

The identity of an Irish cinema

Harvey O'Brien

3rd edition, 2007.

Introduction

When Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989) collected the second of its two statuettes at the Academy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles in 1990, Daniel Day-Lewis remarked that the voters had given him the makings of one hell of a night out in Dublin. He was right. The success of *My Left Foot* was an ironic triumph for an Irish film industry which had seemed crushed and beaten. The closure of the Irish Film Board just three years before was largely seen as the death knell of a cinema which had begun to make halting steps towards the regular production of features. Some of the films produced during the seven years of operation of the Board, such as Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982), Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), and Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* (1987) had demonstrated a distinctive perspective. They signaled that something important was happening in Irish cinema after years of obscurity in the shadow of Irish literature. Unique artistic voices had begun to find expression, crafting filmic images as vivid and memorable as those of poets and novelists and addressing themes as expansive and provocative as any before them.

In fact, *My Left Foot*, a biographical drama made in the classic Hollywood style, would have seemed an unlikely saviour for the Irish film industry, which had struggled throughout the 1970s and 1980s to establish a sense of identity which was definitively anti-classical. Throughout its long history, Irish cinema had continually struggled with notions of identity, attempting to create a space for itself between powerful arbiters of economic and psychic definition, be they the winds of empire from across the Irish Sea or the exhortations of capitalism heard from across the Atlantic. In *Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone?* (1996), a documentary written by film historian Kevin Rockett and directed by Donald Taylor Black to mark the centenary of cinema, Jim Sheridan himself joked: "Identity, identity, identity. It's like a mantra in this country. I think the real reason we're so concerned about identity is because we're worried that we haven't got one." He may have been right.

Beginnings

The story of Irish cinema begins much as the story of cinema elsewhere in Europe. As early as April 1896, four months after the Paris debut of the Lumière Cinematographe, moving pictures were being shown in Dublin city. Kevin Rockett records that over seven thousand people attended Lumière screenings during one week in October 1896. The first images of Ireland on film were made not long after by visiting Lumière cameramen. Seen today these comparatively innocent scenes of life in the cities and countryside of Imperial Ireland speak of a world in quiet transition. Ironically, the changes that were about to wrack the Irish land and people were not so much harbingers of progress as the chaotic omens of willful atavism. The urban spaces replete with vehicles, commerce, and

modernity seen by the Lumière camera would soon be replaced in the world's consciousness first with scenes of violence then with scenes of rural romanticism, a country seemingly blissful in its embrace of the primitive.

The conflicts which defined the development of Irish cinema in the years immediately before and after political independence were both economic and political in nature. Irish culture and society had already undergone significant shifts in the wake of the Great Famine, chief among them the effects of the flight of so many Irish men and women to other countries. Ireland itself, even though part of the British Empire, was arguably too small to produce a fully-fledged film industry in the early years. It certainly did not produce indigenous film production companies until 1916. The departed masses, later to be called the diaspora, would soon play a significant role in the development of a cinematic image of Ireland however. Films about Irish immigrants abroad were in high demand. Ethnic comedy in general was popular in the United States in particular. Films set in 'the old country' were also desirable, allowing those for whom home was now only a distant memory to bask once more in the glory of a remembered past.

In response to this market demand, short comedies and documentaries around historical and emigration issues were produced sporadically throughout the first years of the twentieth century, including the first acknowledged 'Irish' film *Irish Wives and English Husbands* (1907), made in Ireland by the British Alpha Picture Company under the direction of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper. In particular though, it was the success of *The Lad From Old Ireland* (1910) which set the cycle in motion and inspired the US based Kalem Company to set up a production unit in Ireland itself to make more of the same type of film. *The Lad From Old Ireland* was a typical emigration narrative, telling the story of a young man forced to flee his native land by economic circumstance who achieves success in America and then returns home at the end to save his girlfriend's family from eviction. The dream of wealth on the far-flung shore was a familiar one, but the fantasy of the return was what really appealed to the Irish abroad, and they flocked to see it.

Kalem set up shop in Killarney, the periphery of the British Empire once visited by Queen Victoria herself, which had become a leading European tourist destination. In the space of about three years the Kalem company made some thirty films in Killarney, mostly emigration sagas and historical romances. These were highly successful in America, but also in Ireland itself. Their primarily anti-colonial stories were less well received in mainland Britain though, and only fueled British suspicion of Irish sensibilities. When Kalem's Sidney Olcott directed *Robert Emmet, Ireland's Martyr* in 1914, British censors forced the film to be withdrawn from distribution. Though Killarney looked likely to become Ireland's answer to Hollywood, the outbreak of the First World War brought Kalem's activities to an end. The company pulled out of Ireland in 1914, taking all of their equipment and personnel with them. It was clear that the forces which shaped Ireland's cinematic destiny were not her own.

In 1915 Irish-American lawyer and journalist James Mark Sullivan formed The Film Company of Ireland, registered in 1916 with offices in Sackville Street, Dublin. This

turned out to be a very poor choice of location, because all of their early films, documentation and production offices were destroyed in the Easter Rising. The rebellion against the Crown may have failed in the short term, but as the years went by to the outbreak of the War of Independence, the ferment of Nationalism continued to fuel filmic representation. Once recovered from its initial losses, The Film Company of Ireland went on to reshoot several of their lost films and to make several more, many with actors recruited from the Abbey theatre. Again these were comedies, romances, and historical narratives, the most important being the epic *Knocknagow* (1918) based on the novel by Charles Kickham. This sprawling story of evictions, forced emigration, and triumphant immigration was Sullivan's answer to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the film which had inspired him to set up the company in the first place. There in fact was a film called *Ireland: A Nation* made in 1914, but its struggles with censorship and logistical disaster (the first print of the film to be sent abroad sunk on board *Lusitania* in 1915) held up its wide release until 1917.

Knocknagow went on to become a huge success abroad, actually out-grossing *The Birth of a Nation* in Boston. The Film Company of Ireland continued operating all through the years of the War of Independence, documentary scenes of which were recorded in the newsreel *Irish Events*. In 1920, the company had their biggest ever hit with *Willy Reilly and His Colleen Bawn*, a tragic story based on true events in eighteenth-century Ireland where a Protestant girl in love with a Catholic gentleman came to a violent end. The film supplied a happy ending though, and its romance of thwarted love across the barricades of religion would become a leitmotif of subsequent Irish cinema for the best part of a century. The outbreak of the Civil War was too much for James Mark Sullivan though, who lost his wife and child and decided to return to the United States. The story of Irish cinema reached another chapter break with the end of the Film Company of Ireland, though in this case the seeds of indigenous production had been sown. The production of fiction films and documentaries continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s, though new struggles came to define how Ireland represented itself on screen.

Post Independence Cinema

One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Irish Free State was the Censorship of Films Act (1923). This appointed a film censor to control both films made within the State and originating outside of it. His remit to protect the Irish people from material considered "indecent, obscene, or blasphemous" would have far-reaching consequences for the range of topics that could be addressed in Irish film and for the kinds of ideas which people were exposed to from abroad. Kevin Rockett's epic history of Irish film censorship published in 2004 documents this dark chapter in Irish cultural history, including the re-cutting of *Casablanca* (1942) to remove all references to the fact that Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa was married to Paul Henreid's Victor while she was seeing Humphrey Bogart's Rick in Paris. Such a fact would make her an adulterer, and this was unacceptable in the eyes of the Irish censor, who decided to change the film rather than allow an adulterer to be shown in a sympathetic light.

