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## **A Cause for Celebration?**

### **Festivals of Irish Film At Home and Abroad<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Introduction**

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 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, intended to highlight the Council's involvement in film and video since the introduction of the 1973 Arts Act, which extended its remit to cinema. 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. It encompassed screenings of 76 Irish feature films (at the Film Centre and the Cinemobile), an impressive publication, and a 'Day of Debate' with contributions from filmmakers, critics and lobbyists.

The staging of two such events within days of each other calls attention to the growing significance of curatorial practice in Irish film exhibition. The rise of the festival event or the curated film season is by no means specific to the Irish context. Instead it forms part of a much wider set of developments within broadcasting and video/DVD publishing, whereby meaning is produced through the scheduling of a film 'event' or the release of a

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<sup>1</sup> This work forms part of a larger research project, funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and I would like to thank Stephanie McBride and Luke Gibbons for their assistance with this study. I also wish to thank Gráinne Humphreys of the Film Institute of Ireland and Máire Hogan of Bord Scannán na hÉireann, for providing information on audiences at *30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Filmmaker* and *New Irish Cinema, 1993-2003*. A section of this paper was published earlier, in a review of *30 Years On* in *CIRCA: Contemporary Visual Culture in Ireland* 104, Summer 2003: 22-23.

film 'collection'. Given the relative absence of in-depth research into Irish and European cinema audiences<sup>2</sup>, projects such as *30 Years On* and *New Irish Cinema* would seem to provide a useful opportunity to examine the discourses through which audiences for certain forms of national cinema are addressed. My discussion identifies various different modes of festival film exhibition, across small-scale academic and local events, commercially driven markets and high profile international displays of national culture. Through a discussion of Irish and international examples, including *A Sense of Ireland* (London, 1980), *EXPO 2000* (Hanover) and the recent programmes at the Irish Film Centre, I highlight the often contradictory objectives of state institutions, critics and practitioners and consider various critiques of festival exhibition.

### **The Discourse of the Festival: Theorising Modes of Exhibition**

Film festivals have served as sites for the promotion and exhibition of the products of national film industries since the establishment of the Venice Film Festival in 1932 (under the patronage of Mussolini).<sup>3</sup> But the festival has also served as an important, and explicitly *public*, platform for debate around policy and practice, particularly in relation to avant-garde and national cinemas.<sup>4</sup> The late 1960s witnessed the emergence of a number of events dedicated to independent, avant-garde or oppositional work. The Pesaro International Exhibition of New Cinema (Italy), for example, was founded in 1965 with an emphasis on emerging national cinemas. Throughout the 70s and early 80s, festivals at Edinburgh and Rotterdam continued to generate debate around theory and practice, in journals such as *Framework*.<sup>5</sup> Within the Irish context, the Festival of Film and

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<sup>2</sup> John Hill considers the issue of national cinema audiences in "British Cinema as National Cinema: Production, Audiences and Representation", *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (London: BFI, 2001) 208-210. See also Philippe Meers, "Look who's watching! A brief reflection on European cinema audiences", *Mediasalles Research Library*, 2000 (website) [http://www.mediasalles.it/crl\\_meers.htm](http://www.mediasalles.it/crl_meers.htm)

<sup>3</sup> For an historical overview of festivals see Suzanne Mary Donohue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988) 60-73. For an in-depth analysis of the filmmakers perspective on festival exhibition see Barbara Trent "Media in a Capitalist Culture", *The Cultures of Globalization*, eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1998) 230-246.

<sup>4</sup> See Sylvia Harvey's analysis of Cannes (1968) in *May'68 in Film Culture*, (London: British Film Institute, 1978) and Thomas Elsaesser's discussion of the Oberhausen Manifesto produced at the Oberhausen Festival (1970), *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1989) 20-25.

<sup>5</sup> See various articles on festival exhibition in *Framework: A Film Journal* 15/16/17 (1981).

