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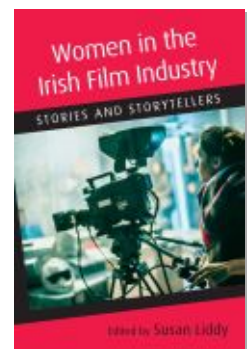
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Activism through Celebration: The role of the Dublin Feminist Film Festival in supporting women in Irish film, 2014–17

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This chapter will examine the activist potential of the annual Dublin Feminist Film Festival (DFFF). Launched in 2014, it was one of the first film events of its kind in Ireland to pursue an explicitly feminist agenda.¹ In the following, former and current members of the organising committee consider the origins and development of the festival in the context of other contemporary Irish women's activist movements, such as 'Waking the Feminists' and the Abortion Rights Campaign, as well as the festival's engagement with, and support from, the wider Dublin arts scene. Our contribution will outline the mission statement of the festival, which uses a programme of short films, features and special events to showcase women's diverse contribution to the film industry. During the 2017 festival, for instance, the DFFF brought a programme of ten international features and nine short films to a total audience of 415 people over three days. Although the festival includes offerings from diverse global locations, each programme to date has worked to highlight and celebrate the work of emerging and established Irish women in film. Through three case studies, the second part of this chapter argues that the DFFF provides a valuable space for working through issues related to women in cinema in terms of Irish productions, distribution, exhibition and criticism. These cases are chosen because they illuminate our conception of what is 'feminist' about film and 'activist' about our festival. First, we discuss the screening of Vivienne Dick's *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978) and *The Irreducible Difference of the Other* (2013) against the background of DFFF's objective to draw the attention of the Irish film-going public to lesser-known filmmakers. Explicating the experimental aspects of Dick's

internationally renowned work and contextualising it provides a fitting example of DFFF's determination to programme avant-garde works. Secondly, chosen in part because its sold-out 2015 screening indicates a significant public interest in the film and its subject matter, we explain that screening Lelia Doolan's *Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey* (2011) provided the opportunity to consider women's place in the male-dominated worlds of politics and film, as well as women's achievements in social justice movements. Finally, with the 2016 screening of Anne Crilly's *Mother Ireland* (1988), we emphasised the important role that film plays in shaping our ideas about femininity and women's social roles. Our screening of this film exemplifies DFFF's activist ethos in engaging with feminist topics that encourage reflection and review the changing material and symbolic status of Irish women, and is therefore an interesting case to consider. The accompanying panel discussion 'Women's Voices in Media Industries' reiterated that the production of more diverse and more complex stories is dependent on women's participation in high-level roles across the industry. To close, we reflect on the activist potential and limitations of feminist film festivals.

Our approach in this chapter is informed by scholarship on the relationship between feminist theory and practice. In her study of the New York Women's Video Festival, which ran from 1972 to 1980, Melinda Barlow examines the benefits of festival-based cultural activism. Referring to a similar question posed in the festival's 1976 catalogue, she asks, 'Why should women, who constitute more than half of the US population, need a special showcase for their work?'² Variations on this question remain one of the most frequent that we hear when publicising the DFFF in the mainstream media. Barlow offers an effective answer, explaining that 'a specialized forum' is more effective for bringing the work of women to public attention. The ongoing need for such women-focused fora is confirmed by a brief survey of the programmes from Irish film festivals. In the three years before the launch of the DFFF, for example, on average women directed only 18 per cent of the films shown at the Audi Dublin International Film Festival.³ This figure mirrors the male bias in high-level creative roles within the film industry. According to Liddy (2015), between 1993 and 2013 only 13 per cent of Irish-produced screenplays were written by women.⁴ Recent gender statistics published by Screen Ireland show, moreover, that in 2018 only 31 per cent of applications for Irish Production funding had a female director

attached. Of the Irish Production films completed, 45 per cent had a female writer (up from 20 per cent the previous year), 36 per cent had a female director (an increase of 16 per cent), and 73 per cent had a female producer.⁵ These figures suggest that the Six Point Plan on gender equality, introduced in December 2015, is bearing some fruit.

