Book Review of Brian McIlroy, Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland

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SHOOTING TO KILL: FILMMAKING AND THE "TROUBLES" IN NORTHERN IRELAND
Brian McIlroy

Reviewed by Casey A. Jarrin

Writing about representations of ethnic violence in Northern Ireland can rarely constitute an apolitical move, and Brian McIlroy’s ambitious and animated intervention in the current critical dialogue is no exception. Originally published in October 1998 (launched in Dublin and at the Cork Film Festival), the first edition of Shooting to Kill was greeted with mixed reviews and sparked much public debate. Three years, fourteen revised chapters, and several appendices later, McIlroy has produced an updated, expanded, and still controversial text that demands attention from the international film community.

SHOOTING TO KILL

A vital project: a genuine attempt to respond to the "dearth of articulate civilian Protestant unionist voices in film," to locate the set of institutional and ideological practices that have limited the opportunities available to Protestant filmmakers, and finally to identify alternatives to those nationalist narratives that have dominated Irish cinema in the wake of the "Troubles." The book interrogates the problems of representation and difference that plague all forms of aesthetic production in a post-structuralist world, and have come to the critical fore within post-colonial discourse of the last decade.

However, in his revisionist attempt to recuperate a Protestant voice—and spectator—in contemporary Irish cinema, McIlroy is quick to identify a clear antagonist: a seemingly monolithic pro-nationalist cinematic canon, committed to what McIlroy repeatedly terms (borrowing from Tom Nairn) the "anti-imperialist myth." McIlroy specifically targets those representations that reduce the situation in Northern Ireland to a transparent milieux, especially those that reduce the complexity of the "Troubles," altogether elides the voice of Protestant unionists. In the end, the sweat on McIlroy's critical brow is too visible. As he positions the text within a constellation of historical, political, and revisionist theory, Shooting to Kill ultimately reads as an impassioned indictment of pro-nationalist filmmakers and their filmmaking practices.

In a brief yet affectively powerful Preface, McIlroy begins the book in the autobiographical mode. His account of how "my formative years in Northern Ireland...coincided with the worst of the "Troubles" invokes childhood brushes with sectarian violence. As McIlroy names 1970s Belfast "a dark theatre of the absurd and sometimes a veritable theatre of cruelty," such characterizations establish his theoretical and personal engagement with representational politics and the aesthetics of violence. The general critical method of Shooting to Kill is that of the "committed documentarian" (McIlroy later spotlights Chuck Kleinhans’ "excellent recipe for the ideal committed documentarian," a recipe which calls for "political analysis in tandem with emotional commitment"). As first illustrated in the opening pages, McIlroy engages in a political analysis of visual representations of the "Troubles," without ever obscuring his "emotional commitment" to Protestant unionism.
As his argument evolves, McIlroy engages in impassioned criticism of the Irish filmmaking "establishment"; he presents a reductive characterization of "the innate intellectual weakness in the dominant cinematic heritage of Ireland"—a heritage appropriated by Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, for example, and proliferated by what McIlroy portrays as the group of nationalist ideologues at Field Day. (Originally founded in Derry in 1980, the Field Day collective began as a theatre company of actors, playwrights, poets, and public intellectuals from Northern Ireland—with Stephen Rea, Brian Friel, and Seamus Deane at the helm—which then branched out into a publication venue for critical and cultural theory.)

McIlroy's allegations of the "exclusionary aesthetics" of Field Day are nothing new. Witness the brouhaha that ensued after the publication of the first three volumes of the 1991 Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing. Yet for an individual committed to reversing the "exclusionary aesthetics" of dominant film narratives, complicating those narratives, and allowing for the voices of Northern Irish citizens to both speak and be represented, McIlroy uses "Protestant" and "unionist" (and even "pro-Britain") too interchangeably. Although McIlroy recognizes the incendiary effect of such ideologically weighted terms, and concedes (via Said) the need to "get beyond... debilitating binary oppositions," he provides no alternative to a Protestant versus Catholic vocabulary.

In a problematic moment of definition, McIlroy catalogs the primary forms of unionism, as practiced in the contemporary North. While he lists the economic and intellectual motivations for unionism, he distinguishes between "unionist" and "Irish" along the most tenuous cultural lines. Most notably, McIlroy sets the Protestant value of secular individualism against the "community values" of the Republic—a critical move he repeats much later in the text, applauding "the belief in secular individualism and in civic society...to which Protestant unionism and culture give voice." Borrowing from Roy Foster, McIlroy encapsulates that nebulous entity known as public opinion or folk wisdom, yet this ventriloquism goes to extremes in order to vilify Ulster's "southern neighbor," particularly its neutral stance during World War II. Ultimately, McIlroy's opposition between secular individualism and community values—or civic society and atavistic nativism for that matter—reinscribes a clear Protestant/Catholic divide, and represents a low point in McIlroy's analysis.

Once we leave the theoretical and historical backbone of these initial chapters, it becomes clear that McIlroy has a particular gift for close readings, of both a formal and deconstructive nature, and the text resounds with critical force in these moments. Particularly strong are the middle chapters, anchored by "Visioning the Other: Representing the Protestants in Fiction Film," which display McIlroy's prodigious ability to discuss film structure, narrative and technique, and reveal his encyclopedic knowledge of the Irish filmmography. The book's most rigorous and compelling chapters, "Irish Herstories, or What Feminism Thinks of Republicanism" and "The Marxist Historical and Political Documentary Reconsidered: Anne Crilly's Mother Ireland," respond to a notable absence in Irish studies and film criticism alike, and constitute an admirable step towards integrating the experience of women into considerations of the "Troubles."

