Sport, Representation, and the Commemoration of the 1916 Rising: ‘A New Ireland Rises’?

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It is impossible to appreciate fully the forces that led to the ‘Easter Rising’ rebellion of 1916, the Rising itself and moreover how it has been remembered and commemorated, without a consideration of sport. The Rising began against the backdrop of one of the highlights of the Irish sporting calendar. On Monday 24 April 1916, when many Dublin citizens were attending the Irish Grand National, Irish Republicans occupied major buildings across the city and the rebels’ chief spokesman Patrick Pearse read the Proclamation of the Republic on the steps of the General Post Office. Furthermore, the early advances of Republicans in taking strategic points in Dublin city were helped considerably by the absence from the city of the many British military officers who attended the horse race, held at Fairyhouse Racecourse in county Meath, some 25 kilometres from the capital. The Irish Grand National at Fairyhouse in 2016 marked this occasion (in an event unlikely to have been well received in such august surroundings in 1916) by members of Fingal Old IRA Commemorative Society re-enacting the 1916 Grand National. As noted in The Irish Times the following day

The 1916 race was recreated here, in heavily edited form, and without any fences, less that tempt fate. In the event, a horse called ‘All Sorts’ won again, safely with ‘Civil War’ — the 1914 victor — once more trailing back in fourth […] The other re-enactment of Grand National day saw members of the Fingal Old IRA Commemorative Society performing armed manoeuvres in period dress, as a tribute to those who fought and won the Battle of Ashbourne on the Friday of Easter Week.²

This event was but one of a range of 1916 commemorative events held in 2016 in association with major sporting organisations and venues.³ It reflects a recurring feature of these sporting commemorations: the association of sport with violence and militarism. This article will contend that these associations attempt to provide a disciplining reassertion of masculinity in response to the contradictions (and the anxieties they reveal) apparent within the events themselves. This includes the principal focus of this article, one of the largest and most viewed commemorative sporting events in 2016, the Laochra pageant organised by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)⁴ and broadcast live by the Irish-language broadcaster TG4 on Sunday April 24th, exactly one hundred years to the day after the first shots were fired in the Easter Rising.

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¹ This article has emerged from ongoing research conducted with colleagues contributing to the inTRUTHS Research Project, funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad and FEDER. [INTRUTHS: FFI2017-84619-P. AEI/FEDER, UE]
³ Apart from the Gaelic Athletic Association event discussed in this article, a further relevant event in this respect was the Football Association of Ireland (FAI)’s 1916 commemoration. This consisted of a pre-match ceremony prior to a friendly game between the Republic of Ireland and Switzerland played at the association’s main stadium (the ‘Aviva’) on March 25th 2016 when the FAI presented the rather extraordinary sight of seven children from Ballymun reading out the Proclamation of Independence dressed as 1916 rebels while carrying mock rifles.
⁴ The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the organisation responsible for the promotion of Gaelic games in Ireland.
Commemoration is part of what defines nations and their configurations; the considerable investment of the Irish state (and various sporting organisations) during 2016 in 1916 commemorations highlights the importance of commemoration in both defining and affirming the state itself and the role these organisations play in it. However, this process is neither straightforward nor uncomplicated; it is rife with contradictions, unresolved tensions and paradoxes. Commemoration involves a constant process of writing and rewriting, an ongoing renegotiation of the past in response to contemporary developments and future aspirations in a process that is intrinsically political.5 The decision of the Irish Government in 2012 to include the official commemoration of 1916 as part of a Decade of Centenaries Programme (from the enactment of the Home Rule Bill in 1912 to the founding of the Free State in 1922) reflected, at least partly, an awareness of the complexity, and the potential divisiveness, of the various moments during the years concerned, none more so perhaps than the 1916 rising. While not an official state event, the GAA’s commemoration was nonetheless linked to the official state commemoration of 1916 on the same day: a Requiem Mass held in the Church of the Most Sacred Heart, Arbour Hill, followed by a procession to the adjoining graveside of 14 leaders of the Easter Rising. Indeed, in a press release published by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, prior to that weekend’s events, Minister Heather Humphreys clearly connected the Laochra event to this official commemoration:

One hundred years ago this weekend, the Irish Volunteers were preparing to stage the Easter Rising, setting in chain a series of events which ultimately led to Irish independence. On Sunday we will solemnly remember the 1916 leaders who gave up their lives, before moving to the historic surrounds of Croke Park for ‘Laochra’, which promises to be a spectacular celebration of our culture and the GAA movement over the last 100 years.6

The GAA was a key force in defining Irish identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and it was one of the most active organisations in 2016 in evoking that period and commemorating events surrounding the Rising. However, as suggested by the question mark in the title of this article — partly taken from the title of the penultimate scene in the Laochra pageant — it is debatable how ‘new’ the depiction of Ireland within Laochra actually was, despite its foregrounding of multiculturalism and women, given its gendered configuration of Irishness and glorification of militarism. Indeed, as examined below the show’s own contradictions and ambivalence is apparent in ‘A New Ireland Rises’ in the scene’s combination of nondescript global cultural signifiers with iconography linked to Ireland and the island’s past.

5 For further on this issue see Rebecca Lynn Graff-McRae, ‘Forget politics! Theorising the Political Dynamics of Commemoration and Conflict’, 1916 in 1966 - Commemorating the Easter Rising, Mary E. Daly and M. O’Callaghan, eds. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 219-238.
Sport, National Culture, and the Media

The relationship of sport with national culture and identity is a complex yet crucial one in considering the popularity and passions that sport evokes internationally. A key force in the promotion of nationalism is culture; as Ernest Gellner notes, ‘culture is now the necessary shared medium’ and sport is one of the most popular of such cultural activities, contributing considerably to citizens’ identification with their nations. Indeed, in emphasizing the banality of nationalism as a ‘natural’ and often unnoticed part of everyday life, Michael Billig has argued that modern sport has a social and political significance that ‘extend[s] through the media beyond the player and the spectator’ by providing luminous moments of national engagement and national heroes whom citizens can emulate and adore. As Billig’s remarks suggest, the mass media has had a crucial role to play in the popularisation of sport and, indeed, in asserting its political significance. Cinema’s potential in particular as a powerful vehicle for the articulation and affirmation of the nation has been recognised in critical studies. Susan Hayward in her study on French cinema identified how film may function as a cultural articulation of a nation [...] textualises the nation and subsequently constructs a series of relations around the concepts, first, of state and citizen, then of state, citizen and other [...] a ‘national’ cinema [...] is ineluctably ‘reduced’ to a series of enunciations that reverberate around two fundamental concepts: identity and difference.

It is this process through which Irishness is ‘textualised’ through the *Laochra* pageant that is the key concern of this article. Gaelic games have repeatedly provided the media with a resonant motif through which (perceived) aspects of Irish identity have been encapsulated and represented. In international productions in particular, Gaelic games have at times been employed as a shorthand for regressive stereotypes associated with Irish people, including their alleged propensity for violence. For indigenous producers, on the other hand, Gaelic games have afforded distinctive Irish cultural practices and as such were employed to promote and affirm the Irish nation and Irish identity, particularly at points where established conceptions of both were being challenged or reconfigured. This process extends to the contemporary context wherein Ireland has experienced huge changes, economically and socially, over the past twenty years. While Gaelic games are a less prominent feature of contemporary fiction film, this article contends that the cinematic has now been incorporated and integrated into major sporting events themselves, including *Laochra*. Furthermore, the mediatisation of *Laochra* reveals the continuing relevance of a

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12 Crosson, “Ar son an náisiúin”: The National Film Institute of Ireland’s All-Ireland Films’ Éire-Ireland, Special Issue on Irish Sport 48.1&2 (2013): 193-212.
range of themes in association with Gaelic games including the employment of these sports as key markers of Irish identity and the association of hurling with violence.

