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Contemporary Scottish cinema

SARAH NEELY

In an article in the Scottish cultural magazine, *The Drouth*, Mark Cousins provocatively bemoaned the lack of a vibrant film culture in Scotland. Putting Iran's cinematic achievements forward as a – perhaps surprising – example, Cousins identifies several reasons for Scotland's underdevelopment, most of which revolve around a lack of experimentation and a general absence of interest in exploring the capabilities of the film form. This he puts down to the dominance of an accomplished literary tradition and the consequent development of oral culture rather than a visual alternative. Blame is also laid on various training schemes and funding initiatives espousing the rigid frameworks of mainstream film-making practices without allowing much room for new forms and practices to emerge (Cousins 2006: 12–13).

That diagnosis seems hard to accept when considering the diversity of recent films made in and about Scotland. Contemporary offerings include films skilfully working within mainstream genres but also films that push the boundaries of dominant forms and representations. However, this sort of experimentation, or even what might be called an avant-garde approach, is not necessarily a new development in Scottish cinema. On the contrary, there is a history of an avant-garde in Scottish cinema that has often been overshadowed by critical accounts and debates concerned with more dominant modes of representation. This chapter aims to reassess the development of a Scottish Art Cinema (Petrie 2000) alongside a consideration of avant-garde film-making practices. In addition to discussing recent Scottish film offerings, stretching across a wide variety of genres – both art house and mainstream – the chapter will refer to the largely ignored work of the experimental film-maker, Margaret Tait, in

order to illustrate some of the key tensions presented within Scottish film-making and the body of criticism surrounding it.

Historically, Scottish film criticism expressed an urgency for debunking the myths of Tartanry and Kailyard. In collections such as Colin McArthur's *Scotch Reels* (1982), or Eddie Dick's *From Limelight to Satellite* (1990), films with Scotland as their subject matter were scrutinised for these types of representations; the depiction of Scotland was seen as limited to narratives of fantasy, more often projected from outside the country rather than from within. These types of representation continue to provide a source of tension between what political bodies and governmental industries promote and what are considered in other spheres to be acceptable representations. The tension is not unique to Scotland: Ruth Barton has pointed to a similar double-bind in Ireland where certain representations of the past are promoted and denied simultaneously (Barton 2000).

The other often-cited myth, Clydesideism glorifies the strength of the working-class male. Throughout the history of Scottish literature and film criticism, heavily masculinised narratives, drawing from 'hard man' mythology, and overlooking the woman's perspective in favour of the working-class male's, have also been the focus of lively debate (Lea and Schoene 2003; Schoene 2002). John Hill's examination of British cinema in the 1990s, including Ken Loach's multiple filmic representations of Scotland, suggests similar points of contention, mainly that the films' meditation on the erosion of working-class culture and their nostalgic attempts to return to traditional representations, ignore other social groups (2000).

Scotch Reels was important for various reasons, not least of which was the serious attention it paid to the representation of Scotland on film. Nevertheless, it paved the way for a subsequent body of criticism that foregrounded debates around the specified discourses at the expense of other forms of representation. Some years later, John Caughie reflected on how the critical approaches in McArthur's book had been somewhat narrow in focus and ultimately restricted the accuracy of the writers' conclusions (Caughie 1990). In *Scotch Reels* discourses of Tartanry and Kailyard were labelled 'pathological', with only 'realistic' feature films being suggested as a 'progressive' route for future film-making (McArthur 1982: 2–3). The tracks thus laid down literally left little to the imagination; fantasies were eschewed in favour of representations strongly tied to the 'material' realities of Scotland. The over-emphasis on realist discourses as a positive route forward was further reinforced by the significant attention to documentary film-maker John Grierson, and the work of the Films of Scotland Committee.

