
IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2017
THE YEAR IN REVIEW
Roddy Flynn, Tony Tracy (eds.)

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Waking the Film Makers: Diversity and Dynamism in Irish Screen Industries 2017

Roddy Flynn, Tony Tracy

Women have to fight really, really hard to get support to do a feature film ... If you just take for example, the [Irish] Film Board, they're aware of it, they're kind of ashamed of it after *Waking The Feminists* ... They know damn well that they fund all these films by young lads that are the same kind of film: horror films or crime fiction. Do we need to see another one of them? Are they that interesting? No, they're not. They're actually really boring – I think. There's other kinds of films out there but they can't get their heads around it. Maybe if they had a few more women on the panel, things might be different.

Vivienne Dick, October 2017, "93% Stardust" retrospective at IMMA

That we live in a time of cultural and political flux seems undeniable. Underlying assumptions within liberal democracies – the inevitability of globalization, structures of access and governance, the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a relatively narrow set of elites – have clearly been upset in recent years, accompanied by a sometimes reactionary but almost always populist wave of political figures. Trump, Macron, Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India etc. have cumulatively inaugurated a new dispensation, one which established cultural institutions and in particular the mass media have struggled to adjust to. Even in Ireland, the far more fluid post-2011 distribution of political power has rendered politics and the public sphere a far more unpredictable arena than at any point in the history of the state, complicating the "sense-making" role of the media institutions in the age of disruptive (anti) social media.

Yet this flux is not exclusively driven by the forces of populist reaction. The #MeToo movement raises the prospect of not just a long awaited rebalancing of cultural, economic and political power amongst genders, but embodies a progressive assertion of an identity politics which goes far beyond. In Ireland, less than a generation after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, a popular plebiscite endorsed Marriage Equality in 2015 (poignantly captured in Conor Horgan's documentary *Queen of Ireland*, 2015). Although anti-choice campaigners would disagree, the current moves to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution can be characterised as an extension of that progressive impulse. Both globally and locally, we are living through a moment of intense ideological struggle where even the epistemological basis on which statements about reality can be made are up for vigorous debate.

That culture – and more particularly the culture industries – are themselves crucial sites where ideological struggles are thrashed out is evinced by the recent and rapid changing attitudes to gender inequality by Irish cultural institutions, heralded and initially prompted on a local level by #*WakingTheFeminists* protest at the Abbey Theatre's *Waking The Nation 1916* centenary programme. Structural inequities within Irish arts organisations that have favoured male artists, administrators and world views have come under intense, sustained and overdue scrutiny since and increased in pace during 2017. In our 2015 article reviewing IFB-supported fiction features between 1993 and 2013, we noted how fewer than one fifth of those films were directed by women, a situation which contributes to an understanding of cinema as not just dominated behind the camera by men, but as being for and about men at a textual level (an imbalance neatly demonstrated by a recent Facebook meme relating to Best Picture nominees).¹

#*WakingTheFeminists* prompted IFB chair Annie Doona to announce a six point plan to address gender inequality in Irish filmmaking and screen content in December 2015. Aiming to achieve gender parity in Irish screen industries, this ambition took on greater substance at the Galway Film Fleadh in July 2017 when the IFB laid out a range of initiatives which, while clearly primarily motivated by considerations of gender, more broadly acknowledge the need to enhance a greater diversity of Irish screen talent whether understood in terms of ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, etc. These include the establishment of a Gender Equality and Diversity subcommittee, a move to ensure gender parity with regard to projects receiving development support and the opening of dialogue with industry partners (including production companies) to inform the development of a strategy to raise the profile of female talent within the industry.²

Although IFB funding decisions over the past several decades appears to support assertions such as those voiced by Vivienne Dick above, it is worth noting that the organisation today itself is far from being a bastion of male authority. While the Chief Executive is the fourth successive male to hold that pivotal role, James Hickey is one of just four men who work there. The other 21 employees, including key decision making areas of Production, Development and Distribution, are all women.³ 70% of the seven member board Board (Annie Doona, Rachel Lysaght, Katie Holly, Marian Quinn and Kate McColgan) are also women. If this suggests that, contra Dick's assertion, there are already "women on the panel", it lends weight to the IFB argument that the issue is not so much that it is hard for applications from women for funding to succeed but rather that it is hard for female creative talent to reach a point where they feel they can credibly apply for such funding in the first place. In 2017, of the 34 applications for Irish feature film production funding received by the Board, only five (15%) had a female writer or director attached (though 50% had a female producer). Hence the Board has introduced two further incentives in the past year targeted at actively encouraging applications from female film-makers. In September 2017 the Enhanced Production Funding scheme offered to €100,000 in additional funding to fiction features creatively lead by women. In February 2018, the IFB announced details of its new "POV" scheme which will award development funding to six projects lead by female director/writer/producer teams with a view to fully funding three features each with budgets up to €400,000.

The issue of gender has clearly also been a key consideration in RTE's recent decisions around drama production. Its two highest profile shows last year were Stephanie Preissner's *Can't Cope, Won't Cope* – a RTE2 dark comedy starring Seana Kerslake and built around a friendship between two co-dependent young women (picked up by BBC 3 and Netflix in the US and UK) and the Amy Huberman legal drama *Striking Out*. Both were recommissioned for second seasons. Furthermore, the outstanding Irish screen hit of the year was unquestionably Lisa McGee's *Derry Girls* for Channel 4, a comedy built around four young female leads in a context (the Northern Irish Troubles) not always associated with absurdist humour.

Nevertheless, it's important to note wider issues of diversity in access and representation in Irish film and TV. According to the 2016 census, nearly 10% of the Irish population are today constituted by Traveller, Black or Asian ethnicities but those voices and faces are largely absent from Irish television screens (not to mention from creative and decision-making roles). This was thrown into sharp relief by John O'Connor's incendiary speech at the IFTAs in February 2018 on receiving the Best Actor award, critiquing not just a "reptilian psychopathic government", but also the IFB (for its failure to support *Cardboard Gangsters*) as well as the industry more broadly ("I can't get an agent to represent me and no filmmakers or casting directors will look past the fact that I am a traveler").

If the general zeitgeist and institutional structures are moving in a direction which might pay more attention to issues of diversity, the highest profile Irish indigenous fiction releases of 2017 also – perhaps suprisingly and coincidentally – often shared a concern with “others”. That these were almost entirely male provokes further reflection. John Butler’s *Handsome Devil* explored the difficulties of stepping outside normative masculinity – defined as artistically inclined or gay or both – within the homosocial confines of a middle-class private boarding school. Though oddly dated in setting and characterization – assuming a milieu that was more common in the 1980s, devoid of mobile phones and social media – *Handsome Devil* nonetheless suggests that, Marriage Equality or no, alternate identities still have to negotiate a space to exist within the sometimes oppressive norms of the mainstream. Frank Berry’s second feature *Micheal Inside* (winner of the ITFA Award for best Irish film in 2017) is entirely different in themes and tone but also focuses on an isolated central character struggling to cope with dominant constructions of masculinity, here working-class criminality. Developed within the community it portrays through extensive discussion and workshopping, Berry’s film is a welcome reminder of the often overlooked role of class in contemporary identity politics as its sensitive and often scared central character (Daffyd Flynn in a performance that brilliantly compliments and balances that of Jordan Jones in Berry’s last feature *I Used to Live Here*), struggles to find his own way within an overbearing social context. Unlike the more priveleged milieu of *Handsome Devil*, there is no inspirational teacher to offer him example and assistance. Finally, Conor McDermottroe’s *Halal Daddy* (from Mark O’Hallorhan’s script) is perhaps most notable for how whilst the ethnicity of its lead character (a British-Indian Muslim seeking to evade his father’s influence by hiding out in Sligo) is critical to its premise, it nonetheless proceeds on the basis that tolerance and multiculturalism are well established even outside the metropolitan centres of the Western world (but, interestingly, not western Ireland which stands in as an opposing space to the xenophobia underpinning Brexit in a similar way to *The Quiet Man* over 50 years ago).

Away from themes of gender, sexuality or ethnicity, diversity on Irish screens in 2017 was marked by several notable engagements physical and intellectual disability. Having overcome complete paralysis to direct his own screenplay *My Name is Emily* in 2015, Simon FitzMaurice was the subject of the affecting and inspirational *It’s Not Yet Dark* (directed by Frankie Fenton and narrated by Colin Farrell), an unsentimental memoir of his struggle with motor neurone disease, released shortly before he passed away. Nick Kelly’s often very funny *The Drummer and the Keeper* (an audience favourite at the Galway Film Fleadh) focuses on odd-couple male protagonists with bipolar disorder and Asperger’s. Inspired by Kelly’s personal experience as a parent to a child on the Autism spectrum, the film actively engages in a debate around the extent to which such individuals are disabled by their social context as opposed to characterising disability as fundamentally innate or medical condition (and thus exclusively the problem of) to those individuals. In a similar vein, Alan Gilensan’s inventive *Meetings With Ivor* – a huge and unlikely hit in its theatrical release across Ireland – focused on maverick psychiatrist Professor Ivor Browne’s belief that traditional psychiatry and, in particular its reliance on anti-psychotic drugs, denies the capacity of the individual mind to heal itself (both films are reviewed here in this edition).

Of course, the transformed context for film-making in the digital age mean that films which engage with current social debates can emerge without IFB Support. Having made his debut with the emigration-themed *Trampoline* for less than €1000, Tipperary filmmaker Tom Ryan’s second film *Twice Shy* bravely engaged with the hugely divisive abortion debate without ever feeling like a by-the-numbers rehearsal of the pro and anti-choice positions. and deserved a far bigger audience than it has thus far achieved.

The indigenous films which did make a mark at the box office in 2017 tended to be based around more conventional, genre-based narratives. As noted in Denis Murphy’s review

of *Cardboard Gangsters*, which took €550,000 at the Irish box office, the Darndale-set exploration of Dublin's criminal gang milieu ultimately fails to transcend the limitations of its origins in the crime genre. By contrast, the best-performing Irish film this year, Stephen Burke's *Maze* (£UK764,000 across Ireland before going on release in the Britain), is arguably at most effective when it consciously identifies with the conventions of the prison-break thriller.

