'The Alternative Within the Mainstream'.
A Critical Analysis of Some Recent Irish Films.

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Master's Degree (Research) in Media and Communications is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work.

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<u>Abstract</u>

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By Nicholas Fennell B.A.

Central to this thesis is the argument, espoused by a number of our contemporary critics, that the success of *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1982) and *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) resulted in a climate in which Irish filmmakers attempted to appeal to a more global market by adopting mainstream Hollywood formats at the expense of the more experimental and socially critical cinema which had existed prior to 1987.

While primarily concerned with Irish cinema since the re-establishment of the Film Board in 1993, the thesis sets out to investigate a number of different strategies which Irish filmmakers have adopted in an attempt to infiltrate a market which has become totally dominated by mainstream American studio films. Its main concern is the extent to which they may be said to have successfully achieved a balance of American style and Irish substance, in such a way that these films can be read as less definably "American" and more specifically "Irish". Each of the films proposed for examination is alternative, not in the classic sense of 'alternative' or 'counter-cinema', but in the sense that they deviate from the more standardised approach of much Irish cinema. The thesis is divided into two main sections.

The first section presents an overview of the Irish cinematic landscape from the emergence of the 'First Wave' to the present, referring both to the main body of literature essential to any undertaking of a textual analysis of Irish film and to the various social, political, economic and cultural changes which have characerised the last three decades, in order to provide the background information required to inform the individual readings which form the bulk of the second section.

The second section is further sub-divided into two chapters. Chapter Three: Nationalist Imaginings and the European Influence, examines a number of indigenous films produced in the 70s and early 80s: Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978), Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* (1978) and *Criminal Conversation* (1980), in order to establish the key themes and tropes associated with the Irish 'First Wave' cinema, before moving on to readings of Paul Tickell's *Crushproof* (1999) and Kevin Liddy's *Country* (2000) - films which, I argue, are reminiscent of the 'First Wave' both aesthetically and thematically. The discussion is then developed into an examination of the difficulties of delivering an 'Irish sensibility' that succeeds critically and financially both at home and abroad.

Chapter Four: 'American Imaginings', examines those directors who have attempted to tell 'Irish' stories within the 'Hollywood' format and provides critical readings of Owen McPolin's *Drinking Crude* (1997), John Crowley's *Intermission* (2003) and Jim Sheridan's *In America* (2003), films which, I argue, primarily adopt specific Hollywood devices while attempting to imbue these generic structures with an Irish 'flavour'.

I shall argue that these 'alternative' strategies, out of economic necessity, occupy a middle ground which attempts to accommodate both the local and the global; focusing less on national identity politics and concerning themselves more with establishing an Irish character/dimension in terms of worldwide, cosmopolitan identity politics.

'The Alternative Within the Mainstream'.
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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction... Methodology... Literary Review... Aims and Objectives... Structure...

1.1 Introduction.

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think
 beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those
moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences.
These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of
selfhood – single or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative
sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society
itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of
domains of difference – that the intersubjective and the collective experiences of
nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated
(Bhabha, 1994: 1/2).

The choice is as to whether we become the consumers of images in a passive
culture or whether we will be allowed to be the makers of images in an active
culture in a democratic society. There is no way of evading that fundamental
policy choice internationally. And there is a way out; it's not achieved I think
myself by simple exclusions, but by building up a base of productivity and
images and accepting one great and exciting fact... that it is at the interstices
between cultures that some of the most exciting things happen, but you cannot
get to that point of pluralism and international tolerance if you have first been
dominated so completely that you have no space in the marketplace
(Higgins, 1994).

The above quotations are taken from 1994, shortly after the establishment of the second
Irish Film Board, and both authors are optimistic in pointing to the 'interstices between
cultures' as being the key area where new and 'exciting' cultural re-imaginings and
innovations are likely to occur over the following decade.

While Bhabha's arguments are formulated in relation to cultures everywhere, Higgins is referring specifically to Ireland and the Irish film industry and, in essence, the cultural interstices which he refers to are those of indigenous Irish culture and the impact of globalisation on the country throughout the 90s.

The term 'globalisation' itself covers a variety of different concepts: the rapid growth of international trade in finished goods and services, the growth of multi-national businesses and enterprises which organize production across national borders and, most relevant for the purposes of this work; 'the slow convergence of consumer tastes in different countries around certain global standards' (Davis, 2003).

In 1998 a series of surveys was conducted by *Foreign Policy* magazine, in conjunction with management consultants A.T.Kearney, to measure the level of globalisation of most of the countries in the world (defined for the purposes of the surveys as integration into the world political and economic system). Ireland was ranked sixth. By the year 2000 it was ranked first and came in first again in 2001 (Corcoran, 2004: 197). This was primarily due to the turnaround in the Irish economy in the early to mid 90s, brought about by the emergence of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger'[1], an appellation which was adopted by the Irish media as a blanket term to cover a variety of diverse social, economic and cultural changes within Irish society.

This economic upturn was reflected in the expansion of the film industry under the auspices of the second Irish Film Board, with over 100 feature films being produced in the last ten years alone [2] and this growth in production was in turn matched by an increase in the body of critical work emerging from our universities and educational institutions, spearheaded by Gibbons, Rockett and Hill and carried forward into the new millennium by McLoone, McBride, Barton and Caughie et al.

Throughout this dissertation I will refer to the key arguments espoused by these and many others, but my primary purpose in this introduction is to clarify the methodology I aim to employ, to give a concise overview of the sources that I will be drawing on over the coming chapters, to draw attention to the primary aims and objectives of the work and to outline the structure of the thesis as a whole.

1.2 Methodology

The bulk of this thesis consists of a textual analysis of a number of recent Irish films where the relevant literature, in the form of books, essays and articles, as well as films, documentaries, taped interviews and websites, are consulted in relation to the history – political, economical and cultural, of Irish film. My purpose is to identify a number of the ways in which our contemporary filmmakers contend with balancing commercial concerns with artistic consideration in order to produce films which have both a local appeal and a global appeal, thereby securing a financially protected future for the industry. I also wish to examine how successful our practitioners are in developing new notions of national identity and delivering contemporary Irish cinematic representations, which manage to clarify elements of the 'inbetweenness' referred to in my introduction.

Diarmaid Ferriter suggests in his introduction to 'The Transformation of Ireland' that in the last twenty years the work of Irish historians; 'has moved away from a narrow focus on the high drama of Irish politics in the direction of social and cultural history' (2004: 1), and that;

> this new vogue of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s emphasised 'diversity', 'variety of cultures' and 'modernity versus tradition' in attempting to contextualise Irish identity as something complex, but ultimately pluralist (2004: 751).

This thesis is firmly rooted in the field of cultural studies. As Peter Biskind puts it: '(I) take film criticism to be a species of cultural criticism; I am interested in what film tells us about society and what society tells us about film (2001: 6). Jeffrey Richards posits that there are two main approaches to the study of film in the UK; 'Film Studies' and 'Cinema History'. 'Film Studies', he argues, are;

> centrally concerned with text, with minute visual and structural analysis of individual films, with the application of a variety of sometimes abstruse theoretical approaches and with the eliciting of meanings that neither the film-makers nor contemporary audiences and critics would have recognised (2000: 21).

while 'Cinema History';

> places its highest priority on context, on the locating of films securely in the setting of their makers' attitudes, constraints and preoccupations, on audience reaction and contemporary understandings (ibid).

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He argues that the empirical cinema historian has three main concerns: analysing film content to ascertain how its; 'themes and ideas are conveyed by script, mise-en-scene, acting, directing, photography and music', investigating how and why the film was made when it was made and; 'how it related to the political, social and industrial situations in which it was produced', and examining box office receipts, reviews and audience reaction to ascertain how the film was received (ibid: 22).

Richards' overview neatly summarises the approach taken in the following pages, but a number of other theorists also helped to refine the direction the work developed in.

In his essay, 'What is Cultural Studies Anyway?' (1987: 38-80), theorist Richard Johnson, having first given an overview of the field of cultural studies – the central role of Marxist critique and how the discipline relates to formal academic disciplines - posits that mass culture should be viewed as an unbroken circuit, that is to say, that neither those who produce it nor those who consume it should be viewed as being more important or more worthy of scrutiny than each other when it comes to deciphering the underlying themes and codes contained within mainstream films.

Johnson looks at three different modes of cultural study: production-based studies, text-based cultural studies and studies of lived cultures and argues that although all three modes have their specific research approaches and viewpoints, cultural studies should work around these differences and use the findings from all three disciplines as the basis for a more emphatic analysis of contemporary society's relationship with mainstream culture. According to Johnson's 'circuit of culture', those who produce our films mostly draw upon society's own ever-changing experiences as the primary ingredients for their produce, distil this information into readily digestible visual narratives and feed these back to the audiences they derived them from. Once this has occurred however, the films are absorbed by audiences; 'who make their own re-appropriations of the elements borrowed from their lived culture and forms of subjectivity' (1987: 52). Hence we get a; 'circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products' (1987: 46).

Elizabeth G. Traube points out that:

cultural commodities, especially media representations, also lead what Johnson (1987: 51) calls a "separated existence" as texts, suspended between the original conditions of their production and the ever-changing moments when they are actually consumed or received. Apprehended as texts, media representations can be interrogated for their formal properties ……. text-based studies informed by the circuit model of culture analyze textual pressures or constraints on receiving audiences … which can be abstracted from particular narrative forms and genres (1992: 5).

I will be focusing on text-based studies in relation to the Irish films under discussion, though I have also conducted a number of interviews with those involved in the industry and refer to them throughout the dissertation where applicable. Johnson himself is quick to point out however, that the; ' ultimate object of cultural studies is not…the text, but the social life of subjective forms at each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiment' (1987: 3).

Alan Nadel argues that in relation to the Hollywood industry;

[I] believe that a culture constitutes social reality by accepting specific narratives (in films) complacently enough to make them virtually transparent. Popular films as collaborative ventures promote a consensus in order to draw on these narratives, a consensus about the themes and tropes with which the audience can "identify" (1997: 5).

Both Traube and Nadel limit their respective critiques to those films which proved most popular in American cinemas, drawing a direct relationship between the narratives of the films under examination and the attitudes of American society based on box office receipts. However, trying to draw conclusions about what Irish film audiences want from an Irish film, based on box office takings, is a futile exercise given the appalling performance of the majority of the Film Boards produce.[3]

My contention, however, is that Johnson's 'unbroken circuit' can yield pertinent material regarding the effects of the ideology generated by the 'Celtic Tiger' on our film-makers, audiences and society in general, irrespective of the poor financial returns of the films themselves.

The Irish industry is relatively unique in terms of the speed with which we went from virtually no indigenous production, to the level at which we find ourselves today. To give an idea of how rapidly the change occurred, let me refer to the premiere issue of 'Film Directions', Ireland's first film magazine, published in 1977. The article in

question[4] is a discussion between Michael Open, the magazine editor and Mike Catto, Ronnie Saunders and David Collins, on the 'current' film situation in Ireland. The primary concern at the time was film exhibition: how to get more European films screened in Ireland and how to deal with the unpopularity of sub-titles. In terms of the lack of 'native film-making', the only comment in the entire discussion comes from David Collins when he states that there:

> is a tendency for American films to dominate both in film and T.V. I think that one of the reasons that it does dominate to such an extent is that there is so little native film making. There is perhaps a native visual awareness but there is no familiarity with the techniques; there is no sense of idealism as to what can be achieved through film and T.V. (1977: 4).

Over twenty-five years later and American films and T.V. are more dominant then ever before. However, since 1994 the Film Board has produced over 100 films[5], and that doesn't take into account the number of overseas productions that have used Ireland for background, nor Roger Corman's Tully-based film studio, Concorde Anois Teo, which has been producing B-movies consistently since 1996. Yet the most recent figures available from the Arts Council (in conjunction with Sgrin Cymru Wales) show that although the average Irish citizen attends the cinema four and a half times a year, 60% of the total box office revenue for 2002 was brought in by 5.4% of all the titles released[6]. The implications of such dominance on behalf of the Hollywood blockbuster will be examined later in Chapter Three, but for now I wish only to emphasize the fact that poor box office performance should not preclude films from being investigated as markers of societal norms and standards given the distribution policies dominant in the current 'Multiplex' environment.

The purpose of this thesis is to critically investigate the aforementioned concepts and to attempt to further explore these 'in-between spaces' and 'interstices' referred to in the introduction through readings of a number of recent films.

In order to frame these readings it is necessary to provide an overview of the broad body of theory that exists in relation to current academic writing on Irish film. It is not my intention to challenge to any great extent that body of theory, rather, to lay it out as one would lay out the 'edge' pieces of a jigsaw and within that structure to hopefully provide a few missing pieces through an in-depth interrogation of the narrative and formal concerns of a number of contemporary films.

The following literary review is a summary of the primary, secondary and tertiary texts which have helped to provide the 'edge' pieces of the jigsaw within which the contents of the following chapters are contained.

1.3 Literary Review

'Cinema & Ireland', written by Rockett, Hill and Gibbons and published in 1988, is still considered by many to be the 'bible' of Irish film studies and constitutes a solid starting place for any analysis of the current Irish film environment. The book not only laid out a chronological history of the key developments in Irish cinema but also; 'mapped out the critical agenda for the debates that were to follow' (McLoone, 1998: 510) and is still regarded as the primary text when it comes to debating representations of the Irish on the cinema screen.

Rockett's contribution; 'History, Politics and Irish Cinema' (1988: 1-144), takes up three fifths of the book and concerns itself mainly with the social and political history of film-making in Ireland. After an in-depth overview that commences with Sidney Olcott's *The Lad From Old Ireland* (1910) and covers every major Irish production that follows, up as far as Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985), Rockett concludes his section by arguing that;

> a tension exists between the dominant international view of Ireland with
> its stereotypes usually located in the rural idyll and the attempt by indigenous
> film-makers to bring to the fore alternative versions of Irish history and society,
> an interaction with contemporary issues and an interrogation of the stereotypes
> themselves....As indigenous film-makers increasingly gain international
> recognition the pendulum will begin to swing once more towards making
> international films but with a more 'authentic' Irish dimension (1988: 142/143).

John Hill's contribution; 'Images of Violence' (1988: 147- 193), concentrates on an examination of the different representations of Ireland presented by American and British cinema in the absence of an indigenous industry, arguing that two main representations have predominated; 'on the one hand, Ireland has been conceived as a simple and generally blissful, rural idyll; on the other, as a primarily dark and strife-torn maelstrom' (1988: 147). However, as the authors acknowledge in their preface, both Britain and America have; 'been able to find in Ireland a set of characteristics which stand in contrast to the assumed virtues of their own particular culture' (1988: xii).

Gibbons' section; 'Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema' (1988: 194-257), is more focused on readings of specific Irish films and concludes with the suggestion that it is necessary to explore in depth our nationalist "id" and to engage with it so as to allow ourselves a better understanding of the singular nature of the Irish cultural experience;

> [I]t is important that myths and stereotypes, with their obsessiveness and their need to coerce experience, are not seen simply as negative or derogatory but are recognised for what they are: stress points in a system of representation which is unable to cope with difference and the unintelligible... The desire to make a refractory culture clear and instantly accessible to a casual (external) observer, as in a convergence between romanticism and realism, arises not so much from a wish to understand that culture but to control it, to provide a privileged vantage point while remaining apart from, rather than a part of, a given community (1988: 249).

Nearly twenty years on and these critical insights are still extremely relevant in terms of contemporary debate regarding Irish cinema. Just how 'authentic' the Irish dimension has become in our 'international' films and whether our filmmakers have managed to further illuminate our 'refractory culture' while working within mainstream Hollywood structures, forms the basis of the readings undertaken in Chapters Three and Four, while Hill's analysis of the history of the dominant strains of representation, is essential to an understanding of the arguments relating to national identity politics versus cosmopolitan identities in the more recent works by Gibbons, McLoone and Barton.

Gibbons published 'Transformations in Irish Culture' in 1996, a collection of his essays published from the early 1980s onwards, and in the introduction used a scene from *The Promise of Barty O'Brien* (1951) to argue that; 'modernization is not solely an external force, but also requires the active transformation of a culture from within, a capacity to engage critically with its own past' (1996: 3). In developing this argument he draws upon a number of influential strands in contemporary cultural history, including post-colonialism and post-modernism and argues that one way of dealing with the diverse interpretations of Irish identity is to take; 'post-colonial strategies of cultural mixing, that is, embracing notions of 'hybridity' and 'syncretism' rather than obsolete ideas of nation, history or indigenous culture' (1996: 171), in order to accommodate the 'disparate legacies' (ibid) with which contemporary Irish culture must contend. Most importantly, he argues that; 'hybridity need not always take the high road: where there are borders to be crossed,

unapproved roads might prove more beneficial in the long run than those patrolled by global powers' (1996: 180).

 It was Martin McLoone's 'Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema' (2000), that brought the relationship between the local and the global centre-stage. McLoone successfully updates the key debates identified in 'Cinema and Ireland' and introduces a number of new elements which had come to the fore with the reconstitution of the Film Board in 1993 and the very productive years which followed. He examines the legacy of Irish cultural nationalism, re-evaluates definitions of 'Irishness' in light of contemporary economic and social forces, discusses how the 'diasporic imagination' has interacted with the 'native imagination' over the years and updates American and British cinemas' portrayal of the Irish in light of a 're-imagining' of Irish cultural identity, and what he perceives to be the emergence of a cinema of national questioning. He also appropriates Frampton's (1985) concept of 'critical regionalism' and argues that when the local and global collide then the global must contend 'with the 'particularity' of this (local) culture and is moulded in some respects by the encounter' (2000: 120), thus providing what Frampton identified as; 'the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique' (Frampton, 1985: 20). McLoone also applies the notion of Third Cinema as espoused by Solanas and Octavio (1969/1976), Willeman (1989) and Chanon (1997) to the Irish situation, concluding that in the current environment the 'new geography' of Third Cinema 'implies the internationalizing of the debate, locating the liminal spaces where the local and the global, the particular and the universal, interconnect' (2000: 123).

 Ruth Barton's 'Irish National Cinema' was published in 2004 and though it doesn't advance the key arguments to any great extent, it does flesh out the recent history of film production quite significantly, identifying recurrent themes and motifs in the cinema of the previous decade, including recent short films that up to now have only received mention in periodicals like 'Film Ireland' and 'Film West' [7].

These then, I would consider to be the primary sources in terms of the key theoretical debates relating directly to Irish film upon which I draw over the coming chapters. In terms of more general 'global' film theory a number of publications were invaluable;

'The Oxford Guide to Film Studies' (1998) and 'The Oxford History of World Cinema' (1996), provided concise information on current gender theory, feminist film theory, postcolonial theory and postmodernism, all of which are touched upon throughout the following chapters. Mast & Cohen's 'Film Theory and Criticism' (1979) and Dudley Andrew's 'Concepts in Film Theory' (1984) also delivered a valuable grounding in terms of enabling me to build a framework on which to develop my ideas, while Susan Jeffords' 'Hard Bodies : Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era' (1994), was particularly helpful in providing an overview of contemporary American theory in relation to issues of masculinity and society. John Hill and Claire Monk's contributions to Ashby and Higson's 'British Cinema, Past and Present' (2000), proved invaluable in tackling the sociological and gender issues raised by the readings of *Crushproof* and *Drinking Crude* in particular.

Throughout the thesis societal and economic changes in Ireland over the last three decades loom large, and a number of recent publications helped greatly in critically evaluating the broader picture in this respect.

Diarmaid Ferriter's 'The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000' (2004), helped chart a number of the key concerns relevant to the thesis, while 'Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy' (2002), edited by Peader Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin - a collection of essays which explore the links between economy and culture by way of the 'unapproved roads' referred to by Gibbons - helped pull a number of strands together, particularly the contributions by Michel Peillon, Geraldine Moane and Debbie Ging.

Both Conor McCarthy's 'Modernisation. Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969-1992' (2000) and Fintan O'Toole's 'After the Ball' (2003) were particularly helpful in terms of specific economic and social statistics, while in relation to the film industry itself there was a slew of extremely relevant production orientated publications leading up to and since the reconstitution of the Film Board in 1993. 'The Coopers & Lybrand Report', IBEC's 'Economic Impact of Film Production in Ireland', and McWilliam's 'The Bigger Picture', Film Makers Ireland independent economic report published in 1999 and the 'STATCOM' report on the Irish Independent Film and Television Industry, as well as the Irish Film Board's (almost) yearly reviews, have all yielded facts and figures which

have helped in affirming my line of investigation. I also found the statistics gathered by Ruth Barton in her conference paper; 'The Smaller Picture?' (2001), to be of great benefit in terms of the information provided on box office receipts in the Irish context.

Specific mention should be made also of both 'Film Ireland' and 'Film West'. Both magazines were invaluable in terms of the minutiae provided on an annual basis, not only in relation to practical statistics such as Film Board awards, the number of productions each year and crew lists on these productions, but also in terms of film reviews, interviews with directors and writers and detailed features on particular aspects of Irish cinema history.[8] Both publications were also of great help when it came to analysing the workings of the second Irish Film Board. I also found the 'Contemporary Irish Cinema' supplement, provided with the March 1999 edition of 'Cineaste', played a major role in advancing a number of the aforementioned debates contained in 'Cinema & Ireland', as did Lance Pettitt's 'Screening Ireland' (2000) and Hill, McLoone and Hainsworth's 'Border Crossing: Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe' (1994). Furthermore, as the writing of this thesis coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Irish Film Board's reconstitution, there were a number of 'overview' articles in both 'The Irish Times' and 'The Sunday Times', which helped me to delineate certain aspects of my work. [9]

The aforementioned material constitutes the bulk of the research which is applied to both the films under consideration in the following chapters, and to the wider aims and objectives laid out in the next section.

1.4 Aims and Objectives.

As previously noted, Bhabha and Higgins have drawn attention to the fact that it is at the interstices, or 'in-between' spaces provided by the clash between 'old' and 'new' cultural traditions that we should look for the 'new' signs of identity that define modern society. Martin McLoone further defines this 'in-betweeness' in relation to Ireland;

> Ireland now inhabits a cultural space somewhere between its nationalist past, its European future and its American imagination. This space, though culturally rich in potential, can be, at the same time, a lonely, displaced and unsettling in-betweenness that so far has failed to offer either emotional commitment or a new imagining of collective identity. Irish cinema's ambivalence about its rural past and urban present is a reflection of this uncertainty about its sense of belonging (2000:7).

I intend to take as a basic structure the three 'poles' which McLoone suggests define our cultural space, the Nationalist, the European and the American and to question the reasons behind his assertion that, to date, Irish cinema has failed to deliver 'emotional commitment' or new notions of collective identity. The films I have chosen to examine, attempt to appeal to each 'pole' while operating within the mainstream Hollywood formula, at the centre of which, as Susan Hayworth notes; 'it is traditionally the male who is the prime motivator of the narrative – that is, it is his actions that set the narrative in motion' (2000: 256).

Furthermore, this thesis is primarily concerned with Irish cinema since the re-establishment of the Film Board in 1993, when for the first time in the country's history an infrastructure was put in place that allowed for the continuous production of indigenous films. This infrastructure will be examined in detail in Chapter Two but it is important to point out in my introduction that my intention is not to provide an all-inclusive overview of the films produced in this period, nor to dwell on the successes or failures of the policies of the second Irish Film Board.

I should also point out that the use of the word 'alternative' does not mean to suggest 'alternative film' in the context of arthouse or avant-garde filmmaking. The last decade has seen a number of such 'art-house' films released – Alan Gilsenan's *All Soul's Day* (1997) and *Timbuktu* (2003), Pat Murphy's *Nora* (1999) and Nichola Bruce's *I Could Read the Sky* (1999) – and the one thing that they all have in common is that they all occupy what Steve Neale refers to as; 'a different space' (1979: 42) from Hollywood within the mainstream market.

The 'different space' that I'm concerned with ties in to Solanas and Octavios (1969/1976) concept of 'Third Cinema' whereby 'First Cinema' is mainstream Hollywood blockbuster film-making, 'Second Cinema' is the domain of European Arthouse and auteurism – independent of mainstream Hollywood but ideologically not that far removed from establishment politics - and 'Third Cinema's primary role is political in conception with a manifesto to counter the dominant Hollywood ideology. However, as Willemen (1989), has posited, by the end of the 80s 'Third Cinema' had come to be seen as a mode of representation in which it is 'the way the world is conceptualized and not the explicitly political character of a film which makes

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it belong to Third Cinema' (1989: 11). He suggests that by its very origins 'Third Cinema' is profoundly nationalist and regional and must therefore be seen as one of the cinemas making up a nation's cinema. Gabriel argues that; 'the preservation of popular indigenous cultures and the representation of them in opposition to the dominant colonial and imperialist values espoused by the ruling classes, constitutes an 'aesthetic of liberation' in Third Cinema' (1989: 16). Given the dominance of revisionist, anti-revisionist and post-colonial theories which abound in relation to Irish film then, it is quite clear that a lot of the writings on 'Third Cinema' are analogous to the Irish situation. As McLoone puts it;

> [T]he 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 (2000: 127).

The films on which I have chosen to concentrate fit McLoone's description in that they all deviate to differing degrees from the more standardised approach of what could be described as 'First Irish Cinema', (with the possible exception of Sheridan's *In America* (2003) which I deal with in Chapter Four), so it is therefore important at this stage to attempt a broad definition of what constitutes our nation's 'First Cinema'.

The definitions of 'mainstream' Irish film are numerous. The term 'mainstream' itself is generally associated with Hollywood, but as Susan Hayward points out; 'all countries with a film industry have their own dominant cinema and this cinema constantly evolves, depending on the economic and ideological relations in which it finds itself' (2000: 93). Donald Taylor Black's documentary *Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?* (1994) identifies *The Quiet Man* (John Ford 1952) as the quintessential Irish film. With its wild and romantic landscapes, and its hard-drinking, fist-fighting but ultimately good-natured stereotypes, the film delivers a nostalgic, pastoral Ireland, which became the template for the majority of overseas productions and still continues to influence new generations of filmmakers today.

Ruth Barton has argued that the foundation of Irish cinema is built on a combination of this pastoral imagery and themes of departure and return, rebellion and sacrifice and spiritual journeys, while the most common narratives are populated by stock characters whose lineage can be traced back to the theatrical characters created by playwrights such

as Synge and O'Casey - the fighting Irishman, the buffoon, the long-suffering mother, the feisty colleen and the rebel son. She suggests that; 'these images, themes and characters form the foundation of an Irish cinema and have become, for each new generation of filmmakers, a way of defining their own work, whether they chose to reject them, incorporate them or rework them' (2004: 7).

Luke Gibbons, writing on the back of the 'First Wave' in 1983, argued;

> [F]rom its beginnings in the early decades of the present century, Irish cinema has been dominated by a number of pervasive and inter-connected themes: the idealization of the landscape, the legacy of the past, the lure of violence and its ominous association with female sexuality and the primacy of family and community (1983: 149).

He further maintained that there are two dominant strains in mainstream representations; 'the first aspires towards realism and authenticity', but in attempting to appeal to an international audience; 'merely succeeds in lending credibility to the darker aspects of romanticism or hard primitivisim' (1988: 241), while the second plays on established motifs such as the rugged landscape, the inherent violence and the established stereotypes inherited from American and British portrayals and; 'tries to render these problematic by refusing to press recalcitrant Irish subject-matter into the convenient moulds of realism and romanticism', but instead views; 'cultural identity as a construct, a construct moreover whose artifice becomes apparent in proportion as it attempts to cancel social difference' (ibid).

From a narrative perspective, McLoone has drawn attention to; 'the preponderance of oedipal themes played out against a background of incomplete families and displaced or ineffectual fathers' and notes that; 'a recurring motif is that of child-abuse and incest, as if the films replay in symbolic form some deep, half-remembered national trauma' (2000: 6). He suggests that such dysfunction serves as a metaphor for the instability of the nation (ibid: 168).

Virtually all of the films produced by the second Irish Film Board are covered to varying degrees by the above definitions, but the primary focus of this dissertation is to undertake readings of a number of recent releases which reflect our own 'Second' and 'Third' Cinemas in terms of both production practices and subject matter, and to

examine the specificities of these film texts, while drawing attention to the wider social and political contexts in which they are located.

My main objectives therefore can be broken down as follows: firstly, to examine both the 'approved' and the 'unapproved roads' taken by a number of Irish film-makers over the last decade and to investigate what their films tell us about the consequences of the rapid social change in Ireland, and, in particular, to assess what effect this modernization has had on the role of social criticism in our indigenous films. Secondly, to discuss a number of different strategies which our filmmakers have adopted in an attempt to infiltrate a market which has become totally dominated by mainstream American studio films, and to analyse whether or not they have successfully managed to achieve a balance of American style and Irish substance in such a way that these films can be read as less definably "American"' and more specifically "Irish". Thirdly, to examine the new Irish stereotypes that have emerged over the last decade and to see what they tell us about current perceptions in the light of nationalist versus cosmopolitan identity politics. Finally, I intend to examine a number of specific themes and tropes common to Irish film both in the past and in the present.

1.5 Structure.

An understanding of the dramatic changes that have occurred over the last thirty years in relation to Irish film, is essential if one is to attempt an evaluation of our contemporary cinema. My intention in Chapter Two: 'Overview 1974 –1993/ The Second Irish Film Board 1993-2004', is to deliver the necessary social, economic and political information required to understand the topography of the current production climate. Beginning with an analysis of the 'First Wave' of Irish filmmakers in the early 70s, which saw the emergence of a socially critical cinema spearheaded by Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy, Kieran Hickey and Cathal Black, and evolving through the establishment of the first Irish Film Board, its dissolution in 1987 and the series of events that led to the establishment of the second Irish Film Board in 1993, I hope to tease out some of the main critical and economic arguments which best illustrate the history of recent Irish cinema.

I will also make reference to a number of 'milestones' in Irish film over the last twenty years – the contretemps surrounding the first Irish Film Board's funding for Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982), the Oscars for Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) and Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), the establishment of the Irish Film Centre and the Section 35 tax schemes – and examine current Film Board policy and the dissenting voices that argue that, as a direct result of the 'Celtic Tiger' climate, indigenous, culturally engaging Irish cinema has been stopped in its tracks. With the social and political context firmly in place, I will then move on to my main dissertation.

Part Two of this dissertation begins with Chapter Three: 'Nationalist Imaginings and the European Influence.', which examines a number of the indigenous films produced in the 70s and early 80s - Bob Quinn's *Poitin* (1978), Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* (1978) and *Criminal Conversation* (1980) - in order to establish the key themes and tropes associated with the Irish 'First Wave' cinema, before moving on to discuss the effect that the success of *Angel* (Neil Jordan 1982) and *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan 1989) had on film-making practices within the country. I intend to argue that the end result of 'world recognition' of Irish film in the late 80s and early 90s resulted in a climate where Irish filmmakers attempted to appeal to a more global market, by adopting mainstream Hollywood formats at the expense of the more experimental and socially critical cinema which had existed before 1987.

I think it is self-evident to point out that the majority of the films produced under the Second Irish Film Board are reluctant to engage directly with the larger sociological questions raised by the whole 'Celtic Tiger' environment in an adult way. Most contemporary dramas deal with either the privileged classes in comedic or dramatic circumstances [10], or Dublin criminals rampaging around the city like it was Chicago in the 20's [11], the 'Troubles' in the North [12], or they are what Andrew Higson defines as 'heritage films' [13] (1993: 113). However, while acknowledging that these films form the bulk of our contemporary indigenous output, my intention in this Chapter is to deliver readings of two short films and two feature films which I feel carry forward the aesthetics, both formally and thematically, of the 'First Wave', while simultaneously attempting to engage critically with contemporary sociological issues.

The main readings undertaken therefore, are Paul Tickell's *Crushproof* (1999) and Kevin Liddy's two shorts, *Horse* (1993) and *A Soldier's Song* (1997), as well as his first feature film *Country* (2000). I've chosen these films as they are 'alternative' in the sense that neither can be said to be 'arthouse' or 'avant-garde' yet each in their own way are untypical of the 'mainstream' Irish films released during the 90s, combining as they do a 'First Wave' sensibility with contemporary cinematic conventions. Through these readings I hope to develop a number of the main objectives laid out earlier in this chapter, namely the tradition versus modernity debate, the role of social criticism in contemporary film, the difficulties of delivering an 'Irish sensibility' that succeeds critically and financially on both a local and a global level, and the effects the 'Celtic Tiger' economy has had on our current production environment.

Chapter Four: 'American Imaginings', focuses on the relationship between America and Irish cultural identity, and examines the role American cinema played in defining a number of Irish cinematic stereotypes, before I undertake readings critical readings of three films - Owen McPolin's *Drinking Crude* (1997), John Crowley's *Intermission* (2003) and Jim Sheridan's *In America* (2003).

Within the last decade the 'Hollywoodization' of worldwide cinema has become 'an accomplished fact' (Nowell-Smith, 1997: 762), not only in terms of the narrative content of the majority of films available to the public, but also in terms of a restrictive pattern of distribution, which has seen the Omniplex replace the traditional single screen cinema, and the bottom line of box office returns deciding how long a particular film will run. Commercial cinema has, according to Susan Sontag; 'settled for a policy of bloated, derivative filmmaking, a brazen combinatory or recombinatory art, in the hopes of reproducing past success', and as a result, cinema has become a 'decadent art' '
(1997: 20). Thus, our cinemas are regularly filled with remakes and sequels aimed specifically at the teen and preteen market, films which are accompanied by marketing campaigns whose budgets often exceed the cost of the films themselves.

This is not to say that the Omniplexes deliberately refuse to screen low budget indigenous films under duress from the 'Hollywood machine', indeed, as Barton has pointed out; these films' 'relatively poor performance in Ireland's main arthouse cinema suggests that their audience is not there either' (2001: 11). What it does suggest however,

is that in order for Irish films to have any chance of economic success, they must engage in a 'complex symbiosis' (Nowell-Smith, 1997: 762) with the dominant mainstream, or else face the reality that after a short tour of the festival circuit, the best they can hope for is the occasional television screening and the possibility of a limited video/DVD release.

Each of the films chosen in Chapter Four is a perfect example of Nowell-Smith's idea of the 'complex symbiosis', in that they have attempted to combine formal styles and narrative structures from both American and European cinema, without losing sight of a specific Irish 'flavour'. The 'complex' element however, is concerned with getting the balance right, not over-capitulating to either 'pole', and I intend to argue that each of the three films under discussion, from the micro-budget of *Drinking Crude*, through the 'indi' budgeted *Intermission* to the mainstream studio backed *In America*, achieve just that, in terms of their appeal to each of McLoone's three 'poles', and that in achieving that balance, each film delivers both 'emotional commitment', and 'new notions of national identity'.

Chapter Five: 'Conclusions', draws together a number of the ideas and arguments contained in the preceding chapters, and examines how successful the application of the literature and films referred to was in relation to the aims and objectives laid out in this introduction, before drawing a number of conclusions about the current state of the industry.

ENDNOTES

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[1] The term 'Celtic Tiger' only came into existence in 1994, when Kevin Gardiner of the Morgan Stanley investment bank in London drew a comparison between the performance of the Irish economy and that of the 'tiger' economies of south-east Asia, (MacSharry & White, 2000:360).

[2] Information obtained from URL: http://www.filmboard.ie (Accessed 14/05/03)

[3] See BARTON. RUTH. (2001) *"The Smaller Picture ? - Irish Cinema: Funding, Figures and the Future."*. University of Wales. Bangor.: Paper delivered at the Inaugural Conference of the European Cinema Research Forum. January 17th.

[4] OPEN M. CATTO M.COLLINS D. SAUNDERS R. (1977) "Story so far: A Discussion about the current film situation in Ireland" *In* Film Directions: A Film Magazine for Ireland. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland." Vol 1, No 1

[5] Information accessed from URL: http://www.filmboard.ie (Accessed 01/11/04)

[6] Mac CARTHAIGH. LIR. (2005) Cited in 'Editorial' In 'Film Ireland' No. 102. Dublin: Filmbase. Jan-Feb. p5

[7] FILM IRELAND began publication as a bi-monthly news letter entitled 'Film Base News' in May 1987. It was compiled by Johnny Gogan and Mike Quinn and published by Film Base, the Centre for Film and Video LTD. The magazine's title changed to FILM IRELAND with issue 30, published in July/August of 1992. It's currently published on a monthly basis.
FILM WEST was published by the Galway Film Centre from 1990 until it ceased publication with Issue 46 in October 2001.

[8] Both Bob Quinn's 'Recycled Rants' (2000) conference paper and Joe Comerford's 'The Sanitisation of Irish Art' (1996), appeared in 'Film West' and these, along with the recent Comerford interview in 'Film Ireland', were indispensable in formulating a large part of my arguments in Chapter Three and are referred to throughout the dissertation.

[9] In particular, McCARTHY. GERRY. (2003) *'Ten Years After: Decade of bloom and bust.'* In *The Sunday Times Culture Section.* April 20th. p10. *'Grave New World for Irish Cinema'.* In *The Sunday Times. Culture Section* 11th May. p14/15. LINEHAN HUGH (2003) *'Stumbling through our screen test'* In *The Irish Times* 5th March. P 14.

[10] *Dead Bodies.* Robert Quinn. (2003). *When Brendan Met Trudy.* Kieron J Walsh. (2000), *Separation Anxiety.* Mark Saunton. (1997), *About Adam.* Gerard Stembridge. (1999), *Disco Pigs.* Kirsten Sheridan. (2000), *November Afternoon.* John Carney, Tom Hall. (1996), *Flick.* Fintan Connolly (1999), Goldfish Memories. Liz Gill. (2003)

[11] *I Went Down.* Paddy Breathnach (1997),When *the Sky Falls.* John MacKenzie. (1999), *The General.* John Boorman (1998), *Accelerator.* Vinny Murphy.(1999), *Ordinary Decent Criminal.* Thaddeus O'Sullivan (1999), *Veronica Guerin.* Joel Schumacher. (2002).

[12] *Nothing Personal.* Thaddeus O'Sullivan. (1995), *Gold In the Streets.* Elizabeth Gill. (1996), *The Boxer.* Jim Sheridan. (1998), *Some Mother's Son.* Terry George. (1996), *Silent Grace.* Maeve Murphy (2001), *H3.* Les Blair. (2001), *Bloody Sunday.* Paul Greengrass. (2001).

[13] *Broken Harvest.* Maurice O'Callaghan (1994), *Circle of Friends.* Pat O'Connor (1995), *Korea.* Cathal Black (1994), *Dancing At Lughnasa.* Pat O'Connor (1998), *Love and Rage.* Cathal Black (1998), *A Love Divided.* Syd McCartney (1999), *The Last September.* Deborah Warner (1999).

CHAPTER TWO: OVERVIEW 1977 –1993 / THE SECOND IRISH FILM BOARD
1993 – 2004

Introduction... The 'Second Period'... Hollywood Here We Come... The Second Irish Film Board... Reactions to the Board's Performance... Recent Developments ... Conclusions.