Television in the Celtic Counties, which moves between Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Cornwall, has been identified by Martin McLoone as an important focal point for regional cultural resistance in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>6</sup>

The rise of the festival as the privileged site of national cinema has also generated criticism, however. Filmmaker Manthia Diawara contends that the “proliferation of African film festivals everywhere in Europe and America” is not in the interests of African cinema, noting that such events are often “used for the purposes of multiculturalism” in European or American contexts.<sup>7</sup> Diawara argues that even (ostensibly oppositional) African initiatives such as Pan-African Film Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) may distort and disguise their role in the maintenance of production and distribution monopolies. He suggests that while FESPACO remains an important source of tourism revenue within the economy of Burkina Faso, it delivers African cinema to foreign audiences without unsettling existing monopolies, so that domestic cinemas remain dominated by “Western and Kung Fu films”.<sup>8</sup>

Festivals evidently serve a number of quite distinct constituencies and must reconcile the demands of local communities and state agencies with those of industry lobbyists, commercial sponsors, critics, distributors and filmmakers, as well as other audiences. Many festival events are also constructed around notions of the ‘marginal’, whether understood in geographical, economic, cultural or political terms, and serve as sites for the articulation and construction of various different identities – whether in relation to a particular site, national culture or social group. For many such events, ‘marginal’ status has given way to increased commercial power, as in the case of the Sundance Film Festival (Park City, Utah). Hamid Naficy has also highlighted a growing number of

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<sup>6</sup> Martin McLoone “Internal Decolonisation? British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe”, *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001) 184-190.

<sup>7</sup> Manthia Diawara notes, in particular, a high profile African Film Festival that took place at New York’s Lincoln Center in April 1993. See his “On Tracking World Cinema: African Cinema at Film Festivals”, *Public Culture* 6.2 (1994): 386.

<sup>8</sup> Diawara, 390. In a recent account exploring aspects of World Cinema and festival culture, however, Dudley Andrew highlighted the growth of an indigenous Nigerian cinema orientated towards *domestic* audiences. “Dialects and Dialectics of Cinema in the World”, paper delivered on July 5 at *The Irish Seminar* 2002, organised by the Keough-Notre Dame Centre, Dublin.

festivals events within the US, dedicated to exilic and diasporic cinema.<sup>9</sup> Within the Irish context, the Cork Film Festival (a well-established forum for Irish and international short filmmaking) has been joined by the Dublin Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, currently in its eleventh year, and by newer events such as the Docklands documentary festival. A number of events dedicated to new media work and to artist's film and video have also emerged in recent years. In the absence of regular gallery screenings Irish filmgoers are in fact *particularly* dependent upon curated festivals and exhibitions and the Darklight Digital Film Festival and the *Diversions* series of outdoor screenings in Temple Bar constitute important extension of Irish film exhibition into otherwise neglected areas.<sup>10</sup> It could be argued, however, that these events have also served to translate the cultural capital of the 'marginal' into a marketable commodity.<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of festival discourse also points towards the existence of a number of quite distinct modes of exhibition. Most Irish festivals, including those in Dublin, Kerry, Derry and Belfast, are staged annually and provide *surveys* of current practice. Surveys tend to be competitive, and the prizes awarded by juries or by audiences are prominently displayed in advertising campaigns. The survey is, however, paralleled by a prominent alternative, which could be termed the *retrospective* mode. Such events tend to privilege continuity in authorship, theme, subject matter or cultural context. It is important not to overstate the distinction between survey and retrospective events, however, since many festivals combine elements of both. For example, the Galway Film Fleadh includes a market component, as well as variety of strands focusing on particular genres or authors.

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<sup>9</sup> Hamid Naficy, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) 297 n3.

<sup>10</sup> Irish galleries (including Arthouse, the now-defunct centre for new media arts practice) have largely failed to develop screening programmes. Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) does host occasional screenings, however, and two major film exhibition programmes *From Beyond the Pale* (1994) and *The Event Horizon* (1996-7) were organised by IMMA in collaboration with the Irish Film Centre and filmmaker Pat Murphy.

<sup>11</sup> The Darklight Festival has, in recent years, been staged in an economically underdeveloped area of the city that has been designated as a 'Digital Hub', largely in the hope of attracting commercial development. The *Diversions* series is one of a number of curated public projects devised for Temple Bar, Dublin's Cultural Quarter. See Stephanie Rains "Touring Temple Bar: Cultural Tourism in Dublin's 'Cultural Quarter'", *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 6.1 (1999).

