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‘Talking to the Dead’

Dir: Pat Collins

A Power Pictures production for RTÉ

No one educated in Ireland needs reminding of the general inspirational force of death. The diet of death-the-leveller poems provided by our English curricula will have generated sufficient morbid cud to chew over for a lifetime. Culturally specific necrolatry, however, is perhaps a less familiar discursive category since it involves less an acquaintance with the transcendental preoccupations of literature than a more wide-ranging concern with the defining attitudes and practices of particular locales and peoples. Based on the book of the same name by Nina Witoszeck and Pat Sheeran, ‘Talking to the Dead’ takes as its premise that, in Sheeran’s opening words, there is in Ireland a deep-rooted tradition of ‘being haunted and being obsessed by death and dying’ — an ‘Ireland of the graves’ as it were. Utilising some evocative new and old photography, and progressing through a series of interviews with intellectuals and also with some individuals who have particular tales of death to relate, the documentary offers conclusive proof for its thesis.

After the expositions, things get suitably underway with excerpts from our daily radio obituary notices, and a standardised gripe is pre-empted by a steady focus thereafter on urban as well as rural Ireland. Two actual funerals are covered, one a country burial of Sonny O’Sullivan, the other a Dublin wake of an unnamed individual. The filming of this material must have required the utmost delicacy even though some interviewees, particularly Sonny’s brother, appear dignifiedly willing to celebrate the departed. A vital seachange in Irish attitudes towards death is encapsulated by Niall Ó Ciosán who talks of the ‘obscenity of the Famine’ and its gross interruption of burial practices. The traditions of Travellers, such as the burning of wagons to free a dead proprietor’s soul, are also nicely included. Folklorist Patricia Lysaght covers some general matters and Declan Kiberd provides some specifically literary analysis, pointing to such important funereal stereotypes in Irish writing as the rising corpse. A provocative section examines the functioning of death in the Nationalist tradition. Lawrence Taylor’s report on the exilic fervour of the Irish toast ‘Bás in Éireann’ and earlier shots of the GPO Cuchulainn statue are followed by Eoghan Harris’ discussion of the centrality of Republican slogans like ‘Long Live Death’ and ‘The Dead Generations’. With commentary from Mary Holland and footage of Bobby Sands’ funeral, the functioning of Nationalist funerals in Northern Ireland, the determination of communities to control representations of their own dead, is impactfully covered.

Within this sweep, there are some individual high points. Gravedigger Paddy Wright gives his own rare worm’s-eye view on professional proceedings. Christy McNamara’s mighty photographs of a Clare wake are included. A brief but haunting recording of one of the last *mná caointe* or keening women, along with the remarkable Brendan Ó Madagáin’s illustration of an old keening song, are the aural highlights. Fr. Eamon Ó Conghaile, recollecting the practice of the *scread maidhine* or dawn cry, provides perhaps the most striking explanation for death superstitions. He has seen himself, he says, the dry-land boat that seafaring people see when a death is nigh: ‘You don’t see that with your corporeal eyes; you see it with the *súilín draíochta*, or the eye inside your head, the magic eye’. To visually emphasise all this,

the programme appears to rely too heavily on scenic graveyard photography; on further viewings however, these shots become almost mesmeric.

It was an unfortunate bit of timing that RTÉ screened 'Talking to the Dead' at Halloween when matters funereal have a theatrical and clichéd air in no way catered for by a serious and imaginative programme in which even the familiar *banshee* is treated with gravitas. There is a strong emphasis throughout on the communally healthy effects of mourning. Sheeran puts the case most emphatically. Ireland is (or at least was), he points out, a 'local outpost of a great Europe-wide carnivalesque tradition and also of a temporary therapeutic rebellion against the authorities'. A strong connection between death, sex and celebration exists in Irish funerary practice and a corpse, curiously, 'licensed lewdness and erotic display'. This is a historically verifiable take on Irish wakes but the film does not quite develop the angle. On the obverse, the possibility that modern funerary practice, particularly that centred round the funeral parlour, is a potentially harmful sanitisation of death is deftly covered, and a sixties 'Radharc' interview with a punctilious funeral director is used to tremendous (and inadvertently humorous) effect. (Incidentally, a discreet sanitisation is also contained in the interviewees' predominant use of the word 'cemetery' instead of the more mundane and demotic 'graveyard'.)

It has often been said of Beckett that his obsession with death was ultimately an absolute obsession with life. The same simultaneity might be attributed to this documentary. Rather than simply chasing down any kind of abstract philosophical notions of death, its resolute particularity makes a difficult subject comprehensible in terms of cultural and personal life-forces. This is emotively figured in the report of Sonny O'Sullivan telling his doctor, once his short final term had been diagnosed: 'I'll neither give up me cigarettes nor I'll not give up me drink' (government health warnings aside, any defiance is actual defiance in the face of death). The final fading elegiac shots of an elderly couple turning and walking away from the camera close a documentary whose humane attention falls on all the dead, but also on all the living.

John Kenny