

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GOLDFISH MEMORIES? ON SEEING AND HEARING MARGINALISED IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH CINEMA

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Introduction

Over the past ten years, and particularly during Celtic Tiger period,¹ Irish cinema has changed dramatically, both as an industry and an art form. The Irish film sector can now accommodate different scales of filmmaking, from experimental video to larger-budget, more mainstream productions. As Ireland has transformed from an agrarian, post-colonial nation to a (post)modern, first-world state, its changing self-image has been reflected in a cinematic output that is increasingly diverse, generically, thematically and stylistically. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that such developments should result in a more pluralistic, multi-vocal film culture, and indeed there has been a marked increase in the visibility of gay, lesbian, immigrant, minority-ethnic and socially-excluded characters on the Irish screen in recent years. Films such as *When Brendan Met Trudy* (1999), *Adam and Paul* (2004), *Goldfish Memory* (2002), *Cowboys and Angels* (2003), *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) and *Pavee Lackeen* (2005) feature a broad palette of such identities, thus providing an alternative vision of Ireland to that portrayed in the heritage or nostalgia films that tended to dominate much of feature production into the mid-1990s.²

While these developments are, in principle, to be welcomed, a number of parallel and often related trends occasion a somewhat more nuanced and cautionary engagement with the assumption that visibility or positive representation on the screen is synonymous with a progressive politics of gender, sexuality or ethnicity. Although a relatively homogenous set of character types has given way to a substantially more diverse palette of identities, the themes, aesthetic styles and narrative formats of Irish cinema are becoming increasingly informed by trends in British and American filmmaking and in Anglophone media culture generally. As the focus shifts toward youth-oriented and urban-based narratives, borrowings from British subgenres such as the underclass film (Monk 1999) and the new British gangster cycle (Chibnall 2001) are increasingly evident in films such as *Head Rush* (2003), *Intermission* (2003), *The General* (1998), *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999), *Veronica Guerin* (2003), *Last Days in Dublin* (2001) and *Man About Dog* (2004). This is also reflected in the tendency of film reviewers to compare Irish productions such as *Intermission* and *Head Rush* with iconic British and American films such as *Trainspotting* (1996), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Magnolia* (1999).³ Thus, while the range of filmic identities to which Irish audiences are now exposed is diverse when compared with the themes and images that characterised earlier Irish cinema, it is arguably becoming increasingly formulaic when viewed in the broader context of Anglophone mass media.

In an article recently published in *Screen*, former CEO of the Second Irish Film Board Rod Stoneman (2005) explains how film policy during his term of office (1993–2003) was explicitly aimed at supporting

a practice of filmmaking that came from, and spoke to, its own national imaginary with authenticity and integrity, whilst also navigating the implications of international finance from a market dominated by doxa from elsewhere (Stoneman 2005, 251).

Stoneman's retrospective account of Irish film policy during this period helps to make sense of the changing topography of Irish cinema. Rather than the purely commercial approach of making a smaller number of larger films, Stoneman tried to encourage a larger number of smaller films, with those that succeeded commercially returning enough to cover the rest. He considers this model to be "the only basis for any non-industrial version of cinema to play to its strengths, maintain its authenticity and integrity, and in the longer term to reinvent itself" (ibid, 249). Notwithstanding a substantial slump in production in 2005, the Irish film industry has largely achieved its economic objectives. However,

while the policy of encouraging filmmakers to consider the audience at all stages of production and to think of themselves as “market-responsive auteurs” (Stoneman 2005, 252) has undoubtedly given rise to more modern, upbeat and urban stories, a number of difficult questions remain regarding the role of national cinema in accommodating marginalised identities.

According to Angela McRobbie (1994, 15), postmodern culture heralds the potential articulation of voices which “were historically drowned out by the (modernist) meta-narratives of mastery”. As the more liberal and undoubtedly more seductive visual culture of contemporary Ireland begins to embrace Ireland’s gays, lesbians, immigrants and ethnic minorities, this essay asks to what extent the universalising forces that increasingly shape Irish cinema might merely be giving disenfranchised and disempowered groups “image space”, as opposed to a genuinely empowered voice. It critically addresses postmodern and postfeminist theoretical frameworks to explore how homosexual, minority-ethnic and socially-excluded identities are being articulated across a range of contemporary Irish films. It explores issues of positive representation, gender politics, interculturalism and the concept of national cinema itself to ask whether postmodern culture and its attendant discourses of progress and diversity are primarily anathema or essential to accommodating a multiplicity of voices in the context of New Irish Cinema.