**Sport and Commemoration**

As Neil Jarman has contended, ‘memories of past events are primarily maintained and structured within membership of a social group rather than by individuals’. As a key facilitator of social gatherings and groups, sport is a crucial part of how events are remembered, particularly in Ireland where sport has such a prominent role. Moreover, as both Paul Rouse and Michael Cronin respectively have noted, sport has functioned prominently in how the Irish state has projected itself nationally and internationally post-independence. This process of national mythmaking through sport has received increasing academic attention, including O’Boyle and Kearns’ recent comparative analysis of sponsored national mythmaking in Irish rugby and soccer, in which the authors identified how these ‘modern sports contribute to the (re)definition of national identities in the context of increasing marketization and mediatization of sport at different levels’. In a further recent study of the transnational football fan, David Rowe noted how ‘as sport becomes more global and transnational in nature, the national is constantly re-asserted as a locus of collective identification’. The remembering and commemoration of 1916 in particular has throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first often been located and associated with sporting events, venues and organisations. On the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 1966, the key commemorative events (discussed below) were hosted in the GAA’s principal stadium, Croke Park, reflecting the strong connection of the association at the time, as now, with the Rising.

William Murphy has uncovered that some 302 GAA players from 53 clubs, almost one-fifth of the estimated 1,500 to 1,800 rebels of Easter Week, participated in the 1916 Rising. Though the GAA’s initial official response to the Rising in 1916 was to deny involvement, in subsequent years the association has made considerable claims for a significant role in the event and its aftermath. Speaking on the eve of St Patrick’s Day in 1966, then GAA president Alf Murray highlighted the contribution of the GAA to the Rising, and stressed that the association

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regards its national attitude as an essential part of the obligation that history and tradition impose upon us if we are to strengthen the Irish character and provide at least a part of the spiritual background that ensures the continuance of the struggle for the nation’s soul.¹⁹

Fifty years later in 2016, the president of the association Aogán Ó Fearghail reiterated these remarks in the programme to the Loachra event, observing that ‘The active patriotism that the Proclamation of the Irish Republic of 1916 proclaims is alive and well in our GAA clubs and counties. The vision of a Gaelic Ireland with a sense of duty and loyalty to nation is what the GAA lives out on a daily basis’.²⁰

The Pageant Format

Pageants have been a recurring feature of GAA commemorative events, including its fiftieth commemoration of 1916 in 1966, when the association hosted not one but two pageants: Seachtar Fear, Seacht Lá [Seven men, seven days] and Aiséirí: Glóir Réim na Cásca [Resurrection: the Easter Pageant]. Seachtar Fear, Seacht Lá was performed again in 2016 as part of the major annual traditional musical festival Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. It was written by Bryan McMahon and featured actors playing the seven signatories of the proclamation giving an account of themselves and their actions accompanied by a cast of nearly four hundred.²¹ While McMahon’s pageant ran from the 17th to 19th of March (and was subsequently re-performed in the GAA’s Casement Park [Belfast] during Easter Week) the GAA hosted a second pageant in Croke Park from Monday to Friday of Easter Week 1966. Aiséirí: Glóir Réim na Cásca presented a nationalist and triumphalist portrayal of the Irish struggle from 1798 to the establishment of the first Dáil (Irish parliament) in 1919, foregrounding in the process the role of Patrick Pearse, militarism, and children with regard to the Rising as well as stressing the theme of the reunification of the island — all prominent aspects of the 2016 Loachra event.

The choice of the pageant format to commemorate 1916 (whether in 1966 or 2016) seems particularly appropriate: the Rising was itself a peculiarly theatrical event, described by Declan Kiberd as one of the ‘most theatrical insurrections in the history of western Europe’ and the events of that week and some of the actions of leaders of the Rising would certainly lend credence to such an assertion.²² Patrick Pearse famously wore an ancient sword during the entirety of the Rising and eventually insisted on its formal handing over during his surrender to the leader of the British forces, General Lowe. Indeed, pageants had been popular at St. Enda’s, the secondary school for boys set up in 1908 in Ranelagh by

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²¹ Róisín Higgins, ‘‘I Am the Narrator over and above…the Caller up of the Dead’: Pageant and Drama in 1966’, 1916 in 1966 - Commemorating the Easter Rising, Mary E. Daly and M. O’Callaghan, eds., (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2007), 153.
Pearse, with the mythological warrior figure Cúchulainn often depicted as the leading figure. As noted by Roisín Higgins,

Pearse’s ideal Irishman would have been ‘Cúchulainn baptised’ [...] while the St. Enda’s boys looked to the vibrant youth of Cúchulainn before 1916, in the aftermath of the Rising it was the hero’s sacrificial death that defined his legend in the popular imagination. This aspect of the Cúchulainn saga in turn became inextricably linked to the death of Pearse.

