

In Context 2: Mythic Journey and Killinarden Short Shorts, Dublin: South Dublin County Council, 2006 (unpaginated).

Familiar and Fantastic Journeys: Killinarden Short Shorts

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Since the very first films of the Lumière Brothers, which documented workers leaving the Lumière factory in 1896, artists and filmmakers have been fascinated by the relationship between the moving image and the everyday world. The documentary impulse that drove the Lumières was already well established in nineteenth century photography and it has continued to evolve – forming the basis for many contemporary film and television genres, including ‘reality’ shows such as *Big Brother* or MTV’s *Jackass*. But an alternative tradition has also been with us since the early years of cinema – a tradition more concerned with the fantastical than the familiar. The fairytale films of Georges Méliès and the early animations of Winsor McKay introduced audiences to special effects and were hugely popular in the early 1900s. This taste for the fantastical also remains with us today, most obviously in big budget sci-fi and fantasy spectacles such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*.

This history of early cinema may seem far removed from a series of eight films produced by young people in twenty-first century Killinarden. But the films are striking specifically because of the way in which they explore the full range of contemporary genres (from horror and comedy through to current affairs, activist documentary and experimental cinema) and continually question established cinematic boundaries between fantasy and familiarity. Before I discuss the individual films in detail it is important to situate them in relation to the wider context for digital media production in Ireland. Bórd Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board currently funds its own programme of digital ‘Short Shorts’, which are generally less than three minutes in length. Some of these shorts are screened prior to features in Irish cinemas, but their main purpose seems to be to promote both the Film Board and the production companies at international festivals. These short works are generally technically impressive, and can sometimes be formally innovative, but the emphasis tends to be on high production values and visual impact rather than artistic experimentation.

The Killinarden Short Shorts have evolved within a very different context, that of the public art work produced for and by a particular community, with funds derived from the budget for the improvement of Donomore estate. From the outset, the development of the art project seems to have been marked by consultation, discussion, and a willingness to innovate. The commissioners recognised the drawbacks of permanent public sculpture and instead initiated a process of dialogue between the artists (Mark Cullen and Brian Duggan) and a group of local young people, who were recruited specifically for this project. The training and workshop process led to the emergence of six young filmmakers, Wesley Brennan, Edel Cummins, Denise Gaines, Terence Salmon, Lorraine Smith and Michael Usher, and it has resulted in a series of works that are challenging, experimental and highly collaborative.

For me, *Still Time*, devised by Edel, Lorraine, Denise and Terence, is the most immediately striking work in the series. One of the shortest of the Killinarden Short Shorts, it is composed of still images of people and places, which are set to a piece of modern classical music (by Philip Glass). Few of the images are carefully composed but this makes them all the more affecting, suggesting a series of fleeting memories and expressing a nostalgic, even romantic, attachment to particular places. My response to this work is coloured by the fact that I spent five years (1994-1999) working in Killinarden Youthreach, teaching photography and video production to young people. During this time, my students produced many images of the fields, parks and streets that recur throughout the Short Shorts films.

Although some of these photographs formed part of an exhibition (entitled *Home Sweet Home*) in Tallaght Community Arts Centre in April 1999, my students were never able to devote the time needed to finish their video projects. As a consequence, I am all too aware of the commitment that has been made by the six young people and the artists involved in the Short Shorts project. These works are the product of dedication as well as imagination, and are also made possible by advances in digital technology in recent years. In fact, *Still Time* offers an interesting insight into the changing cultural role of photography, following the widespread availability of digital cameras. For many of us, photographs are no longer a precious thing – few of us treat digital snaps or video clips with the same reverence once accorded to printed

photographs or home movies, simply because digital files can be easily duplicated. But *Still Time* seems to capture, with great sensitivity, both the immediacy and the preciousness of the photographic image. The experience of viewing this work is similar to sharing photographs with friends or family, and in this sense the work hints at the very important role played by images and stories in the formation of any community.

