

The sins of commission II

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A personal trajectory continued, in which transposition from a radical television company to a national film agency takes place – new policies are proposed but compromise is assumed – new Irish filmmaking develops – the contemporary predicament of English-language cinema in Europe – persistent marketing of dominant American product changes taste and reduces space for cultural diversity – the general condition of progressive film deteriorates but prospects for continued marginal activity endure.

Provenance: repetition compulsion

It is necessary to wish something very different, and above all to believe . . . that for every situation there exists one way out and the possibility of finding it. Or in other words truth exists, absolute in its relativity.¹

In a sense, this essay returns to the format of a previous analytical and confessional undertaking in these pages, 'Sins of commission', written in 1992 after ten years working as part of the Independent Film and Video Department at Channel Four.²

Apart from trying to analyze the opening of a new space for independent film within a new type of television station, the article also represented an initial rumination about the possibility of radical intervention in the complex and overdetermined media structures operating at that time. The context of *Screen*, with its virile rationality and intimidating intellectualism, and its occasional attention to independent film, was the relevant place to talk of that micro-conjuncture in British television. I tried to sketch my sense of the specificity of

¹ Franco Fortini, quoted in the English translation of the script for *Fortini/ Cani* (Jean Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, 1976), *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1978), pp. 11–40.

² Rod Stoneman, 'Sins of commission', *Screen*, vol. 33 no. 2 (1992), pp. 127–44.

3 In the immortal, albeit apocryphal, words of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Tse Tung: 'Sex is good, but power is better'.

4 Stoneman, 'Sins of commission', p. 128.

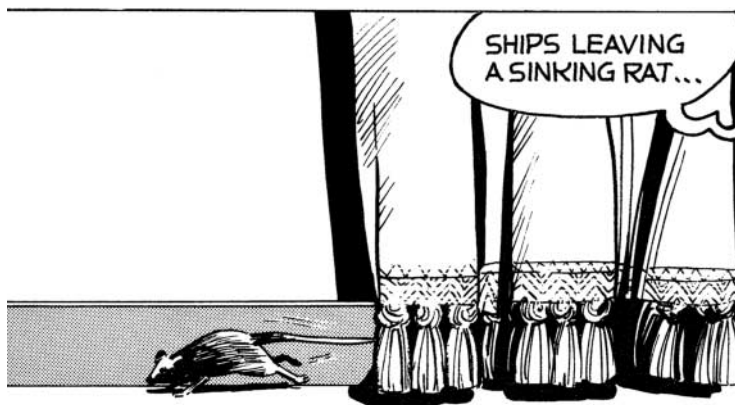
5 I had a direct encounter with this process in another domain while making *Italy: the Image Business*, a programme in Large Door's *Visions Cinema* series for Channel Four in 1984. At that point Italian Television had reached a crucial juncture, with the private stations overtaking the three RAI stations, achieving more than fifty per cent of the audience. This was another specific incidence of the same crisis in confidence in a public service television that had failed to renew itself and outflank the belligerent challenge from commercial interests. The initial phase of Channel Four, deploying faster, more colourful and imaginative programming, was precisely the example that a brave and eclectic mixture was not incompatible with winning audiences.

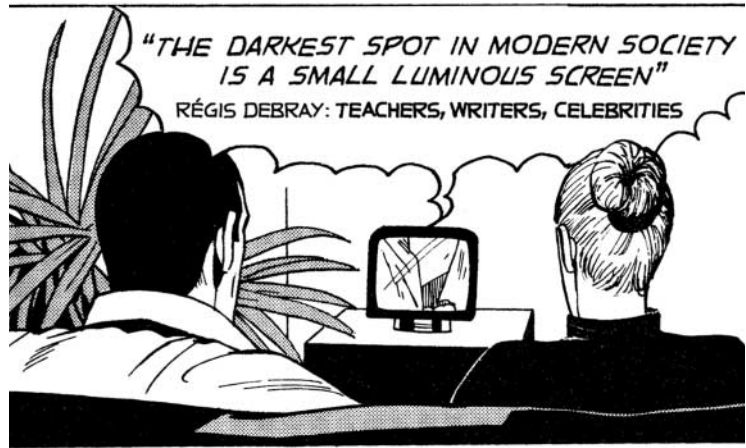
6 *The Moronic Inferno* is a book title that Martin Amis took from Saul Bellow, who took the phrase from Wyndham Lewis.

