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Vanishing Point: An examination of some consequences of globalization for contemporary Irish film

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Abstract

In the following article, some films produced with the support of Bord Scannán na hÉireann (The Irish Film Board) since its reconstitution in 1993 are examined in light of the work of global anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and his theory of global cultural flows. I suggest that cinema, primarily of Hollywood origin, has had a notable influence on the development of Irish society and Irish film. Contemporary Irish film itself also reflects the failure of Irish history to excite the imagination of Ireland's youth as effectively as the seductive depictions of America's past as mediated through the Western and gangster films. Indeed, films made in Ireland today reflect the influence of both these genres. However, as the key to the Hollywood continuity style of film-making is its own self-effacement, this has sometimes been reflected in the effacement of people, politics and place in contemporary Irish film as film-makers endeavor to attract a global audience for their work.

Keywords

Irish Film, Bord Scannán na hÉireann (The Irish Film Board), Globalization, Mediascapes, Ideoscapes

“It was like real families, the ones that you see in the pictures...”

In Martin Duffy's *The Boy From Mercury* (1996), Harry (James Hickey) is an eight-year-old boy in late 1950's Dublin whose perception of reality is largely shaped by the movies he watches. His imagination is fueled particularly by his weekly visits to the local cinema to see *Flash Gordon*. Such has been the influence of these films that he

believes that he is actually not from Earth at all, but from the planet Mercury. Each night he communicates with his fellow Mercurians by torch and he looks forward to his eventual rescue and return to his ‘home planet.’ His best friend Sean (Sean MacCarthy) is a fan of Andy Murphy and cowboy films. Sean comes from a well-off family in Walkinstown. Harry’s family, however, are not wealthy, partly we assume due to the death of Harry’s father five years previously. When Harry visits Sean’s house, it is a wondrous place, ‘like real families’ should be, as seen in the movies Harry has watched.

Harry is not dissimilar to many Irish people whose perceptions of life and the world they live in have been influenced by film, whether in the cinema, on TV, video or today, DVD. Within films, we also find ideas and politics that can be quite persuasive, ideas such as those pertaining to ‘real families’ as Harry remarks. In the following paper, I will examine some films produced with the support of Bord Scannán na hÉireann (The Irish Film Board) since its reconstitution in 1993 in light of the work of global anthropologist Arjun Appadurai¹ and his theory of global cultural flows. In particular, I will attempt to trace in these films some of the differing and crisscrossing paths of what Appadurai has called ‘mediascapes’, such as film, and their inherent ‘ideoscapes.’

Mediascapes refer, according to Appadurai, “both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” through film, TV, newspapers, magazines and other media, and to the ‘images of the world created by these media.’² They provide

large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ‘ethnoscapes’³ to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of ‘news’ and politics are profoundly mixed. What this means is that many audiences throughout the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens and billboards. The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that

the further away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world.⁴

“Ideoscapes,” meanwhile, “are also concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter ideologies of movements explicitly orientated to capturing state power or a piece of it.”⁵ Further, ideoscapes, according to Appadurai, “are composed of elements of the Enlightenment world-view, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation*, and the master term *democracy*.”⁶

The Irish cinema-going experience has come overwhelmingly from Hollywood since independence in 1922.⁷ The Irish Film Board has attempted to counteract Ireland’s huge dependence on imported film by supporting films made in the country and by Irish people. However, Ireland remains a substantial net importer of images, many of them purporting to be of Irish people themselves. Indeed, Kevin Rockett has noted that since the invention of film, Ireland and its people have been one of the enduring themes in world cinemas. Rockett lists almost 2000 Irish-themed films that have been made since 1895. Less than 200 of these, however, have been made in Ireland or with the participation of its people:

The number and range of films about the Irish, especially those produced in the key countries of the Irish diaspora, Australia, Great Britain and the USA, far exceeds the number of fiction films made in Ireland, itself not much more than one-tenth of the almost 2000 titles to be found [in *The Irish Filmography*]. In fact the US accounts for half of all entries. Or put dramatically, more fiction films were produced about the Irish by American film-makers before 1915, when the first indigenous Irish fiction film was made, than in the whole 100 year history of fiction film-making in Ireland. It is this cinema of the Irish diaspora, which was often not made by Irish people, or people of Irish descent, which has mostly formed the image of the Irish in the cinema. The importance of this legacy, therefore, is undeniable.⁸

Pat Murphy's *Nora* (1999) features two of the earliest films made in Ireland prior to independence, *Rory O' More* (1911) and *The Colleen Bawn* (1911). These films were made by the New York based film company Kalem, and directed by Irish-Canadian Sidney Olcott. Murphy suggests the powerful influence of these images by implying that part of the inspiration for James Joyce's classic work, *The Dead*, developed following his wife Nora's visit to the cinema. After viewing a particularly affecting love scene in one of these films, Nora is moved to tears and returns to her apartment to tell James of an earlier relationship with Michael Furey, a former deceased boyfriend, and a man who inspires an important character in *The Dead*.