Many of the places that are documented in *Still Time* recur as locations in other works, most notably in *LFS/Local Fitness Survival*, devised by Wesley Brennan. This work very cleverly exploits the conventions of popular film genres, in order to produce something that is quite unexpected. The opening shot, set to the tune of *The Eye of the Tiger* (the theme from *Rocky III*) features a young man jogging in the distance, and a uniformed figure in the foreground. This combination of sound and image immediately suggests a familiar story, evoking countless Hollywood films. From *On the Waterfront* to more recent examples such as *Ali*, *The Hurricane* or *Million Dollar Baby*, boxing narratives have typically focused on the struggles of working class heroes, against poverty or prejudice, and LFS clearly invokes this history. It quickly becomes evident, however, that this is not simply a tale of *personal* survival. The male hero introduced in the opening scene is quickly replaced by an array of different joggers; children, teenagers, middle-aged women, many performing for the camera, others totally unaware that they are being filmed. Even though some unfortunate individuals are the subject of (very funny) unflattering commentary, LFS celebrates an entire community's survival in the face of adversity – an emphasis that distinguishes it from much Hollywood cinema.

Although some covert footage does find its way into LFS, the majority of the films have been produced with the co-operation, and participation, of local people and businesses. The process of securing permission to shoot is complex and time-consuming, not least because of the fact that many ostensibly public spaces do not permit video recording, even though they may themselves employ some form of surveillance. The issue of surveillance is examined directly in *Soft Scrutiny*, one of the most powerful works in the series. Devised by Denise Gaines and Lorraine Smith, this is a highly accomplished examination of anxiety and depression, articulated from the perspective of a teenage girl. The split screen visual effects, and the voiceover

soundtrack communicates the feelings of deep isolation and depression that are particular to adolescence. Familiar images and sounds of the Square shopping centre provide the setting for this work but this space is transformed, through repetition and fragmentation, into a deeply disturbing environment. Although the subject matter has been addressed elsewhere, by sociologists and psychologists as well as artists and filmmakers, *Soft Scrutiny* is highly original in its sensitivity and its refusal of offer easy, superficial solutions.

Many other works in the series are equally open-ended, and favour ambiguity over a closed ending. This positions them at odds with the dominant tradition in Hollywood cinema; the three-act narrative featuring familiar characterisations and a neat ending, in which good predictably triumphs over evil. These rules have been well established since the 1930s and they helped to secure the transformation of cinema from a cheap fairground attraction into a respectable, and relatively costly, middle class entertainment. But these rules have often been broken, by artists, activists and, more recently, by filmmakers working with popular, youth-oriented genres such as horror or sci-fi cinema. Horror films, such as those in Wes Craven's *Scream* series, for example, often incorporate characterisations that are overtly and openly stereotyped, and deliberately mix the codes that separate drama from comedy.

Several of the Short Shorts employ conventions derived from popular horror cinema and *Killinarden Killer*, devised by Lorraine Smith, includes many of the key ingredients of a good genre film. The plot centres on two girls who venture into their local school after dark, while their nervous boyfriends remain outside. The girls become frightened once inside the building and they are terrorised by spectral female figure, who seems to be able to appear and disappear at will. Despite its short running time, *Killinarden Killer* creates a strong sense of atmosphere through camerawork, editing and soundtrack music. Like the classic Stephen King story *Carrie* and more recent horrors such as *The Ring*, the film explores the dark side of everyday places and things, and focuses primarily on the experiences of female characters, who are both the victims and the perpetrators of terror. These narratives envision school as a space in which rumour and gossip circulate continually, undermining the boundaries between that which is real and that which is 'just a story'.

There are no supernatural or fantastical elements in *The Spike*, devised by Edel Cummins, and as such it could never be described as a horror film. Yet the film examines a potentially horrific scenario, again from the perspective of a young woman. The plot is straightforward; two girls head to their local pub for a night out, and leave their drinks unattended while dancing. One drink is spiked and, when then the victim, played by Susan O'Shaughnessy, wanders out into the car park in daze, she is followed by the perpetrator. In the final shot, she has collapsed in the darkness, leaving the most likely conclusion to the imagination. Although *The Spike* deals with the kind of subject that is typically addressed in a public information campaign, or education programme, it does not attempt to moralise. Instead it examines the dark side of very ordinary and familiar situation from the perspective of the victim. Throughout, the soundtrack music provides a means of articulating the emotional state of the young woman, so that the film remains strongly character-driven.