individual experience in relation to that part of us that is lived in history. Both the 1992 essay and this revisitation take a particular peculiar form in order to grapple with the strange experience of carrying a version of the *Screeniste* critique through positions of power³ within the institutions of broadcasting and film. It is never easy to live one thing and think another.⁴

In the intervening decade I found myself moving from a television station to a national film agency – a transfer from television commissioning within an innovative public service broadcaster in England to a semi-state structure in Ireland, the Irish Film Board. However, the tasks of arranging the disposition of monies to independent filmmakers and acting as midwife to bring forth a range of new filmmaking have, in my experience, a great deal in common.

The original 'Sins of commission' was written at a point when it had just been revealed that the executive directors of the Channel Four company had seen fit to award themselves substantial individual financial bonuses. From inside the company it felt like the channel was crossing a threshold, abandoning its founding ideals and moving towards a new and more venal corporate culture. Of course it is always too easy to denounce such things from afar – I was implicated in the project of the channel and many of its subtle shifts and compromises, but at the time it did feel like a significant change to a more commercial paradigm. Now, ten years later, even a cursory glance at the state of Channel Four makes it all too clear that its original aims and aspirations were being abandoned. This station, and public service television more generally,⁵ has descended into what Saul Bellow referred to as a 'moronic inferno'.⁶ The prominence of specious programmes like *Big Brother* and *Graham Norton* and imported series like *Desperate Housewives* are not the point – it is the lack of a





mixed menu and the limited range of programmes overall; there is insufficient diversity for it to be recognizable as any version of the original conception of Channel Four. A facetious remark I made at my leaving party about 'ships leaving a sinking rat' has proved to be prescient.

More recently the misconceived policies that led to the entirely predictable collapse of Film Four provided another symptom of the same corporate malaise. The shift of focus towards 'let's make fewer films but bigger ones', producing films to address the transatlantic market, was a dangerous policy in its own commercial terms and disastrous from a strategic and cultural perspective. Even Hollywood, at least at the moment of *Easy Rider* in the 1970s, has understood the benefit of doing a larger number of smaller films, most of which would be certain to fail



7 Rod Stoneman, 'Under the shadow of Hollywood: the industrial versus the artisanal', *The Irish Review*, no. 24 (Autumn 1999); *Kinema* (Spring 2000). URL: <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/stonm001.htm>.

8 Margaret Dickinson, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

9 'To be attacked by the enemy is a good thing and not a bad thing'. Mao Tse Tung.

10 I remember specifically Jeremy Isaacs and John Willis, controller of programmes, offering encouragement, and Michael Grade welcoming the internal critique. Isaacs's advice was 'Suaviter in modo fortiter in re' (Soft in approach, resolute in deed).

commercially, but with those that succeeded returning enough financially to cover the rest. This model is, in my view, the only basis for any non-industrial version of cinema to play to its strengths, maintain its authenticity and integrity, and in the longer term to reinvent itself.⁷

'World cinema – that's the past', the Head of the Channel Four Factual Department was heard to exclaim as the late-night *Cinema from Three Continents* slot, commissioned by our section to present feature films from Africa, Asia and Latin America, was carelessly eliminated. A cursory glance at contemporary television programming indicates that access to a broad range of foreign-language films is not at all present, even at the periphery of the schedules; and this at a time when understanding other cultures, other politics has never been more urgent in the life of the world. O tempora! O mores!