2.1 Introduction.

[F]ilm is clearly big business today, and we rightly applaud when Irish films achieve commercial success. Film is, however, much more then that. It is an art form, in that it allows artists to interpret the world around them and express this interpretation in a way that is not possible with other formats. It provides us with a distinctive window on ourselves, sometimes allowing us to laugh at ourselves, at other times dealing with more serious aspects of our life and psyche. Film also allows others a window onto us as a people – our culture, our distinctive character and our unique spin on life (O'Donoghue, 2002:1).

While the mainstream media continues to hype unquestioningly the success of the Irish Film Industry, the public at large steadfastly refuses to buy into this blanket approval and pay up to go and see these films in their local Omniplexes. From a 'home' perspective, the most that the average Irish release can hope for is a quick tour of the country's film festivals, a two week run in the cinemas and an eventual screening on either RTE or TV3 as part of an 'Irish season'.

Despite laudatory revisiting of the films of the First Wave [1], it was always the same. Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978) had an opening run from October 11th to October 16th 1978 in the Irish Film Theatre on Earlsfort Terrace, while Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* (1978) ran from October 25th to October 29th [2]. With the exception of Sheridan and Jordan, and occasionally Boorman, the average Irish cinema-goer chooses to ignore the latest Irish release favouring instead the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

The main objective of this chapter is to provide a broad overview - historically, socially and economically - of Irish cinema over the last 30 years, so as to place the contemporary industry in some sort of context. I have chosen to begin with the 1970s as it was the

decade that saw the emergence of a number of film-makers who, for the first time, set about creating a body of work which challenged the received British and American images of Ireland and the Irish. Now referred to as the 'First Wave', these filmmakers included Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Pat Murphy, Cathal Black and Kieran Hickey. Between them they created a body of indigenous work which continues to elicit critical readings and re-evaluations from writers such as McLoone, Rockett and Barton.

Primarily concerned with critiquing the Ireland of the 70s, but also consciously challenging the shibboleths of American and British filmic representations, works such as Comerford's *Down The Corner* (1978) and *Traveller* (1982), Cathal Black's *Our Boys* (1981) and *Pigs* (1984), Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978) and Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* (1978) to name but a few, set about presenting for the first time, realistic portrayals of marginalized groups, ranging from the working classes to itinerants to the homeless, while also tackling 'sensitive' issues such as the religious and their control over education, class inequality and misogyny and simultaneously debunking the myth of pastoral romantic Ireland so commonplace in foreign representations.

I will be looking at these works in more detail in Chapter Three, but for now my intention is to concentrate on the social and political ramifications brought about by this explosion of indigenous film, with a view to defining the key social and political agendas which continue to dominate the study of Irish film.

2.2 The 'Second Period'

One of the most obvious beneficial aspects deriving from the emergence of this coterie of Irish filmmakers was the establishment in 1981 of the 'first' Irish Film Board. The establishment of the Board fell into what McLoone refers to as 'the second period', in his breakdown of Irish society from 1958 to the present. This period runs from 1978 to 1988 and 'is characterised by a prolonged economic recession and a particularly acrimonious period of social and political controversy' (2000:87). The establishment of a Film Board had first been called for in 1968 in a publication entitled 'The Report of the Film Industry Committee', a government body, which was chaired by John Huston. In 1970 the Film Industry Bill was published, suggesting the establishment of a seven person Film Board which would provide pre-production costs of up to £10,000 for

features with budgets of up to £200,000 and full production investment in features with budgets of £50,000 or less. However, as Rockett points out, the same year saw the arms crisis raise its head and a change of Minister led to the proposal being shelved (1988: 115). So it wasn't until 1980 that the Irish Film Board Act was passed and it wasn't until the 14th of August 1981 that Bord Scannan na hEireann finally came into existence, with the ICC's Louis Heelan as chairman and John Boorman and Robin O'Sullivan as members. That its primary purpose was; 'to assist and encourage the development of a film industry' [3], as opposed to the development of an 'Irish' film industry was just a taste of what was to come.

No sooner was the Board up and running then it became enmeshed in the first of the numerous controversies that would dog its six-year existence and set in place the acrimonious political agenda that continues to infiltrate the arena of Irish film criticism to the present day. As Luke Gibbons posits in his introduction to 'Transformations in Irish Culture';

> to engage in cultural activity in circumstances where one's culture was being effaced or obliterated, or even to assert the existence of a civilization prior to conquest, was to make a political statement (1996: 8).

Little wonder then, that it was the English who were centre stage in the first major contretemps between the 'First Wave' filmmakers and what Bob Quinn currently refers to as 'Irish suitmen and suitwomen (who) say film is a business as well as an art (while) they concentrate exclusively on film as business' (2000: 6).

The Board was allocated £200,000 for the remainder of 1981 and invested £100,000 of this money in Neil Jordan's debut feature film *Angel* (1982). This was the only investment made that year, with the remaining money being returned to the Exchequer. Hackles were raised by the fact that not only was Boorman executive producer for *Angel*, but also that up to this point Jordan's only foray into directing had been a documentary entitled *The Making of Excalibur: Myth into Film* (1981), which followed the production of Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981). (Jordan also received a credit as Creative Associate on *Excalibur* (Rockett, E & K, 2003: 7)). On top of all this, there was the fact that the remainder of the finance for *Angel* was coming from Channel Four, so that effectively it would be a British film. In reality the only British crew member was the 'Director of Photography' - Chris Menges – all the other roles were crewed by Irish technicians. But

those who had struggled to produce indigenous work throughout the 70s with only meagre grants from the Arts Council to aid them felt seriously slighted.

At the 'Third International Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Countries', held in Wexford in 1982, Bob Quinn led a scathing attack on what he saw as Boorman's nepotism. Neil Jordan responded by describing the independent Irish filmmakers as 'cosy' and suggested that they should look at themselves before casting aspersions (Dwyer, 1997: 26). The remarks led to an unofficial boycott of the screening of *Angel* by many of the attendees. Independent film-maker Tiernan McBride then delivered a prepared statement from the Association of Independent Producers Ireland, stating that the Board's part funding of *Angel*, 'was at best improper' (ibid), and this in turn led to Boorman commenting;

> I thought it was some kind of joke. I don't think this petty attitude is worth discussing….How could we have given money to Irish film-makers when they had boycotted the Board? I have to constantly remind myself that they are a group of malcontents and mad dogs. They are in love with martyrdom. After years of this self-imposed martyrdom, they are in a position to make films. Instead they complain (ibid: 27).

Fifteen years later, in an interview with Ted Sheehy to promote *The General* (1998) Boorman argued;

> I think it was a wise thing to make that film, don't you? It launched Neil Jordan's career. It was the first time a completely indigenous Irish film had been made with some international success. You could look at it as the foundation of the contemporary modern Irish film industry (1998: 17).

When drawn on the issue of his detractors, Boorman replied 'the people who were really involved in attacking me were a bunch of really….talentless film-makers, who have subsequently kind of disappeared and who were envious or whatever.' (ibid). The irony of course, from the angle of the 'British film' argument, was that when *Angel* finally obtained a release in the United States its title was changed to *Danny Boy*.

I draw attention to the above fracas because it is indicative of the schism that was to emerge in the industry in the mid to late 80s. It illustrates clearly the lines that were being drawn between the 'First Wave' film-makers, who, in the main, saw film as a means of interrogating the social mores of a rapidly changing culture and the new breed of emerging Irish filmmakers, who, while not necessarily negating these concerns

were certainly more interested in concentrating on a marketable Hollywood-styled cinematic narrative that sought a global audience first and foremost.

In the first Film Board's six-year existence it was responsible for the partial funding of ten feature films and approximately twenty shorter fiction films and documentaries. This period is covered in depth in 'Cinema and Ireland', which was published in 1988. However, between the time that Gibbons, Hill and Rockett had completed their contributions and the actual publication of the book, the first Irish Film Board was abolished in a cloud of bitter acrimony. McLoone argues that this was due to; 'the balance of payment problems and the escalating national debt' (2000: 113), which resulted in severe cutbacks in government spending – Rockett points out that the Board received a return of only 8.5% from the IR£1.247 million it invested in feature films (1994: 128/129).

Despite producing such critically engaging material as Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1980) and *Anne Devlin* (1983), Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1984) and Peter Ormond's *Eat the Peach* (1986), the ultimate end result of the 'experiment' was that;

> the post 1987 film environment … witnessed the restoration of the ascendancy of the industrial model for film production over a culturally engaged, critical cinema in Ireland (Rockett, 1994: 127).

2.3 'Hollywood Here We Come'

The 'post 1987 film environment' proved to be the busiest period in film making that Ireland had seen in over a decade (Flynn. A, 1996: 137). In 1987 alone, Joe Comerford shot *Reefer and the Model* in Galway, Jack Clayton shot *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, Matt Clark began shooting Hugh Leonard's *Da* with Martin Sheen and Neil Jordan went into production on *High Spirits*. But perhaps most importantly, 1987 saw the Minister for Finance, Ray McSharry, introduce two tax schemes under the 1987 Finance Act – Section 35 and the Business Expansion Scheme - which allowed Irish based companies to avail of a tax write off against profits, for annual investments of up to £100,000 in Irish film production companies. According to Conor McCarthy; '$9.4 million' was invested in eleven projects under the auspices of Section 35 in the period 1987-92 and '$1.18 million' was raised by ten projects under the BES in the period 1987-91 (2000: 167/68).

Ironically, only one week after these incentives had been put in place the then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, announced that he was closing down the Film Board and that the Arts Council would now be responsible for film funding (Flynn. A, 1996:138).

The primary reason put forward for the closure was financial – the films made over the six-year period had shown a poor financial return. However, Padraig L Henry, writing in 'Film Ireland' in 1993, conducted an examination from an economic perspective of the production budgets of nine films which had been funded by the Irish Film Board, between 1982 and 1985, including *Angel* (Neil Jordan 1982), *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod 1986), *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy 1984), *The End of the World Man* (Bill Miskelly 1985), *Sometime City* (Frank Deasy & Joe Lee 1986) and *Pigs* (Cathal Black 1984). The total budget for all nine films was £6 million punt and approximately £1 million of this was invested by the Irish Film Board. Henry's conclusions were that for each £1 million punt of production expenditure approximately 48 full time jobs were generated for one year – therefore a £1 million punt investment from the Irish Film Board generated a total expenditure of £6 million punt and the creation of 288 jobs for one year (1993: 15).

Many practitioners at the time felt that the reason for the closure of the Film Board was that the films being produced weren't portraying the image of Ireland which the government wished to see and that the closure was a deliberate reprimand to those film-makers who were continuing to draw attention to the social inequalities in Irish society. Furthermore, as Kevin Rockett points out in relation to the projects funded under the above-mentioned tax schemes;

> as no cultural criteria was employed to orientate these films towards challenging topics… (most of the monies)… invested under the scheme during 1987 –1993 went towards television series and international productions made in Ireland. Irish film makers with unconventional or non-commercial projects found it extremely difficult to make films in the new corporate environment (1999: 24).

This was all the more ironic given that for the first time the 80s had seen the indigenous industry finally start to gain international recognition. Both Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984) and Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1984) had been shown out of competition in the 1984 Cannes Film Festival, while Pat O'Connor's *Cal* (1984) was not only in competition but won Helen Mirren the 'Best Actress Award'. It finally seemed as if those practitioners

who had been struggling away though out the 70s and 80s, were about to get the recognition that had eluded them for so long.

The 80s ended strongly with Pat O'Connor's *A Month in the Country* (1989), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *December Bride* (1989), Sheridan's *The Field* (1989) and Ken Loach's *Hidden Agenda* (1989), all being shot in Ireland. All of these films were overshadowed, however, by the outstanding success of Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989). Funded by a conglomerate of British sources - Palace Pictures, Ferndale Films and Granada T.V. International – albeit with some RTE backing, the picture went on to be nominated for five Academy Awards in 1989, winning two: 'Best Actor' for Daniel Day Lewis and 'Best Supporting Actress' for Brenda Fricker. Described by 'Halliwells' as having a; 'pedestrian narrative, relying on cinematic clichés, but enlivened by the intensity of Day-Lewis's performance' (Walker, 1997: 536), the Irish government interpreted its success as proof that they had chosen the correct strategy for the implementation of their film policy. The fact that it had been primarily funded outside the country was not mentioned, but as Rockett points out; '[I]t is one of the ironies of Irish life….that it often requires the endorsement of the metropolitan centres (especially London and New York), before Irish talent is recognised at home' (1999: 23).

But Sheridan and Pearson, albeit with English monies, had stayed at home and opened a hitherto unknown back door, which was to totally change the mindset of a whole new batch of writers and directors, who had been honing their craft in colleges such as Rathmines and Dun Laoghaire throughout the 80s. International recognition continued with an Oscar nomination for Richard Harris's role as 'the Bull McCabe' in Pearson and Sheridan's *The Field* (1990) and continued with Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) being nominated for six academy awards and winning the 'Best Original Screenplay Oscar' for Jordan himself.

Where there was resentment on behalf of some of the 'First Wave' directors it was not aimed at those who were succeeding on the global front, but rather at the Irish governments assumption that the introduction of the aforementioned tax breaks was sufficient in itself to guarantee a thriving industry. That a new wave of film makers were seen to be pandering to Anglo-American audiences by producing mainstream generic fare was not of itself a bad thing: the problem lay with the fact that as far as the

government were concerned such fare was the be all and end all of the industry - any ideas of an Irish cinema geared specifically for an Irish audience and engaging critically with Irish themes and issues, was now seen to be a thing of the past. If the 'First Wave' of Irish film makers can be said to have been well versed in both Irish cultural traditions and the practicalities of mainstream film production, the 'new commercial cinema stylistic norm' introduced by Jordan's *Angel* in 1982, had come to be seen by the Irish government as the only cinema worth cultivating.

As Bob Quinn argued in 1993, on the back of the fact that 1992 had recorded the lowest level of film production in several years;

> [T]here are three solutions to the impasse in Irish film making:
> 1) Stop claiming as Irish the well-earned awards of our émigré directors when they make British and American films – they only let our masters off the hook.
> 2) Break the distribution and exhibition monopoly;
> 3) Bring back Bord Scannan na hEireann. (1993: 10).

2.4 The Second Irish Film Board.

In March 1993, within twelve hours of Neil Jordan winning the 'Best Original Screenplay Oscar' for *The Crying Game* and Irish born Michelle Burke winning the 'Best Make Up Oscar' for the Francis Ford Coppola film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the government announced that Bord Scannan na hEireann was being resurrected.

It was to receive an annual budget of £2.5 million, starting in 1994 (IR£ 950,000 was made available for the 'part' year of 1993). Furthermore, significant alterations were made to Section 35 of the 1987 Finance Act. The 1993 Finance Act increased the maximum investment from the £600,000 specified in 1987, to £1,050,000. Also, whereas previously 75% of the production work on a project had to be carried out within the State in order for said project to qualify for tax breaks, the first Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D Higgins loosened these criteria – they now stated that where less then 60% of the production work was done in Ireland, Section 35 monies could still be used, but in direct proportion to the percentage of production work being carried out in Ireland. In other words, if only 40% of a film was being made in Ireland, then 40% of the budget could be raised under Section 35. More importantly, from the point of view of low budget film-makers, Section 35 was also opened up to individual

investors as opposed to companies – an individual investor could now benefit from the tax concessions to the tune of £25,000.

The new Film Board was to be based in Galway, a decision which caused much discontent amongst the Dublin-based film community, who felt that the change of location was based entirely on the fact that Galway was the Government Minister's constituency. However, it should be noted that the audio-visual industry had been growing at a rapid pace in the West of Ireland. This was due to a number of factors; as part of an ongoing campaign to establish an Irish language television station in Connemara, Uduras na Gaeltachta had established Telegael Teo, a facilities house, in Spiddal in 1989 and had been running training courses under the auspices of RTE technicians in preparation for the arrival of said channel.

In March 1991, the then Taoiseach Charles Haughey, in his live Presidential address at the Fianna Fail Ard Fheis, had promised that this television service for the Gaeltacht and Irish speakers all over the country would be up and running by 1992. In February 1992, Michael D Higgins had introduced new broadcasting legislation which repealed Section 3 of the Broadcasting Act of 1990, thus lifting the 'cap' on RTE's advertising revenue (the station had used this 'cap' as its main excuse for being unable to afford to commission independent productions) and in April 1993 the government agreed terms of a new Broadcasting Bill which obliged the station to invest £5 million each year in independent audio-visual companies product. Although an Irish language station still hadn't materialised, Higgins had promised that it would be set up by 1994. The combination of these events meant that by 1993 there were a large number of production houses based in the West (Hofnaflus Teo, Gaelmedia and Telebeo Teoranta to name but a few), waiting to avail of the newly released RTE monies and the expected commissions from the new Irish language station.

Also, having successfully produced Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* in Galway in 1988, Lelia Doolan, along with Barra DeBhaldraithe and Aisling Prior, had established the 'Galway Film Resource Centre' in 1989. The Centre, which operated along the lines of Filmbase in Dublin, provided film and video equipment rental at low costs to its members and had been running regular intensive film and video training courses. By 1993 it was producing two or three short 16mm films every year with funding from

RTE and the Arts Council. Also in 1989, Doolan and Miriam Allen had launched the first 'Galway Film Fleadh', a film festival which is now in it's fifteenth year and well established on the international festival circuit.

It's also important to note that a number of the key lobbyists for the return of the Board, including Bob Quinn, Lelia Doolan and Joe Comerford, had been arguing stridently for a decentralization of the audio-visual industry for a number of years. So the fact that the "new' Film Board was to be based in Galway and that it was to have Lelia Doolan as it's chairperson should not really have come as a shock to anyone who had been keeping a careful eye on developments.

The other members of the Board were Mary Alleguen, Deirdre Friel, Neil Jordan, Louis Marcus, Anne O'Connell and Peter Owens. The Board had its first meeting on Thursday 24th of June 1993, and in a statement issued directly after the meeting Minister Higgins said;

> I would contend that the main obstacles which hindered the growth of the film and audiovisual industry in this country have now been removed. I unreservedly say that it is now the responsibility of the industry to respond to these new favourable conditions and to deliver on the promises made in their submission to the Special Working Group (1993a: 10).

Louis Marcus, who had also served on the first Film Board, was quoted as saying:

> the previous Film Board operated in an atmosphere of high scepticism on the part of the state....The new atmosphere under Michael D. and the present government is hugely supportive, we now have civil service support that is highly informed about the industry worldwide. The atmosphere has changed utterly. The last Board was fighting up hill against the state until it was finally axed (1994: 20).

One of the first press releases made by the Board was 'The Film Board Charter', which read as follows;

> Bord Scannan na hEireann is established
> - To promote the creative and commercial elements of Irish filmmaking and film culture for a home and international audience. It is intended each year that the Film Board will support a number of film projects in development and will also provide finance by way of debt/equity for a selected number of films.
> - To encourage the development and training of technical, artistic and production grades as a means of improving the overall skills proficiency within the industry

- To assist in the promotion and marketing of Irish films within Ireland and abroad as a means of stimulating an interest in Ireland, Irish culture and Irish films
- To develop and maintain a working partnership with state and semi-state agencies in order to achieve these aims.[4]

It should be noted that the use of the term 'Irish filmmaking' as opposed to 'filmmaking', suggested that the Board had learnt a lot from the controversies surrounding the first Film Board. That the charter specified that it would promote both the creative and commercial elements of the industry and that it would do so for both a home and an international audience seemed to suggest that the involvement of Lelia Doolan, herself a practitioner in the industry since the mid 60s, was an inspired choice in terms of uniting the various factions involved in film production at the time. As Michael D Higgins said at the time;

> I hope that the work of the Irish Film Board will assist the emergence of a lasting structure for the development of film as an art form in Ireland. I also want the Board to be open and accountable in its procedures. I consider it very important that we should achieve a balance between the cultural, the administratively efficient and the economic dimensions. It is in order to promote that balance that I invited Lelia Doolan to be Chairperson of the Board (1993: 5).

The charter was to herald the most productive period of film-making in the history of the State. Within six weeks of the Board's first meeting, four films began principal photography – *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (Barry Devlin 1994), *War of the Buttons* (John Roberts 1994), *Broken Harvest* (Maurice O'Callaghan 1994) and *Widow's Peak* (John Irvin 1994). Rod Stoneman was appointed as Chief Executive in November 1993. He had previously been Deputy Commissioning Editor for Independent Film and Video at Channel Four Television. Stoneman was quick to point out however that the above-mentioned films, and others like them - *High Boot Benny* (Joe Comerford 1994), *Ailsa* (Paddy Breathnach 1994) and *Words Upon the Window Pane* (Mary McGuckian 1994) – were already scripted and at various stages of production before the Board became involved. As he put it; 'we will really begin to function when we carry a project through from initial development to eventual production' (1994: 10).

The Board received IR£950,000 in 1993 because it was a 'part' year, and was granted IR£2 million punt for the year 1994 (ibid). By May 1994 the Board had offered loans to develop fifteen film projects and provided production finance for eight film projects. Of the fifteen development loans granted, only four eventually made it to the screen,

one of those being the television production *Falling for a Dancer* (1998). Five of the films granted production finance went on to be completed. On taking up her position as chairperson, Lelia Doolan had stated; 'within five years we could begin – yeah, begin – to see a solid body of Irish work, made by Irish people living and working in Ireland. That might be a reality if this Board is true to the spirit of what Michael D is about' (1993: 5).

The first projects produced under the Board seemed to bear this aspiration out. Barry Devlin directed *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1994), Maurice O'Callaghan directed *Broken Harvest* (1994), Cathal Black directed *Korea* (1994), Joe Comerford directed *High Boot Benny* (1994), Mary McGuckian directed *Words Upon the Window Pane* (1994) and Paddy Breathnach directed *Ailsa* (1994), based on a Joseph O'Connor short story. However, none of the above proved to be commercially successful. *Words Upon the Window Pane* had box office receipts which totalled £2,100 punt and *Ailsa* brought in a mere £3,328 punt from its theatrical release. *Korea* fared slightly better, making £40,000 punt, while *Broken Harvest* returned £80,000 [5]. Poor box office returns on Irish-helmed movies were to remain the pattern for the next ten years with a few minor exceptions. Writing in the introduction to the first Film Board Review, covering the years 1994 and 1995, Rod Stoneman noted;

> [I]t is time to recognise the important differences of cultural approach and mode of production and play to our strengths, throwing out the fantasy, especially persistent in English language cinema, of competing with Hollywood on its own ground. Whatever the illustrious histories of various European cinemas, the future does not lie in attempting to make inadequate imitations of large scale industrial product from America (1995: 5).

However, the most commercially successful film produced under the auspices of the Board at the time was *Circle of Friends* (Pat O'Connor 1995), one of the many heritage films produced by the Board, which took a staggering IR£1.4 million punt at the box office (Barton, 2001:8) - (quite probably on the strength of the success of the Maeve Binchey novel on which it was based) - and delivered an 'inadequate imitation' of the classical Hollywood melodrama, pandering more to the 'chick flick' audience with its Michael Kamen score and a central female character Benny (Minnie Driver), who is seen to triumph not because she saves the family business from an embezzling clerk, but because she gets her man despite being overweight (Barton, 1999: 44).

The following year Paddy Breathnach's *I Went Down* (1997), based on a screenplay by Conor McPherson, took the standard American road movie formula and transposed

Midnight Run (Martin Brest 1988) to rural Ireland, giving the Board a minor success on the home front with a box office return of £600,000 punt (Barton, 2001: 8). The film's total budget however, was £1.8 million punt (with the Film Board investing £350,000, the highest production loan awarded in 1996), and although it put in a strong performance on the home front it failed to capture an overseas audience, despite winning acclaim at Cannes and Edinburgh and being the first Irish produced feature ever to be accepted at the Sundance Film Festival.

It is ironic that, given Stoneman's 1995 quotation, it was these two films - both very definite attempts at aping mainstream American product – that should prove to be the two most financially successful products with which the Board were involved up until 1996. Film-maker Cathal Black, interviewed in the same year, was quick to support Stoneman's approach however;

> I think his (Rod Stoneman's) heart is in the right place. He knows the contradictions that are there within the Film Board. I think his reasoning would be that, if the service industry can be kept going, the more nutty fringe might slip through unnoticed and, maybe one of these days, cross over.[6]

By 1997, nearly forty feature films had been made with Film Board involvement (Stoneman, 1997: 4). Of those, eleven were what are called 'heritage films', including *A Man of No Importance* (Suri Krishnama 1994), *Circle of Friends* (Pat O'Connor 1995) and *Korea* (Cathal Black 1994). A further seven were what Barton terms "Troubles" dramas (1999:45), the most successful of which were *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George 1996) and *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan 1995). The remainder were primarily contemporary dramas ranging from mainstream fare such as *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach 1996) through middle of the road material like *Gold in the Streets* (Elizabeth Gill 1996), *Trojan Eddie* (Gillies McKinnon 1996) and *Snakes and Ladders* (Trish McAdam 1995), none of which managed to capture the public imagination either at home or abroad, to a number of low budget arthouse offerings like Alan Gilsenan's *All Souls Day* (1997) and Mary McGuckian's *Words Upon the Window Pane* (1994). 1997 also saw Louis Marcus taking over the Chair of the Film Board from Lelia Doolan. Of the 43 films completed by the start of 1998 nearly three quarters had Irish directors at the helm, 18 of whom were making their feature debuts [7]. Writing in the introduction to the 1996/1997 Film Board Review, Rod Stoneman noted that there had been a return on the Board's production loans of over 20% during 1993-1996 (1997:5).

In a number of respects therefore, it is difficult to find fault with the Film Board's performance over its first five years. Lelia Doolan's wish to see a solid body of Irish work had certainly been fulfilled and, as Cathal Black suggested, there was definitely an attempt to allow little known and therefore less bankable film-makers such as Owen McPolin, Geraldine Creed and John Carney, to get their break into the mainstream. On the negative side, most of these films went out on the festival circuit, got a single television screening, but failed to get a video or DVD release and are thus unavailable to the public at large. However, on the positive side, the aforementioned directors, and many others, are all still working in the industry. The fact that Stoneman could claim a recoupment rate of only 20% on the Board's investments during its first five years may not have been particularly pleasing to the government's accountants, but it does suggest a lack of government interference in the way the Board was being run.

James Flynn, Business Manager of the Film Board from the period 1993-1996, pointed out in a letter to 'Film Ireland', that it would be; 'quite easy to increase the Board's recoupment rate to 35% by limiting the Board's involvement to "Last in, first out" investments on projects with 85% of their finance in place by US Distributors or UK Broadcasters', but that this would be at the expense of developing indigenous talent. Flynn went on to point out that the exact recoupment figure was actually 16.25%; 'but it is as a risk-taker and promoter of indigenous talent that must remain the raison d'etre of Bord Scannan' (1998: 41). While this point of view must be admired and clearly supports the aspirations of the first paragraph of the Film Board's 'Charter', the promotion of a creative film culture for a home audience was certainly not reflected in box office receipts.

While paragraph two of the Board's charter saw the establishment of Screen Training Ireland under the auspices of FAS and an obvious increase in hands-on training due to the number of features and television series being made in the country, it was in the area of promotion, distribution and exhibition that a lot of the reasons for the poor performances of Irish films seemed to lie. When MEDIA 11 [8] was established in 1996, 265 million ECU of its total budget of 400 million ECU was invested in tackling distribution problems in Europe (Flynn. R, 1996: 16), so the problem was not unique to this country, though it was compounded here by a number of factors.

As previously noted, Bob Quinn had cited the distribution and exhibition monopoly prevalent in Ireland as one of the key problems the indigenous industry was facing. This was primarily a reference to the domination of Ward Anderson's Abbey Films Group, which owned 30 of the 170 cinema's in Ireland in 1997, but who also represented a large number of USA Independent Distributors, which suggested a conflict of interests given that the Group would make more profits by screening material from their own clients (ibid: 12). In 1988 Ward Anderson would have controlled about 50 percent of the lucrative Dublin market (valued at between 60% and 70% of the Irish market).

However, the 90s saw a massive increase in Irish cinema admissions, rising by approximately 660,000 per annum from 1985 to a peak admissions figure of 10.4 million in 1994 (ibid), making the Irish the highest per capita cinema-goers in Europe. This rise reflected the arrival of the Omniplex, with dozens of multi-screen cinemas opening all over the country. By 1991 the UCI Cinema Group accounted for 40 % of the Dublin market. The fact that there were now two large distributors controlling 90% of the main territory, meant that Irish production companies found themselves in a seller's market.

The initial signs were good – when Jane Doolan of Clarence Pictures obtained the rights to *Priest* (Antonia Bird 1994), at a time when the Irish clergy were being assailed by sex abuse scandals, the marketing power of a major distributor enabled her to get the film out rapidly all over the country, resulting in the Irish box office accounting for 50% of the total UK theatrical box office (Ireland is generally regarded as a region within the UK distribution market), in an environment where a typical Irish release was expected to contribute 8% (Flynn. R, 1996:11). But the reality was that no distributors were going to hold a picture if it wasn't making money after a week. This policy didn't allow much chance for 'word-of-mouth' to build about a particular film and goes some of the way towards accounting for the poor performances of intelligent and entertaining films like *The Fifth Province* (Frank Stapleton 1997) and *The Boy From Mercury* (Martin Duffy 1995). Marketing and advertising become extremely significant in this sort of environment, yet where American studios were prepared to invest as much in a marketing campaign as in a film itself, the very size of the Irish market dictated against such expenditure. *A Love Divided* (Syd McCartney 1999) had a budget of IR£1.75 million and a marketing spend of IR£50,000 in Ireland (including getting the prints made), a figure equivalent to 2.8% of the budget. *Sweety Barrett* (Stephen Bradley 1998) cost IR£1.8 million and its marketing

campaign came in for IR£40,000, roughly equal to 2.2% of the budget. (Bradley & M, 1999: 19/20). Jane Doolan pointed out in an interview with Roddy Flynn in 1996;

> we've achieved the first part, getting films made, but I think there should be a further focus on getting them sold and seen. You can be in a position as a filmmaker where you have a finished film but no resources to sell it (1996:13).

By 1999 the Film Board's contribution to the marketing campaign of one of their films consisted of a repayable loan to the value of 50% of each film's print and advertising costs, but even adding this support to the above figures shows an expenditure of just over 5% for marketing. The strategy just wasn't working. The majority of Irish releases were getting a premiere at Dublin, Cork or Galway film festivals then getting a one week run at the IFC cinema in Dublin. Nicholas O'Neill, producer of *Crushproof* (Paul Tickell 1999) commented; 'in days gone by people used to say it was an achievement to get a film made, now the achievement seems to be to get it out there' (1999: 20).

In recent years, the trend towards the concentration of media ownership, has meant that there are now fewer outlets worldwide for the sort of non-mainstream product which needs the opportunity to 'break-out' through word-of-mouth. Often it is essential to open on a large print run, in order to generate enough of a reaction, so that the film can survive on the screen another week. Part of the success on the home market for *I Went Down* was due to a deal which producer Robert Walpole struck with Buena Vista International for the release of 50 prints of the film on its opening week-end, a figure put into perspective when one considers that *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld 1997), that summer's American 'blockbuster', had only 53 prints in the country at its box office peak (Power, 1997: 17). It was beginning to become more and more obvious that the majority of Irish product, irrespective of its quality, was incapable of competing with its mainstream American rivals on the advertising front and as a consequence was finding itself being rushed through an extremely competitive market place and dumped into obscurity before anyone had a chance to hear about it.

In 1997, Section 35 became Section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act and yet more changes were made to the criteria under which production houses could apply. The amounts that could be raised under Section 481 were a maximum of 66% of the project's budget for budgets of €5,080,000 or less and a maximum of 55% of the project's budget for budgets of €6,350,000 or more, up to a ceiling of €10,480,000 . The new legislation

also required that a minimum of 75% of the work on the production of the film be carried out in the State. These new criteria would apply until December 31st 2004 [9]. The Film Board entered its sixth year with a budget of IR£ 4 million and a track record that had seen the indigenous film industry grow from 3 productions in 1992 to 20 productions in 1997, a growth which showed no signs of abating. However, the majority of the finished films were folding at the box office after a one-week run and then disappearing without a trace and the Board's critics were becoming more vocal.

The Board completed nine feature films in 1998. Out of these nine, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O'Connor), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan) and *The General* (John Boorman) took, respectively, IR£653,714, IR£800,000 and IR£1.37 million, thus more than covering the Board from the financial fallout of *Sweety Barrett* (Stephen Bradley), *Sunset Heights* (Colm Villa), *Night Train* (John Lynch) and *Love and Rage* (Cathal Black), all of which failed to perform in Ireland at all and made little or no impact on the international front. Of the eleven features completed in 1999 only *About Adam* (Gerry Stembridge) and *Agnes Browne* (Anjelica Huston) fared well at the home box office, with *About Adam* taking IR£660,000 (Joeckel, 2003: 158) and *Agnes Browne* taking IR£551,603 (Barton, 1999:7/8).

2.5 Reactions to the Board's Performance.

In 1999, 'Cineaste' magazine, as part of their 'Contemporary Irish Cinema' supplement, sent out questionnaires to several dozen of the key operatives in the Irish industry and the replies would appear to me to reflect a good sense, not only of how the industry was thinking at the time, but also how writers and critics in general were feeling.

As a whole, they also reveal a certain level of disenchantment and 'fuzzy thinking' about the state of affairs. Gabriel Byrne argued that; 'the real challenge for us is to retain our unique cultural perspective and at the same time to reach the widest possible audiences' (1999: 70). Director John Carney was quoted as saying;

> the poor quality of product in this country is… down to the fact that funds are only available to the middle classes; to an over-educated, under-stimulated few, so it seems that all stories, no matter how varied in content, are told from exactly the same perspective (1999: 70).

Johnny Gogan, who had made *The Last Bus Home* in 1997, argued that 'Ireland is now acceding to the world of the masters', and that;

this development has coincided with a bringing to heel, through patronage or indifference, of formerly critical forces within the country, among whom artists were once numbered. Artists are now to the fore in propagating the feel-good Celtic Tiger image of The Nineties. Perhaps people feel there is less to be critical about than before (1999: 71).

Bob Quinn was more cynical;

[N]ow that this country has finally shed its antediluvian religious beliefs, its national identity, its sense of personal and communal responsibility, its ethical inhibitions, its political sovereignty, even its own currency, all those things that retarded it for so long, the future glows with promise. Particularly the future of "movie-making" here (1999: 73).

1999 also saw the publication of 'The Strategic Development of the Irish Film and Television Industry 2000 –2010' [10], an overview of the industry in the 90s with recommendations for strategic expansion in the next decade. The report was put together by a review group of industry insiders including accountant Ossie Kilkenny, TV3 Commissioning Editor Jane Gogan, producer Ed Guiney, SIPTU's Pat Keenan, Kevin Moriarty from Ardmore Studios and documentarist Louis Marcus. Chairperson Ossie Kilkenny prefaced the report by arguing that; 'the industry is now at a critical turning point' (1999: 9). The report envisaged film and television production rising from IR£123 million in 1999 to IR£500 million by 2010 – a fourfold increase in turnover (ibid: 23), but argued that in order to realise this, a number of key strategies had to be adhered to and a number of new policies introduced. Its key conclusions were that the 90s partnership between the State and the industry had proved extremely beneficial and that a continuation of such a partnership was essential. Section 481 was seen as a huge success and the Review Group recommended that the incentive should stay in place for a minimum of seven years in order to strengthen the industry's framework. The Group also argued strongly that the Film Board should pay 'greater attention to script development' (ibid: 12) and called for ' a radical increase of the absolute amount and proportion of total investment spent on high quality scripts and each subsequent aspect of the project development phase of Irish film production' (ibid: 14). The report also identified marketing practices as a major weakness and called for a 'co-ordinated marketing programme under the aegis of a restructured Film Board' (ibid: 17). It also recommended the establishment of 'a single and well-funded 'National Centre for Film

Excellence' for practical film education within one of the major educational institutions'.
(ibid: 15).

Taken together with the 'Cineaste' quotations, these recommendations suggest that the main complaints being levelled at the Film Board at the close of the century were that they weren't developing scripts to their full potential and that they were lax in marketing their product. Rod Stoneman, ending the questionnaire section in the 'Cineaste' Irish supplement, had written;

> helping to create a friction between fictions, supporting different scales of film made for different audiences, the Board has been a catalyst provoking productive cultural arguments. Let a thousand flowers bloom and a thousand schools of thought contend: we set out to achieve a rich and variegated Irish cinema, with its roots embedded in a vigorous culture. A genuine aspiration towards a radical pluralism (1999: 73).

While not doubting that such florid language represents 'a genuine aspiration' on behalf of Stoneman, the reality was that by 1999 the main cultural arguments being propounded related in the main to the poor quality of Irish films being produced.

The Board's Annual Report for 2000 stated that:

> [T]he Board advanced a total of IR£6,689,343 in feature development and production loans during 2000. In the same period, the Board recouped IR£499,193. This figure brings to 13% the recoupment rate on production feature loans advanced since the re-incorporation of BSE in 1993.[11]

The most recent recoupment figure available from the Board is for 2001 where the rate has crept up to 14%, when, according to the same annual report, the Irish Film and Television industry had an estimated annual turnover of €259 million. From a training point of view, in 2001 the Board committed €1,521,405 to a variety of organisations including Screen Training Ireland, Eurimages, the Media Desk Ireland and Eureka Audiovisual, approximately 14% of what it spent on feature development and production.

The films completed in 2000 again failed to produce any runaway box office successes, the top performers being *When Brendan Met Trudy* (Kieron J Walsh), which took €939,060 at the Irish box office and *Disco Pigs* (Kirsten Sheridan) which took a disappointing €129,438 (Joeckel, 2003:33), while *Country* (Kevin Liddy), *Borstal Boy* (Peter Sheridan) ,

Conamara (Eoin Moore) and *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (Dudi Appleton) all sank within a week. In an interview with Gerry McCarthy, Stoneman agreed that part of the Film Board's brief was to persuade Irish audiences that Irish films were worth seeing:

> [I]t's a crucial part, because what are you making films for if they're not for people to see? That has an international dimension, but crucially the starting point has to be the culture, the society that a film has come from. I think, or I'd like to think, that Irish audiences have a predisposition to be interested in Irish film. Though they might have had bad experiences en route (2000: 33) [12].

2001's production slate included two contemporary dramas, Stephen Kane's debut feature *The Crooked Mile* and Johnny Gogan's second feature for the Board, *Mapmaker*, as well as an adaptation of Spike Milligan's *Puckoon*, written and directed by Terence Ryan and *How Harry Became a Tree* (Goran Paskalijevic), an absurdist comedy set in the 1920s. Geraldine Creed also directed her second feature, the futuristic fantasy *Chaos* and three 'Troubles' films were produced, the low budget 'hunger-strike' dramas *Silent Grace* (Maeve Murphy) and *H3* (Les Blair) and *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass), by far the most successful of the year's output, attracting both critical and commercial success and winning the 'Golden Bear' at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival and the Audience Award at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. The following year the Board supported Glaswegian writer/director Peter Mullan's second feature, *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), which went on to win the 'Golden Lion' at the 2002 Venice Film Festival and the 'Discovery Award' at the 2002 Toronto Film Festival.

