

'Tell Me a Story': Ireland and the Movie Moguls

Patrick O'Sullivan

In this post-modern age, minority groups are supposed to watch, anxiously, their television and film screens, in hope of finding there some image, however distorted, of their reality. And in recent years an unusually large number of cinema films with Irish subject-matter have appeared. So, we watch. But I am one of those people who stay behind in the cinema to read the End Credits.

The making of these films has involved the talents of a number of Irish cinéastes – yes, cinéastes. For we cannot yet call them auteurs. They struggle for some creative freedom in the international business of commercial English-language film making.

It is worth looking at the rewards and dangers of that struggle, and the limitations within which our ideal Irish cinéaste must work – so that, when we look at the screen, we know what we are seeing. My conclusion – which you can have right away – is that we are very unlikely to be watching 'an Irish movie'. We can ask, what is film now saying about Ireland and the Irish? But first we should ask, of what use is Ireland to cinema?

There is one fairly obvious way that present-day Ireland is of use to cinema. John Hill, in *Cinema and Ireland*, has said as much as needs to be said about movies in which a not-quite-repentant-enough ex-IRA man dies, in conspiracy-deep confusion, in the last reel. From James Mason in *Odd Man Out* (1947) to Micky Rourke in *A Prayer*

for the Dying (1987), they die, often in slow motion. These movies, and their kin, say very little about Ireland – though they do link with, and perhaps encourage, a certain tendency to solicit sympathy through suffering.

On the other hand, these films tell us much about the requirements of cinema in general and the preoccupations of *film noir* in particular. Cinema loves a conspiracy. And, I suppose, a conspiracy is a nice simple way of explaining (away) that complex of problems in the north of Ireland. Motion pictures need action – people running around with guns. These people are usually men – though no doubt we will soon have an Irish Nikita. And it is a selling point to be able to place *film noir's* perennial themes of love, betrayal and death in the context provided by current headlines.

Those headlines, and the conflict in the north, are relevant in another way. They mean that the money men, the movie moguls, have actually heard of Ireland. 'When I was first in America in the Seventies, people thought Dublin was in Scotland or England,' says Noel Pearson, the producer of *My Left Foot* and *The Field*. 'Since then the country has been much more in the media ...'

And very often it is through these action and conspiracy movies set in Ireland that our Irish cinéaste gets his foot in the door. Thus Neil Jordan approached Channel 4 with his script for *Angel*. Channel 4

financed the film and agreed to let him direct it. Jordan was then able to go on to direct films without Irish subject matter, *Company of Wolves* and *Mona Lisa*, and become part of an 'Irish' package in *High Spirits*. In the same way Pat O'Connor directed *Cal*.

Television involvement confuses the issues, partly because of different accounting procedures. But, basically, a full-length Irish-subject-matter cinema film cannot recover its costs in Ireland – the audience is not big enough. Interestingly, we are reaching the stage where a medium-budget movie can recover its costs in Britain. But, for real profits, an English-language movie must look to North America.

Irish subject-matter means that at least the protagonists speak English. And our Irish cinéaste will already have a career in some aspect of cinema, somewhere in the world – but hardly in Ireland. Pat O'Connor, educated in California and Toronto, does have his RET work to look back on, but his most recent credits are purely American movies for Columbia and MGM. Thaddeus O'Sullivan left Ireland at seventeen, and found ways of getting involved in movies in London and New York. Thus the movie business simply reflects the migrant Irish involvement in every other profession.

A certain 'Irish' style does seem to help, in the 'oral' world of film and television negotiation. 'It makes absolute sense to me when a

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Hollywood mogul says to me, "Tell me a story". He listens and reacts on a primal level, not an intellectual one,' writes Jim Sheridan in the Introduction to the Faber edition of the *Left Foot* script.

My Left Foot nearly disappeared this side of the Atlantic. But somehow it caught the American imagination and found its audience and its Oscars. So, yes, there are, now, other sorts of film set in Ireland – but you have to approach these films as cautiously as you approach the action/conspiracy genre. Film is a business before it is an art. You need to look at the business of constructing a movie package. According to Jim Sheridan, 'Ireland is sexy for a while, as they say in America ...' We can get our meeting with a mogul. Note that it is very rare for a movie to be developed as a movie from the beginning by our Irish cinéaste. There will, initially, be some sort of text – usually a book, a William Trevor novel, Christy Brown's autobiography, or stage plays by Keane or Sam Hanna Bell. In other words there will be some sort of product with which the producers can begin financial negotiations.

So, Tim Bevan and Sarah Radclyffe, whose production company *Working Title*, made interesting English movies like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Personal Services*, came across the Trevor novel, *Fools of Fortune*. 'It had fantastic potential, as long as we got the right emphasis for the storyline and the casting. We also wanted a director who had the intimate knowledge of Ireland.' So, director Pat O'Connor becomes part of the creation of an 'Irish' package.

