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Northern Irish film: is it finding its voice?

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1975: *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. (Heaney, 1975, p52)

2009: is Northern Irish Film finally, after nearly three decades of development beginning to find its voice? I'm going to argue that it has come of age because of its ability to accommodate the demands of the cinematic popular form while investigating the controversial. I believe that this new confidence has been achieved over the past thirty odd years through the creation of a whole series of interesting if not always commercially viable feature film experiments.

I also want to propose that currently there is an additional opportunity that film makers in Northern Ireland should begin to investigate - the new media world which links film and TV making to the internet and promotes interactivity. It's a world where the filmmaker can speak directly to a selected and engaged audience that is familiar with his/her work. Multi – platform production can offer the filmmaker the opportunity to engage with smaller and more specific audiences who are open to receiving their entertainment in new and interactive ways.

To understand why I am being so optimistic it is first necessary to set out some of the history and film making practice that has lead Northern Ireland Screen in 2009 to suggest:

'The screen agency's profile is at an all time high amongst the global filmmaking community'.

Filmmaking is new to Northern Ireland and in the past has not developed much of a production culture. Jon Hill has given us the most comprehensive account of its development in his book '*Cinema and Northern Ireland*' (2006). He suggests that the unionist government first identified the propaganda possibilities of film in the 1920/30s and any production that was undertaken was used to promote 'Ulster' as a distinct cultural entity. This failed he suggests due to the all pervading already well established notions of what constituted Irishness.

The situation was further complicated by the censorship of films in Northern Ireland due to what was perceived as its damaging effects by Unionist leaders. They were not alone in thinking this at this time but their views led to the banning of films in Northern Ireland that could be shown in England and Eire. The arrival of TV to Northern Ireland in the 1950s ensured that this concern was shifted to the development of programmes for broadcast and the relationship between film and TV has been fairly close since then.

It is not until the 1960s that there is any state policy concerned with the cultural and economic aspects of film and its production and at that point there was no funding with which to develop it. This in turn coincided with the emergence of the unrest that was to become known as the 'Troubles'. Northern Ireland's Film production is therefore very caught up with the imagery of these Troubles. (Hill, 2006, chapter 6)

The 1970s were a very violent time in the conflict, a time of tit for tat murders and retaliations. A number of people have written about these times in novels, short stories and poems but there were very few films made. Heaney's poem, *Whatever you say, say Nothing*, speaks of a provincial people hemmed in by the past and silenced by the conflict.

I was brought up in Northern Ireland during the worst period of these Troubles - a teenager in the 1970s. Although technically an outsider my Polish background ensured I was subsumed into the Catholic Nationalist community even though I lived in a predominantly Protestant area. It was a time when people were forced to take sides to line up with one point of view or another.

Heaney's poem aptly voiced my own feelings on the parochial nature of the conflict. But once the conflict ended, as a writer and film maker, I felt compelled to tell my story. Although no longer living there I was part of the developments, which took place in the 1990s to find new writers with interesting stories to tell. I found writing about the situation difficult because I was always concerned to offer a balanced and non partisan view of the situation. I was worried and uncertain

about my political views. As a result none of my efforts ever really succeeded in offering anything new to the debate.

Ronan Bennett (1994/95) (writer of a number of TV plays about Northern Ireland) suggests that the lack of success in the 70s and 80s was in part due to writers using the same conventions as those engaged in media reporting. These views were that the Troubles were an irrational slaughter, that both sides were to blame, and were driven by psychopathic instincts, that sensitive people did not get involved and that there was no alternative to British rule. This makes it difficult to admit to having any sort of agenda.

