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**Irish Cinema’s First Wave: Histories and Legacies of the 1970s and 80s**

**Introduction: The Arrival of an Indigenous Irish Cinema**

In 2014, the Irish Film Institute collaborated on two separate distribution and exhibition initiatives, responding to the work of Irish filmmakers who first came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. One of these initiatives is a DVD titled *Thaddeus O’Sullivan: The Early Films, 1974-1985*, produced and released in conjunction with an academic study (Pettitt and Kopschitz Bastos 2013)*.* The other is amulti-part film exhibition program, *Absences and (Im)possibilities: Traces of an Experimental Cinema in Ireland,* curated by the Dublin-based Experimental Film Club and distributed by LUX, a London-based international agency for the support and promotion of artists moving image. These two initiatives, addressing a diverse audience that includes Irish cinema scholars and those engaged in moving image production, provide diverse vantage points from which to reconsider histories and legacies of this first wave of indigenous Irish filmmaking. Even though I use the term ‘first wave’ to collectively categorize a group of filmmakers, including Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick, Pat Murphy, Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Bob Quinn, I argue against the notion of a monolithic indigenous Irish film culture. Instead, my analysis highlights the intersection of competing models and cultures of critical practice, and the common ground shared by filmmakers (such as Dick, Murphy and O’Sullivan) who either studied or worked extensively outside Ireland. Informed by analysis of the distribution and exhibition practices shared by these filmmakers, I argue that the legacy of the first wave is perhaps most apparent in the exhibition practices developed – particularly since the mid-2000s – at the intersection of contemporary art and film.

According to Martin McLoone, the “arrival of an indigenous Irish cinema” (2000, 44) was announced by *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* in 1975. This self-consciously Brechtian critique of cultural and political colonialism was directed by Bob Quinn, and commissioned by Sinn Fein – The Worker’s Party. At the time, the party was undergoing a shift to the left and had sought to deepen its connection with the Gaeltacht (Irish language) civil rights campaign, previously documented by Quinn in *Oireachtas na nGael* (1973). Set in the Galway Gaeltacht, the narrative of Quinn’s film centers on the rehearsal and staging of a play based upon an 18th century ballad, the Lament for Art O’Leary, which recalls the story of an Irish nobleman (a descendant of Gaelic aristocracy) killed because of his refusal to conform to the Penal Laws. Through its exploration of the rehearsal process, the film dramatizes a confrontation between the Irish-speaking actors and their English director, played by the activist playwright John Arden. Quinn’s film signaled a new departure in Irish cinema for many reasons.

Combining overtly political themes with formal experimentation, *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* both advocated and modeled an alternative to established norms of exhibition and reception and in this respect, according to McLoone (135), it echoed the practices of Third Cinema, through which spectators are ideally transformed into participants. McLoone is referring primarily to the proposition for a radical political cinema advanced by Argentine filmmakers Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, in a text first published (in Spanish) in 1969. This cinema was to be developed in opposition both to mainstream Hollywood and auteur cinema and Getino and Solanas specifically emphasize the revolutionary potential of film exhibition, which functions partly as the pretext for a gathering – a scenario in which the spectators become actor-participants. They describe a charged political context, in which attendance at screenings might sometimes involve an element of risk (Solanas and Getino, 1976). But in other respects, their attention to the screening situation – attending to the particularities of setting, time and materials – seems to parallel some of the considerations animating expanded cinema in the late 1960s and anticipate site-specific approaches to artists’ moving image exhibition in the 1990s and 2000s (Connolly 2009, 27).

A key sequence in *Caoineadh* concerns the rehearsal of the English and Irish narration written to accompany a filmed insert, featuring a costumed Art (played by Gaeltacht activist and broadcaster Seán Bán Breathnach) on horseback, wandering through the busy streets of a modern-day town. The director insists that the scene is to be introduced in English so that at least part of the production will be “accessible” to a wider audience, but Breathnach’s character questions the realism of the setting, which substitutes Galway city for Uí Laoire’s native Macroom, resulting in a heated exchange between director and actors. *Caoineadh* presents a highly choreographed and staged situation of film viewing, which clearly complicates the distinction between actor and spectator. Nonetheless, McLoone’s analysis underscores the particular importance of exhibition for activist filmmakers. Quinn in fact ran a cinema club at his home in Carraroe, county Galway, for several years in mid-1970s and it is likely that he would also have been present at many screenings of his own films elsewhere during this period. This active role in film exhibition provides a point of connection with contemporaries based elsewhere, including Vivienne Dick. Originally from Donegal, Dick began working with Super 8 while immersed in New York’s ‘No Wave’ film and music scene and like many of her peers, she often screened her films in dynamic live performance contexts at bars and clubs (Connolly 2004).

This concern with the scene of exhibition, and with the potential political or cultural activation of the viewer, whether as individual spectator or as audience member, is far less apparent in the industry-oriented Irish cinema that came to prominence toward the end of the 1980s. The very notion of industrial production, distribution and exhibition is of course premised upon the mass circulation of a homogenous commodity, with the filmmaker’s presence only required at festivals or premieres for the purposes of publicity. These activist exhibition strategies no longer play a central role in Irish cinema yet, as I will argue in my conclusion, they have not disappeared entirely but rather have been integrated into the cultural economy of contemporary art. Here I am referring not to the value placed upon the material object of film, but rather to the scene of collective film viewing and the social architecture of the cinema, which has proved important for numerous artists, curators and commissioners engaging with changing forms and conceptions of public space (Connolly 2012).