Two other forms of exhibition also invite consideration. Academic conferences often feature curated film programmes that are open to the public as well as to delegates and ‘multi-component’ national cultural festivals include tend to feature film, along with theatre, dance, music, literature and educational or interpretative elements such as artists’ talks, scholarly lectures, tours and publications. These festivals are devised for presentation *outside* the national context, and may be developed in partnership with a cultural agency in the ‘host nation’. This latter form of exhibition seems to have prompted considerable criticism, perhaps because it appears to be explicitly promotional. Judith Huggins Balfe and Brian Wallis both locate the roots of the national cultural festival in ‘blockbuster’ art exhibitions of the 1970s, such as *Irish Gold: Treasures of Early Irish Art* (1978) and *Treasures of the Kremlin* (1979).<sup>12</sup> Balfe, however, emphasises a critical backlash in the US against the overtly propagandistic use of visual art and the 1980s seems to have witnessed a shift away towards the more populist ‘festival’ concept, which incorporates visual art events.<sup>13</sup>

Brian Wallis suggests that the exhibited national cultures may share a particular economic profile; huge international debts, cheap and docile labour markets; valuable exports managed by US multinational corporations (principally oil) and recently privatised state industries.<sup>14</sup> He points out that US-based festivals such as *Turkey – The Continuing Magnificence* (1987-88), *Mexico: A Work Of Art* (1990), and the *Festival Of Indonesia* (1990-92) were all developed in order to achieve specific political goals, such as an increase in tourism, trade or aid and his analysis highlights a certain ‘spectacularisation’ of these cultures is events devised for a US audience. It is not only heavily indebted or economically underdeveloped countries, however, that seek to achieve economic advancement through the export of culture. Nor is the US the only

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<sup>12</sup> Brian Wallis, “Selling Nations: International Exhibitions and Cultural Diplomacy” *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacle*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, (London: Routledge, 1994) 265-281. Judith Huggins Balfe, “Artworks as Symbols in International Politics”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 1.2, (1987): 5-27.

<sup>13</sup> Other events include Irish visual arts exhibitions such as *0044 – Irish Artists In Britain* (1999, New York, London, Belfast, Cork) and *When Time Began To Rant And Rage* (1998, Liverpool, Berkeley, New York, London), both of which toured to the US as part of an Irish cultural festival marking the fifth anniversary of Glucksman Ireland House, at New York University in 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Wallis, 277.

target for this mode of exhibition. Rosita Boland has documented a number of *Irish* “travelling arts showcases”, many of which feature film as a component. She identifies *A Sense of Ireland: London Festival of the Irish* in 1980 as one of the first Irish cultural festivals but also cites a number of recent events, including *L’Imaginaire Irlandais*, (various locations in France, 1996), *Ireland and its Diaspora* (Frankfurt, 1996), *Island – Arts From Ireland* (Washington D.C., 2000) and *EXPO 2000* (Hanover).<sup>15</sup> This is in addition to the various other international events dedicated specifically to Irish *film*.<sup>16</sup>

### **Exhibiting Irish Cinema: From Film Societies to Cultural Festivals**

Festivals have, in fact, played an important part in the distribution and exhibition of Irish film since the late 1960s. Indigenous film production was restricted, during the 60s, by distribution monopolies in Britain and in the US, as well as by state policies that favoured international industrial production.<sup>17</sup> But some filmmakers managed to subvert these monopolies and ‘poetic’ travelogues such as Patrick Carey’s 1965 film *Yeats Country* (featuring ethereal landscape photography and excerpts from the work of W.B. Yeats) were screened widely in festivals and non-theatrical circuits.<sup>18</sup> Carey had made documentaries for the National Film Board and in June 1970 his work was profiled by the Toronto Film society in an event entitled *The Irish on Film*. The programme featured both Irish-made and Irish-themed films, ranging from *Man of Aran* (Flaherty, 1934) to Mary Ellen Butte’s experimental *Passages from Finnegans Wake* (1965).

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<sup>15</sup> Rosita Boland “Inside Ireland’s Fair Pavilions”, *The Irish Times*, June 28, 2000: 12. Boland emphasises the considerable cost involved in staging these events. Ireland’s participation in *EXPO 2000*, which showcased industry and technology as well as culture, exceeded nine million punts, while *L’Imaginaire Irlandais* had a budget of 3 million, co-funded by guest and host nation.

<sup>16</sup> Events focusing exclusively on Irish film have been staged in Europe, the UK and the US. Recent US events include *Forbidden Journey: The New Irish Cinema*, (Boston, Dedham Community Theater, April 1993), *In The Name of the Nation: Celebrating Irish Filmmaking 1910-1994*, (Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, June/July 1994) and *Irish Eyes* (Pacific Film Archive, San Francisco, March 1999). New York’s Cantor Centre also hosts an annual Film Fleadh that provides a survey of new Irish, Irish-American and Irish-themed features, documentaries and shorts.

