Werner Huber, Seán Crosson

Contemporary Irish Film: An Introduction

“Californication”, to the proverbial man in the street (or student in the lecture theatre), nowadays means first and foremost a pop culture phenomenon, i.e. the notorious US television series satirising the darker sides of the film business, with perhaps less emphasis on Los Angeles and Hollywood as a locale than on the moral implications in the second part of this portmanteau formation. In 1923, when the Censorship of Films Act was passed by Dáil Éireann (significantly one of the first legislative acts of the parliament of the recently established Irish Free State), “Californication” was a byword for the “celluloid menace” (Fallon), which summed up the general fear of the threats posed by the modernity of the relatively speaking ‘new’ medium of cinema: “We cannot be the sons of the Gael and citizens of Hollywood at the same time […] The influence of cinema is […] one tending towards more artistic and intellectual degradation”, wrote Gabriel Fallon in 1938, shortly after Éamon de Valera had introduced a new constitution for Éire and had laid the groundwork for his ideal of a Gaelic Catholic Rural Ireland. But it was not merely a question of the potential for moral corruption; what was diagnosed here was also a market dominance and hegemony of interpretation (as regards representations of ‘Hibernian green on the silver screen’). It has become a critical commonplace, a topos even, to explain the history of Irish cinema as a struggle for an independent (indigenous) cinema, i.e. a small nation’s/third world cinema, within the much larger international arena, where – for various reasons – “screen representations of the Irish are at the mercy of other filmmaking practices, notably the sentimental vision of Irish-America and the hostile gaze of the last of Britain’s imperial lackeys” (Barton, “Introduction” 2). Kevin Rockett, one of Ireland’s leading film historians, has supplied the statistics documenting this relationship of dominance: “While less than one hundred feature films have been made by Irish filmmakers in Ireland during the cinema’s first century, more than two thousand fiction films have been produced about the Irish outside the country” (Still Irish 2).¹

Ultimately, it will not come as a surprise to see that in such circumstances a small nation’s right to self-determination of its image (“as others see us” vs. “as we see ourselves”) is intertwined with the negotiation of questions of national identity as a pervading and overarching theme. On a meta-level, as it were, the question of Ireland’s (national) identity as a postcolonial country thus also provides the popular paradigms for critical studies of Irish cinema and its history. As Ruth Barton has pointed out (pace her polemics), this umbrella theme covers more differentiated themes and
motifs: “the same binaries also tend to reappear: city/country, Church/ individual, feminine/masculine, colonial/native, global/local” (“Introduction” 3). The question then is: what are some of the topical issues that are unique to contemporary Irish cinema and set it apart from other national cinemas?

The thematic focus on contemporary film in the collection in hand is borne out by the comprehensive interview with Lenny Abrahamson and Mark O’Halloran, makers of the critically acclaimed films Adam & Paul (2004) and Garage (2007). Their work is generally regarded as representative of a new Irish cinema that critically engages with the profound social changes brought about by the economic boom, globalisation, and the concomitant socio-political transformations that led to the designation of “Celtic Tiger Ireland”.2 Adam & Paul points to the Tiger’s underbelly (the themes and motifs of drug abuse, crime, impoverishment, xenophobia) in an exemplary manner. The transformation of Ireland from a country of emigration to a country of immigration has also become a conspicuous theme in contemporary Irish film and is taken up in several contributions which explore the depiction of ‘ethnic otherness’ and racism. It is open to speculation, but this preponderance towards social/socio-political identity issues is a new defining factor – at least in one strand of Irish cinema that continues to eschew the easy option of the theme-parking and exoticisation of Ireland as Ireland Inc., Eiredisney, or “cappuccino” Dublin (“Irish Film”).

* The title of the present chapter is deliberately ambiguous. It is not only meant as an introduction to this collection, but also as a very basic introduction to the study of Irish film and cinema – considering the dearth of relevant material originating from, and visible in, the academic playing fields of Continental Europe or anywhere outside the Anglo-American sphere. The collection in hand constitutes one of the first book publications on the German-language market and one of the few continental publications that are devoted exclusively to contemporary Irish cinema. Therefore, before we present the contents of this collection, a few summarising hints and guidelines for critics, students, and movie-goers new to the study of Irish film are in order. The “Works Cited” section appended to this introduction may also be used as an elementary checklist for the study of contemporary Irish cinema.

