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**Published in *CIRCA* 104, summer 2003, 22-23.**

**Review of *30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Film Maker***

**Irish Film Centre, March 28 - April 1, 2003**

Visitors to the Irish Film Centre during March and April had the opportunity to view an unrivalled selection of Irish films, screened within the context of two retrospective seasons, each celebrating the anniversary of a significant milestone in film policy. Despite the obvious interconnections between these two events, and duplicate screenings of at least one film, they were characterised by quite different emphases. Bord Scannán na hÉireann chose to mark its tenth birthday with *New Irish Cinema: 1993-2003*, encompassing a programme of 76 Irish feature films at the IFC and the Cinemobile and an impressive publication (compiled by Kevin Rockett). The event also included a public Forum with contributions from Neil Jordan, Pat Murphy, Jim Sheridan, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Conor McPherson, among others.

*30 Years On: The Arts Council and The Film Maker* also publicised state support for Irish film but its programme extended beyond feature production. Instead, this joint initiative on the part of the Arts Council and the Film Institute of Ireland highlighted the diversity of the work funded by the Council, from arts documentaries such as the *Heritage of Ireland* series (directed by Louis Marcus in 1978), excerpts from research-based projects like Amanda Dunsmore's video work *Billy's Museum* (2002) and a variety of short and feature-length dramas such as *After '68* (Stephen Burke, 1993) and *All Soul's Day* (Alan Gilson, 1997). Curated by Ted Sheehy, it was developed with the support of Gráinne Humphreys and archival staff at the Film Institute, and with assistance from current and former Arts Council film officers.

The project also resulted in the production of a modest, but significant, publication that includes a full list of the Arts Council's Film and Video Awards from 1973 to 2002. Although it does not specify whether projects have been completed, this list will be an important research resource for anyone with an interest in Irish film or contemporary art practice. Ted Sheehy's catalogue essay also provides considerable insight into the circumstances surrounding the extension of the Arts Council's remit to film in 1973.

Quoting from the Seanad debates on the Bill, Sheehy notes that it was only following the intervention of Mary Robinson (in her capacity as senator) that film was officially recognised as an art form, long after the State had first considered investing in facilities for commercial film production.

*30 Years On* featured a number of relatively well-known film dramas, such as *Clash of the Ash* (Fergus Tighe, 1987) and *Budawanny* (Bob Quinn, 1987) and *Hush-A-Bye Baby* (Derry Film and Video Collective, 1989), but the vast majority of the films in the programme have yet to be released on video. Many are unavailable to view even in the Irish Film Archive. These issues of access were highlighted by the organisation of a temporary video viewing room. Although it was located in an administrative office and open only for part of the event, this initiative is central to the *30 Years On* project and it exceeds 100 titles, despite the fact that many of the works in the award catalogue are not included. The fleeting presence and the incomplete nature of this important collection underscores the need for an accessible video library, supported by the Arts Council.

Although the organisers of *30 Years On* aspired towards a “complete exposition of film’s place within all of the arts”, the event actually highlighted only some aspects of the Arts Council’s involvement in film. It was restricted to ‘Film and Video Project Awards’ only and as such did not include the full range of moving image work funded by the Council across all art forms. This narrow interpretation is particularly difficult to justify given current funding structures, which actually subsume film and video under the Projects Award. Although it would obviously have been difficult to accommodate site-specific or performance-based work within the IFC, this broader context might have been addressed through documentation, or even a parallel exhibition.

In spite of these limits, *30 Years On* presented a much broader range of work than that usually screened in the Irish Film Centre. One programme, scheduled early on a Sunday morning, included Vivienne Dick’s video piece *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994), the Blue Funk film *C Oblique O* (1999) as well as a number of pieces developed for gallery installation, such as *The Turning Point* (Grace Weir, 2002), *Marco, One Afternoon* (Jaki Irvine, 1999) and *Forty Below* (Clare Langan, 1999). The transition from gallery to cinema was somewhat uneven, perhaps because some works were devised for repeat

screening, but the setting did encourage the kind of shared viewing (and discussion) that is relatively rare in galleries.

The programme also featured two scheduled discussions, one focusing on preservation and resource issues, the other dealing with “the developing relationship between the Arts Council and artists working with the moving image”. I missed the preservation session, due to a change in the schedule outlined in the main IFC programme but I did manage to attend the 30 Years On Forum. It was chaired by Colm O’Brian, former director of the Arts Council and in addition to offering an historical overview, featured presentations by filmmakers Joe Comerford, Vivienne Dick and Johnny Gogan.

It was noted by participants that the emphasis was on filmmaking, as opposed to art practice, but the event did raise a number of critical issues with respect to the Council’s current and future policies. One contributor, Vivienne Dick, called for greater transparency in relation to the Projects awards and also for more investment in film programmes at galleries and museums. Others focused instead on the relationship between the Council and Bord Scannán na hÉireann, insisting that the Council should support the type of artisanal practice that has been neglected by the Board to date.

Coincidentally, criticisms of Film Board policy were also voiced by participants in the Film Board’s own Forum, held at the IFC two weeks later. While many contributors regarded the event as a ‘crisis meeting’ (due to ongoing uncertainty with regard to tax incentives for film) others identified low-budget digital video production as the most promising area of Irish cinema. The Arts Council clearly needs to assert a role in this area of film practice, but without losing sight of other areas of production, and exhibition. It is to be hoped that historical perspective offered by the *30 Years On* project will inform a renewed commitment on the part of the Arts Council and a more coherent and accountable film policy.