Parallel Worlds: Contemporary Irish Film Cultures

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overleaf
desperate optimists
Leisure Centre (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor, 2005), film, 35mm, anamorphic, 17 mins, 42 seconds, colour, 2005, image by Susan Gogan

In *Civic Life: Moore Street* (2004), one of a series of films by the artists' group desperate optimists, a familiar Irish location is made strange through a series of formal strategies. Consisting entirely of a single, highly choreographed steadicam shot, this 35mm film tracks a young African woman's journey through the street at night. As she passes by the newly established businesses, serving African, Asian and Eastern European communities, the woman seems to summon others onto the street, and they fall in behind her without speaking, like minor players in a Hollywood musical. But while the woman onscreen seems to know where she is going, the voiceover (shifting between English and Swahili) is marked by uncertainty and ambivalence. Even though the speaker addresses herself to an absent lover, and asks him to join her, she seems unsure as to whether it is possible, or even desirable, to 'belong' in this new place.

The questions around place and belonging raised by this work can also be explored in relation to the broader context of moving image practice, as it has evolved within the Irish context, encompassing both popular cinema and artists' film and video. Desperate optimists' exploration of contemporary Irish urban life continues in *Leisure Centre* (2005), the most recent instalment in the *Civic Life* series, one of a number of public commissions linked to the regeneration of Ballymun. As in the case of earlier works, *Leisure Centre* was scripted through a process of collaboration with the performers and it was screened to the participants and a wider audience within a commercial cinema setting. Unlike *Civic Life: Moore Street*, however, the film incorporates onscreen dialogue as well as voiceover, with much of the dialogue centring on a young man's anxieties about parenthood.

This somewhat melodramatic theme, combined with the appropriation of cinematic convention, positions *Leisure Centre* firmly within the canon of Irish cinema. It can be compared with various earlier film narratives set in Ballymun, ranging from commercial features such as *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992) to low-budget projects such as *Sometime City* (Joe Lee/City Vision, 1986). It would seem that desperate optimists are navigating, or perhaps claiming, a middle ground between two parallel worlds of Irish moving image production. They draw support from funding structures that are particular to the visual arts but employ a single screen 35mm format that, in theory, enables distribution beyond the confines of the gallery. Formally and conceptually, their work parallels aspects of the

gallery-based practices of Irish artists such as Gerard Byrne, Willie Doherty, Anne Tallentire and Jaki Irvine, but it also derives a certain impact from its structural relation to commercial cinema.

It is possible, for example, to read the glossy interiors of *Leisure Centre* as a critical response to *Into the West*, in terms of its representation of Ballymun as an urban space. Both narratives are explicitly concerned with fatherhood, familial structure and social change. But while *Leisure Centre* employs the metaphor of the young family to comment upon the utopian project of urban regeneration, *Into the West*, which was scripted by Jim Sheridan, locates its utopia in the West of Ireland. The Ballymun towers, which provide the setting for the first part of *Into the West*, serve primarily as visual shorthand for urban squalor, reinforcing a reductive opposition between the modernised urban East and the pre-modern rural West.

It is interesting to note that Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (known collectively as desperate optimists) worked in theatre before moving into filmmaking. This path is a familiar one within Irish cinema, and it has been followed by Jim Sheridan among others. Significantly, however, while Sheridan sought his training in the US, Molloy and Lawlor studied in the UK, which by comparison has a relatively strong history of 'art cinema' production. The art cinema tradition encompasses auteurs such as Peter Greenaway and the Powell and Pressburger partnership, as well as the more politically engaged practices of various collectives and directors such as Peter Watkins, Sally Potter and Derek Jarman.

Ireland lacks a kind of comparable history of art cinema, for many reasons, but the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s was marked by moments of formal experimentation and political opposition. An account of this period is beyond the scope of this text but it would certainly make reference to Peter Lennon's critique of church and state structures in *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968) and Bob Quinn's exploration of nationalist historiography in *Caoineadh Airt Ua Laoghaire* (1975). It would also include several works by Cathal Black, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy and Vivienne Dick, among others.

Many of these filmmakers were trained at art school and some made their first films outside Ireland, funding and distributing their work via experimental and avant-garde structures. They tended to favour low-budget formats such as 16mm, and their work is also linked by a self-reflexive exploration of documentary aesthetics and thematic concern with works marginalised groups. Questions of national identity and history are foregrounded in these films, but often woven into a broader exploration of place, displacement and fragmented memory (themes that remain significant for many Irish artists). This period in Irish filmmaking was relatively short-lived and the 1980s witnessed a shift towards a more overtly literary or theatrical model of film authorship.

The new generation of Irish directors, including Neil Jordan, Jim Sheridan, Paddy Breathnach, Gerard Stembridge, Conor McPherson and Paul Mercier, generally did not study at art college. Instead, they proved themselves in literature or theatre before making their first films. Although they are now well established as international directors, both Jordan and Sheridan retain a central place within Irish film culture. They have embraced the conventions of Hollywood narrative, while at the same time exploring themes that are recognised and promoted as distinctively 'Irish'. On occasion they have both been accused of creating stereotyped characterisations and of reducing complex political events to a Hollywood backdrop, but as directors they differ in many ways. Sheridan favours a relatively naturalistic style of staging and has tended to favour dramatic impact over historical accuracy or fidelity to a source text. His films, such as *The Field* (1990) or *In the Name of the Father* (1993), tend to be marked by strong central performances rather than visual inventiveness. Jordan explores similarly melodramatic territory and has repeatedly explored themes of forbidden desire, most obviously in *Michael Collins* (1996), *The Butcher Boy* (1998) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005). Many of these films are formally complex, and visually inventive, and directly concerned with the workings of fantasy and memory.