**Critical Film Practice: Cultural and Political Contexts**

The indigenous cinema theorized by McLoone emerged within an era marked by social, economic and political change, within and beyond Ireland. The late 1960s had witnessed both an expansion of radical film activity and a widespread loss of faith in established media, as evidenced by Quinn’s own departure from the Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ in protest against incidences of censorship (Doolan et al. 1969). Quinn’s actions were directly shaped by developments in Ireland, yet also informed by a broader intersection between popular protest, industrial dispute and philosophical inquiry, with specific implications for film culture. Sylvia Harvey’s (1978) account of *May ’68 and Film Culture* highlights the radicalization of film and literary criticism in the post-1968 era, noting that journals such as *Cahiers du Cinema,* and the newly founded *Cinétheque* and the literary publication *Tel Quel* all engaged with the issues of May ’68, whether by exploring psychoanalytical perspectives on film or by addressing the issue of cinema and ideology.

The implications for Irish film culture, while perhaps not immediately apparent, were both significant and far-reaching. For example, the Irish filmmaker Peter Lennon achieved prominence (and a degree of notoriety) by screening his documentary critique of Irish society, *The Rocky Road to* *Dublin* (1968), to students and striking workers (Pettitt 2000, 88-89). Although *The Rocky Road to* *Dublin* received a very limited release in Ireland (Barton 2004, 86) Lennon nonetheless played a role in the development of Irish cinema, as a of the Production Board of the British Film Institute, perhaps helping to explain that organization’s marked support for first wave Irish filmmakers, including Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy and Thaddeus O’Sullivan. A year before the release of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* , the Production Board actually funded the Berwick Street Film Collective’s *Ireland: Behind the Wire* (1974) a critical documentary focusing on the Civil Rights campaigns in Derry, which was subsequently distributed in Ireland by the Film Society of Sinn Fein – The Worker’s Party. The Berwick Street Film Collective were not the only radical filmmakers to focus on the Troubles and their film incorporates footage shot by Cinema Action, an equally radical group (Dickinson 1999, 267), during their making of a similarly political work titled *People of Ireland!* (1973). These films underscore both the particular importance accorded to the north in politicized film culture during this period and the tendency towards heated critique and outright disputes over both the history and future of critical filmmaking.

The early 1970s also witnessed a reconfiguration of the formalist and materialist concerns that had shaped the founding of organizations such as the London Film-Maker’s Co-op. The discourse of “political modernism”, defined as “decisive reorientation of the problem of the viewer and the ideological function of art through the disciplines of semiology and psychoanalysis” (Rodowick 1994, 5), helped to revitalize debate around narrative, genre and reception. The 1970s also witnessed a renewed interest in realism, anti-realism and the work of Brecht(Heath 1974; MacCabe 1974), which directly informed the Irish reception (Rockett 1978a) of Joe Comerford’s film *Down the Corner* (1978). In the meantime, changes in Irish arts policy, such as the introduction of new legislation that allowed the Irish Arts Council to support cinema as an art formfor the first time, were fuelling the development of a critical film culture in Ireland.

In 1977, the Arts Council offered its first Film Script Award for production (co-funded with RTÉ) and around this time it also began to support a range of film cultural initiatives. These included *Film Directions: A Film Magazine for Ireland,* a quarterly publication that was jointly funded with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In addition, during this period the Federation of Irish Film Societies, the Irish Film Theatre and Project Cinema Club (based in Project Arts Centre) were all partly funded by the Arts Council. Under the direction of Kevin Rockett, the programs of Project Cinema Club engaged directly with debates around critical cinema, including those conducted in the pages of *Screen* and *Screen Education* (Rockett 1978b). For example, the club’s 1978/79 program engaged with debates around feminist filmmaking, showing *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, 1977); *Lives of Performers* (Yvonne Rainer, 1972) and *Jeanne* *Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce 1080, Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), and hosting a talk by Mulvey (who, like Wollen, was active across the spheres of theory and practice) as part of a seminar on women and cinema. Events such as these illustrate the vital educational role played by cinema clubs and societies, before the formal establishment of film studies as a discipline in Irish universities (Rockett 2003).

**Makeshift Exhibition and International Circulation**

While some Irish filmmakers operated at a remove from *Screen* debates, others would have been more attuned to the redefinition of modernist and avant-garde practice in art and film. Thaddeus O’Sullivan, one of the first wave’s most prominent and prolific contributors studied film at the Royal College of Art, working with tutors such as Stephen Dwoskin who were immersed in film co-op culture. As noted in my introduction, 2014 witnessed the DVD release of five early works directed by O’Sullivan, including two made while he was still a student. In his contribution to the DVD booklet, Lance Pettitt frames these films, *A Pint of Plain* (1975) and *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978) within the context of “an extended creative response to the material conditions of Irish migrancy” (2014, 6). Yet Pettitt is quick to emphasize that O’Sullivan did not fit the norm when he left Ireland for London in 1966, going “against a net inflow of migration”, during a period of relative prosperity at home (2014: 6). He also acknowledges other important factors shaping O’Sullivan’s practice, such as the influence of Dwoskin and structural filmmaking. Importantly, Pettitt sees no conflict between this avant-garde formation and O’Sullivan’s role within the first wave. In fact, Pettitt suggests that it was precisely as a consequence of this formation (and his experience of migrancy) that O’Sullivan “readily took to working with the key figures among the formally experimental and critically questioning filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s ‘new wave’ of Irish cinema, such as Joe Comerford, Cathal Black and Pat Murphy” (2014, 8). In addition to his contribution as director, O’Sullivan was responsible for cinematography on several films by Comerford and Murphy, occupying central role in the collaborative culture of production that characterized the first wave.

