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Excluded by the Nature of Things? Irish Cinema and Artist's Film¹

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Introduction

At the close of my report on *30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Filmmaker*, in *CIRCA* 104², I suggested that retrospective seasons and festivals offer a useful perspective from which to assess developments in Irish film policy and practice. Through reference to another recent festival event, Bord Scannán na hÉireann's *New Irish Cinema, 1993-2003*, I also highlighted a number of parallels and oppositions between the policies of the Arts Council and the Film Board. I now want to further explore the relationship between Irish cinema and artist's film and video, focusing on policy and on some broader issues of exhibition and reception.

[end page 33]

Developed through collaboration between the Arts Council and the Irish Film Institute, the *30 Years On* event included a screening programme, a public forum and a published directory of Arts Council-funded works. Yet as I noted in my report, the project was marked by certain emphases, and exclusions. Most notably, the programme excluded site-specific work, and the directory was limited to projects funded through dedicated film and video schemes. This relatively narrow emphasis runs counter to the actual policy of the Council, which has developed new funding schemes to engage with a broader range of artist's practices in film and video.

In recent years the dedicated Film and Video Award has been replaced by the multidisciplinary 'Projects' scheme. While this policy may facilitate a greater diversity of practices, the Arts Council award has perhaps become less important as a means of profiling or *promoting* artist's film. This policy is apparently under review but, in the meantime, the Film Board seems to have staked a claim on an area traditionally associated with artist's film and video practice. In 2002 the Board

¹ This paper forms part of a wider research project, supported by a Government of Ireland Scholarship, awarded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

² This was programme of screenings celebrating 30 years of Arts Council funding for film and it was staged at the Irish Film Centre before its re-launch as the Irish Film Institute. See Maeve Connolly, "Green Screen", *CIRCA* 104, Summer 2003: 22-23.

announced two new schemes for film production, one of which provides 100% funding (between 25,000 and 100,000 Euro) for digital ‘Micro-budget’ projects, “of a more experimental nature”.³

Despite its newfound commitment to ‘experimental’ work, the Board does not have a strong record as a promoter of Irish artist’s film. This is not to suggest that it has failed to fund this type of practice. A recent Film Board publication, entitled *Ten Years After: The Irish Film Board, 1993-2003*, written by Kevin Rockett and published to coincide with the *New Irish Cinema* event, lists a number of artist’s projects under the heading ‘Other Short Films’.⁴ These include Clare Langan’s film series *Floodlight*, *Too Dark for Light* and *Glass Hour*, (2000-2002), *Burn* (Paddy Jolley and Reynold Reynolds, 2002), *C Oblique O* (Blue Funk, 1999) and *Excluded by the Nature of Things* (Vivienne Dick, 2002). None of these were featured in the *New Irish Cinema* programme, however, although several *were* screened at *30 Years On*.⁵ Undoubtedly, the Board needed to focus attention on its achievements in feature film drama because of ongoing uncertainty around state subvention for the Irish film industry.⁶ But this exclusive emphasis also serves to marginalize Irish artist’s film.

Exhibiting Artist’s Film: International Perspectives

Exhibitions of artist’s film, in festivals or in the gallery, inevitably contribute to the construction of official narratives of art or film history, particularly when institutional authorities support curatorial selection.⁷ But the absence of a structuring narrative may *also* prove problematic. Within the British context, Michael O’Pray has criticised the “structuralist-formalist” hegemony that was established in canonical exhibition projects of the 1970s. But he also links the collapse of avant-garde film distribution in the late 1980s with a “crisis of categorisation”.⁸ [end page 34]

³ Hugh Linehan, “Any More Goldfish, Harry?”, *Irish Times*, July 19, 2002: 12.

⁴ Kevin Rockett, *Ten Years After: The Irish Film Board 1993 – 2003* (Dublin: Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board, 2003) ix.

⁵ *C Oblique O* and *Too Dark for Light* were screened at *30 Years On* because (like many of these works) they were co-funded by the Arts Council.