In previous years we have pointed to the emergence of what we might now confidently describe as a "third wave" of Irish film, characterised by a shift away from a national towards a transnational mode. We have cited the works of fiction film makers like Lenny Abrahamson and Paddy Breathnach in this regard noting how their more recent works (e.g. *Frank*, *Room* and *Viva*) are set in contexts textually disconnected from Ireland (Abrahamson's new film, *The Little Stranger*, though starring Domhnall Gleeson confirms this trajectory, set in postwar England). In what we have elsewhere defined as the second wave of Irish film (1993-2003), Irish filmmakers (and IFB funding) sought to find Irish narratives which could nonetheless appeal to international audiences: to make "the local universal" (*My Left Foot* being perhaps the iconic example). This paradigm seems today to have been eroded by a number of factors: a highly open Irish economy and workforce; globalization; a gathering sense of collective environmental crises (the "Anthropocene"). This is particularly evident in this year's Irish animation and documentary output. CARTOON Saloon pulled off the incredible feat of seeing *The Breadwinner*, directed by Nora Twomey, secure the company's third successive Academy Award nomination since 2010. But whereas their earlier nominations were for explicitly Irish texts (*The Secret of Kells*, 2009, and *Song of the Sea*, 2014), *The Breadwinner* (based on Deborah Ellis's novel) centres around Parvana, an 11-year-girl struggling to survive in a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan. Superficially at least, the narrative may seem light years away from Ireland, yet its core conflict – namely the suppression of women by a theocratic patriarchy – has obvious points of contact and empathy for the Irish experience, even in the 2018.

Further support for this third wave/transnational hypotheses emerges from a survey of this year's feature documentaries, a constantly imaginative if often disparate and (thus) overlooked category of Irish screen output. While works like Neasa Ní Chianáin's *School Life* (a year in the life of Ireland's only primary boarding school) and Feargal Ward's award-winning *The Lonely Battle of Thomas Reid* (a David and Goliath' tale of an Irish farmer from Kildare who takes on the might of American computing giant Intel) demonstrate that there remain fascinating local stories to be told, it is striking how outward-looking Irish documentary has become (indeed Ward's compelling and poetic depiction of the David and Goliath struggle between bachelor farmer Reid and the forces of international capital, and their local proxies, the IDA, clearly connects the local to the global). The recent output of a figure like Paul Duane is emblematic in this regard – having completed four feature docs since 2011, up to and including 2018's *While You Live*, *Shine* all around extra-territorial subjects, his career is a striking assertion that being an Irish documentary filmmaker does not necessarily equate with mining Irish subjects. That philosophy is clearly embraced by others. Having examined bee population collapse (a genuinely global concern) in *Colony* (2010), Dublin photographer/film-maker Ross McDonnell collaborated with Tim Golden on *Elian*, a film centred on a five year Cuban boy Elian Gonzalez smuggled out of Cuba in 1999 to become the centre of an international dispute between the US and the Castro regime. Dundalk-born filmmaker Niall McCann's *Lost in France* traces the generation of Glasgow bands that emerged in the 1990s as they regroup to celebrate a key 1997 concert in Brittany. Even when characterised by more overt connections with Ireland, recent Irish docs reach out beyond our borders. Andrew Gallimore's *It Tolls For Thee* recounts the experience of Mary Elmes, a Dublin businesswoman aid worker credited with saving the lives of hundreds of

Jewish children in France during the war. Gerry Gregg's similarly themed *Condemned to Remember* traces the journey of the remarkable Tomi Reichental, the Dublin-domiciled Holocaust survivor as he travels to confront SS Camp Guard Hilde Michnia but also to embrace victims of modern day atrocities in Bosnia and Syria. But perhaps the most ambitious outward glance in 2017 was Emer Reynolds's superb *The Farthest*. A masterfully told story of literally cosmic dimensions, Reynolds latest work as a director recounts the story of the Voyager space exploration missions of the 1970s combining archive footage, interviews with key players in the mission (with a notable and welcome emphasis on female participants) and CGI visualisations of the Voyager planetary fly-bys all set against a contemporary soundtrack. While potentially a dry subject for science-buffs, *The Farthest* demonstrates strong storytelling skills and a sharp intelligence capable of blending a sensitive perspective on people's lives with complex historical and scientific data.

Beyond this, the industrial-scale of international TV production, noted in these pages since the advent of *The Tudors* in 2006, has also continued apace. The BBC's luminescent adaptation of *Little Women* was shot at Ardmore, providing high profile work for Irish crew. AMC's hit post-apocalyptic/fantasy/martial arts/sci-fi mash-up *In the Badlands* (prominently featuring Irish actors Sarah Bolger and Orla Brady) continues to roam Dublin and Wicklow locations where, it perhaps occasionally crosses path with the History Channel's sixth series of *Vikings* which began filming in Autumn 2017. None are likely to encounter another George RR Martin television adaptation *Nightflyers* (for the SyFy Channel and NBC Universal) given its production in the new Troy Studios in Limerick.

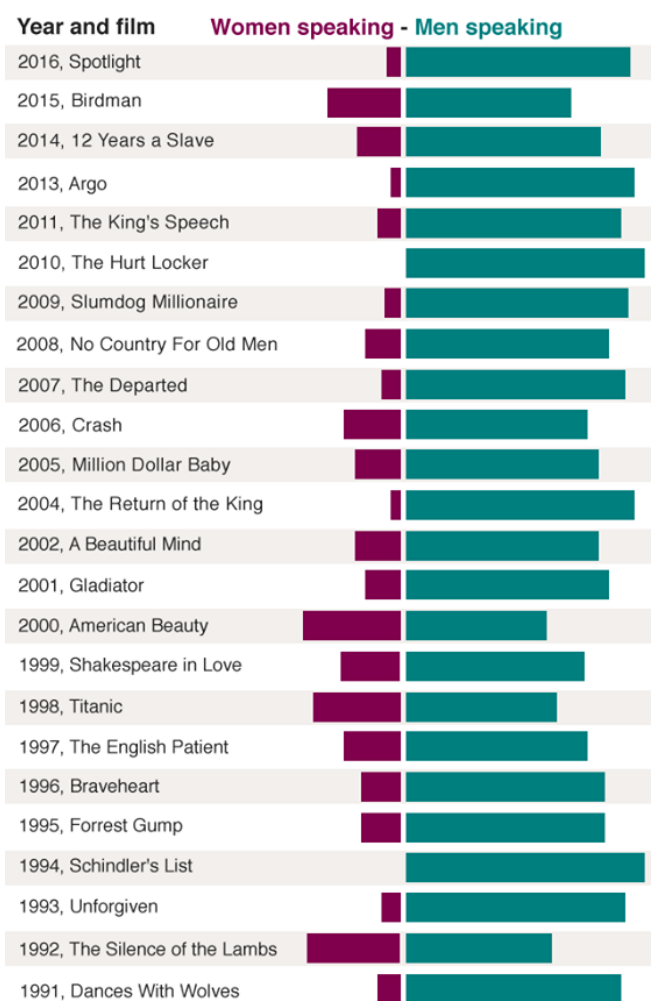
Overall then, the underlying condition of the screen production in Ireland remains very healthy. For decades, the primary question of screen policy was much more existential: can we establish and maintain a film sector at all? That this question is no longer asked, and that we can almost take for granted the routine production of work ranging from transnational big and small screen production to the specific and experimental is a remarkable transformation. In recent years, the work of Pat Collins, in particular, exemplifies this latter course and it is with his latest film *Song of Granite* that we close this year's review. Working with relatively low budget, Collins has managed over nearly 20 years to evoke a vision of Ireland in which place shapes culture and people (rather than the other way around). In this beautiful and unconventional biopic of *sean-nós* singer Joe Heaney, he gives us a portrait of a man who brought a deeply centred sense of Irishness with him no matter that he lived in London or New York, resisting the homogenizing affects of late capitalism and modernity. In this regard his work to date can be read as a richly productive, if fundamentally conservative, assertion of Irish identity. That such work can be not merely supported but increasingly a higher and higher profile, offers the opportunity for Irish artists to make a contribution to the fundamental debates invoked in the our opening paragraphs.

Notes

1

Men speak most in best picture winning films

Proportion of words spoken by characters with more than 100 words



Source: Hanah Anderson, The Pudding



² <https://www.irishfilmboard.ie/about/gender>.

³ Source: Irish Film Board Production Catalogue, 2018.

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Sport and Irish Documentary – Roller Derby: *Revolutions* (Laura McCann, 2017)

Seán Crosson

Sport has been a recurring concern of Irish documentary, reflecting its prominence more generally in Irish life. In his overview of documentary history in Ireland, Harvey O'Brien (2004) makes several references to the depiction of sport, from tourist documentaries of the 1950s that featured distinctive Irish sports like hurling and Gaelic football for exotic local colour (for example *Ireland, Isle Of Sport*, 1959), to Gael Linn's celebration of Irish culture and language in dedicated documentaries on Gaelic football (*Peil*, 1962) and hurling (*Christy Ring*, 1964) in the 1960s. Sport has also been an increasing feature of Irish documentary since the 1990s, spurred on by the success of Irish teams and athletes internationally, as well as the growth of what has been called the "cinematic sports documentary", theatrically released productions dedicated to sport and drawing heavily on mainstream fiction film practice and aesthetic (McDonald). O'Brien also refers in his study to the manner in which Irish works on sporting subjects fulfill an important national and indeed local function – in the case of the GAA – in asserting and reaffirming community identities. However, Ireland itself has undergone profound changes since the 1950s that are increasingly reflected within the subject matter of Irish film, including sports documentaries. Depictions of sport in Ireland are no longer primarily (as with depictions more generally of the country) defined and produced externally. Neither is the cultural and political imperative evident in the works of Gael Linn shared by most indigenous producers, or arguably by the majority of Irish people. In its place is an increasingly globalised culture and society, where people's understanding and self-definition is as likely to be informed by international media culture as local custom. Sport is no different in this respect; the huge growth of mixed martial arts (MMA) in Ireland and the emergence of iconic figures like Conor McGregor – himself the subject of the 2017 doc, *Notorious* – speaks to this changing sporting landscape. McGregor's gaudy employment of a range of Irish and Celtic signifiers in his self-promotion and appearance (and the apparent tolerance of his instrumentalisation of such cultural codes by most Irish people) is indicative of the declining significance of these elements as meaningful and integral aspects of most Irish people's lives today.

McGregor's promotion and mediatisation also shares similarities with the predominant focus found within Irish sport documentaries historically; firstly the focus of these documentaries has been almost exclusively on male protagonists. This is not of course a focus confined to Ireland; the American sports film genre in particular has played a key role in the promotion of a particular brand of ideal masculinity indelibly associated with the American Dream and defined by Aaron Baker as the "heroic individual" who "overcomes obstacles and achieves success through determination, self-reliance, and hard work" (49), a succinct summary of characteristics associated with the mediated version of McGregor. In this context, women's roles (as evident again in the contests in which McGregor has featured to date) are "relative to the male athlete-hero" (Tudor 79), and in the public sphere they appear principally as entertainers and/or sexualised figures – whether singing the American national anthem before the Super Bowl, or titillating a mainly male audience between rounds at boxing matches or the MMA bouts in which McGregor competes.