The DFFF symbolically alludes to women's historical lack of representation in and by the industry in its very form: the event does not take place in a cinema but in a small theatre. It has never used film or even DCP (Digital Cinema Package) files for screenings; rather, we play discs or high-resolution computer files from a projector. Notwithstanding the essentially grassroots structure, approach and tone of the event, or perhaps because of it, the founders of the DFFF hope to redress the gender imbalance in the film industry through an event that celebrates female artists. We thus share Claire Johnston's conviction that feminist film events help to open up spaces 'in which the transformation of the relationship between production, distribution, exhibition and criticism could be worked through and from which strategies could be forged'.⁶ Since Johnston's influential article, which takes the 'Feminism and Cinema Event' at the 1979 Edinburgh Film Festival as its starting point, a growing body of literature on film festivals has emphasised the role that festivals play in film culture – and society more broadly – as circuits of distribution and exhibition. Of particular relevance is the volume *Film Festivals and Activism* (2012), edited by Leshu Torchin and Dina Iordanova, which conceptualises the specific nature and possibilities of advocacy in this context. The DFFF aligns best with what Torchin terms 'cultural activism', a form of advocacy that operates by providing venues and opportunities to filmmakers whose work might otherwise be marginalised by systemic imbalances of power in the film industry.⁷ In this respect, women's and feminist festivals share motivations with festivals that screen media representing or produced by LGBT groups or people of colour. As Skadi Loist and Ger Zielinski note in their study of media activism and queer film festivals from the late 1970s onwards, 'Gay film festivals were established as much to re-present [sic] gays to an interested audience as to provide a showcase for gay filmmakers who had few, or no, other opportunities to screen their work publicly.'⁸ The agenda of the DFFF is similarly two-pronged, focused on both representing a diverse range of women on-screen and providing a designated venue for short and feature-length productions by female writers and directors working

in Ireland and abroad. The festival especially wishes to draw attention to Irish women filmmakers who have been overshadowed in recent decades by the international commercial success of directors like Jim Sheridan, Neil Jordan and Lenny Abrahamson. Beyond celebrating female filmmakers, we hope to inspire and empower others to get involved in filmmaking and production by creating a networking space for those who care about women's cinema, women in cinema and, of course, women in society. Furthermore, we donate all profits to a women's charity.

This affiliation allows the festival to marry theory and practice. As Johnston notes, the interplay between the two has been a priority of the women's movement, which has always sought 'to construct knowledge of the nature and causes of women's oppression in order to devise strategies for social transformation'.⁹ Such transformation, she implies, is more likely when attention is paid to the relationship between text, subject and historical conjuncture, rather than analysing films purely in terms of the content of the film 'text'. The DFFF puts this idea into practice through panel discussions that foreground relevant cultural and political contexts. For instance, Jennifer O'Meara's introductory talk on 'The Achievements of Women in Film' at the 2015 festival purposefully included references not only to filmmakers but also to the various female film scholars working in Irish universities. Her aim was to draw attention to the bias towards male film critics in Ireland's popular media. Similarly, the programme notes for the respective festivals indicate any political issues that shaped the production of the films being screened. In 2016, for example, we showed *Margarita, with a Straw* (dir. Shonali Bose, 2014), a film about the sexual awakening of a bisexual young woman with cerebral palsy. As we explained in the programme notes, this film was 'one of the first Hindi films to get LGBTQ sex scenes past a strict board of censors'.¹⁰ This aspect of the film's production served as a reminder of how far Ireland has progressed in relation to LGBT issues, particularly since the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015. It also reminded Irish audiences that such freedoms are not universal. The simultaneously local and global perspective of the DFFF was emphasised by the fact that *Margarita, with a Straw* shared the programme with Anne Crilly's *Mother Ireland*, which was censored by British television because of restrictions introduced by Douglas Hurd in 1988.