Film production did continue, although the boundaries of subject matter were clearly defined by the prevailing forces of Church and State. On one hand Catholic morality needed to be upheld at all times, and on the other, only a representation of Irish political history which exhorted the mythology of Republicanism was seen to be of good character. Important films were still made throughout these lean years of economic self-sufficiency and cultural revivalism. In 1926 *Irish Destiny* recounted the events of the War of Independence in epic fashion, though it stopped short of depicting the Civil War, which did not receive comprehensive big screen examination until Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* in 1996. In 1935 Denis Johnston produced and directed *Guests of the Nation*, an adaptation of Frank O'Connor's short story of an English soldier held prisoner by IRA volunteers who come to have sympathy for him as a human being. The film demonstrated the influence of the Soviet style of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, but was considerably less radical. Its story was politically challenging though, and its humanism provided the basis years later for the first act of Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992). Another key film of the 1930s was entrepreneur Thomas Cooper's *The Dawn* (1936), a film made in Killarney where Cooper built the camera himself and shot the film with the help of friends and family. This surprisingly effective semi-amateur film made in the Hollywood style was also a tale of the War of Independence.

Two of the best known films about Ireland from the 1930s were international productions: John Ford's *The Informer* (1935) and Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1935). As many writers have pointed out, particularly John Hill, these films reflect the dominant international impression of Ireland in this period and after: on one hand a dark, war-torn, and tragic place framed by exaggerated, expressionistic horrors of the soul, and on the other a romantically impoverished and backward rural landscape where hardy peasants struggle against impossible odds to maintain their human dignity. If truth be told there were elements of reality to both perspectives, and yet both were greatly exaggerated to serve the particular needs of their makers, neither of whom was an Irish native. But, like the emigrant narratives and historical romances that had gone before them, these films were extremely well received abroad, particularly by those of Irish descent. It is interesting to note that prior to the making of *Man of Aran*, there had been several documentaries which saw Ireland as an emerging modern nation with cities and commerce, but afterward, most of those who came to Ireland to make documentary films sought out the Ireland that Flaherty had shown them.

By the late 1930s, the Irish Government had become interested in film making. In 1937 a Governmental committee was set up to explore the potential role of film in Ireland. The Film Society of Ireland had been established in 1936 to introduce important international films to Irish audiences. This was an independent group led by film pioneer Liam O'Leary and Edward Toner, who organised the Society as a private members' club, and were thereby able to show films not normally distributed in Irish cinemas. Their scandalous screening of the banned Soviet film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was the cause of public outcry, though it also attracted eager audiences including a District Justice who said he would not convict the organisers if they were brought before him provided they let him in to see it! In 1943 the National Film Institute was formed, a Church-sponsored secular organisation with strong Catholic principles which strove to ensure that decent

films were made in accordance with the Papal directives on motion pictures. This body would become a significant producer of non-fiction films throughout the 1940s and was instrumental in all Governmental discussions of the development of a film industry in Ireland. They published a quarterly journal assessing the suitability of films, organised workshops, and provided direct funding for film making, all within the boundaries of a strictly defined moral and ethical agenda.

Debates continued throughout the years of the Second World War, which was called ‘The Emergency’ in Ireland. Unwilling to enter into a military alliance with its former colonial occupier, Ireland remained neutral in the conflict, preferring instead to concentrate on building National identity by reinforcing the image of independence and self-determination. In 1945 *A Nation Once Again* was produced, a documentary celebrating the continuity of Irish political philosophy through the struggle for Catholic rights through the War of Independence and into the era of Taoiseach Éamon deValera. The sense of orthodoxy and intransigence of the Irish Nation was continually reinforced throughout these years, until the making of *Our Country* in 1947. This was a political documentary which vehemently questioned the ideals of the then current government and showed images of urban poverty and rural underdevelopment which were decidedly not romantic. Intended as a political campaign film, the documentary highlighted the willful delusions of progress and development under an increasingly stagnant Irish self-image, and to this day remains one of the very few examples of outright politically oppositional documentary produced in Ireland. Though controversial, the film was followed by Government-sponsored documentaries which used its direct approach to address other social and political questions with Governmental approval. One such film is *Housing Discrimination* (1953), an investigation into electoral misrepresentation in Co. Tyrone which brought protests from the Government of Northern Ireland, who said it was none of the Republic’s business what went on there.

The Ardmore Years

The 1950s saw the consolidation of the international image of Ireland in John Ford’s Irish western *The Quiet Man* (1952). This Technicolor reworking of *The Taming of the Shrew* created some of the most indelible images of Ireland on film, including the first appearance of Maureen O’Hara’s Mary Kate Danaher, a scene so self-consciously idyllic that John Wayne’s Sean Thornton is forced to remark “Is that real? It can’t be.” The film’s story of an Irish emigrant returning home and finding love in the lush landscape was nothing new, but Ford had taken it to new levels of colour and confidence, and not without a touch of irony. Today the film is thought of more fondly than it was even a decade ago, with writers including Luke Gibbons coming around to an appreciation of its qualities of self-parody.

Links between Irish cinema and theatre had existed from its earliest days, and if the appearance of Barry Fitzgerald in *The Quiet Man* was iconic in terms of the character he plays, it was also a reminder of the links between traditions of performance and representation. Throughout the 1950s Abbey players and directors continued to develop their film portfolios in films including *The Rising of the Moon* (1957), *Sally’s Irish Rogue*

(1958), and, most famously *This Other Eden* (1958). *This Other Eden* had been a successful play when first produced at the Abbey theatre in 1953. The film adaptation was one of the first productions made at the brand new Ardmore Studios. Ardmore was the Irish Government's first serious attempt to encourage the development of an Irish Film Industry, a modern studio facility in Co. Wicklow suitable for both national and international production. Ardmore was intended as a signal to the world that Irish cinema had a place on the international stage, and the production of film versions of Abbey plays seemed an ideal means of doing so. *This Other Eden* touched on the mindset of the Civil War generation with its story of the furore caused by a statue of a rebel leader being unveiled in a town where a British man plans to buy the local manor. This explosive subject matter was played as comic satire, but was still sensitive enough to make the play very controversial. The film adaptation was enormously popular at the time, but, interestingly, has not endured in the memory to the extent of others from this decade.

The 1950s closed out with the making of the mammoth historical documentary *Mise Éire* (1959), director George Morrison's chronicle of Irish history from ancient times to the General Election of 1919 when Sinn Féin won seats in the British Parliament. Narrated exclusively in the Irish language and compiled entirely from newsreel footage and newspaper reports from the times it charted, the film was buoyed by a majestic musical score by composer Seán Ó Riada. The film's documenting of the Rising of 1916 and the bloody aftermath of executions is one of the most stirring sequences in all Irish documentary; pregnant with history and meaning and brimming with a sense of sadness and mounting anger. The release of this film was a national event, and probably the most explicit statement of unproblematic nationalism even seen. Schoolchildren were brought to see it in their thousands, the film was celebrated at festivals and heralded as the official history of the Irish State. However, by the time its sequel *Saoirse?* was released in 1961, public mood had shifted, and the second, nearly identical film charting the War of Independence up to the outbreak of the Civil War (which was not fully detailed) was not a success.