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988) 100-101.

<sup>18</sup> The critical success of *Yeats Country* was widely noted and it is possible that it may have informed the Irish state’s subsequent recognition of cinema as an art form. See Louis Marcus, *The Irish Film Industry*, (Dublin: Irish Film Society, 1967) 26-28.

A somewhat similar approach to curation was employed by Kevin Rockett in *Film and Ireland*, a season of Irish and Irish-related cinema at Dublin's Project Cinema Club in the summer of 1978. Project was just one of a number of Irish film clubs and societies that were supported by state funding from the mid 1970s onwards, but by comparison with other clubs it articulated an explicitly critical approach. The *Film And Ireland* season featured over 100 films, organised under headings such as "Family Community Disintegration", "Depiction of Class/Work", "Irish Literary Traditions on Film", "The North", "Foreign Images of Ireland - Ireland as Tourist Commodity" and "Nature". In the catalogue Rockett stresses that these groupings are largely "arbitrary", and intended to prompt discussion rather than assert evaluative or interpretation claims.<sup>19</sup>

The Project programme seems to have provided the basis for the film component of the subsequent *Sense of Ireland* festival in London, in 1980. The festival was directed by John Stephenson, a former Project board member and secretary and in addition to film programmes it incorporated revivals of Project Theatre productions, such as *The Liberty Suit* and *The Risen People*, and a number of visual arts exhibitions involving artists, such as Nigel Rolfe and James Coleman, who were prominently associated with the Arts Centre.<sup>20</sup> Interviewed in 2000 about the project, Stephenson states; "in 1980, Ireland saw itself as a cultural backwater, where only dead artists mattered".<sup>21</sup> He continues:

As a direct result of that festival, the Cultural Relations Committee's budget multiplied. And we pioneered the idea of commercial and business sponsorship of the arts.

The festival *was* prominently sponsored, by Bord Fáilte and by the Irish Development Authority, and it explicitly sought to counteract negative stereotypes in the British media

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<sup>19</sup> Kevin Rockett, "Film and Ireland", *Project Arts Centre Programme July – September 1978* (unpaginated). For a review of the *Film and Ireland* season see Ciaran Carty, "It's a Festival to Rival Cork" *Sunday Independent*, December 3, 1978: 31. Rockett was also involved in the curation of a weeklong programme of Irish cinema at the Spanish Filmoteca (in May 1979).

<sup>20</sup> *A Sense of Ireland* 1980 included three visual art exhibitions; *The Delighted Eye: Irish Painting and Sculpture of the Seventies* (a touring exhibition funded by the Arts Councils of Ireland and Northern Ireland and selected by Frances Ruane), *Without the Walls* (curated by Dorothy Cross at the ICA and featuring the work of John Aiken, James Coleman, Felim Egan, Brian King, Ciaran Lennon, Alanna O'Kelly, Michael O'Sullivan, Nigel Rolfe and Noel Sheridan) and *The International Connection: Irish Art in the Seventies*.

<sup>21</sup> John Stephenson interviewed by Rosita Boland, "Inside Ireland's Far Pavilions", 12.

in the interests of Irish tourism and industry. Stephenson's catalogue introduction also makes reference to contemporary developments in Northern Ireland. He writes:

*A Sense of Ireland* isn't happening just because the Irish are tired of the stereotypes, the Irish jokes and the accepted mythologies. It is more because the English are increasingly aware that these don't provide the truth which they are anxious to know. [...] The trauma of Northern Ireland is also theirs.<sup>22</sup>

Another contributor to the catalogue, Seamus Deane, articulates a somewhat different perspective, however. Noting that Irish artists have been "forced to engage in a frontal way with political crisis, he describes the festival as a "presentation of Ireland to itself".<sup>23</sup> The film component of *A Sense of Ireland* also seems to articulate a number of different objectives. As I have noted, the Project season included both indigenous and non-indigenous work within the same thematic strands. But the London event featured *two* distinct programmes; a selection of recent indigenous work screened at the National Film Theatre under the title *New Irish Cinema* and a selection of Irish-related material, presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art as *The Outsider's View*. This shift is significant because it both announces and responds to significant developments in production, while at the same time foregrounding the cultural context within which this work had developed.<sup>24</sup>