At this point, it is worth considering Sophie Mayer's discussion of what is 'new' about feminist cinema in the twenty-first century. For the

London-based film curator, critic and scholar, feminist cinema today is marked by ‘its negotiation of a transgenerational feminist film history of four decades within a reflexive awareness of the interruption and revision of feminism, and interconnectedly of film cultures, in the new millennium’.¹¹ Mayer’s summation relates well to the various components of the DFFF analysed here: the intergenerational dialogue created when featuring Irish women filmmakers from the past alongside those of the next generation(s); the connections the DFFF has established with other women’s rights groups in Ireland, feminist film festivals (London), and distributors (the US-based Women Make Movies); the ways in which the identity politics and digital technologies of the twenty-first century have influenced the film and festival landscape in which DFFF operates. As well as allowing grassroots events like ours to stream films, new digital technologies enable filmmakers to submit their works to festivals online. For instance, in 2016 DFFF began using FilmFreeway to accept submissions to its Short Film Competition, receiving ninety-seven entries in the first year. Such platforms facilitate DFFF’s attempts to create a programme that is inclusive and intersectional, one organised and publicised using digital platforms and social media, including a website as well as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The festival has also made use of mailing lists, not only to engage with attendees, but also to seek feedback after the festival. Thus, while Barlow identifies the importance of the New York Women’s Video Festival using a ‘graffiti booth’ to record feedback from attendees,¹² digital technologies now allow for less obtrusive ways for attendees to provide anonymous feedback and suggestions for the festival. Social media channels have also allowed engaged attendees to provide unsolicited feedback immediately, or to share events with their friends and followers.

Such networks are a vital element of our ambition to bring feminist ideas to a wider audience. With a self-proclaimed nostalgia for the US mass feminist movement of the 1970s, Alexandra Juhasz criticises the insularity of theory-based feminist film studies that ‘has steadily transformed into an expert’s language that speaks almost solely to its own and other academic disciplines’.¹³ She urges feminist scholars to ‘reinvest’ in feminist media practice and politics: ‘Join a group; speak your specialist knowledge about feminism and media there, in a language your comrades can understand; use these political goals to locate or even produce new and relevant texts.’¹⁴ A commitment to making

specialist knowledge more accessible has intuitively underpinned our programming decisions. What is more, we have established a presence in the local cultural community, not least through our links with Trinity College Dublin, Maynooth University and Dublin City University, our annual fundraising feminist table quiz, as well as our sister gig 'Coup d'état', held at the Tivoli Backstage in 2016. By engaging with a variety of industry and academic stakeholders, we are a truly interdisciplinary festival that provides a variety of frameworks for the public to engage with art.

Through such collaborations, we believe that we can debunk the myth that women as creators and filmmakers must constantly reinvent the wheel by creating opportunities for networking and engagement between audiences, the film industry, and academia. In the past, we have worked with the noted short film programmer Eibh Collins, who hosted a panel with directors on our competition shortlist in 2016, and Cara Holmes, the only filmmaker whose work we have screened more than once. By creating opportunities for engagement with audiences and film industry experts, we also hope to help up-and-coming filmmakers to establish a reputation and develop links with industry insiders. For the 2017 festival, moreover, we selected the theme 'Feminist Futures' in a conscious effort to steer away from the canon and showcase fresh perspectives, limiting the programme to films released since 2010. We also invited Nora Moriarty to run a workshop entitled 'Make a Movie on Your Phone' with thirteen- to seventeen-year-old girls. As Mary Celeste Kearney recognises, women's film festivals can play a vital role in encouraging more girls and young women to become involved in the masculine world of filmmaking. Crucially, Kearney argues that girls-only workshops provide a safe environment for them to get to grips with equipment and feel empowered to make films that celebrate their experiences.¹⁵