This is the historical context within which Laura McCann's debut feature-length production *Revolutions* (2017) is situated. The documentary was produced by Ross Whitaker, who has established a career as one of the leading Irish directors of sport-themed productions, including the ground-breaking boxing-themed doc *Saviours* (2007), and subsequent work

When Ali Came to Ireland (2012), and last year's *Anthony Foley: Munsterman* (2017). However, while Whitaker's work as a director has foregrounded male athletes, McCann takes as her subject a sport predominantly associated with American culture and females: roller derby. It is possibly the least-likely sport to associate with an Irish context, and one of the most recent to be established (the first Irish club Dublin Roller Derby was only set up in 2009); nonetheless, as evident in McCann's documentary, it has come to play a key role in the lives of an increasing number of Irish women. Indeed, *Revolutions* uses roller derby as the starting point from which to examine challenges faced by women in contemporary Ireland, particularly in the aftermath of the economic collapse of the late noughties. While the sport itself gets significant coverage here, as with the best sports' documentaries, ultimately it provides a means of examining more serious human concerns.

Revolutions was produced over five years with McCann focusing the film primarily on the two leading Irish roller derby teams, the aforementioned Dublin Roller Derby and their great southern rivals Cork City Firebirds. She was given considerable access to both teams and while her work captures effectively the camaraderie and occasional conflict between team members, it is the individual portraits of team members that are most revealing. *Revolutions* builds up an intimate and insightful study of key individuals involved in both teams and their considerable investment in the sport they love. This passion borders on an obsession at times for those involved, as acknowledged by Cork's "Crow Jane" at one point, a key figure in the work. Initially the main driver and spirit behind the Cork team, she eventually leaves the sport, unable to continue to maintain the level of commitment she feels necessary to be involved; "the rest of life has taken a bit of a battering", she remarks as she leaves the Roller rink behind.

After an initial introduction to the two main teams, the film concentrates on Ireland's participation in the first Roller Derby World Cup, held in Canada in 2011. This was the event that initially drew McCann's attention to the sport in Ireland and it provides an engaging opportunity to foreground its growing international popularity. Despite roller derby only recently arriving in Ireland, the team nonetheless performs creditably at first, but a lack of experience and intra-team rivalry (particularly between Cork and Dublin members) eventually brings a decline in performance. What begins as a hopeful and enthusiastic adventure ends with recriminations and dissension, setting the tone for the remainder of the documentary.

The World Cup also allows McCann to introduce key figures, including Dublin City's "Zola Blood", the team's manager (and indeed the initial national team manager) "Violent Bob", and the Firebirds' "Jessica Rammit". As the production develops, we are brought into the lives of each of these team members and the various challenges they face in their personal and professional lives, from pregnancy to unemployment. McCann carefully documents their day-to-day struggles and the place roller derby has in bringing a sense of purpose and belonging to women increasingly marginalised in times of economic decline. Though roller derby may be looked down upon by those engaged in longer established and more popular (and perhaps for some more Irish!) sports, for the women featured here it has a crucial place in their lives. Underemployed seamstress "Crow Jane" at one point describes half her Cork team as struggling to get by, while PhD student "Zola Blood" (realising she is unlikely to find employment on graduation) views roller derby as "a coping mechanism for the unemployed".

McCann directs the production with the assurance of a more established director; sporting sequences are engagingly and effectively edited to communicate both the particularities of a sport unfamiliar to most viewers and build the dramatic tension as the production progresses. The sequences included also underline the physicality of the sport again countering more stereotypical sporting depictions of women; key to winning games in roller derby is each team blocking (or evading the blocking of) the opposing team while

circling the rink through the employment of an array of sometimes highly aggressive body checks and innovative manoeuvres. We are witnesses to the intensity of engagement, the anger, and the pain that these women experience, and occasionally inflict, on their opponents. Equally, McCann's more intimate depictions of team members and coach "violent bob" indicate an ability to evoke revealing insights into the lives and motivations of her subjects.

Roller derby has continued to grow in Ireland since McCann's film was released and the final credits refer to the establishment of the inaugural all-Ireland tournament. There are now fourteen teams across the island, including the more recently established and wonderfully titled "Midlands Maulers" (based in Mullingar) and the Galway City She Devils. *Revolutions* provides a fascinating and engaging insight into this sport and its increasing importance in women's lives in contemporary Ireland. Neither concerned with providing exotic local colour nor affirming established conceptions of Irish culture and identity, McCann's documentary chronicles how these Irish women live and play today in an increasingly globalised sporting and cultural context.

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Meetings with Ivor (Alan Gilsenan, 2017)

Roddy Flynn

At first glance, the extraordinary variety and volume of Alan Gilsenan's output as both a fiction and non-fiction director since his debut short in 1986 is such that it might seem difficult to divine patterns in his work beyond a broad concern with Irish culture in its myriad forms. Nonetheless, beyond his sporadic forays into state-of-the-nation documentaries (*The Road to God Knows Where* (1988), *Road II* (2001) and *The Importance of Being Irish* (2008)), a persistent concern with biography is attested to by a sequence of bio-docs on both prominent and less-well-known figures from Ireland's past and present, including Paul

Durkan, Liam Clancy, Eliza Lynch and Tom Murphy. These are paralleled by a second thematic thread: a focus on the marginalized and the forgotten. *Stories from the Silence* (1990) was the first major exploration of the reality of HIV/AIDS in Ireland, his award-winning short *Zulu 9* (2001) was a forerunner on the theme of migrants and refugees, while *The Home* (2010) and *The Hospice* (2007) respectively (and respectfully) offered fly on the wall perspectives on the experience of being old and preparing for death in Ireland. Within that second thread, a survey of Gilsonan's oeuvre points to a recurring sub-theme: mental health and mental illness (a concern also hinted at in the moniker he and producer Martin Mahon chose when they established their first production company, Yellow Ayslum, in 1986). *The Hospice* and *The Home* formed a kind of institutional trilogy with *The Asylum* (2005), his groundbreaking and compassionate study of St Ita's Psychiatric Hospital Mental in North Dublin. This was followed in 2009 by *I See A Darkness*, a three part series for RTE on suicide. Strikingly, all three of his fiction feature works released to date – *All Souls Day* (1997), *Timbuktu* (2004) and the 2016 Canadian production *Unless* – are also centred around characters with some form of mental illness. With that pedigree, who better to assay the subject of maverick Irish psychiatrist Ivor Browne.

The biographical documentary commonly adopts the form of a detective novel: the basic facts of its subject's early life history are introduced as a prelude to a slow revelation of the subject's perspective on life which the documentary implicitly connects to those early experiences. By contrast, within 90 seconds of the beginning of Gilsonan's exposition of Ivor Browne's personal and professional philosophy we already know the basic outlines of who he is and what he believes. Framed against a blurred abstract image the film reproduces the opening lines of the Wikipedia entry on Browne, which describe him as the former Chief Psychiatrist of the Eastern Health Board, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at UCD and "known for his opposition to traditional psychiatry, and his scepticism about psychiatric drugs".

There is something provocative but also suggestive about this use of Wikipedia. Reliant on anonymous, crowd-sourced knowledge, Wikipedia is still regarded in academic circles in particular as unreliable and often partial (both in the sense of being incomplete but also potentially biased). Invoking it as a source emphasizes the epistemological difficulties confronting any documentary-maker seeking to adequately reflect the life and philosophy of its human subject but also hints at the complications faced by the film's broader subject of psychiatry in its attempt to unlock and make sense of the inherently opaque world of the mind.

"Making sense" – of individuals, institutions and societies – is also the implicit goal of most documentary work but *Meetings With Ivor* adopts a novel structure in its bid to elucidate Professor Browne. Though loosely ordered around an interview detailing the basic narrative of Browne's life and work in – roughly – chronological order, its deployment of an assemblage of other talking heads evades (without entirely refuting) the traditional documentary suggestion that combining a myriad of subjective assessments constitutes some kind of objective mosaic. *Meetings with Ivor* crowd-sources perspectives on its subject(s) – Browne and psychiatry – via a sequence of encounters between him and a series of high profile figures: patients, acquaintances and professional colleagues. Some of these talk about Browne directly but others scarcely refer to him. The free-styling, associative and apparently improvised nature of the documentary's structure is further added to by interviews with a recent patient of Browne's – "The Young Woman" – and shots of various contemporary psychiatrists whose work chimes with Browne's philosophy.

In the expository document mode, narrative coherence is generally achieved through by suturing visuals together with an authoritative voiceover. Not only has Gilsonan's

documentary work generally avoided such a voice-of-God narration but, from *The Road to God Knows Where* onwards, he has deployed oblique visuals unanchored from the voices he does include (i.e. those of interviewees). The effect of these visuals varies from creating a temporal space for viewer reflection to acting as a counterpoint to interviewee assertions. With Gilsenan receiving a secondary credit as “Director of Abstract Photography” *Meetings* is characterised by the recurring appearance of his trademark super 8 style footage. A format which immediately invokes the past and nostalgia is appropriate for a film which both trawls through Browne’s own memories but which also rehearses his belief that past traumas provoke mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder. That super 8 footage also deposits a layer of abstraction across the entire proceedings: though certain recognisable images recur, presented in supersaturated colour (hearts, dictionaries, Catholic symbols, and family photos), there is also a swathe of suggestive but ultimately nonrepresentational material reflecting Browne’s contention that the workings of the mind remain mysterious even to the psychiatric profession.

But back to the content: in his straight interview, and in an apparently unguarded manner, Browne outlines his somewhat fraught relationship with his father (who frequently referred to Browne’s birth as “a mistake”); his stumble into medicine and later psychiatry; his marriage (and its breakup when Browne was in his mid-40s); his subsequent relationship with “Juno” (author June Levine, until her death in 2008) and the development of his counter-normative beliefs about the practice of psychiatry. Gilsenan makes frequent use of a split screen device during these (and other) sequences: images overtly drawn from Browne’s past sit amongst symbols which visually represent Browne’s spoken assertions. At times, Gilsenan’s deployment of visual codes permits more open readings. When Brown speaks of social revolutions there’s a brief shot of a record revolving on a platter, connecting the energy of the 1960s back to Browne’s love affair with jazz music. Forced to abandon playing the trumpet forever after contracting TB in his 20s, the film obliquely suggests that Browne’s musical passions were redirected down other paths and indeed the film’s overall style might best be described as jazz.