Rather than encourage film-making in Ireland by providing funds or inducements to Irish film-makers to produce their own films, successive Irish governments instead adopted censorship as their primary policy towards film. This was significant in accelerating the consolidation of Hollywood film fare in Irish cinemas and creating what former Film Board chairperson Lelia Doolan has described as "an audience whose taste has been systematically debased over long years" leading to an "absolute reliance on fairly straight forward narrative Hollywood material."⁹ It also indicated recognition by an Irish state, heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, of the powerful 'ideoscapes' these films carried into Ireland.

Indeed, on the day the Anglo-Irish treaty was under discussion in Dáil Éireann, a film censorship conference was being held by groups concerned about film's impact on the moral fabric of society.¹⁰ Participants at this conference included the Catholic Irish Vigilance Association, the Priest's Social Guild, as well as the Protestant churches. In 1923, a deputation comprised of the groups involved in the conference met with Kevin

O'Higgins, the then Minister for Home Affairs. On his introduction of the Censorship of Films Act that year, O'Higgins claimed to have met a 'thoroughly representative delegation.'¹¹ The fact that one of the central proposals of the film conference of December 1921 – that only films with general or Universal Certificates would be released – became a central plank of this legislation indicates the influence of this deputation. Its result was such that "for the first four decades of national film censorship in Ireland ... about 3,000 films were banned and some 8,000 films cut as the film censors equated Irish children and adults."¹²

Kevin Rockett has suggested that the Catholic Church's main reason for concern at the influence of foreign culture was to preserve its own position "as the primary reservoir of ideological engagement" in Irish society.¹³ The Catholic Church recognized the threat posed to such a position by the powerful ideological role of Hollywood film. As Robert P. Kolker has noted: "When we talk about the classical style of Hollywood film-making, we are talking about more than aesthetics, but about a larger text of economics, politics, ideology and stories - an economics of narrative."¹⁴ Kolker goes on to suggest that as the classical style of Hollywood film-making developed prior to the studio system, the structures of narrative may well have "contributed to the rise of the economies of studio production. In other words, the development of a means to deliver narrative meaning through an economical visual construction, created templates for the formation of an industrial mass production of narrative."¹⁵ I would argue that Hollywood film equally played a crucial role in the changes both culturally and economically in Ireland since the late 1950s. They contributed to the generally enthusiastic embrace of the global economy and culture since that period. Hollywood film, even in its much altered

state when it finally left the censor's office, offered liberating alternatives to the repressive ideologies of Church and State. As Kevin Rockett has noted:

Despite the prohibitions, there still remained an excess of meaning and of pleasure in these mutilated Hollywood films. Here was a life, albeit of 'fantasy', cyclically relayed in familiar genre films, which was as much part of an Irish Cinema as this indigenous artisanal and semi-professional films which only very rarely reached Irish cinema screens after the advent of sound, and before new production parameters emerged in the 1970s. Here were aspects of modernity denied in the official culture: the fast-paced excitement of an urban car chase in a 1930s gangster film only needs to be contrasted with the idealization of the rural world, which was such a feature of official ideology during the early decades of independence, to realize that urban dwellers in particular were more likely to identify with the former before the latter.¹⁶

Luke Gibbons has suggested that the Catholic Church and political establishment's fear of film was also to do with the threat film posed to the tight structures imposed on Irish society post independence:

Cinema's capacity to awaken dormant desires was particularly threatening to a rural society that regarded marriage as primarily an economic transaction, a means of securing or consolidating the family farm. For this reason Hollywood's version of romantic love and tempestuous passions were not simply escapist dreams...cinema flowed into the smallest capillaries of Irish life. Hollywood love did much to undermine the ethos of matchmaking and emotional accountancies that regulated relations in Irish society.¹⁷

In Hugh Brody's study of the rural west of Ireland in the late 1960s he noted the development of

a greater consciousness of urban ways and attitudes.... This consciousness includes a far clearer idea of what romance in marriage is supposed to be. Indirectly, it is from films, magazines and newspapers that the women of rural Ireland have drawn these romantic conceptions. In a society where loneliness and isolation were beginning to abound, these ideas were sure to take a firm root, but they can not be realized in that situation. For the girls at least this means yet another displacement and potential source of anxiety. So women go to the cities to marry and raise families. To a majority of the generation of young women just leaving school and deciding their futures, the prospect of marriage in the countryside is too absurd to consider.¹⁸

Brody's observation is indicative of the considerable influence Hollywood films have had

on Irish people's lives so that, as Gibbons has suggested, "Hollywood itself becomes part...of your own way of organizing your innermost thoughts."¹⁹ Martin McLoone has echoed these sentiments in an article in the American film magazine *Cineaste*:

The influence of American popular culture in Ireland over the years has been so profound that it has penetrated deep into the Irish consciousness. The Irish, perhaps more so than any other European people, have inhabited the imaginative spaces of the US for so long, and been involved so deeply in the myth of the promised land or the land of opportunity that the American dream is deeply embedded in Irish cultural identity.²⁰

Cinema going is featured in a number of the recent films receiving Film Board finance, but particularly pertinent to the above argument are the scenes in Pat O'Connor's *Circle of Friends* (1993) when we see Benny (Minnie Driver) and her suitor Sean Walsh (Alan Cummings) at the cinema watching Marlon Brando in a love scene from *On the Waterfront* (1956). Benny is portrayed as a romantic throughout the film. Despite her parent's best efforts to encourage a relationship with Sean Walsh, who works in her father's drapery shop, Benny has fallen in love with the college rugby hero, Jack (Chris O'Donnell). Benny's parents are planning a secure future for both Benny and their shop, in the hands of their apparently 'dependable' employee Sean Walsh. Benny meanwhile has found the romantic love that Hollywood promised. *Circle of Friends*, however, also exemplifies the powerful influence Hollywood has had on the work of Irish directors themselves.