Absolute beginners in the field of Irish Film Studies would do well to consult one of the following thumbnail sketches of the history of Irish cinema (all downloadable from their associated websites and listed here in the order of increasing complexity): Tony Tracy’s Irish Film: Study Guide, Harvey O’Brien’s The Identity of an Irish Cinema, and Kevin Rockett’s
expert summary contained in a brochure outlining the Trinity College Dublin database “Irish Film & TV Research Online”.

As regards monograph histories of Irish film as the cinema of a nation (in analogy to histories of Irish literature as a national literature), mention must be made here of pioneering studies by Brian McIlroy and Anthony Slide and in particular the canonical Cinema and Ireland by Kevin Rockett, John Hill, and Luke Gibbons. Though published before the substantial growth in indigenous film production in the 1990s, this volume has been very influential for the development of a critical discourse concerning Irish film over the past thirty years, including the work of Martin McLoone (Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema) and Lance Pettitt (Screening Ireland). McLoone and Pettitt were the first to bring Irish cinema history right up to the mid-Celtic Tiger era, both of them taking into account aspects of media history and popular culture. (The ‘media studies’ focus is even sharper in McLoone’s Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland and, of course, in Christopher Morash’s more recent History of the Media in Ireland.) One of the most important interventions in the area in the early twenty-first century was Ruth Barton’s Irish National Cinema, a work that provides both a comprehensive overview of the major themes and developments in the history of Irish film and an illuminating analysis of more recent productions. However, the status of Irish cinema, as a national cinema, has been challenged in Michael Patrick Gillespie’s provocatively titled The Myth of an Irish Cinema. Gillespie questions the usefulness of the application of traditional approaches to national cinema to Irish film, given the variety and complexity of Irishness itself. Another recent study which has moved away from examining Irish film in terms of national cinema is Dióg O’Connell’s New Irish Storytellers, a work that has sought rather to identify distinctive storytelling and narrative strategies in Irish films produced after 1993 (this date marks the revival of the Irish Film Board and also serves as a historical period marker). We should also note that two concise histories of Irish cinema are available in monographs in French (Stéphanie Willette) and Italian (Susanna Pellis).

Among the collections of essays which in their diversity deal with a variety of aspects of contemporary Irish cinema, the following stand out: the special issue of the film (studies) journal Cinéaste (1999) is a rich mine of material relating to what was then the latest work in Irish film. James MacKillop’s collection of interpretative essays, Contemporary Irish Cinema, covers exemplary films from The Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa. The continuing importance and influence of John Ford’s seminal film is also the concern of Seán Crosson and Rod Stoneman’s essay collection The Quiet Man … and Beyond. The evolution of Irish film in an increasingly globalised world is the subject of the essays collected in Cinemas of Ireland, edited by Isabelle le Corff and Estelle Epinoux. One of the most important
collections to examine both film and television in Ireland in recent years is Ruth Barton and Harvey O’Brien’s *Keeping it Real: Irish Film and Television*, a work which explores new directions in the discourse field of Irish media and contemporary culture. Irish film has also been examined in relation to genre and genre theory in Brian McIlroy’s edited collection *Genre and Cinema: Ireland and Transnationalism*. Four volumes of essays, co-edited by Kevin Rockett with John Hill (National Cinema and Beyond, Film History and National Cinema, and National Cinemas and World Cinema) and Martin McLoone (*Irish Films, Global Cinema*), have emerged from the annual Irish Postgraduate Film Research Seminar. While these collections published by Four Courts Press have included significant contributions focused on Irish film, the series is rather misleadingly entitled “Studies in Irish Film”, as most of the essays actually focus on non-Irish cinema.

For documentation of Irish film history on an encyclopaedic scale one would naturally turn to the prolific work of Kevin Rockett; his *Irish Filmography: Fiction Films 1896–1996* is an invaluable checklist. Other useful tools relating to hard and basic facts are the dictionaries and companions by Caughe & Rockett, Flynn & Brereton, and Murphy. An excellent annual survey and collection of reviews of recent work in Irish film and television, edited by Tony Tracy, is available online in the Spanish e-journal *Estudios Irlandeses*. The internet resource “Film Studies for Free” also has a useful section dedicated to “Irish Cinema Studies Online”, which provides links to a wide range of essays available online. The bi-monthly magazine *Film Ireland*, while providing some space for academic and critical engagement with film, is primarily a resource for those engaged in the practical aspects of filmmaking in Ireland.