Using her experience of attending the Seoul Women's Film Festival as an example, Juhasz explains that such yearly events allow women to 'use feminist films to better understand their lives, history and the role of cinema in these matters'.¹⁶ Accordingly, our artistic vision prioritises films that challenge society to reject stereotypes, help us to understand our identities, desires, and relationships, and bring pleasure by celebrating (Irish) women's achievements. Writing about the Uist Eco Film Festival in rural Scotland, Torchin notes there can

be a distinct value to festivals with such a 'local' focus that brings a community together, rather than primarily aiming to change the minds of audiences from further afield.¹⁷ In that case, a festival with discussions partly held in Gaelic was particularly valuable for exploring questions of conservation in a community where individuals had suffered losses due to soil erosion and major weather events. In a similar manner, the DFFF caters to those segments of the Irish public that have a renewed interest in watching films that highlight the institutional struggles still facing Irish women today. It seems apt that the DFFF was founded two years after Savita Halappanavar died from sepsis at Galway University Hospital after being denied an emergency termination to end a non-viable pregnancy. Her death triggered renewed efforts to repeal the 1983 Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which affords equal right to life to a pregnant woman and her unborn child. In 2015, the year after the inaugural DFFF, the 'Waking the Feminists' movement in Irish theatre was born in response to the Abbey Theatre's announcement of a male-dominated centenary programme. Much as 'Waking the Feminists' has been described as 'a grassroots movement' that aims to 'put the spotlight on a new wave of female playwrights, directors and other creatives', the DFFF refocused attention on women filmmakers, both at home in Ireland and abroad.¹⁸ What is more, the screening of Irish political documentaries like *Mother Ireland* and *Bernadette* can take on new meaning when reviewed in the context of Ireland in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Torchin notes that while programming is an important aspect of any film festival, unique considerations determine the line-up of activist festivals.¹⁹ A programme may choose to prioritise the representation of marginalised groups, to call attention to political issues, or to screen underappreciated works. These considerations are central to the programming decisions of the DFFF. In direct response to the film festival brochures we had been used to seeing, the criteria for film selection are simple: every film has to be directed by a woman. Our commitment to inclusive art is also reflected in our programmes, which are committed to showcasing documentary, fictional, and experimental films, as well as work by non-heteronormative women and women of colour. Secondly, political considerations informed our decision to screen films such as *Trapped*, Dawn Porter's 2016 documentary about the impact of TRAP (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) laws in states such as Texas

and Alabama, which was shown at the festival in 2017. Choosing to screen a film that tapped into the issues at the heart of the emergent Repeal the Eighth movement, we acknowledged that, to quote Iordanova, ‘topical debates are probably the single most important feature’ when it comes to a festival’s potential for activism.²⁰ Thirdly, most years we commit to showcasing neglected works, often of an avant-garde nature, as well as films that have been forgotten or purposely marginalised. In 2016, therefore, we expanded the scope of the festival to include a non-traditional film experience. Local electronic musicians provided a live soundtrack to *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), directed by pioneering (and soon forgotten) female director Germaine Dulac. This event allowed audiences to engage in modern and innovative ways with silent film. By including a mix of recent and older films in our programme, we provide opportunities for new generations to engage with classics of feminist cinema. To return to Torchin, such ‘representational interventions may challenge the expected aesthetics’.²¹ The following case studies demonstrate how our programmes seek to juxtapose films that portray a wide palette of female experience with works that develop a feminist aesthetic, thus challenging the norms and exclusions of the culture industry.

