

Maeve Connolly

Urban Landmarks and ‘Regenerated’ Cityscapes in *Helen* (Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor/desperate optimists, 2008)

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Introduction

Over the past decade, Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor (also known as desperate optimists) have written, directed and produced nine short films collectively titled *Civic Life*, and in 2008 they completed their first feature film, entitled *Helen*. Shot in various cities across the UK and Ireland, the *Civic Life* films were commissioned as public art projects and generally feature local residents as performers. Most were partly or wholly financed by agencies involved in regional development or urban regeneration, and all explore aspects of urban experience and identity. My paper explores the distinctively ‘locational’ approach to filmmaking developed by Molloy and Lawlor, and analyses the significance of the various urban landmarks that seem to punctuate the narrative of *Helen*.

As Molloy and Lawlor developed *Helen* alongside the *Civic Life* series, I will begin by situating their work in relation to the wider context of public art production. The past decade has been marked by a rise in public art commissioning, often funded (particularly within the Irish context) through Per Cent for Art schemes associated with new construction. The same period has also witnessed the increased formalisation of curatorial and commissioning practices within the public art sector. As a consequence of these changes, ephemeral art projects and events (including those involving the moving image) are now routinely commissioned alongside, or in place of, permanently sited art works.

A public art commission often allows an artist or filmmaker to explore alternatives to the conventional script-based model of production. But they will still be expected to fulfil the terms of the brief, usually by responding to a specific ‘site’, understood in terms of physical location, social or historical context. In some instances, they may also have to involve local residents or other groups in the production process, with the implicit understanding that this experience will yield benefits for the participants.¹ Working within these constraints, and drawing upon their

¹ See Miwon Kwon *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004. Molloy and Lawlor often appear to comment upon the conventions of participatory art production in their work. In

knowledge of theatre and performance, Molloy and Lawlor have developed a distinctively *locational* mode of production. Rather than beginning with a script, they develop an idea in response to the context, often in dialogue with participants.

They also, however, adhere to a rigorous, self-consciously cinematic, methodology. Shot on 35mm cinemascope, the *Civic Life* films all involve ‘long takes’ of up to ten minutes with highly choreographed action sequences involving relatively large casts. Given the low budgets available for production, only one take was ever processed in each instance. This meant that there was no possibility of correcting errors in the editing process. Most of the films do not feature a recognisable story or central characters, and often involve the use of voiceover or soundtrack music, in place of dialogue. In most cases, the action unfolds within a setting (such as a park or other public amenity) that is likely to be recognisable to local audiences. As the films often lack a conventional story, these landmark locations tend to take on a prominent role within the narrative, serving to structure the action.

It is worth noting that although their methodology has evolved within the context of public art commissions, Molloy and Lawlor define themselves as filmmakers and do not exhibit or sell their films as art objects. On completion, each film in the *Civic Life* series was screened to participants and other local constituencies within a cinema setting – often a multiplex rather than an arthouse screen. It is possible to find precedents for this approach in the history of early film production and exhibition. Early audiences were drawn to cinema not only because it offered moving images of distant and exotic places, but also because it presented them with scenes of their own cities, complete with recognisable landmarks. By shooting and screening their *Civic Life* films on 35mm film and screening them directly to participants within a theatrical setting, Molloy and Lawlor seem to evoke this history. Significantly, however, their work also circulates *outside* this ‘originating’² context. In some instances, DVD versions were produced to accompany catalogues or other publication materials outlining the commissioning context. In addition, the *Civic Life* films have been shown in festivals and the first seven have been released together on DVD by Cornerhouse.

Helen, they highlight the strategies used by teachers, police officers and social workers to solicit the cooperation of individuals or groups. The scenes in which Officer Saville addresses the college students are particularly interesting in this respect, since they echo the forms of mediation and negotiation sometimes involved in the production of participatory public art works. See my discussion of the difference between a participant and an extra in ‘Looking Backwards into the Future: Steadicam Cinematography, Narrative Space and Urban Regeneration’, *The Irish Review* 39.1, Winter 2008: 78-92.

² This term is used by Claire Doherty in ‘Curating Wrong Places... Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?’ in Paul O’Neill (ed), *Curating Subjects*, London: Open Editions, 2007, 103.

The Familiar and the Unknown in *Helen*

Joy, the final film in the *Civic Life* series, was devised as a companion piece to *Helen*. Set in an unspecified city, both the short and the feature begin with a police reconstruction of an event that is never actually depicted directly – the last known movements of a young college student (Joy), who has gone missing. While the short film consists only of the reconstruction, the feature film focuses on the consequences of this disappearance for those who are left behind. The main characters are Joy's parents, her boyfriend Danny and (most importantly) Helen, a fellow student who stands in for the missing girl in the police reconstruction. Both films were shot in accordance with Molloy and Lawlor's methodology, using long takes and non-professional performers. In the case of the feature *Helen*, however, the filmmakers processed all of the takes, and also shot cutaways to be used in the editing process, in order to create a recognisable story, centring on Helen's evolving motivations and desires. Most importantly, while *Joy* was filmed entirely in Handsworth Park, Birmingham, *Helen* includes scenes shot in three additional cities (Dublin, Newcastle-Gateshead and Liverpool).

