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From *Kings to Cáca Mílis*: Irish film and television as *Gaeilge* in 2007.

Seán Crosson

Without films in Irish all the work done for the language in the schools, on the radio and by voluntary organizations is doomed to ultimate failure no matter how effectively it is done.[1](#)

When this statement was made in 1950 in a booklet entitled *Films in Irish* published by Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge (The National Conference for the Irish Language), few could have foreseen the developments subsequently in Irish-language filmmaking. While it would not be until the end of the decade that the first feature length film in Irish was made – the Gael Linn produced documentary *Mise Éire* (1959) (and almost twenty years further for the first feature length fiction film in Irish – Bob Quinn’s *Poitín* (1978)) – the past 11 years have seen an impressive increase in the output of Irish language television and filmmaking.

That progress notwithstanding, Irish language film and television has, to say the least, had an uneven and indeed precarious existence for much of the twentieth century. In many ways one can view the different contexts within which the Irish language has been used in various media – from radio through film and television – as reflecting wider policies regarding the use of Irish in Ireland in any given period, policies that met with limited success, evident in the lack of Irish spoken among the majority of Irish people today. Since independence, it has been the state that has been the primary financier of filmmaking in Irish either directly through its use in such government information films as *Gnó Gach Éinne* (*Everybody’s Business*, 1951) or *Na Fiacla Sin Agat* (*Keep Your Teeth*, 1951), or indirectly through the state supports given to Gael Linn, a crucial organisation in promoting the use of Irish in film throughout the 1950s and 1960s, most famously in its feature length documentary *Mise Éire*. As Jerry White has noted, Irish language films for much of the twentieth century were primarily in the Griersonian documentary mode “a socially orientated, non-commercial model for film, a model that was closely linked to strong government and national unity”.[2](#) Significantly, it was the filmmaker with arguably the greatest influence on Grierson, Robert Flaherty, who directed the first sound film in Irish. The Irish government, through the Department of Education, sanctioned £200 to make the film *Oíche Sheanchais* (*Night Of Storytelling*, 1935), directed by Flaherty in London while in post-production on *Man of Aran* (1934). It is ironic that it is Flaherty we have to thank for directing this film, as *Man of Aran*, one of the first Irish set films to achieve international fame, is notable for the absence of the Irish language despite the fact that its cast is made up of largely non-English speaking Aran islanders. But such have been the paradoxes that have surrounded the promotion and use of Irish in Ireland over the past century.

2007 has been a year of considerable achievement for film and television in the Irish language, reflected in the recent announcement of the nominations for the Irish Film and Television Awards (IFTAs), with Irish language productions receiving over thirty nominations, including 14 alone for Tom Collins' *Kings*.³ While both Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board (IFB) and TG4 continued to support provocative short work and drama, through the Oscailt and Lasair schemes, the release of two critically acclaimed Irish language films – the second being Robert Quinn's *Cré na Cille* – marks a highpoint of production. A significant development is the level of interest been shown in Irish medium work by the general public, notwithstanding the modest performance of *Kings* at the Irish box office.

Robert Quinn's adaptation of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* (*Graveyard Clay*) has proved to be an audience favourite at festivals from Galway to Shanghai. [Reviewed by Gearóid Denvir elsewhere in this edition. Ed]. Set in a graveyard in Connamara, the narrative is structured around often quite confrontational and deprecating dialogues between corpses about the world, relations and neighbours overhead. Quinn is fortunate to have some of the finest Irish language speakers and actors at his disposal including the superb Bríd Ní Neachtain in the lead role of Cairtriona Phaidín, ably supported by the entire cast. Yet credit is due to Quinn for the overall convincing manner in which he addresses the central conceit – that is that most of the film's characters are already dead and speaking from beneath a graveyard in Connamara. Furthermore, there are great comedic moments included from the world above that are well realised. While one Irish language commentator has criticised some of the omissions from the original text,⁴ inevitably an adaptation of a work of over 360 pages ⁵ requires considerable truncation for less than 2 hours of film.