Despite the critical success of these two productions, criticism of the Board continued to mount. It was seen to be championing what the critics perceived as British films, while indigenous productions like *The Actors* (Conor McPherson 2002) and *Dead Bodies* (Robert Quinn 2002) floundered at the box office. This was slightly unfair as *Bloody Sunday* had been co-produced by Arthur Lappin and Hell's Kitchen and *The Magdalene Sisters* was co-produced by Ed Guiney, but the general consensus seemed to be that they were not 'Irish' films. On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Board's resurrection, Gerry McCarthy argued that the;

> growth of the Irish film industry has seen two distinct quantum leaps. The first saw the emergence of Jordan and Sheridan, and the sudden eruption of Irish film onto the world stage. The second came at the turn of the century: the brash, sexy exuberance of Celtic tiger cinema. But something has gone wrong since. Stembridge, McPherson, Breathnach and others were poised to leap. They should

now be making films to rival *My Left Foot* and *The Crying Game*. But the follow through never came (2003a: 10).

In respect of Rod Stoneman's tenure as Chief Executive, McCarthy noted that;

> the Stoneman credo is diversity. The decade's work includes films of every description. Stoneman has encouraged films that engage contemporary society rather than those that dwell on nostalgia. He has called for a "Swiftean cinema" – films fuelled by a savage indignation in the manner of Swift. But the IFB can only work with what its given. It can nurture talent, it can foster and encourage emerging directors, but it has no creative role (ibid: 11).

2.6 Recent Developments.

In April 2003 the Film Board staged a ten year retrospective entitled 'New Irish Cinema, 1993 –2003', which showed all 76 films which the Board had produced up to that point. While screenings of recent productions like *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Bloody Sunday* played to full houses, 38 of the films were screened in the Cinemobile, the Film Institute of Ireland's state-of-the-art 100-seater mobile cinema, which was parked at the back of Dublin Castle. The Board also produced a 'coffee-table' book entitled 'Ten Years After', which gave a film still and a brief synopsis of each of the films it had produced. For all the world like an exhibition catalogue, the book avoided any engagement in critical analysis of the films and exuded an 'overall mood of positivity' (MacCarthaigh, 2003: 34).

On the 3rd of April 2003 Rod Stoneman announced that he would be stepping down from the Board the following Autumn, to take up a new position as the director of the Huston Film School in Galway. The school was established by the University of Galway and officially inaugurated in Los Angeles on May 2nd 2003 [13].

Since the re-establishment of the Board in 1993 Irish expenditure in the film industry has grown at an annual average rate of 18%. However in December 2002 the Government cut the Board's funding by 12.5%, sending a warning sign to the industry that tougher times lay ahead. Writing in the Business Section of the Sunday Times, Ruth O'Callaghan argued that;

> although most other European countries have a version of Section 481, or high levels of state funding, the department (of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands) believes that Ireland's industry is over dependent on the tax break and

that makes it vulnerable to competition overseas..... According to its calculations, ending the relief on Dec 31st 2004, will save the exchequer 30 million a year from 2006, based on estimates of how much investment the sector will need to keep itself going (2003: 9).

2003 saw the preparation of a variety of reports geared towards persuading the Government to extend Section 481. The first of these to appear was the Screen Producers Ireland (formally Film Makers Ireland) publication entitled 'Realising the Potential of the Irish Film and Television Industry – A Unique National Asset', released on June 30th, and also known as the Sheridan Report as the committee who formulated it was chaired by film-maker Jim Sheridan.

The report's key findings stated that over 4,300 people were employed directly in the film and television industry, with another 3,000 employed in the tourist industry as a direct consequence of Irish film and television activities. It also argued that the industries contributed €107 million towards annual GNP and a further average annual foreign inward investment of €136 million (O'Malley, 2003: 11), but that growth could only continue with; 'long-term Government commitment to this industry and to the continuation of tax incentives' (ibid: 12). The report then goes on to call for a number of key changes, including a ten year extension to Section 481, an increase on the 'cap' on investments to €21 million and the establishment of a Certification Standards Board to oversee the certification process (ibid: 13).

Minister John O'Donoghue's response was to extend Section 481 to 2008 and to raise the cap on the level of investment from €10.48million to €15million from 2005. Individuals are now allowed to invest up to €31,750 annually, 80% of which can be written off for tax purposes.[14] Whether or not such measures will prove sufficient remains to be seen. As Andrew Higson argues; 'a government-supported national cinema may be one of the few means by which a film culture not dominated entirely by Hollywood can still exist' (2000: 69/70).

In October 2003 Mark Woods took over from Rod Stoneman as the new Chief Executive Officer of the Film Board. Irish born, he had been based in Sydney Australia since 1988, where he worked for the Showtime Channel, a 24 hour channel devoted to first run features. Woods was responsible for purchasing a number of Irish features for the channel, including *The Magdalene Sisters* (Peter Mullen 2002), *Song For a Raggy Boy*

(Aisling Walsh 2002), The *Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (Dudi Appleton 2000), *The Last September* (Deborah Warner 1999) and *The Crooked Mile* (Stephen Kane 2001), so was obviously familiar with the majority of the Second Film Board's output. Interviewed by Michael Dwyer shortly after his appointment, Woods stated that;

> if an Irish film or an Australian film doesn't top the box office in every other territory I don't think its fair to say its not a success....It just depends on what the objectives were the film-makers went into this cultural exercise with – and that's what I think independent film-making and independent co-financing is: a cultural exercise. You shouldn't let the mathematics or the spreadsheets stop you. You should just crunch your deals and crunch your figures in a way that lets you get on with what you've got to say (2003: 14).

Such sentiments would appear to bode well for future directions, but ten years in and many critics still find fault with the Board's production slate to date. While it has certainly been successful in its commercial remit, from a cultural perspective film has not had the impact that many industry observers would have hoped for. Whether this is down to the fact that the creative talent that exists needs a couple more years nourishing before it can successfully apply itself to the mainstream, or to the brutal reality that the Hollywood machine has come to dominate to such a degree that mainstream audiences are no longer interested in indigenous cinema, is something only the next decade will reveal. What can't be denied however is that the Board has been responsible for presenting a broad palette of diverse features, from arthouse to mainstream, from historical to contemporary, from rites of passage to romantic comedy and that this continuous output has given Irish technicians - camera operators, editors, sound recordists etc. - the opportunity to hone their skills to levels which were out of reach a mere twenty years ago. However, as Andrew Higson has argued; 'the parameters of a national cinema should be drawn as much at the site of consumption as of production of films' (1989: 36), and it would appear that Irish audiences have yet to be persuaded of the merits of indigenous cinema.

2.7 Conclusions.

Writing in 2002, Michel Peillon argued that one of the main effects of the 'Celtic Tiger' on Irish life was that it had fundamentally altered the connection between culture and economy, where culture is defined as 'the way people represent the world in which they live: the beliefs they express, and the meaning according to which they act' (2002: 39).

Peillon suggested that the idea of culture as a form of social critique had given way to culture as an economic commodity. He argues that from the 1950s onwards, the state's concentration on the development of the Irish economy at the expense of social, political and cultural modernisation, led to a situation whereby 'traditional' culture began to lag so far behind the modernist socio-economic structure, that 'culture came to be seen as an obstacle to economic development' (ibid: 38-40). He argues that the emergence of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy in the 90s saw a phenomenal growth in the service sector, particularly in the financial, electronic and computer sectors. In this 'post-industrial' economy, he posits, 'cultural products assume the form of a commodity. They are consumed because they function as markers of chosen lifestyles and supports for individual and collective identities' (ibid: 50) and, as a consequence, culture, by becoming subsumed into the dynamic of capitalism loses its ability to criticize societal mores. When we reach a stage whereby directors like Jordan are making pop videos for U2, and Syd McCartney (*A Love Divided.* 1999), John Moore (*Behind Enemy Lines.* 2001) and Damien O'Donnell (*East is East.* 2000) spend as much time working for advertising agencies as they do making films, then, Peillon maintains, 'it follows that a critique of the socio-economic order, which in Ireland was largely rooted in the cultural sphere, is losing its institutional basis' (ibid: 52).

If one follows this line of thought, then it becomes readily apparent that those films that attempt 'a critique of the socio-economic order' are the ones likely to be hardest hit in the current environment. In a recent interview film director Neil Jordan, reflecting on his work in the 70s and 80s, made the point that;

> in a strange way it was all about culture wars then. There was a sense that what you were writing was like throwing little smoke bombs into a very rigid and patriarchal society. There was an odd sense that culture was part of the argument in the 1970s and 1980s. It was probably the only tool you had to express an argument (2004: 9).

If we look back over some of the opinions expressed in this chapter, be it Michael D Higgins emphasising the importance of a balance between the cultural and economic dimensions of film-making, Hugh Linehan's assertion that the idea of film interrogating the fundamental preconceptions of a society has taken a battering, John Carney's allegation that funding is only available to the over-educated and under-stimulated, and most crucially, Gerry McCarthy's comment that the Irish Film Board can only work with what its given and we then apply Richard Johnson's idea of the 'unbroken circuit', then

we have to recognise that, as Colin Coulter has argued, that 'the rampant consumption that has come to define the period of the Celtic Tiger has inevitably nurtured a culture of narcissism. As the devotion to self has escalated, consideration for others would appear to have waned' (2003: 25). Indeed, Jim Smyth goes as far as to argue that the upsurge of cultural studies itself in Ireland; 'may well be a redemptive substitute for the failure to engage with the material reality of Irish life: a class-ridden corrupt society with levels of inequality and deprivation unrivalled in Europe' (2001: 36).

With this in mind, Chapter Three will examine whether the 'culture wars' referred to by Jordan are now a thing of the past and to what extent recent Irish films engage in the sort of social criticism associated with the 'First Wave' films of the 70s and 80s.

ENDNOTES

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[1] See GING. DEBBIE. (2002). *"Screening the Green: Cinema under the Celtic Tiger" In* Kirby P, Gibbons L & Cronin M (Eds). *"Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy"*. Pluto Press. p178

[2] Schedule quoted in *"Film Diary" In "Film Directions"*. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland and The Arts Council. Vol 1, No. 4. p21

[3] Irish Film Board Act. (1980). Number 36.L.5-9.

[4] *Cited In "Film Ireland"* Issue 36. August/September 1993. Dublin. Filmbase. P8

[5] All figures derived from BARTON RUTH. (2001) 'The Smaller Picture? – Irish Cinema: Funding, Figures and the Future'. Conference paper delivered at the inaugural conference of the European Cinema Research Forum, University of Wales, Bangor. January. p7 –9 (Figures unavailable for High Boot Benny and All Things Bright and Beautiful.)

[6] *Cited In* BYRNE TERRY (1997) *"Power In The Eye: An Introduction to Contemporary Irish Film"* The Scarecrow Press Inc. Lanham, Md & London. Cathal Black quotation on p192 and taken from an interview conducted by the author on 27th July 1995.

[7] Information taken from URL: http://www.filmboard.ie (Accessed 26/06/03)

[8] MEDIA 95 was the EEC's audiovisual initiative to tackle the steady decline of the European Film Industry and to attempt to slow down the increasing dominance of American mainstream culture in Europe. Introduced to Ireland in 1989/1990 the MEDIA programme provided information and advice on development schemes, distribution schemes, training workshops and European partnership opportunities. The Media Desk was housed in the IFC in Dublin and a' Media Antennae' Desk was set up in the Galway Film Centre in Galway. Michael D Higgins has credited the MEDIA programme as being responsible for the 'sensitising' of Irish politicians to the potential of the audiovisual industry. In 1996 MEDIA 95 became MEDIA 11, slightly more streamlined and concentrating on training, development and distribution. In 2001 the MEDIA 11 programme became the MEDIA PLUS programme which placed even more emphasis on the role of distribution and issues such as the dubbing for European territories.

[9] Information obtained at URL: http://www.iftn.ie/handbook/index2.htm?fuseaction=article&file=41 (Accessed 05/08/03)

[10] '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. Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands. Was published in August 1999 in Dublin.

[11] Published in The Irish Film Board/ Bord Scannan na hEireann's Annual Report (2000) Galway. p5

[12] The same year the Film Board cut a 90 second trailer advertising Irish film which was released on 400 screens around the country. Featuring 88 shots from 30 different films the primary imagery, was, according to Stoneman: '(U)rban, modern, witty, sexy, violent......It was a very specific remit – because I was afraid that there might be the last lingering cobwebs of a misunderstanding, that the Irish Film

Board was only interested in art house work, middle class audiences, utilising film in rural settings from 1953.' (2000: 33).

[13] Information obtained at URL:http://www.iftn.ie/news/index3.htm17-Apr-03 (Accessed 18/08/03)

[14] Information accessed at URL: http://www.filmboard.ie/section_481.php (Accessed 18/09/04)

PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE: NATIONALIST IMAGININGS AND THE EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

Introduction... From the 'First Wave' to the International... The Impact of 'Angel' and 'My Left Foot'... The 'First Wave': Critical Content – 'Poitín', 'Exposure' and 'Criminal Conversation'... Formal Experimentation... 'Anger Is An Energy' 'Crushproof'... 'Keeping It Real': Kevin Liddy's 'Horse' and 'A Soldier's Song'... 'Country'... Conclusions.

3.1 Introduction

[M]arginal voices are being excluded by a subtle interplay of the culture of approval and the culture of the commercial marketplace itself. I think creative voices end up not knowing where they are.... It strikes me that one could imagine a conspiracy of forces at work at the moment, to build a picture of contemporary Ireland that is safe, modern, very European, and more specifically, middle class, embarrassed about certain aspects of its past (Jordan, 1995: 24).

In 'Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema' (2000), McLoone succinctly summarises one of the key debates in the canon of the current theories relating to modern Irish culture. He argues that there were two camps in Ireland: the revisionists, who are; 'a largely urban, liberal middle class committed to an open economy, the free flow of culture and the abandonment of the cherished ideals of Irish-Ireland nationalism' (2000: 95), and the anti-revisionists, who argued that the central characteristic of Irish cultural traditions was; 'that they manifest both the pain suffered and the resistance offered to the traumas of colonial oppression' (2000: 104) and that what the revisionists over-looked was 'that to ditch what is unique about the past....is to run the risk of ditching also what is unique about the present and thus to capitulate tamely to the globalising and homogenising tendencies of the modernisation process' (2000: 218).

Rockett has argued that there was a definite turning point in the landscape of Irish film after 1987 - a divide that continues to be acknowledged in the writings of all of our film theorists. The general consensus would appear to be that the 'First Wave' film-makers referred to in this chapter were developing an indigenous 'Third Cinema' as originally

espoused by Solanas and Getino (1969/1976); a cinema which included 'the participation of people who, until then, were considered spectators' (ibid: 61), a cinema the aim of which was 'to promote a socialist consciousness' (McLoone, 2000: 123) and that the 'post-87 environment' curtailed this experimentation with the closure of the Film Board and a change in government policy, which saw funding and tax breaks being concentrated on encouraging a national 'First Cinema' only. Ging posits that the majority of the films made by the first Film Board 'explicitly challenged' the 'Ireland of official state nationalism', but that;

> since the 90s a booming economy and the onslaught of globalisation have started to erase the type of self-questioning in favour of a more marketable version of Irishness, whereby Irish identity has become more a global commodity then a means of critical self-questioning (2002: 177).

Also, it's important to recognise that after 1987, economic factors were also starting to come into play, as production practices began to homogenise with those of other countries. Interviewed by Donald Taylor Black in 1995, producer Noel Pearson made the point that; '*My Left Foot* (1989) cost 1.7 million pounds. This film, *Frankie Starlight* (1995), has cost over 7 million dollars. And when you get into that range of expenditure you cannot recoup it here, so you have to kind of have an eye to the market-place' (1995. 00:42:15). British film director Stephen Frears echoes this argument in relation to his own country;

> [I]f you make a film in Britain about Britain you can't earn your money from British audiences in the way that the French can, in the way that the Americans can, so you are forced to export. The question is whether the price of exporting means the loss of some sort of indigenous quality and that seems to be what all the people I know, they're all struggling with the same thing, that to get the money they have to look abroad without diverting the gaze that is England (1995: 01:11:51.).

Many of our filmmakers agree; Jordan suggests that;

> every person who makes films now, unless they make very small independent films, they have to deal with Hollywood in some way or another. Every filmmaker who works internationally is a filmmaker who happens to be Irish, French, Chinese, Hong Kong or whatever because it has become this huge international thing (1996: 00:37:32).

Damien O'Donnell, who enjoyed considerable success in England with *East is East* (1999) argues that; 'inevitably I'm Irish and I make films in Ireland, and I think that's the only association. It's an international industry really' (2004: 16).

This chapter begins with an overview of the 'First Wave' film-makers and an examination of the changes brought about by the unprecedented success of *My Left Foot* (1989) and *The Crying Game* (1992), before moving on to investigate the formal and narrative conventions of a number of 'First Wave' films, including Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978) and Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* (1978) and *Criminal Conversation* (1980). Having identified a number of the key characteristics of the 'First Wave', I will then apply this information to readings of two contemporary feature films - Paul Tickell's *Crushproof* (1998) and Kevin Liddy's *Country* (2000) - and Liddy's two short films, *Horse* (1993) and *A Soldier's Song* (1997), each of which in their own way, reflect specific attributes which I will argue are in keeping with 'First Wave' traditions, while at the same time attempting to utilise audiences familiarity with the contemporary mainstream to put their stories across via the 'unapproved roads'.

3.2 From the 'First Wave' to the International

Joe Comerford's name is predominant in any recent study of 'First Wave' film-making, as much for his highly opinionated views on the Film Board and on contemporary practices, as for his body of work throughout the 70s and 80s. Writing in 1990, he made the following analogy;

> [C]onsider Ireland as a large garden and the story taking place in the early 1920s after the 'War of Independence'. Some members of the family take the skeleton hidden in the cupboard and bury it secretly in the garden. As the years pass those who hid the skeleton die off and its whereabouts become unclear. Most of the following generations don't know there is a skeleton or indeed that it is buried in the garden. What they do know is….digging is not encouraged, and it is better not to use the ground to its full potential (1990: 22).

Comerford's analogy refers specifically to the 'post –87' environment, which, as noted, saw the American 'industrial model' of film-making being favoured over the more socially and critically challenging cinema of the 'First Wave'. His suggestion is that a form of unspoken censorship, the same 'conspiracy of forces' referred to by Jordan, discourages the continued exploration of the subject matter which indigenous cinema in the 70s and early 80s is remembered for – examinations of the 'underbelly' of Irish society with its high suicide rates, alcoholism, dysfunctional families, disenfranchised and marginalized communities and deep rooted misogyny. Comerford argues that instead of making 'films' we now make 'movies'. 'Movies' he defines as the;

kind of things that show *versions* of Ireland, some of them highly amusing, some of them good in their own right, but we are showing them as if we had some real input or control over them, as if they were products of Irish culture. But we really made them as part of the service industry (2004: 24).

The problem, he argues, is that 'if you make propaganda in the guise of commercial product for long enough, ultimately you run the risk of believing it yourself' (ibid). In summary, he concludes by arguing that contemporary filmmakers are in danger of finding themselves in a situation whereby the longer they continue to imitate the 'international', the further they remove themselves from 'true' Irish culture, until inevitably they reach a stage whereby they believe their own 'propaganda' to such a degree that they are no longer capable of delivering any true version of the 'local' (ibid).

The differences between our current situation and the situation that the 'First Wave' of film-makers worked in are numerous, but a number of them deserve to be addressed. McLoone has drawn attention to what he sees as the different cinematic culture that pervaded the industry in the 70s. The Omniplex had yet to reach these shores and Hollywood itself was in transition after the collapse of the major studios (2000:165). Films like Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) and Rafaelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) had not only filled cinemas but had done so by deliberately dismantling the cinematic staples that had preceded them. In a sense the rulebook had been torn up and experimentation was the order of the day. Furthermore, the European 'arthouse' film had finally begun to make inroads into America itself (thanks in no small part to Roger Corman's 'New World' distribution chain) and European sensibilities had started to feed the aesthetic stylings of a generation of emerging Hollywood film-makers. Even established veterans like John Huston and Sam Peckinpah were aware of the changing currents, producing 'anti'-Hollywood fare such as *Fat City* (1972) and *Junior Bonner* (1972).

The 'First Wave' filmmakers began to apply these aesthetics to the Ireland of the 70s and; ' made socially and formally critical films which pandered neither to the traditional image of Ireland as a rural idyll or the established cinematic forms of mainstream commercial cinema' (Rockett, 1991: 21).

There was no shortage of social and political issues to be challenged in the 1970s. The country was undergoing major economic and social changes and experiencing all the growing pains that come with such seismic developments. The upturn in the Irish

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economy brought about by the implementation of the economic policies recommended by T.K.Whittaker in 1958, had begun to pay serious dividends and by the mid-70s there were upwards of four hundred foreign firms operating within the country. That represented a sizable influx of foreign culture, culture that drew attention to some of the more ludicrously anachronistic aspects of Irish life. These changes coincided with the emergence of an educated middle class, who were no longer prepared to lie down and allow the Catholic patriarchy to hold sway over virtually every facet of their lives. Couple this with the fact that from the 1960s onwards, for the first time in the history of the State, the majority of the Irish citizenry now lived in towns with populations of more than 1,500 people and that by 1970 over 40% of the population lived in the Greater Dublin region (Shiel & F, 2001: 222/223) and it is clear that the 'First Wave' filmmakers had no shortage of material with which to engage cinematically. As Debbie Ging puts it;

> by taking a non-indigenous art-form and re-appropriating it to articulate national and local concerns, (they) demonstrated that embracing the global was not necessarily dependent on a rejection of one's own locality or traditions but rather could be mobilised as a powerful means of interrogating the diversity of Irish identities, their relationship with the past and their complex relation to modernity (2002: 178).

However, by the mid 90s, less then twenty years later, we had reached a situation where, according to Comerford;

> in this tiny country a tiny agency assesses (if they give it any time at all that is) a tiny film from the perspective, not of art, but for the most part of anti-art i.e. does the work comply with the current agenda. The anti-art movement is an import from the USA that we need in Ireland at the moment to ensure we do not scrutinise our society or ourselves to any depth (1996: 1).

In his introduction to the second Irish Film Board's retrospective publication; '10 Years On', Kevin Rockett noted that from the 1920s onwards the majority of European national governments recognised that, in order to combat American cinematic dominance, it was necessary to support their own industries with financial incentives and the setting of minimum quotas of home-produced films. From an Irish perspective; 'such aid for its filmmakers, despite pressure from Irish film activists, was rejected by Irish governments for financial, ideological and other reasons in favour of encouraging foreign film producers to make films in Ireland' (2004: viii).

When the 'First Wave' filmmakers became active in the 70s, only small levels of funding were available from the Arts Council and RTE, with state support peaking with the

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annual production budget of €600,000 allocated to the first Film Board between 1981 and 1987. It would appear to me that these relatively meagre subsidies were complicit in keeping 'art' and 'commerce' separate to a degree that is no longer possible today – that is to say that first and foremost given the low level subsidies available the only people interested in making films were those who were committed to the medium primarily as an art form as opposed to a business.

Comerford, who worked with Bob Quinn on *Poitín* (1978), has argued that;

> [I]n retrospect I would say that *Poitín* is a significant point because the film was financed by the Arts Council, so it was a grant. The reason I mention that is because it was made without any expectation that it had to enter the market place and make its money back. It was being made basically because it was a good story (2004a: 00:40:00:00).

Quinn himself remarks that he was in the process of making *Budawaany* (1987) on a budget of IR£15,000, when the Film Board phoned him up and offered him IR£50,000 because they realised they had no films being made that year (1989: 144). This freedom to work outside of the mentality that puts financial return first when evaluating film scripts, is perhaps the key difference between the production climate in the 70s and 80s and the arena in which our contemporary filmmakers work. In the same interview, Quinn had argued;

> what I've seen happening is that Irish filmmakers have been seduced by the great big world outside and have been led to believe that they can become international cinema figures by aiming outside the country all the time. I think there are not sufficient filmmakers interested in the idea of showing their films in and around this country (ibid).

3.3 The Impact of Angel and My Left Foot

The 'seduction' referred to by Quinn, it is fair to assume, had commenced with the success of *Angel* (Neil Jordan 1982), the first 'breakthrough' Irish feature to emerge from the period. Emer and Kevin Rockett have argued that in *Angel*;

> Jordan draws on the rich modernist or art film vein of European cinema and culture as the visual means of exploring Irish "life", in a manner, ironically, not too dissimilar from some other contemporary Irish filmmakers. (…) Later Jordan moved away from this formal European modernism in favour of hybrid commercial cinema genres…. (2003: 17).

Jordan was criticized on the home front for refusing to engage politically with the paramilitary situation portrayed in *Angel*, but in my opinion Jordan was already dabbling

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with 'hybrid commercial cinema'. To all intents and purposes *Angel* works on the same level as a mainstream Hollywood thriller like *Death Wish* (Michael Winner. 1974), delivering first and foremost a revenge narrative common to a variety of different mainstream American genres. Richard Kearney has argued that *Angel*, 'debunks the orthodox portrayal of Irish political violence and deromanticises several of its stock motifs' (1988: 175), yet the narrative thrust of the film still hinges on a revenge story, which by the very fact that it chooses to 'universalise' the Northern conflict by avoiding explanations as to the root cause of the paramilitary situation, makes itself more easily digestible to a global audience. The film certainly adopts a number of 'art-house' strategies in terms of its literary allusions, its staccato dialogue and its mood lighting, but it adheres strictly to the formal rules of mainstream American cinema. The fact that Detective Bonner (Donal McCann) turns out to be the leader of the paramilitary group that Danny (Stephen Rea) is hunting down at no stage suggests that the institutions governing the North are at fault, rather that it is just occasional individuals within them who are unscrupulous (Hounam, 1996: 6). Maria Pramaggiore also argues that Jordan's use of jazz throughout the film;

> calls up experiences associated with colonial oppression, including an anxiety surrounding the question of origins, a rejection of linear history, the neo-colonial influence of US mass culture, and the peculiar configuration of genders and sexualities under colonialism (1998: 273).

On the use of the Billie Holiday/Lewis Allen song 'Strange Fruit' as the film's centrepiece, Jordan has said; 'you could almost transpose the whole lyrics over to Ireland…It was just to do with racial differences; and it's a similar kind of situation that I was talking about in the film'(Kearney, 1982: 302).

It would appear to me therefore, that Boorman has a very definite point when - as noted in Chapter Two, page 24 - he argues that *Angel* represented the 'foundation of the contemporary Irish Film Industry' (Sheehy, 1998:17). As Emer and Kevin Rockett put it;

> with the completion of *Angel*, a new commercial cinema stylistic norm was introduced. No previous Irish film had so clearly drawn on the conventions of film noir, that all-encompassing style (rather than genre), which has been associated with the Hollywood crime film of the 1940s and 1950s (2003:28).

If *Angel* was the harbringer of this 'new commercial cinema' then the mainstream 'seduction' continued with the success of *My Left Foot*, which brought Irish cinema to the next level. That a largely British financed film, made by a first time director should garnish five Academy Award nominations and win two, was a phenomenal achievement, but one which forever changed the expectations as to what constituted 'success' in terms of an Irish film. What this meant from a cultural perspective, was that Irish film-makers, already aware of the success of Jordan - who by 1989 had completed five feature films and was working with mainstream Hollywood talent like Robert De Niro, Daryl Hannah and Demi Moore - now saw that there was a direct route to the very pinnacle of the industry via the international marketplace. Success would no longer be measured in terms of home audiences and Irish media attention. Jim Sheridan, with absolutely no film directing experience, had shown that the formula for the commercial Hollywood feature film could be achieved within the framework of the Irish industry. According to Rockett, *My Left Foot* illustrates;

> the sea change in national ideology during the past three decades. Its universalist sensibility helps confirm the replacement of the earlier inward-looking cultural and political nationalism with an outward-looking liberal humanist ideology. This allows, as in so many aspects of Irish life in recent decades, for a displacement of what is particular to the Irish social formation on to a non-specific universalism (1991: 22).

By 1992 when Jordan's *The Crying Game* received six Oscar nominations and won Jordan the 'Best Original Screenplay' Oscar, Rockett noted that while all this was occurring; 'those filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s committed to an art cinema, personal aesthetic, or highlighting of a social or political dimension to their work, found it difficult to find support for their projects' (2004: ix). Interviewed in 1979, Bob Quinn told Michael Open;

> everybody seems to expect us to want to "progress" from being an independent filmmaker to being commercial filmmakers, whereas, if anything we want to do the reverse, that is push the spectrum in the opposite direction (1979: 10).

Twenty six years later, interviewed for the documentary *Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?* (1995), Jim Sheridan told director Donald Taylor Black; 'the truth of the matter is that what got me into films was money'(1995: 00:42:37), adding;

> everybody denies all the things that are the actual truth – they all say well I wanted to prove this that or the other about Ireland or whatever. I wanted all the vain things; I wanted to make more money and I wanted to be…you know, you make a film and your name is up there (ibid: 00:43:16).

Gerry McCarthy, writing in 2003, made the observation that many of the current generation of filmmakers;

> do not confuse film with the national consciousness. For them, film-making is not about telling us who we are, defining Irishness, or gaining control over our own stories. It is not an archetype, a forum for navel-gazing or an alternative to meditation. It is a business (2003a: 10).

The reality of the 90s has been that the emphasis on economic growth associated with the 'Celtic Tiger' has spilled over into all facets of Irish life, both sociologically and culturally, with the result that the productions emerging under the Second Irish Film Board are in the main geared toward the commercial cinema model as defined by Hollywood, at the expense of the indigenous/European/'Third Cinema' tradition embodied by the 'First Wave' filmmakers. There have of course been exceptions to the rule, but they account for a tiny percentage of the films produced over the last decade. Even Neil Jordan, who appears to have found a successful formula in terms of the global marketplace, remarked, when asked why he chose to shoot *The Good Thief* (2002) in France;

> I'm tired of the dominance of American movies over everything, every facet of filmmaking and cinema-going... I just think it's time to make a move back to Europe. It's time European directors made films with reach, punch and intellectual ambition (2004a: x).

The primary readings undertaken in this chapter – Tickell's *Crushproof* (1997) and Liddy's *Country* (2000) – are both examples of films which attempt to do just that, separating themselves consciously from the 'Celtic Tiger' cinema that accounts for the majority of the Second Film Boards output and adopting an aesthetic approach more readily associated with the 'First Wave'. However, before moving on to them, I wish to draw attention to a number of 'First Wave' films, which are indicative of this aesthetic approach and which illustrate the themes and concerns that many of our contemporary critics feel our 'new' cinema has left behind.

3.4 The 'First Wave : Critical Content – Poitin, Exposure and Criminal Conversation

It wasn't until the 70s that an independent Irish cinema, led by the likes of Bob Quinn, Kieran Hickey, Pat Murphy and Joe Comerford, emerged to deliver the first cohesive body of indigenous representations of the Irish. What distinguishes the 70s output from the cinema of today, is its concern with the realities of Irish life – it wasn't interested in

attempting to create an impact on the world stage – it concentrated on reflecting the lives lived in the Ireland of the time in a realistic 'warts and all' manner.

Art historian Anthony O'Neill has noted that most of the films produced in the 70s were set in contemporary Ireland and that; 'none chose to promote the national question or to celebrate the achievements of national independence' (1999: 16) and he argues that as a cohesive group these films exhibited a trend, also evident in post independence literature, which has been described by the historian John A Murphy; 'as sardonic realism, a reflection of intellectual disenchantment with the narrowness of Irish life' (O'Neill, 1999:16).

Michael Gray wrote of Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978), that it 'rejects the heroic grandeur of Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* and shreds the romantic blueprint of John Ford's *The Quiet Man'* (1999: 153), but its central characters, Michil, (Cyril Cusack), Labhcas, (Donal McCann) and Sleamhnan, (Niall Toibin), are work-shy petty criminals, concerned only with themselves and every bit as violent and vindictive as the Irish males in earlier 'foreign' film portrayals. Michil has no qualms about killing Labhcas's dog and the men themselves because of the theft of a few bottles of poitin, while Labhcas and Sleamhnan terrorise and (impotently) attempt to molest Michil's daughter Maire, (Mairead Ni Chonghaile), when they come hunting for more poitin after a night's drinking. There is even an element of 'paddy-whackery' involving the local Gardai getting drunk on the poitin they have seized and the film delivers its own version of the staple 'cops and robbers' car chase.

What is different about the film, however, is its rejection of American pastoralism and the lack of any hint of a redemptive search on behalf of the central character. What the film delivers instead is the social reality of life in Connemara in the 70s; the chronic unemployment, the bleak and barren landscape and depressing weather, the reliance on a black economy outside of the world of Irish officialdom and the hardness and brutality that such a way of life engenders, where one of the only ways to escape from the daily grind is to drown one's sorrows in drink.

But Quinn doesn't dehumanise his characters. When Sleamhnan, drunk in the pub, roars that Caharoe is "a dead place for dead people", we can feel his despair. Rockett even

goes so far as to suggest that Mícheál 'remains within a set of social values' and that his final revenge; 'ostensibly for stealing the poitín, is also for the transgression of social and sexual codes by these social outcasts, the selling agents' (1988: 130). Quinn himself has argued that the film is an allegory for an Ireland where a paternal power will destroy any challenge to its authority with a casual cruelty (1978: 20).

Made in Irish, with English subtitles, the film was one of the first home grown productions to deliver male characters whose self-loathing is palpable and, as Lance Pettitt puts it; 'borne of frustration and domestic abuse' (2000: 104). Such characters populate much of the canon of indigenous film produced in the 70s and early 80s. In the main they are outsiders in their own country – travellers, the unemployed, homosexuals, the homeless – marginalized classes whose lives reflect 'the fault-lines of modernity in Ireland' (Pettitt, 2000:103). These are the primary characters in most of the work by Comerford, Black et al, who in the main the narratives of these films concern themselves with the effects of the economic and social changes wrought on Ireland by the arrival of foreign investment in the 70s, following decades of mismanagement by successive governments and the social inequalities which this short-lived period of prosperity bought to light.

The late Kieran Hickey, however, was far more interested in the internalised world of the Irish male and tended to avoid the specific social issues which his contemporaries explored with varying degrees of success. Hickey's film output consisted of just five short movies, the first of which, *A Child's Voice* (1978), won first prize in the best short category of the 1978 Chicago Film Festival. His most successful film was *Exposure* (1978), another tale set in the west of Ireland.

What is especially significant about *Exposure* is that it was the first time indigenous cinema tackled contemporary mainstream Irish middle class lives. The setting may be rural but the protagonists are urban and by removing them from their natural environment Hickey exposes the emptiness and frustration of their modern lives. These men are no outsiders, they are middle class Ireland, the 'new' professional class working within the system and as such Hickey's critique of contemporary Irish male attitudes is all the more devastating.

The film takes place in a desolate hotel during the off-season and concerns three men, all surveyors with the same company, up from Dublin to map out the locality. Their days are spent out charting the landscape while at night they sit in the empty hotel bar getting drunk. The men, Dan (T P McKenna), Eugene (Niall O'Brien) and Oliver (Bosco Hogan) initially appear to be the only guests and exude an aura of control – they stay drinking as long as they like, singing and arguing loudly despite disapproving glances from the matronly manageress (Mairin O'Sullivan). All this changes however, when, in a simple twist on the 'outsider' scenario, a fourth guest appears, a female French photographer called Caroline (Catherine Schell), who is working on an assignment for a book of landscape photographs.

Immediately an opposition is created between the men, who mathematically chart the landscape through their theodolite viewfinder in a series of static shots suggesting their desire to control the environment they find themselves in, and the woman, who views the countryside through her camera's viewfinder in a series of creative pans and zooms, suggesting an appreciation of nature which the men are incapable of experiencing. They bring Caroline on a seaside picnic but their adolescent horseplay and attempts to impress her merely serve to heighten the growing sense of unease and tension which permeates the film.

As the men's drinking sessions gradually become more raucous and uncontrolled, a romantic relationship begins to develop between Caroline and Oliver, the only bachelor. The budding relationship is inter-cut with a series of increasingly strained telephone calls which Eugene and Dan make to their wives and eventually acts as a catalyst to a violent outburst of sexual repression in which the two drunken married men break into Caroline's room while she is out with Oliver. Having rooted through her bags and cosmetics they then proceed to destroy the room. In the midst of this drunken rampage Caroline and Oliver return. Both are horrified by what they are witnessing, but it is Caroline who is left sitting alone at the top of the stairs while Oliver retires to his room with the two men. It is she who is left as the 'outsider' while the men carry on as normal, wiping the incident from their memory and returning to the unthreatening safety of their fraudulent camaraderie.

John O'Connor has argued that at the centre of all of Hickey's work is the idea of self-realisation in one form or other (1993: 22). In *Exposure*, the men are forced to recognise their own resentments, prejudices and innate violence, yet rather then face up to their shortcomings, they instead block the revelation from their minds, and, having banished Caroline from their collective consciences, return to the hotel bar to pick up exactly where they began. It's a thoroughly damning indictment of the inherent misogyny of the Irish male. Debbie Ging has argued that the film allows us to:

> enter the male ideological world in order to understand how their misogyny actually functions. Rather than inviting sympathy with their perspective, however, this serves to deconstruct generally accepted 'norms' of male behaviour and to expose jovial male bonding for its fear of sexual difference, foreignness and 'Otherness' (2002: 182).

Hickey's follow up to *Exposure* was *Criminal Conversation* (1980), which moved to suburban Dublin and told the story of two professional couples, Frank (Emmet Bergin) and Margaret (Deirdre Donnelly) and Charlie (Peter Caffrey) and Bernadette (Leslie Lalor), trapped in a middle class limbo of thwarted ambitions and frustrated desires. Both women rely on their husbands monetarily and initially it appears that both have set aside their own desires, in an attempt to appease their respective husbands and fit into their sterile suburban existence. However, the superficiality of their modern lives is blown apart when Margaret reveals that she has had an affair with Charlie.

While not as hard hitting as *Exposure*, with its relentless destruction of the Irish male psyche, the film's denouement is equally depressing. Where the trio in *Exposure* are left to return to the comfort of their misogynist camaraderie, in *Criminal Conversation* Frank is forced to realise that the friendship of men is not to be trusted and that macho posturing counts for little in the wider scheme of things. Phillip Davison, who co-scripted both films, has written of Hickey;

> [I]ntolerance was a theme to which he would return repeatedly, intolerance created and sustained by a powerful yet insecure tribe within a deeply conservative society. *Exposure* and *Criminal Conversation* both explore Irish sexuality. In each case the characters must face a dilemma. Their dilemma is firmly rooted in a society that refuses to recognise the reality of the human condition. A readiness to explore that which is divisive in society carries with it a desire for tolerance. It affirms a belief in pluralism. This is at the heart of Hickey's work (1993: 23).