“Culture talk”⁴ in Cool Hibernia

The Report of the Irish Film Industry Strategic Review Group (1999) states that “film and TV are the most powerful contemporary means of cultural expression”, and that national cinema is the predominant way in which a culture tells its own stories. Similarly, a 2001 report commissioned by the Arts Council, the Irish Film Board and Enterprise Ireland claims that, “moving images that both mirror and create desires and conflicts at the heart of Irish life are the most influential form of communication we have today” (Connolly and Dillon 2001, 6). Yet, in spite of the hypothesis which implicitly underpins such claims, namely that national cinema is vital to sustaining a collective sense of national identity, Irish films are becoming increasingly stripped of historical and geographical specificity. According to Ruth Barton (2004, 112), there is a conscious desire among Irish filmmakers to cast off the old shibboleths of Irish cinema, a phenomenon to which she refers as “the culturally specific desire not to be culturally specific”. As Martin McLoone (2000, 169) has already pointed out, this sentiment is well illustrated by a scene in Frank Stapleton’s *The Fifth Province* (1997). On attending a workshop for Irish screenwriters, the protagonist is told, “What we don’t want is any more stories about [...] Irish mothers, priests, sexual repressions and the miseries of the rural life. We want stories that are upbeat, that are urban, that have pace and verve and are going somewhere”.

In 1998, the Irish Film Board appeared to respond to this plea. With a view to challenging the public perception of Irish cinema as worthy, set in the past and aimed exclusively at an arthouse audience, it commissioned a 90-second cinema trailer “to shift these residual perceptions and transmit a sharper sense that many of the new films were more urban, comic, violent, sexual” (Stoneman 2005, 254). The impetus to redefine Irish identity beyond the confines of the political films of the First Wave (dating from the mid-1970s to 1987) as well as the larger-budget heritage films such as *Circle of Friends* (1993) and *The War of the Buttons* (1993) is undeniably a healthy one. However, the assumption that pre-boom cinema in Ireland belongs to an oppressive cultural tradition that has prevented us from moving toward a more innovative engagement with the art form is a flawed one (Ging 2002). The majority of films made under the first Film Board (1981–1987) were relentlessly critical of the State and the Church, and they were significantly influenced by radical social movements and cinematic traditions from elsewhere, as Maeve Connolly’s (2003; 2004) work on Irish experimental filmmaking has demonstrated⁵. In the recent bid to divest films of signifiers of tradition and parochialism, however, there has been a move toward an increasingly generic style of filmmaking, which mobilises ahistoric and location-unspecific signifiers of Irishness that are easily exported to the global marketplace.

This trend is widely evident in films such as *About Adam* (1999), *Sweetie Barrett* (1998), *The Nephew* (1998), *Waking Ned* (1999), *Disco Pigs* (2000), *Freeze Frame* (2004), *When Brendan Met Trudy* (1999) and *Goldfish Memory* (2002). Ostensibly set either sometime in the past or sometime in the future, these films are both temporally and geographically indeterminate. Recognizable landmarks and locations are frequently apportioned new identities⁶, or entirely fictional name places are used, such as the island of Inisdara in *The Nephew* or the port of Dockery in *Sweetie Barrett*. The growing tendency toward co-production also plays a role in the increasingly arbitrary nature of film location and identity. According to Martin McLoone, the result is often a kind of “Euro-pudding” in the vein of *Spaghetti Slow* (1996) or *The Disappearance of Finbar* (1996), in which the locations and nationality of the cast are heavily influenced by the funding territories, and he suggests this as a reason why so

many Irish films fail. It is difficult, therefore, to reconcile this eschewal of the culturally specific with the claims of policy makers and successive government ministers for Arts Culture and so forth, that indigenous cinema has something important to say about Irish life or identity, beyond convincing the international audience, by virtue of the omission of all things coded as specifically Irish, that we are “Paddys no more” (Vorm 1982).

Clearly, many such decisions are underpinned by economic imperatives, whereby it is considered necessary to ensure that socially-specific references do not alienate foreign audiences. However, there is another, perhaps more philosophical set of considerations to be taken into account here, which has important implications for how we think about and respond to questions of cultural diversity. The notion that somehow, Ireland’s newfound prosperity and assumption of a proud place on the world stage has necessarily made it a more inclusive and progressive society requires closer scrutiny. In such discourses, cultural traditions and the desire to preserve and nurture them are often posited as repressive and parochial, whereas modernity is perceived to be a prerequisite for social diversity and tolerance. According to *Irish Times* journalist John Waters (1998), there is a tendency in Irish public discourse to attribute racist responses to immigration to Ireland’s relatively short history as an independent nation, and thus to conflate cultural nationalism with xenophobia and exclusion. Waters rejects the notion that in order to become less racist, more pluralist and enlightened, we need to loosen our grip on our own identity. Similarly, Luke Gibbons (2000) challenges the perceived notion that modernity and the urban centre are a pre-condition for multiculturalism, by asserting that post-colonial solidarity and the understanding it affords of other peoples’ suffering is rooted in a sense of our own history and not in a disavowal of the past:

What is not often recognized is how much the discourse of universal human rights, with its attempt to transform the native into a citizen of the world, is often responsible for legitimizing “ethnocide” in the name of progress (Gibbons 2000).