Yet Ó Cadhain's works arguably lend themselves more easily than others might to dramatisation, drawing as they do frequently on Irish traditional oral forms like *agallamh beirte* and *lúibíní*. His writing has been adapted successfully previously as stage plays, including Macdara Ó Fátharta's (who co-wrote with Quinn this year's cinematic adaptation) stage adaptation of *Cré na Cille*, in which many of the actors in Quinn's film performed.⁶ There is a competitive element to the encounters between characters in Quinn's adaptation reminiscent of the traditional *lúibíní*, a form of Gaelic song where "two or more performers are set against each other or collaborate together in a bout of semi-spontaneous composition".⁷ The richness of the language comes through in these clashes where one tries to outdo the other in insults – and the viewer is left in no doubt by the end of the richness and variety of insults and coarse words in Irish! Indeed, Quinn's work is one of the most memorable released in 2007, not least because of the viscerality and richness of the language found in Ó Cadhain's original and its superb realization by the actors in this production.

While few would have suspected that the much maligned Blasket Island's writer Peig Sayers would provide material for contemporary drama, Daniel O'Hara has added to his previous successes (including the multi-award winning Irish-language shorts *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom* (2003) and *Fluent Dysphasia* (2004)) with the TV comedy mini-series *Paddywhackery* (TG4). The story concerns Paddy Woods, played by Paddy C. Courtney (who co-wrote the series with O'Hara) who on losing his job with Maxicorp, is inspired by the appearance of the ghost of Peig Sayers (Fionnula O'Flanagan) to turn to the Irish language to get the required grants to start his own business. Aided by Siobhán (Siobhán O'Kelly) – a native speaker from Connamara – he sets out to learn Irish and attempts several projects – including a race night, driving lessons and speed dating *as Gaeilge*, before settling on the translation and production of major musicals in Irish. While the narrative as a whole is somewhat stretched and uneven over the six episodes, there remain moments of real humour and not a little insight into the use of Irish in Ireland today, particularly its dependence on government subsidies. Along the way, O'Hara restores to Peig some of the personality she was renowned for as an extraordinary traditional storyteller rather than the depressing narrator of the eponymous book that became the bane of many a Leaving Certificate Irish student.

While *Paddywhackery* revealed the continuing development of Daniel O'Hara as a writer and director, Declan Recks, award-winning director of *Pure Mule* (2005) [see review in *Estudios Irlandeses*, Issue 2. Ed], was responsible this year for directing one of the finest drama series in any language on Irish television. *The Running Mate* (TG4), co-written by Marcus Fleming, Nicky Murphy and Mark Canton, was one of the most pointed critiques of the Irish political system and the considerable corruption that has damaged public confidence in recent years. It is significant that RTÉ rejected playwright Connor McPherson's initial idea for the series some years ago, which at that time was to be set in Dublin and produced in English. TG4 has shown since its foundation that it is possible to tackle issues in Irish that other broadcasters have feared to engage with, including featuring the first gay kiss on Irish television, in *Rós na Rún*, TG4's flagship drama serial, over ten years ago. Ruth Lysaght's list of subject matter covered in episodes of this serial indicate the willingness of the station to engage with topics mainstream broadcasters have been hesitant to explore: "Exploding petrol pumps, rape, skullduggery, abortion, rural renewal, cot death, drink driving, planning corruption".[8](#)

Set in the Kerry Gaeltacht, *The Running Mate* features local politician, Vincent Flynn (Dennis Conway), who has given his political life as a foot-soldier for Fianna Fáil mopping up votes as the running mate for the local corrupt TD, Paudie Counihan (Eamonn Hunt). Unable to take Counihan's hypocrisy and condescension any longer, Flynn decides to run as an independent candidate when the government falls, assisted by his campaign manager, the alcoholic ex-schoolteacher, Willie Costello (Don Wycherley). Family crises ensue, including an unwanted pregnancy and rumours of an affair, but through it all *The Running Mate*

makes for gripping drama, despite a somewhat predictable and saccharine final episode. The fact that this is a bilingual programme (or “Breac Scannáin” as Fidelma Farley has described much Irish language drama in recent years),⁹ that engages in a pointed manner with issues pertinent to contemporary Ireland as a whole, and not just to the Gaeltacht, represents a considerable maturing in Irish-language drama not apparent in earlier periods.