Elsewhere, Pettitt has emphasized the restricted circulation of some first wave films, noting that the early work of Comerford, O’Sullivan and Cathal Black was “typically produced on 16mm film, which limited its distribution” (2000, 97). He seems to read this as a choice, rather than a consequence of modest resources, noting that *The* *Courier* and *Joyriders* (both 1987)were made on Super 16mm and as a result, could be “more easily and cheaply blown up to 35mm” (Pettitt, 107). Sunniva O’Flynn also contributes a short text to the *Thaddeus O’Sullivan* DVD booklet, contextualizing use of 16mm in *Flanagan* (1974), *A Pint of Plain*, *On a Paving Stone Mounted* and *Assembled Memories: Jack B. Yeats, 1871-1957* (1981). She notes that, in the 1970s, 16mm was both “affordable and accessible [...] the standard gauge used by students, independent film and television makers” (2014, 4). While acknowledging that 16mm films were excluded from commercial cinema exhibition, O’Flynn nonetheless suggests that this limitation “may have had a liberating effect on young filmmakers whose audiences would have engaged with the work in alternative, sometimes makeshift, exhibition venues such as college halls, film societies, art-house screens and Cinematheques” (2014, 4). This description evokes a space that is physically shared by the (young) filmmaker and the audience, resonating with McLoone’s account of Third Cinema objectives and ideals.

As noted by O’Flynn, many first wave films found their way into “16mm-friendly venues” (2014, 4) beyond Ireland. For example, 16mm prints of *On a Paving Stone Mounted, Down the Corner,* and Bob Quinn’s films *Self-Portrait with Red Car* (1976) and *Poitín* (1978) were acquired by MoMA’s Circulating Film Library, with O’Sullivan doing a public talk at the museum in 1979. In addition, during this period, the Production Board of the British Film Institute supported the production and distribution of *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, *Down the Corner,* *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981) and *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1981). Pettitt seems to view BFI funding as a poor alternative to the more conventionally commercial model represented by the nascent Irish Film Board (IFB), which operated from 1981 to 87. Noting that *Maeve* received just IR£10,000 from RTÉ, and ‘no funding from the IFB’, he observesthat “inexperienced filmmakers like Murphy had to take funding from where they could” (2000, 106). But it is possible that Murphy had specific reasons for wanting to work with British production funding. Interviewed for an Irish film magazine shortly after *Maeve*’s release, she frames her approach very explicitly as a critical response to her experience of studying oppositional cinema while completing an MA in Fine Art at the Royal College of Art in London. The primary subject of the RCA cinema course was “Northern Ireland, which had become a kind of anthropological field for certain kinds of filmmakers” (Murphy, 1982, 4). Prompted by this encounter with existing representations, many of them produced for British film and television, she decided to conduct her own video interviews in Belfast. It was this research material that provided the basis for the script of *Maeve*, which she sent directly to BFI, securing £73,000 in funds to shoot the film in Belfast with a British crew.

Yet there is no doubt that some Irish filmmakers were seeking, and struggling, to access the support of the IFB during this period. By this point, Vivienne Dick’s Super 8 films had received a degree of critical acclaim in the US (Hoberman, 1980) and she considered relocating to Ireland in the early 1980s (Connolly 2004). Ultimately, however, she found London to be a much more hospitable environment, securing awards and commissions from the British Arts Council and Channel 4. Yet despite her relative dissociation from Irish film culture during the first wave era, Dick’s work clearly intersects both formally and thematically with that of O’Sullivan and her Irish-based contemporaries, particularly in its exploration of migration, sexuality and the representation of landscape. This is particularly apparent in *Visibility: Moderate*: *ATourist Film* (discussed below), a film shot during a return visit to Ireland, and addressing many of the same issues – migration, sexuality, political repression– that animated her Irish-based contemporaries.

**First Wave Figures: Tourists, Migrants and Actors**

If *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire* announced the arrival of a new Irish indigenous cinema, then *On A Paving Stone Mounted* is perhaps the first film to signal the first wave’s concern with migration. O’Sullivan’s film opens with an address to a live (but off screen) audience, introducing a performance by the professional storyteller Eamon Kelly, but the scene then shifts as quasi-documentary modes of representation give way to subjective camera. A woman speaks directly into the camera, as though addressing a child, and the fragmentary and disjunctive action that follows suggests both recollection and dislocation, with scenes of urban domesticity are interspersed with images of rural folk rituals. In one ghostly overexposed sequence a group of pilgrims climb Croagh Patrick, their faces as indistinct as the voices speaking Irish on the soundtrack. These ethereal images are juxtaposed with more contemporary scenes of Kilorglin Puck Fair at night. Later, the action shifts again to a suburban London house, populated by friends and neighbors, but memories of the Fair, the seaside and school continue to disrupt the narrative.

Gradually, the thematic focus on emigration, and on the experiences of the Irish community in London, becomes more evident. Various characters deliver (apparently unscripted) monologues directly to the camera and one figure in particular, played by Stephen Rea, dominates the central section of the film. A key scene, set in a packed theatre, features a complex series of pans between Rea, seated on a balcony, and Christy Moore, performing onstage. As Moore sings *Lanagan’s* *Ball* and *Patrick was a Gentleman* (from which the phrase “On A Paving Stone Mounted” is taken) the sound of the crowd can be heard. Slowly, the camera traverses the vast dark distance between stage and balcony, while Rea recounts memories of his father’s funeral, emphasizing the pressure to drink whiskey and be his “father’s son”. He compares the weight of family history with the anonymity of London, a point that is underscored by a rapid transition to a new location in the next sequence. In the closing section, the storyteller Eamon Kelly finally appears on screen. In a comic monologue he tells the story of “Mick the Fiddler”, who returns to Ireland from New York and is besieged by friends and neighbors for news of loved ones and a graphic representation of the city itself.