Helen is soon revealed as an isolated figure who has spent all her life in the care of the social services, and she gradually becomes drawn into Joy's life. In the course of the film, she turns eighteen and decides to confront her own family history by accessing the files held by the social services. While this might seem a predictable, even clichéd, resolution to a story of fragmented identity, Helen remains strongly attached to the 'unknown' and the film repeatedly asserts the possibilities for self-invention and transformation that may lie in the unfamiliar. For example, when Helen and her classmates are asked to participate in a 'Blue Skies' thinking session, to prepare them for life after college, she is the only one who cannot identify a fantasy career. Her only dream is to find herself in a space of her own, in a new and an unfamiliar city. This is reminiscent of an earlier interaction with a female co-worker, a young Estonian, for whom migration has created the possibility to wholly reinvent (and even rename) herself. The film is also punctuated by recurrent dreamlike sequences in which Helen walks through the trees into the forest beyond the park, addressing her thoughts to Joy in a voiceover. In these monologues, she imagines that Joy has *chosen* to leave and will return when and if she is ready. There are parallels here with an earlier film in the *Civic Life* series, entitled *Daydream* (2006), which uses the theme of the 'dream' to explore various forms of regeneration.

Like *Daydream*, *Helen* is replete with references to other film texts. While the earlier work recalled aspects of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Helen clearly borrows both from *Vertigo* and from numerous

films by Antonioni, including *L'avventura*, *L'eclisse* and *Blow-Up*. I don't have the scope to discuss these parallels here but I want to note that (as in the case with most works by Hitchcock and Antonioni) the interplay between public and private space in *Helen* is carefully structured and controlled. This is particularly apparent in the first half of the film. Following the opening shots of the park, the action unfolds across a series of semi-public, institutional interiors, including the office of the police detective, the rehearsal rooms in college where students assemble to meet the police liaison officer, a bedroom in the hotel where Helen works and the apartment show house where she meets Joy's estate agent boyfriend, Danny. The scenes of the park, featuring shots of the leafy canopy and dark pathways, provide a pointed contrast with these interiors. My main focus here, however, is on the use of locations that feature prominent *landmarks*, particularly in the latter half of the film.

Locations and Landmarks in *Helen*

Within the context of cultural studies, the practice of *landmarking* is often associated with the production of sites as heritage, in the form of monuments, and it is generally understood as a process that evolves over time.³ I have suggested that the cityscapes of *Helen* are *punctuated* by the presence of architectural landmarks but before I elaborate on this statement I want to note another, more prosaic, form of 'land-marking' in the film. Here I am referring to the representation of the park, the location for much of the action, as a potential crime scene. The first sequence after the title is set on an apparently deserted pathway through the park. Noises of rustling are heard and police then appear, moving methodically through the trees, searching for evidence. In the next shot, Joy's belongings are found amongst the leaves, and the place of each is marked in the ground with a yellow numbered tag. Helen, who also wears yellow, is later instructed to follow similar numbered tags as she traces the route that may have been taken by Joy.

At various points during the preparation for the reconstruction, the police woman uses the park bandstand as a point of orientation, emphasising the simultaneous identity of this place as both mundane scene of recreation and more sinister site of disappearance and reconstruction. The presence of bandstand in these scenes might also render the location more recognisable to local residents. The bandstand was not, however, designed as an urban landmark. As such it is very different from the architectural features that elsewhere. Here I want to highlight three specific scenes - the first is a meeting between Helen and Danny at the Gateshead Millennium Bridge,

³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Heritage, History*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998: 156-157.

which spans the river Tyne, linking Gateshead and Newcastle. The second scene is a conversation between Helen and her social worker beside a sculptural feature in Grand Canal Square, designed by Martha Schwartz in 2007 and located in the docklands area of Dublin. The third is a night time scene in which Helen and Danny sit in a car in a quayside area, also in the Dublin docklands, illuminated by sculptural street lights. The co-existence of these Gateshead and Dublin landmarks within the same cityscape underscores the fact that Helen moves through an unspecified – and composite - urban space.

