early cameos in *Braveheart* (Mel

Gibson, 1995) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) were swiftly followed by his breakthrough lead role in Ken Loach and Paul Laverty's *My Name is Joe* (1998). Secondly, we might note the publicly funded hothousing of Mullan's fledgling directorial career through a trilogy of subsidised short films – *Close* (1993), *Fridge* (1995) and *Good Day for the Bad Guys* (1995) – that preceded his feature debut with *Orphans*. This early trajectory mirrors that taken by his best-known contemporaries, David MacKenzie and Lynne Ramsay, who both worked on a range of subsidised short projects before making their own acclaimed first features, *Ratcatcher* (1999) and *The Last Great Wilderness* (2001) respectively. Granted, some of the precise institutional structures and circumstances that facilitated the beginning of careers such as Mullan, Ramsay and Mackenzie's during the late 1990s no longer apply in the early 2010s. But a historically informed appreciation of such figures' early filmmaking activities underscores the persistence of a central question that still confronts Scottish film culture today, namely, how best to support and develop new creative talent within local industrial structures that remain comparatively under-developed when considered in relation to many (if not most) European and Anglophone counterparts.

It is certainly the case, for instance, that other aspects of Mullan's career path to date demonstrate many of the difficulties that have confronted numerous Scottish filmmakers during the last two decades. The double-edged nature of enhanced collective access to, but enforced dependence on, external sources of production finance bedevilled the theatrical release of *Orphans*. Although shot in early 1997, the movie did not reach British cinema screens until May 1999, a delay that Mullan publicly blamed on the breakdown of working relations with his major production funder, the London-based broadcaster Channel 4. Mullan claimed that the inability of filmmaker and financier to settle upon a mutually acceptable final cut stemmed from the latter's culturally insensitive determination to force the late-1990s Scottish feature projects it supported to conform if at all possible to a supposedly lucrative and modish national stereotype established by the global box office success of *Trainspotting*. This complaint was one echoed by several local contemporaries who also worked with Channel 4 after 1996, including John Byrne and (ironically enough) Irvine Welsh. Several years later, the production financing problems faced by Mullan's second feature, *The Magdalene Sisters*, illustrated the materially parlous state of existence that routinely faces those attempting to work as independent producers from a Scottish base. The film's main local producer, Antonine Films, went bankrupt in April 2001, while in the same month producer Frances Higson announced that the project would probably be forced to shoot in Ireland, not Scotland, because of a shortfall in envisaged production finance and the lure of Irish government-sponsored tax breaks. Only the last-minute intervention of an extraordinary coalition of public funders allowed *The Magdalene Sisters* shoot to proceed. Lastly in this regard, we might also note that the enduring difficulty of financing feature film work from a Scottish base is also suggested by the near-decade-long interval between Mullan's second feature and his third, *Neds*, not to mention the fact that the latter film was made largely with the support of French and Italian financiers.

The final major way in which the story of Peter Mullan's filmmaking career is closely intertwined with that of Scottish cinema more generally relates to his remarkable energy and generosity as an actor. Of the 68 onscreen credits on Mullan's CV at time of writing in early 2014, seven (not

including cameo roles in his own movies) are Scottish features that he supported in the years after *My Name is Joe* cemented his international reputation as a screen performer. Moreover, despite playing a range of notably desperate and/or dangerous male characters in several of the films in question – see, for example, *Blinded* (Eleanor Yule, 2003), *On a Clear Day* (Gaby Dellal, 2004), *Cargo* (Clive Gordon, 2006), *True North* (Steve Hudson, 2006) – it would be emphatically untrue to say that Mullan has used his local acting activities as a platform from which to reiterate the same authorial ideas and interests important to him as a writer/director. Rather, his local filmmaking choices as an actor have exemplified his above-noted determination that Scottish cinema transcend a narrow and received range of aesthetic modes, artistic voices and images of national culture and identity. Mullan's Scottish feature work as an actor spans markedly different film genres and traditions, from European Art Cinema – *Young Adam* (David Mackenzie, 2003) – through melodrama – *Blinded* – to jukebox musical – *Sunshine on Leith* (Dexter Fletcher, 2013). Moreover, of the seven movies in question, three – *Blinded*, *On a Clear Day*, *True North* – were fiction feature debuts for their respective writer/directors. While Mullan's own films have undoubtedly established him as one of Scottish cinema's most distinctive, distinguished and non-conformist artistic voices, that fact should not distract attention from his wider collaborative achievements as a figurehead who has driven the ongoing expansion and diversification of the nation's film industry and culture in multiple ways.

Jonathan Murray