

SOME IRISH PROBLEMS

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REVIEWS

Contemporary Irish Cinema: From The Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa, James MacKillop (ed.), Syracuse University Press, 1999

Many followers of contemporary cinema must have been waiting for a book like this for some time. Despite the international successes of Irish films, film makers and actors, there have only been two authoritative and wide-ranging volumes about Irish cinema: Brian McIlroy's *World Cinema: Ireland* (Flicks, 1989) and Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill's *Cinema and Ireland* (Croom Helm, 1987). While both of these books contain some excellent material, those interested in Irish cinema would be well aware of how they did not encompass recent developments, or indeed take into account developments in Irish studies, such as revisionist history and insights from postcolonial theory. MacKillop's welcome volume certainly updates information although it does not take advantage of newer approaches as much as might be expected.

MacKillop asserts in his introduction that, 'Whereas filmmakers elsewhere would shun being described as "literary," as if that necessarily implied less cinematic films, Irish filmmakers have rooted their films firmly in the nation's literature.'(p.vii) While on the one hand, it is certainly true that Irish cinema, and Irish culture more generally, has received significant inspiration from literature, it might equally be pointed out that MacKillop is describing his (and his collaborators') version of Irish cinema as constructed in this book. The choice of subject matter in many chapters privileges the literary and many of the contributors to this book are from ardent literature backgrounds. Generally speaking, those contributors from a film studies background tend to have different concerns, in some cases looking at Irish 'cinema', whereas those from literary backgrounds deal with 'films' and stick very close to the 'texts', eschewing cultural context and the whole industrial side of cinema (let alone the whole question of viewing and audiences). This fundamentally limits the book to setting a canon of films and interpreting them (a very traditional literary approach), bolstered by in some cases a cavalier attitude to audiovisual aspects that make it seem like the writers were simply consulting a script. While this approach to its subject matter may well not receive applause in departments of film studies, it does lend a strong coherence to the book. Indeed, one of the most diverting aspects of *Contemporary Irish Cinema* is that it contains a filmography of 'Irish' and of 'Irish related' films. The divisions are certainly debatable, but the inclusion of this filmography makes the book into a fairly free-standing and coherent object with the potential to have currency as an almost ready-made course text.

One aspect that would have added further coherence would have been the inclusion of a

general introduction with an overview of the field. Each of the book's chapters are relatively autonomous, most of them focusing on individual films. This tends to relegate 'issues' in Irish cinema in favour of 'great films' or 'great authors'. A consequence is that the problematic production of context of Irish films is largely ignored - aspects such as films being made for foreign markets, dominance by holidaying British and American industries, European Union production and tax breaks.

Notions of the colonizer-colonized and symbolic ramifications of this process are constantly noted, but rarely given any sophistication or approached with any of the incisive visions of postcolonial theory. In fact, the overwhelming majority of references and reference points for the writing are simply film reviews and in some cases the 'reading' of the films involved nothing more than their viewing. While there is notoriously little serious writing about Irish cinema, most chapters neglect to invoke much in the way of scholarly writing anyway, which gives the impression that this book has been born into a void.

As one might expect, there is a chapter concerning religion: Pamela Dolan's 'An Elephant at the Altar: Religion in Contemporary Irish Cinema'. This is a very suggestive area, but the piece remains descriptive and only deals with 'personal belief' in the final paragraph! The rest is about the negative images of religion in Irish films. However, it is one of the few chapters that does not simply interpret an Irish film, although some of the latter are highly sophisticated. Martin McLoone's chapter, '*December Bride: A Landscape Peopled Differently*', is one of the book's outstanding chapters, not least because it recognises and builds on previous writing on the subject, in this case that of Luke Gibbons. Another foundational writer is included here: John Hill, with 'The Past is Always There in the Present: *Fools of Fortune* and the Heritage Film'. This is one of the book's most important chapters, as is Kathleen McCracken's 'Poetic Documentary: the Films of John T. Davis', which is most informative about an interesting and often overlooked film director. In fact, there is rather less about film makers than one might imagine. Even the chapter on Neil Jordan, a director who would surely make anyone's *auteurist* pantheon, is concerned more with his short stories and remains stubbornly descriptive.

For a book about Irish cinema, MacKillop's anthology has surprisingly little to say about what holds these diverse films together. It is as if the filmography simply deflects such questions. Harlan Kennedy, in a reprinted chapter that functions as the book's cornerstone, states: "... movies about Ireland - whenever and by whomever made - are one of the cinema's richest seams." (Kennedy, p.1) So the book is interested in representation, and perhaps should have been called 'Irish movies' rather than 'Irish cinema'. Indeed, a major weakness is the total absence of any discussion of film production in Ireland. Irish cinema is an elusive thing. Despite tax breaks that have been the envy of Britain, the lack of indigenous investment capital and industrial infrastructure has not allowed the establishment of a solid film industry. There is also a restrictive lack of discussion about how these films are aimed at and play to different audiences. The exception is Brian McLroy's illuminating and erudite chapter, 'History without Borders: Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*'. The filmography is very interesting in itself. Its definitions of 'Irish' and 'Irish related' are confusing. However, I found this division useful in that perusing the filmography underlined how difficult it is to set rigid boundaries on 'Irish cinema'. What I thought was more problematic was the lack of distinction between film and television. In a book about cinema, there was a chapter about *Lost Belongings*, a Thames television series broadcast in 1986, while television productions such as *Falling for a Dancer* were presented in the filmography as if they were film productions. Perhaps it is splitting hairs to point to the book's title, but it betrays the book's overall approach to 'films' as objects divorced from any production or reception context. The filmography does make for some bizarre reading. It makes some odd inclusions, such as designating *A Further Gesture* (1995) 'Irish' because of star Stephen Rea and writer Ronan Bennett. The film is not set in Ireland, only has one Irish actor and was not produced by Irish film makers in any way. On the other hand, films like *Hungry Hill* (1946, so hardly contemporary) are only 'Irish-related', despite having an Irish director and majority of the cast. As the inclusion of this film demonstrates, while the book is called 'Contemporary' the

filmography includes a fair amount of old films. Along similar lines, the filmography is inconsistent, for example, noting Mark Knopfler's music for *Cal* (1984) but neglecting inexplicably to note Eliot Goldenthal's music for *The Butcher Boy* (1997).

The book seems to lack differentiation between 'research' and 'criticism'. Criticism seems to involve an appraisal of the film in hand, largely on its own terms. Research suggests the application of contextual information to a film, thus providing a different perspective on the film. The former more resembles the way that journalists deal with cinema, while the latter is one of the strains of the scholarly discipline of film studies. Film studies has shown an increasing interest in aspects of production background, institution and context of films' reception. Almost none of this is evident in this volume. Despite these shortcomings, however, *Contemporary Irish Cinema* is an stimulating volume on a subject that needs more writing. It will prove appealing for anyone with more than a passing interest in the subject and I can also see it providing the basis for many courses about Irish cinema.

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