Davison and Hickey scripted a third film for their 'Irish sexuality' trilogy. Entitled *Afterwards* it was to look at the lives of three women; a counter-balance to *Exposure*,

but it was never made due to lack of finance. While Hickey went on to direct two more films before his death in 1993 [1], he never again worked on his own source material. However, twenty-five years after its initial release, *Exposure* still retains an intense power sorely lacking from our contemporary cinema. It engages in a very real way with the repercussions of repressed Irish male sexuality, without ever resorting to sentimentality and within the context of a definitively Irish scenario, with no explanatory allowances for foreign audiences, or attempts at pseudo-psychology to justify the behaviour of its central characters. Its vision of Irish masculinity is also unique, in that there is no attempt to analyse the trio's behaviour in relation to Catholic, patriarchal or nationalist Ireland. Rather, it states boldly, that this is where we are at and if we want to move forward we need to recognise some home truths; that men's potential for violence does not make them more attractive to women, that excessive drinking does not make problems go away and that the societal 'norms' of male bonding, with its attendant emotional immaturity and false value system, is no substitute for emotional honesty and integrity.

Stephen Whitehead has written that in:

> the 'everyday world', those behaviours of males that are violent, dysfunctional and oppressive are frequently excused or explained away as 'natural' masculine behaviour, being understood in common–sense terms as fixed and, thus, as an inevitable aspect of social 'reality'. A key aim of feminism is to critique and destabilize such notions, the ultimate intention being to challenge those practices and beliefs that contribute to sustaining men's power (2002: 8).

I would argue that it is not only feminism whose 'brief' it is to 'critique and destabilize' problematic accepted 'norms' within society, but that that is one of the primary functions of art itself and that the 'First Wave' filmmakers held that such an approach was integral to their work. Hugh Linehan has commented that:

> [C]onventional liberal pieties reign supreme in too many recent Irish films, while the paper tigers of church and family are rolled out and knocked down with wearisome predictability. Meanwhile, the power of cinema to explore the transgressive and the unspeakable remains largely untapped (1999: 48).

It would appear to me that that is precisely what Hickey et al were doing in the 70s and 80s, but, as Comerford suggests, this style of cinema does not fit into the remit of the 'current agenda'. Referring to the output of the second Irish Film Board, Rockett notes that the 'dominant focus' is on 'the optimistic 'Celtic Tiger' cinema', which; 'in line with

postmodern preoccupations of the self and identity, shifted Irish cinema's concerns from the broader social, cultural and historical realities of the past towards an engagement with the personal or individual' (2004: x).

Yet, as Comerford argues, much of recent Irish cinema has little connection to real lives; 'if you take any single subject that affects the society deeply you'll find almost nothing of that expressed in film' (2004: 23). Film-maker Kevin Liddy, has argued that prior to the establishment of the second Irish Film Board;

> I think we had good cinema. I think *Pigs* (Cathal Black 1984) was good cinema. I'm interested in morality. I look at say, *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach. 1997), and I don't see any engagement with moral codes. I see just a perfunctory basis for the execution of a narrative plot so that you see it and ten minutes after you see it you don't know what the fuck you saw (2000: 8).

It would appear that a perceived sense of a lack of moral engagement in much of the cinema of the last decade is not only one of the major concerns of the 'First Wave' film-makers when they discuss recent Irish cinema[2], but is also one of the more identifiable aspects of the 'space' that separates contemporary cinema from the 'First Wave' - one of a number of elements 'unique' to the 'First Wave' that were 'ditched' in just over a decade. However, it wasn't just narrative content that was affected by the tastes of a rapidly changing society.

3.4.1 Formal Experimentation

If it was the tendency of the 'First Wave' filmmakers to confront 'the cultural perspective', that marks a separation of their work from contemporary offerings on a narrative level, then the formal experimentation employed by Quinn, Comerford and Murphy could also be said to be lacking from most of our recent cinema.

McLoone remarks that one of the most interesting aspects of the films produced in the 70s was ' the way they attempt to explore the medium of film itself in innovative and experimental ways', and refers to *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* (Bob Quinn. 1975), as 'an extremely complex and ambitious film, demonstrating the kind of formal exploration that is rare today' (2000:131). He further argues that a key element in indigenous films of the 70s was 'the interrogation of film language itself' (2000:134). Luke Gibbons notes that in many parts of Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), 'the visual style takes over from dialogue and action, but always in such a heightened artificial way as to dispel any

semblance of realism, emphasising the fact that images also form part of a coded system of meaning' (1988: 248). Diog O'Connell also draws attention to the 'Brechtian devices of distanciation' employed by Murphy in *Maeve* (1981), citing characters talking directly to camera and flashbacks that are not delineated by the standard Hollywood dissolve (1992: 22). Christopher Williams has pointed out that similar strategies emerged in British cinema in the 1980s, citing the emergence of a British 'social art' cinema, which combined the social critique referred to previously, with the stylistically self-conscious concerns of the European art film (1996: 194). John Hill posits that:

> in a culture characterized by postmodern eclecticism in which different forms and styles increasingly coexist and coalesce, realism also becomes perceived as just one set of conventions among others. In this respect, it also becomes less common for cinematic realism to remain 'pure' and, in British films of the 1980s, there is a growing tendency towards a mixing of realist devices with those of other aesthetic traditions such as the avant-garde, European 'art cinema', the thriller, the 'woman's film' and, in many cases, comedy (1999: 136).

Barton suggests that, like their British contemporaries, the Irish filmmakers of the 70s and 80s 'were being blown by the prevailing winds of historicity and the vibrancy of the theoretical movements of the 1970s —of, *inter alia*, structuralism, semiotics, Marxism and feminism.' and argues that as 'this moment' passed - in other words, when the 'post-87' environment 'took over' - 'we can detect a gradual abandonment of formal innovation (and the aesthetics of 'unpleasure') in favour of an emphasis on narrative coherence' (2004: 88).

Formal experimentation in the current marketplace would appear to consist mainly of playing with narrative chronology, a practice brought back into the mainstream by Quentin Tarantino in both *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and continued by Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) and Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritus's *21 Grams* (2003). The European arthouse experimentation[1] of the 70s and 80s, as practiced by indigenous Irish directors like those mentioned, and by the likes of Peter Greenaway and Derek Jarman, Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders, Theo Angelopoulos, Alexander Kluge and many others, has receded dramatically in light of a marketplace that demands regurgitated, generic, Hollywood narrative-based drama.

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[1] It can also be argued that mainstream cinema has attempted to incorporate many of the formal strategies developed in arthouse films and has often successfully co-opted these.

I have chosen to analyse *Crushproof* and *Country*, (and Liddy's two short films), because I feel that they are among the very few examples we have in Ireland of a 'First Wave', or indeed, a 'Third Cinema' sensibility, in the films of the last decade, incorporating as they do elements of 'formal innovation' and emphasising form over content in a way that challenges the viewer to engage on levels other then that of 'narrative coherence.'

3.5 'Anger is an Energy' – Crushproof

> [T]he young male underclass of *Trainspotting* or *Twin Town* is emphatically not framed as a 'social' problem requiring a 'solution', but, with a certain knowing detachment, as a subculture. Rather then seeking to provoke social anger, the films encourage an empathetic complicity between their audience and the two films jobless young male inhabitants, respectively heroin users and petty criminals. The lives led by the protagonists are thus framed as a lifestyle with certain attractions for a young, post-political male audience, although irony is never absent from the framing (Monk, 2000: 278).

Paul Tickell's *Crushproof* (1997) can easily be used to illustrate the arguments put forward by Claire Monk in her essay '1990's Underclass Films' [3], which identified the emergence of a particular sub-genre of recent British films dealing with disaffected youth. Monk identifies three specific strategies which British cinema has availed of to address male anxiety in relation to societal changes. The first involves addressing the issues on a rational level; 'via direct acknowledgement, discussion and the search for some kind of (re)solution'. The second she defines as 'masculinist reaction', which has seen; 'the re-admission into the media and film culture of a degree of sexism and misogyny, which gained a new acceptability in some quarters provided they were cloaked in post-modern irony or humour.' Monk argues that; 'this strategy can be viewed as both an attempted retrenchment of male power and a mechanism of escapist denial'. The third and final strategy she describes as a;

> retreat into nostalgia for old patriarchal hierarchies, whether in the workplace or in male-female relations. An illustration of this is the 90s nostalgia for the British gangster films of the 60s and 70s, reassuring because of their sexism and patriarchal organisational hierarchies (2000: 280).

The 'patriarchal hierarchy' from which *Crushproof* takes its title from, is explained early on in the film when the central character Neal celebrates his release from prison with his 'gang', and tells them; " [T]he knackers were refugees from Cromwell. We're the old tribe, the Bedouins. We're the Tuatha of the North. We've got the warrior blood.

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They'll never crush us 'cos we're crushproof. Thousand's of years old we are. The industrial revolution's just a blip on my bleedin' screen".

Director Paul Tickell, a graduate of BBC's Arena documentary series, delivers a tale of homosocial loyalty and honour and chooses the 'pony kids', with all the attendant mythology of the Hollywood western that such a 'posse' brings with it, as his central characters. Having taken one of the most classic examples of the Hollywood idiom, he then mixes Hollywood mythology with classical Irish mythology – through Neal, the gang envisage themselves as a modern day version of the 'Tuatha de Dannan' [4]— and proceeds to deliver the story with the mix and match style referred to by Hill - on the one hand borrowing heavily from the realist 'documentary' techniques employed by Ken Loach on films such as *Raining Stones* (1993) and *Riff Raff* (1990) and on the other from the more radical, and anarchic 'guerrilla' style of film-making employed by Derek Jarman on *Jubilee* (1978) and *Sebastiane* (1976). While firmly avoiding the first of Monk's 'strategies', the film firmly embraces the other two and can, I would argue, be engaged with politically in that respect.

Given the lack of a studio system in Ireland it seems foolish to refer to *Crushproof* as an 'independent' or 'indi' movie, yet in many respects it has the same sensibilities as a lot of the American independent movies so popular in the early 90s. Kevin Smith, referring to his breakthrough independent movie *Clerks* (1994), said:

> *Clerks* never could have been made through a studio system. What they like is simple stories about overcoming adversity. But in *Clerks* it's a couple of guys at work in a convenience store, hate their jobs, and by the end of the movie, they're still working there, and they still hate their jobs. Like, nobody overcomes anything, really (2001: 164).

Smith's description of *Clerks* could easily be ascribed to *Crushproof*. The film contrasts strongly with the majority of the productions which the Film Board was funding in the 90s, most of which stylistically adhered to what Gerry McCarthy refers to as; 'multiplex lyricism: the dominant style, as practised by Jim Sheridan and Pat O'Connor' (1999: 12).

With a screenplay by Californian writer James Mathers, a Scottish director and a production team that spanned the UK, the Netherlands, Ireland and Germany, perhaps it is fair to assume that the film's central themes should be seen as applying not to Ireland specifically, but to a mythical land of adolescent fantasies and male bonding

that knows no national boundaries. The Irish co-producer, Nicholas O'Neill has pointed out that there was no development money for *Crushproof*, as the project was originally developed for a Los Angeles based company that dropped it when *Into The West* was released, because they felt that one movie about working class kids, ponies and Ireland was enough (1999: 18). Shot in Dublin and Wicklow over 8 weeks in the summer of 1997, the film opens with a montage of images of classic urban decay. Continuous low angle shots of high concrete walls, children dwarfed by the concrete structure of the pillar in the Phoenix park, a wide shot of a 'posse' of horses crossing a bridge over a dual carriageway suddenly eclipsed by a train passing in the foreground. Also featured in the montage are shots of shrines and churches, perhaps suggesting an Ireland still under the yoke of a Catholic patriarchy.

It is clear from the opening sequence that the film is keen to emphasis location over the individual. Where the film adaptations of Roddy Doyle's Barrytown trilogy had been criticised[5] for delivering what Kevin Rockett refers to as a 'relative lack of "tangible imagery" of Dublin' (2001: 223), it would appear from the outset that Tickell wishes to imbue his characters with a sense of authenticity in terms of their surroundings and to juxtapose the urban and rural, the modern and traditional, in order to set up an internal space, which allows him to deal with the concept of a mythical Ireland, where the urban landscape represents repression and indifference, as contrasted with the rural idyll and its suggestions of tradition, loyalty and harmony. Rockett has pointed out that such an approach can be traced back to the very first feature film shot in Ireland, Sidney Olcott's *The Lad From Old Ireland* (1910) (2001: 221), although since the 70s such an approach 'has been problematized by issues of class, and has been recast in terms of social status, with the urban disadvantaged standing in for the rural as the authentic Irish' (2001: 223). Barton suggests that *Crushproof* belongs to 'the urban dispossessed genre'[6], and argues that 'by emulating documentary shooting techniques and borrowing its plotline from news headlines, *Crushproof* demands to be taken seriously' (1999a: 37).

We first meet our central character Neal on the morning of his release from Mountjoy prison. In a series of close, blurred shots, rapidly edited, he batters a fellow inmate in the shower for no other reason then the inmate asks can he have Neal's 'Tetris' Gameboy as Neal is about to be freed. Immediately our credulity is strained. Having established a realist location as the film's backdrop, Tickell then shows us Neal engaging in a violent

attack, which would, in the 'real world', immediately jeopardise his chances of being released. Furthermore the sequence is shot almost entirely out of focus in a series of rapidly inter-cut close shots, using slow motion sequences, strobe effects and a blurred audio track which carries us straight through Neal's release from prison and then, in a sudden return to more standardised techniques, on to the doorstep of his ex-partner's flat where he demands unsuccessfully to see his little boy.

The central narrative, in so much as there is one, involves Neal's accidental killing of the drug dealer who grassed him up and got him sent to prison, and his decision to flee into the mountains on horseback with his gang to escape the pursuing Detective Sergeant Hogan (Michael McElhatton). Along the way we meet Neal's dysfunctional family, witness a farcical riot in a housing estate and follow the gang as they attempt to rob back their horses, which have been impounded by the guards. Gerry McCarthy suggests that the film is;

> different; its heavily mythicised depiction of an urban underclass in surrealist revolt is unlike anything that has previously been attempted. Tickell turns his back on the conventions that have, over the years, congealed into the New Irish Cinema. Instead of soft-focus lyricism, qualified naturalism, and the usual received polarities of past/present rural/urban, we get a pulsating techno-tinged rhythm, strongly stylised dialogue, and a self-contained artificial universe that doggedly avoids adding anything at all to the ongoing 'debate' about the nature of Irish society (1999: 12).

McCarthy's was one of the few positive reviews which the film received. Kevin Maher contrasted the film's subject matter with Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1981), and argued;

> both films examine a culturally disenfranchised part of Irish society and in the process break with received stylistic conventions. Yet while Comerford's travellers are spiritually akin to *Crushproof*'s "pony kids", Comerford's movie is a slow and thoughtful meditation on the travellers' place in Irish society. Tickell's film, by contrast, offers little more than an uninformed chaotic mess (1999: 1).

Barton concluded her review by saying; 'in the memorable words of one of the film's characters: '[T]his whole thing's been a bollix from start to finish anyway" (1999: 37). In the publicity material that accompanied *Crushproof* on its initial release, director Paul Tickell was keen to play down the socio-political environment in which the story was based and to emphasis instead the 'universal' and 'mythical' aspects of the story. Many critics, however, took issue with this approach. In 1997 the 'Celtic Tiger' was being closely analysed by many media observers and attention was being focused on the

increasing marginalisation of the lower classes in a society where; according to Peader Kirby; 'values such as individualism, materialism, intolerance of dissent, lack of concern for the environment and a failure to value caring are identified as characterising life under the Celtic Tiger' (2002a: 159).

When one considers that between 1997 and 2000, two thousand extra prison places were created in Ireland and contrast that with the fact that during the period 1995-99 white collar crime represented just 0.3 % of all crime investigated by the police (Kirby, 2002: 9), it was to be expected that a film which presents the lives of young, dispossessed and disaffected Dublin 'outer-city' dwellers, utilises cinematic techniques most usually associated with realistic documentary, has a contemporary urban dance track, then disengages itself from any real social issues, was going to receive criticism from certain quarters. Yet as Monk has noted, British cinema was producing an entire sub-genre in which the 'social realism' espoused by filmmakers like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh was being replaced by the idea of the dispossessed as an 'attractive' subculture which required 'no solution'.

Generically the film draws from a number of sources; the Western as previously mentioned, with echoes of the standard 'Hollywood' street gang, familiar from films like *Once Upon a Time In America* (Sergio Leone. 1984) and *Rumble Fish* (Francis Ford Coppola. 1983). Yet where generic American 'gang' films tend to portray their protagonists' struggles in terms of a socially realistic environment, where they are the repressed, the underdogs, and in their 'struggle' they draw attention to the unjustness and inequalities of the society around them, Tickell's *Crushproof* has no such concerns. Mather's script is content to concentrate on the minutiae of the gang's existence – essentially drinking, swearing and moodily riding horses around Dublin city. In this respect it draws further on some of the ideas put across by Monk in relation to the British 'underclass' films of the 90s. She identifies two main strands in the genre; the 'mainstream' underclass films like *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman 1996), which 'sought and attracted a non-niche mainstream audience broader in terms of age, and ostensibly, gender' (2000: 274), and the 'youth' underclass films like *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1997) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998), aimed squarely at the 18-25 year old market. It is the latter of these two strands into which *Crushproof* fits neatly in nearly every respect. According to Monk;

the preoccupation of both strands of the cycle with a male underclass performs a symbolic displacement, functioning as a conduit through which a wider, more diffuse set of male emotions, anxieties and resentments around gender as much as economic disempowerment are articulated and soothed (2000: 277).

This combination of 'gender resentments' and the lack of 'social' problems and 'solutions' are clearly identifiable throughout *Crushproof*. Most critics picked up on the sexism that pervades the film; a sexism coated with a post modern irony which clearly fits into the second strategy referred to by Monk in her analysis of 90s British films. Barton referred to the depiction of women in the film as 'miserable' –'[T]hey're either nagging, negligent, over-sized and/or queer' (1999:37). Kevin Maher described the female characters as; 'all lip-gloss and negligees, (they) seem to have come straight out of a particularly bad soft-porn film' (1999: 1). Neal's mother, (Charlotte Bradley), lives with her lesbian lover in a matriarchy that most definitely excludes Neal. His former girlfriend, Ashling, (Fiona Glascott), refuses him access to his own child and the only female he cares about is his little sister, Suki, (Lisa Fleming). There is also a poorly conceived sub-plot concerning Neal's half sister Nuala, (Viviana Verveen). She is initially introduced as a slightly unbalanced stable hand who catches one of the gang, Liam (Jeff O'Toole), returning horses to her stables, and, with gun in hand, forces him to strip and have sex with her. "I'm raping you at gunpoint....You're a fuckin' insect", she tells the gormless youth.

The film seems to relish such scenes of political incorrectness. There is one particular 'sex' scene which could be out of a 70s British sex comedy, that involves Neal's mother and her lover being interrupted mid-coitus, by the police raiding her house to look for Neal. There is also the all too familiar Irish incest scene where Neal rapes Nuala (though it is inferred that she encourages him). Yet, as I've mentioned, all these events are coated in a sort of knowing 'New-Laddism' [7], an ironic tone that suggests nothing we see is to be taken too seriously. The film also seems to infer that all of Neal's problems can be put down to feckless females; his half-sister Nuala's existence is the cause of his parents separation, his mother has disowned him – " I had a son, but I don't know where he is. That was all a long time ago. I was somebody else then" - and his girlfriend won't allow him access to his own child.

At the film's denouement, Neal finally encounters Detective Sergeant Hogan (Michael McElhatton) at a chipper in a small Wicklow town; a confrontation which results in

Neal's best friend Sean (Mark Dunne) being shot dead. Neal flees on horseback back to the mountains to Liam and Nuala. A fight erupts which culminates in Nuala smashing both men across the head with a rock. Our presumption is that they are dead. We hear nothing but natural sound and low-key ambient music as we inter-cut between close shots of the 'dead' men and a wide shot of Nuala riding into the distance. A crow lands on Neal's body and he suddenly rears up and shouts "[F]ucking birds". He then returns to his 'death' posture and the film ends with a 'reprise' montage sequence of the opening prison shots coupled with some snippets of dialogue from throughout the film.

There is a definite suggestion that the 'fucking birds' in question are 'birds' as in the Dublin vernacular; in other words the women who have destroyed Neal's life, not the crow sitting on his chest, yet as a resolution to the film it verges on the absurd. However, it is this absurdist streak running throughout the film that makes *Crushproof* interesting. As Gerry McCarthy notes; 'the vast majority of Irish films make no attempt to challenge convention. They attempt neither creative expression nor formalist critique. If they occasionally make a political point it must be swathed in the conventions of classic realism' (2003b: 16).

Crushproof celebrates all that is anathema to these mainstream conventions; its own 'ironic' sexism, its deliberately stylised language and its anarchic destruction of the ground rules of 'multiplex realism'. In one particular sequence involving the gang breaking into a police lock-up to free their impounded horses, we cut from day time to night time and back to day time, in such a way that it appears as if the director is deliberately showing his lack of respect for established Hollywood norms. Writing about the source material for his most recent film, *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (2002), Tickell commented; 'there's a nihilism and a knockabout glee to the book which is pure punk' (2002: 1). The same description could be applied to *Crushproof* and nowhere is the punk 'ethos' more blatant then in the scene where Neal attempts a reconciliation with his father, played as an ineffectual drunk by Stuart Dunne. He tracks him down to his local pub and tells him that he's just out of prison and has accidentally killed his drug-dealing partner Declan. The father responds by telling him; "[Y]ou make me old heart so proud you do. Like me when I was a young fellah. I was a punk you know? I was bleedin' mad. Fuckin' savage. Fightin' and druggin' like there was no tomorrow. There is no tomorrow. Anger is energy. Get pissed. Destroy !" [8]

Declan Kiberd has noted that; 'wherever one looks in the literature of the Irish renaissance, one finds fathers lamenting the red-blooded heroes now gone and evoking the conquests of their own pasts' (1996: 380). Tickell gives this legacy a post-modernist spin and in doing so reveals a generation whose 'red-blooded heroes' were 1970s punk rockers, revealing in the process what happens to their children when they become inhabitants of a country where they are discouraged from digging for the 'skeleton in the garden'. Kiberd further notes that;

> in a colony the revolt by a son against a father is a meaningless gesture, because it can have no social effect. Since the natives do not have their hands on the levers of power, such a revolt can neither refurbish nor renew social institutions. To be effective it must be extended to outright revolution, or else sink back into the curtailed squabbles of family life (1996: 380).

Formally *Crushproof* appears to accept this advice by adopting a specific anarchic/punk 'outright revolution' aesthetic that sees Tickell's film mix together elements taken from a wide variety of genres. In his article on the novelist B.S Johnson, Tickell remarks on how 'punk pillaged and cut up the styles of the past' (2002: 2). This is precisely what he himself does with *Crushproof*, pillaging elements from Hollywood, British 'kitchen sink', European art-house (Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1999) in particular springs to mind) and Irish cinema itself and throwing all these ingredients together into what Peter Bradshaw called 'a 90-minute scream of inchoate, directionless rage', but a rage that 'is driven by stamina and conviction' (1999: 1). Tickell plays havoc with the regular rules of film-making as a means of drawing form and content together, so that the very structure of the film suggests the anarchic aimlessness of his central characters and sums the whole thing up with a closing title card which reads:

> "Right now I'm cursed and I hate my country, so the best bet is to get pissed and fall asleep on the beach"
> Arthur Rimbaud.1873.

Rockett has argued that as contemporary cinema leans more and more toward the 'universal sensibility' then the;

> practice for alternative filmmakers in peripheral societies must be to engage in what is necessarily a subversive culture of deconstruction which is aimed as much at their own societies as those of the filmic products of the metropolitan centres (1991: 23).

It would appear to me that *Crushproof* is one of the few recent examples we have of such a 'practice' but that given its poor box office performance[9] and the current climate of spiralling film production costs, such formal experiments may soon become a thing of the past. To argue that 'the scream of inchoate, directionless rage' is driven by moral outrage would be too neat a connection to make, but the politics of *Crushproof* are firmly rooted in Hayward's definition of 'Third Cinema', when she suggests that these films;

> are political in terms of making political statements either directly or through allegory in relation to, or about their own country. They are also political stylistically (as a counter-cinema) and again target their own nation's mainstream cinema. Finally they are politicized in their statements (style and content) against dominant film practices within their own country (2000: 390).

From the point of view of production practices and budget, the film must be categorised as 'Second Cinema', along with the majority of the Film Boards output at the time, but its pastiche punk ideology and mix and match formal experiments place it in a very definite opposition to the majority of mainstream Irish cinema released between 1993 and 1998. Willemen asserts that 'Third Cinema'; 'is also linked with national culture...It is the way the world is conceptualized and not the genre nor the explicitly political character of a film which makes it belong to Third Cinema' (1989: 11).

Crushproof readily fits such a description. Aside from its 'self-contained artificial universe' and its; 'interrogation of film language itself' (McLoone, 2000:134), the narrative engages significantly with the revisionist versus anti-revisionist cultural debate by presenting a generation who want a relationship with the past that goes further back in time than the punk rock role models of their fathers[10], a generation who couldn't care less about their fathers' need to rebel against the cultural nationalism which was force-fed to their generation, but rather want to learn from the lessons of the past in order to create a future that isn't morally bereft. Hobsbawm has noted that the:

> destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in (1995: 3).

A similar desire to 'dig up the garden' and confront the past is evident in the films of Kevin Liddy, and though his formal and narrative approach may at first appear to be very different to that of Tickell's, I would argue that both directors are most assuredly

working within the terrain of Ireland's 'Third Cinema' and ploughing a lot of the same furrows and 'fault-lines' that intrigued their 'First Wave' predecessors.

3.6 'Keeping It Real' – Kevin Liddy's 'Horse' and 'A Soldiers Song'

In 'Invitation to the Film', written sixty years ago this year, Irish film historian Liam O'Laoghaire argued that the;

> Irish film industry must not pander to external commercial interests. This is taking the long view because the paradox exists that when you deliberately set out to design for the international market you water down the distinctive local qualities which give strength to your films, or you proceed to distort the truth of your themes and settings. You thus end up with a product which is neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring. Your greatest selling asset has vanished. (1945: 165).

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Limerick born film-maker Kevin Liddy has to date been content to concentrate on portrayals of rural Ireland, throughout a decade – 1993 to 2003 - when to do so was seen in many quarters as being in total contrast to prevailing cinematic trends. Gibbons had noted that by the mid-90s the prevalent attitude was that;

> because tradition is associated with order, stability and the inherited wisdom of the ages, the sluggish evolution of a society over a long duration, it becomes the antithesis of the modern, against which both 'progress' and 'enlightenment' must define themselves (1996: 5).

With Ireland embracing the benefits of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy, - a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita which grew on average by 7% each year throughout the 90s[11] - and the Irish themselves experiencing an unprecedented global popularity[12], Irish films attempted to reflect this new, modern, confident climate. Not only that, but there was a growing sense that depictions of dark melodrama in rural Ireland belonged with a set of values which were complicit with a backward-looking cultural nationalism that urgently needed to be shed. Ging has argued in relation to many of the 'First Wave' films that there is an assumption that because they were concerned with;

> rural narratives, religion, republicanism and dysfunctional family structures (they) belong to an oppressive cultural tradition that has prevented us from moving toward a more modern and innovative engagement with the art form (2002: 177).

Fintan Connolly, who attended Rathmines College Film Course[13] in the early 80s along with Liddy and produced *Horse* (1993), before directing the feature films *Flick* (2000) and *Trouble With Sex* (2004), echoes this assumption when remembering his time in Rathmines;

[T]here was guest lectures by Cathal (Black), Joe (Comerford), Bob (Quinn), Pat (Murphy), but when you're a student it was basically like, well they see those movies, they have their view, right, and then here we are so, you listen to them and go 'Ah fuck this, you know what I mean? I'm going to do it differently when I get a chance.'….'I definitely think that the people who taught me had an agenda. Now, I didn't really care for what that agenda was… (2003:20).

Liddy has a different perspective:

[W]e were making Super 8 movies and I was meeting people like Malachi O'Higgins and Cathal Black and Malachi was talking intelligently about making film – as if you were studying English – and I couldn't believe that that actually existed'… 'literally talking about not just making movies but what to make movies about'(2000: 1).

More than any other of his contemporaries in the early 90s - Paddy Breathnach, Damien O'Donnell, John Moore, Fintan Connolly, Conor McPherson, Owen McPolin – Liddy's films carry the influences of the 'First Wave' into the new century. His work is consistent with the ideology of the 'Third Cinema' in that he sticks to what he knows and refuses to 'distort the truth of (his) themes and settings' in the hopes of expanding his market appeal. American 'indie' director Allison Anders (*Gas Food Lodging* 1991, *Mi Vida Loca.* 1994) described her own approach to film as one where; 'the story is like a clothesline. I'm interested in what's on the clothesline, not the clothesline itself. For the most part, Hollywood is all about the clothesline' (2000: 61). Liddy's aesthetics are quite similar. He made it clear from his first film that narrative was not his primary concern. 'I find myself loving the idea, the sensuality of films, the interplay between music, image and sound. I love it. I love that ballet' (2004: 9). He argues that film-makers;

have always based things around them, when the images were fresh in their brains. Like when they were twelve they saw something and they write about that….My ma used to have this guy who'd call around, like a tinker, and he'd knock on the door and my ma would bring him out the meal, 'cos he wouldn't come in. He'd be like, "No, I'm grand here…" 'Those images, if they hit you when you were twelve, that's going to burn into your consciousness so you write about it. Now I grew up with those memories as well as the Elvis Presley memories, as well as the *Hawaii 5-0* memories, so it's that clash (2000: 6).

It is this desire to build his films around his own 'internal' images and to pollinate these films with carefully observed minutiae taken from his own upbringing - to 'study' the past as opposed to embracing the present- that separates Liddy's work from the majority of contemporary Irish output. He steadfastly roots his work in the unfashionable rural past at a time when, as Barton notes, one can already trace within the evolution of Irish

film; 'a passage from an ideology of the rural as the 'real' Ireland…to a new, post-Troubles, post-Catholic, urban space where the rural lingers on in the unrefined tones of occasional policemen and other bearers of comic relief' (2004: 190). And Liddy does so because he firmly believes that; 'out of the local comes fucking drama as far as I'm concerned' (Liddy, 2004: 18).

I wish to pay some attention to *Horse* (1993) and *A Soldier's Song* (1995), two short films which Liddy made while attempting to raise the finance for *Country* (2000). Both films are minor variations on the themes dealt with in his feature debut and I wish to give a brief overview of their formal and narrative content before moving on to examine the feature film itself.

The script that became *Horse* was the recipient of a Filmbase Short Script Award of £4,000 in 1991. Liddy approached the Arts Council on the back of the Award and received a further £23,000 in 1992. The film is set in the Ireland of the early 60s and tells the story of Michael (Ruaidhri Conroy), a young boy living with his widowed father Patrick (Mick Lally), in an unspecified rural backwater where the only 'outside' influences are photographs of the Pope and John F Kennedy – icons of an Irish belief system long gone – and where the radio recordings of Eamon de Valera condemning Lloyd George's influence on the Irish are played to the children in the school classroom. The opening sequence, in which Patrick shoots the farm's horse in front of Michael because he, "couldn't work, he couldn't run" may or may not be a metaphor for a generation who, by clinging vociferously to the past have become detached and useless to the emerging modern Ireland, but if this is so, there is nothing in the story to suggest that modern Ireland has anything better to offer.

It is clear from the outset that Michael's father is unwell, his sickly cough echoing through the house at night, and this would appear to be his motivation in marrying local woman Helen Garvey (Pat Leavy) midway through the film, so as there will be somebody to look after Michael after he dies. Michael is taunted by a neighbouring farmer, who calls his father; "an old fool" and he seeks his revenge by smashing the eggs in the farmer's henhouse. He is caught and soundly beaten. When his father hears what has happened he goes to confront the farmer and is himself badly beaten. Michael helps to carry him back to the car where his wounded father tells him ; "Michael, never

turn the other cheek, and what anyone tells you is right, you take it as wrong." Shortly afterwards his father dies, and running away from the funeral Michael comes across the neighbouring farmer's dog, tethered to a fence post. He picks up a shovel and savagely beats the helpless animal to death as the heavy thud of the bodhran rises on the soundtrack and we fade out on Michael running into the countryside.

Lelia Doolan, reviewing *Horse* in 1993, wrote:

> [E]ssentially it's about the making of an Irish man at a certain moment in our triumphalist national development. In this case, it's the boy, Michael, who should become 'free as a bird' (like the nation), but who winds up locked into his country's vicious circle of resentment, fear and raging grief (1993a: 24).

Barton agrees, arguing that; 'Michael is surrounded with the triumphant celebration of male aggression and he too must become part of that cycle' (2004: 122). However, what is most striking about *Horse* on first viewing is its lush photography and its concentration on elegant imagery. Beautifully shot by Donal Gilligan on Super 16mm film stock, the film's measured pace spends a large proportion of its 30 minute duration concentrating on the weather-lined faces of its principal characters and long lingering images of the Irish countryside. It was critically acclaimed on its release and was one of the few Irish shorts at the time to get a supporting slot in the Savoy cinema, where it ran for two months in 1993. It went on to win the Jury Prize for 'Best European Short Film' at the Premiers Plans Film Festival in Angers where the jury described it as 'a powerful film, and another reminder that Ireland has not lost its touch for the poetic and literary traditions of its fabled past.'[14]

Liddy straight away began work on *Country*, but financing proved problematic. However, in 1994 the Film Board had inaugurated 'Short Cuts', a funding scheme which allowed emerging filmmakers a budget of approximately £50,000 to make 30 minute films and Liddy submitted the script *A Soldier's Song*, a title with obvious nationalist overtones.

Shot in the Curragh barracks in Kildare in 1996 and set in the Ireland of the late 1970s, the film concerns Tony Doyle, (Gary Lydon), a young FCA cadet, and his struggle to break free from the influence of his dead father. The film takes place almost entirely in the army barracks and examines the victimisation of a young recruit, Charlie Hanrahan, (Greg Fitzgerald), by the malign Joe McEvoy, (Don Wycherly) and the memories awoken in Doyle on witnessing the bullying. The film opens on a framed photograph of a five

year old Doyle, staring nervously into the middle distance, while his father stares boldly out of frame and into the eyes of the grown Doyle, as he prepares to head off to the barracks. He places a St Christophers medal around his neck and creeps from the house to meet Jimmy Costello, (Pat Kinevane), a fellow FCA man. They rush to their pick up point and see Hanrahan being fussed over by his father, before they are whisked off to their training camp.

The autumnal colour tones and Bernard Reilly's ominous score give the film a sombre accent as, like *Horse*, fast paced vignettes fade in and out of black and character is built up through inference and well chosen faces. The mood in the camp is one of testosterone and claustrophobia; the sergeant, (Ger Carey), barking orders at one and all, endless drills and marching, McEvoy constantly exerting his authority over the mouse-like, book-reading Hanrahan, while Doyle looks on in lingering close ups and his early memories gradually creep back – his father bullying him into picking up a bird he has shot, ridiculing him over reading books, teasing him about collecting butterflies – "It'll be dolls next" - and generally denigrating any attempts the child makes to look beyond the everyday existence of small-town Ireland. We see the 10 year-old Doyle's final capitulation as he breaks his butterfly net in half and throws it into the lake. When Costello gets a beating from McEvoy and his mob everyone wants Doyle to get revenge by beating McEvoy in the 'best shot' competition. But Doyle takes one long and meaningful look at Hanrahan and deliberately misses the last shot. To the strains of John McCormack singing 'Una Furtiva Lacrima', he drinks a bottle of Bass in the local bar and rips his father's medallion from his throat. On his return to the barracks he sees McEvoy tormenting Hanrahan and head-butts him. The two march into a Shakespearean thunderstorm and fight it out in heavily stylised slow motion, surrounded by a chanting mob, until the sergeant breaks it up and Doyle is expelled from the camp. We close on a tight shot of Doyle as he is ferried away, eyes still looking nervously into the middle distance.

It is hard not to view *A Soldiers Song* as a companion piece to Liddy's *Horse*. In the true sense of 'Third Cinema'[15], a lot of the same key crew were reunited; Donal Gilligan on camera, Dermot Diskin editing, and the atmospherics are very similar. It explores a slightly different facet of the themes laid out in *Horse*, and as with Kieran Hickey's *Exposure* seems to vilify the accepted Irish 'norms' of violent male rituals and

camaraderie. Also, like *Horse*, it seems to suggest that although Doyle is aware of the violent masculinity his father has handed down to him, he is unable to escape it – that no amount of internal rebellion will stop him being his father's son.

Both films act as precursors to Liddy's first feature, *Country*, which was eventually shot in the summer of 1999 with re-shoots carried out in January 2000.

3.7. Country.

Country's central narrative, like that of *Horse*, revolves around a young male child. Twelve year-old Jack Murphy, (Dean Pritchard), lives with his widowed father Frank, (Des Cave) and his brother Con, (Gary Lydon), in the rural Ireland of the 1970s. Frank, an ex-alcoholic, may or not have been responsible for the death of his wife Bridget and lives a broken life laced with regret. When Jack's Uncle Jimmy, (Peter Dix), dies of a heart attack, his Aunt Miriam, (Lisa Harrow), returns for the funeral and stays on indefinitely, acting as a catalyst for the healing of emotional familial wounds. She advises Con and his girlfriend Sarah, (Marcella Plunkett), to make positive changes in their lives, rekindles romantic yearnings in Frank, and lightens Jack's existence by opening him up to possibilities outside his limited patriarchal world. There is also a secondary storyline in which Jack befriends a young traveller, Michael (Laurence Kinlin), whose family are encamped down the road from the farm.

Sarah's uncle, Mick Clifford, (Pat Laffan), holds a grudge against the Murphys, based on the fact that Jack's mother chose Frank over him, and he acts as a malicious force throughout the film, threatening Jack, encouraging Miriam to find out exactly what happened to her sister, and, unable to bear Sarah's blooming relationship with Con, raping her, with the end result that she leaves town and heads to England. Miriam confronts Frank, who admits that he was drunk and fighting with Bridget when he pushed her and she fell down the stairs and died. Horrified, Miriam decides to leave the next morning and does so without telling Jack. Con, meanwhile, learns that Sarah has left. He meets Mick, who tells him that the travellers raped her, thus joining the two storylines together in a climax that sees the locals, Con included, marching on the travellers' site and burning out the caravans, oblivious to the fact that Jack has sought refuge there with his friend Michael. In the ensuing carnage Con sees Jack emerging

from a burning caravan and appalled with what he has done, runs off into the woods. Michael's father batters Mick Clifford, possibly to death and Michael tells Jack to leave the campsite.

In a concluding montage we see Con leaving the house, observed by Jack from his bedroom window and boarding the boat for England. We see Frank mourning at his wife's grave and a final slow pull out of Jack sitting on the burnt benches in the deserted travellers' camp. We then dissolve to the empty, lifeless kitchen and dissolve to black, before fading up on a Spring morning, some months later. Frank and Jack are tending cattle. Frank starts to cry and Jack watches for a few moments before saying; "[C]'mon Da, Let's go home...". The camera holds on a close up of his face and we fade out.