Both horror and science fiction have traditionally provided independent filmmakers with a space for critical social commentary, sometimes in the form of political allegory. George Romero's *Living Dead* series, for example, has often been understood as an investigation of the violence and inequality that lurks under the surface of American society. Romero's first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*, does not explain exactly how or why 'zombies' have begun to terrorise the living and this lack of logical motivation, or clear moral order, is characteristic of many horror films since the 1960s.

Zombie-like figures also appear fleetingly in *Devil Car*, one of the most darkly comic works in the Short Shorts series. Again, the story takes place in a familiar setting (outside Killinarden House) and the action seems mundane at first; one by one, a series of young people are escorted from the pub into the boot of a small hatchback. But as people continue to enter this small space, the car begins to acquire a monstrous quality, accentuated as the boot repeatedly snaps shut like a giant mouth. The stop-motion 'trick' effects used in *Devil Car* are very similar to those first introduced by early cinema pioneers such as Georges Méliès – and they retain a certain appeal even though we know very well how they are produced. When the car is finally full, it veers off into the country side on a mysterious journey, passing an ominous 'Arrive

Alive' motorway sign before finally returning with its zombie passengers apparently alive and well.

Dinner in a Glass, devised by Denise Gaines, also has a certain comic horror quality but it invites comparison with television rather than cinema. Featuring the kind of masochistic behaviour that makes reality TV shows like *Jackass* and *Survivor* compulsive viewing, it records the consumption (and subsequent reappearance) of a series of disgusting meals. Although the constant focus on vomiting is somewhat worrying, *Dinner in a Glass* cleverly mocks the new-found fascination with food culture in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Concoctions such as "A Whole Egg Mixed – the fondue of Champions" are presented with all the pomp and ceremony of the menus that provide the focus for much contemporary 'lifestyle' and cookery programming.

This critical edge is even more obvious in *Gulf War II*, devised and edited by Michael Usher. The longest work in the series, this is possibly the most ambitious and complex in terms of its subject matter and its exploration of media conventions. The film opens with a montage of black and white news clips, interspersed with vox pop interviews, presented in colour. The interviewees, selected from different walks of life, are invited to offer their opinions on the war in Iraq and these views are juxtaposed with carefully selected media images, which may undercut or support their positions. This process of shifting between two very different physical spaces (Ireland and Iraq) has the effect of bringing the war into close proximity to everyday life and in this respect, the film invites comparison with documentary activism by artists and filmmakers as diverse as Martha Rosler and Michael Moore.

Gulf War II does not claim to provide an objective account of this complex subject, but instead is the product of an active process of investigation and assessment. A personal commentary is offered through a sequence of shots in which a young man (the filmmaker) slowly writes an anti-war slogan on a t-shirt. It is worth noting that this latter sequence is filmed in the Garden of Remembrance, a long established site of both memorialisation and protest in Dublin city. This choice of location is deliberate, in keeping with the overall sensitivity to place that is articulated throughout the entire Killinarden Short Shorts series.

There has been a certain tendency in certain Irish feature films to employ urban locations as short hand for particular social issues – so that high rise flats, for example, are repeatedly presented as the setting for drug abuse or crime. Low-rise suburban spaces, when they are represented at all, tend to signify alienation or simply emptiness. This is not the case with the Short Shorts. In this project, locations have been chosen because they are familiar, and recognisable, but also because (as in the case of Killinarden House or the Square) they can be reimagined and represented in new and different ways. It is this attentiveness to the history of a particular place, combined with a willingness to explore and invent new possibilities through a process of collaboration and experimentation, that makes this series such a rich and complex expression of this community.