Ireland saw itself as moving towards progress in the 1960s. The retirement of Éamon deValera as Taoiseach and the ascension of pragmatic economist Seán Lemass to the leadership of Fianna Fáil, the dominant political party, signaled a new focus on realities and, nominally at least, a move away from traditional ideologies. The world-wide decline in cinema attendance and the launch of Irish television in 1961 had disastrous effects on indigenous film production. Ardmore studios had proved an expensive failure. Its facilities were largely only used by international productions. Due to complicated union agreements and taxation regulations, access proved near impossible for small indigenous production companies, and as big international productions fell away, the studio went through a series of financial restructurings, none of which improved the situation. Probably the most significant indigenous Irish fiction film of the 1960s was Brian Desmond Hurst's adaptation of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1967), though Joseph Strick's American-produced adaptation of *Ulysses* (1967) proved more controversial by far. By the time Hurst's film was released, Synge had become a staple of the Irish literary canon and his work was no longer cause for rioting. Strick's film however was banned in the country in which it was made and set, and remained unreleased until 2003. Both

Playboy and *Ulysses* were literary adaptations though, and reaction to them was essentially filtered through reactions to their sources. The sense that cinema remained subservient to other arts was reinforced.

The most important film of the 1960s was the radical documentary *Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968). Directed by Irish journalist Peter Lennon and photographed by *nouvelle vague* cameraman Raoul Coutard, this angry assault on the conventions of Church and State challenged Ireland's complacent attitude towards progress. Far from being modern in outlook or changing in any significant way, Lennon argued that Ireland had long since lost sight of its revolutionary ideals and become a victim of its own mythologies. He strongly attacked the institutions of Church and State for failing to address the needs of modern people, and, in a freeform *camera-stylo* style, lashed out at almost every aspect of contemporary Irish society. The film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival and hailed as a revolutionary document by the striking students at the Sorbonne. At home, the film was branded communist propaganda and seen only in Dublin city, although Lennon appeared on television defending his point of view. Only in 2005 did the film finally see the wide release it so deserved when after many years of campaigning by the director, the film was picked up for international cinema and DVD distribution. Nearly forty years on, its torrent of anger was still felt by audiences and critics, and the film exceeded expectations by being taken as seriously as any contemporary Irish film in spite of its age.

Lennon was not the only angry young man making films in Ireland in the 1960s. Another documentarist, Cork born Louis Marcus, whose 1967 film *Fleá* had won the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, wrote a series of influential articles for *The Irish Times* in the late 1960s decrying the lack of Government support for the indigenous film industry. It was by now far too late for Ireland to develop a Hollywood style studio system, he argued. He urged instead that the authorities investigate alternative funding models akin to those emerging from European cinemas such as Germany. Small scale, artistically challenging, distinctive Irish films was the goal, and the only way to make this happen was the establishment of a Film Board. This was debated in the Irish Parliament in 1970 when the first Film Bill was introduced, however it did not pass and the Government opted instead to continue to put its energies into Ardmore. The year 1970 also saw the release of David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter*, a romantic epic in keeping with the themes of early twentieth century Irish-themed international cinema but with added explicit sexual content and on-screen violence. These were also the years during which Northern Ireland once again exploded with real-life violence, and it is no surprise that supporting the film industry was not a top priority of the Governments of the day. In 1973 Ardmore was sold to Radio Telefis Éireann, and in 1975 became The National Film Studios of Ireland. It continued to lose money though, and had to be kept afloat with Government grants until it was made a semi-state body in 1977 and finally closed in 1982. Its re-opening in later years under private investment came at a different time following a whole new chapter in the evolution of cinema in Ireland in which the Ardmore played no significant part. The shift in identity was now away from emulating mainstream Britain and America and more towards art-house Europe.

The New Wave

European art cinema had begun to find its feet again in the wake of the Second World War, particularly with breakthroughs like Ingmar Bergman and Andrej Wajda reaching a world audience. However it was arguably the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962 which cemented the determination among independent indigenous filmmakers everywhere that a National cinema should express not so much a single, coherent view of the nation as express the informed personal perspectives of artists with something to say about their own society. It would take many years for this attitude to ferment in Irish society, but by the mid 1970s, it had done so.

Bob Quinn was a maker of television documentaries and a student of culture and society who chose to strike out on his own as an independent film-maker. In 1975 he directed the first of the films of the Irish New Wave, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*. Based on a traditional Irish poetic lament, the film was a radically self-reflexive reconsideration of the nature of Irish identity and its representation. The film has several narrative threads, one concerning a film version of the poem which has been made by an Irish-language acting troupe, and another concerning the actors from the film who are now rehearsing a play using the film as part of the production under the direction of an English theatre director. The threads of past and present, performance and reconstruction, 'real' world and 'acting' world are drawn together through a stylistically radical structure as the actors challenge the director. The audience too are challenged to sift through the maze of representation and find that there is no authentic centre, only a series of constructed ideological fallacies which define 'Irish' identity through both spoken and filmic 'language'. Financed by the then left-leaning quasi-Marxist Sinn Féin, The Worker's Party (which no longer exists), it was the first independently politically funded film since *Our Country* in 1947.

Quinn went on to become one of the most distinctive voices in Irish cinema, working both in documentary and fiction film. He was chosen as director of Colm Bairéad's script *Poitin*, the first film to win the new Arts Council Script Award in 1977. Now looking to small-scale funding models for precedent, the Irish Government had sponsored the establishment of several bodies like the Arts Council, and these became an important outlet for filmmakers at this time. *Poitin* (1978) was another self-consciously revisionist take on notions of Irishness. The film is set in the contemporary West of Ireland, where an elderly poitin maker played by Cyril Cusack is defrauded and eventually attacked by his henchmen, who try to rape his daughter. The film featured criminal activities and car chases not very much different from those in a classic Hollywood gangster film, but the rural imagery and overall the bleak austerity of the resolution subverted conventional expectations both of genre and of 'quirky' Irish characters. Quinn further subverted expectation with his documentaries *Family* (1978) and *Atlantean* (1984), the former presenting the life of a hippy commune in the West of Ireland as an alternative to traditional notions of familial relationships, the latter an epic three-part television series which used conventional and unconventional means to deconstruct the fundamental basis of Irish cultural identity.

Quinn consistently strove for an aesthetic which was uniquely Irish, while constantly questioning the nature of Irishness and the comfortable definitions by which most Irish

people chose to live. He was not alone in his search. Filmmaker Joe Comerford was also active at this time. His films *Down the Corner* (1977) and *Withdrawal* (1979) were instrumental in foregrounding realism as a means of addressing real issues in the new Ireland, but as his later films *Reefer and the Model* and *High Boot Benny* (1993) would show, realism was only the beginning of something more deeply reflexive and subversive. In Comerford's films, reality itself has a dreamlike quality, or rather a nightmarish one. Bizarre narrative feints, schisms between sound and image, and odd characterisation were typical in his films, and yet somehow they managed to seem realistic, relevant, and provocative. Cinematographer and director Thaddeus O'Sullivan also began making films in this period using elements of documentary and docudrama. His abstract experimental films *A Pint of Plain* (1977) and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) were partly funded through the British Film Institute, as was Joe Comerford's *Traveler* (1981) based on a script by relatively unknown Irish author Neil Jordan. Cathal Black's *Our Boys* proved the most controversial of all when produced for Irish television in 1981. This mixture of documentary and drama depicted and reflected upon the physical abuse of boys by the Christian Brothers, the religious organisation responsible for most male Primary education in Ireland. Using interviews with former students intercut with a black and white drama showing the last days of a Christian Brothers' school, Black became the first Irish filmmaker to directly confront the issue of physical abuse in institutional care, but the film was considered too sensitive for broadcast and was not shown on Irish television until 1991.