Caught in a polarised position Northern Irish writers felt the need to tread carefully across boundaries weaving events and imaginings together with the heavy responsibility to remain true to their political commitments while producing a positive explanation that is intelligible to a wider audience that perhaps does not share these concerns. I agree with Seamus Deane whose novel 'Reading in the Dark' is currently being developed into a film in Northern Ireland by writer Ronan Bennett who suggests that 'It's impossible to be measured in Northern Ireland, perhaps one shouldn't bother.' (Fraser, N 1996)

Despite the lack of film production within Northern Ireland during the 60s there were still a small number of films made. *Odd Man Out* (Carol Reid), *The Gentle Gunman*, and *Shake hands with the Devil* have all been written about extensively and I'm not going to repeat that here except to agree that they have set a mark and standard for all the films that have followed.

Martin McLoone in his book *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland* (2008) writing about Ireland in general rather than Northern Ireland in particular very clearly points out that Irish emigration to England and America has resulted in a very special interplay between the cultures and this is reflected in the film making that has resulted. 'The Ireland of the new millennium (he suggests) is caught between its nationalist past, its European future and its American imagination.' (McLoone, 2008, p6)

This is specifically important to Northern Ireland, which still maintains its constitutional links to England while at the same time working closely with Eire through the European Union. Filmmaking in Northern Ireland by necessity has therefore been dependent on support from Britain and Eire. America given its central role in feature film production has also contributed to this mix often through its provision of funds but also through the production of a number of films in the 1990s - Patriot Games (1992), Blown Away (1994), The Devil's Own (1997).

For this reason when I'm looking at Northern Irish film I'm looking at a broad range of films which feature the issues and concerns of the North of Ireland but not necessarily at films that have been exclusively funded, or made in Northern Ireland by local personnel. So the voice or voices of Northern Ireland film are not necessarily all Northern Irish.

Indeed due to the conflict that has raged over the last 40 years there is, as yet, no sense of shared identity in Northern Ireland, it is impossible to talk of these films, which explore the politics of partition and the region's identity, in a national context when any sense of national identity is disputed. The concept of Northern Irish film remains fluid and relates to any film, which has a significant relationship to Northern Ireland. I want to argue that this can be strength rather than a problem for its cinema.

But back to the history. Despite the continued lack of funding available films were made in the 1970s and 80s. Many of these used experimental methods of filmmaking, taken from Western or Eastern European cinema. I'm talking here of filmmakers such as Pat Murphy, Bob Quinn, Cathal Black, Alan Clarke and to some extent Neil Jordan. These filmmakers maintained that the ideas that they wanted to express would not easily fit into what would be described as the conventional Hollywood commercial film structure. They argued that the oblique and metaphoric, poetic language of experimental film was more able to express the conflicting and sometimes contradictory nature of the material they wanted to explore. (Rocket, Gibbons, Hill, 1988)

Therefore, no matter how innovative and intelligent these films were, whatever was being said at this time was being said to a particularly small and already informed audience. In fact Neil Jordan, himself initially a novelist, suggested at the time that coming from a literary culture, making a film was like tackling a whole new language. Both the form and the way the form was realised were new to the Irish experience.

Many films were banned or censored at this time. The BBC chose not to broadcast their own commission of Max Ophul's documentary, *A sense of Loss* in 1972; *Henessey*, a feature film (1975) was not screened by the ABC and Odeon cinemas because they felt it to be inflammatory effectively banning it from the UK, and *Mother Ireland*, a documentary made by Derry Film and Video which featured a picture of Mairead Farrell, a well known member of the IRA ,(1988) was the first programme to be axed under the broadcasting ban introduced by the Conservative government which was only repealed after the ceasefires were announced in 1994.

Given that Northern Ireland was being ruled directly by Britain, the launch of Channel 4 was a significant development. In line with its remit to seek out new and interesting voices and 'represent the alternative and oppositional voice' the Department of Independent Film and Video formed a number of Franchised not for profit workshops including Derry Film and Video. This workshop made a number of documentaries before beginning its first feature in 1989, *Hush a Bye Baby*.