In a seminar at the Huston School of Film in 2005, director Paul Mercier suggested that in the current climate there are primarily three areas in which filmmaking in the Irish language can be made with integrity. These were films set in the past, films set in the future or films that engaged with the challenges of the Irish speaker in Ireland today. Tom Collins’ *Kings*, moves outside such choices to explore another relevant area for engagement – the experience of the Irish speaker abroad. A poignant and at times deeply moving account of a reunion of a group of Connamara natives now living in London, *Kings* effectively utilizes the Irish language to accentuate the marginalized positions of the characters depicted, all of whom left Ireland in the 1970s with high hopes of success in London [see Eithne O’Connell’s review of *Kings* in this issue. Ed]. As was the case for many emigrants, few of these hopes were realised and while Joe Mullan (Colm Meaney) has managed to find some success with his own construction industry, Jap (Donal O’Kelly) and Git (Brendan Conroy) have been less fortunate. Unemployed, poor and living in dreadful conditions, they try to come to terms with their past and present while unsure, as in the case of their friend Jackie (Seán Ó Tarpaign) who took his life, that there can be a future. One might ask what the purpose of Irish could be here, particularly when Jimmy Murphy’s play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2001) on which the film is based was produced entirely in English. Yet the use of the Irish language is not merely for colour or exoticism – it is a further level and element in the drama that depicts the struggles of each character, whether successful or not, to come to terms with their own existence, often on the margins of a foreign society.

Kings was the first primarily Irish-language drama to get a general release at the Irish box office in Ireland and also the first to be entered by the Irish Film and Television Academy in the ‘Best Foreign Language Film’ category for the Oscars. Though it failed to receive a nomination, nonetheless it has attained a North American theatrical deal with BFS Entertainment where its moving narrative, strong performances and the growing interest in the Irish language among the Irish-American community may help it find a significant audience.

It would be wrong, despite the considerable achievements this year, to ignore the formidable challenges that still exist. It was remarked to me by one of those involved in the production of *Cré na Cille*, for example, that if it had not been made this year, it would have been increasingly difficult for the work ever to have been successfully adapted as

fluent speakers of the richly textured and complex Irish found in Ó Cadhain's masterpiece become more difficult to find. Despite the success of Irish medium education (or Gaelscoileanna) in recent years, and the growing numbers of Irish people who claim to be able to speak the language,¹⁰ one of the ironies of the developments in Irish language film and television is that it is happening at a time when the language itself continues to decline in the primarily Irish speaking, or Gaeltacht, areas. A detailed report – *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht (The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht)* – published in October 2007 suggested that Irish may well fail to exist as a community language within 20 years if the decline in the use of the language, particularly among young people, in Gaeltacht areas is not arrested.¹¹ Furthermore, the future of funding for Irish language productions is far from clear. In October 2007, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board announced the discontinuation of the Oscailt scheme (responsible for funding almost thirty shorts in Irish since its inception in 1998) ostensibly because of concerns over the “ghettoisation” of Irish language shorts.¹² While the Board also indicated that all five shorts schemes – Frameworks, Virtual Cinema, Reality Bites, Short Shorts and Signatures – will now be open to Irish language submissions, the failure of the Board to fund *Cré na Cille* does not inspire confidence in its commitment to productions in Irish. It is also unclear whether the *Ciste Craoltóireachta Gaeilge* (Irish Language Broadcast Fund) in Northern Ireland will continue beyond 2009 as the current DUP Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots, has yet to announce any further funding and there are strong indications that no such funding may be forthcoming.¹³