The split screen setup recurs throughout the encounters between Ivor and his discussants – comedian Tommy Tiernan, singer Mary Coughlan, journalist Nell McCafferty, author Sebastian Barry, playwright Tom Murphy and Trinity Professor of Psychiatry Brendan Kelly (author of a recently published – and favourably reviewed by Browne – social history of psychiatry in Ireland). Thus we witness watch both participants as they speak but also as they listen and react to the other. Though presented as the core around which the documentary is structured, their revelatory nature varies, not least because the precise nature of the prior relationship between Browne and his interlocutors is obscure, making it difficult to judge how qualified they are to contribute towards an assessment of him. Indeed comedian Tommy offers no comment on Browne beyond “you’re looking well” but instead discourses on his desire to create a space of love through his performances (Browne, though largely inscrutable throughout Tiernan’s speech, clearly approves of this). In the second meeting with Mary Coughlan, we see Browne at work: overtly identified as a client of Browne’s we watch as he uses hypnosis to regress her to her childhood. In an almost unbearably intimate sequence, Coughlan breaks down recalling her – often absent – mother and the sexually abusive grandfather in whose care she was left. Yet again we appear to learn far more about Coughlan from their encounter than the notional subject of the documentary.

Indeed, the hollowing out of Browne in these early encounters appears to reflect his professional philosophy. Browne comments to Tiernan that a therapist should commence sessions in as “empty” a state as possible to avoid contaminating the therapeutic process. Furthermore, citing Hippocrates, Browne refutes the idea that physicians or psychiatrists “fix”

their patients (hence in part his mistrust of antipsychotics). Instead he asserts that – at most – psychiatrists may act to remove obstacles to the individual’s capacity to heal themselves (in other words, the role of the physician is to “get out of the way” of the natural healing process). When “The Young Woman” recalls her first encounter with Ivor she recounts how Browne handed back control of her life to her by the simple device of informing her that she could choose not to self-harm again. Indeed, in some respects, the film appears to suggest that there is no clear line of demarcation between Browne, his personal philosophy and his professional approach which can be summed up with one word: love. Browne talks of how it took him three decades to move out of his head and into his heart when approaching patients. He repeatedly denies the brain/heart dichotomy asserting that the organs are intertwined. Indeed he asserts not only that heart itself contains 40,000 neurons but argues that they pass more information to the brain than the 80 billion (give or take) neurons residing in the brain reciprocally communicate to the heart.

Two of the meetings are suffused with this emphasis on love. Sebastian Barry speaks affectionately of Browne as a substitute father figure but it is the almost silent encounter with playwright Tom Murphy that speaks loudest in this regard. The author of *The Gigli Concert* (whose protagonist is a self-help therapist of dubious methods) and Browne talk briefly before listening to a recording of Beniamino Gigli singing *O Paradiso*. Neither speaks. The camera lingers as they silently commune over a shared appreciation of the tenor’s performance. As the aria reaches its climax both are clearly moved and the camera cuts to the departure of the somewhat frail Murphy. As he leaves their mutual affection is clear, the 82 year-old Murphy placing a kiss on 88-year old Browne’s cheek. Strikingly, while stressing the power of love as a therapeutic tool, Browne recalls a much more ambivalent experience of love especially in his private life : his distant father unable/unwilling to communicate affection, and a marriage undertaken not for love but because of his fear of being alone: “I don’t think I could call it love, I think I felt safer if I had a relationship”.

That the film is, in its own way, a little in love with its subject seems undeniable. In a recurring setup, Gilsenan deliberately over-exposes Browne in close-up so only the most prominent lines in his still taut visage are visible. As Browne’s face seems to loom out of a white mist, his voice emerging from some space off-camera, he appears to transcend his surroundings. Coupled with the repeated situating of Browne in large white spaces while dressed in a white suit and he is represented not merely as a shaman (though a later section on his embrace of Eastern philosophies and treatments certainly suggests this) but actually angelic.

Perhaps as a consequence, though far from a hagiography, *Meetings With Ivor* does not seek to actively challenge its subject. Despite his critical stance towards his profession, and apparent (though the film muddies this a little) past advocacy of LSD as a therapeutic drug, there is virtually no overt interrogation of this. The arrival of Professor Brendan Kelly promises a more sceptical perspective but even he appears broadly sympathetic with Browne’s outlook acknowledging the limits of science’s understanding of the brain (“there are 80 billion neurons and we know they’re quite busy but we have little grasp of what they’re doing”). The encounter with Nell McCafferty is much more adversarial as she adopts her trademark abrasive persona (“have you embraced your homosexuality yet Ivor?”) but even she critiques him as a man (or rather his failure to sufficiently examine the construction of his own masculinity) rather than as a psychiatrist. Indeed, the most sustained critique of the man emerges from Browne’s often self-deprecating self-appraisal. He identifies his younger self as driven by fear of failure whilst acknowledging his own failings in the context of his familial and romantic relationships. But even this is one-sided: his wife is seen only through old photos and we never hear from his children (this despite the fact that one of his children,

Ronan Browne is not only the film's composer, but at point is filmed playing in a traditional quartet constituted by himself, his father and his own children).

There is no automatic obligation upon documentary film makers to – *qua* Nick Broomfield or Michael Moore – adopt an adversarial (or even sceptical) stance with regard to their subjects. Indeed the manner in which Broomfield and Moore actively seek to generate narrative tension and drama by doing so sometimes results in a somewhat predictable finished product not least because of how often the filmmakers themselves become the subject. Furthermore the fact that Browne had already been the subject of two earlier documentaries when producer Thomas Hardiman initially conceived of this project, effectively freed Gilsenan to adapt a more experimental approach in keeping with the personality and outlook of his subject. The resulting poetic film is ultimately best understood as a kind of cinematic festschrift for Browne, a vehicle to explain and celebrate Browne's counter-narrative of psychiatry. In some respects a documentary filmmaker plays a role akin to that of a psychiatrist, especially when focused on a single human subject, offering an explanation of who but more importantly *why* they are the person we see before us. In this respect *Meetings with Ivor* is an unalloyed success.

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***The Drummer and the Keeper* (Nick Kelly, 2017)**

Roddy Flynn

That one of the two leads in Nick Kelly's feature debut aspires to a rock n roll career as a drummer reflects the director's long immersion in the world of music. Though probably still best known to Irish fortysomethings as the lead singer of early 90s Irish rock outfit *The Fat Lady Sings* (and someone who still sporadically releases solo albums), Nick Kelly's day job for more than two decades has been a freelance advertising copywriter. In that guise he has created some of the more cinematic moments in the Irish commercial short form: his 2003 and 2005 Guinness ads see explorer Tom Crean struggling across Antarctic wastes and another Kerryman (a pre-global fame Michael Fassbender) swimming across the Atlantic to arrive in a New York bar and apologize to a friend. Music plays a key role in both – Crean is awakened from his frozen reverie by an echo of "Oh the Days of the Kerry Dances" while Fassbender's "Man" is prompted into action by hearing Mic Christopher's "Heyday" on the radio.

In parallel with shilling alcohol, Kelly has made several forays into short film. Funded under the Irish Film Board's Short Short scheme his 2003 work *Delphine* follows a demure schoolgirl as she makes a weekly pilgrimage to a music shop to play on a borrowed guitar. *Why the Irish Dance that Way*, produced for the Arts Council/RTE "Dance on the Box" project in 2006 offered an extended visual joke on the origins of traditional Irish dance. Only

Shoe, the Academy Award long-listed tale of man contemplating suicide lacks an overt musical connection.

Shoe was funded under the Film Board's now defunct Signatures Scheme, one designed to allow directors regarded as on the cusp of more ambitious work to work with more generous – €75,000 – budgets before graduating to full-scale features.

That feature has arrived in the form of *The Drummer and the Keeper*. It immediately reminds us of Kelly's knack for the arresting visual image demanded by the narrative economy of commercials. Opening on the naked buttocks of a man dragging a sofa to the waters edge on Dollymount Beach, the camera watches him set it alight then return to the hearse that brought him there. As the camera cuts to a wide-angle long shot, the film title appears framed by the flames and the Pigeon House towers.

Thereafter the film moves to a much more intimate scale. The man is Gabriel (Dermot Murphy soon to be seen as Bob Geldof in the much-delayed *Bohemian Rhapsody*), dishevelled drummer in a three-piece band starting to attract record company (and groupie) interest. 24 year old Gabriel is something of a tortured soul. Both parents are dead (his father through a heart attack, his mother by suicide), he has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder "with psychotic and delusional episodes" and is self-medicating with a cocktail of booze, drugs and late nights. And of course, there is the pyromania: after the sofa incident, his sister Alice (*Love/Hate*'s Aoibhinn McGinnity) and bandmates Pearse and Toss (Charlie Kelly and Peter Coonan) stage an intervention, insisting he gets himself sorted.

Psychotherapist Dr Flahavan (Annie Ryan) prescribes medication plus therapy in the form of a weekly football training session with the patients attending St Cosmas, a care centre run by Eric (Adrian Hudson). On the field of play, Gabriel encounters goalkeeper Christopher (Jacob McCarthy in an effective glass-eyed, monotone performance) who is on the Aspergers spectrum. Placed in St Cosmas by his mother and stepfather, Christopher expects to return to his family home after he turns 18. After a rocky start, the two strike the beginnings of a friendship, based initially on mutual convenience: Christopher needs someone to practice penalties with, Gabriel (or rather his band) need a roadie (something Christopher's eye for detail makes him preternaturally gifted at).

While mental health pathologies have been a recurring theme in Irish cinema, (*All Souls Day*, 1997; Eamon Owen's schizophrenic Francie in *The Butcher Boy*, 1998; and Cillian Murphy's suicidal Jonathan in *On The Edge*, 2001), explorations of the distinct categories of intellectual disability and/or developmental disorders have been less common. Screenwriters may have balked at the challenge of adequately representing characters who lack the resources and opportunities to express their own perspective. Jim Sheridan and Shane Connaughton could use the works and words of Christy Brown to use as source material for *My Left Foot*, but there are few, if any, equivalents from Irish authors with autism or on the Asperger's spectrum. (Such texts do exist: witness for example David Mitchell's recent championing of Japanese teenager Naoki Higashida's "The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism").

There are also a multitude of political sensitivities to be negotiated, not least of which is the potential for dangerously inaccurate nomenclature. Though sometimes carelessly treated as synonyms in popular discourse, "mental illness", "intellectual disability" and "development disorders" describe very different conditions. As *The Drummer and The Keeper* suggests, even those with such conditions may not grasp these distinctions. When Gabriel refers to Christopher's as having "mental health... issues", he is immediately corrected: "I don't have a mental health issue. I have Aspergers, it's a syndrome... *You* have a mental health issue".

Nick Kelly is better equipped than most to negotiate these kind of hurdles given that his own son has Aspergers. And it is tempting to suggest that the possibility of making this film now owes something to a particular moment in the development of identity politics. And though, on the surface, Kelly's accessible text is structured as a hybrid of the fish out of water and buddy movie genres, it repeatedly invokes and explores the competing discourses used to construct the identify of those with mental illness or developmental disorders.