This section is actually an excerpt from Kelly’s stage show *In My Father’s Time* (performed in New York during the late 1970s) but in *On a Paving Stone Mounted,* the action is subtly looped and repeated. O’Sullivan was interested in Kelly because he “wanted to suggest that this is an actor at work [...] it’s a kind of professional nostalgia” (O’Sullivan 1990) and the looping of Kelly’s words confirms the primary focus of the film, its critique of familiar representations of exile and migration and its parallel undoing of linear narrative. Irish women are notably and deliberately absent from the film, but Englishwomen figure prominently and one overtly middle class character (played by Miriam Margoyles) describes Ireland as the only place “in the British Isles” so poor that children go without shoes. Elsewhere, younger English women are framed as consumers of Irish masculinity, exclaiming “that’s *so* Irish, you’re very good at telling stories”, and performing a cosmopolitan identity from which the central character is excluded.

Informed by her own experience of living and working outside Ireland, Vivienne Dick has also repeatedly explored the theme of Irish migration, most notably in *Visibility: Moderate*, made during a visit to Ireland. Taking its title from a weather report, this film is a restless exploration of the perspective of outsider, played out through the genres of the home movie, advertisement, documentary and thriller, while also loosely evoking elements of *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952). The pre-credit sequence is staged around the twin towers of the World Trade Center, calling attention to the transnational economic flows structuring cultural and political relations. The first part of the film traces the journey of an Irish-American tourist, dressed in fashionably ‘retro’ clothes, as she poses in the ruins of Irish monasteries, kisses the Blarney stone and travels on a horse drawn cart. This tourist itinerary is mediated by other forms of consumer culture, as she encounters TV and radio ads promoting well-known Irish and international brands, ranging from the low-budget animation of *‘Jack Ryan* truck rental’ to the slick suburban domestic fantasy offered by *Blueband* margarine.

Like O’Sullivan and Quinn, Dick is drawn toward actors, filming staged performances of folk culture that form part of a tourist attraction, which seems to inspire a dreamlike scenario in which the Irish-American heroine imagines herself as a ‘Celt’ running through a mystical rural landscape. Yet *Visibility: Moderate* is not exclusively concerned with cultural tourism. In fact, the pre-credit sequence introduces a connection between power and vision; the camera pans from the spectacular view over New York City back to the central character. She is slicing a rotten pineapple, which can be read as a symbol of global trade. This alignment between spectacle and power returns in the second part of the film, which deals primarily with surveillance, and unfolds against a backdrop of political protest (focused on the hunger strikes in the north). The tourist embarks on an alternative journey, through the urban spaces of Dublin and Belfast, culminating in a (somewhat unconvincingly) staged sequence, in which one of the tourist’s Irish friends is interrogated. It is followed by an interview with former political prisoner Maureen Gibson, speaking straight to camera, dramatically shifting the tone of *Visibility: Moderate* and re-framing it as a feminist critique of power and representation.

Also made in 1981, Pat Murphy’s film *Maeve* was similarly informed by both feminist critique and direct personal experience of migrancy. But while Dick structures her film as a travelogue or road movie, Murphy draws more heavily upon melodrama. *Maeve* is structured around a young woman’s return to Belfast from college in London, exploring her position as both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ through interactions her family and former boyfriend. It announces itself as melodrama primarily through devices such as flashback and voiceover, with the journey to Belfast punctuated by a total of twelve sequences exploring Maeve’s memories. Her recollections focus on both everyday and dramatic events, including conversations with her Republican ex-boyfriend, her family’s traumatic move into a Catholic area, a childhood visit to the countryside with her father, stories told in the local pub, harassment by British soldiers, lessons in school and the aftermath of a violent protest. Luke Gibbons notes that these flashbacks are “inserted into the narrative without the usual demarcating devices of blurred focus or dissolves - as if to say, in Maeve’s own words, that ‘the more you focus on the past, the more reality it gains’” (Gibbons 1996, 119-120). These flashbacks occupy a deliberately ambiguous place in relation to the diegesis, since, according to Paul Willemen, they “interrupt but also irrigate what could be (mis)taken for a realist drama” (1994, 141). *Maeve* lacks an explicit demonstration of collective viewing, in the manner of *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire.* But it does feature several crucial scenes in which Maeve – and other characters – comment or reflect upon practices of framing and looking, including those bound to specific ideological positions, associated with colonialism, Catholicism and Republicanism.

Like *Visibility: Moderate* and *Maeve*, Joe Comerford’s *Traveller* tracks the movements of its mobile central characters but in this instance, mobility is circumscribed and constrained by cultural tradition. The storyline concerns two members of the socially marginalized Irish Traveller community, an indigenous Irish minority, routinely mythologized and demonized in film and television (Connolly 2006). Based upon a script by Neil Jordan, and shot by Thaddeus O’Sullivan, Comerford’s film received an Arts Council Award (in 1979) and its budget was around £80,000, the largest yet for any indigenous feature, but it did not go into production until it had secured the support of BFI Production Board. In keeping with the approach developed in *Down the Corner*, Comerford chose to work with a number of non-professional actors and the two lead roles are played by Judy Donovan, a member of the Travelling Community, and Davy Spillane, a well-known Irish traditional musician. The plot of *Traveller* is relatively conventional, suggesting a cross between a melodrama and a road-movie: in opening scenes, Angela (Donovan) and Michael Spillane) are matched by their fathers and forced to marry. Following the wedding, they become embroiled in cross-border smuggling and when hiding border town they begin to resolve their differences, eventually joining forces against Angela’s father. Formally, however, *Traveller* departs from convention, particularly if compared to films subsequently directed by Neil Jordan. There is almost no synchronized dialogue and instead audio monologues are used communicate a sense of the characters inner lives, while also disrupting linear development of the plot.