⁶ Section 481 is to be discontinued shortly, barring a change of Government policy. Board itself was also under threat relatively recently. Ted Sheehy, “Saved From ‘Bord Snip’”, *The Irish Times*, December 20, 2002:16.

⁷ Curators often acknowledge this fact. See Deke Dusinberre, “Introduction” *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film: A Touring Exhibition Selected by David Curtis and Deke Dusinberre*, eds. David Curtis and Deke Dusinberre (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978): 7.

Recent years have witnessed a collapse of British distribution structures, most notably in the case of Cinenova (formed in 1991 through a merger of feminist distribution organisations) and Lux (an amalgamation of the London Film-maker's Co-op (LFMC) and London Electronic Arts).⁹ But Lux has reinvented itself through projects such as *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot*, a touring retrospective of LFMC work from the 60s and 70s, which opened at Tate Modern in 2001.

Shoot, Shoot, Shoot provided the focus for a recent study of British avant-garde film distribution and curatorship, led by Julia Knight.¹⁰ This ongoing research project focuses on two different approaches to distribution; the 'traditional' model involves the maintenance of a library and catalogue and has its roots in the Co-operative system. The newer model, exemplified by agencies such as the British Film and Video Umbrella, prioritises the selection, packaging and touring of film programmes over the establishment of a library. This overtly *curatorial* approach runs counter to the Co-op principle, which is inclusive and non-selective. *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* represented a commercially and critically successful fusion of the traditional and curatorial modes, as it managed to attract diverse audiences for artist's film and video and Knight's research suggests that, in the future, traditional distributors may come under increased pressure to provide "value for money" through this type of curated programme.¹¹

Irish Artist's Film in the 70s and 80s

2003 was marked by another major exhibition of British artist's film: *A Century of British Artist's Film and Video*, at Tate Britain. This project, curated by David Curtis of the British Artist's Film and Video Study Centre, provides a thematic survey of

⁸ Michael O'Pray, "Introduction", *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, Ed. Michael O'Pray. (London: Arts Council of England/John Libbey Media/University of Luton, 1996) 20.

⁹ Lux had to close its cinema and exhibition space in 2001. Shortly afterwards, Cinenova also lost a substantial amount of its funding and ceased operations as a distributor.

¹⁰ References to this ongoing research project are taken from Julia Knight's presentation, entitled "Reaching Audiences: The Role of the Distributor", at *Experimental Film Today*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, July 6, 2003. See also Knight's earlier discussion of video art distribution: "In Search of an Identity: Distribution, Exhibition and the 'Process' of British Video Art", in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, ed. Julia Knight (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996) 217-237.

¹¹ Knight noted that the organisers exploited existing networks for avant-garde film, such as the *Frameworks* email forum, while also benefiting from the public profile offered by Tate Modern.

British practice. It encompasses artists such as Tacita Dean and Jaki Irvine, usually associated with gallery exhibition, early work by ‘art cinema’ practitioners such as Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway *and* activist projects such as *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986).¹² There have been few comparable attempts, in publishing or in exhibition, to explore the links between cinema, artist’s film and video and activism within the Irish context. The *30 Years On* Project did suggest a starting point for this type of analysis but, when considered in conjunction with the *New Irish Cinema* event, it actually reinforces a sense of ‘separate spheres’ for Irish art and film. The Film Board’s Public Forum actually opened with an historical overview outlining the pivotal role of the Arts Council during the 1970s but there was little evidence of any ongoing dialogue between the two organisations in terms of policy.