Case study one:

Vivienne Dick’s *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978) and *The Irreducible Difference of the Other* (2013)

At the inaugural festival, we felt that it was crucial to recognise and appreciate the work of some of the most important female filmmakers in the country. For this reason, we decided to dedicate the closing event to Vivienne Dick, screening *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978) and *The Irreducible Difference of the Other* (2013) followed by a Q&A with the filmmaker. Dick has been lauded globally for her work and is revered within the artistic community, perhaps more so than in traditional film communities. In fact, Dick was one of the originators of the New York No Wave movement, which, as Eileen Leahy notes, ‘brought avant-garde experimental film into bars and clubs, screening trash Super 8 short films alongside punk bands and performances’.²²

She Had Her Gun All Ready, Dick's second film, cemented her avant-garde credentials. For Jim Hoberman, it is her 'most compact and accessible narrative'.²³ The film features underground icon Lydia Lunch in one of her first roles and depicts her antagonistic struggle against a passive foil, played by another fixture of the No Wave scene, Pat Place. As critic Karyn Kay résumés, the film 'speaks the contemporary unspeakable: women's anger and hatred of women at the crucial moment of overpowering identification and obsessional thralldom'.²⁴ *She Had Her Gun All Ready* is not merely about the dichotomous tension between these two exceptional female figures, it also tells the story of normal people and New York, the city so synonymous with Dick's early years. In so doing, the film draws on four traditions that Hoberman has identified as integral to narrow-gauge filmmaking, not least the psychodrama.²⁵ In addition, Dick fuses a gritty home-movie aesthetic with the perspective of a *flâneur* observing the city. The attempt to capture the megalopolis on lo-fi Super 8 produces an 'ironic spectacle, in which the filmmaker's visionary ambition is continually played off against the paucity of ... her means'.²⁶ With an expressive style and wild edge, Dick's camera tracks the figures from the Lower East Side and New York's famous punk mecca, St Mark's Place, to Coney Island, where the confrontation between Lunch and Place reaches its violent climax. As Hoberman remarks in his review for *The Village Voice*, 'Dick's attempt to keep them in frame as the rollercoaster goes into its horrendous first drop ends the film in an exhilarating, totally kinetic jumble'.²⁷ Under the lens are not merely the sights and sounds of the prototypical US city but also the dark underbelly of American culture. As Connolly notes, references to stalkers and serial killers add a feminist edge to Dick's broader 'exploration of "Americana" through myth and popular iconography'.²⁸ Her critique of popular culture and its representation of women is reinforced by her choice of medium, which rejects the 'oligarchy' and 'prodigal values of the larger culture industry', as Hoberman eloquently summarises.²⁹ Not only is Dick's work uncompromisingly artistic, it seems to encapsulate perfectly theoretical conceptions of 'feminist film' as a kind of 'counter cinema'.³⁰ All of this makes Dick a formidable feminist filmmaker, of course, 'for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', as Audre Lorde famously claimed.³¹

The title of Dick's more recent film *The Irreducible Difference of the Other* (2013) contains an explicit nod to the work of feminist philosopher

Luce Irigaray. The homage expresses Dick's concern with the recognition of difference and otherness as ethical desiderata. It is also a clue as to the underlying feminist message of the film. Dick rebukes the patriarchal techniques of mainstream film by eschewing traditional narrative forms and instead using experimental techniques, which include Franco-Irish actress Olwen Fouéré inhabiting two personae, avant-garde dramatist Antonin Artaud and Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Likewise, the film uses a wide palette of shots and sounds to emphasise distinctions between her subjects, from a roof-gardener in Cairo to the chief personae. As Leahy explains, the 'weaving together of disparate sounds and images posi[t] our interrelatedness as humans and challeng[e] the prevailing understanding of relationships in terms of power, where one group or individual affirms themselves through dominating another'.³² In fact, the film includes references to the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, and recent protests against austerity in Ireland. Leahy perceives traces of the No Wave aesthetic in Dick's latest film, for example in 'some of the audio (the performed-sound sequence by Suzanne Walsh which focuses on a close-up of her mouth at a microphone)' and 'the party sequences in which a bright red colour dominates'.³³ Such echoes of earlier films bridge the past and present in a film that is fundamentally about the possibilities of connection and relation in a world dominated by conflict and alienation.