When, in 1999, Margaret Dickinson reprinted my article in *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90*,⁸ she described it somewhat reproachfully in her introduction as a 'thoughtful and ambivalent reflection . . . that seems to support a thoroughly orthodox view of broadcasting'. Strategies intended to inflect new conditions within the given terrain end up being attacked not only from the right⁹ but also from the left, on the basis that they are indeed not thoroughgoing or radical enough. That any cultural intervention or incision is open to critique from such polar perspectives invokes the inevitable structural discomfort of tactical tensions seen from opposed positions. But this particular argument has to be viewed in perspective and in relation to the extent to which the aspiration for radical filmmaking (indeed, by now, for most kinds of non-US film and television) to reach a wider audience, has, with the privilege of hindsight, proved to be more difficult to sustain than anticipated. Aspirations to establish any kind of eventual hegemony for progressive work seem very far distant indeed.

There was some response to the original 'Sins of commission' article from independent producers and television apparachiks,¹⁰ although the true 'reply' was the silence that emanated both from *Screen's* increasingly academic catchment and the continuing disjunction between media practitioners and any kind of analytical/theoretical perspectives in Britain. Old notions of integral interaction between theory and practice are long gone.

Pausing again to try to understand the current conjuncture, there are some significant differences in tattempting another evaluation after ten years at Bord Scannán na hÉireann (the Irish Film Board) – a European national film agency. In my mind, at least, there is some continuity and connection with the Project of independent film as formulated by the Independent Filmmakers' Association, articulated in this journal in the 1970s and inflected by the practice of the Independent Film and Video Department at Channel Four in the 1980s. Although there are inevitably shifts both from television to cinema and to a disparate national context (a postcolonial context with complex circumstances of its own), there are

further subtle ramifications arising from a move from the metropolis to live in Galway with the cultural intensity of the west coast of Ireland.

Film in Ireland: the conditions of engagement

Although it is sometimes difficult to extricate clear strategies and plans from the disruptions of the contingent and their lubrication by the ironies of the everyday, the desire to drive a progressive perspective through underlying structures, themselves in constant movement, persisted. Our¹¹ approach redeployed the talents of the nascent independent sector in Ireland in relation to the needs of the audience, the perceptions of the state and a renegotiation of market conditions at that time.

The specific history of the evolution of film in Ireland includes the setting up of the first Film Board in 1982 and its closure in a fit of monetarist parsimony by the then prime minister Charles Haughey, not a paradigm of fiscal rectitude himself, in 1987. The first Film Board had made ten feature films, many of them, such as *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1982), *Ann Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984), *Reefer and the Model* (Joe Comerford, 1988) and *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986), considerable achievements. Significant films were also produced in the ‘dark years’ which followed – *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) for example – but without the support of a national film agency. The absence of an agency meant that the independent sector in Ireland was badly impeded, but lobbying continued from the film community alongside strategic arguments from the Coopers and Lybrand Report, principally drafted by Ann O’Connell in 1992, which bore fruit in the civil service and government structures; eventually leading to the adoption of new policies. Bord Scannán na hÉireann was reconstituted on 4 April 1993 with Lelia Doolan as executive chair, and I was appointed as chief executive in August of that year.

The new Board was set up at a time when Ireland was itself in a period of extremely rapid economic and social transformation. With unparalleled speed the country ingested the reverberations of economic flux, the complex and wideranging effects of a belated ideological secularization, changing gender relations, and decisive shifts in the armed conflict in Northern Ireland. Although, perhaps, the political and climatic movements cannot be fully grasped even, or especially, by those who are within them, it can be asserted that one of the crucial and determining contexts of new Irish cinema has been the dynamic of rapid social and cultural change.

An unparalleled opportunity for advanced cultural politics presented itself – the architecture of the Board’s novel policies could be sketched anew, on something like a blank sheet of paper – its reconstitution after such a long period of closure enabled a break with the approach of the national film agencies of previous epochs. In the 1970s and 1980s, those agencies, often housed within national film institutes, espoused cultural

¹¹ It is worth stressing that the use of the plural ‘our’ in relation to the Board’s work is not a token one – there has been a considerable, continuous, collaborative input from colleagues, filmmakers and fellow travellers working through every level of the endeavour. Institutionally, I would also stress the directive role of the individual members of the Board itself and the crucial input of the four very different chairs – Lelia Doolan 1993–96, Louis Marcus 1997–99, Ann O’Connell 1999, Ossie Kilkenny 2000–05 – and colleagues on the staff of the Board over this period.

aims to be delivered by an unreconstructed auteurism, within an uncritical notion of national cinema. This did not seem viable in the current epoch. The new conjuncture of the 1990s necessitated a more complex and adept negotiation with audience expectations: requiring the reshaping of auteurist visions in relation to the very powerful forces of the market and the complex financial machinery that underlies contemporary cinema processes. We set out to construct a practice of filmmaking that came from, and spoke to, its own national imaginary with authenticity and integrity, whilst also navigating the implications of international finance from a market dominated by doxa from elsewhere.