There are a number of contrastive and comparative studies which consider Irish cinema as a small nation cinema in relation to the film histories of other countries/regions, such as, for example, Austria (Joeckel), Spain (Holohan), India (Woods), and Africa (Pramaggiore). North America, and the US in particular, is a special case, as hybrid identities, the diaspora, and cross-cultural links come into play here. Joseph Curran has charted the work of Irish-American filmmakers in *Hibernian Green on the Silver Screen*; more recent is *Screening Irish-America*, a substantial collection of essays edited by Ruth Barton. Barton has followed this work by focusing on the filmic representation of the Irish in Britain, editing a recent special issue of the *Irish Studies Review*.

Quite a few important studies have dedicated themselves to what may not necessarily seem part of the mainstream of the history of Irish cinema, but nevertheless are important aspects to complete the picture. “The ‘Troubles’ and Northern Ireland” is one such topic, as for example covered in Brian McIlroy’s *Shooting to Kill* and John Hill’s *Cinema and Northern Ireland*. Other subjects explored by recent studies are film and theatre or theatre
Contemporary Irish Film: An Introduction

business (Monahan, Barton, Frazier), censorship (Rockett), silent film (Condon), documentary filmmaking (O’Brien), and the representation of (the English) language in film (Walshe).

Regarding the work of individual filmmakers/directors, the “Ireland Into Film” series published by Cork University Press can be recommended as a series of concise and valuable introductions to landmarks in the history of Irish film (e.g. The Field, The Dead, Ulysses, Nora, The Quiet Man, The Informer, The Butcher Boy, This Other Eden, Felicia’s Journey, December Bride, Dancing at Lughnasa, The Barrytown Trilogy). The Liffey Press also included studies of leading Irish directors Neil Jordan (by Emer Rockett and Kevin Rockett) and Jim Sheridan (by Ruth Barton) in its series on contemporary Irish writers and filmmakers.

If we turn to other (i.e. the new) media, we must point out at least six important online resources, some of which serve as encyclopaedic tools providing catalogues, filmographies, and specific (technical and critical) information on Irish films: Trinity College Dublin’s “Irish Film & TV Research Online” database; the Boston-based, annotated “The Irish in Film” database; the “Filmography” database available from the Irish Film & Television Network (IFTN); the database of the Irish Film Board, and, of course, the online information (and more traditional archives) provided by the Irish Film Archive (based in the Irish Film Institute in Dublin) and the British Film Institute (London). A further useful, if dated, resource is the CD-ROM Cinema Ireland: A Database of Irish Films and Filmmakers, 1896–1986, compiled by Robert Monks in 1996.

The medium of film itself has charted its own progress; three documentaries complete with interviews and film excerpts are worthy of note: A Seat Among the Stars: The Cinema & Ireland details the history of Irish cinema/film from its beginnings into the early 1980s. Unfortunately, this programme – originally a six-part television series (Ulster TV for Channel 4) – is only available for viewing in the British Film Institute Library, London. Irish Cinema: Ourselves Alone? (directed by Donald Taylor Black) highlights the aporias of Irish cinema and its identity crises during the first century of cinema (the film was first released as part of the BFI’s series “The Century of Cinema”). Peter Canning’s excellent five-episode series Memories in Focus, also produced as part of the centenary celebrations of cinema in 1995, includes rare clips and illuminating interviews regarding the history of Irish film but is, unfortunately, not widely available. Finally, the dissemination of knowledge about Irish film production is the brief of Reel Ireland, an agency associated with Culture Ireland that promotes Irish films overseas and abroad, organising Irish film weeks and festivals.
In his 1931 book *Synge and Irish Literature*, Daniel Corkery draws on a native Irish phrase to describe the Irish national consciousness as “a quaking sod” (l4). Corkery was referring to what he perceived as the “flux and uncertainty” that was part of the Irish mentality, being neither “English, nor Irish, nor Anglo-Irish” (l4). As the contributions to this volume and a brief glance at the history of Irish film suggest, eighty years later, in 2011, contemporary Irish cinema continues to reveal such “a quaking sod”, though one in which Irish identity has become still more unstable, also encompassing people of Polish, Nigerian, and Brazilian origin (to name but a few), as well as those which Corkery identified. The so-called Celtic Tiger years, usually associated with the period 1995–2007, and their aftermath have had an enormous impact on Irish society and culture. Their legacy lies, on the one hand, in the massive debt load the Irish state is currently attempting to address as a result of excessive and reckless bank lending, focused primarily on speculative property development and apparent today in the ghost estates and empty apartment blocks that blot the Irish landscape. However, these years also had the effect of transforming Ireland from a country of net emigration to one of significant immigration, further challenging definitions of Irishness.

