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## *Six Shooter* (2006)

### Sean Crosson

Since the emergence of a critically engaged indigenous cinema in the mid-1970s, short films have played an important role in Irish film culture. Not only did they offer Irish filmmakers such as Joe Comerford, Bob Quinn and Cathal Black an opportunity to learn their trade and establish their credentials, often the films themselves made original and provocative contributions to contemporary debates while providing an important local response to the sometimes questionable portrayals of Ireland often found in international productions. Furthermore, Irish short films –in contrast to most feature-length productions– have proven remarkably successful at international festivals' award ceremonies.. Few may recall the Oscar nomination for Hilton Edwards' *Return To Glenascaul* (1951) starring Orson Welles, but among the major award winners in the last twenty years have been John Lawlor's *Sunday* (1987), John Moore's *He Shoots, He Scores* (1995), Damien O'Donnell's, *Thirty five Aside* (1995) and Daniel O'Hara's *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (2004). As recently as 2005, Ken Wardrup's *Undressing My Mother* (2004), won the European Film Academy Short Film Award, while Tim Loane (*Dance Lexie Dance* (1996), Cathal Gaffney (*Give Up Yer Aul Sins* (2002)) and Ruairi Robinson (*Fifty Percent Grey* (2002)) have all received Oscar nominations for their work in the past ten years.

Such success notwithstanding, there was considerable surprise when Martin McDonagh won the best Oscar award in March 2006 for his debut short, *Six Shooter*. For any Irish film to win an Oscar is no small matter in a country not renowned for its filmmaking culture. For it to be the directorial debut of a young Anglo-Irish filmmaker (London-born of Irish parentage) seems almost impertinent. But if McDonagh's filmmaking credentials are slim, he already has an esteemed reputation on both sides of the Atlantic as the author of seven plays and recipient of numerous awards, including two Laurence Olivier Awards for *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003) and *The Pillowman* (2004). He has also been nominated twice for Broadway's Tony Award as author of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1998) and *The Lonesome West* (1999). However, while he is best known for his work in theatre, and often compared to JM Synge with whom he shares an interest in the west of Ireland, it is from the cinema that McDonagh takes much of his inspiration, citing Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Quentin Tarantino as major influences (Leonard 2006).

Combining the darker themes and extreme violence of Scorsese and Tarantino with the surrealism of Lynch, *Six Shooter* is one of the most provocative Irish shorts for some time. Over its 27 minutes the film manages not just to reference McDonagh's major influences but also provides a commentary on representations of Ireland in cinema, often characterised by "rural backwardness or a marked proclivity for violence" (Rockett et alia 1988: xii). However, in line with McDonagh's irreverent approach to Irish theatre, it is a provocative portrayal that may appear at first to perpetuate as much as critique previous questionable representations.

McDonagh's choice of a train journey is particularly inspired. It not only propels the narrative along but allows for an encounter with the modern (on the train) and the traditional (out the window). Furthermore, while the character of 'Kid' (Rúaidhrí Conroy) may have resonances with Synge's Christy Mahon, in cinematic terms, McDonagh takes the conventional representation of the violently insane Irish character (apparent in films such as *Patriot Games* (Phillip Noyce, 1992) and *Blown Away* (Stephen Hopkins, 1994)) and brings it to its absurd extreme, creating in the process a character, dressed in (what else?) a bright green shirt, that owes more to a British and Irish-American imaginary (and cinema) than to the realities of Irish culture. But there is a further presence here epitomised in the gunfight sequence at the film's climax, and that is the American west, a recurrent feature throughout McDonagh's work, where the west of Ireland seems occasionally indistinguishable from the Wild West. In this respect, in terms of McDonagh's theatrical work, *Six-Shooter* seems closest to *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. However, whereas it is the death of a much beloved pet cat that bookends the narrative in the play, in *Six Shooter* it is the death of a rabbit that provides the film's blackly humorous dénouement.

*Six-Shooter's* narrative begins with a doctor's revelation to Mr. Donnelly (Brendan Gleeson) that his wife has just passed away. While he sits by his wife's hospital bed, we are presented with the familiar figure of the inarticulate Irish male – reminiscent of Bunny Kelly in *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach, 1997) – repeating the words 'I don't know what to say'. The doctor can provide little support, forced to leave to attend to two cot deaths and the body of a headless woman, killed by her son. From the beginning McDonagh is referencing Irish theatre, except here it is not a father who dies at the hands of his son *à la* *The Playboy of the Western World*, but a mother.