Gibbons’ and Waters’ comments provide useful principles for considering the issues surrounding cultural representations of Otherness. They dovetail significantly with the ideas proposed by Robert Stam (1991), who has applied Bakhtin’s writings on cultural difference and polyphony to demonstrate how positive representations of minority groups in the mainstream media do not necessarily accommodate the voices or perspectives of those represented. Stam argues that Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony can be used to distinguish between cultural texts that pay lip service to diversity and those which speak from genuinely diverse perspectives:

The film or television commercial in which every eighth face is black, for example, has more to do with the demographics of market research or the bad conscience of liberalism than with authentic polyphony, because the black voice, in such instances, is usually shorn of its soul as well as deprived of its colour and intonation (Stam 1991, 263).

Stam does not advocate here an essentialist concept of culture as authentic, reified or static. On the contrary, he acknowledges that dynamic interchange between cultures involves mutual transformation, accompanied by a respect for the difference and integrity of divergent worldviews. Most significantly, however, he uses Bakhtin’s work to show that the ability to accommodate and understand difference is not enhanced but rather hindered by a disavowal of one’s own cultural identity. Insofar as mediated interventions are concerned, Stam argues that, rather than accommodating diversity and inclusion, the trend toward universalism and positive representation is more inclined to drown out multiple perspectives and to mould cinema into an increasingly homogenous, monovocal form of expression. He cites Bakhtin:

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding [...] We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one’s own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign. Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched (Bakhtin 1986, 6-7).

Stam’s acknowledgement of the limitations of the positive/negative representation paradigm is especially significant at a time in which the supposed integrity of identity politics is being challenged, not only by the market forces which increasingly construct citizens as atomized individuals but also by the genuine limitations inherent in assigning blanket commonality to peoples united solely by sexuality or ethnic background. He claims that considering a film’s ambient voices is an alternative and more

critically fruitful way of way of thinking about cultural diversity in the media, since it evades the value-laden issue of what is “positive,” and thus helps to circumvent or cut through the “burden of representation”. Margo Harkin’s recent television drama, *You Looking at Me?* (2004) is an important contribution in this respect. The film, which is set in contemporary Belfast, tells the story of a young Chinese woman who falls for a local Protestant, and of the conflict that arises between the couple and two Catholics from the Falls Road. Unlike many mainstream films which feature minority-ethnic characters, rather than celebrating stereotypical concepts of Otherness, it explores the complex ways in which inter-cultural conflicts emerge and are worked out.

This approach differs from the more celebratory tone of Eugene Brady’s *The Nephew* (1998). Although the film does attempt to expand the boundaries of Irishness, this approach to multi-ethnicity seems to be about making Irish identity more colourful rather than confronting us with radically different understandings of the world. This is helped by the fact that the film’s black protagonist Chad is American-Irish and that the signifiers of his ethnicity are widely recognizable through their commercialisation by the fashion and music industries. Chad is accepted by the locals of Inisdara when he sings a ballad in Irish at a wake, yet—bar the introduction of rap music and bandanas—the island remains largely unchanged. Short film *Yo Ming is Ainm Dom* (2003) opens up a more polyphonous ideological space in this regard. The film tells the story of a Chinese student of the Irish language, who on his arrival in Dublin is shocked to discover that nobody can understand him. It is in the Gaeltacht that Yo Ming finds acceptance and becomes integrated, though not assimilated. Significantly, he ends up welcoming tourists to Ireland, thereby also challenging outsiders’ preconceptions about Irish language and culture. The film thus serves to advance Gibbons’ argument about tradition, self-knowledge and cultural memory, namely that they need not be antithetical but rather can be conducive to progressive concepts of Ireland’s changing identity.

Gaelic and Gay

Similar questions about marginalised or “alternative” identities arise in relation to cinema’s representations of sexual identity. Significantly, Stam (ibid.) points out that the question of a film’s ability to articulate a perspective on the world as opposed to positively representing a collective identity is one of form as well as content. According to Aronson and Kimmel (2001), in spite of the increasing visibility of positively-coded gay characters in Hollywood romantic comedies, their function in the narrative is to bring heterosexual couples together, thus reaffirming the centrality of conservative family values and of heteronormative masculinity. Clearly, close textual analysis of this kind does not account for the multiple subject positionings of audiences and thus the plurality of ways in which a given film may be interpreted. However, the ubiquity of the bourgeois-realist mode of filmmaking makes it more difficult for viewers to assume a critical position *vis à vis* positive representations, since it renders neutral or invisible the anglocentricity not only of a particular filmic grammar but also of an ideological mindset. According to Todd Haynes, a proponent of American New Queer Cinema:

People define gay cinema solely by content: if there are gay characters in it, it’s a gay film [...] Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as it is a content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society.⁷

Until recently, audiences in this country have been under-exposed to non-normative images of Irish sexuality on the screen. The more adventurous work of short filmmakers notwithstanding, including Eve Morrison’s *Summertime* (1995), Barry Dignam’s *Dream Kitchen* (1999) and Orla Walsh’s *Bent Out of Shape* (1995), the only feature-length films of the 1990s to deal explicitly with this theme are Johnny Gogan’s *The Last Bus Home* (1997) and Jimmy Smallhorne’s *2x4* (1998). Gogan’s film was refreshing in its decision to confront Irish attitudes to homosexuality in socially-contextualised terms, namely during the Pope’s visit to Dublin in 1979 and three years later, when little has changed from the perspective of gay character Petie. *2x4* presents a complex study of (homo)sexuality, in which Johnny, an Irish construction worker in New York, confronts his conflicted sexuality and history of childhood abuse at the hands of his uncle. Privately funded and made in the US, *2x4* is a film which, through its exploration of diasporic life and identity in the US, has much to say about the Ireland that Johnny and his compatriots have left behind. Although Jenny Murphy (2005) argues that the film pathologises homosexuality, it is nonetheless an important intervention into debates about desire and provides a cross-generational study of Irish masculinity and sexuality that is pertinent to a particular time and place.