While the text sets up overt parallels between Gabriel and Christopher – one orphaned, the other de facto abandoned by both parents, both institutionalized – their respective conditions place them in very different situations. Delusional episodes aside, Gabriel can usually “pass” as normal. Indeed, he is determined not to be identified with his condition. Fearful Christopher's constant referencing of his bipolar disorder will further alienate his bandmates Gabriel begs him not to mention it again (“I kind of need to be seen as together right now and you're not helping”).

Christopher does not have this luxury. Though high-functioning, he finds it difficult to cope with novel social interactions for which his learned-by-rote behavioural routines are inappropriate. Even when they do kick in, they may be misapplied: apologizing for his initial engagement with Christopher, Gabriel is told he can return to football training if he can be “friends” with Christopher. Christopher immediately sets in train a chain of pre-patterned behaviours triggered by the term “friend” oblivious to Gabriel's obvious discomfort with this. Asked by Gabriel why he persists, Christopher quotes from his internal rule book: “that's what friends do”.

Through its two leads the film discreetly invokes two contrasting discourses relating to people with disabling conditions. The medical discourse, embodied in the pivotal figure of Dr Flahavan (Annie Ryan) identifies conditions such as Gabriel's bipolar disorder as immanent to the individual and treats them accordingly. She instantly recommends recourse to drugs as the main course of treatment (“any regime other than the clinically approved route ... would be a huge gamble”) and curtly dismisses the talking cure. Asked how long Gabriel will follow the regime, she replies “For the rest of your life”. Even the football sessions she prescribes are primarily intended to offset the physical side effects of the drugs – they are not treated as therapeutic in themselves.

By contrast Christopher's character permits some exploration of the social model of disability. Commonly applied to physical disability, the social model suggests that individuals do not “have” a disability but rather are disabled by a built environment primarily designed for the mainstream of society. Applied to those who are mentally or socially divergent, the social model suggests that every individual occupies a space on a spectrum of states of mental health. As a result those lying on the more challenging end of that continuum should no longer be regarded as ineluctably different from “normal” people. Christopher is depicted as having struggled to enter the mainstream end of that continuum through learned behaviours but the film emphasizes that the challenges he continues to face are less of his making than the social context he encounters. When Gabriel complains to Eric that Christopher cannot get upset every time “every little thing doesn't go his way” if he is to cope with the “real world” Eric resignedly concedes that the intransigence of mainstream society is such that it may never permit Christopher to fully participate within it.

The film offers a complex negotiation of these discourses. Having dutifully taken his meds and “gone straight” as demanded, Gabriel's bandmates complain that he no longer plays like he used to and move to replace him with another drummer. The suggestion that creativity is connected to (indeed perhaps dependent upon) psychological divergence has plenty of antecedents: Ludwig van Beethoven, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemmingway have all been identified as having bipolar disorder. It creates an impossible bind for Gabriel, however: his

wish to be identified as a drummer dependent upon precisely the identity he wishes to suppress.

Christopher's main life goal might be summarized as "belonging", symbolized by his wish to move back in with his mother's. His efforts to internalize behaviours acceptable in mainstream society represent steps on this path. However, at his 18th birthday party, this is blocked by the "pragmatic" Jeremy (Phelim Drew), his mother's partner, who makes it clear that Christopher's Aspergers makes this impossible. Given that Christopher is presented as largely independent it is evident that the issue lies with Jeremy who simply does not want to deal with difference, however minimal.

In a further nuancing of the social discourse, it is suggested that, even while mimicking normal behaviours, Christopher also embraces Aspergers as a key component of his identity. As Christopher is reeling in the wake of one of Gabriel's more destructive episodes at St Cosmas's, Roly, another kid with Asperger's rushes to Eric with crushing news:

Roly: They've abolished us. There won't be any Aspergers any more, we'll all just be autistic.

Eric: Says Who?

Roly: The American Psychiatric Association.

Eric: It was just a label Roly.

Roly: Yeah but it was *our* label.

Christopher also has no truck with these blurring of identities. Actively distancing himself from a profoundly autistic patient at St Cosmas, he observes: "I have nothing in common with him". By defending the boundaries of Aspergers, Christopher and Roly assert a coherent identity of their own even if this potentially cements their "otheredness".

It is not always clear as to where the film situates itself in relation in this regard. That the medical discourse is mainly expressed by the glacial Dr Flahavan, who continues to rely on the same professional protocols which failed to prevent Gabriel's mother from committing suicide, seems calculated to damn that discourse by association. Yet the film also depicts the catastrophic consequences of entirely rejecting the pharmaceutical route. Desperate to secure his place in the band Gabriel deliberately goes off his meds to regain his "feel" for the drumkit. When this fails to convince his former comrades, an unchecked Gabriel spirals out of control, literally and figuratively damaging everyone around him, including Christopher and, ultimately in a final instance of his pyromania, himself.

The film does *seem* to endorse the social discourse even while acknowledging that it will demand a sea change in social attitudes to become operative. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Michel Foucault traced how following the Enlightenment, the categories of sane and insane emerged as structural binaries, one element of a larger process of social classifications ultimately designed to facilitate the workings of capitalism. The social model harks back to a pre-Enlightenment (yet arguably more progressive) model which suggests that all individuals exist on a continuum of mental health conditions. The film is certainly keen to stress that aberrant behavior is just as common among the notionally normal characters: bandmates Pearse and Toss are portrayed as self-interested abandoning Gabriel as soon as they perceive him to be a liability; a groupie with whom Christopher has his first sexual experience turns out to be exploiting him in order to get back with Gabriel; Christopher's stepfather is a reactionary brute while Dr Flahavan's robotic adherence to her professional guidelines is not obviously distinguishable from Christopher's coping strategies.

Indeed, ironically, it is Christopher, the character who experiences more difficulty than any other in making empathetic connections who emerges as the most sympathetic character in the film. He persistently forgives those who trespass against him (provided they submit a formal apology), goes out of his way to be helpful to Gabriel (“that’s what friends do”) and after Gabriel’s second act implosion emerges as the figure who ultimately resolves both his own and Gabriel’s problems with a leftfield but internally logical proposal that makes a virtue of combining his and Gabriel’s disorders.

In truth that conclusion feels a little pat, driven more by the structural demands of the buddy movie structure than anything else. Although its novel take on the “You complete me” line sidesteps the monstrous egotism of its original deployment in *Jerry Maguire*, the consequences that follow from Christopher’s proposal seem too neat. The end does partially succeed in resolving the competing medical and social discourses: Gabriel negotiates his twin identities as musician/person with bipolar disorder by going back on his meds and becoming a music teacher at St Cosmas while Christopher finds both acceptance and a new home with Gabriel. The film leaves Gabriel and Christopher as an inverted reincarnation of the Odd Couple: though both are intrinsically odd as individuals, as a unit they are depicted as amounting to more than the sum of their parts. Ultimately the film concludes that one’s mental status is less important than whether one is a fundamentally decent person or not.

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***Cardboard Gangsters* (Mark O’Connor, 2016)**

Denis Murphy

Lazy day, you can’t find work now
 When you confess your real address
 You feel your back up against the wall now
 You’re classed as scum ‘cos of where you’re from
 Little gangster boy, I see the pain in your eye
 Little gangster boy, are you ready to die?
 (Damien Dempsey, *Gangster Boy*)

At the 2012 Galway Film Fleadh, the director Mark O’Connor prefaced a screening of *Stalker*, his third feature, with a public statement entitled “Irish Cinema: A Call to Arms”. This “manifesto”, simultaneously published in *Film Ireland* and the *Broadsheet* blog, announced the arrival of “a new face” of Irish film: “The makeup is finally coming off. The

conventional and generic Irish films of the past are being replaced by what could be referred to as ‘The Irish New Wave’ or ‘Tonn Nua’. I believe that we are finally finding our voice” (O’Grady-Peyton).

According to O’Connor, this new voice was discernible in the work of filmmakers like Terry McMahon (*Charlie Casanova*, 2011), Ivan Kavanagh (*The Fading Light*, 2009; *Our Wonderful Home*, 2008), Perry Ogden (*Pavee Lackeen*, 2005), Carmel Winters (*Snap*, 2010) and Juanita Wilson (*As If I Am Not There*, 2010). These writer/directors, with their “uniquely personal way of working” and appreciation of film logic, supposedly represented an emerging “protest film” genre standing apart from more market-driven fare, derided (in echoes of John Grierson) as “Hollywood infant formula”. Unloved by critics and mainstream filmgoers, perhaps due to their alleged sensitivity to the post-Tiger socioeconomic and moral zeitgeist, *Tonn Nua* filmmakers eschewed the questionable rigours of “perfecting the script” for “emotionally reactive” films derived from “political and social consciousness” (O’Grady-Peyton).

While a rigorous analysis of *Tonn Nua* sensibility is beyond the scope of this article, it nevertheless provides a broad framework for analysing O’Connor’s own work, which is presumably accountable to the boldly declared principles of his manifesto. In addition to the lo-fi, DIY-ethos *Stalker*, the director had already shot *Between the Canals* (2011) and *King of the Travellers* (2012), both supported by the Irish Film Board under CEO Simon Perry, credited as the “grandfather” of the emerging movement. The “independence” of O’Connor from more mainstream indigenous fare is thus questionable: with the exception of *Stalker*, all his films have been produced and/or distributed with public finances. O’Connor’s next project, *Cardboard Gangsters* (2016), would be no exception: the entire shooting budget was provided by a €300,000 award from the BAI’s Sound and Vision Fund (carved out from a seven percent “top-slicing” of the television license fee), with a further €132,000 from the Section 481 tax scheme (BAI, 2014; Revenue Commissioners, 2016).

Fast forward to the summer of 2017, and *Cardboard Gangsters*, a year after its premiere (again at the Galway Film Fleadh), had arguably justified this public investment by becoming something of a popular sensation. The film was screening in over 60 Irish theatres on the way to amassing a reported box office gross of €550,000, to become the most seen-in-the-cinema Irish film of the year (O’Grady, 2017; Griffin, 2017; the author has not been able to corroborate these box office figures, which can be difficult to verify). The film, which received additional backing from TV3, had its small-screen premiere in December, and although the TV viewing figures do not appear to be readily available, on the evidence of its theatrical success alone it can be argued that *Tonn Nua* cinema, if *Cardboard Gangsters* is a typical example, may indeed represent a new populism in indigenous Irish film.