Grierson's influence on Scottish cinema is profound. His mass communication background, his preference for pragmatic, collective, political approaches

to film-making, and a general disregard for the artifice and invention of fictional narratives can be traced through to contemporary film-making practices. Although Grierson does not entirely escape without criticism in *Scotch Reels*, his influence is a key strand of debate throughout. The dominance of the debates around realism and the opposing fantasies of Tartanry and Kailyard resulted in the marginalisation of discussion of other film-making practices. Although a detailed account of the Workers' Film Society movement is provided (Allen 1982: 93–9), only brief consideration is given to the amateur film movement. More astonishingly, Bill Douglas is largely ignored. Glasgow School of Art graduates Helen Biggar and Norman McLaren are signposted, but mainly in terms of their politically motivated rather than artistic efforts (Allen 1982: 96; Hill 1982: 110). In the volume's timeline of Scottish film culture, the retrospective of McLaren's work at the Edinburgh film festival in 1971 is mentioned, but another retrospective organised in 1970 by Murray Grigor (one of the volume's contributors) on the Scottish independent film-maker Margaret Tait is not.

ON THE PERIPHERY OF SCOTTISH CINEMA STUDIES: MARGARET TAIT

Throughout her lifetime, the Orcadian-born film-maker and poet Margaret Tait produced over thirty short films, including the feature *Blue Black Permanent* (1992). After studying at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome in the 1950s, Tait established Ancona Films with fellow student and film-maker Peter Hollander. Her films were largely self-financed, and distribution and exhibition were largely confined to the festival circuit and various touring exhibitions; eventually many of her films would be distributed by the London Film-makers Co-op and the British Film Institute.

By the time *Scotch Reels* was published, Tait had been making experimental films for thirty years and was also exhibiting on the international circuit. Yet the oversight is hardly surprising when considered within the context previously discussed. It is also worth noting that Tait expressed her own frustration with the Films of Scotland Committee and its narrow remit to fund only certain kinds of film-making.

The lack of critical attention given to Tait in this instance could be explained as a reluctance to engage with non-narrative films which are not classified as documentary and a general failure to ascertain the significance of what might be considered part of the amateur film-making movement. Lack of interest in Tait's work could also be read as part of a more general and problematic history of the critical reception of women avant-garde artists, a reality that has prompted a number of feminist initiatives to recover a somewhat fragmented film history. The material most at risk of being lost is often driven by personal,

intimate narratives that deal with issues perceived as having lesser value than those deemed to be of cultural, 'collective' importance (Rabinovitz 2006). As with Tait, these film-makers risked being overlooked because of the failure of their work to be identified within existing genres or film-making practices. Robin Blaetz has criticised the narrow-vision of previous film scholars for:

not realizing that the play with focus, the haphazard framing, the disjunctive editing, and the often abbreviated length found in the films of Gunvor Nelson, Chick Strand, and others working in the 1960s and beyond were not signs of incompetence but marks of a different vision. (Blaetz 2006: 154)

Like the other avant-garde filmmakers mentioned, Tait's work focused on the particular and the personal. Like other non-narrative films that explore the materiality of the medium, their primary focus is not to attempt to address issues of national identity. Mitch Miller explains the critical oversight of Tait's work in the following way:

Filmmaking on 'big subjects', big landscapes that excited political and social engagement and educated the masses drove this small northern adjunct of the British film industry. Tait's examination of the minute and domestic, had it been noticed at all would have seemed indulgent in such a setting. (Miller 2005: 63)

Tait's oversight can be seen as part of a general issue around the invisibility of avant-garde film-makers within studies of Scottish cinema where artists are relegated to an international framework lying outside the radar of the national, and are often marginalised because of their inability to contribute to the debates around national, identity (Morgan 2003).