In the past few years, a more upbeat and optimistic approach to gay and bisexual characters has become evident, most notably in Liz Gill’s *Goldfish Memory* (2002) and in David Gleeson’s *Cowboys*

and Angels (2003). To some extent, these films present recognizable aspects of the “New Ireland”, in which increased affluence and the decline of religion have created a new sexual landscape, seemingly uninhibited by prejudice, social conformism or the economic imperative to marry. In the vein of recent television series such as *The Big Bow Wow*, they portray cosmopolitan urban *milieux* populated by affluent, hedonistic twenty-somethings. Clearly, the appearance of successful and well-adjusted gay characters provides a welcome respite from the sad, isolated and victimized characters that have populated much of mainstream Anglophone cinema to date (Murphy, *ibid.*). Yet while *Goldfish Memory* shows gay and bisexual identities assuming a highly visible, mainstream position, the politics of sexuality have arguably become more liminal than ever. Sexuality is portrayed as a matter of choice, and the choices characters make have little or no impact on their rights or on issues of social inclusion and exclusion. This liberal rhetoric of free choice is highly characteristic of recent portrayals of gender and sexuality, which operate on the basis that equality has been achieved and that collective political intervention is obsolete. As Tasker and Negra (2005) have pointed out, the inclusion of marginalised identities in postfeminist⁸ media culture is not coincidental:

Postfeminism already incorporates a negotiation with hegemonic forces in simultaneously assuming the achievement and desirability of gender equality on the one hand while repeatedly associating such equality with loss on the other. That such fictions tend to exclude even as they include, propagating an environment for ethnically and racially diverse protagonists that is devoid of social or political context—at least explicitly—is also no surprise (Tasker and Negra 2005, 108).

Rather than presenting audiences with an insight into the sexual mores of contemporary Ireland, therefore, *Goldfish Memory* is better read as a utopian vision of a more sexually tolerant future, given that homophobia is still a major problem in Ireland (Lynch and Lodge 2002; Norman and Galvin 2005) and that equality for homosexual couples is far from achieved, as the high-profile case taken by lesbian couple Dr Ann Louise Gilligan and Dr Katherine Zappone against the Revenue Commissioners demonstrated.⁹ However, as is the case with cinematic representations of ethnic identity, the tendency to conceive of positive visions of non-normative sexuality within what is ultimately a heteronormative framework of understanding results in a peculiarly individualistic and middle-class take on sexual diversity. There is arguably little in *Goldfish Memory* which genuinely challenges received views of existing gender structures or relations. Like Benetton’s ethnic palette, this *smorgasbord* of sexuality suggests that parity of esteem is achieved through recognition of the fact that, beneath our external differences, we are all fundamentally the same: thus gay sex is unthreatening, lesbianism is strictly of the lipstick variety and everyone wants to have babies. There are few, if any, traces of the ideological universe in which these rights were fought for.

Similarly *Cowboys and Angels*, in its “queering” of the buddy/coming-of-age movie, relies on the trope of television makeover programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *How Gay are You?*, which suggest that gay culture has much to offer straight men when it comes to attracting women. However, while this ostensibly fluid take on gender and sexuality has the potential to challenge the limitations of traditional masculinity, it falls short of what gender theorist Judith Butler might refer to as a true “queering” of gendered identities. Firstly, homosexuality is both depoliticised and desexualised and thus rendered synonymous with camp. In this new consumerist guise it is made available to all: not so much as a means of destabilising heteronormative masculinity as a way of reforming it to comply with a more liberal consensus (Hanke 1998, 189). While such films presumably succeed in challenging the prejudices of some viewers, makeover homosexuality and wonderbra feminism present us with a safe, upbeat and somewhat complacent view of gender equality and sexual diversity, which has little to do with the realities of daily life for the majority of Ireland’s LGBT community. Even as fantasies of liberation or empowerment, they are limited in their inability to break free of gender stereotyping and traditional familial roles, and in this sense are “queer-light” rather than “queer-heavy”.

