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Title	Irish short films: essential indigenous productions
Author(s)	Crosson, Seán
Publication Date	1995
Publication Information	Sean Crosson (1995) ' Irish Short Films Essential Indigenous Productions '. Ropes: Review Of Postgraduate Studies, (4).
Publisher	ROPES: Review Of Postgraduate Studies
Link to publisher's version	https://ropesgalway.wordpress.com/
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/5329

Downloaded 2022-05-19T02:23:52Z

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Irish Short Films – Essential Indigenous Productions

Seán Mac an Chroisín

Since the first development of an Irish cinema of national questioning in the mid-1970s, short films have played an important role in Irish film culture. Not only did they offer Irish filmmakers an opportunity to learn their trade and establish themselves, but often the films themselves made original and provocative contributions to contemporary debates including those surrounding cultural identity. Joe Comerford's *Withdrawal* (1974) and *Emtigon* (1977) both gave a voice to previously unheard "victims of our social system": the brutalised old man in *Emtigon*, the drug addict in *Withdrawal*.¹ Cathal Black's *Wheels* (1976), preceded Bob Quinn's *Poitín* (1978) in presenting a more negative picture of rurality than the mythologised one of de Valera, Robert Flaherty (*Man Of Aran*) and John Ford (*The Quiet Man*): the city is represented as liberating the son of a small farmer from the enclosed nature of country life.

During the '80s, significant shorts continued to be made. Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *The Woman Who Married Clarke Gable* (1985), set in 1930s Dublin, presented the cinema as a liberating force from the constraints of Irish family life, while Siobhán Twomey's *Boom Babies* (1986) treated of the difficulties women have in overcoming traditional gender stereotyping.

In recent years, Irish Short films have continued to play a vital role. Irish history, contemporary society, male and female sexuality and the Northern Ireland situation are but some of the more significant themes to be found in these films. But before I talk of films, why is the Irish "Short" so important?

The Short film has become in effect, with rare exceptions, the only truly indigenous form of Irish film-making, being directed, written, and, most importantly, funded by Irish people through the Film Board, the Arts Council, the Film Base/RTÉ short film awards, the Galway Film Resource Centre Script award and private

investment. The funding of Irish films by Irish people has long been recognised as important. In 1977 a doctoral thesis on the Irish Film Industry concluded that

dependence on foreign money or initiative is detrimental [to a native film industry] ... countries like Australia, which at first put their trust in co-production work found the imbalance intolerable; they were exploited for their locations and their financial investment ... In Australia, there was no real success until the attitude changed to self reliance ... the picture shows even more forcefully that only self-reliance will create a national film industry that will be the voice of its people, that will fulfil cultural and political requirements ... and that will even, in the long term be economically independent.²

Yet Irish film-makers have still tended to rely heavily on foreign investment and had to compromise their vision as a result. Kevin Rockett gave us the example of Jim Sheridan's *The Field* (1990), a film exclusively funded by British television with American distribution guarantees, to highlight this in his essay "Culture, Industry and Irish Cinema".

Firstly, the shifting of the context of the original John B. Keane play from the late 1950s/early 1960s to the 1930s discarded the potential to examine Irish society at a crucial period of transition and secondly, the replacement of the character William Dee – a Galwayman recently returned from England, where he has become a successful businessman – as the catalyst in the story with an Irish American, while appealing to an American spectator ship, dilutes the impact of the film

The contested issue of someone returning from Britain to buy land, with its sensitive historical resonances, would have had a greater cultural impact than that of a more neutrally-received Irish-American. These changes were made for quite particular reasons and were effectively forced on the production by the film's backers.[†]

Of course, the reality is that it is very difficult for an Irish film, of the standard and length of your typical Hollywood motion picture to find sufficient money for its production in this country alone. Our population in the Republic of three and a half million accounts for less than 5% of that of the U.K., of which we are often seen as just a province in terms of the world media industry. However, maybe we have lived for too long under the "tyranny of Hollywood", and not just in the films that are available to watch. Bob Quinn, one of the more innovative of Irish directors over the last twenty years, suggests that:

There's an assumption that a film is something that's an hour and a half long ... It seems to me that [this is] a narrowing of the definition of film. Film is not just a story told in an hour and a half, with a beginning, middle and end ... I think that a film five minutes long can be infinitely more worthwhile than 99% of the hour and a half long bullshit churned out simply because there is a consumption structure to receive it.³

Creating a "consumption structure", as Bob Quinn would say, for the short-film might appear difficult. Admittedly, it is unlikely that Irish cinemas will be willing to exhibit them, being slow to exhibit even Irish films of so-called feature-length, preferring the Hollywood picture instead. Yet research has shown that shorts can be both popular and financially viable.