Comerford deploys recognizably Brechtian distancing techniques, filming through reflective or distorted glass, incorporating short animation sequences (suggesting movement and mapping) and disjunctive flashbacks, to disrupt identification with the central characters and frustrate any expectations of a privileged or ‘authentic’ insight into Travellers’ culture. In addition, the film includes a number of musical interludes that seem to highlight the performative dimension of Irish and Traveller identities. This is most apparent in a scene at Angela and Michael’s wedding reception, in which Angela stares at a rotating mirrored ball while the singer Agnes O’Donnell, announced by the master of ceremonies, launches into the song ‘One Day at a Time.’ The lyrics of the song seems to underscore Angela’s lack of autonomy, and as we hear O’Donnell sing the words “I’m only a woman”, we see her for the first time and she is revealed as a strikingly androgynous older woman, dressed in a tuxedo.

Even though filmmakers such as Comerford, Dick, Murphy, O’Sullivan and Quinn were animated by disparate concerns, and informed by diverse models of critical film culture, there are many points of formal and thematic connection between these films. Most obviously, several are structured around the experiences of mobile protagonists, ranging from relatively privileged tourists to much more socially-marginalized figures such as migrants and Irish Travellers, who are both actors and observers within these narrative. It is also worth recalling that, like *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoire*, *Traveller*, *On a Paving Stone Mounted* and *Visibility: Moderate* all incorporate scenes with stage actors, singers or musicians performing for live audiences. These moments of performance are narratively motivated and yet – like the tourists and exiles that animate these narratives – they also serve a deliberately dissociative, even alienating, function.

The interconnections between Dick’s work and her Irish-based contemporaries went largely unremarked in the early 1980s. But with the release of *Maeve,* critics such as Claire Johnston began to identify and theorize a critical current in Irish filmmaking. Writing in *Screen*, Johnston notes that Murphy’s film, like Kieran Hickey’s earlier *Exposure* (1977), explores “the exclusivity of the all-male group and the threat which a woman represents” (1982, 63). Citing *Caoineadh Art Uí Laoire* and *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, she also notes a broader shift, away from “the dominant classic realist aesthetic”, through the use of the lament structure and the reworking of documentary “within a more fragmented narrative structure”, while at the same time framing Murphy’s film as the “first feminist intervention within this ‘new wave’ of Irish film-making” (Johnston 63). Perhaps the most significant element of her analysis, however, is its attention to the representation of landscape in *Maeve.* She suggests that, in order to construct “an imaginary *for* women” the film subverts the status of landscape, as either “male domain [...] the central metaphor for generations of republican men” or “the repository of a ‘Celtic’ truth that lies beyond history and politics” (1982, 59).

This process of subversion required a critical reconfiguration of narrative and setting, a project taken up by Paul Willemen in a text that aims to expand definitions of avant-garde practice, primarily to engage with films made in dialogue with the feminism (such as Godard’s *Numero Deux)* or within the context of anti-colonial movements. Referencing the work of Irish filmmakers such as Murphy, Willemen highlights a new avant-gardism of cultural practices no longer caught in the “realism-modernism dichotomy”. This new avant-garde operates *in-between* the conventions of modernism and psychological realism and represents subjectivity as “one, and only one, not necessarily important process within a situation over-determined by the forces that shape social existence” (Willemen 1984, 68). Willemen suggest that a characteristic of this work may be the mobilization of “what Raymond Williams, following Brecht, called ‘complex seeing’” and he defines this, in relation to *Maeve,* as “reading of landscape within the diegesis as itself a layered set of discourses, as a text in its own right” (1984, 53).

Willemen actually rejects the term ‘postmodernism’ (or, to use his phrasing, “Post-Modernism”) as “confusing”. He suggests that it compounds “the mystifying effects of the previous equation of modernism and avant garde” and he situates the revival of avant-garde practice within the context of a return to history. In subsequent theorizations of Third Cinema and the ‘National’, Willemen emphasizes that, unlike European counter-cinema, Third Cinema was *always* informed by an awareness of the historical variability of necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted. Yet even if made by “intellectuals”, he argues, Third Cinema requires ‘close contact with popular discourses and aspirations - with a people engaged in bringing about social change” (1989, 27).Focusing on the British context, he goes on to cite films such as Cinema Action’s *Rocinante* (1986), shot by Thaddeus O’Sullivan, along with Isaac Julien’s *Territories* (1984) and Pat Murphy’s *Anne Devlin* (1984), framing these works as evidence of the “re-actualisation” of the Third Cinema debates from a position of “outside-otherness [...] the only vantage point from which a viable cultural politics may be conducted in the UK” (Willemen, 1989, 28-29).

Despite this expansion of film cultural activity, and the critical attention it generated both within and beyond Ireland, the first wave did not constitute an organized movement. In fact, it could be argued that the overarching characteristic of first wave filmmaking – a critical approach to the representation of landscape, history and identity – did not become fully apparent until it was beginning to decline. The first edition of *Cinema and Ireland* (in1987) clearly highlighted the oppositional character of indigenous filmmaking, yet its publication coincided with a temporary diminution in state support for Irish filmmaking and the “Postscript” to the second edition of *Cinema and Ireland* noted the abolition (by the new Fianna Fail government) of theIrish Film Board. Although this was ostensibly for financial reasons, the authors observed that many of the films funded by the Board were “perceived as undermining the image of contemporary Ireland which the state itself wished to project” (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill 1988, 133).