Such critiques may lead one to assume that socially-contextualised films must be narratives of misery, featuring downcast characters engaged in futile struggles to overcome adversity. In addition to this, Jenny Murphy argues that “while searching for an alternative cinematic mode of depicting gay concerns is without doubt an intriguing concept, it is also one that will undoubtedly reduce homosexuality once again to the label of ‘other’, something confusing and unrecognisable, alienating and nonsensical” (2003, 74). Murphy’s conclusion—that it is important to portray gay men and women as “multifaceted members of an evolving Irish society” (*ibid.*)—points towards a model of change and questioning from within the mainstream, and it is difficult to disagree with the rationality and potential effectiveness of such an approach. However, it is also important to consider that change and

questioning cannot flourish without courage and originality. Rather than airlifting commercially successful formulae from elsewhere into broadly Irish contexts, filmmakers might also consider the possibility that the way in which (sexual, ethnic and gender-political) formations emerge and interconnect in different places is unique, and that the “international audience” may in fact be interested in such culturally specific explorations of life, as has been demonstrated by the successes of the *Beur* and *banlieue* films in France,¹⁰ and of recent Iranian and Turkish cinema. Indeed, the eschewal of contextualised experiences means that a great many unique stories are being lost, with authentic and original (gay and minority-ethnic) voices often being confined to the format of the short film.

Marginalising Masculinity?

According to Cleary et al. (2004), social inequality, unemployment, the decline of organised religion, the re-conceptualisation of community and the family and rising levels of crime have had a particularly negative impact on young, working-class men. Given this situation, it is unsurprising that images of socially excluded men have become increasingly visible in recent Irish cinema. In fact, it is perhaps unusual to express concern about socially excluded identities at a time when social exclusion has become such a visible trope in indigenous filmmaking. Although recent years have also seen the emergence of a number of Irish films set in middle-class contexts and featuring non-normative, sexually fluid and reconstructed masculinities (*About Adam*, *Goldfish Memory* and *When Brendan Met Trudy*), working-class “male types” (Spicer 2001), such as the hapless criminal, the stoner, the “loser” and the underclass rebel have also become increasingly visible. Approximately twenty films made in the past decade revolve around themes of crime and social exclusion, and feature sympathetic male antiheroes who are variously marginalised, criminally active and ostensibly positioned in opposition to the *status quo*.

These films include *I Went Down* (1997), *Crush Proof* (1999), *Vicious Circle* (1999), *Flick* (2000), *Saltwater* (2000), *Accelerator* (2001), *The General* (1998), *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999), *Veronica Guerin* (2003), *When the Sky Falls* (2000), *Last Days in Dublin* (2001), *Headrush* (2002), *Intermission* (2003), *The Halo Effect* (2004), *Adam and Paul* (2004) and *Man About Dog* (2004). *Dead Bodies* (2003) and *Freeze Frame* (2004) can also be loosely associated with this “cycle”, given their preoccupation with crime, while the comedies *Spin the Bottle* (2002) and *The Actors* (2003) tend toward parody of underclass and gangster identities. These films epitomise the recent thematic trajectory in Irish cinema from the rural to the urban, from the historical to the contemporary and from the local to the universal. This shift has also involved a radical reconfiguration of cinematic masculinities, not only in terms of the representation of male characters but also regarding how masculinity as discourse is addressed: unlike the earlier critiques of traditional patriarchal masculinity, which emerged from a more politically engaged and less commercial period in Irish filmmaking (Rockett 1994, 127), the contemporary films are typically male-centered narratives, whose protagonists resist unequivocal ideological categorization.

Ruth Barton (2004) sees in these films a critical preoccupation with exposing the darker underbelly of Celtic Tiger Ireland, whereas Lance Pettitt (2004) argues that the crime/gangster genre has been “indigenized” to comment upon rising crime rates in Ireland in the 1990s. What is particularly striking about these films, however, is their focus on male characters and their preoccupation with what has come to be generically described in public discourse as “anti-social behaviour”. To the extent that they tackle issues of class and social exclusion, therefore, they do so in highly gendered terms. Moreover, as Pettitt’s analysis indicates, they adopt generic styles from elsewhere to tell stories that take place in Ireland, but which could in fact, happen anywhere. Significantly, both Claire Monk (2000) and Steve Chibnall (2001) have argued in relation to a similar cycle of films in Britain (*Trainspotting*, *Twin Town*, *Shopping*, *Face*, *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*) that these films are more preoccupied with (a regressive politics of) masculinity than with class. According to Monk, they are targeted at a *Loaded*¹¹ demographic and configure male social exclusion as a subcultural lifestyle rather than a social problem. In this sense, they can also be understood as continuous with postfeminist trends in western media generally, whereby lad culture’s nostalgic reappropriation of images of hard, working-class masculinity is used to poke ironic fun at feminism as well as being understood by audiences as subverting bourgeois values and consumer culture (Ging 2005).

Similarly, both Chibnall (2001) and Leigh (2000) maintain that the (postmodern) reappropriation of the gangster genre in British cinema (*Lock Stock*, *Snatch*, *Fast Food*, *Circus*) has little to do with the realities of modern-day crime in Britain and more to do with the perceived threats of multiculturalism, political correctness and the gains of feminism. According to Chibnall and Murphy (1999), the popularity of gangster iconography in cinema is part of a wider cultural phenomenon, whereby certain

images of hypermasculinity have become popular on account of the moral and social certainties that they are assumed to symbolise:

When we assemble the evidence from a range of media, it points pretty unerringly to a preoccupation with nostalgic representations of a kind of masculine essentialism—a time and a setting in which men knew how to perform masculinity, the rules of male association were clear, and the penalties for their infraction were draconian (Chibnall and Murphy 1999, 2).