Beneath the title of the video box presentation of *Circle of Friends*, the following line appears: "For everyone who ever thought the person they loved was out of their reach. Sometimes dreams *do* come true." The centerpiece of the cover is a photo of Benny, the film's main protagonist, and Jack, her love interest, across a stream with a rainbow over their heads. It is a shot used to exemplify the 'romantic comedy' nature of

the film, a genre whose parameters were largely defined and developed by Hollywood. Indeed, the film was mostly funded by American production and distribution companies, including Polygram Pictures and Savoy Pictures,²¹ and includes Chris O'Donnell, a prominent American actor, as Jack, one of the film's leading characters. The scene, however, also sets us up for a stereotypical representation of Ireland, reminiscent of many classic Hollywood films throughout the twentieth century that have used Ireland as their setting.²²

One of the finest exponents of classic Hollywood cinema was the Irish American director John Ford. Pat O'Connor has admitted to having been influenced cinematically by Ford's films, describing Ford's shots as 'all brilliant, they were all perfect.'²³ As Sean Thornton (John Wayne) says on first viewing Mary Kate Dannaher (Maureen O'Hara) in Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952) "Is that real? It couldn't be!" our attention is drawn to the "unreal" or "dreamlike" nature of this representation.²⁴ Equally, the construction of the shots of Knockgleng and the Irish countryside in *Circle of Friends* is reminiscent of Ford's *The Quiet Man*. *Circle of Friends* opens with scenic, almost postcard-like, shots of an Irish village, Knockgleng, in the year 1949. Intimate or love scenes throughout the film inevitably take place beneath trees, by a stream or in Benny's friend Eve's cottage in the wood near Knockgleng. While the story has all the elements of a fairytale – ordinary looking girl wins the heart of attractive college rugby star – this is accentuated by the dreamlike quality given to the scenes through the soft focus techniques used by Ken MacMillan, the film's Director of Photography, in the filming of landscapes and the leading characters. In effect, it is almost as if Ireland is part of what Arjun Appadurai has called an 'imagined world.'²⁵ Ford's influence on O'Connor is equally apparent in his

most recent Irish film, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998). This is particularly evident in the opening shot of the Mundy's cottage on the side of what is ostensibly a Donegal hillside (it is actually a hill in Co. Wicklow). It could well be a shot of "White O'Morn" in *The Quiet Man* (1952) as Sean Thornton sitting on a bridge first beholds his ancestral cottage, bathed in sunlight on a not dissimilar hillside in the distance.²⁶ On the cinematic release of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, American reviewers drew comparisons between O'Connor's film and actors from Ford's *The Quiet Man* with Paul Tatara of CNN commenting on Catherine McCormack who plays Christine, the youngest of the Mundy sisters: "There's something of Maureen O'Hara in McCormack; she has the look of an old fashioned girl while glowing with a kind of wholesome sexuality."²⁷

Catherine McCormack is herself an English actress whose highest profile role to date was the Scottish themed Hollywood blockbuster *Braveheart* (1996), a film which was itself, thanks to Ireland's significant tax incentives, largely made in Ireland. The decision to cast McCormack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, along with the Oscar-winning actress Meryl Streep, was influenced greatly by their familiarity to cinema going audiences throughout the world, particularly in the United States. It is a common feature of contemporary Irish film, including films produced with Film Board support, to feature recognizable foreign stars. Even where such actors are not present, Irish films draw heavily on classical film narratives. As Ruth Barton has noted, most recent Irish cinema is "structurally and formally conservative."²⁸ Robert P. Kohler has written that one of the important ingredients in the success of the classical Hollywood, or continuity, style (of which John Ford was one of the finest exponents) is that audiences identify with the story "and its participants."²⁹ This identification is helped considerably by the use of a 'known

actor.’ However, Kohler also points out that

The classical Hollywood style...asks that form be rendered invisible; that the viewer see only the presence of actors in an unfolding story that seems to be existing on its own.... The key to the continuity style is its self effacement, its ability to show without showing itself, tell a story and make the storytelling disappear so that the story seems to be telling itself.³⁰

The use of foreign stars has been one of the most obvious examples of the increasing effacement of Ireland and things Irish from apparently Irish films. It has also meant that one of the most obvious aspects of identity, the Irish accent, has often suffered in the mouths of British and American actors. As Kevin Rockett remarked at a conference on National Cinema in the Irish Film Centre in 1996:

One distinguishing feature of the local is the importance of textures of speech and voice, essential elements of identity in national cinema. One of the reasons why there is little or no cinema tradition in Ireland is that pressure of market has determined that foreign stars with so-called proper diction should play Irish roles. The trajectory can easily be traced through which American cinema from James Mason in *Odd Man Out* (1947) to Tom Cruise in *Far and Away* (1991) or even more disastrously the 1962 Irish produced adaptation of Synge’s play *Playboy of the Western World* (1962)... The need to maintain the interest of foreign investors in large or medium sized Irish productions who are also aware of the minuscule nature of the Irish box office requires audience recognition of international actors.... In this process as we know from listening to these actors on the screen in Irish roles we may lose local textures of speech and voice.³¹

In the environment described by Rockett, language becomes merely functional as the inherent subtleties of accent are sacrificed in order to make Irish films as accessible as possible to international audiences. It is this ‘death’ of language that the fictitious philosopher Konigsburg laments in Conor McPherson’s *Saltwater* (1999): “The more communication becomes an effective tool in getting us what we want,” Konigsburg remarks, “the more selective we become with information and the less we can really know.”

Where Irish actors have played leading roles, and the subtleties of accent have

been preserved, the influence of American popular culture is no less apparent in many contemporary Irish films. Paddy Breathnach, director of *Ailsa* (1993) and *I Went Down* (1997), has acknowledged the considerable influence of American cinema on his work and his concern with making mainstream film:

Things like *Pulp Fiction* definitely changed the nature of cinema [in the 1990s], gave a different tack, and allowed for dialogue to be used in a different way. I mean, they were influential, but we weren't looking to them.... We were probably more involved in things like *Thelma and Louise* and *Midnight Run* meets the Coen Brothers meets Roddy Doyle. And we didn't do it very deliberately.... We wanted to make a film whose heart was in the mainstream, so we were giving an emotional payback but not trying to be too clever about it. The heart was with those kinds of film where you get that emotional payback; that bonding experience.³²

However, despite his protestations, Breathnach's *I Went Down*, a film also written by Conor McPherson, does share some noteworthy similarities with Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Tarantino reinvigorated the gangster genre in the early 1990s with his first two films, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and the Oscar winning *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and arguably had an important influence thematically, as well as formally, on contemporary Irish film. This may partly account for the popularity of the theme of the "Irish gangster" generally in recent films funded by the Irish Film Board, including three featuring characters based on the real life Irish gangster Martin Cahill.³³

Right from the opening scene of *I Went Down*, the choice of both music and credits is evocative of *Pulp Fiction*, while the use of intertitles also invites comparisons. Likewise, the general theme of two gangsters, Git Hynes (Peter McDonald) and Bunny Kelly (Brendan Gleeson), on a mission reminds one of the duo of Vincent Vega and Jules in *Pulp Fiction*.

Further, there are a number of significant references to the United States in *I Went*

Down. When Git mentions the United States at one stage in the film, Bunny responds enthusiastically “The States is brilliant.” We learn, however, that Bunny has never actually been to America but has seen it “on the telly and that...”. Philip Kemp in *Sight and Sound* recognizes another import from American culture in the scene in which Bunny robs a petrol station, adjacent to which “stands a faded pink construction called ‘The Boom Boom Room.’ Bunny Kelly, with his USA-fixation, drawn from television shows and dime novels, would find his spiritual home there.”³⁴ Equally, one of Bunny’s favorite expressions ‘Chicolito’ is taken either from cowboy films he has watched or from his own preferred ‘pulp fiction,’ the cowboy novel we see him reading at a number of points in the film.

Indeed, the cowboy genre is another popular motif in contemporary Irish film. The opening scene of Sue Clayton’s *The Disappearance of Finbar* (1994/95) introduces “The Roscommon Cowboys,” a band that might have frequented the “Boom Boom Room” featured in *I Went Down*, and who are reminiscent of many Irish country bands down through the years that have embraced the music, and indeed the accents, of American country music. It is a John Wayne film at “the Royal” that gives Miriam (Lisa Harrow) and Jack (Dean Pritchard) a chance to relate outside the often emotionally tense environment of the Murphy household in Kevin Liddy’s *Country* (2000). In David Keating’s *Last of the High Kings* (1994/95) Frankie’s (Jared Leto) Western obsessed younger brother Ray (Peter Keating) entertains his family by reading in his best “wild west” accent from an American cowboy book. Kieron Walsh’s *When Brendan Met Trudy* (2000) features clips from films by one of the most renowned directors of Westerns, John Ford, including Ford’s own influential “Irish western”, *The Quiet Man*.³⁵ Indeed,

Brendan's (Peter McDonald) dialogue is peppered with quotations from American Westerns and he imitates the famous final scene from *The Searchers* (1956), featuring John Wayne posing at a doorway before walking into the distance, at the end of *When Brendan Met Trudy*.