Significantly, these two key events were re-enacted as the opening performance of Loachra: Cúchulainn’s vibrant youth as the boy Setanta playing hurling and his death as a warrior on the battlefield. Moreover, as elsewhere in the production, physical combat was highlighted and celebrated in this scene in a lengthy fight sequence as part of a recurring return to military elements throughout the pageant. Accompanied by a stirring orchestral accompaniment, this initial re-enactment elevates violent and militaristic elements from Cúchulainn’s life. These aspects are combined with both Irish and English narration, garments and iconography associated with pre-Christian Ireland, and sophisticated cinematography, including the use of steadicam to follow events on the pitch, and pre-recorded inserts of a Cúchulainn-like figure (played by prominent former Cork hurler of Fiji extraction, Seán Ó hAilpín) striking a sliotar (the ball used in hurling) aflame and attacking with a sword. The performance also comprised an inclusive cast featuring both women and people of colour. This integration of older motifs with a more multicultural and representative depiction of contemporary Ireland was a recurring if sometimes contradictory aspect of Laochra.

_Laochra_

Writing in the _Freeman’s journal_ in 1909 (in an article republished by Pearse in the Christmas edition of _An Macaomh_), the journalist and translator Stephen McKenna remarked on the revival of pageants at that time and praised it as a cultural form that could ‘gather together the broken threads of our national history’. An examination of the Laochra pageant reveals a similar process, whereby the ‘broken threads’ of Irish national history are gathered together in a seamless and energetic expression of contemporary Irish identity. Laochra, which can be translated as ‘warriors’ or ‘heroes’, followed the playing of the GAA’s Allianz League divisional finals and consisted of a specially commissioned half hour stadium production featuring a cast of more than 3,500 performers. The pageant presented aspects of Irish mythology and history and (unsurprisingly) highlighted the role of Gaelic games and the GAA in that story, from the earliest days through to the revolutionary period and right up to the present day.

There were two principal modes of experiencing the Laochra event; one televisual (via TV broadcast over the Irish language broadcaster TG4), the other theatrical, with significant cinematic elements for those present at the performance in Croke Park. The cinematic aspects were evident in the combination of different forms of live performance
(including re-enactments from episodes in Irish mythology featuring hurling, Irish dancing, and live reading/singing performance), rendered for television broadcast through pitchside camera, dynamic steadicam sequences, and pre-recorded archive footage screened on three of the largest high definition outdoor big screens in Europe. The use of steadicam to capture the event added a peculiarly cinematic element to the rendering of Laochra: invented by the American cinematographer Garrett Brown, one of the first films in which steadicam was used extensively was the seminal Oscar-winning sport drama Rocky (1976), a key text in defining and popularising the sport cinema genre subsequently. With regard to the screens in the stadium, while two screens are normally featured in Croke Park, a third 90-square metre screen was added on the Hill 16 part of the stadium, reducing the capacity (normally 82,300) to 81,000. Nonetheless, even at 81,000 this was the largest crowd ever to attend a league final, which preceded the Laochra event. In addition to those in attendance in the stadium, the Laochra event and the preceding league finals attracted the largest ever audience for a TG4 broadcast, ‘earning TG4 a share of 38% of all people viewing TV in Ireland [...] In total, almost three quarters of a million viewers (739,000).’

The cinematic/televisual aspects of the production reflect the background of the show’s artistic director and producers. Artistic director Ruán Magan is an award-winning filmmaker who has worked primarily in the documentary format, including the 3-part historical series 1916: The Irish Rebellion (2016). Laochra was produced by the TV production company Tyrone Productions, one of the most successful producers of entertainment and documentary content on Irish television. The company was founded by John McColgan and Moya Doherty, the producers behind the phenomenally successful Riverdance theatrical show, and aspects of that dance phenomenon were also evident in the Laochra event.

Laochra opens by immediately connecting elemental and stereotypical images of Irishness with Gaelic games. The pre-recorded footage which begins the TV version (and was shown on the screens in the stadium) opens with a shot of the Gold coloured GAA crest, set against an elemental background of water and fire (Fig. 1).