But does it exude the social consciousness claimed by O’Connor for the New Wave of Irish filmmakers? The film is set in the north-side Dublin suburb of Darndale, one of the most disadvantaged areas in Ireland, providing ample opportunity for social critique, especially in relation to causes and effects of economic inequality. The drama follows the fortunes of Jay (John Connors, who co-wrote the film), a wannabe gangster whose efforts to carve out a slice of the local heroin market leads to a predictably bloody conflict with established kingpin Derra (Jimmy Smallhorne). Despite the *Tonn Nua* promise, Darndale is presented as hermetically sealed: a hotbed of crime, violence, intimidation and despair, devoid of any wider social context or comment that might explain and critically examine the deprivation depicted on screen. Gang rivalries and drug wars ensue with no apparent opposition, either from within the community itself or from outside authorities. The police, marginal and ineffectual, function only as agents for an uncaring State, a role established early in the film when plain clothes officers evict a family for non-payment of rent. The same scene provides

an opportunity for Jay to demonstrate both his fearlessness and contempt for the forces of the law, in an odd juxtaposition of slapstick comedy with the genuine contemporary social problem of housing loss.

As well as avoiding social engagement, the film displays a marked – if common – weakness for poorly drawn female characters, suggesting a *Tonn Nua* propensity to fall back on stereotypes of gender as well as class. The three leading female characters are defined mainly in terms of their relationship with Jay, failing to transcend even the limited ambitions of the Bechdel test. Jay is drawn to Derra’s wife, Kim (Kierston Wareing), who is introduced as “proper gangster gee”, in the colourful argot of the Darndale mean streets. An unlikely (and spectacularly indiscrete) tryst ensues, ensuring that Jay, already on a collision trajectory for his unsanctioned drug dealing, cannot possibly escape confrontation with the criminal overlord and the inevitable reckoning that follows. The one-dimensionality of O’Connor’s female characters is perhaps not unusual by the standards of “indie” street-crime genre, but hardly inevitable. Such female inaction would hardly pass muster in a Tarantino film, for example, where the mother-and-girlfriend duo would probably stage a bloody and empowering intervention to save Jay from his impossible predicament, rather than suffer the passive, dramatically bloodless “rescue” to which they are subjected by the *Tonn Nua* screenplay.

Despite the script’s shortcomings of exposition, character and dialogue, Connors delivers a credible (and indeed IFTA-winning) acting performance. One scene in particular – shot in a long take in Jay’s bedroom, where the confined proportions reflect the closing in of Jay’s growing anguish following a series of increasingly desperate choices – demonstrates Connors’ considerable emotional power as an actor. But the real star of *Cardboard Gangsters* (also evident in the same scene, one of several staged in single-shot long takes) is Michael Lavelle’s kinetic cinematography. His camera infuses many scenes with a jittery edginess, elevating the narration to a plane that the writing and acting alone would struggle to reach.

Tony Kearns’ film editing is similarly fluid, lending energy and drive to the unlikely series of narrative events. Ultimately, however, *Cardboard Gangsters* is a home-grown genre piece whose semantic elements (urban mean streets, tattooed tough-guy characters, improvised weapons of torture,) and syntactic structures (“skangsta” situations, “macho” characterisation, techno/hip-hop/rap soundtrack) fail to combine in a synergistic manner that might allow the film to transcend its generic limitations. In O’Connor’s Darndale, status is measured solely in terms of criminal ambition. As an alternative to criminality, the only “legit” career choices available are improbable celebrity culture options like working as a DJ or being a rap musician. Arguably, *Cardboard Gangsters*’ real point of reference is the hit television drama *Love/Hate* (RTE, 2010-2014), on which Connors was most likely working while writing the original version of the script. Like that series, *Cardboard Gangsters* achieves commercial appeal while conflating working class with underclass, relegating women to subservience, and fetishizing Irish criminality with visual and linguistic tropes borrowed from American film and television.

In the closing credits, thanks are extended to the people of Darndale, and to workers at the Belcamp Village Centre, which provided a production base during the 15-day location shoot (Film Ireland, 2017; Brosnan, 2016). The Centre spearheads several community-building, local art, and employment initiatives in Darndale. Its support of this film is let down by the filmmakers’ failure to deliver what is surely an essential element of successful film drama rooted in the gritty social realism to which *Cardboard Gangsters* clearly aspires: authenticity.

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On the Threshold: *Song of Granite* (Pat Collins, 2017)

Aileen O’Driscoll

The French philosopher Simone Weil’s contention that “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity” comes to mind when considering the work of Pat Collins. As with his previously acclaimed films, including *What We Leave in Our Wake* (2009), *Tim Robinson: Connemara* (2011), *Silence* (2012), and *Living in a Coded Land* (2014), *Song of Granite* again evinces Collins’ deep empathy and sensitivity, his commitment to bearing witness and paying attention, while somehow conveying a sense of the “filmmaker as listener”. His unconventional documentary work communicates a humanity, a curiosity about the depth and pain of existence, as well as demonstrating how tuned in he is to the subtleties of the everyday without romanticising the mundane for sentimentality’s sake. For a film shot in black and white, it is fitting that *Song of Granite* – a documentary-of-sorts about renowned Irish sean nós singer, Joe Heaney, which incorporates extensive dramatisations of Heaney’s life – is a

story of contrasts. These dichotomies operate at three levels: in the character of Joe Heaney himself; in the quietness of domesticity versus the excitement of performance; and in the rural Connemara environment set against the urbanity of Glasgow and the cosmopolitanism of New York. Indeed contrasts are apparent from the opening scene, which finds young Joe Heaney (played with stunning competence and conviction by Colm Seoighe) displaying a tenderness and delicacy in crouching down amid the exposed expanse of the rough and rocky hills of Connemara to mark the spot where some eggs are nested. Pulling a thread from his jumper, he slowly and carefully ties it around the windswept grass leaves patting down the long grass to protect the fragile nesting eggs from the blustery elements.

“He wanted to be on the move”: Heaney’s son’s assessment of his father’s spirit midway through the film is alluded to early on in young Joe’s intensely contemplative gaze at his surroundings. His sense of quiet guardedness, suspicion and tentativeness evokes parallels to a skittish animal; he is not quite sure about the world beyond himself, his family and his way of life. Nevertheless, he gets gentle encouragement from his schoolteacher and his father, and is both seen and validated; counter to the contemporary popular perception that children were cruelly treated, ignored and unvalued in Ireland. Joe Heaney, a boy growing up in rural Connemara in the 1920s and 1930s, is presented as neither molly coddled nor neglected. Rather, the portrayal of the relationship between Joe and his father is one of understated affection. In one of the most touching scenes, Joe’s father instructs him in how to hold his knife when peeling potatoes. He does not discount his son’s nervousness about handling the knife, but assures him that, in his own time, he’ll get the hang of it. This is borne out too in his talent for singing; something he acquired through absorbing the song, music and dance in his intimate interactions with his father as well as engaging with the musicians and storytellers in his community. In a later scene, Joe is hurling stones up onto the roof of his cottage-home resulting in a series of loud clatters, while ignoring the chastisements of his mother. This is the first indication of some discontent, some restlessness in him. Life happens *around* Joe, and he skirts in and out of the action; ever on the side-lines observing. In Heaney’s middle years in Scotland, Michael O’Chonfhlaola gives an outstanding performance of a man, a musician whose physically strong body belies a shyness and quietness, and an inner life teeming with thoughts and emotion. O’Chonfhlaola, as Heaney, explains the process of sean nós singing and the fact that “you’re all alone for those couple of verses”. Given that Heaney disappeared from Glasgow around 1954 or 1955 leaving his wife and children, and later reappeared in 1961 only to leave for the US for good several years later, this sense of aloneness, of restlessness, of wanting to escape is echoed in Heaney’s father’s comment to him on a visit home, perhaps in the late 50s: “you always had your eye on the horizon”. It is fitting, then, that Heaney worked as a doorman in New York for several decades; he exists on the threshold of two worlds: the public and private; the external and internal. In a subtle glimpse into his inner life, Collins shows Heaney’s weathered and rough hand caressing the granite pillar outside the building he works at in NYC; a tactile gesture reconnecting him with Connemara, a way of grounding himself to a place. The final phase of Heaney’s life is played by Macdara Ó Fátharta. This is the most vocal version of Joe Heaney that the film offers. In an emotional passage, Heaney laments that he doesn’t want to “die amongst strangers”, in a land that is not his. Heaney’s self-reflection towards the films close has him wondering if he is the warrior-hero of the myths he knew growing up, or if he’s the beast of those stories. Heaney is rooted but unrooted; he has no connection with his children and no sense or interest in lineage in that respect. Instead for him the songs are the link to the past and to place, they’re his offspring, and they hold and express for him the complexity of life.

Such antithetical characteristics as held simultaneously within Heaney’s rootedness and unrootedness is mirrored in the depictions of domestic life as opposed to the lively music

scene that Heaney inhabits. Given UNESCO's recognition of the cultural significance of the Irish uilleann pipes in December 2017, it is timely that Collins' film contains within it fictionalised but realistic scenes of traditional Irish music sessions that are both energetic and poignant and demonstrate the deep respect for culture – for Irish music, dance and song – that runs through the veins of many Irish people. Collins' patience and confidence in his filmmaking means that he avoids over-directing. This approach allows for three full dramatised performances to be captured during the scene of the traditional Irish music session in the pub; which may have been a Glasgow pub surrounded by the Irish community, or a pub in Dublin or some other Irish place. It is a testament to how well the sequence works that one is not consciously or intellectually concerned about knowing where it is supposed to be; rather, the sense of being part of the crowd sweeps the viewer along and keeps one present in those few minutes. Damien Dempsey's rousing and foot-stamping performance of *Rocky Road to Dublin* is contrasted with Lisa O'Neill's deeply moving and beautiful rendition of *Galway Shawl*. But during their songs both singers maintain a presence in the crowd of rapt listeners. When O'Chonfhlaoila, as Heaney, closes his eyes to sing he melts away from the crowd. Even though he holds the hand of a man throughout the song (traditional accordionist, Seamus Begley), O'Chonfhlaoila exudes the air of someone who is totally alone and unaware of the audience. This is enhanced, arguably, by the fact that the song is in Irish and – unless a native speaker – the viewer feels a voyeur, watching the poetic utterances of a man expressing something no-one else understands. These scenes of crowded pubs, pints of stout, singing, talking and laughing cut against the depictions of home life. While Heaney's early years in Connemara are portrayed as offering him a home life characterised by supportiveness, with no need for urgency or stress, this is sharply contrasted with the glimpse of domesticity Heaney is cocooned in in Glasgow. Married life, for Heaney, is fraught with a sense of being suffocated by the responsibilities it entails, and bristles with Heaney's need for escape; leading to his betrayal, abandonment, and rejection of his family.