In many cases a production company involved in the much despised BritLit or EngLit movies will find a IrLit product. It's an easy move for IrLit is simply a sub-department of EngLit. Isn't it?

Usually at an early stage in the packaging/financing you have to get a script ready – for the script becomes a central part of all further

negotiations. Producers tend to turn to writers they know, and know they can rely on. The script of *December Bride* is by David Rudkin,

McAnally, as in *My Left Foot*, or, since that sad loss, from Donal McCann (*The Dead*, *The Miracle*, *December Bride*). The rest is local



an able English television and stage writer. The script of *Fools of Fortune* is by Bradford-born Michael Hirst, one of *Working Title's* reliables.

The cast will be a package. There is usually a part for a middle-ranking American actor: Tom Berenger in *The Field*. Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio in *Fools of Fortune*, Beverly D'Angelo in *The Miracle*. Often we can involve a rising English star, like Saskia Reeves in *December Bride* or Frances Tomelty in *The Field*, or Iain Glen in *Fools*. Yes, yes, I know Glen is Scottish – don't distract me.

Irish acting talent will be called on, but in limited ways. It is true that there is usually a part for Brenda Fricker, the Bert Lynch *des nos jours* – telling us all cinema wants to know or needs to know about Irish motherhood in *My Left Foot*, and *The Field*. There is usually a study in Irish male inability to communicate – perhaps from Ray

colour. I stress that it is useless to complain about this sort of packaging. Without it the film would not be made. And everyone is grateful for the work. Though an odd feature of these movies is how very often, somewhere along the line, the package picks up a really weird, over-bearing and condescending, music score. By Hans Zimmer in *Fools of Fortune* and by Elmer Bernstein in both *My Left Foot* and *The Field*. The score for *The Field* has all the subtlety of Bernstein's similar effort for *Airplane*.

So, our Irish cinéaste will be come involved, at a later or an earlier stage, in the creation of a movie package. He – and by the way, it is 'he' (where 'she' might fit is quite a different story) – he has struggled to put himself in a position where he can be part of that negotiation, and where at last he can initiate projects with some hope of success. But he must be

*The Commitments:
Fame on the Liffey?*

careful – the moguls may think Ireland is ‘sexy’ this month, but that cannot last – and it would be unwise to get a reputation as a person who can direct only ‘Irish’ movies.

All the movies I have mentioned deserve a careful viewing and reading – if only out of my respect for the work and the talent that have gone into them. But, collectively, I do have awful problems with these movies. Such silences, such longeurs. Maybe it is a creative use of tedium, which can work in the cinema – where the social control of excuse me, excuse me, excuse me, keeps you pinned to your seat. Watching them on video at home, the urge to get up and make a cup of tea is irrepresible.

I find these movies old fashioned, in style and content. The style, I know, is partly a product of their low budgets. The content seems partly a product of this text-based packaging system. But it is all as if our cinéaste attended a meeting in Donaghue’s bar, where it was decided that we should fill all the gaps in Ireland’s filmography, and make now the films that should have been made in the 1930s, the 1940s and the 1950s.

Andrew Strong and Robert Arkins: ‘I wish them more luck than the original kids from *Fame*’

The contrast between our archetypal Irish cinéaste and his English brother is instructive – the English flight to Hollywood and big-budget American subject mater is almost total. Here, there is a sort of collective commitment to Ireland, and a wish to show Ireland upon the screen. But it is a strange Ireland, of the mind, and the past.

Commitment brings us, by a commodius vicus of recirculation, to *The Commitments*. There is a lot about that package that you will recognise. The script is by ‘Dick Clement & Ian La Frenais and Roddy Doyle’ – as the Credits quaintly put it. Clement and La Frenais are British television troopers – *Porridge*, *The Likely Lads*, etc., etc. Production is by their new company, Clement La Frenais Productions. But the script is based on Roddy Doyle’s novel, which, if not a study of Ireland today, at least says something about Ireland last week.

This movie does not want an Irish director as part of its package. No, no, no. Quite the reverse. We do not want silence and longeurs. This package is designed for Alan Parker – this is *Fame* on the Liffey. It seems

to be the only one of these movies made with a real audience in mind. It is designed for real English-language cinema audiences – it works for teenagers. It works for their parents – because, as one member of the audience told me, ‘It was like being sixteen again.’

Again we have the undoubted talent of the Irish participants – all the local colour. Though I wish them better luck than the original ‘Kids from *Fame*’. ‘Our film’ says Parker ‘is set in Dublin, Ireland, but it’s about the hopes and dreams music brings to young kids everywhere, from Finglas to Philadelphia and Memphis to Minsk.’ It turns out that Ireland is of most use to cinema when Ireland is most like everywhere else.

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The Irish Worldwide