**Histories and Archaeologies**

By the early 1990s, government funding for the indigenous film industry had been re-established in the form of the more industry-oriented Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann. As 35mm feature film production increased, a more formally and politically conservative cinema emerged, prompting criticism from both theorists and practitioners. In his contribution to a special issue of *Cineaste* in 1997, for example, Kevin Rockett laments the emergence of an Irish cinema modeled around Hollywood genres, noting a pronounced shift away from the culturally engaged practice of the late 1970s and 80s (Rockett 1999). Yet even though many proponents of first wave filmmaking were struggling to resource new projects, their work remained an important point of reference for scholars in the field of Irish cinema studies, which expanded in parallel with feature film production during the 1990s.

Several important histories of Irish cinema were published in the early 2000s, including Martin McLoone’s *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, already cited, and Lance Pettitt’s *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation,* which includes a short section on “indigenous experimentation”, framed as an alternative to the “large-budget, panoramic pictures about Ireland”, by international directors such as David Lean and Stanley Kubrick (2000, 103). Noting that the early 1970s marked a period of both rapid social change and brief affluence, for some, Pettitt emphasizes that the films of Quinn, Comerford, Cathal Black and their contemporaries often focused specifically on those “pushed to the margins of this new Ireland”, including “Travellers, unemployed people” and the homeless (103). He points out that while some of these filmmakers chose to address the political situation in the north obliquely, Murphy’s film tackled this “forbidden topic” more directly “by provocatively linking it to the gendered nature of power and historical discourse (105).

Although Pettitt acknowledges the specificity of indigenous experimentation, he is keen to emphasize continuities with Irish cinema in the 1990s, highlighting what he sees as a “vital element running through contemporary Irish film culture” extending from “experimental, formalist films” (2000, 254) such as *A Pint of Plain* and Comerford’s *Waterbag* (1984) to critically acclaimed shorts engaging with the history of the Troubles, such as Stephen Burke’s films *After ’68* (1994) and *81* (1996). Ruth Barton’s (2004) account of the first wave also acknowledges a degree of continuity, in that it positions the “Irish independents” of the 1970s and 1980s within contemporary Irish cinema. She emphasizes, however, that the first wave sought to establish “new Irish cinematic idiom” precisely by operating “within an international movement of avant-garde, experimental and low-budget filmmaking practices” (85) even if Ireland lacked the formal structures (such as co-operatives) associated with this movement.

Noting that this period has “come to be retrospectively regarded as something of a golden age of filmmaking”, Barton points out that even though the first wave filmmakers had to compete with each other for the “very limited sources of finances” available in Ireland, they frequently collaborated on film production “arguably contributing to a similarity in aesthetics and style” (88). This collaborative dimension seems highly significant and certainly seems less pronounced in the self-consciously ‘industrial’ film culture that succeeded the first wave. Like McLoone, Barton recognizes Third Cinema as an important reference point in the critical reception of these films. Ultimately, however, she argues for a different framework, more indebted to Colin McArthur’s concept of a “poor Celtic cinema”, which prioritizes a sense of history and the social over the “unpleasure” of the avant-garde (McArthur 1994).

Yet even though first wave filmmaking rarely embraced “unpleasure” it has been repeatedly designated – and sometimes celebrated – by critics as “experimental”, while at the same time relegated to the margins of ostensibly industrialized Irish cinema. Debbie Ging laments this situation in a contribution to an anthology of texts on the reinvention of Ireland in the Celtic Tiger era, noting that the work of filmmakers such as Joe Comerford and Pat Murphy has been “written off as experimental or avant-garde and thus of little relevance to what we might now refer to as a national film industry” (2002, 146). According to Ging, the films of the first wave were dismissed on the grounds of content as well as form; precisely because they often deal thematically with issues such as “religion, violence, Travellers, national identity and feminism” (Ging 178), they were incorrectly associated with oppressive cultural tradition.

Countering this dismissal, Ging argues that first wave films very often engaged directly with, and gave visibility to, individuals and groups excluded by cultural nationalist models of Irish identity (178). Ging further suggests that, while the films of the 1970s and early 80s often sought to articulate contradictory aspects of identity, the Celtic Tiger era witnessed a more affirmative approach to identity, in keeping with a “more marketable vision of Irishness”(177). She attributes the ‘writing off’ of the first wave primarily to the emergence of this market-oriented ethos:

Just as this ‘cinema of resistance’ was starting to get off the ground, the growth in multinational investment and our increasing sense of global identity shifted the focus from a concern with popular memory to a concern with constructing a more ‘progressive’ cosmopolitan identity (Ging, 185).

Even though it was published several years before the consequences of Celtic Tiger-excess were to become fully apparent, Ging’s analysis articulates an already evident disquiet over the role of culture in Irish society. Ruth Barton’s position is rather different, and she argues that “issues of marginalization and dispossession” continued to engage Irish filmmakers in early 2000s (2004, 110). On balance, however, the first wave has been historicized as much more socially- and politically-engaged than the industrially-oriented film culture that became established in the 1990s. Also, as we will see, it is precisely the notion of an economically marginalized, yet ideologically robust, “cinema of resistance” – exemplified by Peter Lennon’s *Rocky Road to Dublin* – that seems to have captured the interest and imagination of contemporary Irish artists working with the moving image.