Sheridan and Jordan have both contributed to a cycle of Irish costume dramas adapted from literary or dramatic sources and set in the middle of the last century. These films, which also include *Korea* (Cathal Black, 1995) and *This is My Father* (Paul Quinn, 1999), were produced during a period of unprecedented social and economic change, but tend to focus upon earlier moments of transition. Many centre on conflicts between tradition (represented by the Catholic Church, the nuclear family and farming) and modernity (signified by popular culture, sexuality, industry or technology). More recently, Irish cinema has articulated anxieties about the rapid social changes associated with globalisation and post-industrialisation. These concerns are apparent even within explicitly generic narratives, such as the

romantic comedies *About Adam* (Gerard Stembridge, 2000), and the cycle of crime dramas focusing on the life and death of Dublin criminal Martin Cahill.

The majority of these productions were scripted and developed over a period of several years, financed by the Irish Film Board and filmed on 35mm. Many received only a limited domestic theatrical release and outside Ireland they have been screened in festivals, rather than within a wholly commercial context. In recent years, however, Irish filmmakers have been encouraged to explore alternative models of production and distribution, made possible by developments in media technology. Low budget features, such as *Dead Meat* (Conor McMahon, 2004) for example, are produced on digital formats and addressed towards niche audiences that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of 'national cinema'. An interesting precedent for this approach is offered by Roger Corman, a B movie veteran who has been making low budget films in the West of Ireland for many years.

This revival of low budget filmmaking might seem to signal a possible return to the earlier moment of formal experimentation and political critique. Some of the key themes explored by the first generation of Irish artist-filmmakers, particularly concerning the experiences of marginalised social groups, have in fact resurfaced in digital features such as *Pavee Lackeen* (Perry Ogden, 2005) and *Adam and Paul* (Leonard Abramson 2004). Ogden has a background in fashion and art photography, while Abramson has worked extensively in advertising, suggesting a possible shift away from the dominant literary mode of authorship. But there is little evidence of formal or conceptual rigour in their work, and little deviation from established cinematic conventions in relation to the representation marginalised 'others'. *Pavee Lackeen* offers a compelling documentary-style portrait of Winnie, a charismatic young member of the Travelling Community, but it does not counter or even complicate existing stereotypes of Traveller identity. *Adam and Paul* is less exploitative, in that professional actors have been cast as urban drug addicts, but its combination of gritty urban realism and surreal black comedy seems equally misguided.

This revival of low-budget production modes has enabled new routes into feature filmmaking, but it has not given rise to a radicalisation of Irish cinema, or a return to the self-reflexivity that characterised earlier explorations of documentary aesthetics. A far greater sensitivity to issues of representation, in relation to documentary and other genres, is apparent within Irish artists' recent moving image practice. Artists such as Anne Tallentire, Willie Doherty, Jaki Irvine and Gerard Byrne, for example, have all employed the format of the moving image installation to investigate aspects of cinematic and televisual convention.

Both Irvine's *The Silver Bridge* (2003) and Tallentire's *Drift* (2002-2005) articulate an awareness of the complexities of spectatorship and exist in dialogue with the traditions of representation that encompass, and extend beyond, popular film and television. Willie Doherty's work functions directly as a counterpoint to popular media and has recently begun to incorporate performances by professional actors. *Non-Specific Threat* (2004), for example, takes the form of a steady circling shot around a man's upper torso and head. The movement of the camera is accompanied by an insistent (yet simultaneously detached) voiceover commentary, which is delivered in the first person. Doherty first encountered the onscreen actor in the role of a generic 'thug' in a TV drama dealing with sectarianism, and the project forms part of an ongoing exploration of representations of political conflict in broadcasting. But the lighting, framing and cinematography seem to shift the image into the realm of the computer game or action film, pointing towards the persistence of familiar stereotypes within an era characterised by the development of new media.

Gerard Byrne is also engaged in an investigation of popular culture but his work tracks the interplay between past and present moments, focusing partly on the ebb and flow of utopian desires. Like many of his counterparts in Irish film drama, Byrne frequently employs processes of adaptation. But the scripts for his films, such as *Why it's Time for Imperial, Again* (1998-2002), *Homme à Femmes* (Michel Debrane) (2004) and *1984 and Beyond* (2006), are not drawn from the literary or theatrical canon – instead, they are adapted from interviews or advertisements published in popular magazines. This recovery and transformation of cultural ephemera through processes of mediation and translation also functions as a commentary on obsolescence, a key concern for many artists working with the moving image.

The embrace of low-budget formats and modes of production that is apparent within recent Irish feature drama would seem to be less evident in relation to artists' film and video. At least some Irish artists (including Byrne) are working within an increasingly professionalised context, often drawing upon international supports for production and exhibition. In contrast with many of their counterparts in Irish

Gerard Byrne
Homme à Femmes, 2004, video installation with surround sound, courtesy of the artist, Anna Sanders Films, & BAK

film drama, many artists seek to address an audience that extends beyond the local context. While retaining an engagement with questions of place and identity, the most interesting artists have resisted or self-consciously appropriated the conventions of representation particular to popular cinema. A future convergence between these disparate traditions, in the form of an Irish 'art cinema', is both unlikely and unnecessary. But a more extensive examination of the parallels between these worlds, extending to the local and international forces that shape their ongoing formation, could perhaps be of value to both.