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26 Seán Crosson, Sport and Film (London: Routledge, 2013), 93-98.
It should be noted that the league finals featured counties Dublin, Kerry, Cavan and Tyrone — all counties with very large followings which undoubtedly contributed to both the attendance and viewership.
This dramatic initial image gives way to a shot of a red-haired woman (played by singer Sibéal Ní Chasaide) dressed in a green cape, looking out upon an Irish landscape, which is dominated by water in the foreground and features a dramatic mountain in the distance (Fig. 2).

This figure is returned to through pre-recorded inserts throughout the event, and it recalls a key trope in representations of Ireland, one that was also invoked in the GAA’s 1966 pageant Aiséirí. As noted by Anthony Roche “The central, and virtually sole, female role [in Aiséirí] is the allegorical personification of Ireland as “Éire” or Cathleen Ni Houlihan.” This is a figure that also famously featured in W.B. Yeats’ play of the same name. While women are featured more prominently within Laochra (including in the Cúchulainn sequence discussed above), their inclusion is problematically juxtaposed with the recurring use of more traditional representations of woman as Ireland within the event.

The initial opening shots were followed by a montage of images associated with Gaelic games, from crowd shots of supporters presumably on their way to a game, to shots of the pre-match parades of legendary teams from counties Cork, Kerry and Kilkenny.

(including prominent former Cork and Kerry players Christy Ring and Páidí Ó Sé) and to scenes of Irish Volunteers drilling, a shot of the British army, and a return to the female figure from the beginning. There is in these scenes an inevitable marching towards what would appear to be a shared goal — despite the fact that some of the marchers actually have little in common, particularly if we consider the shots of the British army and the Irish Volunteers. That goal would appear to be bound up with the female image of Ireland. Notably, while the image itself is female, all the participants in the other images are male. This creates a clear divide between the active male participants in sport and revolution, and the passive female representative of Ireland. Such problematic gender stereotyping is also evident elsewhere in the production, though simultaneously at odds with the inclusion of women in other aspects of the commemoration.

Subsequent to this initial prelude, Laochra is structured around 9 scenes titled respectively ‘An Táin – Scéil Cú Chullainn’ (discussed above), ‘The Darkening Light’, ‘The Brightening’, ‘For God and Country’, ‘Uprising – 1916’, ‘Coming of Age’, ‘A New Ireland Rises’, and ‘Is Laochra Muid Go Léir’ (We are all heroes/warriors). As the titles suggest, the pageant is indebted to established configurations of Ireland and Irishness within which the GAA is centrally featured. A further key focus of Laochra’s narrative arc is the Irish tricolour and the Irish national anthem — the show builds up to a final climatic rendition of Amhrán na bhFiann (The Soldier’s Song), which is accompanied by the formation of the national flag on the pitch and by spectators in the stands. Apart from sport, Irish dance (particularly, though not exclusively, in its contemporary post-Riverdance mode) is also a key aspect of this commemoration.

The pre-recorded opening sequence ends with a return to the female figure in the landscape before we enter the stadium to witness the performed and theatrical elements of the commemorative event, beginning with the re-enactment of aspects of the Cúchulainn saga already discussed. The death of Cúchulainn is followed by the singing of the well-known Irish language song Óró sé do bheatha abhaile (Óró welcome home), the lyrics of which were written by Patrick Pearse to a much older Irish tune. The song itself is quite provocative, personifying Ireland in the figure of Gráinne Mhaol (or the legendary pirate queen Grace O’Malley) who is ‘coming over the sea/Armed warriors along with her as her guard//They are Irish themselves, not foreigners nor Spaniards/and they will rout the foreigners’. The words of this song sit uneasily with the attempts to incorporate recent immigrants — the new-Irish — into the commemorative event itself, including the preceding re-enactment of the Cúchulainn saga.

The performance of this song leads into a lengthy sequence focused on Irish music and céilí dancing, followed by readings of extracts from speeches associated with leading political and cultural figures in Irish history, including the GAA’s founder Michael Cusack. The words chosen from Cusack in particular to be read during Laochra capture the juxtaposition of militarism and sport evident throughout the commemorative event: ‘A warlike race is ever fond of games requiring skill, strength and staying power’. This sequence

is followed by a further reflection on militarism, in particular World War 1, with extracts read from the writings of John Redmond, Edward Carson, Thomas Hardy and Stephen Gwynn, accompanied by images from the war depicted on the stadium’s screens and relayed to the television audience. This entire sequence lasts less than one minute before the much longer Part Four, ‘Uprising – 1916’ begins, with an image of a burning Irish Republic flag followed by the singing of the nationalist ballad ‘The Foggy Dew’ (which chronicles the Easter Uprising of 1916) by Lisa Burke.