Unfortunately, very little has changed since Tait's encounter with the Scottish Film Council in the 1950s, when it refused to support her work financially. If Tait had been unable to fund her own production activity, it is unlikely that any of her films would have been made. Film-maker Peter Todd, curator of the LUX touring exhibition of Tait's work, blames the lack of support from UK funding bodies for limiting the work of independent and experimental film-makers (Todd 2000: 25). A similar marginalisation of experimental film exists in Ireland (Connolly 2003). Given the strong literary heritage in both Scotland and Ireland, Cousins' argument about the burden of that heritage on the development of an innovative cinema culture is relevant here. The strong links between literary, cultural and film criticism could well explain an unsympathetic view to non-narrative approaches. Ruth Barton blames the literary origins of Irish cinema studies for the lack of attention given to the visual. Speaking of this narrowness (or lack) of vision Barton asks: 'Had

Irish film studies become obsessed with the relationship between the state, the nation and cultural representations thereof?’ (Barton 2004: 2). Like the funding bodies that fail to see beyond what is widely deemed as commercially salient, criticism has also suffered from the blind-spot formed by the dominance of debates around representation.

OPENING UP THE DEBATE: GENRE-BENDING AND NEW
REPRESENTATIONS IN RECENT SCOTTISH FILMS (2000–)

While the critics might be obsessed with the exhaustion of this network of causal relationships, Scottish film-makers get on with the business of making films that challenge the relevance of debates around representation or, on occasion, side-step them altogether. The recent rise in films which playfully rework a variety of genres is striking.

The examples are numerous. Richard Jobson transposed the martial arts genre onto contemporary Edinburgh in his film *The Purifiers* (2003). The horror genre has also proved popular. In 2002 *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall) used Scotland as a backdrop for its story about a British squad on a training exercise that goes haywire when they come under attack by werewolves. At the time of writing, Marshall is also set to release another thriller, *Doomsday*, a futuristic depiction of the aftermath of a deadly outbreak of the plague, filmed around Blackness Castle near Linlithgow. David McKenzie mixed the horror genre with the road movie in *The Last Great Wilderness* (2002). His latest film *Hallam Foe* (2007), produced by Sigma Films, is billed as a thriller narrative tracking the activities of a young, peeping tom in Edinburgh. The multi award-winning *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006), also developed by Sigma Films as part of their ‘Advance Party’ project with Zentropé, has been marketed as a thriller for its suspenseful narration, which plays with notions of voyeurism through the point-of-view of its central character who works as a CCTV operator.

Comedy has also proven to be a successful platform for playing with genre. As in the films of Bill Forsyth, humour provides a way to explore myth and stereotypes that distances itself from the ‘serious’ debates of representation. Annie Griffin’s 2005 mockumentary, *Festival*, which takes the fictional camera behind the scenes of the Edinburgh Fringe, astutely employs comedic form as a way to explore a number of cultural and national stereotypes. *American Cousins* (Don Coutts, 2003) playfully engages with stereotype and issues of representation through its story of the reunion of two diasporic Italian communities (Scottish and American) cast through the generic lenses of the romantic comedy and thriller. Although critically it provides a rich text worthy of further analysis, it suffered from distribution problems. Ultimately, its inventive approach to genre made it a challenging film to market.

Despite the discouragement of critics, a host of films continue to engage with the more distant Scottish past, and the heritage genre remains a commercially successful genre in both local and overseas markets (Neely 2005). Narratives of damaged masculinity, often within an urban setting, also continue to substantially define the Scottish cinematic landscape. These include films such as *Orphans* (Peter Mullan, 1998), *16 Years of Alcohol* (Richard Jobson, 2003), *On a Clear Day* (Gaby Dellal, 2004), *Sweet Sixteen* (Ken Loach, 2002) and *My Name is Joe* (Ken Loach, 1998), but there has also been a noticeable rise in films which engage with multicultural representations of Scotland. In addition to the aforementioned film exploring the Italian diasporic community, *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004) is Loach's insightful take on love across the cultural divide, where the star-crossed lovers are an Irish-Catholic school teacher and a Scottish, Pakistani man. Another film, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (Pratibha Parmar, 2006), set in an Indian restaurant in Glasgow, tells the story of a Scottish Asian woman who returns home from London after the death of her father and then falls in love with a woman working in the family shop. And finally, *Gas Attack* (Kenny Glenaan, 2001), borrowing from real-life issues, uncovers the acts of violence carried out against Kurdish refugees on Glasgow estate.