By the early 1980s, it was evident that Irish film had found its feet as a means of serious self-scrutiny and a challenge to expectations of Irish identity. These films were not widely seen by mainstream audiences though, and the prevailing social mood in the country was still conservative. Referenda on abortion and divorce were both defeated in the early 1980s and there was a bizarre outbreak of Catholic superstition when 'moving' statues were seen in several sites around the country, causing a wave of hysterical Marian worship. Yet the wave of change was swelling, measured to a strong degree by the increasing political role played by women. High profile public campaigns such as the famous 'condom train' where women traveled to Belfast to return with illegal contraceptives, a campaign to raise the legal age of marriage, and eventually the Employment Equality Act of 1977, were the result of agitation by feminist activists, and these and other events led by women significantly affected the perception of Irish femininity, so long locked into compliant provincialism. Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1981) was the boldest cinematic assertion of the new sense of Irish femininity, a BFI funded, co-directed film set in Northern Ireland where a young woman revisits her old friends and family having found a new sense of herself by leaving home. It was, yes, an emigrant narrative, but one fused with a cinematic sensibility informed by the events of the 1960s and 70s, where Marxist radicalism and contemporary Northern Irish politics ran together through the perceptive filter of a strong, independent-minded woman. Murphy followed this film with the beautifully photographed historical drama *Anne Devlin* in 1984 which challenged perceptions of history by charting the events of the 1803 rebellion from the perspective of a woman literally at the fringes of the action. Featuring many long, slow-moving scenes exploring the relationship between psychic, political, and personal space,

the film sustained a particular pace and rhythm which brilliantly captured the sense of passing time in the nominally empty spaces of history.

What all of these New Wave films have in common is their desire to challenge what had gone before them in cinematic terms. These films aggressively debunked stereotypical images of Ireland and Irish people on film and sought to challenge audiences to see Ireland in a different light. As such their mission was, ironically, one with a limited lifespan, as once the breakthroughs came and the boundaries had been broken, who knew what would happen?

The establishment of the Film Board in 1980 was a pivotal moment. After years of lobbying, Irish independent filmmakers were finally to be given a chance to bring feature projects to fruition with State support but without direct State control. In its first year of operation, the Board partially funded the making of Neil Jordan's debut film *Angel* (1982), for which the Film Board provided £100,000. Though this would seem to make it doubly important, as it launched the career of Ireland's most important film maker, all was not as it seemed. Jordan was still comparatively unknown, and though he had written the script for *Traveler* and directed a 'making of' documentary for John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), he had virtually no experience compared to filmmakers like Comerford, Quinn, and O'Sullivan, all of whom had struggled long and hard and were seemingly not acknowledged by the Board funding this unknown upstart.

When *Angel* premiered at the Cork Film Festival in 1982, there were angry scenes, not celebrations. Members of the audience from the film industry complained that this film did not represent Irish cinema. It was mostly British-financed, they pointed out, and it was insinuated that the only reason Jordan was favoured was because Boorman was a member of the Film Board. Also, the film was not well received in itself. It was seen to be reinforcing the traditional image of Ireland as a mystical place in the grip of irrational and apolitical violence. The story of saxophonist Danny (Stephen Rea) turning to murder to avenge the death of a mute girl was seen not so much for what it was in itself - a meditative, surrealistic cine-poem from a young filmmaker exploring a new medium - and more in terms of what it had failed to do in terms of the output of an ideal National cinema. It was as if the establishment of the Film Board meant that the National film effort was alive once again as it had been in the 1940s, but now, with talented, creative, left-leaning individuals at work, it had a chance to posit a different kind of society. It was evident from debates in the press and public shouting matches like at Cork that Irish filmmakers had become so self-conscious about their aesthetic and political concerns that they were perhaps unable to see that once the flood gate opens, the torrent that rushes through can take you in unexpected directions.

The first years of operation of the Irish Film Board were marred by internecine squabbling. Irish resident John Boorman quickly resigned his position on the Board in disgust with the comment that "there's a lack of ambition in this country. There's a sense of being in love with failure." These tempestuous years nonetheless saw the project of the New Wave continuing towards its latter days. Cathal Black's *Pigs* (1984), Kieran Hickey's *Criminal Conversation* (1980), Tommy McArdle's *It's Handy When People*

Don't Die (1980), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's short *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985), Bob Quinn's *Budawanny* (1987) and Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* (1987) were all made at this time: all part of the investigative, deconstructive new tradition of Irish film-making. Comerford's *Reefer* was particularly strange, fusing the classic 'gang on the run' genre with heightened absurdist realism. The film also featured a homosexual couple dancing and ended with a woman giving birth - images challenging to contemporary audiences even on a thematic level. However, the most popular film of the era was the decidedly more whimsical *Eat the Peach* (1986) a light comedy based on a true story of two men who decided to build a motorcycle 'wall of death' in the midlands of rural Ireland. This offbeat film harkened back to the older tradition of viewing the activities of the Irish as eccentric and provincial, and yet Irish audiences responded warmly to its blend of the hard-hitting realism of the New Wave and something gentler by far.

In spite of all of this film making activity, Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey disbanded the Film Board in 1987 on grounds of lack of profitability. Though it had been a source of contention among the film making community, The Film Board was still a lifeline for the sensibility of the New Wave and its loss was seen as disastrous. By the time the Board was re-activated in 1993, everything had changed.

The International Years

As far back as Rex Ingram (*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 1921), Irish directors had gone to Hollywood and Great Britain, but the 1980s saw Pat O'Connor and Neil Jordan become the best known Irish filmmakers in the world by not making films in Ireland. O'Connor had directed the acclaimed television play *The Ballroom of Romance* in 1982 before making the IRA drama *Cal* (1984) for producer David Puttnam. Though an excessively familiar tale of love across the barricades, *Cal* became a huge international success. It was nominated for the Palme D'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. O'Connor then made the English heritage film *A Month in the Country* (1987) starring Colin Firth and Kenneth Branagh before moving to the US to make the comedies *Stars and Bars* (1988) with Daniel Day-Lewis and *The January Man* (1989) with Kevin Kline. Likewise Jordan survived the domestic reception of *Angel* to receive international acclaim including the London Evening Standard's Most Promising Newcomer award. He remained in the UK to make the haunting Angela Carter-penned adult fantasy film *The Company of Wolves* (1984) and the award-winning psychological drama *Mona Lisa* (1986) before also going to America to make the big budget supernatural comedy *High Spirits* (1988) and the David Mamet-penned remake of *We're No Angels* (1989).