### **Crowd Pleasers or Critical Sites?**

My analysis has highlighted the various different constituencies served by festival exhibition and the (often contradictory) objectives of organisers, sponsors and practitioners. Critical analysis of national cultural festivals has tended, however, to centre on a perceived failure to engage with the contradictions inherent in the concept of national heritage. Brian Wallis points out that certain projects staged in the US, including *Turkey – The Continuing Magnificence* (1987-88), were developed specifically in order

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<sup>22</sup> John Stephenson, "Introduction", *A Sense of Ireland*, (Dublin: A Sense of Ireland Ltd, 1980): 13.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Deane, "The Artist in Ireland", *A Sense of Ireland*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Rockett's defines the project in terms of a reconstruction of lost histories in the catalogue introduction; "A Sense of Ireland: Irish Cinema", *BFI/National Film Theatre Programme*, (February 1980) 30.



to counteract a negative national image, under the direction of public relations experts.<sup>25</sup> He reserves his strongest criticisms, however, for the museums and other cultural institutions that collude in this type of ‘propagandistic’ enterprise. He states:

[T]hese shows are far from the disinterested scholarship most museums claim to provide. [...] Yet museums, strapped for cash now more than ever, are reluctant to resist the allure of these well-endowed crowd pleasers, even when they verge on exploitation of the museum’s intellectual resources and professional integrity.<sup>26</sup>

Wallis’ analysis does not hold true for all forms of national cultural exhibition, however. In particular it fails to account for the presence of diaspora communities or practitioners, and their role in structuring or critically negotiating cultural relations between guest and host nations. A small number of festivals and exhibitions have actually foregrounded issues of cultural exchange and cultural translation. These include the *Festival Of Los Angeles* of 1993, which centred on the city’s diaspora communities, and the *Distant Relations* project from 1996, which focused on Irish, Chicano and Mexican art and critical writing.<sup>27</sup> Festival curation may, in fact, require an ever more *self-reflexive* mode of address. This is because, as Balfe notes, “increasingly sophisticated audiences [...] now expect varieties of propagandistic ‘halos’ around visiting artworks”.<sup>28</sup>

Even an overtly promotional event, such as the EXPO fair, can provide a context for critical curatorial and artistic practice. Fiach MacConghail, cultural director of the Irish *EXPO 2000* presentation, commissioned Desperate Optimists (an art group whose members Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor are Irish but London-based) to produce a piece of work for the event. Their project, entitled *Lost Cause*, is a web-based audiovisual narrative staged and filmed around the site of the festival, which can be seen to interrogate the discourse of the EXPO itself. Molloy states:

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<sup>25</sup> Wallis notes that Turkey had been widely condemned within the US context for human rights violation and for the oppression of Kurdish nationalism, 270.

<sup>26</sup> Wallis, 279.

<sup>27</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s analysis of the 1993 Festival of Los Angeles in “Confusing Pleasures”, *Muntadas: On Translation: The Audience* eds. Octavi Roles, Muntadas and Wilte de With (Rotterdam, Center for Contemporary Art, 1999) 53-99 and Lucy R. Lippard, “Distant Relations”, *Distant Relations: Chicano, Irish, Mexican Art and Critical Writing*, ed. Trisha Ziff (New York: Smart Art Press, 1996) 16-24.

<sup>28</sup> Balfe, 215.

Using an evocative sound score, *Lost Cause* follows a woman as she makes her way through a futuristic city intent on finding and ultimately blowing up the head quarters of the Chemi-drome Corporation. *Lost Cause* very consciously makes reference to a number of classic sci-fi films including *La Jetee* and *Alphaville* and is, in many ways, an attempt to look at the notion of narrative as experienced on the web.<sup>29</sup>

Interviewed by Rosita Boland about the context for this project, MacConghail states: “EXPO isn’t an arts festival. Ireland’s participation in EXPO is because of economics, and Germany is a very important market. [...] Germany has had a rural view of Ireland, and my job is to be to try and open that up a little. What is Ireland? I don’t have any answers to that, but I can ask questions”.<sup>30</sup> MacConghail also notes the importance of festival events for artists, in terms of both publicity and direct financial support<sup>31</sup>