There then follows the recitation of the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic by 32 children from 32 counties across the island. This sequence affirms a further key trope throughout the event – the island as a unified space reflected in the images included in the commemoration, including the repeated use of the image of the island of Ireland. This sequence elides the partitioned nature of the island while again simultaneously affirming woman as the personification of Ireland. This is the case, despite the inclusion of girls in the recitation; the scene ultimately concludes with a return to the iconic female image and the singing by Sibéal Ní Chasaide of ‘Mise Éire’ (I am Ireland), Pearse’s iconic poem that imagines Ireland as an old woman who feels abandoned and betrayed by her children. As this song is sung, a map of Ireland is formed on the pitch and surrounded by men waving the flags for each of the 32 counties of Ireland (Fig. 3). This becomes the centrepiece for the remainder of the event and highlights a recurring theme: a united Ireland. The combination of this image, the singing of ‘Mise Éire’ and the return of the female figure introduced at the opening of the event reaffirms this reading for the viewer.

The foregrounding of children in the reading of the proclamation indicates a further key concern evident in the 1916 commemorations: the embedding and affirming of historical elements (including those associated with gender and militarism) within a contemporary Irish context while simultaneously eliding the ruptures and disjunctures within the nationalist narrative. This new Ireland, while modern, youthful and energetic, is problematically positioned in relation to iconography, configurations and sentiments of a
much older Ireland, with sometimes contradictory or paradoxical results. These contradictions are managed through a robust fetishisation of military elements as part of an attempt to bring order to the evident inconsistencies. The recitations by children in this sequence, for example, were prefaced by the arrival into Croke Park of members of the Battle of Ashbourne Commemorative Committee re-enactment group, dressed in the uniform worn by Irish Volunteers who participated in the Rising; the Croke Park setting was also surrounded by military paraphernalia, including cannons from the period.

**A New Ireland Rises?**

The tensions and contradictions evident throughout *Laochra* are all the more apparent in the penultimate section, entitled ‘A New Ireland Rises’. We have already discussed the resort to militarism as one response to these contradictions; a further consequence is the ambivalence that becomes apparent as *Laochra* develops towards established signifiers of Irishness, an ambivalence that shares parallels with changing discourses of Irishness identified by Diane Negra in association with late Celtic Tiger Ireland. In her 2010 essay ‘Urban Space, Luxury Retailing and the New Irishness’, Negra mapped a ‘transformation in concepts and discourses of Irishness in the ambiguous phase in which Celtic Tiger affluence largely continued but its novelty and sense of contrast to a formerly quasi “Third World” Ireland at the European periphery had worn off’. In the place of previous nostalgic and traditional representations of Ireland, Negra identified instead

a new discursive formulation that emphasizes the integration of Irishness and globalization (where once Irishness was positioned as a respite from it), a shift in the emotional palette of Irishness from warm to cool, an emphasis on Irish glamour and a focus on Ireland as the exemplary scene of capitalism.

In this context, she contends, ‘Irishness is often very lightly worn and can even operate in counterpoint to more anxious displays of national identity’. While Negra’s comments have relevance to the *Laochra* event as a whole, this is particularly so when we turn to the ‘A New Ireland Rises’ section, a scene which brings a modern and dynamic turn to proceedings, accompanied by fireworks and pyrotechnics. This ‘New Ireland’ is energetic, youthful, though ambivalent regarding established Irish iconography, combining nondescript global cultural signifiers with tropes linked to the island and Ireland’s past. The sequence begins with a return to a centrepiece image of the island of Ireland (with no indication of partition) surrounded by men waving flags from each of the 32 counties (Fig. 3). The music and performance, entitled ‘Reel of Arrivals’, in this sequence is taken from Doherty and McCollgan’s theatrical show *Heartbeat of Home*, a work clearly indebted to their earlier more successful show *Riverdance*. As a whole, *Heartbeat of Home* combines Latin and Afro-Cuban music and dance with Irish music and dance and these influences are evident in the dance sequences included in *Laochra*. The pre-recorded sequences that are only briefly shown in the TV broadcast but continued at length on the screens in the stadium emphasise a casual, contemporary, and (in Negra’s terms) ‘cool’ global youth culture as evident in