The existence of these relatively separate spheres is all the more striking, given the earlier convergence between Irish art and film. Many of the leading contributors to Irish film culture in the 1970s and 80s, including Joe Comerford (a panellist on the *30 Years On* Forum), Pat Murphy and Thaddeus O’Sullivan (both contributors to the Film Board event), were actually art school-trained. Joe Comerford developed his film practice while studying Fine Art at the National College of Art in the late 1960s. During a series of student occupations he helped to organise screenings of avant-garde films by Richter and Man Ray and this experience informed early works such as *Emtigon* (1972). Subsequent works such as *Down The Corner* (1978) and *Traveller* (1981) are informed by a more collaborative, community-based approach and both were co-funded by the Production Board of the British Film Institute. These explorations of social and cultural identity were followed by *Waterbag* (1984), a visually complex representation of abortion and sexual repression, and two further features: *Reefer and the Model* (1988) and *High Boot Benny* (1993). [end page 35]

Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Pat Murphy also studied film at art school, primarily at the Royal College of Art (RCA). O’Sullivan’s *A Pint of Plain* (1975) and *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) are set amongst London’s Irish community. Both films are characterised by a fragmentary, episodic structure and were developed through

¹² *A Century of British Artist’s Film and Video* is curated by David Curtis, currently one of the directors of the British Artist’s Film and Video Study Centre.

improvisation. The latter film was funded and distributed by the Production Board of the BFI, and continues to generate critical interest for its exploration of visuality and memory.¹³ In later films, however, such as *The Woman Who Married Clark Gable* (1985), O'Sullivan began to rely on scripting, and to work closely with writers. He also worked as a cinematographer on a number of critically significant projects such as Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (1984), Cathal Black's *Our Boys* (1980) and *Pigs* (1984), Joe Comerford's *Traveller* (1982) and *Waterbag* (1984), *The Return* (Phil Mulloy, 1986) and *Rocinante* (Cinema Action, 1986). In 1990, he directed the acclaimed film adaptation of Sam Hanna Bell's novel *December Bride* (1990) and he has recently returned to female-centred period drama with *The Heart of Me* (2003).

In some respects, Pat Murphy has followed a similar path to O'Sullivan. She developed the script for her film, *Maeve* (co-directed with John Davies, 1981) while studying film at the RCA, and again this project was funded by the Production Board of the BFI. Murphy also spent time in New York, on the Whitney Independent Study Program, where she collaborated with feminist filmmakers such as Lizzie Borden and began to work closely with actors. With *Maeve*, and *Anne Devlin* (1984), Murphy established herself as a prominent feminist filmmaker but continued to produce critical work within other contexts. She directed high-profile street theatre events in support of the Guildford Four and the Birmingham Six in 1989 and 1990 and subsequently developed film programmes at IMMA and the Irish Film Institute.¹⁴ She has also produced video work for installation at the Famine Museum at Strokestown House. Her most recent feature, *Nora* (2000) clearly extends the exploration of subjectivity instigated in her earlier work, particularly through its representation of sexuality and memory.

It seems that many of the most prominent of the art school-trained filmmakers of the 1970s and 80s have gravitated towards feature production, and particularly period drama. As such their work seems to share few points of contact with Irish artist's film and video, and particularly with gallery-based installation. It is possible, however, to identify an intersection between these parallel traditions in the work of Vivienne

¹³ See Cheryl Temple Herr, "Addressing the Eye in Ireland: Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978)", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.3 (2000): 367-374.

¹⁴ See Stephanie McBride, "The Peripheral Eye." *CIRCA* 72 (Summer 1995): 34-37.

Dick. Although she has received relatively little critical attention within the context of Irish cinema studies, Vivienne Dick has explored many of the same issues as Comerford, O'Sullivan and Murphy, through Super-8, 16mm film and video (for festivals, film clubs and broadcast contexts) and more recently, multi-screen gallery installation.

Vivienne Dick: On the Margins of Irish Cinema

Born in Donegal, Vivienne Dick moved to New York in 1975. There she became active in No Wave film culture and produced a series of Super-8 works that include *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978), *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979), *Liberty's Booty* (1980) and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981). Instead of 'structuralism' or the 'poetic' avant-garde of New American Cinema, No Wave filmmakers were influenced by the New York Underground of the 1960s. Together with contemporaries such as Beth and Scott B, James Nares and Eric Mitchell, Dick celebrated the seedier side of New York City life.