While the American cowboy appears frequently in contemporary Irish film, it is the experiences of the American Indian, however, that Joe Comerford draws on in *High Boot Benny* (1993). Comerford has been one of Ireland's most uncompromising and innovative directors over the last twenty-five years. Set just south of the border with Northern Ireland in a Donegal school, "the Mount," that is attempting to offer an independent non-sectarian approach to education, *High Boot Benny* offers a grim portrayal of contemporary Ireland prior to the IRA ceasefire in the early 1990s. Benny (Marc O'Shea) is portrayed as an unaligned free spirited teenager who, following troubles with the law in the north, is given refuge by the unorthodox family of the school's Matron (Frances Tomelty), and ex-priest and teacher Manley (Alan Devlin), who run "the Mount." However, when Benny finds the body of the school's caretaker, who has been murdered by the IRA for being a British informant, it initiates a chain of events that force him to take a position on the Northern conflict.

Characters in *High Boot Benny* have been failed by both Church and State, whether north or south of the border, and are portrayed as victims of both British repression and Irish neglect. The British army cross the border illegally in pursuit of those responsible for the murder of the caretaker and eventually, in apparent collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, murder both the Matron and Manley. However, the landscape, and conditions of both the school and the area portrayed in the film imply

neglect by the Southern government, while the Catholic Church, in the form of Fr. Bergin (Seamus Ball), pressure the matron to close the school, despite the fact that it is the last refuge for many of its students.

While the globalization process may threaten the future of indigenous cultural practices and identities, it has also brought colonial experiences in different parts of the world closer together. Comerford appears throughout the film to relate the oppression and neglect suffered by the film's characters to the experiences of the American Indian. Benny has a Mohawk haircut and the badge of a buffalo (the animal that provided food, clothing and housing to Native Americans on the Plains) on his jacket is highlighted at a number of points in the film. The music throughout the film, particularly the drumbeats, is reminiscent of Indian drums beating. Indeed, at one stage a student sings a song about Irish people fleeing the famine to join an Indian reservation in America:

A ship was wrecked on America's coast at the end of its journey from Ireland.
The children of famine who made it ashore were raised in the Indian nation. As
the brave and the squaw of a new Indian war they again fought the British...

The film cuts here to Indian like drums and uilleann pipes - Ireland and the Indian nation come together – and a shot of Benny in the crucifixion position tarred and feathered on a hillside. He has been punished by the IRA for destroying a receptacle of blood destined for an injured volunteer.

While Comerford draws attention to American history in his film, the students of “The Mount” are portrayed as singularly uninterested in Irish history. At one stage Fr. Bergin attempts to give the students a history lesson about the area they are studying in. However, the pupils are indifferent to the lesson and eventually one of the boys cuts the wire to Fr. Bergin's microphone and suffers a beating as a result. The schoolboys, it appears, are more interested in Manley's Indian war dance, a device he uses at one stage

to get their attention, than their locality's past. Students in Maurice O'Callaghan's *Broken Harvest* (1993) seem equally uninterested in Irish history. After having been thrown out of class for making noise, Willie Hogan (Joe Jeffers) entertains himself playing with his toy gun and declaring in a mock American accent that "this ain't no cowboys and Injuns, this here's the civil war, darling." In the class concerned, the teacher Master O'Donnell (Jim Queally) was attempting to educate the largely uninterested class on the suffering caused by the civil war in Ireland. However, it is the seductive history of the US that excites the imagination of these children, in particular as related through Hollywood "Cowboys and Indians" films. It is this 'nostalgia' for a past that Irish people never had that Appadurai has described as "one of the central ironies of the politics of global flows, especially in the arena of entertainment and leisure.... Here, we have nostalgia without memory."³⁶

While Comerford emphasizes the difficulty of remaining aloof from the specific politics of the Northern conflict, the influence of international political culture, particularly that of the United States, is apparent in more commercially successful features set in that region.³⁷ The opening line of Jim Sheridan's only Irish Film Board supported feature, *The Boxer* (1998), is spoken by the then President of the US, Bill Clinton: "The sun is shining and I hope it's a good omen for peace in Northern Ireland." The Peace Process in Northern Ireland during the 1990s significantly raised the profile of the region internationally. This was reflected in an increase in Northern themed films produced over the decade, many with Film Board support. These films, however, often exhibited the continued effacement of Ireland from apparently Irish films. While Northern Ireland is a region where identity and people's distinctive cultural differences

are defining characteristics for thousands, films such as Sheridan's *The Boxer*, Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996) (also co-written by Sheridan), and Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1994/95) demonize and exclude exponents of such identities, in preference for a Clintonesque liberal democratic agenda.