Rachel Andrews, in her review of *Country*, made the observation that its theme; 'evokes strong memories of the television remakes of John McGahern's work' (2000. 60), with its attempt to 'portray how lack of communication, secrets and a refusal to confront the past can lead only to bitterness and misery', but concludes that 'it has been done before' (ibid). Indeed it is hard to argue, given the preceding synopsis, that the subject matter is particularly original. Yet when one considers that McGahern has scripted Cathal Black's *Wheels* (1976) and Kieran Hickey's *The Rockingham Shoot* (1987), amongst others, one can see that this comparison also suggests that the film is reminiscent of the themes explored by the 'First Wave' filmmakers. Like Hickey's *Exposure* (1978), or Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1978), the inability to communicate is a central theme, while dysfunctional males dominated much of the 'First Wave's output. Within the opening five minutes of *Country*, Jack receives a beating from his father for discussing the family's 'business' with his Uncle Jimmy. "You'll say less...talking against this house", Frank tells him, before producing his belt. Liddy himself says of the males in *Country*;

> [T]hey do things but they may not understand the consequences of what they do, but they do things. They hit people, they don't talk to people, which was, in my growing up it was that kind of weird thing (2000: 5).

I would also suggest that the formal conventions employed in Liddy's film are similar to the 'First Wave' experimentation previously discussed. Three quarters of the way through the film, Aunt Miriam reads Jack a passage from the Dickens novel; 'The Old Curiosity Shop.' It goes as follows;

> [T]here are chords in the human heart – strange, varying strings – which are only struck by accident; which will remain mute and senseless to appeals the most

passionate and earnest, and respond at last to the slightest casual touch. In the most insensible or childish minds, there is some train of reflection which art can seldom lead, or skill assist, but which will reveal itself, as great truths have done, by chance, and when the discoverer has the plainest and simplest end in view.[16]

This idea of the 'accidental' nature of 'great truths' revealing themselves in their own time is by far the longest passage of 'dialogue' within *Country* and for that very reason is worthy of further examination. M H Abrams argues that classic and neo-classic defenders of art claimed;

> that poetry imitates not the actual, but selected matters, qualities, tendencies, or forms, which are within or behind the actual – veridical elements in the constitution of the universe which are of higher worth than gross and unselected reality itself (1976: 35).

I would contend that Liddy is one of the few contemporary filmmakers whose work at least attempts a similar strategy, that is to say, to return to Anders notion of the Hollywood clothesline, that the objects which Liddy is concerned with 'hanging' on his narrative, are abstract and emotional feelings, which attempt to connect with the viewer's own internal emotions on a formal as opposed to narrative level and that in this regard it is difficult to separate his concerns from those of the 'First Wave' film-makers. Early on in the film there is a deliberately stylistic and lushly photographed sequence of Jack observing a horse running parallel to the car as he is being driven to his Uncle Jimmy's funeral. Shot in slow motion and scored with piano and strings, accompanied only by the faint beat of the horses hooves, the scene grabs one's attention and one's initial reaction is to try and process the image as some kind of metaphor for the dead Uncle Jimmy, or perhaps Jack's need to escape from his surroundings, but it soon becomes clear that such images are not necessarily meant to be 'read' in specific relation to the narrative, that they are in fact reflective pauses which hint at the underlying meaning behind the Dicken's quotation. Such images crop up regularly throughout the film – at one stage Miriam gives Jack a red kite as a present and we get an interlude of classically photographed golden wheat-fields as Jack teases the kite through the bright blue sky accompanied by gentle violin strings on the soundtrack. Further on there is an equally simple but elegant sequence where Jack and Michael lie back and look at cloud formations. Liddy himself has said of Jack; 'I think that he's looking to get high on aesthetics and love' (2000: 5).

Perhaps most striking is a sequence in which Con and Sarah meet by the river and he washes her feet in the sun-dappled water before gently embracing her. The setting is

reminiscent of the sort of pastoral landscape associated with *The Quiet Man*, and as Luke Gibbons has noted in relation to that film;

> by dwelling unduly on the landscape, the camera tends to go above the heads of the characters and to draw attention to its own intrusive presence, hence denying the invisibility of the medium which realism seeks to attain (1988: 224).

Yet in the case of *Country* I would argue that this is a deliberate act, designed to draw our attention to the 'veridical elements' referred to by Abrams, and that the director's intention is to deliberately focus the audiences attention on the emotional as opposed to narrative content. Liddy suggests; 'you lean towards the thematic, everybody leans towards the thematic, but my job as a filmmaker is not to just sketch out a fucking landscape, but to fill it in with love, with sensuality' (2004: 16).

In her review for 'The Irish Independent', critic Sarah Caden wrote that *Country* was; 'a dark, rather hopeless portrait of Irish family life' and added; 'since it's an Irish film, you know already that this can only end badly' (2000: 1). The reviewer in 'The Sunday Business Post' suggested that; '*Country* is not a sociologically important film, but visually, it's a delight to watch' [17], while Harvey O'Brien noted that; 'this is an old, old story told more or less in the old old way', and continued, 'it simply cannot grip you unless you've really never seen anything like it before, and if you're an Irish film viewer, you have' (2000: 1).

Each of these reviews suggest that there is something regressive about an Irish film that is set in the 'rural' past and that deals with dysfunctional males in crisis, yet as noted back in my introduction,[18] Gibbons had long argued that; 'modernization is not solely an external force, but also requires the active transformation of a culture from within, a capacity to engage critically with its own past' (1996: 3). Liddy comments; 'the thing about *Country*; it is old-fashioned if you want to talk about it that way, but I would hope that it has...in the way it's shot, that it has a certain modern style. It's not made by some guy from the Fifties. It has a lyricism to it' (2000:3). Despite winning the Verona Love Screen Film Festival in 2001[19] and being picked up for distribution by the French company Pandora International, the film made little or no impact on the international market. Clarence Pictures pulled out of a deal to release it on video and to date the film has yet to be screened on terrestrial television.

Yet *Variety* film critic David Rooney was quite positive in his review, calling it; 'a conventional but sensitively handled drama that balances the natural expanses of its rural setting with the emotional intimacy of its focus' and arguing that 'this confident feature (which) has the necessary elements for cross-generational audience appeal, should make a fine entry for quality television line-ups' (2000: 1). In terms of Ireland however, as I've said, it seems film reviewers saw it as a return to a style of Irish film that had no place in the contemporary market. Harvey O'Brien went so far as to suggest that;

> it may be time to lay this particular type of story to rest. It is not that the themes are not valid, nor that it fails to put across a message which is arguably more important than ever in the era of the Celtic Tiger (but) it adds nothing to the viewing menu of contemporary Irish cinema and is therefore just not of enough interest to be worth recommending unless you have a particular predisposition to its point of view (2000:2).

Liddy himself is familiar with the argument and remembers;

> hanging around and listening to the reception that Cathal Black's *Korea*(1995) got, and it was 'Oh fuck this, more bullshit Irish stuff about fathers and all that, but I mean, I find that so facile an argument, because if its good it doesn't fucking matter.'.... ' I hate people who go on and say 'Not another culchie movie'. That's like saying not another urban movie. It's nonsensical. It shouldn't be mutually exclusive…you can do whatever you want as long as you do it fucking well (2000: 9).

Commercially, the film took only £15,547, which translates to viewing figures of a mere 4,858[20], while its budget was £975,000. Barton has pointed out that;

> by the time this narrative of abusive and domineering patriarchs was released, the cinematic exploration of masculinity had pushed towards a new desire to depict a more sensitive male hero and Liddy's feature seemed to belong to an earlier era (2004: 122).

Liddy himself maintains that what Barton wrote about *Country;* 'belonging to a different era, I'd go along with that. I made it as a shrine to a different era' (2004: 12), arguing; 'middle-aged people – they're entitled to go to the cinema as well, right? We don't have to make films all the time for twenty three year olds'. (2000: 4). McLoone has suggested that; '[T]he over-weening importance of the myth of rural Ireland has been a factor that has inhibited the growth of a social realist tradition in Irish culture' and perhaps this is the fault-line on which Liddy's film lies, that in attempting to tell a socially realistic story while using a natural rural landscape, the old clichés of 'Oirishness' are never far away and the intended pathos suffers due to its similarity to previous, more

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melodramatic representations. Its romanticized vision of a pastoral Irish landscape is perhaps too reminiscent of the; "multiplex lyricism: the dominant style', referred to by Linehan (1999: 12), while its adherence to the conventions of classic realism does not on first view appear to challenge mainstream representations. The indigenous critical reception seemed to suggest the film was passé - re-hashed, McGahern narratives - and had nothing of value to add to the new, modern canon of forward-looking, progressive Irish cinema.

While Liddy's narrative and thematic concerns are certainly reminiscent of McGahern's work and while there is no denying that at times *Country* is overly melodramatic, it does adhere to Phillip Davison's reflections on the work of Kieran Hickey, when he argues that; 'a readiness to explore that which is divisive in society carries with it a desire for tolerance. It affirms a belief in pluralism' (1993: 23). Liddy argues that central to the theme of the film is the idea that;

> you can't push the past away and say it never happened. *(C)ountry* is generative, because it makes you go… well, hopefully it makes you go "Yeah, shit, everybody's got problems but if you face up to them, maybe, after pain, they might disappear." You might come to terms with them. One of the last images of Frank is you see him going back to the graveyard, and he's going like; "I maybe should have come here earlier, because I've been running away for years, and that didn't get me anywhere. And I'm in a load of shit now…". But at least you see him looking at something (2000: 5).

Along the way the film also delivers a very poetic interpretation of a bygone life - the Saturday night dance, trips to the pictures, the village pub and the beauty of the countryside itself, in a style more reminiscent of Eric Rohmer then Pat O'Connor. Diarmaid Ferriter closes his overview of Ireland in the 20th century, with a reflection on the works of John McGahern, and argues that; 'apart from his insight about character and what propels people, McGahern was also able to write beautifully about nature and rural Ireland, gentle, small and independent communities and local concerns, employing rich dialogue and an acute sense of space' (2004: 759). He concludes; '[T]hese positive aspects of Irish identity were, if not dying by the close of the twentieth century, at least being left further behind by a pragmatic, dismissive and ideologically indifferent Ireland' (2004: 759).

Comerford paints an even darker picture in relation to the future of 'First Wave'/ 'Third Cinema' orientated productions, arguing that;

one of the by-products of globalisation in my opinion is that indigenous film has to be removed. Globalisation only works by taking control. It doesn't go on top of what already exists, it replaces it. It stops the development of an indigenous industry and gets rid of the people who are developing it – this is not just in Ireland, this is happening on a wide scale…. Once a society that related to its origins turns into a society that is a global unit, it becomes kind of an ex-country. I would consider us close to becoming, you know, Global Unit No.32 (2004: 23/23).

3.8 Conclusions

It is clear from the huge financial losses made by both *Crushproof* and *Country* – close enough to one and a half million euro between the two films – that the Film Board is in an unenviable situation when confronted with the arguments put forward by the likes of Comerford, who maintains that the Board is; 'actually being run by accountancy criteria and filmmakers don't have any input into the decisions' (2004:23). However, as he goes on to note, this is; 'partly happening because of higher political decisions based on economic imperatives. It's not just a question of some board making evil decisions' (ibid). Liddy makes the point that while he has great sympathy for Comerford's argument that art has to be encouraged, pointing out that the; 'Tourist Board is making fistfuls of money off people who died penniless' (2000: 2), he can also understand the Film Board's point of view that we; 'can't keep making movies that just don't do anything' (ibid).

Peter Biskind has argued that by the mid 90s when independent low budget films - including Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) and Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1994) - had proved their worth in terms of Oscar success and box office returns, the major studios set up their own 'independent' wings and began to flood the market with 'indi' productions (2004: 472/473). He points out that the;

> ferocious competition, alongside the twin obsessions with the young and the new, means there is little opportunity to fail, and from failing to learn. The indie landscape is littered with first (or occasionally second) films of promise – promise that has rarely been realized, not necessarily because the filmmakers have no talent, but because of the cultural and economic ecology of the environment in which they are working (ibid: 474/475).

Most of our contemporary Irish film theorists and writers have recognized that the same argument can be applied to the Irish industry over the last decade. If we accept that *Country* and *Crushproof* have more in common with 'Second Cinema' or 'Third Cinema' then they have with the mainstream, then we must recognise, as Biskind posits, that on

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the international front; 'the new rules of the indi game are weighted heavily toward box office success, with promising or even brilliant but uncommercial films failing to get picked up for distribution' (2004: 473). Furthermore, as Lelia Doolan has commented, contemporary Irish cinema-goers are; 'an audience whose taste has been systematically debased over long years' and who now have 'an absolute reliance on fairly straight forward narrative Hollywood material' (2000: 3). If we are to take this opinion as fact, and certainly box office receipts in recent years would seem to indicate that this is the case, then the ways in which Irish filmmakers attempt to make films that retain an 'Irish' sensibility, are now limited to fitting this 'sensibility' into a very limited set of generic conventions, in order to bring audiences in. As Rockett puts it; '[L]ike many other European countries, Ireland at best offers a type of Hollywood regionalism, and, as a peripheral film economy perhaps that is as much as can be expected at this time' (1999: 25).

With the exception of Jordan, O'Connor and Sheridan, all of whom had been firmly established in the industry prior to the reconstitution of the Film Board, there have been no other success stories among the beneficiaries of indigenous funding. Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Paddy Breathnach, Gerald Stembridge and Conor McPherson have all managed to get two or three feature films made over the last decade, but none have moved on to the same level of international success enjoyed by the two Oscar winners, while critically respected first-wave film-makers like Pat Murphy, Cathal Black and Joe Comerford have failed to make any headway in the new cinematic environment. The end result of these global trends, Rockett posits, is that; 'despite the huge expansion in the production of Irish films in the 90s, it is not leading to the type of critical indigenous cinema which would make a significant cultural intervention in Ireland' (1999: 24).

Due to the expense involved in film production and the complexities of multinational finance, it would appear that our filmmakers have little choice but to offer; 'Hollywood regionalism', whereby dominant Hollywood genres are commandeered and, as Barton puts it, tailored; 'to reflect a local idiom' (2004: 7). However, as Charlie Keil has noted, by;

> internationalising culture to the extent it has done so, the United States has
> also loosened its claim to defining that culture. It may be "American-styled", but

it is no longer completely controlled by Americans and the sensibility may be less definably "American" than what emerged in earlier eras (2002: 55).

In his discussion of the point of encounter between the universal and the particular, McLoone argues that the universal culture; 'must contend with the 'particularity' of this (local) culture and is moulded in some respects by the encounter', pointing out that this;

> interface is analogous to that space identified by Kenneth Frampton[21] as 'critical regionalism', an 'arriere-garde' which 'has the capacity to cultivate a resistant, identity-giving culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique (2000: 120)

The following Chapter, 'American Imaginings', examines three Irish films, ranging from the indigenous low budget to the studio supported mainstream, which have come out of that space defined as 'critical regionalism' and have attempted a number of alternative strategies to adapt to changing cinematic trends. I intend to argue that the 'alternative' strategies which I refer to, occupy, out of economic necessity, a middle ground, which attempts to accommodate both the particular and the universal, while at the same time focusing less on national identity politics and concerning themselves more with establishing an Irish character/dimension in terms of worldwide, cosmopolitan identity politics.

ENDNOTES

[1] *Attracta* (1983). Written by William Trevor and *The Rockingham Shoot* (1987). Written by John McGahern

[2] See COMERFORD (1990), (1996), (2004), (2004a), DOOLAN (2000), JORDAN (2004), (2004a) and QUINN (1999), (2000).

[3] The term 'underclass' was popularised by the American academic Charles Murray in 'The Emerging British Underclass', London, Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit, 1990, and referred to a strata of society that were considered to be so alienated from the mainstream that the 'work ethos' that keeps capitalism ticking over had passed them by and they had become social parasites who, as Monk puts it, were more 'work-shy rather than merely work-less'. Monk, by contrast, uses the term to denote 'a subordinate social class', or 'post-working' class 'that owes its existence to the economic and social damage wrought by globalisation, local industrial decline, the restructuring of the labour market and other legacies of the Thatcher era.' (2000: 274)

[4] The mythical Tuatha De Danann , (people of the goddess Dana), were a capable and cultured, highly civilised people, so skilled in the crafts, if not the arts, that their chief rivals, the Firbolgs, named them necromancers.

[5] See O'TOOLE F (1999) *'Working Class Dublin On Screen: The Roddy Doyle Films'*. Contemporary Irish Cinema Supplement *In 'Cineaste'*, xxiv (2/3). March. p37

[5] See O'TOOLE F (1999) *'Working Class Dublin On Screen: The Roddy Doyle Films'*. Contemporary Irish Cinema Supplement *In 'Cineaste'*, xxiv (2/3). March. p37

[6] Other examples of this genre would include *Pigs* (1984), *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999), *Pete's Meteor* (1998), *The General* (1998) and *The Disappearance of Finbar* (1995).

[7] The idea of the 'new lad' was invented by the British media in the wake of the launch of the men's magazine Loaded in 1994. The 'new lad' exhibited a degree of sexism and misogyny which became acceptable when interpreted in an ironic or post-modern style of humour.

[8] 'Get pissed...destroy' are the closing words of The Sex Pistols single 'Anarchy in the U.K', originally released in 1976. (EMI, 2566:11/76.)#38 "Anger is an energy' is the refrain from 'Rise', a hit single for Johnny Rotten aka John Lydon's second band Public Image Limited in 1988, released on the album 'Happy? (Virgin. CD. 1988). Both are still considered punk 'anthems'.

[9] The film's theatrical take was IR£10,449, which corresponds to an attendance of 3,265 people (BARTON, 2001: 8).

[10] It's interesting to note with regard to this debate that one of the main dedications on the opening page of COULTER. C & COLEMAN. S. (Eds) (2003) *'The End of Irish History: Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger.'* is to Joe Strummer, lead singer and song-writer with the punk group The Clash.

[11] COULTER C & COLEMAN S (2003) *'The End of Irish History: Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger'*. Manchester University Press. p3

[12] NEGRA.DIANE (2004) *'Irishness, Innocence and American Identity Politics Before and After 11 September'*, In BARTON.RUTH & O'BRIEN. HARVEY (Eds) *'Keeping It Real. Irish Film and Television'*. Wallflower Press: London and New York. Negra writes; 'The commercial exploitation of Irishness in everything from popular music and print fiction to coffee and cholesterol medication advertisements and chain restaurants marked its emergence as the most marketable white ethnicity in late twentieth-century American culture'. p 54/55

[13] Rathmines was the first college in Ireland to run a practical filmmaking course, and its tutors included producer Lelia Doolan, scriptwriter Patsy Murphy, experimental filmmaker Vivienne Dick as well as a regular pool of guest lecturers, many of them filmmakers from the 'First Wave'

[14] *'News Report' In 'Film Ireland'* (1994) Issue 40. Feb/March. Dublin: Filmbase. p7

[15] McLOONE.M. (2000) argues that 'Third Cinema' was 'artisanal and collective in its working methods and geared towards raising political questions in its audience, rather then merely offering ideology marketed as entertainment.' p122

[16] DICKENS. CHARLES.(1995) 'The Old Curiosity Shop'. Wordsworth Classics Editions. p402

[17] Anon. (2000) 'The Sunday Business Post'. Obtained at URL: http://www.unison.ie/search/frame_search.php3?span=web&words=Kevin%20Liddy%20Country (Accessed 09/09/04)

[18] p8

[19] Information accessed at URL: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0264499/awards (Accessed 29/10/04).

[20] BARTON.R. (2004) p191

[21] FRAMPTON. KENNETH. (1985) *'Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance' In* FOSTER. HAL (Ed) *'Postmodern Culture'*. London: Pluto Press. pp 16-30. Cited quote from p20

CHAPTER FOUR: AMERICAN IMAGININGS

Introduction... Ireland and the American Dream... 'He's Leaving Home' –
'Drinking Crude' and the 'mythical' male journey... Adopting The New
Aesthetics: 'Intermission'... Playing Them At Their Own Game: Jim
Sheridan's 'In America'... Conclusions.

4.1 Introduction.

Fifteen years ago, the popular theorist Francis Fukuyama caught the public
imagination with his essay, 'The End of History?' (1989), in which he argued
that liberal democracy may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological
evolution' and the 'final form of human government' and as such constituted
the 'end of history'.

While he recognised that stable democracies like France, Switzerland and
America were not without their serious social ills, he ascribed these to the;
'incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality' and
argued that the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on. Underlying
this argument is the presupposition that in order for under-developed countries
to 'catch up', with the dominant liberal capitalism of America, France and
Switzerland, they would have to radically alter their customary ways of thinking
and being and develop a more 'global' approach both internally and externally.
As Coulter puts it in his introduction to 'The End of Irish History?';

> at some stage in this particular journey, there would come a fundamental
> moment of rupture when underdeveloped states would finally free
> themselves of the burdens of tradition and take their place in the exalted
> company of the genuinely 'modern' (2003: 5).

In a later 'addition' to his original paper, Fukuyama expressed the belief that;

> all countries undergoing economic modernisation must increasingly
> resemble one another: they must unify nationally on the basis of a
> centralised state, urbanise, replace traditional forms of social organisation
> like tribe, sect, and family with economically rational ones based on
> function and efficiency, and provide for the universal education of their

citizens. Such societies have become increasingly linked with one another through global markets and the spread of a universal consumer culture.[1]

However, Coulter disagrees, concluding his argument by pointing out that the;

> assertion that the process of modernisation in effect entails the obliteration of those inclinations and practices conventionally understood as 'traditional' simply flies in the face of historical evidence. It is the experience of most developed societies that the onset of modernity allows for the persistence and even the revival of certain forms of tradition (2003: 17).

The point of this chapter is to relate this argument to a number of recent Irish films and to examine the ways in which these films have adapted to market forces by copying formal styles and narrative structures from American cinema in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience, while simultaneously adding an Irish dimension that reflects the 'tradition' referred to by Coulter.

Eoghan Harris differentiates between 'Hollywood' movies and what he terms 'French film' by arguing that the former emphasize narrative construction and action and are structured around 'an arrangement of incidents which places your protagonist in a field of necessity that reveals his character, which is also his destiny' (2003: 7), while the latter; 'favours character, dialogue or production design over what Aristotle's 'Poetics' argues is the most important ingredient in drama: plot' (ibid). Harris argues that the majority of Irish films are in fact 'French films', stating that; 'most Irish films still lack a simple plot premise of dire necessity stated clearly at the start' (ibid). He concludes his article by saying '[T]hank God for Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan, who make Irish movies the Hollywood way' (ibid).

Each of the three films I have chosen to analyse; Jim Sheridan's *In America* (2003), John Crowley's *Intermission* (2003) and Owen McPolin's *Drinking Crude* (1994), have embraced different mainstream Hollywood conventions while managing to retain or revive the traditions referred to by Coulter. Thomas Elsaesser has noted that; 'Hollywood can hardly be conceived, in the context of a 'national' cinema as totally other, since so much of any nation's film culture is implicitly 'Hollywood'. And Hollywood is itself far from monolithic' (1987: 166).

I have selected the above films because they each represent different aspects of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's idea of the 'complex symbiosis' between the universal and the particular. In the case of Sheridan, *In America* is representative of the type of adult-orientated drama - by 'adult' I mean not specifically geared towards the 15-25 year old demographic favoured by the majority of studios - that have come to find favour with the Oscar committee and the public over the last two decades beginning with *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford. 1980) and moving on through *On Golden Pond* (Mark Rydell.1981), *Terms of Endearment* (James L Brooks. 1983) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (Bruce Beresford 1989): sentimental, deliberately manipulative works, generally dealing with death and its consequences for the living. Furthermore, the film is a prime example of Solanas's (1976) definition of 'First Cinema' in that, from a production point of view, it belongs to the mainstream Hollywood studio system, while its political effect is to reproduce unquestioningly the dominant representations of the mainstream.

John Crowley's *Intermission,* on the other hand, is firmly rooted in what Solanas defines as 'Second Cinema', a less expensively budgeted 'auteur' cinema, which is, as McLoone puts it; 'independent to some extent from the economics and aesthetics of the Hollywood model, but nonetheless caught up in the ideology and politics of the establishment' (2000: 122). The film is very definitely aimed at the 15-25 year old market and capitalises on the popularity of what Jeffrey Sconce referred to as; 'the smart movie', films which adopt a post-modern, ironic tone and play with generic conventions to keep their audiences off balance and unsure of what to expect[2]; a film style which has virtually become a sub-genre in itself over the last ten years, while McPolin's *Drinking Crude* is included as an example of the sort of youth orientated low budget writer/director-driven film that recalls the early days of the 'original' independent films, like Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) - films that reflect a victory for sheer determination over commerce – while simultaneously being representative of 'Third Cinema' in respect of the fact that its writer/director raised the funding himself in order to maintain artistic control of both form and subject matter.

The budgets, which range from $12 million for *In America*, down to approximately half that figure for *Intermission*, to a ludicrous IR£40,000 in the case of *Drinking Crude*, are in keeping with McLoone's breakdown of the; 'three levels of financing and budgeting' (1999: 28) available to Irish film, which, he argues; 'has its own implications for the resulting film's content, commercial viability, and its visibility to audiences both at home and abroad' (ibid).

My aim in this Chapter is to investigate the methods employed by each film-maker and to examine how successful they have been in achieving a fusion between mainstream cinema and Irish tradition, while competing in a financially driven marketplace.

4.2 Ireland and the American Dream

[T]he Irish, perhaps more so than any other Europeans, have inhabited the imaginative spaces of the USA for so long, and been involved so deeply in the myth of the promised land or the land of opportunity that the American dream is deeply embedded in Irish cultural identity (McLoone, 2000: 188).

There are a number of obvious reasons why American culture, and, specifically, American cinema, should be so attractive to the Irish. Firstly, there are the obvious historical connections in terms of emigration. By the early 1920s 43% of Irish born men and women were living abroad, and 1,037,234 of them were living in the United States (Brown, 1981: 18). It is therefore self-evident that those who had stayed behind would obviously be drawn to these mythical representations of life 'on the other side' which dominated the growing cinema circuit in the 30s and 40s. Secondly, there is McLoone's argument that in;

trying to come to terms with the dominance of American popular culture it is important to take into consideration the genuine pleasures and aspirations that this culture offers in contrast to the often narrow and restrictive ways in which 'national' culture and identity have been constructed (2000:98).

Nowell Smith points out that on a 'worldwide' level, the;

ideology of the American cinema had tended to be far more democratic then that of the cinema of other countries. This in part reflects the actual openness of American society, but it is above all a rhetorical strategy to

convince the audience of the virtues and pleasures of being American. Translated into the export arena, this meant a projection of America as intensely – if distantly –appealing (1985: 157/158).

Rockett argues that American cinema lacked the 'social stratification' that dominated the majority of British output and provided a theatre of working class characters that the Irish cinema-going public could readily identify with (1991: 19/20). On top of that, the Hollywood representations of the Irish were actually quite positive in a number of respects. It is true, as Barton has suggested, that if we examine these representations closely, we find that; 'Irish men are violent – a trait that is harmless in the American films and (self-) destructive in the British productions – and prone to alcoholic success.' (1999: 40). However, Harlan Kennedy has also suggested that the;

> classic Englishman in world cinema is a product of (over)-breeding: a paradigm of repressed virtue (from Ronald Coleman to Dirk Bogarde), or of suave, perfidious vice (from Basil Rathbone to Alan Rickman). The Irishman is broader in voice and gesture, more tousled and spontaneous in thought and manners, deeper in his tap roots to precivilization, closer in touch with the mystical-poetic-atavistic (1994: 7).

Such perceptions have taken a firm hold on America itself in recent years, with Diane Negra arguing that the;

> commercial exploitation of Irishness in everything from popular music and print fiction to coffee and cholesterol medication advertisements and chain restaurants marked its emergence as the most marketable white ethnicity in late twentieth-century American culture. The strikingly anodyne nature of the Irishness conceptualised in such formats indicated its use value as a consoling ethnic category (2004: 54/55).

The downturn in the Irish economy in the 80s saw widespread emigration amongst the younger generations to both England and America. The success of the 'Celtic Tiger' in turning the Irish economy around in the 90s saw many coming home to avail of this new prosperity. Geraldine Moane, in referring to some of the major developments in the last decade of the twentieth century in Ireland, listed six main points, including; 'a shift from mass emigration to immigration; the emergence of a multi-ethnic immigrant community' and 'unprecedented success for Irish artists internationally, ranging from literary prizes to superstar status' (2002:111).

These returning 'immigrants' brought with them what Rockett describes as 'an outward looking liberal humanism' (1991: 22), which replaced the inward looking cultural nationalism of earlier decades. The upturn in the Irish economy was in no small part due to the embrace of foreign capital investment. Kirby argues that; 'subservient integration into a radical free-market or Anglo-American informational capitalism has itself shaped values, attitudes and forms of cultural expression which function within contemporary Irish society' (2002: 6). It's little wonder then that a new generation of film-makers should embrace American cinematic traditions, given not only that it is their chief reference point in terms of their own cinematic intake, but also that Irish society itself has become more and more 'Americanized' as technological advances speed up the process of globalisation. Furthermore, the reality is that the Irish, like the majority of cultures around the world, have little choice but to buy into the economic and ideological mindset of American popular culture if they wish to compete financially in the film marketplace. And so, as Bob Quinn points out; 'even the growing number of vaguely home-made 'Irish' films are in the main simply lookalike mainstream Americana with Irish accents' (2000: 6).

The majority of the films produced by the second Film Board in the last five years have attempted to combine the conventions of modern American genre films - thrillers, road movies, romantic comedies etc – with a version of a new, modern Ireland as the backdrop, but the majority have failed to successfully achieve Nowell Smith's 'complex symbiosis'. Kevin Liddy has remarked of *The Courier* (Joe Lee and Frank Deasy 1987), one of the first Irish films to attempt this 'splicing', that the concept behind it was that;

> you had to make an urban movie to try to be like somebody else's idea of who you are. Of course, they did it really badly – I mean it was shit, everybody knows that, but also it was fundamentally flawed – it couldn't have been any good because they were just trying to be L.A. in Dublin (2000: 1).

Linehan has referred to a 'dispiriting literalism about many of these productions', and while some have played very successfully to home audiences[3], they have failed to make any impact outside of Ireland. As McLoone argues, citing Frampton, the 'critical' dimension of 'critical regionalism' is dependent upon 'maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness' and the avoidance of

'simple-minded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular'. (Frampton, 1985: 21)

To build a national cinema based on the adulation of Hollywood may be considered acceptable if home grown concerns and issues are at the centre of such works – that is to say that if at the same time as taking advantage of the positive aspects of the Hollywood approach to film-making, we query its limitations in much the same way that feminist film theory critiques the mainstream patriarchal industry and we attempt to control our own representations by delivering the 'emotional commitment' and 'new imaginings of collective identity', called for by McLoone (2000: 7). Each of the films discussed in this Chapter may be said to be taking 'approved' roads by virtue of their adherence to mainstream convention, but each in its own way, I would argue, is fleshing out the 'liminal spaces and interstices' where the local meets the global' (McLoone, 2000: 120).

4.3 'He's Leaving Home': *Drinking Crude* and the 'mythical' male journey

Drinking Crude (1997) was the debut feature from Tralee born writer/director Owen McPolin. I've chosen to single it out for a number of reasons. Firstly, it fits neatly into the canon of classic, archetypal male stories, what Stephen Whitehead refers to as; '[H]e's leaving home : the heroic male project' (2002:117). These stories inevitably take place between the public-private spheres and concern a central lone male character; 'the adventurer/explorer/conqueror trapped in a cycle of return and departure as he exposes himself to new challenges; with a drive to achieve that is not, apparently, of his choosing but comes from 'deep' within his psyche' (ibid: 118). Such narratives can of course be traced back as far as Ancient Greece but they have been a staple of American film for many years.

Secondly, the film (from an Irish perspective), falls into what Martin McLoone calls the 'Leaving Cert Summer' film (2000: 172), a sub-genre of Irish film which began with Fergus Tighe's excellent *Clash of the Ash* (1987) and has continued with David Keating's *Last of the High Kings* (1996), Graham Jones' *How To Cheat in the Leaving Certificate* (1997) and Johnny Gogan's *The Last Bus Home* (1997). '[I]n all such films, the protagonist is caught between two worlds – that of the family

and childhood on one side and the beckoning adult world beyond' (McLoone, 2000: 170). Thus, there is a lineage which can be traced and which can prove extremely useful in identifying changing social mores and ways of being. Finally, the film virtually stands alone as an antidote to the fatalistic male melodramas that had come to dominate contemporary Irish cinema in the mid to late 90s, films such as *Country* (Kevin Liddy 2000), *Accelerator* (Vinny Murphy 1999), *Disco Pigs* (Kirsten Sheridan 2000), *The Last Bus Home* (Johnny Gogan 1997), *Crushproof* (Paul Tickell 1998), *Flick* (Fintan Connelly 1999) and many others. In all these films the central male seems unable or unwilling to look after himself and relies on those around him to provide emotional, physical and often financial support. They invariably appear to be cut off from their immediate support group – their family – and rely on 'outsiders'. Coulter has argued that the;

> lives of people who reside in the twenty-six counties exhibit all the pressures and dislocations that are the hallmark of the modern world. The course that it has taken over the last generation has begun to gnaw at the very fabric of southern Irish society. Increasingly there are signs of atomisation among people who were formally renowned for their sense of connectedness (2003:24).

Such films buy into what has become known as 'the masculinity in crisis' thesis. Popularised by numerous 'role theorists' in recent years [4], the argument, at its most basic level, suggests that globally men have been bombarded over the last few decades by a series of crises – the rise of feminism, the undermining of patriarchy, changing work practices, the fact that consumer culture now targets males in the way it used only target females hence making men feel commodified and objectified – the end result of which is, as Susan Faludi concludes, that not only are men suffering a crisis of confidence, but; 'men have no clearly defined enemy who is oppressing them. How can men be oppressed when the culture has already identified them as the oppressors, and when they see themselves that way?' (1999: 604).

Drinking Crude manages to avoid the standard despairing/helpless/violent male clichés that dominate in so many Irish films and instead tells a classic, mythical male narrative that borders on the timeless in terms of its interaction with the society around it. The film could be set anytime between 1980 and 1994, with a single reference by a minor character to the; '300,000 unemployed', being

the only sign of any social awareness being expressed throughout its 90 minute running time.

 Set in London, Dublin and the fictional Portstown, the film's central narrative is a rights-of-passage story concerning 18-year old Paul Kelleher, (Andrew Scott), who sneaks away from the family home in the early dawn and makes his way to London. There, after a series of misadventures, he meets Al Russel, (James Quarton), a boozy Scottish labourer, who takes him under his wing, shows him how the other half lives and gives him work cleaning out filthy oil containers in refineries. These refineries just happen to be in Ireland and before Paul knows it he is heading back to Portstown with Al and Karen, (Eva Birthistle), a young woman that Al hitches up with in Dublin and rescues from her violent boyfriend. Tempers flare when Paul discovers that Al has been holding back on the money he's being paid, but after a final explosive confrontation friendship wins out and Paul demonstrates his new-found maturity in a telegraphed but entertaining finale.

Straight away it is worth drawing attention to the similarities between *Drinking Crude* and Fergus Tighe's *Clash of the Ash* (1987), the last film to be financed by the first Film Board. Both films tell a similar story, but the ten years that separate them draw attention to a myriad of changes in Irish society over that period. In *Clash of the Ash*, the central teenage character Phil Kelly (William Heffernon) is effectively driven from his home town by it's parochial drudgery – his dreams of escaping to London are fed by a sense of missing out on life. All that Ireland offers him is the GAA and a job in the bank, dodging Sunday mass and lurking about the town quaffing pints and smoking cigarettes. London meanwhile is full of 'happening' bands, the mystique of squats, and, as exemplified by Mary, (Gina Moxley); the promise of an exotic and bohemian lifestyle beyond the imaginings of small town Ireland. Tighe's 40 minute film only brings us to the point where Phil finally gets on the bus to leave but despite it's brevity the director manages to imbue Phil, and indeed all his main characters, with a believability that allows us to empathise strongly with them. For all his 'bad-boy' bravado Phil is essentially an innocent – horrified but intrigued by the joint Mary offers him, on the hand railing against his parents humdrum existence but on the other,

sensitive enough to be aware of how hurt his mother will be by his departure and indeed how much he will miss the security of the family home. The film now reads as a sympathetic and convincing epilogue to a time less then twenty years ago when the majority of teenagers were emigrating in droves because the country could offer them nothing but drink and the dole[5].

Drinking Crude, on the other hand, opens on the actual moment when the central character, Paul, decides to leave Ireland and the family home behind him. The film barely registered on its cinema outing (no figures are available) but was viewed by 170,000 people when screened on RTE as part of their 'New Irish Film' season (Barton, 2001: 8). The script, originally entitled *E-Rider*, received Script Development Finance from the Film Board in 1994, but a further application to the Board for Production Finance was turned down in 1995. McPolin was turned down by RTE, Channel 4, BBC, ZDF and many others (McPolin, 1997: 18). He decided to raise the finance himself, getting friends to invest and pulling in favours. In the end the budget was £32,000 (sterling) with the Film Board offering Completion Finance for post-production and a 35mm blow up with Dolby SR sound. The tight budget shows in the finished product; sets are limited, there are some poor secondary performances and amateur looking lighting set-ups, but the script and central performances make up for a lot of its shortcomings[6].

We are given no specific reason as to why Paul should choose to leave, and in this respect the film ties in to Whitehead's idea of the 'mythical aspect' of the 'man as lone hero';

> [A]t an ontological level, the cycle of leaving serves to create the conditions and possibilities for alleviating the male's ever-present existential uncertainty and self-doubt. The theme is a potent one in the mythologies surrounding men, spawning countless books and films (2002:119).

Whitehead argues that; 'the image and mythology of man leaving home to engage in a heroic project maintains a resounding presence in most societies', and goes on to point out that;

> women play a key role in the imagery of 'man in his world'. They exist, usually, as the purpose, the vulnerable, the flight from, the prize, the sought after, the protected. 'Woman' is omnipresent, yet necessarily

curtailed by the masculine mysteries invoked by the images of man doing 'his own thing'. Woman is the Other that necessarily exists in order to allow man to assume his central role (ibid: 119).

Paul's reasons for leaving are eventually explained, but not until the final act. For the opening twenty minutes of the film, Paul is 'everyman', stranded in London having being evicted from his pre-arranged squat as soon as he arrives, getting ripped off on the tube and finally meeting Al and his motley crew of friends and flatmates. We observe his middle class abhorrence of all things coarse and vulgar, his aversion to drinking and smoking, as he is taken under Al's tutelage. As Whitehead has noted, this is a staple of the classic myth; 'release and comfort come in the form of another man, not (apparently) a gay man, but a fraternal friend, a buddy who symbolizes a rugged (heterosexual) independent, heroic and mysterious masculinity' (2002: 118/119).