This cultural project combined in a new way with an economic imperative – to create activities with significant economic and employment outcomes which would also support cultural effects. The timing involved the fortuitous release of underlying expressive energies during a phase of rapid prosperity. The speed of social change led to a configuration of subject matters and creative preoccupations that had some urgency and freshness.

In Ireland the structural questions of scale immediately came into focus – here advantages of interconnectedness coexist with the limitations of a small nation-state. Definable benefits sit alongside specific disadvantages arising from the attempt to generate sustainable levels of film activity in a country of about three-and-a-half million (or an island of five million, depending on how one draws the boundaries).

Although European filmmakers tend not to be driven primarily by market motives, the Board set out to encourage them to ‘think of an audience’ at all stages of the production process; this seems crucial and healthy for an activity that draws upon relatively large amounts of money for even the lowest budget film. Of course this approach is not the same as a fully commercial orientation, although it is liable to be mistaken for such. In fact thinking of the audience might also be an integral part of the concept of the socially motivated artist. Some relation with audience interactivity was predicated in the historical British independent work of the 1970s.¹² The conception of reception is part of a necessary process to take creativity away from the solipsistic ideology of self-expression. This perspective also leads to a new framework for the placement of the ‘auteur’ and reader in relation to the text. How meaning is made is a precision calculation for all constructive creative decisions. What meanings are socially available in each sequence of images and sounds? Which interpretations are likely to dominate? What is the political context of the representation and of its reception?

Dealing with the problems of solipsism is a constant issue, accurately satirized in Anthony Burgess’s fictional poet Enderby. Having been scalded by prunes at birth, he uses the significant phrase ‘death, terrible as prunes’ in his poetry, assuming that this fruit has the same dreadful resonance for everyone. Thinking social meanings and audience positioning through at an early stage is also the basis for a necessary clarity before the filmmaker enters the field of contention arising from

¹² See Hilary Thompson and Rod Stoneman (eds), *The New Social Function of Cinema, Catalogue: British Film Institute Productions '79/80* (London: British Film Institute, 1981).

naked market pressures that intervene with, say, casting issues or script changes. For example the notorious Miramax wanted to change the word ‘poteen’ to ‘moonshine’ in the dialogue of *Last of the High Kings* by David Keating, and also to insert inappropriate cast into Gerry Stembridge’s *About Adam*.

This relation with reception led to the encouragement of a ‘market-responsive auteur’, an oxymoronic formulation which managed to confound both those who wished to recreate the Board as an economic, semi-automatic fund shaped by commercialist ideology and those who would have preferred an anachronistic version of the purely cultural agency funding ‘artists’. This was consistent with other deliberate discursive manoeuvres which we adopted – for example the Film Board would provide filmmakers with ‘loans’ and not ‘grants’, a small change in transaction nomination but one that tried to signify a move away from the soft and addictive subsidy mentality which has often reduced European independent producers to ‘homo applicans’. I talked of achieving a ‘judicious equilibrium’ between culture and commerce (a facile and manichean dichotomy anyway). Of course it is difficult to argue with such an overtly reasonable approach; no one can object to the term ‘balance’ as it is such a irrefutably moderate word, and it was helpful to assert these positions from which to designate and dominate the discursive terrain.