The year 1989 also saw the release of *My Left Foot*, a film that is arguably the pivot upon which the story of Irish cinema turns. *My Left Foot* was, on one hand, a product of the creative explosion of the New Wave, but it was also the beginning of the outward-looking modern Irish cinema. Based on the true story of artist and writer Christy Brown, *My Left Foot* was essentially a familiar tale of an underdog succeeding against the odds, but its sense of perspective was strong, clear, and distinctive, brilliantly illustrated by surefooted direction from Sheridan and Oscar-winning performances from Brenda

Fricker and Daniel Day-Lewis. Sheridan's own background was primarily in theatre, which obviously paid dividends in his instincts with performers, and the film resonated with audiences all over the world. Sheridan followed this film with an adaptation of John B. Keane's play *The Field* (1990) starring Richard Harris, and then the massively controversial but also hugely successful *In the Name of the Father* (1993) with Daniel Day-Lewis and Emma Thompson, based on the true story of Gerry Conlon, a young man arrested and imprisoned for terrorist acts he did not commit. Both *The Field* and *In the Name of the Father* followed *My Left Foot* in having broad international appeal. Their straightforward approach to the material relying upon strong central performances made them ideal for export, and though *The Field* was heavily criticised in Ireland, it went on to again achieve Oscar recognition (a nomination for Richard Harris), keeping the eyes of the world on Ireland until the next big thing.

In the wake of *My Left Foot*, Pat O'Connor and Neil Jordan returned home to make smaller-scale, personal projects, making the classic emigration narratives come true. O'Connor's *Fools of Fortune* (1990) was a heritage drama based on the novel by William Trevor (who had authored *The Ballroom of Romance*). Jordan's *The Miracle* (1991), still his favourite of his own films, was an enchanting tale of a boy who unwittingly falls in love with his own mother. Other indigenous productions released during this time included such acclaimed films as Margo Harkin's Northern Irish pregnancy drama *Hush-a-Bye-Baby* (1989), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's Northern Irish marital drama *December Bride* (1990), and Joe Comerford's border country drama *High Boot Benny* (1993). Harkin's film emerged out of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, a co-operative body operating with finance from sources on both sides of the border and in the UK. The Workshop also produced Anne Crilly's feminist documentary *Mother Ireland* (1988) which was banned by its own commissioning authority, the UK TV station Channel 4. Its linking of the causes of feminism and nationalism was seen as too risky to air in Britain, especially because the film featured an interview with IRA volunteer Mairéad Farrell, who had subsequently been shot by the SAS in Gibraltar. Equally important in documentary terms was Alan Gilsean's angry attack on the economic and social attitudes of 1980s Ireland, *The Road to God Knows Where* (1988), a film also commissioned by Channel 4 but shown on RTÉ amid a storm of controversy. The film's damning portrait of a country wrapped in nostalgia but dying in squalor recalled the ire of *Our Country* and *Rocky Road to Dublin*, but its release in a whole new environment brought protests from Governmental agencies and sparked significant public debate on the Irish economy.

In 1991 attention shifted to British director Alan Parker's adaptation of novelist Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments*, which combined national and international contexts in its story of a working class Dublin band who play American soul music. Again the film was criticised at home, where increasingly concerned cultural critics were asking what cost the popularity of Irish-themed film would have for Ireland's sense of itself, but the successes continued. Sheridan's early career script *Into the West* was filmed by director Mike Newell in 1992. This mystical tale of traveler children on the run with a beautiful white horse instantly became perceived as a family classic, touching once again on the long tradition of Irish magic and whimsy recalled from the days of *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959). The year 1992 also saw the first big Hollywood-backed Irish-

themed romantic epic since *Ryan's Daughter*, Ron Howard's *Far and Away* with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. It also saw Neil Jordan reach superstar status with the release of *The Crying Game* (1992), a mixture of elements of *Guests of the Nation* and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* with a reversal of Jordan's own *Angel* as an IRA volunteer turns away from violence in the name of love and conscience. The film's notorious gender-bending twist (the woman he falls in love with is a man) became a prime marketing tool for the Miramax corporation, who distributed the film in the United States. After a slow initial response, the film gained momentum enough to earn \$62m at the box office and garner seven Oscar nominations, winning one for Best Screenplay.

The Irish Government could not but respond to the demand to hear what the Irish were saying by re-establishing the Film Board, which they did in 1993. This was also the year of *The Snapper*, the first sequel to *The Commitments*, and, more controversially by far, Joe Comerford's *High Boot Benny*. The release of *High Boot Benny* was an especially important moment, signifying that the days of the New Wave had finally come to an end. Once one of the leading figures in the New Wave, Comerford's position in the industry had slipped since *Reefer*, and he was now widely seen as a relic: a self-indulgent aesthete out of step with the new film culture. *High Boot Benny*, with its dark and introverted rehashing themes of the sectarian divide just as the Northern Irish ceasefires had gotten underway and its deliberately uncompromising visual style, was not generally well received. A stridently negative review in *Film Ireland*, the country's leading film magazine, led to a public confrontation between the film-maker and the editor, with the values of cinema itself at its heart. Comerford continued to argue for an Irish cinema which was uniquely personal and challenging, while the prevailing winds were towards outward-looking, accessible narratives that would reach beyond Irish shores. *High Boot Benny* was to prove the last significant film of the New Wave. Bob Quinn's *The Bishop's Story* followed later in 1994 and was well received by critics, but this seemed like an old master revisiting earlier triumphs and was treated more with respect and admiration than genuine excitement: that was reserved for the Oscar campaign of *In the Name of the Father*, which, like *The Crying Game* before it, earned seven nominations in 1994, though it lost out to that year's big winner, *Schindler's List* (1993) starring Irish actor Liam Neeson.

The Celtic Tiger

It can be argued that the successes of the inter-board years were the direct result of the struggles of the years before, and that the return of the Film Board was therefore also a direct result of the New Wave, but little of its sensibility survived the hiatus between 1987 and 1993. Though self-conscious art films were made in the 1990s, such as Paddy Breathnach's *Ailsa* (1994) about a man obsessing over his American housemate, Mary McGuckian's Yeats adaptation *Words Upon the Window Pane* (1994) featuring time-travel and Jonathan Swift played by Jim Sheridan, and Nichola Bruce's *I Could Read the Sky* (1999), an abstract meditation on emigration a long way from its forebears in the early twentieth century but not far from O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, such films were now at the fringes of an increasingly mainstream film culture. The New Film Board was essentially a continuation of the old one, but with a bigger budget, new

personnel, and the benefit of relaxed regulations on tax relief, all of which fueled the fires of film production to levels hithertofore undreamed of on the island.

The same was true of Irish culture and society on the whole. Following the economic wasteland of the 1980s, the 1990s saw the slow rise of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger', a period of economic prosperity which accelerated from the mid 1990s through to the first years of the new millennium before slowing down once again. In this new, confident, outward looking Ireland many saw a decline in traditional values and a loss of faith in venerated institutions. A series of public scandals and tribunals into political corruption shattered the authority of the patrimonial State while almost simultaneously a series of revelations about the treatment of young people in the care of religious orders became more and more shocking. From relatively innocent matters such as the secret families of Priests and Bishops to the more serious allegations of sexual abuse, the 1990s saw the erosion of the authority of the Church. Though the media played an active role on the level of talk shows and newspaper reports, documentary cinema remained remarkably slow on the uptake. The public airing of *Our Boys* in 1991 still seemed challenging, but by the time Louis Lentin's documentary about the abuse at the Sisters of Mercy at Goldenbridge Orphanage *Dear Daughter* aired in 1996, the subject had been heavily exposed in the public sphere. By the time the high profile documentary series *States of Fear* aired in 1999, there was little to add to the debate and the series could only bear witness to the ever-increasing amount of data being generated by ongoing investigation. In time these matters became the subject of feature films in their own right, including *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003), then again documentary with the Oscar-nominated *Deliver Us From Evil* in 2006.