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31 Negra 836.
32 Negra 836.
figure 4 — the dancing itself (described in the pageant’s script as ‘Fusion Dance’) has few features familiar from Irish dance; indeed, there is nothing that one could identify as distinctively or recognisably Irish. Even the locations are unfamiliar and certainly not representative of the typical iconography associated with Ireland. This is an Irishness, in Negra’s terms, ‘very lightly worn’, though it operates ‘in counterpoint to more anxious displays of national identity’ evident in the stadium performance. Here an updated version of the global phenomenon *Riverdance* is performed with a large troupe of dancers, dressed predominantly in black outfits though styled with Celtic ornamentation and reminiscent of monk costumes (fig. 5). Visually the energy and dynamism of the performance is communicated through the employment of fast-moving steadicam operators who race across the pitch to capture the many performers as they dance.

![Figure 4: Global youth culture as evident in *Laochra*. Images from *Laochra* courtesy of Tyrone Productions Ltd.](image)

![Figure 5: Dancers during *Laochra* wear black outfits styled with Celtic ornamentation. Images from *Laochra* courtesy of Tyrone Productions Ltd.](image)

However, there is a further progression evident in these latter performances of Irish dancing. While ostensibly displaying a freer and less constrained style than that associated
with Céili dancing (featured earlier in the event), this dancing does demonstrate a high degree of discipline, one quite reminiscent of military practice, both in formation and expression. Indeed, the structuring of the performance as a robust encounter between the dancers and the drummers (many of whom are playing Lambeg drums, associated particularly with the Unionist tradition in Ireland) affirms this connection. Furthermore, the formations created by the dancers are reminiscent of military formations as they gather on the pitch, with gestures included also having a military origin (fig. 6). In these aspects, the ‘New Ireland Rises’ sequence reveals a disciplining of Irishness itself — a feature evident throughout the Laochra event in the integration of military elements and gestures into the performance of aspects of Irish culture — as a response to anxieties raised by the inherent contradictions evident throughout the show as a whole.

![Figure 6: Gestures of dancers during Laochra with military connotations. Images from Laochra courtesy of Tyrone Productions Ltd.](image)

**Conclusion**

Sport and sporting venues were key parts of how 1916 was recalled and commemorated in Ireland in 2016. As the largest sporting organisation on the island, the Gaelic Athletic Association hosted one of the most significant of these events, the Laochra pageant held on the centenary of the first day of the 1916 Rising. The dynamic visual rendering of Laochra reveals the incorporation and integration of the cinematic into contemporary major sporting events, including the employment of steadicam and the importance of pre-recorded footage and big screens to the stadium performance. As evident in previous indigenous cinematic (and televisual) depictions of Gaelic games, the promotion and affirmation of the Irish nation and Irish identity were also key concerns. Indeed, the format of Laochra was structured to disguise and obscure the ruptures within Irish history and Irish politics. The
show as a whole repeatedly worked to naturalise and normalise a narrative of Irish history and identity that placed World War I and 1916 as parallel paths on this journey, largely ignoring the divided and contested nature of Irish history, identity and the island of Ireland itself. This is a version of Irishness that appeals to long-established, regressive and gendered configurations of Irishness while simultaneously seeming to promote a modern and multi-ethnic contemporary Ireland. Contradictions such as these contribute to the, at times ambivalent, construction of Irishness presented in *Laochra*, evident in the combination of nondescript global cultural signifiers with iconography linked to the island and to Ireland’s past.

*Laochra* is ultimately an event that through its contradictions and paradoxes speaks to the uncertainties and anxieties concerning contemporary Irishness, particularly when placed in relation to established conceptions and configurations of Irish identity. While foregrounding aspects of the New Ireland – whether in terms of gender or ethnic composition – it ultimately does so within the frame of older Irish tropes which constrain the possibilities for a truly reimagined and reconfigured sense of Irishness in the 21st century. More problematically, it contributes to an exclusionary discourse that constructs a passive feminine and active and militaristic masculine space while obscuring the complex and ruptured nature of the Irish past and present.

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