Many of Dick's early films are melodramas staged around landmark New York sites such as the Twin Towers, Coney Island and the Statue of Liberty, featuring punk performers such as Lydia Lunch and Pat Place. Her work is characterised by a retro aesthetic, in terms of costuming, design and music, and it articulates a fascination with all forms of Americana. This quality led critics such as J. Hoberman to define Dick as the "quintessential No Wave filmmaker".¹⁵

[end page 36]

But despite overtly American settings and themes, Dick's work can actually be seen to explore many of the same issues as her Irish contemporaries. Most notably, she explores incest, abuse and familial violence in *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, in parallel with Irish works such as *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981) and *Traveller* (Comerford, 1981). Dick also began to represent Irish experience directly, through images of Catholicism and the Irish landscape in *Liberty's Booty* and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film*. The latter film, in particular, features scenes of the Ring of Kerry that recall Hollywood fantasy and O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted*.

¹⁵See J.Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick," October 20 (Spring 1982): 102-106. Vivienne Dick's work formed part of two major retrospectives of American avant-garde film: *No Wave Cinema 1978-87* (1996) at the Whitney Museum, New York and *Big as Life: An American History of Super-8 Film* (1999) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Vivienne Dick returned to Ireland in the early 1980s, in order to continue her film practice. But, although she was actively involved in the establishment of a film production course at Rathmines College, Dublin, and in the Ha'penny Film Club, she was unable to secure funding for her work. She points out that, during this period, the newly established Irish Film Board simply did not recognise Super-8 as a medium during this period.¹⁶ She soon relocated to London, and became a member of the London Film-Maker's Co-op. There she continued to explore explicitly Irish themes, often with the support of British funding agencies, most notably in *Rothach* (1985), *Trailer* (1986) and *Images/Ireland* (1988). Through her participation in a number of (gallery-based) festivals and exhibitions of Irish cinema¹⁷ she gradually acquired a profile as an *Irish* practitioner.

As I have noted, Dick has recently moved into gallery installation. Her three screen video work *Excluded by the Nature of Things*, presented at the Limerick City Gallery in 2002 and at the Galway Arts Centre in 2003, was funded by Bord Scannán na hÉireann and by the Arts Council. In terms of its imagery, *Excluded* seems to reference an expanded history of film and art practices. It features images of pilgrims on Croagh Patrick and at holy wells, fragments of animation (like Joe Comerford's *Traveller*) and fleeting close-ups of Sheela-Na-Gigs and pre-modern sculpture.¹⁸

Excluded could be read as a feminist corrective to earlier projects such as O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, which deals explicitly with masculine experience. In particular, Dick shifts attention away from vision and towards *other* senses (smell, touch, hearing) through close-up images of gorse, bracken and cattle, and sounds of driving rain on the lens and the windowpanes. She also disrupts the pictorial quality of the cinematography through animated sequences and a series of rapid camera movements, suggesting both motion and broadcast 'static'. The

¹⁶ For a more extensive analysis of Vivienne Dick's work during this period see Maeve Connolly, "Visibility Moderate? Sighting an Irish Avant-garde in the intersection of Local and International film cultures", *Boundary 2* (forthcoming 2003).

¹⁷ Vivienne Dick's work was included in *An Eye For Ireland, a Celebration of Recent Independent Irish Filmmaking*, at the Chisenhale Gallery in 1987 and in *Selected Images*, an exhibition curated by Declan McGonagle and James Coleman at Riverside Studios in 1988 (as part of the second *Sense of Ireland* festival).

¹⁸ The Sheela-na-Gig recall Bob Quinn's 1975 short *Cloch*, in particular, but *Excluded* also offers parallels with *No Colouring Can Deepen the Darkness of Truth* (Alanna O'Kelly, 1992).

soundtrack is presented on six speakers and suggests a complex layering of predominantly natural sound. The only words spoken throughout the piece are overheard snatches of conversation at sites of pilgrimage.