With large-scale international productions such as *Braveheart* (1995) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) being shot in Ireland in order to avail of tax breaks, a climate of professional industrial production was evident in the film industry for the first time since the first years of Ardmore Studios. Ardmore itself had reopened by this time under the auspices of private investors, and had become an important production facility. No longer bound by a specific National agenda or linked in any way to the ethos of an ideal Irish cinema, Ardmore became simply what it always should have been, a production base. American independent producer/director Roger Corman attempted to set up a comparable facility in Galway, but this operated only for a short time. Meanwhile former Disney animator Don Bluth also set up shop in Ireland, boosting an increasingly active Irish animation sector. With extensions of the Governmental tax break schemes and increasing numbers of initiatives and funding bodies, it seemed as though the phrase 'film industry' finally had meaning when applied to Irish based film making activity.

Of course, with the headlong rush towards nominal prosperity (although Irish films still did not result in significant box office returns), cultural critics were warier than ever. The 'Los Angelesiation' of Ireland was spoken of with increasing frequency. Old-guard Irish film analysts were unimpressed by films made under the new Film Board. However, for the first time it was possible to look at the output of Irish cinema and see new and different perspectives emerging. Films like *The Boy From Mercury* (1996), a charming movie about the fantasies of a bullied child who believes himself to be an alien,

November Afternoon (1996), a stylish low-key film about an incestuous relationship between contemporary bourgeois Dubliners, *How to Cheat in the Leaving Certificate* (1999), an entertaining caper movie about teenagers determined to shake the education system by cheating in the State exams, *Snakes and Ladders* (1995) a comedy drama about two independent-minded girls and their love lives, *The Last of the High Kings* (1995) about growing up in 1970s Ireland, *Frankie Starlight* (1995) about a dwarf astronomer, *Guiltrip* (1995) a brutal, intense drama about a controlling husband and soldier who beats a woman to death, the hugely successful *I Went Down* (1997) about two bumbling would-be hitmen and their journey across country by car, and *The Last Bus Home* (1997) an edgy drama about a punk band getting together and falling apart in the late 1970s shared only one thing: they were all Irish films. There was no longer any one single defining aesthetic, even aspirationally. There was no longer any great concern with how Ireland had been seen in the past. There was no sense in these films that their directors were as actively concerned with debating the frames of reference of an 'Irish cinema': they were simply making Irish films. Some films still paid homage to the concerns of the past, such as Cathal Black's magnificently photographed *Korea* (1994) based on a short story by John McGahern about a boy and his father, a veteran of the War of Independence, and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's Northern Irish thriller *Nothing Personal* (1997) about a Loyalist gang on the rampage in 1970s Belfast, but it was increasingly obvious that films with familiar themes were either the work of new directors with nothing new to say about these issues or they were continuations of the concerns of the New Wave in an environment which was increasingly disinterested in them. In 1995 Pat O'Connor directed *Circle of Friends*, adapted from the novel by Maeve Binchy. Its sweetly nostalgic view of life and love in 1950s Ireland was seen by many as a clear restatement of the sanitisation of Irish cinema as needed to be seen, coming from a director as distinguished as this, and yet the film proved popular both at home and abroad.

In 1996 Neil Jordan cemented the relationship between the global and the local with *Michael Collins*, a \$60m historical epic based on a script he had been developing since 1982. Jordan's film was a remarkable fusion of familiar Irish concerns and a mainstream Hollywood style, charting the life and death of the IRA founder and rebel leader whose famous transition from man of war to man of peace straddled the years of the War of Independence and the Civil War. The film was massively controversial in Ireland and Britain, where it sparked public debate on Irish history. It became the biggest ever grossing film at the Irish box office, but failed to achieve the same success abroad. Released as the Northern Irish ceasefires were in a state of temporary breakdown, the film's seeming sympathy for the Republican cause was seen as a potential liability. *Michael Collins* may have been the most important crossover between mainstream and indigenous filmmaking ever to come out of Ireland though, and its release capped the period of intense interest in Irish cinema and Irish issues abroad. By the time Jim Sheridan released *The Boxer* in 1997, the sense of anticipation and excitement generated by Irish film-makers abroad seemed to have ended. The concluding film of Sheridan's Northern Irish trilogy co-written with Terry George, which also includes *In the Name of the Father* and *Some Mother's Son* (1996), directed by George himself, *The Boxer* was an

overly-familiar tale of love across the barricades which did not excite audiences either at home or abroad.

However, the year 1997 also saw the release of Jordan's adaptation of *The Butcher Boy*, instantly hailed in Ireland as the most important Irish film of the late twentieth century. Jordan's richly textured film was seen as an accessible yet challenging revisioning of Ireland's sense of its own identity, represented through the story of a mentally deranged young boy. Based on the novel by Pat McCabe, this story was both allegorical and dramatic, standing alone as a film to be seen and appreciated and yet packed with detail and allusion enough to keep cultural critics busy for years. Built around a remarkable performance by fourteen year-old Eamonn Owens, the film represented an Ireland struggling with modernity and post-modernity, gripped by destructive internal forces that shape its view of the external world.

The Butcher Boy may be seen as representing the tortured and largely hidden traumas of Irish cultural transition in the years of the Celtic Tiger, but the public face of these changes was arguably more ably reflected by the sheer volume of films being made which were singularly unconcerned with anything deep at all. Though a series of urban crime dramas exemplified by not one but three films on the life of real-life criminal Martin Cahill (*Vicious Circle* (1997), *The General* (1998) (directed by John Boorman), and *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999) (directed by Thaddeus O'Sullivan)) and two about real-life murdered crime journalist Veronica Guerin (*When the Sky Falls* (2000) and *Veronica Guerin* (2003)) arguably reflected concerns about moral values in an increasingly amoral society, Gerry Stembridge's *About Adam* (1999), a slick urban sex comedy, became the focal point in the re-envisioning of Dublin city. In the wake of *The Commitments* and its sequels, Dublin was now being seen in two paradigms as, on one hand, a deprived urban wasteland, as in *Crushproof* (1997), *Accelerator* (1999), and *Last Days in Dublin* (2001), and, on the other, a multicultural, metrosexual bourgeois playground as in *Flick* (1999), *When Brendan Met Trudy* (2000), and *Goldfish Memory* (2002). *When Brendan Met Trudy* was particularly revealing, a romantic comedy written by Roddy Doyle which drew most of its gags from intertextual postmodern film in-jokes. With allusions to classic Hollywood films such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and European films such as *A Bout de Souffle* (1959), the film could either be seen as proof that Irish cinema was finally completely free of the yoke of its own past or of the fact that it now lacked any discernible identity beyond what could be cobbled together from elsewhere. By the time Alan Parker's big-budget adaptation of Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* was released in 1999, the kind of old-fashioned image of Ireland and Irish culture proffered by the film seemed increasingly out of step with what Ireland was saying about itself.