The films mentioned above are set at three central moments in the troubles in Northern Ireland. *Nothing Personal* is set at the height of the conflict in 1970s Belfast, during a precarious ceasefire between loyalist and republican groups. *Some Mother's Son* is set during one of the defining moments for contemporary republicanism in Northern Ireland: the 1981 Hunger strikes. This had a crucial bearing on republicans' engagement with constitutional politics in the North which would eventually lead to today's Peace Process. *The Boxer* is set at the beginning of the negotiations in the early 1990s that led to the current peace process in Northern Ireland. However, these films offer little to the debates concerning these moments. Rather, they present personal intimate stories set against the backdrop of these tumultuous events. Thaddeus O'Sullivan has insisted that

commercial-sized audiences...will accept Ireland as inspiration or 'background' (provided they are not constantly reminded of it) and that is how most successful Irish films present it (*The Crying Game*, *In the Name of the Father*). It's a myth that American audiences are interested in films about Ireland, or Irish films. Investors will wearily point out that most films do not make a profit and there's even less chance if that film is Irish.³⁸

It is ironic that O'Sullivan should have acknowledged the inspiration of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1965) on *Nothing Personal* during the film's final credits. Pontecorvo's documentary style portrayal of Algerian revolutionaries was one of the first works of world cinema to examine the real people behind the atrocities that have labeled them "terrorists." However, the political characters O'Sullivan (in common with Sheridan and George) depicts never really move beyond the level of stereotypes.

Nothing Personal, a film that “draws liberally on the iconography of the gangster genre,”³⁹ is described on the video packaging as a “thriller”. The thriller is a cinematic form popularized by Hollywood and described by the Oxford English Dictionary as “an exciting or sensational story or play etc. esp. one involving crime...”. This depoliticization of the troubles to the level of ‘crime’ is reflected in the content of the film. The narrative concerns Liam (John Lynch), a Catholic, who gets lost on the Unionist side of Belfast following a riot and tries to find his way back home. However, in the process he is captured by loyalist paramilitaries who beat him, apparently in an attempt to get information from him on IRA members in his area. However, we discover that the leader of the loyalists, Kenny (James Frain), knows that Liam is not involved in the IRA or with its members. Yet he allows his subordinates to humiliate Liam, reducing their activity to senseless criminal acts without any political motivation. Indeed, characters such as the deranged and ultra-violent Ginger (Ian Hart) appear to extract a sick enjoyment from the atrocities they carry out.

Some Mother’s Son presents the British as manipulative and underhand, concerned only with the demoralization and defeat of the republican project. As Sam Farnsworth (Tom Hollander), the British intelligence officer leading the offensive against republicanism, says at one point: “This is war, not diplomacy ... treat these people for what they are, a bunch of terrorists. You do what it takes to draw them out into the open and then you finish them off.” To the British, Ireland is looked upon as a statistic, like those statistics on the board behind Farnsworth in the situation room listing the numbers of killed and wounded among each of the forces in the North, security and otherwise. The room is presented with its large map, statistics and TV screens like a computer game

where the participants are removed from the reality. The British try to further dehumanize their opponents through a new three pronged strategy devised by the Prime Minister,

Mrs. Thatcher, and outlined by Farnsworth:

Isolation, criminalization, demoralization. We've cut off these routes across the border [pointing at map]. We've taken control of these roads. We isolate the community. Criminalization. These people are criminals. They are not soldiers, they are not guerrillas. There is no war, there is only crime. Demoralization. I want to see these people in jail...it is in the prisons that we will break the back of the IRA.

The political situation in the north is presented in *Nothing Personal* and *Some Mother's Son* as being manipulated by people at the top of each community for their own selfish reasons to the detriment of people within these communities. There is little attempt to engage with, or attempt to comprehend, the political leaders of either loyalism or republicanism. The loyalist leader Leonard Wilson (Michael Gambon) in *Nothing Personal* is portrayed as someone primarily concerned with how the sectarian conflict might interfere with his own highly profitable extortion racket. In one scene in particular, we witness one of Wilson's henchmen collect protection money from a bar in a Protestant area. Sinn Féin and the IRA in *Some Mother's Son* are, like the British establishment, portrayed as shady characters. Danny Boyle (Ciaran Hinds), the head of Sinn Féin in Belfast, is presented as someone manipulating the troubles, to the detriment of many in his own community. As Father Daly (Gerard McSorley) warns Cathleen and Annie after the death of one of the hunger strikers: "This isn't a protest anymore. These people are using these funerals to win support."

The Boxer is essentially the love story of Danny (Daniel Day Lewis) and Maggie (Emily Watson) set against the backdrop of the troubles. When Danny Flynn is released from prison, he finds he still has feelings for Maggie, his former girlfriend. However,

Maggie has married since Danny's incarceration. More significantly, she has married an IRA man who is now in prison, making Maggie 'untouchable,' even though Maggie admits in one scene that her marriage "was over before Liam (her son played by Ciaran Fitzgerald) was born." Thus "the troubles" get in the way of the path of true love.

The Boxer demonizes members of the republican movement, personified in Harry (Gerard McSorley), as callous, ruthless and irrational terrorists who must be shot and killed for the Peace Process to prevail. While Danny attempts to rebuild his life after prison through the establishment of a non-sectarian gym, some republicans such as Harry will go to any lengths, including breaking a ceasefire, in order apparently to destroy any cross community solidarity that Danny's gym might encourage. As Donald Clarke has asked, "Quite why the republicans would be so concerned about one boxing gymnasium is not clear. A quick sub-plot involving some hidden explosives disposed of by the hero is dropped in to paper over this crack. But one still can't quite see why they are bothering with him."⁴⁰

The irrationality of the republican movement is further emphasized in *Some Mother's Son*, where its members are portrayed as acting on emotion rather than thought. The attack that Frank (David O'Hara) and Gerard (Aidan Gillen) carry out on the British army is presented as an unsanctioned emotional reaction to the blowing up of bridges by the British. Frank insists "we have to retaliate" even though they have "no clearance from Dublin."