This opening section establishes a strong narrative drive that is far too seldom seen in Irish features, but the narrative is essentially an archetypal 'male' myth. Gradually Paul takes on Al's habits and mannerisms – drinking, smoking, wearing dark sunglasses – basically learning to become a 'man'. The men return from London to clean oil storage units in Ireland and when they arrive in Dublin they learn to Paul's horror that they are scheduled to clean out the oil refinery in Portstown. Out in the pub on their first night back, Al hooks up with Karen, a street-wise woman with a young child who is in an abusive relationship, and having known him for eight hours she decides to flee her violent boyfriend and take a lift with the two men down to Portstown where, coincidently, her sister lives She also brings her young child with her. There is no hint of sexual competition between Paul and Al over Karen's attentions. Karen is Al's woman – at no stage does Paul express any interest in her.

McLoone notes that; 'the building of an alternative family conceived outside the strictures of an unfeeling and uncaring society is a familiar device for encapsulating an alternative imagining of the nation' (2000:172). In terms of Paul's 'real' family we learn very little. There is no father figure – whether he is dead, absent or merely asleep upstairs we never learn. The missing father (or mother) is a recurring motif in a huge proportion of 90s Irish films and on a

metaphorical level is meant to suggest that something is wrong with the state of the nation as a whole. Yet McPolin refuses to tell us whether or not there is an absent father figure, just as he fails to tell us whether or not there are any other siblings in the family. In fact the only dealings he has with his biological family in the entire film is a singular confrontation with his mother (Marie Mullen), in which he explains his flight by arguing that he didn't think he'd done well enough in his exams to get into college and that Portstown had nothing to offer him – "[T]here was nothing to keep me here; especially in this town on the dole." Yet the fact that he has failed to contact his mother for the three weeks he is away, suggests that the true reason for his flight was guilt over letting her down. Applying psychoanalytical film theory as popularised by Lacan' re-thinking of Freud the suggestion is that it is the absence of a father figure or the overpowering nature of the mother which brings about what Susan Hayward calls; 'their offspring's tormented state" (2000: 199).

With his 'alternative family' in place, we can take McLoone's suggestion and examine what this 'alternative imagining of the nation' suggests. Al would initially appear to represent a form of strong male leadership that has long been missing from the nation. That Paul gradually comes to adopt his habits and mannerisms suggests that Al is the type of male he aspires to be. He is seen to be reliable yet roguish, rough around the edges but fair and decent in his dealings. He protects Karen from her violent boyfriend. He treats both her and her child respectfully once they have settled in Portstown, and has no problems with allowing her join him cleaning the containers, allowing her in other words to enter the male public domain, albeit as an 'honorary male'.

However, all this changes when Paul learns that Al has been cheating him financially and is getting paid a lot more for the jobs then he told Paul. Furthermore he learns that Al only hired him because he knew all along that they were heading for Portstown and reckoned Paul's local knowledge would be helpful. Paul reacts to these revelations by punching Al and setting off a chaplinesque chain of events, which leads to an oil tanker exploding and destroying the refinery. At the film's denouement however, Paul makes his peace with Al and chooses to continue working the refineries rather then go

to college. In one stroke he has inherited Al's mantle, although on his own terms, and has broken free of the (m)other. Furthermore he has made peace with the older generation, the father figure and in doing so has become his own 'man'.

If one were to follow McLoone's suggestion that; 'even if these films are not politically engaged, they can be engaged with politically' (2000: 168), you could argue that Al's financial treachery can be read as a metaphor for the endless financial irregularities that were coming to light in Ireland at the time and that Paul's disillusionment was reflective of an entire generation who felt that a high percentage of the male role models that they had elected to govern them over the previous decades were no longer worthy of their respect. Yet Paul chooses to forgive and move on, grateful for the positive things he has 'inherited' from his flawed role model. *The Last of the High Kings* (David Keating 1996) comes nearest to capturing the same sense of optimism - the notion of the young proudly inheriting the country and determined to do their best - but Keating's film was tempered by the fact that it was set in the 70s and the spectre of the depressed 80s hung over the upbeat ending. The optimism we feel for Paul is of a different sort. In rejecting university he appears to be rejecting the very idea of 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland. Coulter has argued that;

> over the last generation, the Republic of Ireland has, like all other western societies, become a place that elevates having over being. It would seem, increasingly, that the principal way in which most southern Irish people are willing or able to express their sense of who they are is through the commodity form (2003: 25).

This would seem to be the lifestyle that Paul is rejecting, opting for a hard honest graft where he can be his own 'man', free from the economic strains and value systems which modern Ireland would impose on him. A place where, as Al says; "[B]etter men then you have grafted longer for less", in other words, where men are not judged by their possessions or their consumer fads but by an honest and moral 'male' code of behaviour. During their fight, Al tells him; "[Y]ou'll get what you deserve and I'll get what I deserve" and what Al gets is an instant family, Karen and her son Jamie. When we last see him he is clean-shaven and spruced up, sitting happily with his 'family' in Dublin airport. "[A] man's got to earn a proper living now", he tells Paul, with a proprietorial arm on Karen, demonstrating his patriarchal control and suggesting the next 'episode' of Paul's

journey to adulthood - finding his own woman, starting his own family, and providing for them. In one of the first published examples of 'role theory', Durkheim (1957) argued that social stability occurs in the; 'collective conscience' of common belief systems and that it is through the implementation of a variety of social obligations and the lengths to which a society will go to enforce its moral codes that our personalities and behaviours are created, the result of which is that we gell into integrated social units and perform 'culturally prescribed roles for the benefit of both society and (our)selves' (Whitehead, 2002:19).

Drinking Crude's underlying story is about what happens when the codes and 'role performances' which a society demands, codes and performances that have rapidly become outdated due to the intense societal changes of the last twenty years, are at odds with the individual's moral code. For the past 30 years, sex role theorists like Pleck and Sawyer (1974) and David and Brannon (1976), have been applying the same type of critique that feminists had applied to the dominant patterns of gender socialization in the 70s, but they have concentrated on what a society expects from its males. By 1995 Pleck had identified the 'male gender role strain paradigm'; brought on by the fact that the male sex roles offered by society were far too constricting and that therefore; 'masculinity ideology directly creates trauma in male socialization' (1995). These 'traumas' were apparent in the majority of Irish male melodramas throughout the 90s, and in general the central character ended up either dead (*Disco Pigs, Crushproof*) or running away to the west (*Into the West, Flick*), to London (*Clash of the Ash*) or even Scandinavia (*The Disappearance of Finbar* Sue Clayton. 1995) to embark on their 'heroic male project'.

What makes *Drinking Crude* stand out from the 'standardised' approach referred to by McCarthy and Linehan is that firstly, Paul chooses to reject the role society offers him but in a way that doesn't entail challenging the society which has produced these roles. Instead he chooses to live on its margins by an older, primarily patriarchal male code, where male friendships are strong and honest, 'being' is more important then 'having' and women are only welcome in the male 'public' sphere if they adhere to the 'male' code. In essence this is a reprise of Robert Bly's 'Iron John' (1990) argument - that men should get back in touch

with their inner masculinity through sharing experiences and intimacies with other men. Of course, as Victor Seidler argued in relation to Bly's argument, while such actions might benefit men themselves; 'they do little to change our relationship's to women, or really help us to reflect upon the ways male superiority is sustained' (1997: 181). In many respects, *Drinking Crude* is a prime example of the sort of film Debbie Ging was referring to when she wrote;

[I]n their strident attempts to disassociate with Oirishness, many younger film-makers have opted for story-telling contexts that are determinedly apolitical, free of cultural references and, as a result, increasingly global in their outlook. In the current drive to purge Irish cinema of its demons, the focus seems to be on discarding the old themes and embracing the new ones (2002:187)

McPolin's film has a strong 'feel-good' factor at its core and in some respects is a virtual antidote to the themes explored in *Crushproof* and *Country*. Where Liddy and Tickell examine the fall-out from the 'culling' of Irish nationalism and the links with the past and conclude that we are doomed to repeat the patterns of history, McPolin adopts the 'outward-looking liberal humanist ideology' that Rockett referred to in relation to *My Left Foot* (1991: 22) and mixes it with the type of American positivism that dominates much of global 'First Cinema', to suggest that the future will be brighter if we re-engage with an age-old code of morals that have been temporarily swamped in a the rising tide of consumerism. The film seems to echo Fukuyama's assertion; 'that the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on', but asserts the right of the individual to create their own liberal democracy that does not have any obligation to embrace cultural nationalism but rather aspires independently to 'the twin principles of liberty and equality'.

Formally there is nothing to separate the film from the standardised approach of television drama, the focus is primarily plot driven, placing the film firmly in the 'Hollywood movie' spectrum as opposed to the 'French Film' spectrum as defined by Harris (p87). McPolin has since concentrated on working as a 'Director of Photography' - shooting *H3* (Les Blair 2001), *Flick* (Fintan Connolly 2000) and *Trouble With Sex* (Fintan Connolly 2004) amongst others - so perhaps *Drinking Crude* was a 'calling-card', a way to get into an industry, calling to mind Gerry McCarthy's observation that to the current generation of film-makers, film

'is a business' (2003a: 10). Yet from a business point of view *Drinking Crude* was a financial failure, albeit on a relatively small scale. Its 'Third Cinema' production values and budget were never going to allow it to break out into the mainstream audience, unlike *Intermission* (2003), which I discuss next.

4.4 Adopting The New Aesthetics: *Intermission.*

To date, *Intermission* (2003) has been the most successful independently produced Irish film to be released by the second Irish Film Board. By December 2003 it had taken over €2.3 million at the Irish box office and was still running in suburban cinemas ten weeks after its initial release, a feat which no other independently produced Irish film has managed to equal. The fact that it was director John Crowley and writer Mark Rowe's first venture into cinema from a theatrical background is reminiscent of their predecessors, Sheridan and Pearson, as is the astonishing home box office. However, unlike *My Left Foot* (1989), *Intermission* looks unlikely to make a major impact in the United States.

Produced by Neil Jordan and Stephen Woolley's 'Company of Wolves' production house and Parallel Films, initial press reports suggested that the film would be distributed by Dreamworks, then Miramax [7], before it was finally released on March 19th 2004 by the Independent Film Company in only ten theatres where it took $39,540 in its opening week-end. It was expanded to 26 theatres the following week and increased its box office to $128,802, but peaked in its fourth week playing at 69 theatres, when its take dropped 25%, before going on to achieve an American box office total of $889.857. However, the film's worldwide theatrical take was an impressive $4,560,974. [8]

The film is a multi-storied narrative set in contemporary Dublin, a genre that film critic Phillip French refers to in his review of *Intermission* as 'chamber movies' (2003b: 7). This type of narrative was popularised by Robert Altman with *Nashville* in 1975, *A Wedding* in 1978 and again in 1993 with *Short Cuts*. This style of episodic, multi-charactered film saw a resurgence after the success of *Short Cuts*, with *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999), *Wonderland* (Michael Winterbottom, 1999), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas

Anderson, 1999), Altman again with *Gosford Park* (2002) and most recently *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003) all doing well at the box office. However, as a format, its popularity was always dependent on its 'uniqueness' and the fact that mainstream cinema has now adopted it as a viable option has seriously diluted its power.

David Bordwell defined mainstream Hollywood cinema as having; 'three acts or sections: an established scene, a violation or disturbance of that scene, and an eventual reassertion of order.' He continues; 'stylistically, we expect establishing shots; shot/reverse-shot formations; matching cuts; background music; locations chosen to suit the psychology of the characters or the dynamics of the action; a camera viewpoint with an omnipotent or privileged perspective; and smooth or invisible editing'. He concludes, 'we expect a heterosexual romance; meaning to be communicated through content not structure, clarity of lighting, sound and framing; a happy ending or definitive closure; and anaemic politics' (1986: 27/28).

'Chamber movies' radically alter a number of the key conventions listed by Bordwell. The three act structure is replaced by a series of interlocking episodes, initially expository as we are introduced to up to a dozen characters, who are then developed in such a way that the central narrative does not rest with any single character but rather creates a broader sense of the vagaries of the world we live in by delivering a number of people struggling with different dilemmas and observing them succeed, fail, or meander on unchanged. There is no guarantee of 'definitive closure' and 'a happy ending' for any or all of the individual characters and rarely is there 'a deadline to be met'. *Intermission* is one of the first Irish films to attempt this 'chamber movie' structure [9], yet the film also remains faithful to one of Susan Hayward's key tenets of Hollywood cinema. She defines the classic Hollywood narrative as being predominantly based on male sexuality, with 'a standard set of patterns which can be defined by the triads order / disorder / order and order / enigma / resolution' (2000: 257). The film follows this pattern closely, with the central couple being re-united at the end, 80% of the other characters storylines ending affirmatively and no storyline left unresolved.

The title *Intermission* refers to the temporary breakdown of John (Cillian Murphy) and Deirdre's (Kelly McDonald) relationship when John decides that they need a trial separation, and the events that bring them back together again.

For the opening twenty minutes of the film we are introduced to eleven other 'principal' characters. Directly connected to the central relationship are Deirdre's widowed mother Maura, (Ger Ryan) and sister Sally, (Shirley Henderson), John's best friend Oscar, (David Wilmot) and Sam (Michael McElhatton), a bank manager who has walked out on his wife Noeleen, (Deirdre O'Kane), after fourteen years and moved in with Deirdre, much to John's outrage. The basic premise is that out of pure jealousy, John, with Oscar in tow, becomes involved with two drinking partners, Lehiff, (Colin Farrell), an amoral street thug and Mick, (Brian F Byrne), a dour bus driver in a scheme to rob Sam's bank. Lehiff's nemesis is Jerry Lynch, (Colm Meaney), a thuggish Detective intent on cleaning up the streets of Dublin. Lynch is accompanied by eager young documentary-maker, Ben, (Tom O'Sullivan). The remaining two characters are slightly more unidimensional – John and Oscar's boss Mr. Henderson, (Owen Roe) and a young street urchin named Phillip, (Taylor Molloy), who wears a red jumper and who Phillip French notes 'resembles the Venetian toddler in the red mac in *Don't Look Now* (Nic Roeg.1972) and plays a similar role as a malevolent spirit terrifying the neighbourhood' (2003b: 7). The young boy is responsible for a number of car accidents throughout the film and acts as a kind of metaphor for 'chaos theory'; a cipher for the randomness of the universe and the tricks fate will play.

It is this use of coincidence and synchronicity throughout the film which brings me to Jeffrey Sconce's definition of a new style of American cinema which he defined as 'smart film' (2000: 349-369). Sconce identified a number of formal, narrative and thematic elements in a 'strain' of cinema which had become hugely popular with American audiences in the late 1990s. These films covered a wide spectrum - *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995) *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff, 2001), *Your*

Friends and Neighbours (Neil LaBute, 1998), – and their similarities were originally brought to Sconce's attention by two articles that appeared in the 'Los Angeles Times' and the 'L A Weekly' in 1998 [10]. Kenneth Turan argued that the success of 'pitch black pictures' like those mentioned above had created a situation where the;

> high-end buzz among the nominal intelligentsia has become increasingly
> focused on what's bleak and hopeless. If it doesn't make you squirm, the
> feeling is, it's got to be simplistic and beneath serious notice. And if
> something leads to wincing, it's automatically presumed to be, as one of
> "Very Bad Things"' producers grandly put it, "talking about deep
> and disturbing truths" (1998: 1/2).

Sconce set about comparing the similarities among a wide variety of these 'bleak and hopeless' films and arrived at the following conclusions;

> American smart cinema should be seen as a shared set of stylistic,
> narrative and thematic elements deployed in differing configurations by
> individual films, In this respect I think its fair to say that these films do
> frequently trade in a number of shared elements, including: 1) the
> cultivation of 'blank' style and incongruous narration; 2) a fascination
> with 'synchronicity' as a principle of narrative organization; 3) a related
> thematic interest in random fate; 4) a focus on the white middle class
> family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction; 5) a
> recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity. These
> elements do not necessarily appear in all of the films at the core of the
> irony/nihilism debates, but they do circulate with enough frequency to
> suggest widespread diffusion in smart cinema directors (2002: pp358/9)

He argues that 'smart movies' are 'invariably placed by marketers, critics and audiences in symbolic opposition to the imaginary mass-cult monster of mainstream, commercial, Hollywood cinema' (ibid: 351), and that;

> dividing them is the semiotic chasm of irony. On the one side is an
> emerging 'structure of feeling' that sees everything, from Scooby Doo to
> paedophilia, in giant quotation marks; on the other a structure of feeling
> (dominant ? residual?) that still looks for art to equal sincerity, positivity,
> commitment, action and responsibility (ibid: 358).

My contention here is that *Intermission* is our first 'smart movie' and as such represents a significant development in terms of how Irish filmmakers attempt to appeal to the American market. As opposed to endeavouring, like Sheridan, to appropriate the mainstream Hollywood formula, Crowley instead adopts the American 'smart movie' as his model.

Of the five elements Sconce lists, the only strand absent from *Intermission* is the 'blank style'. Sconce defines this 'blank style' as; 'an attempt to convey a film's story, no matter how sensationalistic, disturbing or bizarre, with a sense of dampened effect', pointing to the use of longer shot lengths, static composition and measured, unobtrusive editing (ibid: 359). *Intermission* instead favours the jerky hand-held style, popularized by Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), in which the colour-drained grain of 16mm film is utilized to create a sort of cinema-verite/documentary feel, where the camera constantly moves about and slips in and out of focus. Von Trier argues that; 'the hand-held camera gives quite a different feeling of intimacy' (1996: 8). This camera style, the presence of Kelly McDonald who also featured in *Trainspotting* and the film's dynamic opening chase sequence led the majority of mainstream critics to compare it unfavourably with Danny Boyle's film, but I would argue that the film has far more in common with the canon of 'smart movies' referred to above.

Sconce's definition of 'incongruous narration', however, points out that that some of these films; 'create blankness through a more radical juxtaposition of mismatched (that is, ironic) form and content' (2002: 361). *Intermission* opens with a sequence which initially looks like it wouldn't be out of place in *Love Actually*(Richard Curtis. 2003). Colin Farrell, by far the film's most marketable asset in terms of the American market, charms a young shop assistant by discussing fate and love and how you never know when you'll meet Mr. Right - "I mean a fellah like myself, a stranger, could just be a bit of fun in the sack, no more than that…or…or, and its not that crazy…your soulmate…", he tells her. "[O]ther hand I could just be a thief or something", at which point he punches her hard in the face and robs the cash register.

It's a dramatic opening, and straightaway it sets a tone whereby audiences are unsure whether to laugh or recoil at this generic synthesis; chick-flick melodrama with Tarantino style realistic violence, shot in an art house camera style with one of the biggest Hollywood actors of his generation playing against type, and all delivered with an underlying irony encoded into the text which suggests that the

film's casual depictions of misogyny and sadomasochism are not (like similar scenes already discussed in relation to *Crushproof*), to be taken too seriously. Sconce argues;

> American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960' and 1970's art cinema (especially in its political wing) and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic distain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle class culture (2002: 352).

He draws attention to the 'increasing prevalence' of the 'chamber movie' structure in this new 'smart movie' genre and argues that; 'this shift from the modern protagonist's search for meaning to the postmodern ensemble 'fucked by fate' can also be discerned in the centrality of coincidence and synchronicity as an organizing principle in contemporary smart cinema' (2002: 363). *Intermission* is riddled with such coincidence and synchronicity, from the continuous appearance of the young boy in the red jumper, hurling rocks at the cars and buses and directly affecting five of our main protagonists, to Noeleen and her friend Karen hooking up with John and Oscar at a night club and Ben interviewing Maura and Sally, to the regular reappearance of the young shop assistant assaulted in the opening sequence.

But it is Sconce's notion of; 'mismatched (that is, ironic) form and content', that truly defines the film as a 'smart movie'. Lest we are in any doubt as to the film-maker's intentions, writer Mark O'Rowe presents us with a running 'chorus' in the form of Ben, the documentary maker. Early on in the film, while Lehiff's assault is still fresh on our minds, Ben discusses the programme he is working on - 'Little/Big City' - with his boss Thomas, (Darragh Kelly). Ben tells him;

> "[W]hich says to me, yeah….stories, yeah characters… There's a broad diverse spectrum there and that's what we're doing and that's fine. But where that diversity is lacking, is tone. Tone, Thomas, texture. What I'm saying is let's go a bit darker now and again, find a subject with a little bit more of an edge and explore that edge with the weight it deserves….Spice it up, give it some depth, some complexity".

This emphasis on tone, combined with the echoes of Kenneth Turan's above reference to the producer of *Very Bad Things*, suggests an awareness on behalf of O'Rowe of the current debates surrounding American cinema. At one point

Ben's camera crew complain about his fixation with 'the mythic shot', a low-angled wide shot of Maura framed against the sky, which draws our attention to the fact that director Crowley is constantly using the same framing. This 'chorus' continues into Ben's partnership with Detective Jerry Lynch, whom he agrees to film despite his boss's objections. Lynch sees himself as a Hollywood cop, a 'Dirty Harry', working the mean streets of Dublin and epitomizing the action figure at the centre of so many mainstream American films, to the degree that one wonders if it is coincidental on O'Rowes' behalf that this duo should be named Ben & Jerry, given that such names evoke endless connotations of American consumerism and mainstream taste.

The' 'action' sequences featuring this duo are virtual pastiches of classic American action films – whether bouncing over tiny ramps in suburban Dublin like Steve McQueen racing down the hills of San Francisco in *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968), or chasing drug dealers on the streets of Dublin like a latter day Gene Hackman in *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) - these scenes are laced with inferences to classic Hollywood texts. When Ben films Jerry beating up a 'scumbag' drug dealer we view the action from the point of view of Ben's handheld camera and Jerry looks straight at us, beating over, and says; "[A]re you getting this Ben ? It's the only thing they understand", there is no doubting that the 'they' in question are us, the cinema audience. That O'Rowe chooses to pepper the film with such postmodernist contrivances may add to the film's ironic tone, but when Jerry tells Ben; "[D]o your own film. You said you were a maverick. Well this is how mavericks create. Outside the system", one can't help but feel that both Crowley and O'Rowe are clearly posting their 'independent' allegiance to the mast.

Sconce's remaining elements; a related thematic interest in random fate, a focus on the white middle class family and its dysfunction and a recurring interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity, are scattered throughout the film in abundance, but it is the latter which brings *Intermission* firmly back into the firmament of 'Irish' film.

Aside from the obvious political markers such as John's fixation with brown sauce and Jerry's adoration of Celtic music, the film is one of the first Irish productions to successfully tackle the idea of 'Celtic Tiger' consumerism. Barton argues that the;

> constant re-affirmation of a national identity has dictated that all cultural productions should in some sense reflect on what it means to be Irish. For a new generation of film-makers, and other artists, this trope holds little interest and their work needs to be seen as the rejection of national identity politics in favour of other identity politics or as an expression of their internationalism, more part of youth culture, for instance, than Irish culture (2004: 9).

If, as critics such as Barton maintain, we have indeed reached the stage where our contemporary film-makers no longer feel obliged to engage in the standard tropes of cultural nationalism and the failures of church and state then surely the consumerism at the heart of the Celtic Tiger is one of the 'new' bete noirs of contemporary Irish society. As Coulter and Coleman point out, the;

> accounts that appear most regularly in media portrayals of contemporary southern Irish society seek not merely to document current modes of consumption but to celebrate them. The ways in which the individual who resides in the twenty-six counties chooses to spend his time and money have come to be viewed as part of an ongoing attempt to arrive at an understanding of himself and others (2003: 13).

Intermission takes serious pot-shots at this 'consumption' – part of John's loathing for Sam comes from the fact that he is wealthy and can afford a lifestyle beyond John's means, while Mick constantly bemoans the pressures his wife puts on him to buy the latest consumer accessories, but explains to John that; "besides materialism we have something else. I get the belly flits when I snuggle up to her at night."

The exterior sequences feature endless shots of giant billboards advertising various products, John and Oscar are besieged by consumerism in their daily routine at the Fruitfield Supermarket, Lehiff is seen circling kitchen appliances in the 'Argos' catalogue while staking out Sam's bank and when John buys Deirdre's favourite perfume in a chemist so as he can 'smell' her the camera lingers longingly on the poster advertising the fragrance – 'ENIGMA'. Yet this fixation on consumerism, although highlighted by Sconce as a marker of the

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'smart movie', has a resonance that is specifically Irish in *Intermission* and this sense of 'Irishness' is achieved through a number of deliberate textual devices used throughout the film by Crowley.

Firstly, the opening credits of the film are a montage of a series of shots of hand-drawn maps of Tallaght complete with street names, thus localizing the film very specifically for a home audience. Unlike *About Adam* (Gerry Stembridge, 1999), or *Flick* (Fintan Connelly, 1999), there is no attempt to make the city look pretty or stylised, in fact the cinematography and choice of locations seems to deliberately underplay the sort of cinematic representations of Dublin that overseas audiences have become accustomed to. The film concentrates on the drabness of suburban Dublin, the retail parks and the motorways, avoiding the classical images of the Liffey and the Ha'penny Bridge, O'Connell Street and the Four Courts. Its characters are ordinary people and most ordinary Dublin dwellers live in the suburbs, so it is the suburbs that dominate the urban landscape.

Secondly, there is the use of language and accent. Critic Andrew Sarris, writing in the 'New York Observer', noted that the cast was so; 'frenetically Irish that half the time I thought I was listening to Aramaic with no English subtitles to enlighten me' (2004: 1). Furthermore, O'Rowe's script is peppered with segments of traditional oral Irish story-telling. Deirdre tells Sam Sally's back-story about an abusive boyfriend, an idea lifted directly from Woody Allen's *Hannah and her Sisters* (1986); but whereas Allen shows the event, Crowley's film delivers it orally. When Mick asks Lehiff why his face is bruised, Lehiff tells him that the red-jumpered boy threw a stone through his windshield and he crashed. Similarly when the same boy causes the bus on which Maura and Sally are travelling to crash, the story is initially 'told' to Sam and Deirdre before we flashback and see the action. The dialogue throughout the film is interwoven with a steady stream of profanity which brings to mind the early writings of Roddy Doyle (though none of the film adaptations of Doyle's work are as foul-mouthed as O'Rowe's script) and bus driver Mick speaks throughout in the sort of contrived, poetic, Dublinesque vernacular that theatre goers would associate with Eamonn Morrisey's *The Brother*.

Thirdly, there are a number of purely stereotypical Irish characters among the ensemble. Ger Ryan's Maura is the classic Irish mother, who when asked by her daughter why she never remarried tells her; "[T]o have had someone like him in my life, that special, that's enough. I feel blessed by all of that, so why would I want for anything more", while Owen Roe's Mr. Henderson and Detective Gerry Lynch have a lineage which can be traced cinematically back to Neil Toibin in Peter Ormrod's *Eat the Peach* (1985), with their fondness for all things American. Finally, Crowley's use of music throughout draws on both globally successful Irish bands such as U2 and Clannad, to the less well known, such as Ron Sexsmith, Brian Kennedy and David Kitt, with even Colin Farrell contributing a cover version of the song 'I Fought The Law'. The use of this music also ties in to Sconce's notion of the politics of taste, with Gerry obsessing over Clannad, Noreen over Brian Kennedy, and the 'trendier', more youth compatible sounds of U2 and David Kitt being used in standard Hollywood mode for action sequences and montage sequences.

Unfortunately, as critic Jack Mathews points out, the; 'disconnect between the realism of its violence and the near-slapstick tone of some of its comedy is too much to be framed within one movie' (2004: 1). Though ambitious in scope, and admirable for that ambition, most critics agreed that while promising in conception the film was unable to hold all its disparate elements together, with Gabriel Shanks noting; 'it is, in essence, the promise of a great ensemble film...that still needs a few years to grow into its potential' (2004: 1).

Yet despite such formal flaws, the film obviously touched a chord with Irish audience's that went beyond the star appeal of Colin Farrell, given its box office performance, and its American returns were far higher then those achieved by most Irish films. By copying a style of 'Second Cinema' auteurism, popularised by the American 'independent' sector, Crowley and O'Rowe were able to present a modern Irish scenario in a fresh and entertaining way. However, as American independent producer James Schamus has pointed out;

> [T]he original sin of the American independent cinema, when it shifted away from the avant-garde, was the introduction of narrative. Once you do that, you're inserting yourself into a commodity system. At that point, whether or not you have seized the means of production, a la Karl Marx, doesn't matter, because what you haven't done is seize the means of

exhibition, marketing and distribution, and so you end up having to play by the rules of the big boys (2004: 21).

Intermission is not only our first 'smart movie', but it is also one of a very small handful of recent Irish film that has managed to 'play the rules' successfully; pleasing audiences, pleasing critics and perhaps most importantly, making a profit. But the undisputed Irish master of such game-playing is Jim Sheridan.

4.5 Playing Them At Their Own Game: *In America.*

In terms of the American marketplace, the most successful Irish film of 2003 was undoubtedly Jim Sheridan's *In America*. It was nominated for three Oscars and two Golden Globe Awards[11] and won the 'Stanley Kramer Award' as selected by the Producers Guild of America and the 'Critic's Choice Award' for Best Writer(s). To date it has taken $15,539,266 at the American Box Office and its worldwide total for theatrical release was $24,883,879.[12]

In 'Framing the Nation', Ruth Barton's insightful book on the films of Jim Sheridan, the author notes that while Sheridan's films have consistently performed well at the box office they haven't attracted the same sort of critical academic attention as Neil Jordan's work, arguing that it;

> is perhaps their very profitability that has rendered Sheridan's films suspect, even slightly tainted, in the eyes of the academic establishment. Here is someone who makes films to an unashamedly mainstream formula and…does so without apology. As Sheridan has discovered, if you want people to watch your work in large numbers, then you have to present it in a populist manner (2002: 4).

Thus while film theorists like Margot Gayle Backus may read *In The Name of the Father* as bearing; 'explicit, literal witness to the ongoing crisis that processes of colonization and economic and cultural imperialism have precipitated in Ireland' (1999: 55), Sheridan will argue that at the core of the film is the story of the 'Good Father' (The Prodigal Son) (Barton, 2002: 144). Where Barton herself argues that *My Left Foot* is about reflecting; 'a tension between tradition and modernity that informed Irish society as it emerged from a period in which the modernising process seemed to go singularly awry' (ibid: 6), Sheridan points out that 'I was always thinking of the oedipal bit' (ibid: 144). In the interview conducted by Barton for the book, Sheridan tells her; 'I realised that making a

film set in Ireland or England and trying to make it work in America or the rest of the world, you had to have a theme or a sub-structure that would appeal on a deeper level. So, I'd always find myself thinking of a story' (ibid).

Writing about *My Left Foot* in 1991, Rockett noted that; 'an Irish film which travels largely with the aid of British finance to Hollywood and is embraced by it must necessarily leave its social and cultural specificity at home' (1991: 24). Higson argues that it is counter-productive to use the borders of the nation to contain and label cinema; 'identity is far too complex an issue to be reduced to nationality.' (2000a: 40). Indeed Sheridan would appear to explicitly imply as much in a scene in *In America*, where the family attend the girls School Hallowe'en party and daughter Christie, (Sarah Bolger), embarrassed by their home-made Hallowe'en outfits when all the other children have bought their outfits, tells her father that she doesn't want to be different, she wants to be like everybody else. Furthermore, curiously for a film set in New York in the early 80s there is a total absence of other Irish characters. One would assume that Johnny and Sarah would seek out Irish connections once they had settled in but there is no suggestion of an extended Irish community. Higson, referring to a number of recent British films [13], identified what he termed; '(A) new post-national cinema that resists the tendency to nationalise questions of community, culture and identity. The concept of post-nationalist cinema surely better describes films that embrace multiculturalism, difference and hybridity' (2000a: 38). I would argue that *In America* deliberately avoids introducing other Irish characters to achieve this 'post-nationalist' position, and delivers instead a 'hybrid' of well-proven Hollywood traditions and staple Irish literary conventions to appeal to the widest audience possible.

As previously noted, McLoone argues that; '(A)merican culture (including the dominant Hollywood form) interacts with other cultures in ways that are actually dictated by the characteristics of the receiving or indigenous culture and does not itself remain unchanged by the encounter' (2000: 98). Sheridan's film output to date would seem to bear this argument out. At the heart of each film is a story that while global in the archetypal sense has a special resonance for Irish audiences, be it tradition vs. modernity recast as oedipal drama, postcolonial

paternity recast as the Good Father or the Troubles recast as maternal melodrama. (*Some Mother's Son.* Terry George. 1996. - Sheridan co-scripted the film.) A further related discourse that continually crops up in relation to Sheridan are his films emphasis on 'the family'. Barton has pointed out that in all of his films, the family unit; 'functions on a symbolic level as a marker of the nation and on a functional level as a point of audience identification.' 'If the early films are not overtly political in theme, their foregrounding of family narratives invites a parallel reading of the family as nation.' (2002: 124) In Sheridan's first five films the nation being 'read' is most definitely Ireland; the interesting thing about *In America* is that for the first time the central reading of the family as the Irish nation is subsumed, perhaps even unintentionally, by a central reading of the American nation. When Barton conducted the key interview with Sheridan for 'Framing the Nation', he was in the middle of writing the screenplay, then entitled *East of Harlem*, for what would eventually become *In America*. He described the film as an 'Irish love story', adding;

> (I)t's difficult to find an Irish love story. Now Joyce always made love stories about women in love with dead people which I think has something to do with the national psychic mood, where the only true love is dead. That's true from Nora to the women of The Dead to Molly Bloom. I started writing this story about my own time in America and I made myself my father and my wife my mother which may say something about me that I don't want printed. And then because my brother died when I was a kid, then I brought that into the story. I realised that the story was about the husband and the wife and a triangle with their dead child and this couple had gone to America to get rid of this death culture. It sounds easy to write a love story and it sounds like it should be possible. But it doesn't seem to be possible in Ireland (2002: 145).

He summed up the screenplay by saying 'The story I'm doing now is about my own life and really, to be commercial it should be about now, it should be about America now' (ibid: 152). The interview was conducted on the 27th of June 2001, just eleven weeks before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, an event which was to have a profound impact, not only on American foreign policy, but on the American psyche as a whole. It would appear that in the light of these events Sheridan's screenplay was presented with a completely new dimension. No longer would the grieving process simply reflect a coming to terms with the Irish 'death culture', now it would also be a metaphor for New York/America itself – a lesson in learning to grieve and move on. As Gerry McCarthy puts it;

'(I)n the Sheridan world view – as in mainstream American film-culture – such expression is crucial. Anybody lacking it is damaged in some profound way: but their struggle to overcome the inhibition is the stuff of drama' (2003c: 12).

It is this adoption of generic American conventions and formulaic construction that causes 'serious' critics to view Sheridan's work, to use Barton's phrase, as 'slightly tainted'. Yet cultural theorist John Fiske has pointed out;

> (A) formula (....) is an industrial and economic translation of conventions that is essential to the efficient production of popular cultural commodities and should not be evaluated by aesthetic criteria that dismiss it as mere lack of imagination. Getting the right formula that transforms the right conventions into a popular art form is no easy task, but given the high cost of cultural production and the unpredictability of the cultural marketplace, formula art is an integral part of the culture industries and needs to be investigated, not dismissed (1987: 110).

Sheridan's track record speaks for itself – since 1989 he has continued to produce realistic populist narrative melodramas, well founded in generic tradition that to date have been nominated for eighteen Oscars, winning two. As Fiske says, that is 'no easy task'. *In America* is Sheridan's most autobiographical film to date, telling the story of an Irish couple, Johnny, (Paddy Considine) and Sarah, (Samantha Morton), who flee to America in the early 80's in an attempt to recover from the death of their little boy, Frankie. The couple are accompanied by their two daughters, Christie, (Sarah Bolger), aged ten and Ariel, (Emma Bolger), aged six. Christie is our narrator and the back-story is played out through a combination of her voice-over and footage that she has shot on her hand-held camcorder, which she carries with her throughout the film. This device enables Sheridan to jump from 35mm film stock to a 'second lens' of regular VHS footage, which lends an autobiographical authenticity to the story as it develops. Sheridan himself points out, however; '(the) 'Camcorder stuff I did because I knew it would give me a great feeling of New York for a very cheap price' (2004: 00:09:45).

The film is a triangular love story about Johnny and Sarah and their dead child Frankie, and the journey they must undertake to come to terms with their grief. Publicising the film, Sheridan told journalist Stephanie Merrit;

(I) was accused of lying in *In the Name of the Father*, but the real lie was saying it was a film about the Guildford Four when really it was about a non-violent parent. With *In America*, the deliberate lie is that you can get over the death of a child. In the Irish tradition it's been a huge problem that you can't get over a death; like in Joyce, who made his women in love with dead people. I wanted to force these characters into a situation where in a new land they could overcome that and begin again. That's the lie I've told (2003: 8).

He follows up this idea on his DVD Commentary, where he says;

(N)ecessary lies are very important to me because they seem to be what civilization is about. Like saying, 'This is my body, this is my blood.' What's that hiding? What's behind it? And why is it important? It's important because we live through civilized lies. We construct a method of living that denies death' (2004: 00:33:48).

Sheridan implies that the key difference between American and Irish attitudes to death is that Americans are more willing to believe the 'necessary lies', and he is an astute enough film-maker to realise that if he wishes to get what Fiske referred to as; 'the right formula', then such lies are an essential part of mainstream Hollywood cultural production. The film opens with Christie telling us;

"(T)here are some things you should wish for and some things you shouldn't. That's what my little brother Frankie told me. He told me I only had three wishes and I looked in his eyes and I don't know why...I believed him."

While we listen to this voice–over, we see a blurred full screen of flickering shadows and light, which gradually focuses into the American flag with the sun behind it. In his opening commentary on the DVD, Sheridan tells us; '(T)hese images I shot myself on Camcorder soon after September 11th. I saw this flag fluttering in the breeze with the sun behind it and I don't know what I was feeling actually' (2004:00:00:36). He returns to the shot further on in his commentary when he tackles the notion of 'invisibility';

(W)hat I mean by that is most directors are doing the visible, you know, great directors are doing it, like Kubrick and Hitchcock and....they're doing visible images structurally organised that you can see, and I think that in a way that cinema's building blocks is invisibility, so I'm actually trying to find invisible emotions and mystic kind of emotions, and when I grew up the television that I had, it used to go into horizontal and vertical hold and you couldn't see it sometimes, and that's why the opening shot of

the flag, the deprivation of information seems vitally important to me. So rather then have to show everything you sometimes take it away, so that the invisible can become present (2004: 00:42:54).

He continues to define 'the invisible' by referring to Vincent Van Gogh and arguing that Van Gogh was so obsessed with his dead brother that in paintings such as 'The Potato Eaters' and 'Gaugan's Room'; '(H)e's trying to paint the absent person, which is probably something to do with his brother, and he's trying to paint the invisible. And sometimes he succeeds' (2004: 00:44:50). His commentary here refers to a scene in the film where the family's neighbour, Mateo, (Djimon Hounsou), senses what we assume is the presence/absence of Frankie on first meeting Christie and Ariel and could equally be applied to an earlier scene where Johnny senses the same presence/absence while playing 'blindmans bluff' with his daughters. I would argue, however, that at a synchronic intertextual level it is impossible to view *In America*, which Sheridan refers to as; 'a love poem' to his family 'by way of New York' (2004: 01:35:00), without the spectre of the terrorist attacks on September 11th informing both the 'visible' - that is to say New York itself and the central narrative's 'necessary lie' that death can be overcome - and the 'invisible' as defined by Sheridan. The opening shot is initially unrecognisable, it is a blurred mix of light and dark shapes which very gradually coalesce into a recognizable American flag as seen on a shaky camcorder with the sun behind it. Sheridan says; '(A)nyway, I quite like it even though there was an awful lot of flag-waving at that time...which I can understand' (2004: 00:02:45).