Rosita Boland suggests that the funding of cultural festivals through public money tends to ensure a “healthy interest in how that money is spent”. But a cursory examination of press coverage of recent Irish touring festivals yields little in the way of any critical analysis of policy or practice (with the exception of Boland’s own piece). Specialist arts publications, however, are more inclined to weigh up the objectives and achievements of these events. Henry Lewes, writing in *Film West*, notes that *Travelling Dublin* (a major exhibition of Irish cinema at the Rennes Film Festival in 2001) proved highly successful, in terms of box office numbers.<sup>32</sup> Seamus McSwiney, by contrast, highlights the low turnout for the film programme at *L’Imaginaire Irlandais* in 1996 and as emphasises the need for constructive criticism in place of “PR gloss”.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, McSwiney

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<sup>29</sup>This project can be accessed at <http://www.lostcause1-10.com>

<sup>30</sup> Boland, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Inclusion in *A Sense of Ireland* 1988 seems to have marked a significant turning point in Vivienne Dick’s career as a Irish filmmaker. Prior to 1988 she had failed to secure funding from Irish agencies but in 1989 her film *London Suite* (1989) was screened by RTÉ and subsequent works such as *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994) were co-financed by RTÉ and the Irish Arts Councils.

<sup>32</sup> *Travelling Dublin* at Rennes attracted over 64,000 spectators, the highest attendance at any previous festival of national cinema at Rennes. See Henry Lewes “Film Festivals: Travelling Dublin at Rennes” *Film West* 44, (Winter 2001): 70-71.

<sup>33</sup> The event included screenings of forty Irish films, both drama and documentary. Seamus McSwiney points out that the average screening attracted an audience of just 17 people. See Seamus McSwiney, “The Imaginaire Irlandais Film Festival”, *Film West* 25 (Summer 1996): 7.

concludes that “if one Irish film got a decent French distribution because of [*L’Imaginaire Irlandais*] then a certain amount of self-congratulation would be justified”.

Filmmakers sometimes view festivals as a potential stepping-stone towards a broader audience but it could also be argued that festivals also deliver *audiences* to commercial or public sponsors. I have already highlighted the explicitly ‘public’ function of the festival, particularly as a site for debates around national policy and culture. But even smaller-scale, more local, events have a public dimension, providing a focal point for otherwise diffuse film going audiences.<sup>34</sup> The organisers of the Dublin International Film Festival (which replaced the Dublin Film Festival in 2003) were aware of this when they chose to stage the event in a small arthouse cinema rather than in a multiplex such as the UGC. Rory Concannon states:

The success or failure of events in the film festival calendar depends on how comfortable audiences feel, how much they feel they own the festival. That excludes A list festivals, which are successes for a different reason. Toronto is the model we use. It’s based on audience.<sup>35</sup>

An in-depth study into the audience for curated film events is currently underway, within the British context, led by researcher and former distributor Julia Knight.<sup>36</sup> Although the project focuses on avant-garde cinema it provides an insight into broader developments within film distribution and curatorial practice. Knight identifies two different approaches to independent distribution. The ‘traditional’ model involves the maintenance of a library and catalogue and is represented by organisations such as the LUX and Cinenova within the British context, originally founded and run by artists and filmmakers. The newer approach, developed by curatorial agencies such as the British Film and Video Umbrella,

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<sup>34</sup> The concept of the diffuse audience for film, extending across various media, is developed in Martin Barker “Film Audience research: Making a virtue out of a necessity”, *Iris*, 26 (1998): 131-147.

<sup>35</sup> Rory Concannon, interviewed in “Believers”, *Film Ireland* 91, March-April 2003: 12-14.

<sup>36</sup> References to this ongoing research project are taken from Julia Knight’s presentation, entitled “Reaching Audiences: The Role of the Distributor”, at *Experimental Film Today*, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, July 4-6, 2003. See also Knight’s earlier discussion of video art distribution; “In Search of an Identity: Distribution, Exhibition and the ‘Process’ of British Video Art”, in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, ed. Julia Knight (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996) 217-237.

prioritises the selection, packaging and touring of film programmes over the establishment of a permanent library. This overtly curatorial approach runs counter to the Co-operative principle, which is explicitly inclusive and non-selective.