The New Millennium

When Alan Gilson's long-expected documentary sequel to *The Road to God Knows Where* was finally made in 2001, it seemed as though everyone was flailing about in search of meaning in an increasingly dislocated culture. *Road II* revisited many of the participants in Gilson's 1988 film and asked them what had become of them since

those dark, oppressive years. Most of them were visibly better off than they had been, had nothing to say of any real interest as no-one had a clear perspective on what was happening around them. This was echoed by the director's use of abstract postmodern imagery to match the world of his subject. Unlike *The Road to God Knows Where*, the film provoked no debate and ultimately revealed an Irish consciousness in a state of crisis it seemed unable to understand, let alone address. Success, it seems, has come with a cost as yet unmeasured. Though Ireland is now economically more comfortable with itself in the way of many Western societies, it still has little clear sense of what that self really is, and is still grappling with the anxiety of influence on an increasingly global stage. It is also an increasingly fragmented society with greater gaps between social strata, and as multicultural influences become increasingly evident in the racial make-up of the cities (addressed by Gerry Stembridge in the comic TV drama *Black Day at Black Rock* 2000 and the African-Irish themed thriller *The Front Line* (2006)), Ireland's future seems positive and yet uncertain.

Modern Irish cinema is a reflection of modern Ireland. Its wide-ranging, multi-faceted subject matter reflects the concerns of an increasingly globalised culture still grappling with a sense of its own identity. In 2006 John Boorman plunged deep into this culture with his critically lambasted black comedy *The Tiger's Tail* (2006), a vitriolic assault on the values of an Ireland marinated in money but lacking a soul, or even a focus. Taking the classic doppelganger/evil twin premise, the film offered Brendan Gleeson as a successful contemporary Irish businessman haunted by what at first seems an hallucination of a darker, more downtrodden other, only to find this stranger slowly taking over his life. The film's most powerful sequence depicted the crisis in Irish health care, which Gleeson had condemned on television earlier that year on foot of his own personal experiences with his parents. In the film his character attempts to navigate the nightmarish labyrinth of an accident and emergency department with his injured son, a son, by no co-incidence, played by Gleeson's real life son.

Films are doing well in Ireland, buoyed by television sales and DVD distribution rather than box-office receipts, Irish and Celtic film festivals and retrospectives are springing up all over the world, and the indigenous industry continues to trundle on in spite of fears of a sudden collapse after years of fickle international attention. Yet cultural critics continue to despair of an Irish cinema that is distinctly Irish. Director John Carney scored an unexpected critical and commercial success with *Once* (2006), a film which repeated Alan Parker's sleight of hand in *The Commitments* in making a non genre musical, tapping the non-conforming vein of using Irish performers and subject matter to subvert and deploy genre convention. The film won the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and brought Carney, first noted domestically as the director of *November Afternoon* ten years before, a deserved and overdue recognition.

There is in general though a very definite schizm between what is popular and what is critically successful, and between genre film (primarily comedy) and serious drama. Perhaps Boorman's comment about being in love with failure is still apt, as it seems a film must still be small-scale, introverted and dark in order to receive significant critical praise. Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam & Paul* (2004) garnered some of the best reviews for

an Irish film since *The Butcher Boy*. Its bleak look at the lives of two Dublin drug addicts brought comparisons with Beckett, whose works were recently filmed in their entirety by a panel of Irish film directors for television and DVD distribution. Abrahamson's probing look at the empty spaces of contemporary Ireland goes some way towards giving a moment's pause amid the rush to please commercial concerns, but it also speaks of a sense of despair which suggests that Ireland must not enjoy its success lest it forget its continuing social failures. Similarly, Perry Ogden's *Pavee Lackeen* (2005) resonated with the echoes of the New Wave, and Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1981) in particular, by making virtues of its low budget and commercially alienating use of actual members of the traveling community in depicting the story of the trials of life of a teenage Traveller in modern Ireland. The film claimed an IFTA Award for Best Film as well as the Satyajit Ray Award for its director at the London Film Festival.

One of the defining features of the new Ireland has been the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland. Though Northern Irish subjects had proved a staple of international filmic representations throughout the decades, these had become increasingly dark since the resurgence of troubles in the late 1960s. By the time of *Cal* and *High Boot Benny*, the subject seemed over-exposed, or at least lacking a new angle. Rejuvenated by the Jim Sheridan/Terry George Northern Ireland trilogy, international attention was again focused on Irish films by the time of the first ceasefires and the eventual peace process of the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, by the turn of the millennium, a new attitude had emerged in a series of comedies including *Cycle of Violence* (1997), *Divorcing Jack* (1998), *Wild About Harry* (2000), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2000) and Barry Levinson's *An Everlasting Piece* (2000). Comedies based around the troubles would have seemed unthinkable even less than a decade earlier, but these films and others made for television seemed comfortable playing familiar scenes of sectarian bigotry and even torture for laughs.

However, darker and more introspective Northern Irish drama is still to be found, with only the thriller *Resurrection Man* (1997) based on a real life figure from the paramilitary underworld in the 1970s taking an unexpected approach beside more conventional historical films like *Bogwoman* (1997), *A Love Divided* (1998), *Bloody Sunday* (2001) and *Omagh* (2004). *Bloody Sunday* did employ an electrifying documentary style, which led to much international praise and attention and brought director Paul Greengrass to Hollywood for *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), and, subsequently, the highly controversial but generally lauded 9/11 film *United 93* (2006). Brian Kirk's fundamentalist drama *Middletown* attempted to fuse satire and dark nightmare in a drama about feuding brothers in early 1960s Northern Ireland, but the film fell short on both counts, being altogether too straight faced for either humour or terror to break through an overly familiar set of conventions in representing schisms of religion and family that literally make a small town burst into flames.

Still caught between the massive influences of the United States and Britain, Ireland also looks to Europe and beyond to get a sense of its place in the overall scheme of things. European co-productions from the millennial and pre-millennial years include the French-Irish *Le Dernier Mot* (1999), the Scandanavian-Irish *The Disappearance of*

Finbar (1995), the Italian-Irish *Spaghetti Slow* (1996), the almost entirely British *Peaches* (2000), the Polish-Irish short *A Song for Rebecca* (2005), the German-produced, Polish-set *Molly's Way* (2006) and most striking of all, Goran Paskaljevic's surreal, absurdist allegory *How Harry Became a Tree* (2002) based on a Chinese fable and featuring Colm Meaney as a man who chooses to confront a womanising publican in post-Independence Ireland. The sheer oddness of this film made it distinctive, but all of these European co-produced films remain at the fringes of the popular Irish mind.

Perhaps the most talked-about Irish film of recent years was the short *Yu Ming is Anim Dom* (2003). This comedy by Daniel O'Hara touched on many of the social and cultural fractures in contemporary Irish identity in its story of a Chinese shop clerk who decides to seek a better life in Ireland. He learns the Irish language in preparation for his arrival because it is the official language of the State. When he gets there he finds that no one understands him. Bemused Irish residents, who speak only English, assume that he is speaking Chinese and do not engage with him until he meets an elderly man in a pub who directs him to the west of Ireland, where Yu Ming finds gainful employment in the Gaeltacht, the Irish-speaking region. O'Hara followed this film with another short on the same theme, *Fluent Dysphasia* (2004), in which an ordinary man played by Stephen Rea awakes one morning to discover he speaks only Irish.