Other film-makers have looked outside Scotland to consider Britain and Scotland's role in the wider, global community. *The Last King of Scotland* (Kevin Macdonald, 2006) offers a studied portrait of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin told through the eyes of Nicholas Garrigan, a fictitious young Scottish doctor who becomes one of Amin's personal advisers. Along similar lines, but perhaps less successfully, Michael-Caton Jones's *Shooting Dogs* (2005) revisits the 1994 Rwandan genocide through the viewpoint of two British workers, a Catholic priest and a young school teacher who are marked by the same optimism as the Scottish doctor in Macdonald's film. Unfortunately, the narrative-structuring device results in the marginalisation of Rwandan points-of-view. Perhaps most interesting, in terms of its reframing of the representation of damaged masculinity through its relationship to wider global issues, is Scott Hudson's *True North* (2006). The story follows the fate of a small fishing boat run by a father and son and facing hard economic times. Unbeknown to the father, a crew member, Riley, played along the familiar lines of the hard-man stereotype by Peter Mullan, hatches a money-making scheme to stow away Chinese immigrants – a decision which ultimately endangers both the future of the boat and the lives of those on board. In one poignant scene, issues of culpability come to the fore, when Riley, faced with the consequences of his actions, refuses to handle the dead body of one of the stowaways, leaving the skipper's son to deal with his mistakes.

Other critics have praised Peter Mullan's *Orphans* (1997) for its skilful subversion of social realist narratives and potential to serve as a metaphor for

post-devolutionary Scotland. David Martin-Jones argues that *Orphans*' deployment of a variety of European Art cinema styles – social realism, magical realism, expressionism, and surrealism – works to destabilise the documentary-realist tradition, ultimately characterising it as 'a somewhat arbitrary way of defining Scottish national identity' (2004: 240). Although these types of readings are in danger of overplaying the assumed links between criticism, culture, politics and film that Barton questions in relation to Irish cinema studies, there is no doubting the significance of Scottish film-makers' look to other cultures in order to counter the somewhat dominating influence of British social realism. As Alan Riach has argued, referencing of other cultures has long served as a strategy to bypass England (1996: 84). More positively, this might be read as actual cosmopolitanism. However, as Martin McLoone has remarked in relation to Irish identity, it has often defined itself against its 'other' (England). He explains: 'Whatever its positive attributes, crucially Irish identity was not British' (McLoone 2000: 12).

In addition to its referencing of European film-makers, Scottish cinema has also drawn from American traditions. Citing *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994) and *Rob Roy* (Michael Caton-Jones, 1995) as examples, Jonathan Murray has argued how in 'both institutional and representational senses, 1990s Scotland can be asserted to have spawned a "devolved" American cinema as much as it did a "British" one' (Murray 2005: 218). On the other hand, the appropriation of alternate cinematic traditions can also signal the type of subversion that Martin-Jones refers to in his analysis of *Orphans*. His argument, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's work on minor literature and its later application to cinema by Deleuze, is that the film 'makes a minor use of a major voice, ensuring that it exists as both a work of devolved British cinema and of new Scottish cinema' (2005: 240). Similar claims have been made for other Scottish films such as *Dreaming* (Mike Alexander, 1990) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) and also Irish films like *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1997) and *When Brendan Met Trudy* (Keiron Walsh, 2000). In particular, their inventive employment of the voiceover in relation to conventions of classical Hollywood cinema or European art cinema resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's work (Neely 2004).

What this brief overview of recent film productions emanating from Scotland reveals, especially when considered alongside the growth in co-productions – Denmark for *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996) and *Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself* (Lone Scherfig, 2002) and Ireland for *The Magdalene Sisters* (Mullan, 2002), *Blind Flight* (John Furse, 2003) and *True North* (2006) – is that Scottish cinema is increasingly less bound to issues of representation; there is an opening-up of discourse and a freedom of movement across both genre and subject.