We now move to the terrain where most of the action of the film takes place – on a train. Once the train has left the station it travels through the countryside and coastal regions of Wicklow and Waterford where the film was shot. While Donnelly sits opposite a verbose and eccentric young man, known only as 'Kid' in the film, they are joined in the next seat by a clearly upset couple who become the subject of repeated verbal comments by Kid. We discover later that they have lost a son to a cot death, a matter which provides further amusement for Kid who suggests that they may have 'banged it on something'.

From the beginning of this train's journey one is reminded of an iconic moment in Irish cinema. The first shots of the train's arrival, while Donnelly waits to board, are reminiscent of the opening scene of that most quintessential and influential of 'Irish' films, *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), the film that more than any other served to establish in the world's imagination the image of Ireland as a green pastoral idyll populated by a friendly, loquacious though seemingly unintelligible people, with a noticeable weakness for alcohol and conversation – not entirely dissimilar to characters portrayed in McDonagh's film. However, in *Six Shooter* the director seems intent on literally exploding and shattering myths that John Ford's 1952 film helped to promulgate.

*The Quiet Man* is a film in which the rural idyll of Ireland provides relief from the modernity of the city for the film's protagonist, the returning Irish emigrant Seán Thornton (John Wayne), a former prize fighter attempting to come to terms with his accidental killing of a friend in the boxing ring. The Pittsburg he left behind is described by Thornton as 'hell' and contrasted to the 'heaven' he imagines Innisfree to be. Similarly in *Six Shooter*, for the characters on the train, all of whom are attempting to come to terms with their own suffering, the repeated shots of the Irish countryside they see through the train's windows appear to offer some brief relief from their own internal traumas. Again and again we see the train's passengers stare out into the countryside, particularly at tense points in the narrative – following a failed attempt by the man (David Wilmot) to comfort his distraught wife (Aisling O'Sullivan), the mother of the cot death victim; after the attempted physical attack by Wilmot's character on Kid for repeated use of bad language; and after Kid reveals he would kill his own child if he had one. In this final instance, it is Kid himself who draws our attention to the outside world, remarking unexpectedly while discussing Rod Steiger's late parenthood: "Ah Sheep". We are then presented with familiar shots of sheep in an Irish field framed, almost postcard like, in the train's window. It seems that all the time while we watch, the passengers are watching their own film, a film

that unfolds through the window allowing them to temporarily escape their present worries.

But it is all an illusion, and McDonagh suggests as much by the very framing of the pastoral images. Furthermore, the windows themselves are broken dramatically as the train comes to a final halt and a gun fight ensues between Kid and the armed Gardaí outside, shattering not just the windows, but the very illusion that outside there might be some relief from the traumas of those taking the train.

As if to emphasize the shattering of pastoral myths, McDonagh includes within the narrative Kid's story of a cow suffering from trapped wind. In a surreal sequence brightly lit by cinematographer Baz Irvine to amplify its images and suggest an exaggerated fiction from Kid's past, we witness Kid as a child been brought to a cattle fair by his father. Everything about this scene suggests an imagined and heavily constructed event, whether in terms of the number of people present, the events that follow or the location, including the ubiquitous ruins (seemingly an ever-present in Irish-themed films) in the background. On the soundtrack, Kid describes the expanding cow's stomach and the unorthodox solution provided by a 'short tiny fella', reminiscent of the conventional image of a leprechaun. However, the apparent 'solution' leads to the exploding of the cow, an event that is as effective and memorable in exploding myths as the detonation of an atomic bomb in the centre of a scenic Irish lake in Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997).

As with McDonagh's theatrical work, *Six Shooter* will no doubt offend and irk as many as it will impress. For viewers, it is hard to find an assured position in relation to a film which repeatedly undermines one's expectations with regard to both character and narrative. Yet in all of this *Six Shooter* provides an intriguing, if ironic, commentary on representations of Ireland in cinema and indicates the important role short film continues to play in Irish film today.

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