Threaded throughout *Song of Granite* too are contrasts concerning depictions of landscape. It is a half an hour into the film before any archival footage flashes on the screen, which shows men working in the mines, perhaps in Scotland in the 1950s. This serves to uproot the viewer from the calm and serene rocky landscape of Connemara, and the audience is transplanted into the "real-world" – both in the sense of it being archive footage and also that the dream-like sensibility of the first 30 minutes connotes childhood and innocence, as opposed to the grittiness of hard, physical work and family-life, marriage and children signifying adulthood; something reflected in the city setting of Glasgow. In this film, depictions of landscape on screen dominate. Film landscapes "come not only with cultural history but also with political intent and with wider context. They arrive with questions, and they arrive as the result of questioning ... They explore the economies of human interaction with nature, with each other, with place and with time" (Harper and Rayner 4). Collins certainly employs representations of landscape to both ask questions and to posit some answers. Much of the focus of contemporary Irish cinema, as McLoone suggests, has been to "demythologise rural Ireland and to question the ascetic nationalism that underpinned it" (44). In contrast to, for example, Lenny Abrahamson, whose use of a rural setting in *Garage* is crucial to the film but remains secondary to the narrative, Collins does not fit into this category of filmmaker. Instead, Collins very much foregrounds landscape in *Song of Granite*. However, whether Collins portrays the Irish landscape in ways that oscillate between what Luke Gibbons (as cited in Harper and Rayner) has referred to as "soft primitivism" – highlighting an unmarked-by-industrialisation, romanticised version of Ireland – and a "hard primitivism" – which evokes a landscape that is hostile and compels one to break away from it – is not quite clear. What is clear is that "landscape as place" (Lukinbeal 6) has resonance

for the portrayals of various locations in Collins' film. Lukinbeal's suggestion that iconic and stereotypical images of place allow for audiences to immediately locate the film is something certainly present here both in the landscape of Connemara being instantly recognisable as the West of Ireland, and the cityscape of New York's buildings and skyscrapers being likewise easily identifiable. Present too in *Song of Granite* is "landscape as metaphor" (Lukinbeal 13). This involves imbuing landscapes with anthropomorphic characteristics such as "nobility", or "wildness" or "melancholy"; something in evidence in the contrasting "characteristics" of Connemara, Glasgow and New York; each with their own connotations. Connemara is perhaps a metaphor for solitude, peace, and simplicity; Glasgow represents community and family but also emotional turmoil and hardship; while New York offers an expanse and solitude of a different kind, a loneliness that echoes Connemara and Glasgow but differs in the fact of it being a place of intense excitement and vibrancy and international success for Heaney. If, as McLoone has suggested, the current generation of Irish filmmakers are reluctant to depict the Irish landscape on screen for fear of reproducing stereotypical tropes, Collins does not harbour such a fear. He stands as one of the exceptions that offers a complex, mature treatment of the Irish landscape.

The heart of this film is reflected in the features of young Joe; his freckled nose, threadbare jumper, a sense of place, his hunched and shivering figure is the embodiment of the physical and spiritual hardship of daily-life, kept at bay in the evenings by the warmth of the night-time fire, comforted by the love of his parents, and surrounded by poetry and neighbours. The soul of the film is embodied in young Joe's father. Portrayed beautifully by sean nós singer Pól Ó Ceannabháin, he is gentle, warm and reassuring, and sings exquisitely with a palpable respect for the past as well as an immersion in the present. Collins's restrained film resists the temptation to overuse expository commentary and dialogue. Though not identified, at different points in the film we hear two voices which we assume to be Heaney's son and daughter but their contribution to shedding light on the temperament of their father is culled at one comment each. The film is all the better for the sparsity of "insight" into Heaney's character. In the end, the film is less about Heaney and more about an Irish sensibility, particularly of a generation growing up in the 1930s through to the 1950s; we see these people as demonstrating tenacity and tenderness, vulnerability as well as a dignity embedded in silence, and a hardship borne of tough, physical work eased by living within a tight community. Ultimately, Collins wants us to feel something rather than simply know or learn something about Heaney; we leave *Song of Granite* feeling something about the importance of genealogy, about a lineage and tradition of Irish culture, song and music, about the nature and disposition of Irish peoples, which is reflected in the depictions of the land.

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***Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* (Cahal McLaughlin, 2015) and *We Were There* (Laura Aguiar and Cahal McLaughlin, 2014)**

Melania Terrazas

The legacy of the Troubles is a difficult subject for the contemporary Irish scholar, if for no other reason than the scale of the literary, artistic, and critical output inspired by the political conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Within this work there has been a key focus on the iconic site of the prisons where paramilitary prisoners resided, both influencing and being influenced by political manouvres outside the prison walls. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol*, directed by Cahal McLaughlin, and *We Were There*, directed by McLaughlin with Laura Aguiar, are two important contributions to this sub-field within Troubles studies.

After several years of negotiations with various political institutions in Northern Ireland, former prison staff and former prisoner groups, the Prisons Memory Archive filmed inside empty prisons during the summers of 2006 (Armagh Gaol, the primary prison for female prisoners in Northern Ireland), and 2007 (Long Kesh/Maze Prison, which held male prisoners during the Troubles) (McLaughlin "The Prisons"; for further reference see The Prisons Memory Archive). *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* offers the perspectives of women who had passed through the eponymous prison, while *We Were There* is a documentary about the memories of some of the women who had worked in Long Kesh or had male relatives imprisoned there.

Edited by the Prisons Memory Archive, the documentaries tell the story of these two prisons through three main protocols: collaboration, inclusivity, and life storytelling (McLaughlin "Who Tells"). The human aspect of the interviewees, which these three protocols draw out, makes *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* unique. They will be of great value both to film studies scholars interested in gender issues (Johnston "Memory") and their role in the the Troubles, and to a general readership unfamiliar with this significant moment in the history of Northern Ireland.

Both films present in on-screen text the key historical facts: the role of the prisons; the type of prisoners assigned to them; the story behind the films themselves; the removal of prisoners' political status in 1976; the years of prisoners' protest against forced integration (which led to more protest and conflict); their "dirty" protests and hunger strikes in 1980 and; the number of casualties and injuries that resulted from the conflict. All this information is "thrown at" the audience to the accompaniment of a blunt sound drumming these basic verities into the consciousness and memory of the viewer.

Both documentaries present their interviews in chronological order. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* addresses both Protestant and Republican female former prisoners but also includes other relevant figures, like a lawyer, various officers, a priest, an Open University tutor, a doctor, and a male ex-prisoner. *We Were There's* interviewees drawn from the Maze prison include two Open University tutors, two Probation Service (Protestant

and Catholic) workers, a prison officer's widow, mothers and sisters of former prisoners and visual artist Amanda Dunsmore.

Together, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* address the full scope of the representation of women in the Troubles from 1971 to 2000, from the perspectives of 175 people who worked in, were imprisoned in, or visited these two prisons for political prisoners. They follow the same protocols and methodology so that all participants are treated equally. The first protocol, from which the other two evolved, is a collaborative approach (Aguiar).

The Prisons Memory Archive staff worked closely with interviewees and showed their commitment by agreeing co-ownership of the material with them. Participants could withdraw the material from the Archive at any point; this enabled the filmmakers to build a relationship of confidence with interviewees and showed their respect for the sensitive nature of the material. The second protocol is inclusivity. Both films show as full a range of participants as possible, many of whose stories conflict in terms of experience and interpretation. By asking the audience to listen to the stories of the "other," the two films assume a viewership willing and able to listen to stories that may challenge their preconceptions. The third protocol is the use of life story approach to oral history and reliance on the materiality of the institutional sites to stimulate memory recollection. The Prisons Memory Archive staff engaged in conversations with the participants to clarify and tease out what they had identified in a briefing session as the areas the participants wished to cover. There was no list of set questions; participants were encouraged to set the agenda (McLaughlin "Who Tells").

There have been other films about Armagh Gaol: Claire Hackett and Michele Devlin's *A Kind of Sisterhood* (2015), looks at the prisoner experience there but interviews no prison officers and conducts most interviews outside of the prison. *We Were There* is particularly valuable for its contributions on the role of women in male prisons. In terms of context, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* are also very much unique in Irish documentary in returning to the site of the experience, although there are international precedents, such as Pithy Pahn's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2013), in which guards and survivors return to a Cambodian interrogation Centre or Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012).

Furthermore, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* fit into a genre of oral histories from the Troubles, although their focus on the prison experience is without parallel. In this regard, it is worth noting that there are up to 50 local community-based storytelling projects that fill the vacuum created by the lack of official attention to addressing the legacy of the past (for further information, see *Accounts of the Conflict*).

One of the strengths of *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* is that although there have been many broadcast films about the legacy of the Troubles, these tend to be investigative such as Alex Gibney's *No Stone Unturned* (2017), or Sean Murray's forthcoming *Unquiet Graves: The Story of the Glenanne Gang*. In contrast, McLaughlin and Aguiar's engaging documentaries are crafted from interview recordings, music, and script. They are meticulous in their attention to detail and creative, and both filmmakers have a natural ability to get the best from the two prisons' scenarios, and to draw the participants into very fruitful dialogue. On the site of the experience, as producers and directors, McLaughlin, Aguiar, and the Prisons Memory Archive staff show themselves to be flexible, responsive, and reactive. The two films consistently show effective communication on location, and both weave a storyline that flows seamlessly: their directors are natural storytellers. Despite the bleakness of the stories narrated, McLaughlin and Aguiar demonstrate great ability to find a good narrative and, all in all, tell compelling stories.

The two films complement each other through scenes devoted to crucial aspects of the Troubles, such as the prisoners' hunger strike, the "dirty" protests of 1980, and in their treatment of the prisoners' experiences after they lost their political status. They take up overlapping topics, presenting them from the contrasting perspectives of prisoners in *Armagh Stories* and the women employed by or visiting Long Kesh/Maze Prison in *We Were There*. Both also reveal the human side of the stories, not just the political. While the former inmates of Armagh Gaol contain their emotions and feelings on many occasions during their interviews, the relatives of *We Were There* let them flow freely and exhibit visible relief afterwards. The humanity of all these individuals is reinforced by many agents in both films: in *We Were There* probation service officers Eleanor Mulligan and Valerie Owens speak of their relationships with prisoners in Long Kesh: "You thought one thing and then discovered that these were very nice people".

There is a contrast between the two prisons and the participants in terms of the dynamics of place and space, and sound. In *Armagh Stories*, the prison is filmed from outside, the soundscape is peaceful, birds are singing, and there is a lot of light. This tranquility stands very much in contrast with the anxiety and stress shown by most of the former prisoners and other individuals interviewed in the film. The retelling of their experiences is disturbing and uncomfortable. In *We Were There*, in contrast, the sound of drilling is constant and it is dark. Place, space and sound are intertwined, suggestive not just of the many horrible things that happened there, but that victims' heads are still being drilled. Their traumatic experiences still need to be told, shared with, and known by the general public, but the authorities do not facilitate the process. The Maze Prison is being demolished while the women who visited there are being interviewed, and they seem to feel relief when they are taken to the site of their experience and express their emotions and feelings freely, because *they were there* too.