Continuing with the 'orphans' theme, Alan Riach, referring to recent trends in Scottish literature, cites the growing 'self confident use of cultural models' as evidence that 'late twentieth century Scotland flourishes, culturally distinct, but [. . .] also an absent political entity in search of its own statehood, an heroic ideal, orphaned from itself and travelling in a world without closure' (1996: 79–80). Scotland's current unresolved issues around sovereignty are in fact more and more characteristic of the contemporary world.

Likewise, Riach's comments also ring true in relation to the rise in film narratives engaging with displaced identity. Several critics have identified films like *My Way Home* (Bill Douglas, 1978), *Carla's Song* (Ken Loach, 1996), *Morvern Callar* and *Dear Frankie* (Shona Aurbach, 2004) for their concern with the diasporic and migratory experience (Petrie 2000). In many instances, recent Scottish cinema provides fruitful terrain for both the metaphor of the orphan and that of the drifter, but it is also important to note the surge in narratives that are highly personal and individual representations of identity rather than aimed towards the collective.

PERSONAL FILM-MAKING AND A SCOTTISH ART CINEMA

In *Screening Scotland*, Duncan Petrie describes the formation of a Scottish art cinema, citing film-makers like Bill Forsyth, Bill Douglas, Ian Sellar, Margaret Tait and Timothy Neat as key figures. As Petrie explains, notions of art cinema have traditionally been described as emerging in response to the dominance of Hollywood (2000: 148; Higson 1995). In this regard, art cinema mobilises the nationally specific, and often that which is associated with 'high culture'. The strategy assumes that even if a film is not commercially successful within the mainstream, it will be of great cultural importance in its ability to speak to a global audience through its participation in the festival circuit and an international, art-house market. Again, this framework brings us back, full-circle, precariously leaning towards a privileging of national representations and cultural specificity. But as Petrie notes, art cinema in Scotland has evidenced itself in self-reflexive, personal narratives (2000: 151). Although subjective narration is a common feature of art cinema, the recent rise in such styled narratives may not serve as a method of differentiation from dominant Hollywood practices. Instead, it perhaps signals a shift away from the turgid roots of its realist past and a reinvigoration of the cinematic traditions marked by film-makers like Douglas, McLaren or Tait, and other films which reached the universal through the personal – the kind of avant-garde more closely akin to Wollen's 'personal' avant-garde which he linked to the co-op movements (1996).

Margaret Tait was Scotland's first woman feature-film-maker with *Blue Black Permanent* (1992), a film about an artist's coming to terms with the long-ago

suicide of her poetess mother. Although a conventional feature funded by the BFI, the film explores issues of the personal in the meditative style characteristic of her experimental shorts. I would argue that other more recent film offerings, particularly those from women film-makers, offer a similar departure from previous styles but also reflect on similar themes around displacement and mourning, usually the absence of a family member, typically the mother. One obvious example is Lynne Ramsay, whose poetic films *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *Ratcatcher* (1999) have been compared in their use of highly charged images to the work of Bill Douglas. But we could also add films like *Dear Frankie* (2004), a moving portrait of a young mother who continually uproots and moves to a new town in order to distance her son from an absent father. The young boy's yearning for his absent father who he believes to be at sea recalls earlier films like Ian Sellar's *Venus Peter* (1989). *Dear Frankie* was written by Andrea Gibb who scripted *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, and *AfterLife* (Peebles, 2003) and has also adapted Louise Welsh's novel *The Cutting Room* which has yet to be produced. Similarly, we might include Arnold's *Red Road* whose psychological exploration of its central character, who faces trauma following the death of her sister, handles complex issues around violence and sexuality with a considerable amount of depth.