The result of all this activity was the formation of the Northern Ireland Film Council whose job it would be to promote local film and video production and culture. The increased activity of BBC Northern Ireland's drama output, the availability of Lottery funding and the establishment of the Irish Film Board also contributed to increased film production. As a result commercial film making in Northern Ireland was born in the 1990s.

Another compelling reason for this was the fact that the political and economic background was changing. After many years of violence both Loyalist and Nationalist groups called a ceasefire in 1994. This was to lay the basis for what was to become the peace process that would eventually result in the Good Friday Agreement.

All these developments resulted in a small amount of money being made available to make films and the beginnings of a climate in which it was possible to examine the past and so Northern Irish cinema began the process of reimagining post conflict Northern Ireland. It was a time to say something and many writers and directors from England, Ireland and America set about making a range of popular films.

Neil Jordan made the *Crying Game* and Jim Sheridan made *In the name of the Father*. Both were very popular and commercially successful films, which interrogated stereotypes and began to signal a changing political mood, one of peaceful resistance. Both films received a host of awards but were greeted with controversy and criticism for different reasons. As Neil Jordan said (Jordan, N, 1996) 'In Ireland I was accused of misusing public funds, portraying the Irish as irrational and prone to atavistic violence, reinforcing colonial stereotypes etc.'

Jim Sheridan's film tells the story of how the Guildford Four became wrongly imprisoned in British jails. Much was made of the factual inaccuracies of his film but Sheridan makes it very clear that his intention was not to elucidate the facts of the situation but to hold up a mirror to Britain in an attempt to show that a mistake had been made. 'If you can't say that then the whole thing really does come tumbling down' he maintains in a TV programme called *Ourselves Alone* made by Channel 4 in 1996. At around the same time Margo Harkins low budget *Hush a Bye Baby* was also screened on Channel 4 and received the highest ratings for its slot. Again there were protests from Derry but suddenly the Irish question was on the big screen and attracting large audiences as well as controversy.

Some 18 feature films were made along with 7 television dramas. Jon Hill was critical of these developments and characterised Neil Jordan's films as British and 'unequal to the challenge of their subject matter and as a result have obscured as much as they have illuminated the issues with which they have dealt'. (Rocket, Gibbons, Hill 1988 p85)

More recently after analysing these and a range of more recent films Hill rather depressingly concludes that 'while troubles drama may often have settled into conventional patterns, the integration of troubles subject matter into popular cinematic formats has proved problematic. This has remained so despite the announcement of the ceasefires. For while the prospect of peace may have spurred a new cycle of 'upbeat' films aimed at the popular audience, they none the less remain haunted by the realities of continuing social division.' (Hill, 2006, p242)

In the traditional troubles paradigm, a 'gentle gunman' takes the central role and is unable to breakaway from his comrades, giving rise to fatalism and pessimism. The light entertainment value is provided through the central character's romance. For Hill this 'Ceasefire Cinema' characterised by films such as *Nothing Personal*, *The Boxer* and *Resurrection Man*, although moving away from this paradigm, still demonstrate the difficulty in moving beyond this point. They maybe optimistic but they have yet to engage with any solution.

Martin McLoone on the other hand saw these 1990s films as the development of an indigenous cinema, which he said 'demonstrated a critical engagement with the legacy of Irish cultural nationalism'. (McLoone, 2008, p) The failings that he sees in these films, such as the lack of a developed loyalist dimension, he suggests are due to the conventions of mainstream cinema rather than a Nationalist filmmaking conspiracy.