Nonetheless there are hopeful signs, including the doubling of the funding (to €20,000) available under the Filmbase/TG4 *Lasair* scheme, through which some of the most successful recent work in Irish was produced, including *Yu Ming is Ainm Dom*. In addition, there are indications that Irish is becoming more integrated into the mainstream media. The title of this article derives from one of the most quoted recent advertisements on Irish television. Though primarily in Irish, it wasn't just found on TG4, but rather featured in a popular advertisement for Danish beer, Carlsberg, carried on all Irish mainstream and cable channels, and in Irish cinemas in late 2007.¹⁴ While a skit on the use of the Irish language by many Irish people, often used more on trips abroad than in Ireland itself, the advertisement reflected the continuing growth in the use of Irish in the mainstream media and in film over the past ten years. While Irish speakers may rightly lament the nonsensical content, with the words and phrases used more a commentary on the limited knowledge of the language by the speaker than noteworthy in themselves, the fact that Irish was featured at all is significant. As Colm Ó Laoghaire, director of Gael Linn's Amharc Éireann series, remarked in 1957 '[the newsreel's] primary purpose is to encourage the public to accept Irish in the cinema as something normal and everyday (no more: not even to teach a few words)'.¹⁵ The use of Irish in this commercial, as well as other recent advertisements

for Tayto crisps and Chef sauce, and the growth of the Irish language film and television sector, may just help contribute to its normalization in everyday life.

Notes

1 *Films in Irish*, anonymous booklet published in 1950 by the Comhdháil Naisiúnta na Gaeilge quoted in Jerry White, “Translating Ireland back into Éire: Gael Linn and filmmaking in Irish”, *Éire-Ireland*, 38.1/2, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FKX/is_1-2_38/ai_105439608/pg_1, (accessed January 10, 2008)

2 Jerry White, “Translating Ireland back into Éire: Gael Linn and filmmaking in Irish”, *Éire-Ireland*, 38.1/2, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FKX/is_1-2_38/ai_105439608/pg_1, (accessed January 10, 2008)

3 Michael Dwyer, “Irish emigrant film receives 14 IFTA nominations”, *Irish Times*, Thursday, January 10, 2008, http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/ireland/2008/0110/1199313758872_pf.html (accessed January 10, 2008)

4 Éilís Ní Anluain, “Díomá faoi chré mhearáí Quinn”, *Irish Times*, Wednesday, Mar 14, 2007, http://www.ireland.com/newspaper/anteangabheo/2007/0314/1173443115066_pf.html (accessed June 7, 2008).

5 Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Cré na Cille* (Baile Átha Cliath: Sáirséal agus Dill, 1949).

6 RTÉ also adapted Ó Cadhain’s short story “An Taoille Tuile” as a TV play in the 1970s.

7 Gearóid Mac Lochlainn XE “Gearóid Mac Lochlainn”, *Sruth Teangacha, Stream of Tongues* (Indreabhán: Cló Iar-Chonnachta, 2002), p. 188.

8 Ruth Lysaght, “Ar Oscailt-New Openings. Short Films in the Irish Language Since the Advent of TG4”, *The Representation of Ireland/S: Images from Outside and from Within*, ed. by Rosa González (Barcelona: PPU, 2003), p. 147.

9 Fidelma Farley, “Breac Scannáin/Speckled Films: Genre and Irish-language Filmmaking”, *Genre And Cinema: Ireland And Transnationalism*, Brian McIlroy (ed.) (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2007), pp. 163-176.

10 According to the most recent census figures there are more Irish speakers in Ireland today – 1, 656, 790 – than at any time since independence. However, it should be noted that these figures do not equate with fluency in the language, and are more representative of knowledge, or at least a sense of good-will towards it.

[See <http://beyond2020.cso.ie/Census/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=10380> for more information on Irish speakers today.]

11 Acadamh Na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, Ollscoil Na hÉireann, Gaillimh, *Staidéar Cuimsitheach Teangeolaíoch ar Úsáid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht* (2007), l. 356. Seán Tadhg Ó Gairbhí agus Áine Ní Chiaráin, “Droim láimhe do phríomhmholadh”, *Foinse*, Dé Sathairn, 2 Samhain, 2007, l. 1.

12 Niamh Creely, “Schemers”, *Film Ireland*, 119 (November/December 2007): 16.

[13](#) Concubhar Ó Liatháin, “Post na náire faoi Chiste” *Lá Nua*, Dé Céadaoin, 23 Eanáir, 2008, l. 1.

[14](#) The commercial is available to view on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTNBmFveq2U>.

[15](#) Quoted in Harvey O’Brien, *The Real Ireland: the evolution of Ireland in documentary film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 335.