Dick's feminist critique also finds expression in the interplay between the three screens at key moments. In addition to a Gothic female presence, *Excluded* incorporates two *contemporary* figures: a man and a woman. In the course of the narrative, they appear on the left and right screens, each approaches the camera and retreats, approaches again and then jumps off to the side. The central screen remains empty throughout and these gestures seem to articulate a desire for a space *between* genders. This dimension of Dick's work invites further analysis¹⁹ but, for the purposes of this discussion, I want to consider this 'third space' from a slightly different perspective.

Cinema, Gallery, Landscape: Continuities in Critical Practice

Multiple screen installations, often diptychs, have become relatively commonplace within the gallery since the mid 1990s. The staging of an explicitly *cinematic* narrative across several screens (in the work of Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, Shirin Neshat and, more recently, Willie Doherty) provides a means of interrogating conventions of spectatorship and reception that are particular to the gallery and the cinema. [end page 37]

By extending this fascination with the 'doubled image' across a third screen, *Excluded By the Nature of Things* articulates a critique of the shot/reverse shot cinematic convention from an explicitly gendered perspective. Dick's exploration of spatial dynamics is inseparable from a critique of *landscape*, in terms of its mediation through processes of representation. As such, it recalls a critical tradition in Irish (and international) film practice, which can be traced through Third Cinema, postcolonial film practice and the political current of the avant-garde.²⁰

¹⁹ Aidan Dunne addresses this aspect of the work in his review of *Excluded by the Nature of Things*. See "Seeing how seasonal images can capture the circle of life", *Irish Times*, December 11, 2002: 12.

²⁰ For an analysis of these practices see Paul Willemen, "An Avant-Garde for the 90s", *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994) 141-161.

A similar engagement with issues of specificity in relation to landscape and reception can be identified in recent Irish artist's film and video. *C Oblique O* (1999), by the artist's group Blue Funk, is a 16mm film that has been screened with a cinema context. It employs various different modes of address (including medical lectures and dramatised references to science fiction and fantasy) to suggest possible points of intersection between the body of the nation and the subject of medical discourse. The 'national' is figured through images of the hydroelectric turbines at Ardnacrusha and of an ESB worker, whose body is used to conduct electricity. The medicalised body is that of Evelyn Byrne, a member of the group and a cystic fibrosis sufferer who died before completion of the film. The soundtrack provides the point at which these discourses (and bodies) seem to converge, through recordings of the electrical current and Byrne's critique of medical and psychiatric practice.

Berlusconi's Mousetrap (Eamonn Crudden, 2002) also invites analysis for its more literal representation of the body politic. This digital video diary documents the repression of anti-capitalist protest at the Genoa G-8 summit. It also interrogates the media's 'staging' of political protest as a form of spectacle. A version of *Berlusconi's Mousetrap* was presented in the Hugh Lane Gallery in 2002, accompanied by archived anti-globalisation web resources. This mode of presentation referenced the broader context for activist media production and critique, the finished video is currently distributed and promoted via the Indymedia website.

The 16mm films of artist Gerard Byrne also evince a concern with the representation of public space. In *Why it's time for Imperial Again* (2001) Byrne employs a National Geographic 'advertorial' for the 1981 Chrysler Imperial as the script for an open air dialogue, which is restaged several times across a post-industrial landscape complete with rusted railway tracks and scrap yards. The two central characters, 'Frank Sinatra' and 'Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca', take up a series of mock-adversarial positions in order to debate the merits of the Imperial car. *Why its time...* was shown at IMMA, as part of the exhibition *How Things Turn Out*, and it was screened on a monitor surrounded by framed photographs of the National Geographic on library shelves. This mode of exhibition highlighted the contrast between the film's disused industrial locations and the museum interior, calling attention to the displacement of manufacturing by the information economy.

Despite their evident differences, these works suggest an ongoing concern with issues of site and specificity in Irish artist's film. In some instances, the installation format also provides a means of commenting upon traditions of representation that are particular to cinema or to other contexts of reception. Clearly, the critical perspectives articulated in the Irish cinema of the 1970s and 80s and in recent artist's film and video should inform developments in Irish film policy, particularly in the area of 'experimental' practice. But this would require a reconsideration of the institutional frameworks that constitute Irish cinema and art practice as separate spheres.