These mainstream conventions demand a hero – a main character who is clearly drawn and who is opposed by an identifiable villain. The hero travels from a position of equilibrium through various disruptions to emerge at a new place with

new knowledge. McLoone does not feel that this form is particularly conducive to the 'contradictory, historical and multilayered complexities of politics'. (McLoone, 2008, p196)

In opposition to both these analyses, Brian McIlroy (2001) in his book 'Shooting to Kill': Filmmaking and the Troubles in N.Ireland argues that these 1990s films were dominated by Irish Nationalist and Republican ideology saying that these visions by Jordan, Sherridan, George, Comerford and O'Connor are problematic in that they concentrate on the Catholic community, 'The representation of the majority Protestant community is so perfunctory in these films that the viewer could be blamed for thinking that the British government is entirely at fault for the violence and instability.' (McIlroy, 2001, p9)

Some films were limited in their political complexity, perhaps allowing the popular form to constrain their development. But this was not true of every filmmaker's attempts. As Ronan Bennett stated at the time about Neil Jordan's work, 'There is a very real and a very important sense of ambiguity around Jordan. It is the ambiguity central to artistic endeavour. Ambiguity here is not neutrality but the recognition that doubt, dilemma, crisis and confusion - personal, moral, political - play a crucial part in creating a point of view in the work. Jordan's critics are polemicists. To them certainty, right and absolute truth are things apparently easily grasped, clearly defined and spurned only by the wilfully degenerate. No self-respecting filmmaker can put such fixity of purpose and belief in his work.' (Bennett, R 1996)

It is also true that Protestants have not been featured very widely in these 1990 films. There were films made about the Protestant experience but December Bride, Nothing Personal and Resurrection Man were all limited successes but it wasn't until Colin Bateman emerged into the film production world in late the late 1990s that a 'Unionist Thriller' Divorcing Jack was developed.

This has something to do with the fact that not many in the protestant community decided to engage with this form of expression. Richard Williams, chief

executive of the Northern Ireland Screen has said 'there isn't a pile of projects in our office that we're somehow rejecting. That sort of material is rarely written. Interestingly, writers from a Protestant background have a tendency to just shift away from here and ply their trade elsewhere. But even when they do stay here they've a tendency not to write about this sort of thing.' (McKittrick, 2008)

But these arguments essentially miss the point. All these films were made within 10 years of each other – a short time in the feature film business. It was a time when film organisations in the North were finding their feet and looking for the talent of the future. The decade reflected an important learning process for a varied range of English, American and Irish filmmakers.

They tried to inject ambiguity into the popular form at the same time as offering a more partisan view. They didn't always succeed, but this public adoption of a 'position' involved a struggle between moral and artistic integrity and necessity. It was played out in the heat of a very public criticism that, due to the popular form that the films adopted, took place in the larger environment of a worldwide debate.

By the end of the 1990's more funding became available due to the changing nature of the Northern Ireland economy. Reflecting New Labour's desire to promote and strengthen the creative industries the state engaged in a rush to develop the commercial bedrock of the filmmaking culture. But during the 1990s the commercial success of these films began to diminish while at the same time the peace process was stalling. Audiences were beginning to tire of the endless talks and the lack of a resolution. This may have explained the drive to then invest in material without such a political content.

By 1997 Northern Ireland Screen had placed a high importance on the commercial viability of the product. The subsequent productions, *Mad about Mambo* (1999), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (1999) and *With or Without You* (1998), reflected the general revival of interest in Romantic comedies, as seen in the success of films such as *Sliding Doors* and *Notting Hill*. I would suggest that

at this time the film making community in Northern Ireland were keen to put the past behind them to show that they were engaged with global filmmaking practice and trends.

Having begun the dialogue of how to talk about the controversial political and cultural issues facing Northern Ireland, it appeared that we were in danger of throwing it all away in order to placate an international marketplace that had had enough of us. This is understandable if you have hitched your cart to the film as economic development horse. So Northern Irish filmmaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s tended to demonstrate the downside of engaging with the popular form.