Knight's research focuses specifically on *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot*, a 2001 collaboration between LUX Distribution and the independent film curator Mark Webber, which represents a fusion of the traditional and curatorial modes. This touring programme showcased work from the early years of the London film-maker's Co-op, although it failed to raise its target budget, it was successful in generating audiences. In particular, a relatively high turnout for a series of screening programmes at Tate Modern was achieved through the use of email lists, with only limited print advertising and press coverage. Knight emphasises that many of those who attended the screenings would have already had some association with the avant-garde film culture located around the LUX and mailing lists such as *Frameworks*.<sup>37</sup> She also suggests that a funding crisis at LUX, shortly before the launch of the exhibition, contributed to a groundswell of support for the exhibition.

Elsewhere, Michael O'Pray has suggested that a "crisis of categorisation", during the 1980s, contributed to the decline of an earlier generation of avant-garde film festivals, even though he critiques the relationship between gallery exhibition and canon formation.<sup>38</sup> Knight's research suggests that a demand for some form of structuring curatorial 'narrative' has contributed to a shift away from traditional models of distribution. In fact she seems to argue that distributors founded on the traditional model may come under increased pressure from funding agencies to provide "value for money" through curated programmes. This type of activity may be problematic for an organisation such as Cinenova, however, which evolved as a distributor for women's cinema through a *critique* of canon formation.

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<sup>37</sup> The searchable *Frameworks* mailing list archive can be found at <http://www.hi-beam.net/fw/>

<sup>38</sup> See Michael O'Pray, "Introduction", *The British Avant-Garde Film 1926-1995: An Anthology of Writings*, (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996) 20. See Karen Schwartzmann "National Cinema in Translation: The Politics of Film Exhibition Culture", 16:3 (February 1995): 66-99.

### **Conclusion: Artists Film and National Cinema at the Irish Film Centre**

Irish film culture never supported 'traditional' distribution libraries and during the 70s and early 80s Irish audiences for avant-garde film were, in fact, largely reliant on British agencies.<sup>39</sup> As such the developments highlighted by Knight are perhaps less problematic and less overt within the Irish context. But her work does inform analysis of the promotional and curatorial strategies employed by the organisers of both 30 Years On (March 2003) and New Irish Cinema (April 2003). Although it aimed to document the full range of work supported by the Irish Arts Council<sup>40</sup>, *30 Years On: The Arts Council and the Film Maker* included a number of film and video works by Irish artists. One screening programme featured various works that are only rarely (if ever) shown at the Irish Film Centre (IFC). These include Vivienne Dick's video piece *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy* (1994), Amanda Dunsmore's research-based video work *Billy's Museum* (2002) and a number of pieces developed for gallery installation, such as *Forty Below* (Clare Langan, 1999).

This was not the IFC's first foray into the exhibition of artist's film. The Centre has previously hosted events such as a selection from the Darklight Film Festival (curated by Paul Rowley), Peter Watkins' seven-hour long film *La Commune (1871)*, made in 2000 and a programme of Irish and international work curated by artist Mairead McClean.<sup>41</sup> Yet, by comparison with some of these earlier events the turnout for many of the *30 Years On* screenings was disappointingly low.<sup>42</sup> Instead of supporting an argument against this type of programming these low audience figures should prompt an examination of the curatorial and promotion strategies employed by the organisers.

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<sup>39</sup> I discuss this issue in further detail in "Visibility Moderate? Sighting an Irish Avant-garde in the intersection of Local and International Film Cultures", *Boundary 2: International Journal of Literature and Culture* (Forthcoming)

<sup>40</sup> In fact the screening programme and catalogue featured only film and video work funded by the Council under specific schemes, and included a considerable number of installation-based artworks.

<sup>41</sup> Mairead McClean curated *Until That Time*, a programme of artist's films, for the artists group 147 on July 28, 2001. For a review of this event see Jane Humphries "Review: Dublin II", *CIRCA* 98, Winter 2001: 52-54

<sup>42</sup> The entire season included 45 films, screened in 23 separate programmes, but total admissions were just 352