The changes which Irish society has undergone have also presented additional challenges for those attempting to define Irish cinema today. Tony Tracy’s contribution to this volume begins by reflecting on definitions of national cinema, arguing that while most draw on Benedict Anderson’s formulation of “imagined communities”, as both “limited and sovereign”, he prefers to view Irish cinema, drawing on the work of Andrew Higon and Homi Bhabha, as encompassing an “interstitial sense of identity”, evident in the “in-between and uncertain quality” of recent Irish cinema. Towards this, he examines in particular the 2002 release *How Harry Became a Tree*. Tracy argues that this film, directed by Serbian Goran Paskaljević and based on a Chinese novella, represents a “pioneering site both of Higon’s diasporic identity and Bhabha’s ‘janus-faced’ boundary of national discourse”. While definitions of national identity, and national film, tend to delineate the nation in finite, limited terms, Tracy argues that “*How Harry Became a Tree* breaks such conventions of coherence and unity and deepens this problematic status in its confounding of stereotypes, conventions and narrative coherence”.

Increased immigration to Ireland presented challenges for many Irish people, resulting, for example, in some instances of racism, as indicated by Seán Crosson. However, Irish film was slow to engage with this subject and filmmakers were criticised before and during the Celtic Tiger period for focusing excessively on the past, with Ruth Barton, for instance, arguing that many of these films constituted an Irish heritage cinema, which drew on an international tradition of representing Ireland “distinguished by
rural pastoralism” (Irish National Cinema 149, see also 148–156). Notwithstanding Barton’s remarks, Crosson contends that a significant number of films in this period, rather than being concerned with perpetuating such romantic visions, “sought to identify the roots of contemporary racism through an exploration of intolerance in Ireland’s past and towards long-resident minorities within Irish society, including the Traveller community and homosexuals”.

As the twenty-first century progressed, Irish filmmakers increasingly engaged with the subject of immigration. Indeed, Agnes Kakasi views the theme of immigration and the representation of immigrants as indicating a new direction in Irish cinema and is critical of the failure of scholarship in Irish Film Studies to engage adequately with this new thematic focus. Kakasi attempts to address this gap “by posing questions about the possibility and validity of establishing a politically engaged, interdisciplinary approach to film studies, in the hope of shedding light on issues of racism and antiracism, social inclusion and exclusion; as reflected through the politics of representation in Irish cinema”. As part of this study, she examines recent immigration-themed films, including the documentaries Here to Stay (2006; dir. Alan Grossman and Áine O’Brien) and Seaview (2007; dir. Paul Rowney and Nicky Gogan) as well as the fiction feature Capital Letters (2004; dir. Ciaran O’Connor), and contends that it is possible to uncover the prevailing ideology and discursive practices in Ireland concerning immigration through an examination of such texts.

Zélie Asava also reflects on the changing face of Irish film today through an examination of ethnicity and gender in three films that feature mixed/black lead protagonists: The Nephew (1998; dir. Eugene Brady), Irish Jam (2006; dir. John Eyres), and The Front Line (2006; dir. David Gleeson). Asava considers the position of blackness and mixedness in Irish society and film, arguing that the few Irish films that have depicted such characters in the past have tended to depict them “stereotypically as prostitutes, single mothers, rappers and pimps” as well as foreign. However, for Asava, these three films “represent racial difference as a reinvigorating element that liberates Irish communities from stultifying social patterns and returns them to the repressed elements of their own identities such as spirituality, creativity”.

While immigration has become an increasing part of Irish cinema, such stories now predominantly take place in urban spaces, in contrast to the popular representations of rural Ireland found particularly in international cinema. Eduardo Barros Grela examines the relationship between Irish subjects and their urban identities, with particular reference to the films Intermission (2003; dir. John Crowley), Breakfast on Pluto (2005; dir. Neil Jordan), and Adam & Paul. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and, more importantly, Gilles Deleuze, Barros reads the urban landscape of
Werner Huber, Seán Crosson

Dublin as “a decomposing terrain vague” and contends that these films present “sets of alienated characters who inhabit a new, globalized, and liberal Dublin. The city seems to work not so much as a centring ground for dispersed subjectivities, but rather as a dispersing spatiality for decentered identities”.