Then suddenly along came Paul Greengrass who made *Bloody Sunday* (2002) suggesting that he ' was very lucky. I made that film at the height of optimism. That definitely put wind in the sails of the project. We thought let's take the one event – Bloody Sunday – for which there is definitely no shared narrative. Let's try and persuade a large number of people from Derry who were either on that march or whose family members were on the march, and a large number of soldiers who had served in Northern Ireland, and see if we can take the known facts and together shape a shared narrative cinematically. Then when it is all done, we can all as a group say it must have been a bit like that.' (Macnab 2008)

Oddly enough his film did not provoke a shared experience in Northern Ireland where there was much protest over its release. Unionist politicians in Northern Ireland attacked it for its pro republican bias. But the film was a huge success both critically and financially and had a much wider draw than the British and Irish audiences that had been estimated, speaking as it did to the world about its shared experience around the 9/11 events. Films about the Northern Ireland experience had developed a new resonance - they were helping to answer our questions about why these terrible things were happening.

Many of the writers and directors of this period were able to go on to write about conflict in other countries and contribute to a range of popular films that continue

to engage audiences in these issues. Ronan Bennett – a northern Irish screenwriter and novelist wrote *Hamburg Cell* : Neil Jordan Irish writer/director subsequently engaged in a number of different genre and is probably Ireland's most famous filmmaker to date: Paul Greengrass an English writer/director made *Omagh* and then went on to make his name in action films: Terry George Irish writer and director of *Some Mother's Son* has gone on to make other award winning films such as *Hotel Rwanda*: Colin Bateman has gone on to contribute an Irish perspective to British television through his creation *Murphy's Law*.

Their contribution to what has become know as Northern Irish cinema and TV is significant. The issues raised by their films have contributed to general debate about both national cinema and the forms that such a cinema should take. No small achievement for an industry, which has only been in serious operation for 20 years - a pretty good strike record if you ask me.

These writers, producers and directors have helped give that small area called Northern Ireland a global voice, a voice that is offering new insights into urban conflicts, which continue to feature in our modern world. Their success supports my hypothesis that it was an important endeavour to engage in filmmaking ventures, which are popular in form when discussing Northern Ireland's past.

So what of the future? I want to turn my attention briefly to the recent films, which have once again featured the troubles. These films have been on the whole well received as has been suggested by my opening quote from the Northern Ireland Screen. *Hunger* (2008) made by Steve McQueen won the Camera d'Or for best First Film at Cannes, *Five Minutes from Heaven* (2009) won the screenwriting and directing prizes at the Sundance Festival. *Only Fifty Dead Men Walking* was less feted on its release and this has probably something to do with the fact that it retreads the old ground of some of the 90s Northern Irish cinema with its cinematic stereotypes. 1990's popular cinema has paved the way for these new takes on the past as has the resolution of the conflict.

The first two of these films have adopted new ways to express their ideas. In particular McQueen's film *Hunger* has been described as an art film by many and a 'work that is characterised by its poetic tone and slow cumulative power' by Sean O'Hagan (2008) in his *Observer* article in particular. Art or not his film is once again opening the door to new ways of filmmaking.

Despite its success *Hunger* has not made large profits. It is for this reason that I suggest that filmmakers working in this way should investigate the emerging market of multi platform production. This form of production is likely to work well for those who have already built up a reputation for their work and a relationship with their audiences.

Already filmmakers are beginning to market their films directly to their public through such sites as YouTube and iTunes. It may also appeal to new writers and directors who want to try out their work on audiences without the additional pressure of having to justify large production budgets and investment. It may well help filmmakers who have so far been underrepresented in the filmmaking culture that is Northern Ireland film, to establish an appreciative audience who could give confidence to their ambitions.

Northern Ireland screen has already realised that it is necessary to engage in this form of production by making available funding for this form of work through its new digital funding programme, by training writers to work for online soaps and by making a web portal for its Irish language programmes. This form of work also promotes and is more open to collaborative working methods. Maybe instead of searching for that illusive and I would argue counterproductive national film culture for Northern Ireland we should be looking at using technologies that help to promote collaborations between English, American, Irish and any other nationality of filmmakers who wants to engage in the filmmaking and discussion that is so essential to the reimagining of Northern Ireland.

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