With the exception of *Adam and Paul*, whose influences are distinctly more vaudeville and European arthouse than British or American, the new Irish films which feature criminal, unemployed and socially excluded masculinities (which include *Last Days in Dublin*, *Crush Proof*, *Accelerator*, *Intermission*, *Headrush*, *Spin the Bottle* and *Man About Dog*) represent a significant departure from the social-realist tradition that influenced Joe Comerford's work in the 1980s. This is most evident in their eschewal of overt political comment and context, coupled with many of the stylistic devices cited by Chibnall (2001) in his definition of postmodern British gangster films as “gangster light.”¹² While the films are clearly set in recognizable Dublin locations, they do not engage with the specific realities of these communities, using them instead as metonyms for social disadvantage generally. This tendency toward lack of social and historical context, combined with the films' discursive configuration of social exclusion as both a social problem and a seductive “protest lifestyle”, facilitates a high degree of ideological ambiguity.

That male social exclusion has been theorised by film scholars elsewhere (Savran 1998; Pfeil 1995; Monk 2000; Chibnall 2001; Leigh 2000; Giroux and Szeman 2001) as indexing concerns about changing gender relations rather than class oppression does not negate the possibility that some audiences read this cycle of Irish films as narratives of empowerment. A recent study of male audiences of these films (Ging 2006) reveals that working-class viewers identified strongly with the protagonists and subcultures portrayed. For these men, films such as *Accelerator* and *Crushproof* valorised marginalised urban identities by presenting a counter-discourse to the news media's demonisation of socially disadvantaged male youth (Devlin 2000). However, for middle-class male viewers, the pleasures offered by these films were more rooted in the fantasy of a homosocial, responsibility-free lifestyle, and they were quick to make connections between them and other “laddish” texts and to adopt the discourse of lad culture when discussing them. These divergent readings should alert us to the fact that the cinematic visibility of marginalisation is by no means an indication that class society is under attack. On the contrary, the currently fashionable commodification and reification of working-class, underclass and criminal male identity, as seen in *The Football Factory* (2004), *Green Street* (2005), *The Business* (2005) and *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2006), may well serve to further essentialise the groups in question as a social inevitability rather than a social problem of the State. As Will Higbee has commented in relation to French film *La Haine*, such imagery risks contributing to the “already exaggerated media representation of the disadvantaged urban periphery as the site of violence and delinquency which warrants the repressive police presence” (Higbee 2001, 202).

Reconsidering National Cinema

Many of the concerns expressed above derive from the fact that so many Irish films look to mainstream British and American cinema for inspiration. However, this should not lead the reader to assume that an “authentic” national cinema is being idealised as an insular and self-sufficient cultural entity. As Andrew Higson (2000, 65) has argued, there is an artificiality inherent in the concept of national cinema as a “tight-knit, value-sharing collectivity, sustaining the experience of nationhood”, given the fundamentally transnational nature of film production and distribution. Higson challenges the national versus imperialist cinema dichotomy, and paints a more optimistic picture of current developments, whereby the transnational—as opposed to global or universal—nature of film production, distribution and consumption is seen to have positive potential for cultural diversity. As he points out, film-viewing communities

“are rarely self-sufficient, stable or unified. They are much more likely to be contingent, complex, in part fragmented, in part overlapping with other senses of identity and belonging that have more to do with generation, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, politics or style than with nationality (Higson 2000, 66)”.

Higson goes on to state that the arguments in favour of protecting national film culture against the pernicious influences of Hollywood are often based on rather static and homogenous notions of

national identity, and he suggests that such limitations may work to undermine rather than foster cultural diversity in what David Morley (1996) refers to as the changing postmodern geography of communications processes:

The “imagined community” argument thus sometimes seems unable to acknowledge the cultural difference and diversity that invariably marks both the inhabitants of a particular nation state and the members of more geographically dispersed “national” communities. In this sense, as with more conservative versions of the nationalist project, the experience and acceptance of diversity is closed off (Higson 2000, 66).

It is difficult to take issue with Higson’s argument here, since what he advocates is a genuinely intercultural approach to and understanding of the role of cinema in relation to cultural identity. In this sense, he presents a Bakhtinian view of transnational flows, whereby a plurality of cinematic influences and voices collide and are mutually transformed and enriched in the process. However, while Higson appears to describe what Hal Foster (1986) has referred to as a “postmodernism of resistance”, an aesthetic that rejects hierarchy, repudiates the status quo and celebrates diversity, or what Angela McRobbie (ibid.) sees as a postmodernism that accommodates formerly marginalised voices, there is arguably more evidence in recent Irish cinema of Foster’s “postmodernism of reaction”. Irish films such as *Man About Dog*, *Intermission* and *Head Rush* are replete with stylistic quotations from the new British gangster films,¹³ most of which are, in turn, homages to the British gangster films of the 1970s and 1980s and to the work of Tarantino, Scorsese and Fererra.¹⁴ For Chibnall, the influence of Tarantino has been a crucial factor in turning traditional “realist” gangster films into a “semi-comedic travesty in which authenticity is replaced by pastiche” (ibid, 2), and he describes these films as characterised by “faux-ness”, which he defines as “a knowing theatrical distortion of real life, a mutually condoned simulacrum that, by a typically post-modern conceit, is something better than the real thing” (ibid, 3).