The politics of each of these films parallels the liberal democratic politics espoused by the Clinton administration during the Peace Process. Towards the end of the largely American funded *Some Mother's Son*,⁴¹ in a pivotal scene that is played in slow

motion for effect, we see Boyle willing to allow the hunger strikers to die for the sake of the word ‘right’, rather than ‘privilege’. We are led by the camera, which is clearly from the point of view of Kathleen, to see all the protagonists of the troubles as equally manipulative and flawed. This clear positioning of perspective is indicative of a strategy in each of these films. While they demonize the proponents of the politics of both loyalism and republicanism, they do so by suggesting, most explicitly in *Some Mother’s Son* and *The Boxer*, a liberal democracy that would bring peace and harmony if only the men with the guns would go away.

This is most clearly illustrated through the character of Kathleen in *Some Mother’s Son*. She is portrayed as a woman who abhors the violence of groups such as the IRA, and appears to have little interest, or support for their politics. However, she is willing to support and indeed canvas for a member of the IRA, Bobby Sands, in his attempt to enter the political process. It is a position, as one commentator has suggested, “not at all dissimilar from the power sharing strategies proposed by Clinton’s administration in the early 1990s.... The application of liberal democratic nostrums to Northern Irish politics.”⁴² This standpoint attempts to paper over the political and social divisions within the society by appealing to the common humanity of all. However, in so doing it effaces those real and tangible cultural differences that exist. Peter Flynn is surely correct in proposing that

The “non-exclusion of difference” that [*Some Mother’s Son*] purportedly serves to promote is erased by the more fundamental (market driven) urge to exclude or eradicate difference and appeal to a homogenized and undifferentiated global audience. The “Hollywoodization” inherent in this tendency functions to replace the colonial strictures of British identity on the Irish body politic with those of American (neocolonial) globalism.⁴³

Probably the best recent example of the effacement of distinguishing aspects of

Irish identity is to be found in Stephen Bradley's Irish/German/Icelandic⁴⁴ co-production *Sweetie Barrett* (1998). Sweetie (Brendan Gleeson) is a mentally retarded man who is let go by the circus he appears to have worked with all his life. Eventually, he finds a job in a fishing village working for Flick Hennessy (Tony Rohr), looking after his yard and helping him store his illegally smuggled poteen. This trade is carried on with the collusion of the corrupt Detective Bone (Liam Cunningham), the local law enforcer who controls the harbor and its activities ruthlessly. Sweetie befriends a young boy in the village, to whom he teaches some of the skills he acquired in the circus. When the young boy is killed in a hit and run by Detective Bone, Sweetie confronts him and, after a struggle, Bone is killed.

Apart from the character's accents in *Sweetie Barrett*, the only reference to Ireland throughout this apparently Irish film, however, is in "Rixxolis Irish-Italian circus" at the beginning. Even the registration plates are missing from the few vehicles that appear. In the bar, the names of the drink have been taken off the taps and the banknotes used to gamble on Sweetie's drinking prowess have more in common with board-game currency than legal tender in Ireland. Detective Bone, in his long leather coat and with an ever-present cigar between his lips, looks more like a cross between the gangster Carlito Braganti (Al Pacino in *Carlito's Way* (1993)), and the 'man with no name' from Sergio Leone's 'Spaghetti Westerns', than any recognizable Irish police officer. Meanwhile, the only indication that his two subordinates are police officers is the insignia on the shoulders of their anoraks. Indeed, the taxi that is involved in the hit and run incident with Sweetie's young friend could well be from the streets of New York, if (re) painted yellow, rather than purple.

In conclusion, I suggest that cinema, primarily of Hollywood origin, has had a notable influence on the development of Irish society and Irish film. Contemporary Irish film itself also reflects the impact of cinema on appreciations of Irish history, which often fails to engage Ireland's youth as effectively as the seductive portrayals of America's past as mediated through the Western and gangster films. Indeed, each of these genres has had a considerable influence on the form and content of Irish film today. However, as the key to the Hollywood continuity style of film-making is its own self-effacement, this has sometimes been reflected in the effacement of people, politics and place in contemporary Irish film in order to appeal to a homogenized and undifferentiated global audience.

