

Jessie Jones 'Twelve Angry Films'

Pigeon House, Dublin.

10 – 12 November '06.

IN recent years, there has been a tendency for artists working with the moving image to explore modes of exhibition associated with cinema. For example, the film works at both the Dutch and Polish pavilions in the 2005 Venice Biennale were screened at scheduled intervals, rather than continuously. On busy days, audiences had to queue to enter these pavilions as a group and this generated a sense of expectation more usually associated with commercial film promotion and exhibition. Other works at Venice, such as Francesco Vezzoli's *Trailer For A Remake Of Gore Vidal's Caligula* (2005), extended this appropriation of cinematic convention even further through the construction of a screening room complete with surround sound and movie theatre-style seating. Jesse Jones' drive-in cinema project, entitled '12 Angry Films', also sought to claim (or perhaps reclaim) a mode of exhibition associated with popular cinema. In some respects, the staging of the event at the Pigeon House, complete with parking ushers, illuminated signage and fast food, suggested a form of 'borrowed nostalgia' for an experience that was never accessible to Irish audiences. But despite its obvious exoticism, the drive-in is nonetheless an established symbol of Americana, and the setting would be familiar to most audiences through multiple screen representations.

As a project, '12 Angry Films' is very directly concerned with the writing and rewriting of popular cultural histories, particularly where they concern repression and resistance. The programme, which was intended to include six features and six short films, addressed the intersection between cinema and activism and explored issues such as migration, globalisation and the role of gender, class and ethnicity within oppositional movements.⁽¹⁾ These issues were also examined within pre-recorded panel discussions prefacing each screening programme, relayed (like the film soundtracks) to parked cars via a temporary radio frequency. While the panel discussions were somewhat abstract at times, the opening feature film provided a dramatic exploration of the process of politicisation, as experienced by individuals and communities. Based on actual events concerning a strike by Mexican-American zinc miners, *Salt of the Earth* (Michael Wilson, Herbert J. Biberman, Paul Jarrico, 1953) was suppressed during the McCarthy era, partly as a consequence of its radical engagement with gender politics. The action centres on a woman who takes her husband's place on the picket line, in order to prolong the strike, and in the process challenges traditional gender roles within both public and private spheres.

Through the inclusion of both *Salt of the Earth* and *Rocky Road to Dublin* (Peter Lennon, 1968), another feature subject to censorship, '12 Angry Films' highlighted the existence of hidden histories of activist practice. The project also sought to explore continuity between past and present through the workshop programme, involving participants from trade unions, community and activist



Jessie Jones '12 Angry Films'. Photo: Hugh Mc Elveen. Image courtesy of Fire Station Artists' studios.

networks. The workshop process, encompassing discussions, screenings, workshops exploring Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' and tutorials on scripting, storyboarding and film production, was guided from the outset by three rules. The 28 participants were required to make a film in a language other than English, set entirely in a car and with a maximum running time of three minutes. Perhaps surprisingly, given these relatively tight constraints, the short films are formally diverse and often highly imaginative. Several make clever use of the car as a framing device, and employ strategies of appropriation or adaptation as a means of engaging with the wider context of popular cultural production. For example, *Cercando Una Rivoluzione* (Gerard Meaney, Eleanora Costa, Ruffina Keavney and Jenny Guerin) combines lyrics from pop songs with archival photographs of historic events, while *Volando Sin Raices* (Mary Healy, Eva Tabares, Paul Kizza, Jenny Solomon) explores ideas of difference and distance through references to a poem by Pablo Neruda.

Sol Zieme (Patrycja Galas, Caroline Mary Murphy, Jesse Jones, Karen McCormack, Katarzyna Piotrowska, Przemek Sawulski) is one of the simplest of the six collaborative works, but among the most interesting. Borrowing a key segment of dialogue from *Salt of the Earth*, it focuses on the difficulty of respecting oneself and others within a social context characterised by overt exploitation. *Sol*

Zieme also underscores the significance of re-enactment as a critical strategy linking all aspects of the '12 Angry Films' project, from the selection of the features to the development of the collaborative works and the staging of the drive-in. This exploration of re-enactment calls to mind the work of Peter Watkins, who although not directly represented within the programme, developed a highly influential model for political filmmaking. Many of Watkins' films, including *Culloden* and *La Commune* (Paris, 1871), incorporate references to actual events and were devised in collaboration with non-professional actors drawn from local communities or political networks.

While Watkins' work tends to be formally self-reflexive, utilising various strategies to complicate the relationship between historical events and dramatic representation, some of the features included in the programme of '12 Angry Films' are more ambiguous. *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002), for example, is an engrossing and ultimately disturbing account of a young refugee's journey from Afghanistan to London. Incorporating diagrammatic and statistical information at various points, it employs many of the conventions of documentary filmmaking in terms of editing and cinematography and features a highly naturalistic performance by the lead actor. When *In This World* is viewed alongside many of the other works in the programme, the precise relationship of the narrative to actual historical events appears somewhat unresolved, yet the film derives an emotional force from the context of exhibition. This is simply because the scenes set in vehicles, particularly the traumatic culmination of the clandestine journey to Britain, become even more resonant when viewed from a drive-in sited (very deliberately) next to a port.

As an exhibition event, '12 Angry Films' demanded a lot from its audience; the drive-in experience involved both a considerable time commitment and a degree of physical discomfort for those who had to fold themselves into small cars. But despite these issues, the programme itself remained highly engaging, as evidenced by the sudden and spontaneous beeping of car-horns at the end of each screening. The various strategies of re-enactment that linked the contexts of production and exhibition, and cohered around the imaginary space of the drive-in, ultimately proved to be rewarding; through these strategies '12 Angry Films' called attention to an alternative history of popular cinema, and pointed towards the possibility of an alternative future.

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(1) Initially scheduled over an entire weekend, the programme had to be compressed into two nights when the outdoor screen was damaged by high winds, and as a consequence two of the features (*American Dream* and *The Battle of Algiers*) were omitted.



Jessie Jones '12 Angry Films'. Photo: Hugh Mc Elveen. Image courtesy of Fire Station Artists' studios.