This rather arbitrary, second- or third-hand reappropriation of themes and styles from other cinemas (and media cultures generally) has become a key feature of “Cool Hibernia”. It is an aesthetic which favours pastiche over parody, and in which the signifiers of irony can be readily detected but their meaning or “evaluative edge” (Hutcheon 1994) remains largely elusive. According to the rules of postmodern cultural production, irony, intertextuality and polysemy must be present but, in the majority of films which employ these devices, there is little sense that either filmmakers or audiences fully understand the joke.¹⁵ There may be as many exceptions to this rule as there are examples: films such as *The Butcher Boy* (1997) and, perhaps to a lesser extent, highly self-conscious parodies of the horror and sci-fi genres, such as *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), *Dead Meat* (2004) and *Flyin’ Saucer Rock n’ Roll* (1997) are clearly conversant in the political and ideological functioning of irony. However, there is a sufficiently substantial raft of hip, youth-oriented Irish films to indicate that, in the contemporary discursive terrain of postmodernism and postfeminism, irony has become “a commodity in its own right” (Austin-Smith 1990, 51, cited in Hutcheon, ibid, 28). In this scenario, irony becomes not so much a self-reflexive commentary on, or parody of the outmoded status of former gender codes, as it becomes a cue not to take the text seriously.¹⁶

It would appear that, in an increasingly transnational and converging mediascape in which virtual communities transcend geographical boundaries, the cinema-as national-allegory model is no longer an adequate framework from which to challenge Hollywood cinema, which itself continues to be erroneously conceived of as a monolithic and ideologically homogenous entity. However, the random appropriation of generic, narrative and stylistic codes from other commercially successful cinemas is not likely to foster a vibrant and original film culture in this country. Nor is it likely to give voice to the plurality of identities and perspectives that are re-shaping contemporary Ireland, since styles and grammars that have evolved out of cultural constellations elsewhere cannot simply be airlifted in to articulate the narratives that are pertinent to Ireland in the 2000s. Only by adopting a truly pluralist approach to filmmaking, whereby it is understood that transcultural exchange leads to *mutual* self-questioning, transformation and hybridity, can Irish cinema gain progressive momentum. The current disavowal of cultural specificity and self-reflexivity, on the other hand, is likely to limit cross-cultural understanding by framing an ostensibly neutral culture of pastiche as the “norm”, thus eschewing the Anglo-American-centricity of its social, moral, political and aesthetic values.

Conclusion

This chapter does not set out to demonstrate that the majority of Irish films are failing to address marginalised identities. It is cognizant of the highly original voices that have emerged in

groundbreaking films such as *Pavee Lackeen* (2005), *Adam and Paul* and *Once* (2007) and suggests that this type of nuanced self-questioning, which takes its influences from film cultures other than British and American box-office hits, can and does succeed. The argument points rather to the potential risk of consolidating a particular vision of or discourse on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in which social marginalisation is dealt with in highly limited terms. In the current climate, in which a postmodern aesthetic of surface representation dominates, social marginalisation, multiculturalism and homosexuality are in danger of being posited as ready-formed subcultures with visual appeal, rather than as complex social situations with which policy-makers are still coming to grips. Instead of engendering a lively forum for self-questioning, much current filmmaking appears to be increasingly subsumed into the discourse of what Gavan Titley (ibid.) calls “culture talk”, which attempts to blend marketability and economic buoyancy with discourses of progress, diversity and inclusion.

While certain marginalised identities are highly visible in the culture of “Cool Hibernia”, marginalised voices remain largely unheard. The tendency to focus on hip, upbeat and ultimately futuristic visions of a pluralistic and inclusive Ireland dovetails with current trends in advertising and marketing discourse, where there is a heavy futurist bias (Lien 1997) or what Appadurai (1996) has referred to as an “aesthetics of ephemerality”. This kind of cultural and social rootedlessness fits well with the logic of promotional culture which, according to Andrew Wernick (1991), has come to invade all forms of cultural production. It is arguable that the nature and scope of Irish identity has never been so elusive and contested, and issues of identity now concern Irish people more than ever before. However, the eagerness of some filmmakers to escape “the miseries of rural life” means that filmmaking is in danger of erasing cultural memory in favour of empty pastiche, style over substance and the unquestioning acceptance of liberal ideologies. While the resultant images are often seductive and suggestive of an inclusive, multicultural metropolis, they are a little like “world-music” compilation CDs: they give audiences a positive taste of the exotic, without any insight into the historical, political and cultural struggles that have shaped the communities and cultures that are represented. Given the current aversion to self-questioning, it is possible that Ireland will not succeed in developing a truly vibrant and original film output until minority filmmakers gain sufficient confidence to break free of the constraints of positive representation, and until the country’s new inhabitants establish a foothold in the culture industries and begin to speak in their own voices, be they migrant, refugee, second-generation, hyphenated, naturalised or diasporic Irish.