Ian Goode has discussed the break from British realism and the challenge to the masculine narratives of Scottish cinema provided by films such as *Stella Does Tricks* (Cokey Giedroyc, 1996) and *Blue Black Permanent* (2005: 239). Goode describes the films as coming-of-age narratives akin to the body of work Phil Powrie categorises as 'rite of passage films', a genre in which Powrie includes films like *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (Terence Davies, 1988) or *Small Faces* (Gillies MacKinnon, 1995). Organised around character subjectivity, these films often result in elliptical, fragmented narratives rather than following a more traditional, linear approach (Powrie 2000: 317). The foregrounding of the central character's inner experience also provides a point of departure for reflections on the past (Goode 2005: 236). Although Petrie has argued that *Blue Black Permanent* lacks the intimacy and observational acumen of Tait's shorter films (2000: 165), a wealth of moments exist where the privileging of character subjectivity breaks with the narrative progression in order to explore the minutiae of detail in a self-reflexive manner. Goode explains:

Tait's tendency to cut away from the speaker to the artefacts and materials of expression, such as the trace of watered-down paint splashed above a sink, the paintings mounted on a wall, or the books and objects that line a shelf, further underlines her concern with expressive form and its materiality. (2005: 237)

Lynne Ramsay's film *Morvern Callar*, adapted from Alan Warner's novel of the same name and hailed as the 'female *Trainspotting*', provides an interesting point of comparison. It was co-written with Liana Dognini, an Italian filmmaker whose collaboration with Ramsay began when they were students at the National Film and Television School. Warner's focus on feelings of displacement and alienation experienced by the central character was emphasised through their choice of casting an English actress. The novel developed its strong characterisation through first-person narrative written in Oban dialect, but unlike *Trainspotting* – which began life as a text constructed as a series of vignettes narrated in the first person by several protagonists, and evolved into the strong, unified narration of the central character, Renton – Ramsay's film forgoes the employment of voiceover and instead largely withholds Morvern's voice. Comparisons can be made between Samantha Morton's laconic performance as Morvern and the character James in Ramsay's first feature *Ratcatcher* (1999).

It might be tempting to read the silencing of Morvern's first-person narration from the original text as undermining her authority within the film. Considering that the voiceover is usually a privilege reserved solely for male characters in narrative cinema (Silverman 1988: 164), the failure to utilise Morvern's strong and vivid narration may seem like a missed opportunity. It may further be charged with diluting the cultural specificity that, in the light of *Trainspotting*, Alan Warner's novel promises to deliver.

Although Morvern's highly developed first-person narration would prove ripe terrain for translation into voiceover, its use, like Renton's narration in *Trainspotting*, would suggest a compliance with established structures of power in classical narrative cinema. Instead, Morvern's silence further articulates a central theme of exile, both personal and cultural. The difference in modes of adaptation, suggest a break in the film's engagement with issues of national identity. T. G. Murray, connecting Ramsay's approach to other film-makers, notes how:

by with-holding women's voices, physically and symbolically, these film-makers free their true subjects – the cultural, rather than national subaltern – from the overwritten discourses of both politics and economics, making their experience unique to them, and unknown to us – the international audiences who might otherwise attempt to make them up. (2006: 279)

Rather than control the narrative through language, the emotive musical soundtrack – although ultimately dictated by the selection provided by 'His' (her boyfriend's) usurped record collection – allows Morvern to direct the narrative. Again, identity here is more concerned with the personal rather than

any larger consideration of cultural identity. A similar argument could be made of Kate Dickie's wonderfully restrained performance as the CCTV operator in *Red Road* and the tension created through the character's point-of-view guiding the narrative.

Shohat and Stam's formulation of a 'poetics of embodiment' provides a useful frame of analysis for these types of narratives of displacement featuring in recent Scottish cinema. Briefly characterised as a general resistance to 'macro-narratives' in favour of stories reflecting a 'diversity of experiences within and across nations', the narratives can also be marked by themes of dislocation within 'a "multinationalized" global economy' (1994: 318).

The alienated relationship between the morbid reality of Morvern's personal life and the sterile environment of the supermarket she works in and the utopian fantasy provided by the mass-produced suburban housing in *Ratcatcher*, are evidence of similar themes of dislocated identity which Shohat and Stam describe. However, in *Trainspotting* the narrative of Renton – hardly an orphan – revolves around his inability to break the strong bonds with his close-knit group of friends. Even when he relocates to London in an attempt to start over, it takes little time for his past to catch up with him in the shape of Begbie. The narrative ends with him heading to Amsterdam with the money, but the film's cyclical return to the structures laid out in the opening sequence suggest the impossibility of a clean break; furthermore, as we learn in Welsh's follow-up novel, *Porno*, Renton eventually returns. *Trainspotting* explores the place of the disaffected within global-capitalist culture, but, conforming to narrative principles of unity, the closing sequence and the cyclical return to the theme of the film's opening voiceover implicate Renton in the lifestyle he originally rejects.