In addition to his formidable skills as a film analyst and cultural theorist, McIlroy exhibits a solid understanding of the commercial pressures exerted upon film production. In two chapters—"Troubled Fictions: Contemporary Irish Film" and "Hollywood and the Troubles"—the international business of filmmaking looms large. (McIlroy's 1988 contribution to the World Cinema series, World Cinema: Ireland, shrewdly anticipated the role foreign financing and distribution would play in the production of contemporary Irish films.) As McIlroy delves into Marxian analysis, he suggests that film production is inherently a function of dominant ideological structures (and in the case of Northern Ireland, the dominant cultural narrative of romantic republicanism). McIlroy dismisses critical and commercial successes such as The Crying Game and In the Name of the Father as politically-driven films designed to sell tickets to audiences with nationalist sympathies in the Republic and abroad. Ultimately, McIlroy argues that the political bias of those holding the purse strings (in Ireland, Hollywood, and beyond) foreclosed the possibility of a fully represented Protestant voice.

Brian McIlroy's intervention in the critical debate on Irish cinema is both welcome and vital. A sincere attempt to claim a voice for Protestant filmmaking, Shooting to Kill aims to locate the multiple voices that constitute an alternative to the nationalist narratives that have dominated contemporary Irish cinema. Yet as McIlroy dons his historical revisionist hat, and the text works to demythologize romantic nationalist narratives, he engages in critique that borders on personal invective. By the time we reach the Epilogue, "Where Do We Go From Here?" McIlroy is not afraid to argue in unmitigated extremes. In response to the aesthetic and political "marginalization" of the Protestant voice, he argues that "visual representations of the Troubles" have so underplayed the Protestant community that a major cultural dislocation has occurred."
Rather than defining a productive "political spectatorship" that might lead to expanded possibilities for representation, McIlroy's final words—"if these kinds of representations continue, the future of Northern Ireland is, sadly, a bleak one"—constitute a wake-up call for Protestant filmmaking, Irish filmmaking, and the Peace Process as a whole. In the end, Shooting to Kill shrinks from its compelling manifesto, and engages in more anxious than hopeful anticipation of the future of Irish cinema.

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PERSONAL VISIONS: CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY FILM DIRECTORS
Mario Falsetto

Reviewed by Philippe Mather

In a recent online article entitled "Auteur Desire", Dana Polan examines some of the reasons for a continued interest in auteurist approaches to film scholarship. It may seem anachronistic in this age of post-structural theory to use such a romantic and "unscientific" method to analyze a film. What does it matter what the auteur thinks? Who and what is the Author, anyway? But the auteur matters a great deal to Mario Falsetto, who has recently published Personal Visions, a collection of interviews with seventeen film directors. The interviews are organized alphabetically, and each is preceded by a brief appreciation of the filmmaker's career.

Falsetto acknowledges his auteur bias in a six-page introduction to the book, relying on common sense and a basically evaluative stance rather than offering any theoretical argument to support auteurism's assumptions about the role and importance of the director as the ultimate focal point and ur-text of a film. Auteurism is a complex topic, because it involves intersecting and contradictory discourses about normative aesthetics, theories of meaning and commercial concerns. It is precisely because these issues are so entangled that they are worth examining. Personal Visions might be an excellent place to start for the interested critic.

On the one hand, the repeated biographical questions about the filmmakers' upbringing might give the impression that the films themselves take a back seat to an examination of the artist's sensibility and world view. It is not always clear whether this focus is warranted, given the sometimes unremarkable portraits that seem to emerge from these conversations, with the notable exception of Terence Davies. On the other hand, the real subject of this volume is the creative process, the stories of success, failure and compromise that make up the careers of most of these so-called independent film directors. On that count, Falsetto's book is a resounding success. It records in a methodical, sensitive and intelligent way, the filmmakers' thoughts and feelings about their adventures and misadventures during pre-production, principal photography and post-production.

The target audience for this collection of interviews may very well be filmmakers, whether they are already accomplished and are curious about their colleagues' experiences, or whether they are aspiring artists studying in trade schools, art institutes or universities. While many of the stories highlight the difficulties of film production, especially from the business side of the equation, the perseverance demonstrated by most of the filmmakers should prove inspirational.

Film scholars who may be less interested in the creative process as such should still find much to learn from a close examination of these interviews, due to their discourses about film, art and industry. The directors are asked many of the same questions, which can be extremely useful for comparative purposes. For instance, while most of the filmmakers are understandably sympathetic to the auteurist assumptions of Personal Visions, some interviewees questioned those assumptions.

To his credit, Falsetto chose not to edit those comments.

Criticizing the industrial mode of film production is one manifestation of auteurism, expressed by directors who resent being told how to spend a studio's money. Speaking of her experience on her debut feature Loaded, Anna Campion sounds bitter about being forced to do "twenty drafts of the script" and deal with "a lot of voices on the film" because of its complex financing. Richard Linklater complains bitterly about having no control over the marketing of his film The Newton Boys, and about "the stupid poster, the MTV-style TV ads" that, in his view, misrepresented the film. Keith Gordon refers to the producer's job as "the dirty work," complains that he hates meetings and hates "selling people on how much money [his] movie's going to make for them."

On one occasion, Falsetto's line of questioning appears to invite the filmmaker to critique the Hollywood mode of production. Neil Jordan states that he was merely hired to direct the film We're No Angels, which immediately prompts questions about whether he had input into the casting and the script. After admitting that he didn't, he is asked whether it was an unhappy experience. Jordan denies it, but the interviewer seems to imply that anything short of total creative control cannot make for a positive experience.