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¹ The Celtic Tiger period was a time of unprecedented economic growth in Ireland, stretching from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. It was triggered by the dot.com explosion, corporate-friendly legislation and low tax rates.

² Examples include *Waking Ned*, *The Field*, *Circle of Friends*, *War of the Buttons*, *A Love Divided*, *Angela's Ashes*, *Agnes Brown*, *This Is My Father*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *The Last of the High Kings* and *Rat*.

³ According to Michael Dwyer, *Intermission* is similar to both *Magnolia* and *Trainspotting* ("That's a Wrap", *The Irish Times (The Ticket)*, 21st August 2003, 2). See also Gerry McCarthy, "Vice of a New Generation: Ireland's answer to *Trainspotting* is also Shimmy Marcus' answer to Hollywood", *The Sunday Times (Culture)*, February 2004, 6-7, and Donald Clarke, "Veinspotting", *The Irish Times (The Ticket)*, 20th August 2004, 6-7.

⁴ Gavan Titley (2004) uses the term "culture talk" to describe a particular discourse common in what he calls "Ireland™", which attempts to construct a stable, marketable image of national identity that is also viewed as progressive and inclusive.

⁵ Connolly explores Ireland's subaltern, migrant and feminist film cultures, demonstrating the extent to which they were informed by social developments and aesthetic traditions from elsewhere, most notably avant-garde film collectives in London and the New York "No Wave" scene.

⁶ For example, in *About Adam* the Music Centre in Temple Bar is a private apartment.

⁷ *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1993, vol. 46, no. 3, 2–8.

⁸ Postfeminism is used here in the same way that Tasker and Negra (2007) mobilise the term, i.e. as a position which acknowledges the "pastness" of feminism, whether that pastness is mourned, celebrated or regarded with indifference.

⁹ Dr Zappone and Dr Gilligan were married in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (where there are no residency requirements for same-sex marriage) in September 2003. When they returned to Ireland they informed the Revenue Commissioners of their marriage but were refused the tax allowances to which heterosexual married couples are entitled. In November 2004, they were granted leave by the High Court to bring their case by way of Judicial Review. The Revenue Commissioners and the State filed a defence to the case in May 2005. The case is now placed in a list for hearing.

¹⁰ Carrine Tarr (2004, 110) describes the Beur films as "films made by and/or featuring second-generation young people of Maghrebi or North African origin in France" and the *banlieue* films as "films set in multi-ethnic working-class estates on the urban periphery".

¹¹ *Loaded* magazine is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of British lad culture As David Gauntlett (2002, 155) has observed, "*Loaded* reader" is often used as "a shorthand for a kind of twenty-something, beer-drinking, football-loving, sex-obsessed male stereotype."

¹² Chibnall (2001) distinguishes between “gangster heavy”, which he describes as a search for “unvarnished authenticity”, and “gangster light”, which he claims is characterised by distancing, irony, self-conscious intertextual borrowings and an awareness of the artifice of filmmaking.

¹³ In *Man About Dog*, the names of the characters (Mo Chara, Cerebral Paulsy and Scud Murphy) and the way in which they are introduced at the start of the film is highly reminiscent of *Trainspotting*. The film also uses fast- and slow-mo to similar effect. *Intermission* uses randomly interconnected subplots in the vein of what Jeffrey Sconce (2002) describes as “smart films” such as *Magnolia* and *Crash* (of which Altman’s *Short Cuts* was the progenitor).

¹⁴ According to Danny Leigh (2000), *Lock Stock* is indebted to the London gangland mythology of MacKenzie’s *The Long Good Friday* (1979): “time and time again the new boys return to Hodges’ and MacKenzie’s twin genre shibboleths (with the occasional faux-LSD nod to Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg’s *Performance*)”. He argues that Ritchie’s work is replete with influences from Scorsese, Ferrara and, especially, Tarantino. Similarly, Spicer (2001, 192) has argued that *Lock Stock*’s “highly allusive intertextuality and numerous bouts of stylised violence derive from Quentin Tarantino’s influential *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994).”

¹⁵ According to Ackerman (1983), the correct interpretation of irony involves two processes: firstly detection, which requires a judgement about the likelihood of the information contained in the utterance, and secondly inference, which requires judgement of the speaker’s intent and the function of the utterance. Audience research with male Irish teenagers (Ging 2005) showed that laddish irony was sometimes detected but was rarely inferred. These findings were corroborated by subsequent research (Ging 2006) with 18–35 year old male viewers, which demonstrated that irony was a highly familiar but little understood feature of postmodern constructions of gender.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon (1994) describes this phenomenon as “morally suspect evasion masquerading as healthy suspension of certainty”.