The differences in narration and structure perhaps signal a divergence in the films' influences: *Trainspotting* can more easily be traced to American independent cinema, whereas *Morvern Callar* draws more clearly from a European art cinema tradition. Additionally, *Morvern Callar* could be seen as part of a recent trend in Scottish cinema, where issues of national identity are dealt with more tentatively. Issues of migration come to the fore, identity is not fixed but fluid, and breaks with narrative convention serve to mirror the fragmentation of experience.

To varying degrees, films like *Blue Black Permanent*, *Stella Does Tricks*, *Ratcatcher*, and also *Young Adam* (David Mackenzie, 2003) could be read in this way. *Young Adam*, an adaptation of a novel with a distinct first-person narrative, like *Morvern Callar*, avoids voiceover in another skilful depiction of estranged identity, the Forth and Clyde canal providing a shifting backdrop for a transient group of drifters. Performing well on the festival circuit, the film's dark subject matter and elusive central character played by Ewan McGregor sit comfortably within established definitions of art cinema, but the film's billing

as a noir-thriller pulls it in other directions. *Red Road* serves as another prime example of the complexities continually offered by contemporary film-makers. As with Bill Forsyth's films, which have enjoyed popularity within both art-house and mainstream markets, *Red Road* successfully balances the popular thriller genre alongside an art-house aesthetic.

In this respect, it is better to avoid too neat a categorisation. Although it is appealing to attempt to define a 'New Scottish Cinema', what the project of *Scotch Reels* showed us is the limitations and dangers in this type of analysis. What criticism should ultimately accept is that the films produced are too complex and contradictory to allow for a clear definition of Scottish cinema to be easily carved out (Blain 2008).

A comparable situation exists in studies of Scottish literature which fail to address the discontinuities of new work resisting traditional frameworks of analysis. Concerned with similar themes of 'exile or estrangement', Eleanor Bell argues:

while there has been an impulse within Scottish literature to experiment with these new possibilities of identity, in criticism there has been a repeated recourse to more traditional formulations of identity, an anxiety about potentially losing hold of the bedrock of tradition. (Bell 2004: 138)

Similarly, the opening-up of modes of discourse within Scottish film-making should also be reflected in its film criticism. The fact that many of the recent offerings of Scottish cinema resist easy classification is most certainly an indication of their responsiveness and inventive approach to contemporary issues.

The accessibility of technology provides further hope for the diversification of film-making practices. Films like May Miles Thomas's acclaimed digital feature *One Life Stand* (2000), made on an estimated budget of £60,000 (Petrie 2000: 165), suggest an opening-up of possibilities for new film-makers, allowing for more intimate modes of storytelling. The film, shot in monochrome and following the story of a mother, played by Maureen Carr, who unwittingly encourages her son into the escort business, is testament to what a good production team, skilful cast and powerful script can achieve.

To return to Mark Cousins's argument cited at the start of this chapter, a strong literary tradition does not spell the ruin for a vibrant cinema. Some of the most successful cinemas stem from cultures with rich artistic, musical and literary traditions. An ideal environment would allow for the forms to intersect, overlap and inspire one another. One should not have to cancel the other out. A bad adaptation is one that limits itself entirely to the merits of the text it is drawing on without adding anything of its own. A vibrant cinema is marked by a diversity of influences, the collaboration with and borrowing from

other film cultures, and the embrace of a variety of film-making practices, both mainstream and experimental. The potential of smaller-budget or 'no-budget' film-making offers the hope of increasing flexibility and the opportunity for film-makers to choose their own path.

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