Endnotes:

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- ¹ Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 27-47.
- ² *Ibid.*, 35.
- ³ Appadurai describes "ethnoscapes" as the "landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and individuals". *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 36 The italics are from the original text.
- ⁷ Kevin Rockett, "Aspects of the Los Angelesation of Ireland," *Irish Communications Review*, Vol. 1, 1991: 19.
- ⁸ Kevin Rockett, *The Irish Filmography*, (Red Mountain Media: Dublin, 1996): i.
- ⁹ Lelia Doolan, personal interview, 13 November 2000.
- ¹⁰ Kevin Rockett, "Disguising Dependence: Separatism and Foreign Mass Culture," *Circa* 49 (1990): 26.
- ¹¹ Kevin Rockett, "Film Censorship and the State," *Film Directions* 9 (1980): 11.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹³ Rockett, (1990): 22.
- ¹⁴ Robert P. Kolker, "The Film Text and Film Form," *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 18.
- ¹⁵ Robert P. Kolker, "The Film Text and Film Form," 18.
- ¹⁶ Rockett, (1991): 20.
- ¹⁷ Luke Gibbons, Keynote address, "Technologies of Desire: Media, Modernity, & Sexuality in Recent Irish Cinema," *Irish Film: A Mirror Up To Culture Conference*, The VFH Center for Media & Culture, Charlottesville, Virginia USA, 10 May 1996.
- ¹⁸ Hugh Brody, *Inishkillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*, (Harmondsworth: The Penguin Press, 1973): 128-129.
- ¹⁹ Luke Gibbons, Keynote address, 10 May 1996.
- ²⁰ Martin McLoone, "Reimagining the Nation: Themes and Issues in Irish cinema," *Cineaste*, 2-3 (1999): 33.

²¹ This information is available in the credits to *Circle of Friends*.

²² The author is reminded of *Finian's Rainbow* (1968), *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* (1959) and, of course, the association of Leprechauns with rainbows.

²³ Elaine Lennon, "Inventing the Director," *Film Ireland*, April/May. 1997: 15, 17.

²⁴ This point is made by Luke Gibbons in his chapter 'Romanticism, Realism and Irish Cinema,' in *Cinema and Ireland* (1988): 200.

²⁵ Appadurai, 35. Appadurai uses the term "imagined worlds" with respect to his model for global cultural flows, which includes 'mediascapes' and 'ideoscapes.' He uses the suffix '-scape' to indicate that these are not objectively given constructs, appearing the same from all standpoints, but rather deeply perspectival concepts: "inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what (extending Benedict Anderson) I would call *imagined worlds*, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread across the globe."

²⁶ Coincidentally, the 'ancestral cottage' in *The Quiet Man* was not as it seemed to be. It was actually a false backdrop, as Luke Gibbons notes in *Cinema and Ireland*, (1988): 225.

²⁷ Paul Tataru, "Streep overshadowed by others 'Dancing at Lughnasa,'" *CNN Online*, 9 December 1998. <<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9812/09/review.lughnasa>>

²⁸ Ruth Barton, "From History to Heritage: Some recent developments in Irish Cinema." *The Irish Review* 21 (1997): 45.

²⁹ Kolker, (1998): 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

³¹ Kevin Rockett, "A State called Irish National Cinema," *Projecting the Nation: National Cinema in an International Frame Conference*, Irish Film Centre, Dublin, 16 November 1996.

³² Greg King, "Peat Fiction? Greg King Talks to Irish director Paddy Breathnach about *I Went Down*, the quirky new crime thriller from Ireland," *The Reel Ring*, December 1997. <<http://www.alphalink.com.au/~pjh/a018pad.htm>>

³³ These are John Boorman's *The General* (1998), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (1999) and John MacKenzie's *When The Sky Falls* (1999). Other gangster themed films have included Gillies MacKinnon's *Trojan Eddie* (1996), Colm Villa's *Sunset Heights* (1998), and Fintan Connolly's *Flick* (1999), while Thaddeus O' Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1994/95) "draws liberally on the iconography of the gangster genre" (Ruth Barton, "Feisty Colleens and Faithful Sons," *Cineaste*, 2-3 (1999): 45).

³⁴ Philip Kemp, review of *I Went Down, Sight and Sound*, 2 (1997): 45. Indeed, it is the United States that appears to be the eventual destination for Git and Bunny, as they drive off at the film's end towards their plane in a new BMW.

³⁵ The other Westerns are *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *The Searchers* (1956).

³⁶ Appadurai, 30.

³⁷ While *High Boot Benny* failed to get a widespread theatrical release in Ireland, *The Boxer* (£800,000), *Some Mother's Son* (£750,000) and *Nothing Personal* (£70,000) each enjoyed varying degrees of success at the Irish box office (Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*. [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000]: 286).

³⁸ Interview with Thaddeus O'Sullivan in "Irish Cinema at the Crossroads: A Filmmaker's Symposium," *Cineaste*, 2-3 (1999): 72. The italics are from the original text.

³⁹ Ruth Barton, "Feisty Colleens and Faithful Sons," *Cineaste*, 2-3 (1999): 45

⁴⁰ Donald Clarke, review of *The Boxer*, *Film Ireland*, February/March 1998: 36.

⁴¹ *Some Mother's Son* and *The Boxer* both received significant funding from the Hollywood studio, Universal. Film Four International, a subsidiary of the British Television station Channel 4, largely funded *Nothing Personal*. This information is available on the video sleeves of each of these films.

⁴² Peter Flynn, "Some Mother's Son," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, July 2000, Part 3, 3. <<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/29/somemothersson3.html>>

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, article on *Sweetie Barrett*, *The Europe of Cultural Co-operation*. <<http://culture.coe.fr/eurimages/100%20films/sweetie%20barrett.htm>>