Dublin is also the setting for John Carney’s Once (2006), a micro-budget film that enjoyed considerable international commercial success as well as winning an Academy Award for Best Original Song. Neasa Hardiman, in her contribution, examines the “qualities in the film that made possible its extraordinary trajectory” and contends that it succeeded due to the strategic deployment of two central ideas: peripherality and equality. For Hardiman, these ideas are found throughout the narrative, but also in the aesthetics of its form and the conditions of its production and distribution, and they made the film attractive to audiences, particularly in the United States, receptive to constructions of Ireland as both authentic and familiar.

Irish animation has also been the recipient of Academy Award nominations in recent years, including the short animated films Fifty Percent Grey (2001; dir. Ruairi Robinson) and Give Up Yer Aul Sins (2002; dir. Cathal Gaffney). Indeed, animation has been one of the areas of significant growth in contemporary Irish film and is the subject of Tom Walsh’s contribution to this collection. Walsh provides a timely overview of the development of animation production in Ireland, before focusing on the 2009 Academy Award nominated feature The Secret of Kells. He considers the pan-European production context of the film, which, he contends, raises a number of crucial questions, including the possibility (or otherwise) of producing a culturally specific cinema in such circumstances. For Walsh, “films made using such methods become sites of tension between local interests and global economics, and between personal expression and universal commercial viability”.

Ruth Barton examines the work of one of the most internationally successful Irish directors, Neil Jordan. Barton is particularly interested in charting the representation of superstition and religion in Jordan’s work, aspects influenced by Jordan’s formative years spent in Sligo and Dublin. She contends that Jordan’s films exhibit a “Catholic aesthetic, both thematically and visually”, evident in his depiction of priests, the church, prayer, and statues of the Madonna. Overall, she argues, the “visual richness” of his films owes a great deal to his religious heritage.

One of the most distinctive and exciting voices to emerge in contemporary Irish film has been Lenny Abrahamson, whose collaboration with screenwriter and actor Mark O’Halloran has so far produced two award-winning feature films, Adam & Paul and Garage, as well as the television mini-series Prosperity (2007). Both Abrahamson and O’Halloran are the subjects of a lengthy interview later in this volume, and their work is also
Contemporary Irish Film: An Introduction

analysed here by Dióg O’Connell. O’Connell concentrates on the distinctive narrative approach apparent in the works produced by Abrahamson and O’Halloran to date, while also exploring the nature of storytelling in contemporary Irish cinema. She argues that their work combines Hollywood structures of filmmaking with more illusive European aesthetics and reveals “an evolutionary and developmental stage in new Irish cinema” that may well suggest an alternate narrative space for other contemporary national cinemas from small countries.

If contemporary Ireland does indeed continue to be ‘a quaking sod’, as our contributors suggest, the changing nature of the island, culturally and ethnically, has also provided rich subject matter for Irish filmmakers. While change can be challenging for some and requires us to re-evaluate our definitions, whether of identity or culture, it may also produce a creative energy that can lead to significant works of art. At a time when Ireland faces its most severe economic challenge since independence, the contribution that art and culture can make has never been more crucial. Such works, whether in literature or film, may not provide answers, but they may just help to identify or provide a means of engaging with the most significant challenges, some of which are the subject of the contributions to this volume.

Notes

1 See also Kevin and Emer Rockett’s assessment in the introduction to the TCD Irish film and television database: “With huge government investment in cinema since the mid-1990s, more films have been produced in Ireland in the last decade than in the previous 100 years. Yet, well before the 1990s, cinematic images of Ireland and the Irish were in circulation worldwide. Most of these were produced by non-Irish filmmakers, British and American in particular, with the latter country making, before 1930, more films about the Irish than Ireland itself has over the entire history of cinema. Consequently, any study of Irish cinema is necessarily intertwined with these and other national cinemas” (?).

2 On the theme of globalisation in the Celtic Tiger era, see Crosson and Lonergan (with a special emphasis on drama); Huber traces Celtic Tiger themes in contemporary cinema.

Works Cited


Werner Huber, Seán Crosson

Cineaste 24.2–3 (1999) [special supplement on “Contemporary Irish Cinema”].
Film Ireland 1987–. <http://www.filmireland.net/> (11 July 2011).
Contemporary Irish Film: An Introduction

*Irish Studies Review* 19.1 (2011) [Special Issue: “Screening the Irish in Britain”].


*Memories in Focus.* Dir. Peter Canning. Dublin: Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), 1995 [documentary series].


Werner Huber, Seán Crosson


Walshe, Shane. *Irish English as Represented in Film*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009.