The importance of shorts to any nation [culturally and politically] has already been established ... No nation's film industry seems content to settle for the making of shorts only ... Yet some countries have made reputations, and probably money (at least indirectly) on their shorts, as in the cases of Canada and Holland⁴

On the continent the short film has established a following in its own right and, what is more, Irish Short-films have proved remarkably successful at continental festivals and further afield. One would be hard pressed to recall the Oscar nomination for Hilton Edwards' *Return To Glenascaul* (1953), but as recently as last March an Irish film, John Moore's *He Shoots, He Scores* won the prestigious Golden Bear for best short at the Berlin film festival, while this spring Sean Hinds' *The Pan Loaf* was one of only ten shorts from all over the world to be nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Apart from the film festivals, in the U.S. earlier this year a new 24-hour television channel Celtic

Vision was established, providing a structure through which the work of Irish filmmakers, both shorts and conventional one-and-a-half-hour films can be broadcast eventually to some of the 44million people of Irish extraction in that country.⁵

Closer to home, there are of course a wide range of less orthodox outlets like film societies, college campuses, and video cassettes through which directors or their distributors could distribute their work. The national television service, RTÉ, is yet another outlet. Already during the summer of '95 a wide range of shorts were shown as part of their "Debut" series, helping to raise the profile of our young filmmakers.

To return now to the film texts themselves, speaking at the Clermont Ferrand short-film festival in France in 1991, the then French Minister for Culture, Jacques Lange had the following to say:

The role of the short film can no longer be limited to that of a mere testing ground for young film makers. The concise and rhythmic properties inherent in the brevity of such films have produced a particular aesthetic quality, autonomous and singular, which favours infinite diversity⁶

Irish Short filmmaking has indeed thrown up a great diversity of themes in recent years. A list if compiled would include such diverse topics as Irish history, culture, language, society and/or sexuality (in all its guises), abortion, loss of innocence, football and even space travel. The main impetus in this area has come primarily from the emergence from the Departments of Communication at both Rathmines and Dublin City University, as well as Dun Laoghaire School of Art and Design of graduates going on to a career in film. I have chosen, however, to deal with just one short film in particular here, Kevin Liddy's *Horse*.

Horse (1993) has won numerous awards and certificates of merit while travelling the circuit of European film festivals. However, it remains a distinctly Irish production. By this, I refer to the fact that this film presupposes a knowledge of Irish history from the viewer. Therefore, it remains of most relevance to an Irish audience.

One significant feature of Irish filmmaking past and present has been its preoccupation with the past. However, though *Horse* is set in the Ireland of yesterday, unlike other filmmakers

Liddy makes no attempt to glamorise it. Indeed, his film could more accurately be described as a searing indictment of de Valera's legacy.

Set in the rural Ireland of the early 1960s, the story revolves around Michael, a teenage boy who is living alone with his father, Pat, a feeble old man dying from TB. This is a dark, sombre tale that contrasts, through the eyes and ears of Michael, the differences between the ideal Ireland of de Valera's imagination and the reality he must live with. This is not "a land whose countryside would be ... joyous with the ... contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens."⁷

Rather the countryside appears as a desolate, lonely and unforgiving environment right from the first scene, when Michael witnesses his father shooting their farm horse as "he couldn't work" anymore.

There are few young people left now. Most have emigrated. The pictures on the walls speak volumes for de Valera's Ireland: the Pope for religion, John F. Kennedy for the thousands that fled a succession of failed economic policies, beside a picture of de Valera himself. Michael himself appears as no athletic youth. Rather he is "locked into his country's vicious circle of resentment, fear and raging grief"⁸ The "Comely Maidens" are represented by the frumpish, chain-smoking, but kind-hearted spinster Helen Garvey, who has been calling into their unkempt home to make their dinners ever since Pat's wife died, hoping that one day she might take her place. On the way to school Michael is taunted by a neighbour over his "auld fool" of a father who will, he claims, soon marry Helen Garvey.

In school, the camera pans over the 1916 proclamation on the wall, as the class watch John F. Kennedy congratulate Ireland on taking her place "among the free nations of the world" following 800 years of struggle. This is followed by a tape of de Valera describing the malign power of Lloyd George over Irish lives. But both seem but empty rhetoric for people like Michael who must live with the reality of rural "free Ireland" in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

When Michael goes to Dublin with his father, he visits the G.P.O, where under the statue of Cuchulainn he traces the words of the 1916 proclamation. Later, Pat goes drinking with Junior, Helen's brother, and between them they recall younger days, as if there is little in the present to remember.