I would argue that in its contemporary cultural context, this shot 'succeeds' like Van Gogh sometimes succeeded and in doing so creates a powerful underlying reading which relates directly to 9/11 and which provides an extra emotional resonance to the later scenes of the 'invisible' brother/son. It is interesting; to note that the press release that announced the film had won the Stanley Kramer Award went on to say that the award 'honours the uplifting portrayal of provocative social issues'. [14]

The shot is followed by handheld video footage of the family arriving at the American customs. Christie decides that her first wish will be that the family get through customs safely. The notion of Frankie and the three wishes introduces a

layer of magical realism which is heightened by the family's car journey through the westbound Midtown Tunnel under the Hudson river to emerge facing Grand Central Terminal - a geographical feat impossible in real life - during which the radio reception on the car stereo sputters out, then blurs and fades with the noises of the traffic and the river to create an ambient soundscape which, combined with the sense of dislocation evidenced by the young girls, suggests nothing less then Alice's journey through the tunnel into Wonderland. When we emerge into the city itself 35mm film and digital hand-held footage combine to create a 'fantasy' New York - part *Fame* (Alan Parker.1978), part *Annie* (John Huston.1982) - with 'The Lovin' Spoonful's' 'Do You Believe in Magic ?' dominating the soundtrack.

The combination of these elements suggests a deliberate construction that telegraphs the fact that what we are about to see is not to be taken literally, but rather as a magical, albeit semi-realistic/impressionistic collection of memories and images which the three Sheridan's recalled from their time living in New York in the 1980s. At the start of the film's final act, Christie, having agreed to give a vital blood transfusion to her newborn baby sister, is put under a local anaesthetic and the 'tunnel journey', complete with audio fade-out, is reprised, leaving Sheridan free to return to the 'real world' where the resolution of the central drama can be seen outside of 'Wonderland'. Sheridan told Stephanie Merritt that he and his daughters wrote out their key memories and;

> (T)hen we compared all our versions. Of course, they often conflicted and naturally we were all the hero of our own stories, so dramatically you couldn't get the story past a certain point because it was just memoir. We needed to bring in an element that would give the film narrative cohesion (2003: 8).

This 'element' was the death of Frankie, the central narrative device onto which the collected Sheridan memoirs are pinned. It is interesting that Sheridan consistently refers to Joyce's 'Ulysses' when attempting to explain the films 'story'[15], for it brings me on to the use of intertextuality in relation to *In America*. David Macey defines the basic premise of the theory of intertextuality as being; 'that any text is essentially a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts, a text is not a closed system and does not exist in isolation' (2001:203), citing 'Ulysses' as an example, while novelist David Lodge suggests, albeit in

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relation to literature, that; 'all texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not' (1992: 98), adding, 'James Joyce's Ulysses is probably the most celebrated and influential example of intertextuality in modern literature.' (ibid 101).

It does not require a large leap of the imagination to suggest, that if at the core of *In America* lies 'Ulysses' and its 'love of death', then Sheridan was also conscious of the possibilities presented by setting the film in New York and availing of the iconic cinematic status of the city to create a variety of intertextual connections to enhance the audience's emotional engagement with the film. Film critic Bob Westal wrote that; '(C)inematographer Declan Quinn delivers some of the most seductive views of New York since Gordon Willis' black and white, amazingly clean city in Woody Allen's *"Manhattan"'* (2003: 1) and goes on to argue that; '(N)ew York is the real star of *"In America".'* (ibid). However, as David Macey points out;

> (I)ntertextuality is not simply a matter of influences which pass from one author to another, but of the multiple and complex relations that exist between texts in both synchronic and diachronic terms.' 'Influence' is simply one mode of intertextuality (2001: 204).

Fiske divides intertextual relations into two dimensions, the horizontal and the vertical;

> (H)orizontal relations are those between primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axis of genre, character or content. Vertical intertextuality is that between a primary text, such as a television program or series, and other texts of a different type that refer explicitly to it. These may be secondary texts such as studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism, or tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves (1987: 108).

He continues by arguing that the most influential form of horizontal intertextuality is genre, defining genre as; 'a cultural practice that attempts to structure some order into the wide range of texts and meanings that circulate in our culture for the convenience of both producers and audiences' (ibid: 109). He posits that;

> (H)ighbrow, elitist works of art are typically valued for their unique qualities, and a whole critical practice is devoted to detailing and praising these elements that differentiate one particular work of art from others, for it is in its uniqueness that its value is believed to reside. Understanding

works of art generically, however, locates their value in what they have in common, for their shared conventions form links not only with other texts in the genre, but also between text and audiences, text and producers, and producers and audiences (ibid: 110).

Umberto Eco has written about the phenomenon of 'Intertextual Dialogue', whereby 'a given text echoes previous texts' (1985: 175) and how that when these 'echoes' are explicit enough to be recognised by a mainstream audience then they can be used to generate certain effects and emotions. The technique is common from television advertising and Eco goes so far as to suggest;

> (A) "modern" conception of aesthetic value, according to which every work aesthetically "well-done" is endowed with two characteristics:
> 1.It must achieve a dialectic between order and novelty – in other words between scheme and innovation;
> 2.This dialectic must be perceived by the consumer, who must not only grasp the contents of the message, but also the way in which the message transmits these contents (ibid: 173/74).

David Lodge argues in relation to 'Ulysses' that the book; 'is full of parody, pastiche, quotations from and allusions to all kinds of texts…intertextuality is not, or not necessarily, a merely decorative addition to the text, but sometimes a crucial factor in its conception and composition' (1992: 102). Sheridan's Director's Commentary on the DVD of *In America* is obviously a primary source of vertical intertextuality and on it he states; '(I)'m not really aware sometimes of the influences of other films, I don't consciously ever do that' (2004:01:06:39). However, he also states earlier in his commentary, having attempted to define what he was trying to achieve for a particular scene;

> (T)his is getting very philosophical now, but it's just me in my pseudo-intellectual way trying to understand what's going on; but I believe stories tell you and another day and another time somebody will know what kind of an idiot I was and what was really going on (2004: 00:43:12).

From a diachronic approach, *In America* follows the straightforward Hollywood narrative triad of order/disorder/order restored. From a synchronic approach it must also be remembered that the film was prepped and shot during the build up and commencement of the Iraq War, at a time when the media were concentrating on a perceived hostility towards America from a variety of European countries.

By presenting the film not only from the 'immigrant' point of view, but also quite often through an exaggerated child's eye view of a new city and a new country, the film presents an unquestioning positive ideal of America and the American ideological values of family unity and home life. It is, furthermore, littered with references to the cinematic, iconic New York. Whether it is the physical and contextual similarities between Samantha Morton's Sarah and Mia Farrow's Rosemary in Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) - the hair style, the 'threatening' pregnancy, the brownstone building - the obvious similarities between Mateo (Djimon Hounsou), the troubled artist suffering from a fatal and nameless blood infection, who lives below the family, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, the New York graffiti artist who died of Aids in 1988 (*Basquiat* Julian Schnabel. 1996), or the formal cinematic approaches employed by cinematographer Declan Quinn, which resonate with intertextual connections from classic New York films such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorcese 1976) and the aforementioned *Fame* (Alan Parker 1980) and *Manhattan* (Woody Allen 1979), Sheridan avails of this 'intertextual dialogue' to create a version of New York that embraces endless positive representations of the city's cinematic history to create one of the most affirmative backdrops to contemporary America that we have seen in recent years. This is a New York, as Phillip French points out, where the family; 'live in a tenement without a cockroach or rat in sight, and the other tenants suddenly develop a sense of community' (2003: 11).

Furthermore, Sheridan takes as a sub-motif that runs throughout the film, one of the most popular and sentimental texts in Hollywood's history, Steven Spielberg's *E.T.-The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and uses it not only on a metaphoric level to suggest 'the alien(s) in a strange land' scenario, but also on a textual level, whereby 'E.T.' features in the granting of both the second and third of Christie's wishes. The explicit and foregrounded use of other films has been used to similar effect in *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore 1989) and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (Woody Allen. 1986) and perhaps most effectively in Leos Carax's *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991). Having brought the family to see the film *E.T.*, Johnny then bets their rent money on the throw of a single ball at a huckster stall in order to win an E.T. doll for Ariel. Christie's voice-over informs us that she asked

Frankie, as her second wish, to let him win it. Conscious of her father's concept of 'necessary lies', co-writer Kirsten Sheridan has said;

> (I)n many ways it's more of an American film than an Irish film because it embraces that kind of emotionalism that's optimistic, that Irish people tend to take a step back from. Like, the scene at the fair; in truth my dad didn't win the doll, and we lost all our money and had to go home and share a slice of pizza. But you couldn't have that in the film because it would have been too depressing and arty and Irish (2003: 8).

In the film's final scene, Johnny and Christie bring Ariel out on the fire escape and convince her that she can see Mateo, who died without saying good-bye to her, cycling past the full moon and waving farewell. Not only does this achieve the effect of layering the film's own internal narrative with the emotional impact of one of cinema's most memorable scenes – *E.T.*'s moonlight cycle with Eliot - it also leads to Christie availing of her third and final wish and asking her father to '(S)ay goodbye to Frankie, Dad'. Johnny says '(G)oodbye Frankie' and is thus free to move on, to feel again and to start living for his family and the present. As Gerry McCarthy puts it; '(the film) connects directly to the American myth of itself as a place where identities are refashioned and old wounds healed' (2003c: 13).

Barton has written of Sheridan;

> (H)e has consistently proved that Irish cultural production can appeal to the local whilst circulating within a global environment of capitalist exchange, namely the Hollywood film industry. Much of the debate about the new Ireland, an Ireland that has been largely fuelled by multinational corporate investment, has hinged around a profound anxiety (....) about the ability of a small culture to retain its identity within the universalising practices of global capital (2002: 15/16).

McLoone has argued that one of the main problems with American popular culture and its dominant position in Irish culture is that; 'it can be seen to represent a form of cultural imperialism that thwarts the development of indigenous culture and merely reaffirms that prosperity in Ireland has been gained at the expense of national difference (2000: 184). Andrew Higson, in attempting to define indigenous British cinema has asked the question; '(H)ow far back must the line of inheritance stretch within the nation-state before an action, event or idea counts as deeply rooted in the national culture or as an indigenous tradition?' (2000a: 36). And if we apply this question to Ireland

what traditional Irish 'ideas' can we recognize in Sheridan's film? The Irish love of the dead? The compromised or broken father? The protective, long-suffering mother? The mingling of blood and its Irish/Catholic connotations? Colcannon ? There is no denying that formally and stylistically *In America* is much more a product of Hollywood film-making then native film-making. It must also be stated that by adhering to his philosophy of 'necessary lies', Sheridan delivers an ideological framework that currently dominates mainstream Hollywood films. Yet as he says himself;

> (I)n Europe we say the 11th of September, we say '11/9', but throughout the world its become now '9/11'because the American system of actually speaking and talking and through the power of film and the media has become the worldwide dialogue (2004: 00:38:32).

This is Sheridan's 'necessary' compromise; in order to get the finance to make his films he will provide the required formal and ideological framework for the mainstream market, but within the constraints of that framework he tells stories that are synonymous with Irish culture, initially acquiring the stories directly from Christy Brown and John B Keane and re-imagining them for a global audience, and here applying the same approach to his own story, by way of Joyce. The final shot of the film is of the New York skyline, with Christie's voice-over asking us if we can remember what she looked like. On his director's commentary, Sheridan says;

> (T)he idea that I'm saying to the audience, you know, remember her face, or your version of her face, but create your own picture in your head, don't always be dependant on the images that are fed to you. Create your own stories, have your own memories, don't let the mass entertainment world take your imaginative life away. (2004: 01:34:29)

Many critics see such as attitude as Sheridan 'having his cake and eating it', but his continued success over the last fifteen years suggests a canny understanding of the nature of the business and while he may be accused of capitulating to market forces he continues to return to the archetypal Irish stories for his source material.

Diane Negra notes that at the 9/11 benefit concert held in Madison Square Garden on the 25th of October 1002, a New York city fireman named Mike Moran invited Osama Bin Laden to; 'kiss my royal Irish ass', at a time when professions of American national identity were the norm. She suggests that;

'(T)his episode (.......) speaks forcefully to the emergence of the trope of Irishness as white ethnic legitimacy and empowerment in contemporary American culture', arguing that;

> (T)he circulation of this clip suggests how Irishness has become a crucial discursive platform for articulating white working-class legitimacy and innocence. Amidst the exigencies of politics and the marketplace, invocations of Irishness gave shape and substance to nebulous, unstable and/or discredited notions of national and ethnic identity (2004: 59).

She concludes by suggesting that;

> (I)f before 11 September Irishness was most often invoked to negotiate the traumas of deficient family values or to assuage a sense of capitalism run amok, its flexibility is such that after this seminal event, it could be differently mobilised to stave off an anxious, traumatised perception of American identity (2004: 63).

In America does just that, presenting a 'wart-less' New York/America – friendly, compassionate and open to all comer's - and in doing so, Sheridan once again captures the American zeitgeist in a way that he hadn't done since *My Left Foot*.

4.6 Conclusions

As noted at the start of this chapter, each of the three films examined represent a specific level of McLoone's; 'three levels of financing and budgeting' (1999: 88) and as previously stated, this; "has its own implications for the resulting film's content, commercial viability, and its visibility to audiences both at home and abroad' (ibid). However, each film very definitely takes the 'approved' as opposed to the 'unapproved' road in terms of its dealings with the marketplace.

They are all plot-driven and derive their formal conventions from the mainstream Hollywood model. Also, unlike *Crushproof* and *Country*, they are easily marketed; each film can be summed up in a single 'pitch' line. *Drinking Crude* was never going to have a wide market appeal – it was too limited by its budget – but its director managed to deliver a version of 90s Ireland that was; 'genuinely 'modern'', to use Coulter's phrase (2003: 5), while retaining a distinctly Irish flavour through its use of the 'Leaving Cert Summer' genre. Crowley and O'Rowe are even more studied then McPolin in their deconstruction of a specific American genre their and re-building of it in an Irish context, yet the very fact that such an approach hadn't been attempted before gave a freshness

to *Intermission* that calls to mind Gibbon's assertion that; 'transformations induced by contact with the new may activate a transgressive potential already latent in the old, in the cast-offs and rejects of history' (1996: 5), particularly in relation to the juxtaposition of 'Celtic Tiger' consumerism with the 'smart movies' recurrent interest with the politics of consumerism and taste, but also the way in which the film utilises the Irish oral story-telling in conjunction with a disjointed narrative chronology, which as already pointed out, has become a staple of mainstream American cinema. Of the three films, Sheridan's is probably the one that is more 'American' than 'Irish', but as he himself argues, the driving force behind the narrative is the Joycean 'love of the dead' and you can't get much more Irish then that. Kiberd notes in relation to contemporary Irish writers that;

> (T)he exponents of the Irish Renaissance shaped and reshaped an ancient past, and duly recalled it, giving rise to an unprecedented surge of creativity and self-confidence among the people. The task facing this generation is at once less heroic and more complex: to translate the recent past, the high splendours and subsequent disappointments of that renaissance, into the terms of a new century (1996: 641).

Our contemporary film-makers are in a similar position, but their output is further constrained by the financial realities of the film industry. Marginalised voices may argue the importance of '(A)rt for Art's Sake', but base commerce would suggest that unless film-makers compromise they will be left with 'no space in the market-place' (Higgins, 1994). While Comerford and others may feel that such compromise will eventually lead to Ireland becoming '(G)lobal Unit 32' (2004: 23), it would appear that currently there really isn't any other solution but to adopt to the dominant market forces and to tell our own stories as best as we can. In the meantime we can take some solace from the findings of Inglehart and Baker in their evaluation of three waves of the World Values Survey (1981-82, 1990-91 and 1995 –1998), where they concluded that;

> (E)conomic development tends to push societies in a common direction, but rather than converging, they seem to move on parallel trajectories shaped by their cultural heritages. We doubt that the forces of modernization will produce a homogenized world culture in the foreseeable future (2000:57).

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ENDNOTES

[1] FUKUYAMA FRANCIS (1992) Extract from 'The End of History and the Last Man', published by Penguin and available at URL;
http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/fukuyama.htm (Accessed 18/08/03)

[2] Examples would include *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995) *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998), *Ghost World* (Terry Zwigoff, 2001), *Your Friends and Neighbours* (Neil LaBute, 1998), Anthony Payne's *Election* (1999), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) and *This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999)

[3] *Man Bites Dog* (Paddy Breathnach 2004),*About Adam* (Gerry Stembridge 1999),*When Brendan Met Trudy* (Keiron J Walsh 1999)

[4] See FALUDI SUSAN (1999) 'Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man.' London. Chatto & Windus. PLECK J.H.(1981) 'The Myth of Masculinity.' Cambridge.Mass.:MIT Press. CONNELL.R.W. (1987) 'Gender & Power'. Cambridge. Olity.

[5] FERRITER DIARMAID. (2004) notes that 'In the years 1985-6, over 30,000 emigrated, and between 1983 and 1988 there was a net outflow of 130,000'.p 672

[6] *Drinking Crude* features the screen debut of Colin Farrell, who within five years was to become the most famous Irish actor of his generation.

[7] Information accessed at URL:
http://filmforce.ign.com/articles/302/302383p1.html?fromint=1 (Accessed 12/03/04)

[8] Information accessed at URL: http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2004/NTRMS.php (Accessed 05/04/04)

[9] Liz GILL's *Goldfish Memories* (2003) attempts a similar approach.

[10] The articles in question were: TURAN. KENNETH. (1998) 'The Film Industry's Lust for the Grim Precludes the Good'. Accessed at URL:
http://www.boundless.org/1999/departments/atplay/a0000072.html (Accessed 23/10/03). and DARGIS. MANOHLA. (1998) 'Whatever. The New Nihilism'.
http://www.laweekly.com/ink/99/01/film-dargis.php (Accessed 23/10/03)

[11] *OSCARS*: Best Supporting Actor- Djimon Hounsou, Best Actress – Samantha Morton and Original Screenplay – Jim, Naomi and Kirsten Sheridan.
GOLDEN GLOBES: Best Screenplay and Best Song – Time Enough for Tears – Written by Bono, Gavin Friday and the Man Seezer and sung by Andrea Corr.

[12] Figures accessed at URL: http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2003/INAMR.php (Accessed 29/10/04)

[13] The Instability of the National.' In ASHBY. JUSTINE & HIGSON ANDREW. (Eds) 'British Cinema, Past and Present.' Routledge. London and New York. HIGSON cites *My Beautiful Launderette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1993), *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1995) and *My Name is Joe* (Ken Loach, 1998) pp37-38

[14] Quotation obtained at URL:
http://www.iftn.ie/news/index3.htm?fuseaction=getbody&file=2074 (Accessed 12/02/03)

[15] See MERRITT.STEPHANIE. (2003) 'The Observer' 'Review Section'. 'In the Pain of the Father'. October 12th p8. ILLEY. CHRISSEY. (2003) 'The Sunday Times' Magazine Section. October 12th.p59. BARTON.RUTH. (2002) 'Jim Sheridan. Framing the Nation.' Contemporary Irish Film Makers Series. The Liffey Press p145.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

I began this thesis by announcing my intentions to examine the 'interstices' referred to by Higgins, Bhabha and McLoone amongst others – the unactualised spaces provided by the clash between modernity and tradition – with a view to discovering new signs of Irish identity in a selection of films produced by the second Irish Film Board. My aim was to focus not only on the films themselves, but to adopt Richard Johnson's approach to cultural studies and observe these films in relation to the; 'circuit of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural products' (1987: 46). This entailed consideration of the constraints placed on film-makers in a climate where the balance of commercial concerns with artistic considerations tipped ever more toward the former, at a time when Irish society was one of the fastest growing economies in the world and Hollywood mainstream cinema was at its most dominant. I undertook to examine the lack of social criticism in recent Irish films, the impact of global recognition on the Irish industry, the concept of 'Third Cinema' in relation to Irish production practices, a number of different strategies which our film-makers have adopted in an attempt to find 'space in the market place' and the critical issue of Gibbon's 'approved' and 'unapproved roads' (1996: 180) – the contemporary tendency of critics and commentators to revile those films which dwell on the themes and tropes common to the 'First Wave' film-makers because they see them as being regressive.

In such a broad undertaking it is inevitable that certain aspects of the debate about contemporary Irish cinema are going to suffer due to lack of space. The films of our female directors - Pat Murphy, Vivienne Dick, Geraldine Creed, Aishling Walsh, Liz Gill, Kirsten Sheridan – are under-represented throughout this dissertation, as is the debate about representations of Northern Ireland. Given the regularity with which 'Third Cinema' is referred to, I am also aware that the whole area of the DV film-

making revolution and the Film Board's 'micro-budget' productions weren't touched upon. But I hope that my readings have managed to shed some more light on the 'liminal spaces and interstices where the local meets the global' (McLoone, 2000: 125).

It is interesting to note the dictionary definition of the word 'interstice' refers to it as 'a small space'.[1] As dominant Hollywood cinema continues to refine the financially lucrative generic conventions available to Irish film-makers, these spaces would appear to be becoming even smaller. Ten years after the re-establishment of a Film Board which has produced on average eleven feature films a year since its inception, Irish film-makers may have gained sufficient experience to become more adept in their attempts at achieving Nowell-Smith's 'complex symbiosis' in terms of Irish versus cosmopolitan identity politics and they have certainly improved their technical abilities on all fronts due to the availability of regular work in the mid to late 90s. They have also established connections in the marketplace with European and American co-producers and Irish as an ethnicity, as pointed out by Negra, is more popular than it has ever been in American popular culture. Ironically, this is all happening at a time when anachronistic union practices, an over-priced labour force and an inflated economy are driving foreign productions to locations outside of the republic such as Eastern Europe, the Isle of Man and indeed Northern Ireland, to avail of cheaper film crews, extra funding sources for productions, advantageous tax breaks and a lower cost of living. But the primary problem with recent Irish film has been the narrow parameters within which it operates. Kiberd notes in relation to our 20th century writers;

> the breakneck speed of change in society gave added force to the concept of "generation", and the gap which had always separated fathers from sons grew so wide as to suggest that the young and old inhabited totally different countries. For the first time in history, perhaps, writers found themselves forced to write solely for their own immediate generation (1996: 382).

Such is the case with many of our contemporary film-makers. In their determination to break free from the traditions of mainstream Irish cinema and tell their own stories, many of them have also jettisoned the encoded familiarity, warmth and communal emotions and morals associated with such cinematic traditions, and struggle to find something to replace them with. As Kiberd reflects;

> to a modernist generation intent on making things new, the fact of fatherhood was an encumbrance and an embarrassment. The emerging hero was self-created like

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Jay Gatsby, who sprang from some Platonic conception of himself, or an orphan of indeterminate background, or a slayer of fathers (ibid).

'Jay Gatsby' style characters are now the norm in contemporary Irish features, young men and women defined by their consumerist tastes and their desire, like Christie in *In America*, not to be different, to be like everybody else. Via the 'unbroken circuit' we can argue that such characters are illustrative of middle class social norms in modern Ireland, reflecting a general desire to belong to a global metropolis as opposed to a global village. However, as Gibbons notes;

> the need to address the other, and the route of the diaspora, is invariably presented as a passage from the margins to the metropolitan centre, but the reverse journey is rarely greeted with much enthusiasm. In fact, those who go in the opposite direction are invariably derided as 'going native', as slumming it when they should really be getting on with the business of persuading the natives to adopt their master's voice. Yet it is only when hybridity becomes truly reciprocal rather than hierarchical that the encounter with the culture of the colonizer ceases to be detrimental to one's development (1996: 180).

The lack of output on behalf of our 'First Wave' film-makers over the last decade and the increasing difficulty in raising funding for projects which choose the 'unapproved' roads would suggest that Irish film still has a long way to go before reaching this stage. Writing sixty years ago, Liam O'Laoghaire, reflecting on the possibilities for an Irish film industry, made the point that;

> if we think of French cinema, how it has gone to the towns and villages and cities for its themes, how it has explored the historic past and drawn its strength from a real and deep understanding of the people, we see at once what is open to us (1945:169).

Today, French cinema is still comprised of a body of work that can incorporate Francois Ozon and Catherine Breillat's provocative adult dramas, the gentle, feel-good rural nostalgia of Christophe Barratier's *Les Choristes* (2004) and Nicolas Philibert's *Etre et Avoir* (2002), the 'Third Cinema' of Oliver Assayas and Tony Gatlif and the mainstream experimentation of Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Yes, the French government has a protectionist policy towards its cinema that puts the rest of Europe to shame, but that does not account for the fact that such diversity has failed to materialise in the Irish canon. Alan Gilsenan, one of the only directors we have who is working primarily in the avant-garde arthouse tradition, argues that; 'there is a danger of everybody playing too safe, where the great desire to have hits comes at the expense of individual creative thinking and people can be enamoured with the idea of a jet-set existence'[2] As the space in the market-place becomes more and more crowded, this practice of playing the odds will inevitably lead to

a policy of diminishing returns in terms of experimentation.. Fredric James stated in a recent interview;

> I tell my Japanese friends that their whole economic miracle squashed everything for a long time because people who are enormously prosperous end up making not very interesting movies or art of any kind. Now that they've gone into depression it might be a good time for them artistically.[3]

Perhaps this is the case with Ireland, and it is only when the disruption generated by the 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon has had a chance to settle and normalise that the next decade will see the film industry's potential finally coming to fruition.

ENDNOTES

[1] Interstice /in'tuhstis/ **noun** *formal* a small space between adjacent things. [French *interstice* from late Latin *interstitium*, from Latin *intersistere* to stand still in the middle, from INTER + *sistere* to stand} Taken from The Penguin English Dictionary.

[2] Cited In ANDREWS. RACHEL (2003) *"The Irish Film Industry: lights, action... CUT!" In The Sunday Tribune.* Dublin: Tribune Papers 29th June. p 12/13.

[3] JAMESON. FREDRIC. (2003) *Interviewed by* KING. NOEL In *'Critical Quarterly'* Volume 45 Issue 1-2. July. p185.

APPENDICES

Kevin Liddy Interview One: June 8th: 2000

NF: It's been four years since A Soldier's Song. For the benefit of those millions who've graduated from the endless film courses available around the country in the meantime, tell us a bit about your own film background.

KL: Well, I went to the focus theatre years ago. I was always interested in acting and I was doing that for a couple of years when my Ma said to me; 'Hoy, you've got a cousin in Rathmines and he runs a film course', and I said, 'Get out of it', 'cos I thought it was all bullshit – like film was something they did in America. I mean, this was 17 years ago. So I looked at the brochure and I saw names like Vivienne Dick, Joe Comerford, Cathal Black, all these guys, and I'd read about them in this magazine called Film Directions, I think it was called. A Northern Ireland thing. So I went up, did the interview and the bit of nepotism didn't stand against me, and got in. And like, we were making Super 8 movies and I was meeting people like Malachi O'Higgins and Cathal Black, and like Malachi was talking intelligently about film, I mean, as if you were studying English and I couldn't believe that that actually existed....

NF: My impression of that era is that there was quite a bolshie, socialist attitude going on...

KL: Yeah, it was radical stuff. It was... fuck 'em, and taking on things and trying to be slightly critical about things. It was really brilliant. I mean, Lelia Doolan was there, and Patsy Murphy, literally talking about not just making movies but what to make movies about.

NF: In the course of preparing for this interview I came across a piece you wrote in an old Film Ireland about Cathal Black's short Wheels. You described it as "quiet, sombre, intelligent, evocative and hard." And summed up by saying it reminded you of what Irish film had lost. Can you elaborate on that?

KL: That was written maybe 7 or 8 years after I'd left Rathmines, where there was crap like The Courier being made – you had to make like, an urban movie to try to be like somebody else's idea of who you are. Of course, they did it really badly – I mean it was shit, everybody knows that, but also it was fundamentally flawed – it couldn't have been any good because they were just trying to be L.A. in Dublin. But there were brilliant movies around at the time, like Cathal's Pigs, an exceptional movie. But when Pigs came out Cathal got roasted for it. "This is depressing, this is not the Ireland we want to see..." Whereas stuff like Pigs and Anne Devlin were far more mature, far more investigative. Also, they're (Cathal Black and Pat Murphy) much better as filmmakers, they're more lyrical, they push the camera around...

NF: Where do you stand on your personal life being intertwined with your script-writing from a critic's perspective?

KL: Well, Joe Comerford said to me years ago, "Kevin, you should go back to where you came from and have a good look around." And I went, "Fuck off, Joe". And then

financial circumstances made me go back and I did have a look around and that's when I started to learn to write. And whether I write good or bad, that's what started coming back into my head, going, yeah, at least I should do something that I know about. Even if I don't do it well, maybe I should start off with that premise. Like, I'm not too sure if I'm just into plot mechanics per se... I don't want to do something like Raiders of the Lost Ark, even though I can go and see it and have a laugh with a couple of my nieces and nephews. But I'm not mad at plot mechanics. I get confused at a James Bond movie – who is the good guy and who is the bad guy? I like lyricism and all that shit. I think just writing from where you come from gives you ideas, and those ideas, maybe they are not successful all the time, but if they do hit home, I think they hit home with people who.... like I've had people coming up to me saying, years after Horse was on TV, saying "How the fuck did you know about that shit?". "You're too young to know about that." But I did happen to know because I was in that generational gap.

NF: So you don't object to critics interpreting your work in that sense?

KL: I think it's always personal. I mean you'd want to be kind of thick not to look at Horse and A Soldier's Song and Country and not see that there's something going on there! What I love about anybody is if they have respect for the craft. I've seen some crappy movies, like, Irish movies, and you go, "Those guys are pontificating about shit and they can't even make good films." I can't quote those films 'cos I'd be the worst cunt in the world, but its something that happens. I want my stuff to be honest, but I also worry about how good its going to look, and what the music is going to be like and can I entertain people as well as say something about something, no matter how small or how big. Now they're trying to make it an industry. I have great sympathy for Joe Comerford when he talks about "Give us money to make art". I go, yeah, maybe he's right, because art has to be encouraged. And the Tourist Board is making a fistful of money off people who dies penniless. They're all over Bord Failte posters and the Yanks come over and spend a fortune on these same guys that they didn't want to encourage when they were there, so I really understand Joe's point of view. But I understand the Film Boards point of view. We can't keep making movies that just don't do anything. Now I'm not saying that Country's going to make money, but what I am saying is that you can show it to people in festivals and everything like that and there is a degree of rigour to it where people will go, "That's interesting", and maybe we'll fund the next one, or something like that. I mean, if the Film Board has 6 million quid, I think the Film Board should put away 2 million towards the type of films that are not going to be funded by the regular institutions. Because there could be a kid out there who's going to make something brilliant, and I do know that he or she can't go to the fucking Arts Council looking for cash. But the Film Board is caught up in a dilemma, and it's a political dilemma, and that is you guys are going to make films that make money because you're going to, in a sense, support the industry. Now, I don't see anything wrong with supporting the industry, but there could be an artistic industry as well as an entertainment industry, and if they don't both feed off each other and if you don't support the artistic industry... Some of the great moments we've got are from arty stuff, and you know filmmakers mate, filmmakers watch arty stuff, and they see clips, and they go "I'm going to use that in my film but my films going to be mainstream."

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NF: How come you weren't tempted to write books or short stories, rather then opting straight for film?

KL: Because I was educated on Hawaii 5-0, The Rockford Files, when I was a kid that's what I was looking at, and I loved that. And everybody loves the start of Hawaii 5-0, with that big zoom in on Jack Lord's face as he turns around. I used to have to go out to the hallway and hyperventilate I was so excited. My Mam brought me to the doctor and he said; "There's nothing really wrong with him, does he watch a lot of television?" And she says, "He never stops." So he told her to stop me watching it because I was getting so excited. I was six! I loved that American shit! But when I went to Rathmines, then people were like; "Hang on a second there – take a look at this." Like, Patsy showed me The Boys From The Blackstuff and you went; "Wow, it can be entertaining and beautiful." Like you walk out of the movies and you're thinking about it instead of just going there, sitting watching the fucking Titanic and thinking this is a load of crap. When I grew up in Limerick my Da used to bring me EPs of Elvis because he worked in Shannon airport. So I grew up with that Hollywood stuff, I looked around Limerick and I saw no culture, nothing going on, but I used to go down and work on a farm for the summer, in Kerry, and that to me was beautiful. I thought it was magical and I think that has flowed into, or has influenced my writing because it's cool. The thing about Country for instance, it is old-fashioned if you want to talk about it that way, but I would hope that it has - in the way its shot, that it has a certain modern style. It's not made by some guy from the fucking fifties. It has a lyricism to it. I remember years ago meeting someone from RTE and they were going; "Oh, the Country script is really depressing." And I said hang on a second there, I said its not depressing, and they were like "Oh that scene" or whatever. Now that's a tender scene, its not depressing, it's real. There's a difference between topics that are difficult or hard, or serious drama or whatever, and quality, but they equated everything that was semi-serious with being negative and I was going, "But it's not that." And people like strong drama, that's the crazy thing about it. People do like to go and see strong dramatic movies. One of the really good things about say, chick-flicks, is that that's the only place where you get serious fucking drama talking about issues that are relevant to people. Do you want to go and see another Arnold Schwarzeneggar movie? I don't. I'd much rather go and see a bad Michelle Pfeiffer movie, you know what I mean?

NF: So you headed back to Limerick in the mid-80s, and I presume that was when you started working on Horse?

KL: Yeah, I wrote it in Limerick over a couple of days and put it in for a Filmbase short script award and I got it. It wasn't much, £4,000, £5,000, so I approached the Arts Council and they go "Well, he's got £5,000.", presumably, I don't know if they were thinking that, but presumably they liked the script as well because they gave me £23,000, and that was - I'm telling you, unheard of. We shot it on Super16 and it looked really well, and like, you know, some people like it, some people don't, but sure you can't please all the people all the fucking time. I like it much better then A Soldiers Song. To me it's a much finer picture.

NF: A Soldiers Song was made under the Short Cuts scheme. The problem I found with it was that it seemed to connect to the American clichés from genre stuff like

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Taps and Streamers and Full Metal Jacket ad that seemed to dilute the emotional force...

KL: I think it did myself. The only thing I'd also say though, is if I showed Horse to somebody, and they were the people who were hopefully going to give me money, they would probably be more impressed with A Soldiers Song, because they'd be able to click into it easier because of those clichés that you're mentioning. And I did A Soldiers Song a) because I wasn't doing Country and I knew that, and b) because I thought, well, if I'm ever going to do it I better prove that I can do background action, that I can take things out of a room, right? And that's one of the reasons why I actually said, well, I'll make it about an army. What's more background action then a fucking army?

NF: The 25 minute constraint of Short Cuts must have been very difficult to work with given such a story?

KL: It was very difficult. It was a Short Cut, £50,000, I mean, what could I do? But, nonetheless, I tried to do it as well as possible. And when you see it on the big screen, which is the best way to see it, you do get a hit off it. Now, in the end, I think that Horse is much better, but the reason I did A Soldiers Song was to impress people that I could do something that wasn't so, eh, elitist is the wrong word, but just so domestic, so contained. I wanted to open it up because I thought if I can do that, if I can give them a few snazzy montages and all that shit, then maybe they'll give me some cash to make what I want to make, which was Country.

NF: Do you've a problem with me referring to Horse, A Soldiers Song and Country as a triptych?

KL: No, I think that's what it is. And I think Country is the last, the final – me, delivering a kid and that's it. It's out of my system. But I really wanted to make Country. I thought firstly that it was good. But also, I felt say, middle-aged people, they're entitled to go to the cinema as well, right? We don't have to make films all the time for 23 year olds. So what's wrong with somebody who is 40 coming up to me and saying "I really liked that." What's wrong with ordinary people saying that was cool. Like, they are just as legitimate as 20-year-old punks. But the attitude seems to be "Let's make it snazzy to get the punks in."

NF: Let's talk about Country. First off, at one stage Jack tells Miriam that what he misses about the Uncle Jimmy is that "We used to talk." The inability of the Irish to communicate, that's what I would see as one of the main themes of the triptych.

KL: Yeah, I'd go along with that.

NF: Secondly, in Horse we see a child inherit his violent past and in A Soldiers Song we see a young man run away from his past. But in Country there's a very definite upbeat feel to the end that while the poetics of the situation that the character finds himself in are very similar to those in your short films, something happens that makes him come to terms with his past. Now the only difference I can see is the presence of the feminine. Is it the feminine that makes the difference?

KL: Well, I remember Lelia Doolan saying in a review that there were no women in Horse and that "I think maybe that's insipient feminism." That because they are not there you are going, "Well, where are they? And the two things you're talking about; the inability to communicate, that's a big thing, because I have that on a personal level. Like, I'm a really great talker, but that inability is certainly something. People do hide things and they don't say what they should say because there are all these codes of ethics and everything. Certainly when you come from a small community that's even more profound, so the inability to communicate is a big thing. Now the thing that I think though is, that the kid in Country is looking to get high on aesthetics and love...

NF: But is that not 'the feminine'. Because the thing that strikes me about Country is that all the males, except Jimmy, are really threatening...

KL: They're dysfunctional. You see, I think a lot of the male characters in Country are very - they do things but they may not understand the consequences of what they do, but they do things. They hit people, they don't talk to people, which was, in my growing up it was that kind of weird thing.

NF: So when you say Country is a culmination, are you saying that that's dealt with?

KL: I do think that – one of the reasons why I think Country has, as you say, an up-beat thing is, you can't keep banging on about it. There comes a time when you have to make peace with your past. But that doesn't mean pissing out your past, or getting fuckin' rid of your past, but coming to terms with your past. Dealing with it, and then moving on. And dealing with your flaws. But dealing with other people's flaws as well. And looking at the beauty in peoples flaws. They inherited these flaws. And they don't have to be condemned because they're somehow flawed. I mean, Des plays this character Frank. He's a bollix. He's a symbol of maleness that is now defunct. But for somebody, at some time, he was an engracing character.

NF: Mick says in the film; "People still remember things, they've a right to."

KL: Yeah, because you can't push the past away and say it never happened. You have to have retrospective knowledge before you can go on. You have to face the past, face what you did two days ago. Like say, I know where I'm coming from, and maybe I'm a fucking asshole but I should look at why I'm a fucking asshole. For me, Country is generative, because it makes you go... well, hopefully it makes you go "Yeah, shit, everybody's got problems but if you face up to them, maybe, after pain, they might disappear." You might come to terms with them. One of the last images of Frank is you see him going back to the graveyard, and he's going like; "I maybe should have come here earlier, because I've been running away for years, and that didn't get me anywhere. And I'm in a load of shit now...". But at least you see him looking at something.