Case study two:

Lelia Doolan's *Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey* (2011)

Similar to Dick, Lelia Doolan is a stalwart of independent cinema. It is not uncommon for evaluations of her contribution to Irish cultural and cinematic life to cite former Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, who once described Doolan as 'mad, bad, and dangerous'.³⁴ Such a 'badge of honour' (as luminary of the Irish and international screen, Fionnula Flanagan, puts it) attests to Doolan's formidable character, unconventionality, talent and influence.³⁵ She was heavily involved in the early years of the newly established Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ, initially in acting and presenting roles before turning to producing and directing. Doolan is particularly credited for her work developing one of the first Irish soap operas, *The Riordans* (1965–79), as

well as her involvement in the seminal current affairs programme *7 Days* (1966–76). Doolan went on to become artistic director of the Abbey Theatre from 1971 to 1973 before moving on to Queen's University Belfast to undertake a doctorate in anthropology, meanwhile becoming heavily involved in the social and political life of the city. In the 1980s, she moved to Galway. Her love for the city and appreciation of the power of art, culture and film to enrich people's lives led to her negotiating the terms of her role as chairperson of the IFB; among other things, she insisted to the then minister for culture, Michael D. Higgins, that the IFB be located in Galway. Doolan's role in this organisation and her involvement in setting up the now internationally acclaimed Galway Film Fleadh cemented her position as a figurehead for a changing and maturing Irish film industry.

This legacy was at the forefront of our minds when we put together the programme for DFFF 2015. Our decision to screen Doolan's 2011 documentary feature *Bernadette: Notes on a Political Journey* in part reflected our commitment to showcasing the best films made by Irish women alongside renowned and less well-known international work. Moreover, we relished the opportunity to remind the audience of the history of feminist and socialist activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, born in Cookstown, County Tyrone, who acted at the heart of the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, which united Protestants and Catholics in the fight against poverty and discrimination.³⁶ She became the youngest woman elected to the parliament of the United Kingdom in 1969, having run as an independent 'Unity' candidate. In 1974, she co-founded the Irish Republican Socialist Party. | Less than a decade later, she survived an assassination attempt by the Ulster Freedom Fighters. Through all this, Devlin McAliskey witnessed first-hand, and played a part in, some of the pivotal events of twentieth-century history, including the Battle of the Bogside and Bloody Sunday.

As Jerry Whyte notes, then, the political journey evoked in the title of Doolan's film 'is both Devlin's and Ireland's'.³⁷ The documentary combines archival footage with recent interviews between Doolan and Devlin McAliskey spanning the decade prior to the film's release. These interviews shape the narrative of the film. Doolan astutely recognised that her intended focus on the political ideas and opinions of Devlin McAliskey would best be captured by allowing her protagonist to 'decide what she wanted to say, and I was merely putting it into place

as we went along'.³⁸ Devlin McAliskey appreciated this sensitivity and generosity, which reflects the radically collaborative ethos of much feminist research and art. In giving Devlin McAliskey the opportunity to articulate and expand on the various strands of feminist, socialist and republican thought that underpinned her activism, Doolan affords the viewer an insight into this figure's deeply held beliefs and principles. Liz Greene emphasises the novelty of this approach, musing that 'it is still uncommon to make a documentary film about political ideas and not focus on personality'.³⁹ This observation especially holds true for biopics about noteworthy women from history, which all too often obscure the achievements of the women in question by instead focusing on titillating aspects of their private lives.