**Curating First Wave Film Culture**

If the early 2000s witnessed an expansion of publishing activity in Irish cinema studies, this was paralleled by a different form of retrospection regarding the film practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Visitors to the Irish Film Centre during March and April of 2003 had the opportunity to view an unrivalled selection of Irish films, screened within the context of two different retrospective seasons, each celebrating the anniversary of a significant milestone in film policy. The first of these, *30 Years On: The Arts Council and The Film Maker,* was a joint initiative on the part of the Arts Council and the Film Institute of Ireland, organised by Ted Sheehy and Grainne Humphreys, with the intention of highlighting the Council’s involvement in film and video since the introduction of the 1973 Arts Act. It included a programme of 45 screenings, a temporary video library, a catalogue and public forums on preservation and arts policy featuring filmmakers, archivists and policy-makers. The second event, *New Irish Cinema: 1993-2003,* marked the tenth anniversary of the revived Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann and encompassed screenings of 76 Irish feature films, a comprehensive publication, edited by Kevin Rockett, and a ‘Day of Debate’ with contributions from filmmakers, critics and lobbyists.

Both festivals provided opportunities to historicize the practices of the first wave, but *30 Years On* was perhaps particularly important in its reframing of film production activity as ‘art’. Although its printed catalogue was modest (especially by comparison with the *New Irish Cinema: 1993-2003* publication) it nonetheless illustrated the breadth of Arts Council-funded filmmaking. Presented without an obvious thematic or chronological structure, the screenings ranged from first wave productions, including Quinn’s *Cloch* (1975) and *Poitín* (1978), Cathal Black’s *Wheels* (1976), Comerford’s *Down the Corner*, *Traveller* and *Waterbag* , to Vivienne Dick’s autobiographical video essay *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994), and short scripted dramas such as Stephen Burke’s *After ’68*. It also included *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (1989), directed by Margo Harkin and produced by Tom Collins and the Derry Film & Video Workshop with the support of Channel 4. *30 Years On* was also significant because, through the inclusion of works such as Clare Langan’s *Forty Below* (1999) and Blue Funk’s *C Oblique O* (1999), it pointed toward a potential expansion of both funding and exhibition opportunities for artists’ film and video.

During the decade that has elapsed since this period of retrospection in the early 2000s, organizations such as the Irish Film Institute have developed a much more prominent role in the exhibition of experimental film and artists’ moving image. In addition to hosting and supporting monthly screenings organized by Experimental Film Club, IFI has collaborated with several of the club’s founders, Aoife Desmond, Alan Lambert, Donal Foreman and Esperanza Collado, on the curation of the touring program, titled *Absences and (Im)possibilities*: *Traces of an Experimental Cinema in Ireland*. Through its tripartite structure, which spans disparate moments and contexts of Irish film production, the program directly addresses the challenge of constructing any coherent lineage of Irish experimental film practice. Perhaps somewhat provocatively, the first wave-focused section of *Absences and (Im)possibilities* consists solely of three films: Samuel Beckett’s *Film* (1965), directed by Alan Schneider, Bob Quinn’s *Self-Portrait with Red Car* (1976), shot by Joe Comerford, and Vivienne Dick’s *Guerrillére Talks* (1978), made while she was based in New York.

It is certainly possible to identify loose parallels between *Film* and *Self-Portrait with Red Car* in that both were made with a professional production crew, problematize speech, emphasize absurdity and feature individual male protagonists engaged in a struggle with their surroundings. But Dick’s work, which takes its title from 1969 book (Les *Guerrillére*s) by Monique Wittig exploring female sexuality and identity, seems to explore quite different subject matter and also exemplifies a much more handmade model of filmmaking. It is composed of unedited improvised monologues (each running the length of a Super-8 roll) by prominent women in New York’s underground ‘No Wave’ art and music scene, interspersed with frames of leader strip.

By placing these three works together, the curators of *Absences and (Im)possibilities* (several of whom are also artists or filmmakers) differentiate their history of the first wave from the accounts offered, for example, by scholars such as Barton, McLoone and Pettitt. So, for example, they reject what they see as tendency for Irish cinema studies scholars to use the term “experimental” to label works that resist easy categorization, or to signify a pre-existing “genre [...] defined by recurring familiar elements, such as structural archetypes, visual techniques or iconography” (IFI 2013). They propose a mode of experimental practice that is organized around social and political action, rather than formalism. Framing first wave film culture as “the first real movement of independent, indigenous filmmaking” in Ireland, they specifically highlight its collaborative, even potentially collective, dimension. They note, for example, that many of the first wave’s key figures were involved in “the collective AIP (Association of Independent Producers)”. AIP is described as “one of the most identifiable formations to emerge from this period”, perhaps signalling that this “collective” fulfils a symbolic role in their history, standing in for the co-operative structures never fully realised by Irish-based filmmakers.

**Conclusion: Legacies of the First Wave**

The *Absences and (Im)possibilities* program employs a relatively conventional approach to exhibition. Other Irish-based practitioners have, however, developed projects that engage with film history yet are much attuned to the material, social and imaginative architectures of cinema. Commissioned by the Dublin Docklands Development Authority and Fire Station Artists’ Studios, Jesse Jones’s *12 Angry Films* was devised as a site-specific installation in the form of a drive-in cinema presented over three days in November 2006. Located at the Pigeon House, a disused power station near Dublin Port, Jones’s project was devised as a direct response to the planned redevelopment of this former industrial area. The temporary drive-in cinema could only be accessed and experienced by car, drawing attention to infrastructural networks and flows linking (and separating) the port from the rest of the city. The screening programme consisted of twelve films exploring social justice and labour issues, including six features, ranging from *Salt of the Earth* (Herbert J. Biberman, 1954) and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) to a selection of video works made by Jones with an elective community of participants, motivated by a shared interest in migrancy, labour and social justice. Significantly, this community was formed through a series of discursive events and meetings, held at Fire Station Artists’ Studios, including a session conducted with the participation of Peter Lennon, which explored the production and reception of *The Rocky Road to Dublin*.