Helen is not the only film to have been set in an unspecified place and shot in multiple cities - *Blindness* (directed by Fernando Mereilles and based on the novel by Jose Saramago) is a recent prominent example. But Molloy and Lawlor's inclusion of architectural landmarks associated with regeneration, seems distinctive and pointed. The Gateshead Millennium Bridge and sculptural constructions in Dublin's Grand Canal Square exemplify a trend whereby cities have sought to attract tourists, workers or investment, by commissioning bridges, museums or parks from celebrity architects or designers. It could be argued that, by incorporating images of purpose-built landmarks such as these, Molloy and Lawlor are colluding with what Hal Foster describes as the production of 'the cultural center as site of spectacular spectatorship, of touristic awe'. Emphasising the pervasive quality of what has become widely known as the 'Bilbao Effect', within the context of a critique of the work of Frank Gehry, Foster laments what he describes as the 'corporate "revival"' of cultural centers in which cities are ostensibly 'made safe for shopping, spectating, and spacing out'.⁴

The relationship between cinema and practices of landmarking has not been widely theorised. But critical discourse around the monument, particularly in relation to Hitchcock's, is much more developed. Steven Jacobs notes that the characters in films such as *North by Northwest* and *Vertigo* are often engaged in acts of sightseeing. Whiles these films initially demonstrate the 'right way to experience the landmarks by selecting viewpoints and approaches', these viewing patterns are often disrupted, so that monuments are eventually looked at from the 'wrong' position.⁵⁶ Fredric Jameson offers a more systematic account of the monument as a signifier of public space in *North by Northwest*, proposing that the film discloses the very *impossibility* of public space within

⁴ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes*, (London: Verso, 2002), 41.

⁵ In these films, techniques such as rear projection and the Schufftan process (involving mirrors) were frequently used to blend live action with miniatures, still photographs, painted scenery and location shots. Steve Jacobs, 'Sightseeing Fright: Alfred Hitchcock's Monuments and Museums', *The Journal of Architecture* 11.5, 2006: 593.

⁶ Jacobs, 594

‘the regime of private property’.⁷ In the finale of the film, the back of the Mount Rushmore monument is revealed, emphasizing the fact that this supposedly ‘public’ and open space is actually ‘*uniquely closed* by virtue of its sculptural existence as sheer representation’.⁸

The landmarks that appear in *Helen* obviously cannot be defined as national monuments; they are not associated with national historical events or figures. Not have they acquired significance over time. Instead they were commissioned and designed specifically for the purposes of branding *the city or region*, and their presence is directly associated with a reorganisation of space and territory in the era of globalisation, in which regions and cities visibly compete with each other in order to attract, and manage, flows of capital and labour.⁹ As such, it is no coincidence that the film is filled with oblique references to the production and consumption of aspirational modes of urban living. This is apparent in Danny’s description of the apartments he is trying to sell, in Helen’s description of the ‘four star’ hotel where she works, and also in the various discourses of teachers, social workers and police.

Earlier, I suggested that these landmarks *punctuate* the cityscapes of Helen. In using this term I am deliberately evoking Barthes’ notion of the *punctum*, to highlight the importance of subjective association. The appearance of the landmark, which is recognisable only to some viewers, might perhaps be said to function like the punctum within the frame. It should also be noted that the presence of the landmark, as allusion to the ‘image-city’, stands in stark contrast to the overt *repression* of other types of images in the film. While the narrative is filled with allusions to representations – including the reconstruction itself – these images are never seen directly. At one point Joy’s mother appears on television to appeal for witnesses, but we see only the flickering light from the screen reflected on Helen’s face and body. Elsewhere Helen refers to posters of Joy that have made her aware of her resemblance to the missing girl, but these are never seen. Later Helen takes a family photograph from Joy’s bedroom, and shows it to Danny, pretending it is her own. At her request, he describes what he sees in the image, and his words are uncannily similar to those used by the case worker when she presents Helen with the only surviving photograph of her family. But in each instance the image itself is withheld.

Conclusion: The City as ‘Stand-in’

⁷ Fredric Jameson, ‘Spatial Systems in *North by Northwest*’ in Slavoj Žižek (ed), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, London: Verso, 1992/54. Emphasis added.

⁸ Jameson, 70. Emphasis added.

⁹ Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 1994).

In their study of locational dynamics in the global film industry, Goldsmith and O'Regan describe a situation in which 'image-cities' or 'media cities' compete with each other to attract investment, often by flaunting their ability 'to be remade' as somewhere else. These forms of promotion are often in conflict with tourism marketing, the purpose of which is usually emphasise the unique and distinctive features of a city or region. Goldsmith and O'Regan also outline four specific roles that are available to a 'cinematic place'. The first is to play itself, the second is to act as an unidentified generic urban or rural backdrop, the third is to stand in for another real place, and the fourth is to represent a speculative fictional place.¹⁰ The four cities featured in *Helen* apparently 'play themselves'. But these cinematic places are recognisable partly through the staging of action in settings that have been 'landmarked', by architecture or public art works. These landmarks are simultaneously distinctive and generic. So they serve as a reminder of the ways in which urban space are structured *as* images (or as 'visions' to use the rhetoric of regeneration) and designed so that they might even evoke, or perhaps stand in for the speculative fictional places of science fiction or fantasy. So rather than constituting a reference to national history and memory, contested or otherwise, the bridges and art works that punctuate the regenerated cityscapes of *Helen* literally mark the point at which the production of the city as image (through cinema or tourism) intersects within the transformation of the physical environment. As such the film simultaneously contributes to and comments upon the ongoing instrumentalisation of art, architecture and cinema, in the constitution of cities as 'places'.

¹⁰ Goldsmith and O'Regan, 70-71.