The interviews themselves in both documentaries are also exceptional high points, extracting the maximum impact from returning to the site of the experience. In *Armagh Stories*, I found particularly powerful the moments in which three former prisoners remember specific moments on location. I found it very revealing when Patricia Moore recalls the way she felt on her first day in prison or the humiliation of being strip-searched by prison officers when she had her period. In another powerful scene, Josie Dowds expresses how sad she and the rest of the girls felt the day her baby was taken away from all of them. Finally, I was very moved when former prison officer Daphne Scroggie tries to hide her anger at the way some of the inmates celebrated when they learned that one of her new colleagues, a young officer and a mother, had been assassinated outside the prison (Side and McLaughlin). The post-traumatic effects of all these terrible experiences are visible to the attentive viewer who observes how all these women have a lump in their throat when they remember these hard times on the sites of the experience (Johnston "Female").

In *We Were There*, I find particularly powerful the ease with which most of the participants are able to communicate in a wide range of situations. In contrast with *Armagh Gaol*, where all the interviewees talk on their own, many of the women in *We Were There* share their traumatic experiences in pairs and groups. This film also shows a broad variety of women recounting very intimate experiences, and their relief afterwards. I was particularly moved by the experiences of Mary Nelis, who smuggled Turkish delight in to her son rolled up in plastic inside her vagina because it would have been confiscated if the officers found it. She also recalls that she saw lice running through her son's hair after a few weeks of the no-wash protest, and her son describes sleeping surrounded by his own faeces, yet he bore no grudge against the prison officers because "they were just doing their job".

Armagh Stories and *We Were There* conclude in a very different manner. In the first, Father Murray's departure is one of the longest shots. It seems as though the filmmakers

wanted to remind the audience that although Armagh Gaol is now deserted, it still holds the memories of his interviewees, and indeed the memories of all those who passed through its gates. Another clever example of this is when the camera films the former inmates of Armagh Gaol recounting their stories and, a little later, walking up and down the stairs in various parts of the prison, one immediately after the other, as if they were still imprisoned. By contrast, in the last part of *We Were There*, visual artist Amanda Dunsmore mentions that a former officer at Long Kesh called Billy had collected many objects owned by prisoners over the years and offered this collection to her so that younger generations would know what had happened. The directors' decision to end the film with the artist's interview seems to be a comment on the demolition of Long Kesh, which was going on around them as they filmed, and also a counter-argument directed at those who are unwilling to address the trauma of the past inclusively. In sum, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* are particularly valuable for their contributions to recording the modern history of Northern Ireland, particularly, as Breidge Gadd wrote in an *Irish News* feature article, for the "young people who weren't born during those times", for the "fundamental role" that these stories "have in a future peace resolution" (Gadd).

Together, these two documentaries help both established and new scholars of film studies to come to terms with the scope of the Troubles. Cahal McLaughlin is to be praised for assembling a large and varied group of people from all walks of life in *Armagh Gaol*. He and Aguiar are to be congratulated for bringing together a fairly varied group of women, former prisoners and relatives, and partners and friends of male prisoners at Long Kesh in *We Were There* to draw out touching and spontaneous memories, and for ensuring deep and wide coverage of their subject. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* are clear and concise documentaries that highlight significant areas of debate. They provide many examples of theoretical investigation in the hope of engaging viewers with the Troubles. Both films will be welcome additions to university libraries and will serve well postgraduate students and lecturers of Irish film and Northern Irish culture and history.

Note

DVDs of *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* are available for free to public and academic libraries. Please send your library's details to the Prisons Memory Archive at info@prisonsmemoryarchive.com for more information. After asking the participants/co-owners of the material permission, the Archive will send copies by post. *Armagh Stories* is available in English and (soon) in Spanish. *We Were There* is available in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

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***Michael Inside* (Frank Berry, 2017)**

Tony Tracy

In 1977 Joe Comerford wrote/directed *Down the Corner*, a foundational work in the emergent “first wave” of Irish Cinema. In keeping with many films from a period when filmmakers explored what an emerging indigenous cinema could and should do, the film rejected the picturesque and sided with the marginal. In this case it was a group of five teenage boys from the working-class suburb of Ballyfermot, and the film’s episodic narrative emerged from Comerford’s workshopping of ideas and experiences within the community depicted. The film depicted their world – families, community, social pressures (alcoholism, unemployment) as well as a grandmother’s recollections of 1916 – against a backdrop of a petty crime in which the boys rob an orchard. Clearly inspired by the example of the British new wave and socially-conscious film makers such as Ken Loach (shades of *Kes* in particular), the film also pursued more abstract levels of meaning, notably through the symbolic use of the orchard as a lost Eden that stands in contrast with their dehumanizing modern milieu.

Down the Corner is today rarely screened and thus likely unknown to many younger Irish filmmakers but it is worth invoking as a precedent when approaching the films of Frank Berry: his 2011 documentary *Ballymun Lullaby*; feature debut *I Used to Live Here* (2014) and, in particular his latest, *Michael Inside* (2017). Each of these have also emerged from workshops directed by Berry with working-class community groups, combining an open attitude to the often fragmented narratives of his participants with skillful storytelling. His films thus both take up from and diverge from that earlier moment in Irish film history. Masterfully connecting under-represented places and people, they display an all-too-rare engagement with the issues of the communities depicted (often casting from within such

communities) while eschewing the more formally experimental elements of first wave cinema. In rendering such stories both engaging and accurate, Berry is emerging as an Irish filmmaker of real significance, deriving quietly powerful dramas from local, lived experiences. Such achievements were publically recognised when *Michael Inside* recently won the IFTA for best Irish Film (2017), despite not having yet had theatrical distribution in Ireland (the film had however screened at both the Galway Film Fleadh in July 2017 winning Best Irish Film, and at the Cork Film Festival where it won the Audience Award. The delayed theatrical release allowed the film build word-of-mouth on festival circuit before releasing it in Irish cinemas in early April 2018).

Having focused in his previous film on the pressing issue of “copycat” teen suicide (see my 2016 review), Berry turns to themes of crime and punishment among a similar age and social demographic here, developing his story from numerous interactions with former inmates within the Irish Prison Service’s “Pathways Programme”. Mobilizing narrative elements familiar from the prison drama genre, the film centres on a young protagonist Michael McCrea (Dafhyd Flynn, a superb non-professional actor cast in *I Used to Live Here*). With his father in prison and his mother dead (continuing the trope of absent Irish mothers in recent Irish cinema), Michael lives in poor circumstances in suburban Dublin – on the ironically named “Fortune Avenue” - with his grandfather Francis (Lalor Roddy). Through a combination of naivety and circumstance, Michael minds a bag of cocaine for a friend’s brother, and following a police raid he is arrested for possession of drugs. Processed by an impersonal and unsympatetic state system (we hear but do not see the prosecuting judge), he is sentenced to three months incarceration. While this is a relatively short sentence (the last month is suspended), it leaves Francis profoundly upset, and he stumbles from the court in a state of shock, fearful of what might happen to his beloved, unworldly grandson.

The film’s second act takes place “inside”, prefaced by a brilliantly evocative ten minute sequence where Micheal is processed and kept in the dimly-lit, purgatorial setting of “holding”. His passive, vulnerable status is intensified by a cacophony of unidentified male voices: prison officers ask him if he is in fear of his life or needs protection; anonymous and circling older prisoners test and tease him before he is assigned a cell. Once inside the prison proper, he is marked by the seductive and dangerous David (Moe Dunford) who grooms him as an accomplice by offering protection from other prisoners. The conditionality of that “protection” is revealed when David stages an attack on another prisoner but insists that Michael inflict violence on the inmate. He fails, but in this brutal Darwinian environment, distinctions between perpetrator and victim meld and Michael’s relative blamelessness for his given crime, as well as his grandfather’s hopes for him emerging unscathed, become irredeemable. In an inversion of the coming-of-age narrative in which the protagonist achieves self-knowledge and a measure of freedom, the film’s third act plays out the fated consequences of this fall from innocence to experience.

While the themes and prison genre framework of *Michael Inside* recall a film such as Jacques Audiard’s *The Prophet*, its social realism, melancholic tone and empathy for the vulnerable – particularly its young protagonist – bring it closer to the realistic humanism of Dardenne brothers’ films like *Rosetta* (1999), *The Son* (2002) or *The Kid with a Bike* (2011). There is a sense of resigned helplessness at the heart of its narrative in which Francis and Michael prove incapable of protecting themselves from the more aggressive masculinities within their own community. Dafydd Flynn’s Michael may be the most vulnerable portrait of Irish masculinity ever committed to film, openly and repeatedly expressing doubt that he can do what the proverbial man’s “gotta do”: “I can’t do it”; “I’m not cut out for it”; “I won’t make it”. Once convicted, the dynamic between the grandfather and grandson shifts, and Francis is revealed (through Lalor Roddy’s brilliant performance) to be more a man of the

world than his grizzled and helpless demeanor suggests. He tells Michael to “toughen up” and keep his “head down” and although he must know that both are unlikely, it’s the only advice that Michael has and he manages to make it work for a while. Berry creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia and dread within the familiar setting of the prison, helped in no small part by the Victorian severity of the recently closed Cork prison where the film was shot and greatly aided by Tom Comerford’s muted, often hand-held cinematography as well as Daragh O’Toole’s elgiac score which sporadically interrupts and inflects the highly effective use of location sound. When Michael is finally met at the gate by Francis after his short but grulleing stint, the sense of release is both physical and psychological.

The film, however does not end there and instead pushes into an exploration of the potential for individual agency and mobility among individuals – and particularly young men – within communities where criminal masculinites have assumed hegemonic status. Its bleak conclusion is that there is precious little possibility for escape and that the various agencies of the state are inadequate and ineffectual. Furthermore, Berry offers a chilling and convincing local rendering of what sociologists refer to as “revolving door” incarceration: the process where young offenders are brought into the prison system for the ostensible purpose of rehabilitation but, hardened and institutionalised by the experience, they quickly reoffend and are returned. “Your sentence only starts when you’re released”, David gnomically warns Michael, but this proves prophetic as he vainly attempts to reassume his former life and relations. Both “toughened up” and deeply frustrated, a subsequent outburst of violence is a doubled-edged expression of rage and hopelessness. In a deeply ironic way, it is also “successful” in a way that Micheal was previously incapable of.

At a time of deepening social inequality, increasingly violent drug crime and class-coded social media outrage (see for instance reponses to the “scumbags” who vandalised the Lidl store in Tallaght #LidlLooting), Berry’s film is a profoundly timely and empathetic cultural intervention. Nuanced yet accessible thanks to a simple but strong narrative, skilful use of cinematic form and compelling performances from its the three male leads (Flynn, Dunford, Roddy), *Michael Inside* deserves widespread popular and critical recognition.

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