The filmmaker's own political ideology, rooted in an ethics of equality, fairness and justice, facilitates her incisive treatment of Devlin McAliskey's life and activism. Doolan uses montage sequences of the civil rights movement, Battle of the Bogside, and the Troubles to weave together complex ideas and social commentary. For Greene, these sequences bear the hallmarks of what she calls 'clashes'. That is to say, rather than adopting a wide-lens angle to observe street violence, the montages immerse the viewer in the action. They 'follow and track the protestors as they oppose State repression'.⁴⁰ Doolan underscores these 'clashes' effectively with music, using Leonard Cohen's song 'Everybody Knows' during a montage sequence showing a civil rights protest in 1968. The theme of retrospection is emphasised through this song, 'written about a position of looking back'. As Greene adds, however, there is a tension between this music and the tone of the film: 'Cohen's song is about defeat and pessimism and yet the film is centred on struggle and optimism'.⁴¹ Nonetheless, ending in the present, with images of political candidates who espouse socialist principles, the film suggests the perseverance of the social struggles for which Devlin McAliskey first advocated in the 1960s, not least inequality and capitalist oppression.⁴²

Similar tensions were reflected in the panel discussion that followed the screening, which offered the opportunity to discuss the joys and challenges of creating in an Irish context. Doolan was joined by Maeve Connolly (lecturer in Film and Animation, IADT), Jesse Jones (filmmaker and visual artist), Tess Motherway (documentary filmmaker and festival director at Dublin Doc Fest), and Maria Pramaggiore (Head of Media Studies, Maynooth University). The title of the panel ('Forms

of Feminist Film: Fiction, Non-fiction, Experimental’) reflected the fact that the programme of DFFF 2015 included a range of short and feature-length documentaries and experimental films, as well as more mainstream fictional narratives. Drawing on their own backgrounds, the panellists considered the relative merits of these forms in terms of funding and screening opportunities. Questions raised included whether, for women filmmakers, the decision to make a short or a feature is typically an artistic choice, or something determined by financial constraints, the kinds of challenges and opportunities that exist when recording women’s real-life experiences in documentaries, and the impact of digital media (such as the use of crowd-sourcing, self-distribution, or streaming) on women filmmakers. The panel was conceived to allow the audience to reflect on the diverse range of feminist cinema represented at the festival and the importance of recording women’s real-life experiences on-screen.

Case study three: *Anne Crilly’s Mother Ireland (1988)*

The cultural and political status of Irish women has always informed the decision-making process at the DFFF. Screening Anne Crilly’s film *Mother Ireland* allowed us to marry these concerns with the theme for DFFF 2016: ‘Othered Voices: The female voice on screen’. Produced by Derry Film and Video with support from Britain’s Channel 4, Crilly’s documentary offers a fascinating account of how the motif of a mythical ‘Mother Ireland’ (also known as *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* or *Sean-Bhean Bhocht*) served to marginalise women in public, political, social and cultural life. Crilly situates the historical roots of her film in nationalist culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when, ‘due to reasons of political censorship (Ireland’s political situation couldn’t be discussed), Ireland was personified as a woman – whose allies had to come from France or Spain to help her fight’.⁴³ This discourse conceived Irish women’s rightful and dutiful place in the home as nurturers and carers of their men.

Centuries later, this mythical image continued to underpin a cultural imaginary that compressed the multidimensionality and complexity of female experience into the emblematic image of the stoic, suffering and silent mother. Crilly’s film measures how this myth matched up to the

reality of women in political life, above all in feminist and nationalist culture. *Mother Ireland* includes interviews with noted Irish women historians, journalists, filmmakers and activists. It thus gives voice to a mute icon, by allowing Irish women to express their relationship with the imagery. For example, one of the documentary's contributors, Mairéad Farrell, an IRA member shot dead in controversial circumstances months after filming was completed, reveals that she and fellow female inmates at Armagh prison would cynically joke, 'Mother Ireland, get off our back.' They rejected this figure because 'it didn't reflect what we believed in'. Furthermore, the 1980s witnessed a growing rejection and resistance to this motif amongst feminists.⁴⁴ Irish feminists well understood the need to step out of the shadow of 'Mother Ireland' in order to push back against reductive and constraining depictions of Irish womanhood. By way of illustration, filmmaker Pat Murphy claimed that, on balance, Mother Ireland

is not a positive image, the associations I have with it are not positive ones, I actually think it's a wrong thing to do – to call a country after a woman – because it gets into those kind of areas where a country is to be won, or penetrated, or ploughed ... And it means that women aren't seen for themselves.⁴⁵