NF: You had to go out and re-shoot the ending in January...

KL: I didn't have to. I wanted to. I looked at this movie that I'd made and I went, "It's good, it has potential, up until the last six minutes, then it starts to get a bit too melodramatic." And I remember showing it and going; "Ah, I don't like the fucking

end. Let's do it again." I don't want to talk about the specifics of the previous ending because I don't want to detract from what is there now. But I said, "Lads, it doesn't work", and Jack's first reaction was "Now hold on.." because we were on a very tight budget. And we were shooting five; six-day weeks and we were shooting it like it was a kung-fu film. And Rod Stoneman went; "Well, listen to him now for a minute." And I said, "Rod, I see something else happening." And he was going, "What do you see?" and I said, "I don't know yet, but something". And I explained roughly the idea I had and he went "I think you're right." And I completely understand Jack going "For fuck's sake, we're not going out again shooting", but people do that all the time in Hollywood. All the fucking time, it's not like a big thing. And Jack turned around to me at the screening yesterday and said, "You're so fucking right about the ending".

NF: I saw Woody Allen being interviewed recently and he talked about the van full of fresh compromises pulling up on set every morning...

KL: Van! You're talking about a truckload! Like I said, we shot it like a kung-fu movie. We were doing like 45 set-ups a day! One day we got, I think, 72 slates. And there were times when I was going, "Look, can we just track the thing..." and it was "No, you can't, because you've got to do this in twenty minutes". If you look at some of the good things, like when the girl turns to Con and says, "Let's go", and it cranes up after them, or when the boy runs down the field and it cranes up and shows the countryside... I would have liked more of that elegance. But there were lots of scenes we had to lose as well.

NF: Tell me about the images, the fleeting images that re-occur in your work.

KL: I think filmmakers have always based things around them, when the images were fresh in their brains. Like when they were twelve they saw something and they write about that....My ma used to have this guy who's call around, like a tinker, and he'd knock on the door and my ma would bring him out the meal, 'cos he wouldn't come in. He'd be like, "No, I'm grand here... ' 'Those images, if they hit you when you were twelve, that's going to burn into your consciousness so you write about it. Now I grew up with those memories as well as the Elvis Presley memories, as well as the Hawaii 5-0 memories, so it's that clash....

NF: It strikes me that in Horse and A Soldiers Song, the pub is the bastion of maleness, the symbol of the adult male, yet in Country it has become virtually a refuge from the outside world.

KL: Yeah, it's the place to go to express yourself. For instance, say people talk about women and what they like. A lot of men love going into a bar, having a pint, having a cigarette, and just sitting there thinking. They like it. Now, it ends in alcoholism so you don't want to do too much of it. But that sense of just being in the world on your own, that sense of independence, I love that sense of independence. But in Country you're going, "Yeah, but being there isn't going to change things". Maybe you've got to inter-relate a bit fucking more, and I think that's the difference in Country, it's trying to be more inclusive. It's trying to realise that you can't keep walking away from relationships or else you'll never fucking deal with them. That's what I think.

NF: How come the church is so absent from your films?

KL: Because they didn't really bother me that much, because from the time I was nine or ten I was a convinced fucking atheist. I don't really care about them that much, in fact, to be honest, I think Proust said it, that if the only good thing that the church ever did was to lift a person's gaze from the gravel in front of them up to the spire that would have been good enough. I mean, for some people religion is the only form of poetry they know. Like the Bible or whatever. But they didn't interfere with my life that much and when it came to making films I was more interested in human relationships. You can give out about the church but its much better to look at what the church has produced, which is dysfunctional people. So I prefer to look at the dysfunction that happens, rather then saying, "Oh, it's the church.", because that's just like blame. Blame doesn't get you anywhere without looking at the reality of what makes people tick, or not tick, what makes them hate each other, love each other, like each other...

NF: In A Soldiers Song we had the symbol of the butterfly net. In Country it's the kite. Tell me about your use of symbols.

KL: Well, lets be honest, we've both been through smashed up relationships, we've all regretted things that we've done in the past. People go out in the street and they cry in the rain, and you're going like, "What's their personal tragedy?". And so God knows what they're looking at in their heads when they look up. So when you go to make a script you say, "I'll pick a symbol of, again, maybe effeminate stuff like a butterfly net or a kite", something soaring, something that can get you out of where you are. And maybe that's all they are.

NF: And do you associate that ability to soar with the feminine?

KL: Yeah, I think I do. They're much gutsier.

NF: And does that come from a role model sense?

KL: Yeah, I'd have to say it does. Also, I like the way guys are bull-headed and stupid and ignorant and thick but also active doer's, and I think there's some of these elements that are really good and that women could learn from, but I also like the things that maybe we should learn from women, so you're trying to balance it and say, "Can I find a progress here?".

NF: If this is the culmination of your trilogy do you envisage dealing with contemporary Ireland?

KL: Well to be honest with you I've just been asked to do a thing that's set in 1904! And I'm looking forward to it. Martha O'Neil once turned around to me and said "I hope this is the last film you're going to do that's a) in rural Ireland and b) in the past! I mean, setting something in the 90s, how progressive would that make me? Is Country regressive or does it even fucking matter?

NF: Does Country represent a return to the 'loss' you wrote about twelve years ago?

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KL: Well, I think we had good cinema. I think Pigs was good cinema. I'm interested in morality. I look at say, I Went Down, and I don't see any engagement with moral codes. I see just a perfunctory basis for the execution of a narrative plot so that you see it and ten minutes after you see it you don't know what the fuck you saw. Now, I'm not saying that Country is good or bad, but what I am saying is that at least I'm trying to say, "Look, this is something that keeps me awake at night and how do you feel about it? And I try to guide it through interesting photography and through music and sound effects and characterisation, and if people look at it and they go, "Hmm, there's something about that that relates to me...", then I've done my job.
I remember hanging around and listening to the reception that Cathal Black's Korea got, and it was 'Oh fuck this, more bullshit Irish stuff about fathers and all that, but I mean, I find that so facile an argument, because if its good it doesn't fucking matter. I hate people who go on and say 'Not another culchie movie'. That's like saying not another urban movie. It's nonsensical. It shouldn't be mutually exclusive...you can do whatever you want as long as you do it fucking well.

NF: I came across a quote from Bob Quinn lately, where he said he didn't believe film is worth such time, energy or capital, financial or emotional. How do you feel about that?

KL: I'm working hard with people to try and make lovely images, record good sound, to try and get actors to invest in characters that are nothing more then words on a piece of paper. If you put that much time and energy into something and you get nothing back then you do go, fuck it, I should be working in a bank. But we're all driven, so we've got to go, "It won't happen to me". I'd rather make small movies in a sense and that they mean something then big pieces of shite that don't mean anything. Though I'd like to make a bit of cash as well. I wouldn't be able to do Country again. It took too long and it took too much. It was too hard, too difficult. I couldn't have made it without the Film Board, without the help of David Collins, and I couldn't have made it without Donal Gilligan, Niall Byrne, Jack Armstrong. I'm proud of it, I think its good, but you can't ask people to live like that. It's just impossible. It takes all your youth. Then you turn around and you're going, "Where's my youth? Fuck, I left it in the Savoy One."

Kevin Liddy Interview Two: May 20th: 2004.

NF: We've left our cultural revisionism behind, according to McLoone. The new filmmakers want to leave the past behind also. Country would appear to belong in the anti-revisionist camp...

KL: Let me respond to that. What I would say to that is I think that that is an absolutely legitimate criticism. However, I belong to some kind of schizophrenia. It's like the fellah says in Platoon... 'I'm born of two men... ', right, I'm almost the bastard son. And I find myself loving the idea, the sensuality of films, the interplay between music, image and sound. I love it. I love that ballet. However, then I got myself some education and people like Joe Comerford and Cathal Black and Patsy Murphy and Lelia Doolan told me an awful lot about... not just pretty pictures... so I was caught between the two of them. I remember when Pigs came out, right, Cathal got done down... and yet to me I thought it was a wonderful picture. I'm not sure if it was Alexander Walker because I think he's a reactionary fellah, but one of the guys in the Evening Standard called Pigs the 'Mean Streets' of Ireland. Now I've never heard a film by Neil Jordan, for instance, called that. Obviously we all hanker after the desire to be famous, whatever the fuck that means, but then we also want to make sense and meaning out of our lives. Now it seems increasingly so that you're not allowed to make sense, that you have to follow a particular route. For instance, Neil Jordan promoting a questionable talent, certainly in the film business, like Conor McPherson....

NF: (Interrupts to remind him he's quotable!!)

KL: I couldn't give a flying fuck. I'm sick and tired of the mafiosa where one is not allowed to criticize what, essentially what we live in, what filmmakers try to do, and poets and artists, they try to question the prevailing methodology, the prevailing ideology but we're not fucking allowed to do that. Now, I'm not bitching but I am trying to discuss and articulate something that happened but it's like that two and a half hour Pat Kenny show that was done on the Late Late about Jim Sheridan. And it was a two and a half hour ad to Jim Sheridan, a questionable talent in his own right.

NF: Quotes Rockett's review of Caoineadh Art O Laoghaire in Film Directions where he states that 'for too long we've treated the few Irish films made, independent, not commercial, as being too sacred to criticize. This in my view is dangerous. It is unlikely that the resilience of people like Bob Quinn will by dented by criticism of their work. The struggle to make films here has often hardened filmmakers to the importance of a public discussion of their work. The traditional antipathy on the part of filmmakers who are out there doing it to critics who merely write or talk about their work needs to be broken down especially if, as many hope and expect, an Irish cinema is to develop.

KL: That's an absolute fact. I'll tell you where we are now. We're way gone beyond, way past. We're ten years before him. He's dead right. Now we have a new fascism, right, and it's the fascism of success. We have to be successful. By all means. By any

fucking means necessary. And that means promoting, over-feeding yourself, being goitrous in an intellectual manner. The people who read this will know who I'm talking about. Now, I don't mind that because everybody has to have their own way in the world, what I mind is now its almost fetishised, now this is the criterion by which we judge things. But what about the alternatives? We talk about alternative cinema, but what about alternative politics like Gerry Adams? Gerry Adams was banned off the airwaves and then they gave him a voice and now we have a peace process. People who make films, and I'm not talking about, this is a success story. It was an insult to me when I went to In America by Jim Sheridan, to actually see it. I couldn't believe how gauche, how inferior, the piece was. And yet you're not allowed say that. It's unbelievable...

NF: All the British reviews said it was smaltzy, overwrought....

KL: And I thank you for bringing my attention back to that again. The Brits said it, the Irish didn't say it, and we're back again to this idea of the mafiosa.

NF: Does the mafiosa include the filmmakers as well as the journalists?

KL: Well of course it does, because they're intertwined. They're feeding in on themselves. Nobody would seriously look at it and say this is shit but it took the Brits to say it. And I find it really interesting that for instance, a director like Jordan has that kind of Anglo-Irish shit going on... I mean there's never a film where there isn't a circus or an elephant or some such twaddle going on, but they hide behind it.

NF: Hang on, as an artist what sticks in your head will find its way into your work...

KL: There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that nobody should be censorious about what an artist wants to express and the metaphors they want to use. Like, don't send a pop reviewer to an opera, OK? So when I go and see a film by whoever, I put it in a situation, I contextualize it, I go well this is what.... so therefore... don't go and see Kill Bill and expect something else. You just expect the best that that kind of oeuvre can give you. So I'm not censorious about an artists desire or landscape, its up to them. However, having said that, then when you look back in time, you go well, what stood up, what went through the fashion and what stands up as something parsable and something you could eat. Now, then it seems to me you do make choices... When I went to see In America, I found it to be an appalling piece, really rank and quite distasteful and then I had to sit through two and a half hours of Pat Kenny on the Late Late Show giving what was essentially a PR exercise. Now if they can give cars away can you imagine what two hours did? And then when I went to see the picture, and I went to see it with an American lady, and she went what are you talking about? It's like there's a franchise on poverty and its owned by Jim Sheridan, the old kind of Dickensian, 'you all right gov'...

NF: Sheridan quote about real lies...

KL: I think it's a great quote. I certainly didn't see... what I saw was a paucity of intellect, right. An injurious leaning towards a pumping out of something that I thought was best left in a sub-textual manner. Cos like he has referred to it before in The Field, when Richard Harris goes down and blesses himself, there's an allusion to

a lost child, you know what I mean, in fact its not even an allusion, it's a direct quote... 'Shamie, what did I do..' or something like that and it's a lost son. Now, that I thought had what we were talking about earlier; that artistic ability to make something manifold out of just pithiness. What I find in In America is that there is no pithiness, there is no artistry, it is just gunge. It's not that I reject the sentiment, it's I reject the articulation of the sentiment.

NF: Necessary lies. We live through civilised lies. We construct a method of living that's denying death. He admits that he bases the film on a deliberate lie...

KL: Again I go back to the subtlety of it, right. It's not that I disagree with his ethos; in fact I think it to be as particular as Sheridan is..like, a voice. However, I don't have to swallow all of it when I see it on a dramaturgical level. In America is twaddle.

NF: I saw it in the cinema and couldn't believe how many people cried. Sheridan talks about the notion of invisibility. ..."What I mean by that is most directors are doing the visible, you know, great directors are doing it, like Kubrick and Hitchcock and....they're doing visible images structurally organised that you can see, and I think that in a way that cinema's building blocks is invisibility, so I'm actually trying to find invisible emotions and mystic kind of emotions, and when I grew up the television that I had, it used to go into horizontal and vertical hold and you couldn't see it sometimes, and that's why the opening shot of the flag, the deprivation of information seems vitally important to me. So rather then have to show everything you sometimes take it away, so that the invisible can become present. (Sheridan: 2004: 00:42:54) 'Most directors deal with the visible etc (Sheridan quote) Television story... deprivation of information. Sheridan has all these genuine notions....

KL: Celtic Twaddle. As Gramsci said, 'terminological acquisitions far exceeding conceptual advances', so Sheridan can fucking dance his way around it, but the essence is it's a bullshit fucking movie, its self-serving, its self mythologizing, its like nobody ever knew about poverty before that guy did. The main character can't act. Sometimes its very difficult to talk about these things because you say on an artistic level or really on a content level because sometimes you can blind them with science, can't you. Declan Quinn did marvellous photography on it, there's no doubt about that, but the script was just, it was so lacking, it was so... its difficult for me to say just how much I was repulsed by it.... And many people like me by the way. What did you mean by the last one by the way.

NF: STOPS TAPE TO EXPLAIN SHERIDANS NOTION OF THE INVISIBLE AGAIN.

KL: What is the idea of the invisible that he is talking about? , which seems to me to be just another word for the dead. Now what if the dead meant that you were so egotistical and narcissistic that you were afraid of your own demise because you were so lacking in substance. Now what if that's what it means? What about if we all go through the great world and we just end up and we go, "When I go, I go." That has a confidence about it. A confidence that... he refers to John Huston and people like that, he shouldn't, he has no right, because John Huston had an alacrity about him, this idea that he was going to live his life to the full. What Sheridan is talking about is making some kind of fabrication out of fucking neurosis. Making it a badge of courage.

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NF: Sheridan again, 'I believe stories tell you, and another day and another time somebody will know what kind of an idiot I was and what was really going on...'

KL: Now I like him. Now that's nice, 'cos now he's saying, look, everybody, look...Francois Truffaut said he made the same film all the time. There's nothing wrong with being obsessive. There's nothing wrong with it on a...

NF: Would you say that Sheridan makes the same movie the whole time?

KL: Of course I would. And there's nothing wrong with that. But he's just getting worse at it, that's all.

NF: Fiske quote: "Highbrow, elitist works of art are typically valued for their unique qualities, and a whole critical practice is devoted to detailing and praising these elements that differentiate one particular work of art from others, for it is in its uniqueness that its value is believed to reside. Understanding works of art generically, however, locates their value in what they have in common, for their shared conventions form links not only with other texts in the genre, but also between text and audiences, text and producers, and producers and audiences...."(Fiske: 1987: 110) Sheridan has mastered that ability to do the generic movie. They may not make a fortune but they turn over a profit...

KL: He's a successful fellah, yeah.

NF: Barton about Sheridan; "'...he has consistently proved that Irish cultural production can appeal to the local whilst circulating within a global environment of capitalist exchange, namely the Hollywood film industry. Much of the debate about the New Ireland, an Ireland that has been largely fuelled by multinational corporate investment, has hinged around a profound anxiety about the ability of a small culture to retain its identity within the universalising practices of global capital." Now these are just two positive aspects that I'm applying to In America....

KL: OK, now look, sometimes it is up to the critic to formulate and so they can come up with notions like this, and its not that they're wrong. All I have to tell you is, what say Miss Barton wrote about Country belonging to a different era I'd go along with. I made it as a shrine to a different era. However, having said that, I also have shown it to people in America and you go, oh, America suits you when you're a success story, but when you're just showing a small little independent picture and they like it, then they go, well the Americans will love it. You can't have your fucking cake and eat it...I fucking showed Country to a couple of Americans and they just went, 'wow, man', that's so true. Then you say true about what, is it true about the ideology, the landscape that you used to think was true because I used romantic, lush images, there's no doubt I use romantic lush images, but I use them for a reason. Now we go back to what does everybody else do for a reason, and people like Jordan and Sheridan use imagery for a reason, to buffer up their sense. Now I say, what is their sense? And then we can fucking start talking about...because I look at...seventeen films say that Jordan did for instance, and I'm still wondering what is his sense....

NF: To go back to Sheridan, Sheridan's basically saying I don't really know what I'm making. Maybe I'll look at it in ten years and I'll know what was going on in my head...

KL: If only that were true...He is so manipulative...

NF: The daughter, Kirsten, said, "In many ways it's more of an American film than an Irish film because it embraces that kind of emotionalism that's optimistic, that Irish people tend to take a step back from. Like, the scene at the fair; in truth my dad didn't win the doll, and we lost all our money and had to go home and share a slice of pizza. But you couldn't have that in the film because it would have been too depressing and arty and Irish.[i]"

KL: Well there's nothing more wonderful and intricate and also ironic about say when Jimmy Stewart at the end of 'It's A Wonderful Life' when he goes, 'By God', because at once you're in commune with a nature of the human being which is destroyed and yet at the same time he's saying 'Can it remain so'. This is a great artist at work, right, but its sub-textual. It's a subtlety that the Sheridans will never fucking know. I'm telling you. Because they see gushing sentiment as being American. This is not true. We're talking about the land of Bob Dylan, Lenny Bruce....

NF: But you have to be honest and say that mainstream Hollywood embraces that emotionalism...

KL: Well first of all, that was a mainstream picture in its own time. But the Americans will be Americans...

NF: Sorry, what scene exactly are you referring to in It's a Wonderful Life?

KL: At the end, when he picks up the baby and he's looking, and they're all going, "You're back"...There's a wonderful triumphalism about it.

NF: But what Kirsten Sheridan is saying is that you can't show the reality of things whereby somebody fails and that to do so is anathema to American cinema, too depressing, too arty and too Irish.

KL: I'll try to refer that to my own stuff, because then I might be able to make sense of it. Well, OK, its true, its true that the American experience, right, as trying to fucking direct an entire continent with disparate values...its true that they all rush towards a union. That's why you can't walk down the fucking road in America without seeing an American flag every..in Ireland, you'd never see an Irish flag. In Britain, in France....Maybe its because they have to continually remind themselves that they are in union for one reason. Now those reasons are wonderful reasons, as enshrined in the constitution of America they're absolutely exceptional. What we disagree about is the fact that they're not really articulated....

NF: Let's try and keep it to film...

KL: Well, let's get down to film...Now, when an American makes a movie, he or she is an American, and there's an intuitive response to the material, and that means I

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come from where I am. What I dislike about this type of skulduggery, is really what she's saying is the Yanks are stupid so we have to give them a happy ending. Now that's ridiculous, because that's like destroying an entire continent that is actually full of art, should I say, wonderful people, great dissidents…and for somebody to talk about America like as if its sewn up, as if I know what it is, that the Americans want that….

NF: Let's give her the benefit of the doubt here and lets say that what she's saying is that in order for our films to make back the money that it costs us to make them we are obliged to work within a standard Hollywood formula and within the confines of that Hollywood formula we try to get as much of our Irishness into that. That's what the basis of this MA is; it's looking at how cultural identity is maintained within the strictures of the Hollywood film industry.

KL: You could have great tension within that space….

NF: You could, yes, and that's what I'm talking about….

KL: What I'm talking about is when people are given a chance, like a Sheridan or a Jordan, when they're given the chance to talk about, to articulate those ideas, they somehow become very dumb, right, they pansy to the pansy and nobody likes that. Now they may get away with it for 10 years, 15 years, 20 years, like a lot of rock music, but eventually the wheel will turn and you'll look back and you'll go, it doesn't stand up. There is more Irish in fucking John Ford's The Quiet Man then there is in a lot of contemporary Irish films.

NF: But the basis of In America is basically Ulysses…its Joyce and the love of the dead…

KL: But that's aligning yourself to greats when you shouldn't be in the same room as them. How dare they even draw a parallel.

NF: Well the obvious flaw with In America is that if he's going to pretend that there's Irish elements in there then why the fuck isn't there another Irish character in the whole film. I mean, the Irish in New York in the 80s hung out with Irish other Irish…

KL: There are no Irish characters… there's only this big black guy…

NF Let me quote Sheridan's comments on the final shot. We see the little girl's face and she says…she asks us to remember what she looks like as the face fades away, and Sheridan says "…the idea that I'm saying to the audience, you know, remember her face, or your version of her face, but create your own picture in your head, don't always be dependant on the images that are fed to you. Create your own stories, have your own memories, don't let the mass entertainment world take your imaginative life away." (Sheridan: 2004: 01:34:29)

KL: How could I not agree with that? That's absolutely true What I'm saying to you is he says that and then what happens? I get force fed In America down my throat, I turn on the telly, my American lady is over and she has to watch two and a half hours of….

NF: No hang on, we've done that…. I'm asking about what Sheridan says about his film and what we actually see on the screen…

KL: Can I ask you a question?

NF: Yeah.

KL: Do you think you're any less talented or any less articulate or interesting then I am? Of course you don't. Your own life is your own life. What makes this cunt think that we have to listen to all this doggerel? And when you talk about the interplay between filmmaker and critic…just because a filmmaker can put a couple of fucking images together, or get interested in characterisation. All those things that a mechanic does to a fucking car…what makes you think that we are any more fucking important then your fucking mechanic? The only thing that makes it true is the Oscars! Is the red carpet. Is the idea…(TAPE ENDS)

(TAPE STARTS)

NF:…the way you use women in your films and also to the men that you therefore set up.

KL: Well how about applying it to my life? Isn't your life just a reflection of what you do? So therefore if I have been guilty of certain, like for instance, Lelia Doolin said about Horse, she said there are no women in it, but she also said a very clever thing, she said, maybe the absence is part of the oeuvre. Now at that time of course there wasn't a body of work but what I'm saying is then you go on and you think about it right? It never really comes to you on an intellectual level, you never really think…And then after it you go oh yeah, I get it, right? And I can look at the women in my fucking films and I can say first there was the absent and then there was the fleeting glimpse and then there was like, the Virgin Mary. The woman who'll come and heal everything. Now, that probably mirrors my fucking life and my reaction to women.

NF: Let's apply that to the quote we've just read (Stephen Whitehead noted that in:

…The 'everyday world', those behaviours of males that are violent, dysfunctional and oppressive are frequently excused or explained away as 'natural' masculine behaviour, being understood in common–sense terms as fixed and, thus, as an inevitable aspect of social 'reality'. A key aim of feminism is to critique and destabilize such notions, the ultimate intention being to challenge those practices and beliefs that contribute to sustaining men's power.[ii])

KL: Now hold on a minute here. In the 60s there was a guy who went into a laboratory and he made a pill and that pill meant that women could fuck with impunity, right, without consequence, and they called it the sexual liberation. Terrific man. I'm all into it, believe me. And then you go to the 70s and the 80s and everything like that, and you end up…

NF: I want to keep you to Country here… You refer to Miriam as the Virgin Mary, but you refer to her as this presence that moves into a male world and its nearly like her job, her function, is…

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KL: ..to make it all complete. Well you know what, I would say that that's.... I would hanker after that notion even though 1 don't subscribe to it on a political level, but on a personal level I would hanker after the notion that we all need to complete each other, right, I'd be a little bit of a hippy that way.

NF Did you see Breaking the Waves?

KL: I did and I found it repulsive.

NF: Did you not think it's the same notion?

KL: No, no. Excuse me; I did not, Because I'm fucking telling you one thing. That film was so misogynistic that I even felt like a woman watching it. That's a crap movie. Beat you, stay there...

NF: Look, I'm trying to keep you on Country. What you're saying is this woman comes on like the Virgin Mary in Country. She walks into a male dominated environment and her function would appear to be to fix it, OK?

KL: Well hold on a minute here, because you're talking about artistic things. You can't just fucking reduce it. Hold on, what you're really talking about is yes, your plank of nature, your fucking schemata; you want to push it on Country, of course. However, the wonderful thing, yes, she wanted to come in and yes, me as a writer made her come in to fix things. But as a director I picked a wonderful actress and the lines in her face meant she wasn't a fucking gollywog, the idea of a black fellah... that there was something about her that you went, can I go with this? Can I understand through this metaphor other things? Because we all use metaphors, we all use language. I mean we've acquiesced into the fucking social order so I picked Lisa Harrow, not some fat bitch from Fair City. Lisa Harrow did it though, because people went, 'She is lovely though'. And I was relying on that, yes to get over what? What you're talking about, a thematic leaning towards? Of course! You lean towards the thematic, everybody leans towards the thematic, but my job as a filmmaker is not to just sketch out a fucking landscape, but to fill it in with love, with sensuality, and she was a very sensuous woman, and she was great in the role. And of course you can say, well, but she exemplifies the idea of a woman coming back. Listen that's been done for years, the guy comes back. I mean it's a genre, its what you do along the way. One of the most important scenes in Country, for me, because it mirrored my own fucking life, was when she came in, and he was out in the outhouse, and she said 'They're all off now.', right, and they were going away from the funeral and she came in and she hadn't seen him in ages and he was a little boy and he was stroking a little cat on a bale of fucking hay, and she said 'How are you doing.', and she asked him questions and he didn't fucking answer, and then she said 'I best go then.' And as she left he said 'We used to talk to each other every day', about the Uncle Jimmy, and there's a tear that broke and she turned around and she went, 'I know'. Now if you ask me does that exemplify or add flesh to a thematic, 1 don't know, but I'm telling you one thing, women have always been a huge part of my life you see, but I won't let them get away with anything. Because they brought us up. Since the fucking 60s they go on and they've got their stuff. They already had their stuff. We just had to institutionalise it, give it to them. They're more important then we are.

NF: Let's go back to McLoone and some of the McLoone stuff in his book. What about the Irish mother in films? She's now seen virtually as an archetype.

KL: I have to say hand on my heart if I ever made a film where the Irish mother was an archetype I'd shoot myself...

NF: No, I know you haven't, but I'm asking you what you think of the archetype?

KL: Well I think it's appalling. I think it ghettoises...

NF: What is it a concretisation of? Why does it crop up so often?

KL: Don't just blame it on the fucking Irish. Hold on, it fucking crops up with the Jewish religion, right?

NF: I agree. All these academics cover Irish film from the point of view that it has to be explained in terms of the country's history, in terms of post-colonialism, in terms of the after effects of the Great Famine, the after effects of 600 years of oppression...

KL: You know what, honestly. When I go abroad and see my films somewhere else I'm constantly shocked. I never made them as Irish films. I just made them as something...

NF: Sorry, what shocks you?

KL: The idea that all of them are going like that... fuck it, that's fucking great, or what the fuck or whatever. It's the dialogue.

NF: So you watch it with an audience that isn't engulfed in Irish history and the reaction is totally different?

KL: The reaction is the exact same. I've met fucking people from Belarus, from fucking Poland, right, from here and there. I've met motherfuckers from Tucson Arizona and they look and they go like that... Good luck. It's the same. Now, they might not get this bit of it or that bit of it but they get the overwhelming undercurrent. That's what art is. Overwhelming undercurrent.

NF: You talked to me way way back about A Soldiers Song. About how you felt that the point of A Soldiers Song was that you were going to show that you could direct crowds, you could direct... that you had the directing skills necessary for mainstream Hollywood, yeah?

KL: Yeah.

NF: So where do you stand on that. A lot of what you're saying now, you're very adamant that you're true to your culture for want of a better word...

KL: Yeah, but that's not true. I'm not.

NF: Well hang on, what we've been talking about up to now, you've been saying that its not about emulating Hollywood, its not about the Sheridans and the Jordans. What I'm asking you is as somebody who has to earn a crust, where does that compromise come in terms of the Hollywood mainstream versus your own stories and your own sense of Irish identity.

KL: Well, I'll tell you one thing, the filmmaker that I most admire in this world is Ken Loach 'cos I think that that man can keep on making movies after 40 years and just keep making them. And somebody should stop him, but they can't. And he's never drawn on other filmmakers, he never talks about other filmmakers, he goes 'I do my shit'. Can you imagine? As a radical, political.

NF: He's done Hollywood every now and again. He did the one about the Hispanic maids.

KL: What's it called?

NF: I can't remember.

KL: Then he didn't do it... (Laughing) I know there's filmmakers in my life who would just be so delighted to make a film every year and a half. And all right, they might make a bummer every now and again, but they'll still make it.

NF: I'm trying to hold you to this notion that you make films the way you want to make films and you living in a commercial world....

KL: I can't do that...

NF: But you talked about making A Soldiers Song to show people that you could do the big budget...

KL: That's exactly what I'm saying to you. For me... wouldn't it be appalling if you knew a friend who was a wonderful opera singer and yet they wouldn't let her sing? Wouldn't that be a terrible state? Now, I don't want money, well, a little bit, but it's not my mainstay. My mainstay is to find out who I am, to find out who everybody is, but not on a big fucking project, just in a localised area. Out of the local comes fucking drama as far as I'm concerned. So I would just like to make a picture. The reason I'm getting so excited about my new venture... you know what, I did deify. Country, I met people and they came out of it and they just started crying, I thought that's lovely. Now, I just made it. I met other people came out who said I couldn't be tossed, its crap, but that's OK too. But why can't we have an arena where one can make those types of things and yet at the same time let these vulgarities. Because people think just because you're successful, that you are successful. It's not true. It's not true.

NF: Your films are based on your own life experience, but what sort of role did the Joe's and Bob's and Lelia's from a teaching perspective have on shaping the actual tools that you brought to do with...

KL: Well first of all I think recognising the female part of me, I think that was the first thing they did. They recognised that I was full of bluster and yet at the same time they also knew I needed guidance. In this strict mathematical world that we live in, in these financial times that we live in, nobody ever gave me that worth. They turned around to me and they went, yeah we know you're a dickhead and there was a sense of liberation about that because then you went, yeah I am. So, I think they had a surrogate mother role for me. And that's what they promoted. Because you can teach people technique, you can teach people whatever you want to teach them, and they will be adept. But that's the most important thing they did.

NF: What I'm trying to get it back to is the big key argument that runs through Irish film is that we have sacrificed a glorious indigenous industry that dealt with real issues, that dealt with real shit that was going on for a 'c'mon lets jump on the Hollywood bandwagon lads.' Now, what I'm saying to you is you're struggling against the bandwagon; you're trying to carry on the ideas that were around in the 70s and 80s. What are those ideas? What did the guys bring to you and I'm not talking about the personal interest they took in you, I'm talking about in terms of your oeuvre what did the guys bring to you?

KL: Well, sometimes I know when I'm writing a script, or a scene, I can hear those ghosts behind me saying, 'bullshit'…

NF: But can you define what it was that they taught you?

KL: A sense of authenticity. There's no doubt about that. A sense of authenticity. If you're asking me about some, and again you're back to that vulgar, logical… The idea that one can be schematic, how schematic can you be, really, when say, for instance, I met a man who taught me everything about schema, Roland Barthes, wonderful issues, and yet when his personal life fell apart there was no room in his life for schemata,' cos he just fell apart. So isn't that the tension between academia and art?

NF: Again I want to bring you back. You're one of the few filmmakers who's carried on the 70s and 80s poetics and that's what I'm trying to define, what are those poetics? What is it that you would use to describe what separates your stuff from the 80 or 90% of shit that's out there? What was it that identifies?

KL: I'll tell you what it is. I'll tell you. It might be the idea of just somebody walking by you and you like the smell of them. We're talking about art and you're trying to schematise it. You're trying to say what is it. I would like to articulate it as well, I would like to be able to say, it's this, but I don't know. I've never been good at a pitch. You're trying to reach towards a meaning and so am I. You seem to think that like, artists are like politicians, that they have the fucking answer. I'm not sure.

(END OF TAPE)

[i] SHERIDAN KIRSTEN. *Cited by* MERRITT.STEPHANIE. (2003) 'The Observer' 'Review Section'. 'In the Pain of the Father'. October 12th p8.
[ii] WHITEHEAD. STEPHEN M. (2002). 'Men and Masculinities: Key Themes and New Directions'. Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p8

Fintan Connolly Interview (Answers Only): July 12th: 2004.

I don't know if Irish film-makers want their characters to succeed...

It's not all about just the character; it's about the particular place. Dublin, for example, fascinates me....

I think you've got the trilogy...you've got the girl he's going out with, the girl he meets and I suppose an idea of a girl he has....

I was in Rathmines, Patsy (Murphy) was there, I remember Lelia was there on and off, and a guy called Michael Morris. Vivienne was there too; she was one of my teachers. There was guest lectures by Cathal, Joe, Bob, Pat, but when you're a student it was basically like, well they see those movies, they have their view, right, and then here we are so, you listen to them and go 'Ah fuck this, you know what I mean? I'm going to do it differently when I get a chance.

I love American movies, but I also love Japanese movies, Chinese, Korean, Italian, whatever strikes you. I like stories with good characters.

I think I had a reaction against the teaching of Irish film, that Irish film should be all about you know, just us – ourselves alone kind of thing. I'm trying to keep a kind of happy medium I suppose. Obviously I want to make more and that's all I want to do. I mean its more motivation then an agenda but I definitely think that the people who taught me had an agenda. Now, I didn't really care for what that agenda was.

I think like in the 70s and 80s everything was up for grabs and you could be political. Now the business of film isn't really about your personal view or messages. I mean nobody cares about messages anymore. I think there are three or four films on in the Fleadh about church and abuse or whatever so that's maybe a carry over, but I'm more interested in the inter-personal stuff.

It's very hard for someone coming from a more marginalized background to make a film. I know plenty of people I've met over the years who would love to make a movie but just don't have the wherewithal, don't have that kind of contact.

I think that they are campaigners; they campaigned for films when we were all growing up and I really do think that's very good. I think the Film Board being closed down, number one, was a political whim just like the new one can be closed down tomorrow, who knows, but in terms of how they fared I don't know, you'd have to ask them. I don't think there's been a lot of movies from them in that ten years, you know, I think Joe's made one or two, Cathal's made one or two, don't know about Bob, and Pat's made one or two. Ten years you'd imagine there'd be more but maybe people don't want their films...

In the 70s and 80s there was that time for a critical period. Now it's all like one big scenario, even politics has changed; everything is middle of the road or even centre right. I don't think the Film Board Mark 11 is in league with Bord Failte. Things like This Is My Father, Some Mother's Son, I mean they're getting at something. I think you've got to support it. I mean everyone has an opinion but and I mean maybe now with the ten year retrospective…. But its more the bureaucracy I suppose that influences things then the actual film-makers.

Business has taken over Irish film and everything is looked at from that point of view.

I suppose a lot of things are quite political, like with a small 'p', but like I said the film board could close tomorrow and what would happen then? It's a subsidy driven business so we can't compete with the Americans, there's no doubt about that. Imitating their movies doesn't work. Imitating their movies on a budget of half a million? Forget about it. I think there are bigger problems then like the Board or the politics. I think there's not enough development of writing, directing, two essential ingredients. There are loads of courses for trainee sound assistant or producers or whatever, I mean, how can you train a producer? But in terms of writing there's a problem there. We're very literary based, the Irish are very literary, but I spent a lot of time working on this film and looking for an Irish co-writer and didn't find one. I had to go to England…

There hasn't been an emergence of Irish film making because it's now overrun by production. Production is the Gospel. Everybody is producing budgets, schedules, nobody really talks about the movies themselves.

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Short Cuts, 1993. Film. Directed by Robert ALTMAN. USA: Artifical Eye / Spelling / Fine Line /Avenue.

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The Boxer, 1998. Film. Directed by Jim SHERIDAN. Ireland/USA: Universal Pictures / Hell's Kitchen.

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The Crooked Mile, 2001. Film. Directed by Stephen KANE. Ireland : IFB / Campbell Ryan Productions.

The Crying Game, 1992. Film. Directed by Neil JORDAN. UK: Palace / Channel 4 / Eurotrustees / NDF / British Screen.

The Disappearance of Finbar, 1995. Film. Directed by Sue CLAYTON.Ireland: First City Features / Samson Films / Victoria Films AB.

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The Field, 1990. Film. Directed by Jim SHERIDAN. Ireland/UK: Granada Film Productions / Sovereign Pictures / Hell's Kitchen.

The Fifth Province, 1997. Film. Directed by Frank STAPLETON. Ireland: Ocean Film Productions /A Strawberry Vale / Geissendorfer Films.

The French Connection, 1971. Film. Directed by William FRIEDKIN. USA:20th Century Fox / D'Antoni Productions / Schine-Moore Productions.

The Full Monty, 1997. Film. Directed by Peter CATTANEO. UK/USA: TCF / Redwave.

The General, 1998. Film. Directed by John BOORMAN. Ireland/UK: Warner / Merlin Films / J&M.

The Good Thief, 2002. Film. Directed by Neil JORDAN. UK/France/Ireland: Momentum / Alliance Atlantis / TNVO / Sarl / Double Down / Metropolitan.

The Lad From Old Ireland, 1910. Film. Directed by Sidney OLCOTT. USA: Kalem Production Company.

The Last Bus Home, 1997. Film. Directed by Johnny GOGAN. Ireland: IFB / Grand Pictures / Bandit Films.

The Last September, 1999. Film. Directed by Deborah WARNER. Ireland/UK/France: BskyB / British Screen Productions / IFB / IMA Productions / Le Studio Canal+ / Matrix Films / RTE / Scala Thunder.

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The Magdalene Sisters, 2002. Film. Directed by Peter MULLEN. UK/Ireland: Element Films / IFB / Film Council of Great Britain / Momentum Pictures / PFP Films Ltd / Scottish Screen / Temple Films..

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The Promise of Barty O'Brien. 1951. Film. Directed by George FREEDLAND. Ireland.

The Quiet Man, 1952. Film. Directed by John FORD. USA:Republic / Argosy.

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Widow's Peak, 1993. Film. Directed by John IRVIN. UK: Rank Organisation / Fine Line Features / British Screen.

Wonderland, 1999. Film. Directed by Michael WINTERBOTTOM. UK: Universal / BBC / Kisret / Revolution.

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