In fact, the full details on the featured titles in the programme of artist's films were not available to audiences until a few days before the event. Instead they were simply listed as 'Shorts', a customary practice with respect to student work but one that is unsuitable for artist's film and video work, which is likely to be more diverse in format, length, genre and theme. *30 Years On* also seems to have been under-resourced in terms of promotion, although this would not account for the apparent failure to employ email advertising. It would be a mistake, however, to judge the project solely in terms of audience numbers, since the exhibition programme was actually just one outcome (albeit the most visible) from a far more complex and ambitious undertaking. Curator Ted Sheehy, working with Gráinne Humphreys and other IFC staff, were in fact faced with the difficulty of *tracing* and *cataloguing* the full body of work funded by the Council since 1973. The project resulted in the publication of a modest, but significant, catalogue that includes a full list of the Arts Council's Film and Video Awards from 1973 to 2002, so it serves the needs of researchers and archivists as well as those of policymakers and IFC audiences.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, although the screening programme was curated, the *30 Years On* project actually resulted in the production of a temporary video library, recalling Knight's 'traditional' distribution model. The vast majority of the films included in the programme have yet to be released on video and many are unavailable to view even in the Irish Film Archive. But, for two days during the event, a temporary viewing room and collection was made available in an administrative office, with access to over 100 videotapes. Following on from the initial event, a touring package has been organised for a screening at the Centre Cultural Irlandais in Paris (on November 15-16, 2003). But the project has highlighted the need for a permanently accessible library, supported by the Arts Council, (and perhaps modelled along the lines of the British Film and Video Artists Study Collection) and it remains to be seen whether or not this will be established.

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<sup>43</sup> 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. This essay, together with full programme details, can be located at <http://www.artscouncil.ie/news/docs/30years.pdf>

By comparison with the Arts Council/Film Institute of Ireland event, *New Irish Cinema* seems to have benefited from a substantial promotional budget. It was sponsored by a commercial radio broadcaster and widely advertised across various media. The screenings, which took place at the IFC and at the Cinemobile (a mobile screening room parked in nearby Dublin Castle for the duration of the event) were accompanied by a lavishly illustrated publication, with text by Kevin Rockett and a free full colour brochure. Somewhat surprisingly, the programme included only *feature* films, even though the Board supports documentaries, animation and a range of short film schemes in partnership with other agencies. This emphasis on feature film could possibly be read as a political statement, in response to ongoing uncertainty around Government support for state subvention, in the form of tax incentives.<sup>44</sup> These concerns were addressed directly by a number of panellists at the ‘Day of Debate’ and undoubtedly structured the context of reception.

Tom O’Regan, writing in relation to the Australian context, has emphasised that a national cinema is “dependent upon the development and rationalization of public support [...] through publicity and ongoing governmental and private sector commitment” and he emphasises that this cinema must be “made collective on a continuing basis”.<sup>45</sup> Evidently, given the increasingly ‘diffuse’ character of film audiences, festivals play a crucial role in this process of ‘making collective’. In particular, they serve to *demonstrate* public support through media coverage and through the physical presence of audiences. *New Irish Cinema* seems to have achieved its political goal, in the sense that tax incentives are likely to be continued. But the event also served (perhaps inadvertently) to highlight a *failure* to engage with certain audiences.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The Board itself was apparently under threat in late 2002. See Ted Sheehy, “Saved From ‘Bord Snip’”, *The Irish Times*, December 20, 2002:16. Rod Stoneman also announced his departure as CEO of the Board in April 2003 and this may have contributed an added urgency to debates around the future of the film industry. For details on *New Irish Cinema, 1993-2003* see <http://www.filmboard.ie>

<sup>45</sup> Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 25-26.

<sup>46</sup> Although they were unable to provide box office figures the Film Board note that many of the screenings were sold out. I attended screenings of several films, including *Love and Rage* (Cathal Black, 1998) and *Chaos* (Geraldine Creed, 2001), at which audiences were considerably smaller.

My analysis has highlighted the extent to which film festivals serve disparate objectives and constituencies. As I have noted, the rise of the festival may be paralleled by a decline of traditional 'independent' structures for film distribution and exhibition, although this tendency is by no means dominant within the Irish context. I have argue that even ostensibly promotional events, such as *30 Years On* and *New Irish Cinema*, can articulate the *limits* as well as the achievements of cultural policy, by supporting the development of research facilities or by generating public support for state subvention. Even international displays, such as *EXPO 2000*, can provide a context for critically engaged arts practice.

Yet, for the most part, critical attention seems to have focused on the promotional character of international events, particularly in relation to national cultural festivals. This may be at the expense of an in-depth analysis of the processes through which curated programmes may frame 'marginal' practices, at home and abroad. Even when they are not explicitly 'audience-based', festivals may actually display audiences in much the same way that they display the work of particular filmmakers or artists. In addition to catalogues, screening programmes, distribution contracts and prizes, festival discourses contribute to the production of public representations of national "collectivity", as well as images of the 'marginal'. It is this aspect of festival discourse that seems to require further attention.



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