And yet Ireland is still a small nation. In spite of the tongue-in-cheek claim of the 1999 television documentary series *The Irish Empire* that Irish culture exerts a world-wide influence through its diaspora, it is arguable that the reverse is actually more true. As Bob Quinn argued in *Atlantean*, many of the precepts upon which notions of an exclusive Irish cultural identity are based are constructed to begin with. Perhaps Ireland's capacity to continually evolve will ultimately be the measure of its long-term success. A younger generation of filmmakers has come to the fore in recent years, in some cases directly descended from the older one although sharing few of their forebears' concerns. Such talents include Robert Quinn, son of Bob and director of the black comic thriller *Dead Bodies* (2003), Kirsten Sheridan, daughter of Jim and director of the tragic romance *Disco Pigs* (2000) (and Oscar co-nominee for *In America* (2003)), and Shimmy Marcus, son of Louis and director of the black comic drug-dealing drama *Headrush* (2004). Of the three Sheridan seems the most promising, deploying an arresting cinematic vocabulary in opening up Enda Walsh's linguistically rich play about teenage friends in an obsessive relationship written in an exaggerated Cork dialect. The feature fulfilled the promise of her early short work, however, it has taken seven years for her to reach her second feature, with *August Rush*, a fantasy drama expected in 2007.

The older generation are still active though, and films by Jordan, Sheridan, O'Connor, O'Sullivan, Black, and Murphy are all still received with respect and admiration. In an industry that seems increasingly peopled by one-hit wonders and one-off genre films, being a survivor is itself a considerable achievement, even if your grip on the ethos of your national cinema has slipped.

Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto* (2006) addressed this very concern in its tale of a firmly individualistic but possibly self-deluded transvestite played by Cillian Murphy. An

unusually light touch from Jordan matched the seemingly relentless optimism of its central character, yet darker undertones were never far from (literally) exploding through the veneer of camp 1970s chic. This eagerly awaited follow-up to *The Butcher Boy*, reuniting Jordan and McCabe, successfully addressed the shortfalls of Jordan's remake of *Bob le Flambeur* (1955) *The Good Thief* (2002) by at least having a sense of identity, albeit couched in terms of a wink to the audience. Meanwhile Jim Sheridan's filmography took an odd turn following his semi-autobiographical *In America* with the making of the apocryphal bio-drama *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2005). *In America* was a politely received and very well meaning account of the director's years in New York with his family, co-written with his own daughters. Its strong personal dimension was at least testament to its heartfelt honesty, if not of any prevailing importance in cinematic terms. *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* seemed to amplify the most problematic element of *In America*, its depiction of African-Americans, in telling the story of rapper Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson, which in spite of Sheridan's best efforts could not but be received with a skeptical eye in Ireland. Again though, survival is a running theme here, and though lines of connection may be drawn between Jordan and the transformative Kitten and Sheridan and the unflappable 50 Cent, both films represent the continuing practice of two of Ireland's most consistently visible filmmaking practitioners.

Less prolific but no less notable when she does appear is Pat Murphy, whose long winter since 1984's *Anne Devlin* finally ended with *Nora* (2000), a strong dramatic account of the life of Nora Barnacle, wife of James Joyce, based on the biography by Brenda Maddox. Meanwhile Pat O'Connor directed the film adaptation of the hugely successful play *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 1998 before again fading from view, Thaddeus O'Sullivan contributed *The Heart of Me* (2002), a touching but underrated British-based romantic drama, and Terry George directed the high profile drama *Hotel Rwanda* in 2004, again demonstrating the capabilities of Irish filmmakers on an international stage.

Hits within Ireland by less well known directors include the aforementioned *Once*, the comedy *Spin the Bottle* (2003), adapted from a successful television show about a man recently released from prison trying to put his rap group back together, the violent urban comedy-drama *Intermission* (2003) interweaving stories of modern Dubliners in jeopardy, Damien O'Donnell's sensitive disability drama *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004), and Paddy Breathnach's Guy Ritchie-influenced comedy *Man About Dog* (2005) (followed by another greyhound racing comedy *The Mighty Celt* (2005)). Other releases including the romantic comedy *The Honeymooners* (2004), the Limerick-based *Cowboys and Angels* (2004), Stephen Walsh's adaptation of *Ulysses, Bloom* (2004) with Stephen Rea and Angeline Ball, the horror films *Dead Meat* (2004), *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), and *Isolation* (2006), Fintan Connolly's comedy *The Trouble With Sex* (2005), and Paul Mercier's film version of his successful stage-play *Studs* (2006) were less widely admired but nonetheless contributed to the ongoing output of a contemporary Irish cinema.

Mercier's film was proof that the legacy of the theatre still hangs over Irish film, with a play that broke ground and provided entertainment twenty years before failing to ignite the imagination as film or as drama. The theatre's influence is also seen in the continued success of Conor McPherson and the high profile arrival of playwright Martin McDonagh

with the Oscar-winning short *Six Shooter*, an exuberantly over the top comic drama featuring Ruaidhri Conroy and Brendan Gleeson, last seen together on screen in *Into the West*.

The release of Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) re-ignited many old debates. The film claimed the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and was more or less unproblematically accepted on the world stage as an accurate account of Irish history. However, this tale of the War of Independence and the Civil War was so identifiably the work of a very distinctive cinematic auteur that one hesitates to easily file it under the same analytical columns as Jordan's *Michael Collins*, or even Tom Cooper's *The Dawn*. Loach's realist-based, left-leaning political oeuvre has been so consistent over time that one is never in doubt whose vision is driving the film (in spite of Paul Laverty's script), and one wonders if it is helpful to discuss the film in terms of a contribution to the development of an 'Irish' cinema. But are such distinctions even sustainable in the face of an indigenous practice so willfully removed from specific engagement with its own identity and losing touch with history to the point where it hardly seems to matter? Certainly the response to the film in Ireland was much less lively than that which greeted Jordan's film ten years before. This did not prevent it receiving an enormously hostile response to the film in Britain where it was branded Irish propaganda in spite of its numerous multi-European co-producers and the authorial problematic at its core.

The best that can be said of Irish cinema today is that it certainly exists. Even with its strata of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' films, its commercial entertainments and its dark dramas, Irish film at least now produces enough films for there to be such divisions in the first place. It was not that long ago when one film a year was a remarkable number, and before that one every few years, and before that one per decade. The film industry has been slow and halting in its development in Ireland, and it may perhaps be subject to the whims of Government and international investment, but this pattern reflects much of what is true in Irish society on the whole. Though the identity of Irish cinema remains unfixed as far as consensus within Ireland is concerned, perhaps this is not so much an absolute evil as necessary one. As cinema itself goes through another of its periodic revolutions and faces the challenges of the digital age, the time when one could speak of a national cinema which influences the world has long passed. Irish cinema may never affect the development of other cinemas, but its products continue to find a forum at festivals and, increasingly, on commercial release in theatres around the world. This is no bad thing by any measure. Irish cinema exists, and its search for identity goes on: to reach a conclusion on the issue would only be to accept that there are limits to what can be found.

Recommended Books on Irish Cinema

Barton, Ruth, *Irish National Cinema* (Routledge, 2004)

McIlroy, Brian, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the Troubles in Northern Ireland* (Flicks, 1998)

McLoone, Martin, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (BFI, 2000)

O'Brien, Harvey, *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester, 2004)

Pettitt, Lance, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester, 2000)

Rockett, Kevin, *Irish Film Censorship* (Four Courts, 2004)

Dr. Harvey O'Brien is the author of *The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film* (Manchester, 2004) and co-editor (with Ruth Barton) of *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television* (Wallflower, 2004). His articles have appeared in *Cineaste*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, *Irish Studies Review*, *Éire-Ireland* and *Film and Film Culture*, of which he is co-editor. He teaches film studies at the UCD O'Kane Centre for Film Studies, has lectured at the Harvard Film Archive, Boston College, and Université de Bourgoine, and taught courses for New York University, the Irish Film Institute, Film Base, and the National College of Art and Design.