Even though its concerns clearly extended well beyond Irish cinema, *12 Angry Films* both invoked then history of the first wave (through Lennon’s involvement) and mobilised several of its most distinctive characteristics, from collaborative production to “makeshift” exhibition venues (O’Flynn 2014, 4). In subsequent projects, Jones has continued to critically mine the history of political modernism, developing a series of 16mm films (*Trilogy of Dust*, 2009-2011) using Brechtian concepts and techniques to explore and interrogate the speculative economy of late capitalism. Many of these projects were realised over several years and Jones has also frequently organised public events such as screenings or seminars as part of her research process, recalling the Third Cinema ideal of film exhibition as “meeting”. Jones has been especially consistent in her mining of the social and political histories of radical cinema but many other contemporary artists based in Ireland or elsewhere (including, for example, Sarah Browne, Duncan Campbell, Declan Clarke, Willie Doherty, Jaki Irvine, Daniel Jewesbury, Gareth Kennedy and Sarah Pierce) have either explicitly or implicitly invoked theories and histories of radical film exhibition in the development of projects for gallery installation.

It could perhaps be argued that the entry of radical film histories and practices into contemporary art galleries signals (or even contributes) to the dissociation of radical cinema from broader socio-political circulation. More generally, the past decade has witnessed a pervasive interest in art as “social practice” and in curatorially-led initiatives that seek to mobilise the art institution as a kind of model public sphere with the result that art galleries have been transformed, both physically and operationally, into temporary schools, cinemas, subsidised cafes, publishing houses or discussion spaces, with little or no emphasis on the display of art objects (Farquharson 2006; Montmann 2006). Generally intended as temporary interruptions to the gallery programme, such initiatives are often explicitly propositional and symbolic, sometimes favouring the short-term interests of art communities over the long-term needs of other constituencies. At the same time, however, some publicly-funded art galleries have also offered vital resources for activist organisations deploying media for social and political change, over a longer period of time. Within the UK, for example, contemporary art spaces such as the Showroom (London) and the Tetley (Leeds) have supported and facilitated the political work of activist group Justice for Domestic Workers, hosting meetings as well as more publicly-oriented events such as screenings and talks.

Long-term collaborations between art galleries and activist organisations are relatively rare but even temporary exhibitions can offer an important platform for social and political critique, within specific contexts. For example, during the period leading up to, and immediately following, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy, several publicly-funded art institutions significantly altered their programmes to address the impending crisis. Two of the more prominent examples are *Re: Public*, organised by guest curator Daniel Jewesbury at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios (Dublin, 2010), which sought to constitute its audience as a “public” through a range of performance and screening events (Connolly, 2011) and *The Prehistory of the Crisis* (2008-2009), a two-part show that was presented in the galleries of Project Arts Centre (curated by Tessa Giblin) and Belfast Exposed (curated by Monica Nunez). Giblin and Nunez sought to understand how the impending recession might impact upon the situation of migrant workers and asylum-seekers in Ireland, informed by partly by analysis of sectarianism in Northern Ireland.

While a full discussion of these projects is not possible here, it is significant that both involved the participation of several artists, critics and curators working actively in art education, in Ireland and elsewhere. Exhibition projects like these articulate the very close ties between art practice, research and education, and the shared value placed by practitioners, researchers and educators on temporary events (including screenings) as pretexts for “gathering”. This close collaboration between spheres of film production, criticism and education was also apparent in first wave film culture, as evidenced by the work of Project Cinema Club, an initiative that preceded the full establishment of both film studies in Ireland and industry-oriented courses in film production. During the 1980s, Irish film studies and film practice emerged as distinct spheres of activity, resulting (in some educational contexts) in a clear separation between film production and critique, a separation that does not exist to the same extent in art education. Ireland’s industry-oriented film production culture is consequently less hospitable to the culture of philosophical and political debate that once animated the first wave (and continues to engage many contemporary artists).

It may be that some contemporary artists are drawn toward the political discourses that animated film culture in the 1970s because of the symbolic value attached to ostensibly non-commercial activity within the art economy (Horowitz 2011). But such a reading overlooks the time and energy invested in long-term practices of peer-based critique routinely developed and sustained by artists and curators working with the moving image, through initiatives such as the LUX Critical Forum groups. Formed after the dissolution of the London Filmmakers Co-op, LUX is one of the most important European resource organizations dedicated to artists’ moving image. The Critical Forum groups, established in Dublin, London and Glasgow since 2011, are designed to facilitate the shared viewing and discussion of film and video for educational purposes, providing subsidised access to works in the collection, with LUX staff playing a developmental role in film cultures both within and beyond the UK. Considered together, initiatives such as the *Absences and (Im)possibilities* screening program, the *12 Angry Films* drive-in cinema, and the LUX Critical Forum network, demonstrate that the legacy of the first wave persists. It finds expression in critical histories of the “golden age” of Irish indigenous cinema, and in the ongoing exhibition practices of contemporary artists working with the moving image.

**Keywords**

Experimental film

16mm film exhibition

1970s and 1980s

Feminism

Third Cinema

Artists’ moving image

Vivienne Dick

Bob Quinn

Joe Comerford

Thaddeus O’Sullivan

Pat Murphy

**Biography (50 words)**

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