In other words, associating Ireland, Irishness and nationalism with a static set of feminised characteristics robs women of a framework that is flexible enough to allow them to express the diversity and multiplicity of their personalities, talents, sexualities, political persuasions and ambitions – in ways that would enable them to live full, empowered and dignified human lives. As A.K. Martin notes, the symbolic burden on Irish women 'involves very real material consequences for body, self, and nation', most notably sexual repression and abuse, and patriarchal double standards, not to mention the reproductive restrictions endured by generations of Irish women.⁴⁶

These issues came to bear on the discussions that comprised the closing panel of DFFF in 2016: 'Othered Voices: Women's Voices in Media Industries'. The participants included writer-director-producers Nicky Gogan and Margo Harkin, as well as members of the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University: Sarah Arnold, Anne O'Brien and Maria Pramaggiore. Iordanova notes that unlike Q&A sessions at

mainstream festivals – which tend to focus on the film’s making and message – discussions at activist festivals can ‘go beyond the film and address the issues that the film is concerned with, as well as to influence the thinking of the audience’.⁴⁷ Accordingly, our panel incorporated ideas around the voice, literal and figurative, and how women’s voices are heard, or not, in the industry. Such a focus on ‘instances of control’ aligns DFFF with other activist festivals discussed by Iordanova that are committed to renouncing censorship, which can undermine artistic creativity and potentially also interfere with a human rights agenda.⁴⁸ The censorship of *Mother Ireland* is a case in point. When originally broadcast, two segments were removed from the film, one showing human rights activist Emma Groves after she had been shot with a rubber bullet by a British soldier and one featuring Christy Moore’s song ‘Unfinished Revolution’. It is ironic that Crilly’s production was the first programme to fall victim to the British broadcasting ban given the documentary’s broader aim of underscoring how cultural and stereotypical images of Ireland as a woman have influenced an idealised version of femininity within Irish society.⁴⁹ At a moment when the country was poised for a referendum on repealing the 1983 Eighth Amendment, such a fully rounded recap of Irish women’s current material and mythic position was certainly timely.

Conclusion

Factoring the relationship between film, subject and historical conjuncture into programming decisions has allowed the festival to benefit from, and provide a platform for, women working in Irish cinema and media. It is also a pragmatic set-up, given that events focused around international guests would be prohibitively expensive for a group with grassroots origins and fundraising aims. In our history so far, moreover, we have remained conscious of our commitment to offer celluloid reminders of how far Irish women have had to travel in a considerably short period, all the while acknowledging how far we still have to go in order to achieve full equality. Simultaneously, we endeavour to advocate for film’s ability to explore issues pertinent to this complex. When considering the potential impact of activist festivals like the DFFF, Torchin makes two important arguments. First, she problematises the view that audiences

can and should be immediately transformed upon viewing activist films, or that exposure to activist festivals ‘inevitably leads to action’.⁵⁰ Secondly, she reflects on the phrase ‘preaching to the converted’, which is often directed at activist festivals or documentaries by the news media as a way of questioning – and, perhaps, undermining – film’s activist potential. Even if festivals do preach to the converted, however, there is value in that process. As Torchin explains, festivals can serve as ‘places for renewal of commitment’ to a given issue.⁵¹ What is more, even if those in attendance at DFFF screenings, talks and panels already make an effort to support media produced by women, a feminist film festival can function as what Torchin terms ‘a performative platform’.⁵² For the local and national media coverage received by festivals like the DFFF keeps the underrepresentation of women in the Irish film industry in the news. Our event serves as an annual reminder to organisations like Screen Ireland and the Irish Film Institute that more work must be done to achieve equality in production and exhibition.