Michael, on his return home raids the hen house of his taunting neighbour, only to be caught and have his head savagely ducked into a barrel of water as punishment. When Pat hears of it he goes that night to take revenge, but is himself badly beaten up. As Michael helps his father from the field of battle, his father utters his own proclamation "never turn the other cheek." Michael takes it all in, helping to create a new angry, yet sad, generation.

Throughout all of this there is a clear evocation of Irish history, and the failures of the cultural nationalist enterprise. Indeed, the horse itself could represent the failure of the Catholic Fíor-Ghael definition of Irish identity that de Valera so eloquently espoused to reflect the reality of Irish life. Like the Horse that couldn't work anymore, it can no longer suffice. Yet it dominated Irish cultural, economic and political speak for nearly forty years, and made protectionism from outside influences the fundamental social policy of successive governments. In the area of film censorship alone, by 1960 over 3,000 films were banned and almost 8,000 cut as part of this policy.

The barren landscape of the film is testament to a land ravaged by emigration, while the dying father, as a single parent trying to raise his son in obvious poverty debunks de Valera's "rural idyll". Horse lasts altogether 28 minutes, but in that time it probably says more about the period in question than *The Field* does for 1930s Ireland in almost 2 hours. Because there was no need to go abroad to secure financing, Liddy did not feel obliged to spell out the subtleties, or indeed leave them out as irrelevant. This is one of the most important roles of film, to be able to translate into images and sounds, words and emotions that need to be said but have often been left unsaid for too long, often disregarded or discouraged as too dangerous. However, as the Russian dramatist Chekhov wrote in his play *The Cherry Orchard*

"To begin to live in the present, we must first atone for our past and be finished with it ..."

Irish Shorts have from the development of an Irish cinema in the mid 1970s, played an important role in Irish film culture. Indeed, they may be the only indigenous productions, being directed, written and funded by Irish people. The funding aspect is very significant. As I pointed out, foreign financing of Irish film

compromises the vision of Irish directors. This does not apply to Shorts, which can be State-funded.

Indeed, there may be a need to re-imagine the parameters of film in Ireland to include the often neglected Short. Already on the continent, Shorts have garnered significant respect and popularity in their own right, and more possibilities are opening up all the time, via T.V. in the U.S. and Ireland, as well as the film festivals, to create a "consumption structure" for the Short.

This paper is not suggesting that Irish filmmakers should not be trying to make films of one and a half hours in length. Of course there are stories that cannot be told in five minutes, ten minutes or even half an hour. But I feel that the short by virtue, I suppose, of its name is often regarded as somehow of lesser quality than the "feature"-length film, and directors may ignore an excellent script simply because it doesn't give scope for a film longer than an hour. As Brian Corr, Programme Director of last year's Irish Film Festival in Limerick, has written

Unfortunately, the short film is still not considered a conventional component of film in Ireland and, despite the wishes of many, it may be a while before it can be seen as a genre in itself, treated with the respect it deserves.⁹

Irish Shorts have already made significant contributions to our imagining of Irish history and contemporary society. If we are to develop these essential indigenous productions, we need to re-imagine our own definitions of film itself.

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¹ Simmons, David. "Joe Comerford, Travelling Forward?" in *Film Directions*, Vol.3, No.12, 1980. p. 4-5

² "Prospects for an Irish Film Industry:... an extract from the concluding chapter of a 400-page doctoral dissertation (University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1977)." Printed in *Film Directions*, Vol.1, No.2. 1978, page 5-7. The thesis examined the film industry experiences of Australia, Finland, Canada, Denmark, Holland, Sweden and Great Britain, and this is the "picture" to which the author refers. The author's name is not given.

[†] Rockett, Kevin. "Culture, Industry and Irish Cinema", p. 139 in *Border Crossings: Film in Ireland*

Britain and Europe.

³ This is but one of the many contributions made by Quinn and others including Lelia Doolan at the recent Audience Participation Forum during the Irish Film Festival at the University of Limerick on Sunday 23rd of April, 1995.

⁴ "Prospects for an Irish Film Industry ...", *ibid*, p. 6.

⁵ "Green Day" in *Film Ireland*, April/May, 1995, p.18.

⁶ Quoted in "Francs for the Memory", an article by Mick Hannigan published in *Stet*, The National Literary and Arts Newspaper, No. 6, Summer 1991, p. 12.

⁷ This quotation is taken from M. Moynihan's *Speeches and Statements by Eamon de Valera*, Dublin, 1990.

⁸ This is taken from a review of the film by Lelia Doolan, chairperson of the Irish Film Board in *Film Ireland*, april/may 1993, p.24.

⁹ "Rathmines 1994 Graduate Films" in *Film Ireland*, February/March, 1995, p. 32.