‘Radical pluralism’ was the oft expressed aspiration – a founding concept taken from the school of early Channel Four, presented as a flag for the Board to sail under: the line ‘Let a thousand flowers bloom and a thousand schools of thought contend’¹³ was quoted in the preface to the Film Board’s first annual *Review/Athbhreithniú 1993*. A senior civil servant in the Linneus tradition spotted the provenance and remarked that ‘this may well be the first time Mao Tse Tung has been referenced in the annual report of an Irish semi-state body’. Arguing for the diversity of the variegated elements of a national cinema was vital in order to keep a range of elements in play, including artisanal and ‘personal’ filmmaking. Even the deployment of the term ‘filmmaker’ is important precisely as it avoids the tiresome jockeying of the component elements of film production – producers vs directors vs writers – all competing for hegemony and above-the-title credits.

Critical pragmatism was accompanied by a clear respect for the autonomy of the individual filmmaker, insisting on full involvement and detailed input as a funder, but relying on rational persuasion rather than forcing filmmakers to change their work.¹⁴ There has been some slippage from this approach in the tendency in both television commissioners and public funders in national agencies to pose as interventionist commercial executive producers in recent years. This is neither ethical in professional terms nor effective in creative ones.

As a Board we made polemical arguments like ‘In all its forms film is at its most innovative when it is experienced as unexpected, challenging social norms and complacencies of taste, extending the boundaries of the

¹³ In fact my mis-memory of the original quotation and a desire for even greater diversity served to have multiplied Mao’s mathematics by ten.

¹⁴ For discussion of the executive production role, see Stephen Lambert, *Channel Four Television with a Difference* (London: British Film Institute, 1982) p. 153.

- 15 Irish Film Board, *Review/ Athbhreithniú 1993*.
- 16 Irish Film Board, *Review/ Athbhreithniú 2000*, Rod Stoneman, 'Icons of the imagination', in Kevin Rockett (ed.), *Ten Years After* (Galway: BSÉ, 2003).

- 17 Che Guevara, *Motorcycle Diaries* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996) p. 26.

- 18 The loss of parts of the spectrum of specificity is irreversible, as Alpha Oumar Konare, a former President of Mali, put it: 'It's like standing in a burning library'.

possible . . .',¹⁵ and issued mission statements: 'We intend to encourage bravery and embrace creative risk. Paradoxically, in cinema, the further you push artistically the more genuinely commercial you can be.'¹⁶ Uttering these 'neither/nor' verbalizations and myriad other oxymoronic policy formulations seemed the only way to absorb and deflect the implacable pressures of increasingly economic discourses.

This should not be mistaken for the social market pragmatism of the British (New) Labour party in its avowed determination to 'take moderation to extremes'; rather, it was a conscious strategy to keep challenging and radical work as an integral part of the film production landscape, where it can remain an available choice and, given a situation where more congenial conditions prevail again, it can be strengthened and move 'in transit to another conception of the world', as Che Guevara wrote in *Motorcycle Diaries*.¹⁷ Maintaining the range of the creative gene pool in contemporary global conditions is vitally important at a time of aggressive reduction in the spectrum of filmmaking and a continued threat to cultural diversity.¹⁸

It was also necessary to modernize the national and indeed international perception of Irish cinema, as there was some persistence of the anachronistic image of indigenous films as arty and 'worthy', generally depicting historical and rural subjects and aimed at an art-house audience. In 1998 we commissioned a fast-cut ninety-second cinema trailer about Irish film to shift these residual perceptions and transmit a sharper sense that many of the new films were more urban, comic, violent, sexual. This was a part of a small-scale attempt to intercept and shift audience desire through our own direct marketing in the multiplexes. We utilized some of our meagre resources to negotiate the place where the audience had formed its expectations and then endeavoured to extend those desires towards contemporary Irish production. Inevitably the puny scale of this intervention meant that it would not deflect the formidable forces focused on the development of audience taste. The cost of making and distributing this trailer was a tiny fraction of the publicity budget deployed for any one of the many studio films released each week in Ireland.

When the Irish government reconstituted the Film Board in 1993, it was as part of a range of connected, concerted policies such as a revived tax incentive, encouraging RTE (the recalcitrant national broadcaster) to spend a proportion of its budget on independents, creating an Irish-language station, T na G (later TG4), with a new structure as a publisher broadcaster. These were carried through in short order by the then Minister of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins. Taken together these policies had a transformative effect – an immediate and sustained exponential growth in film production in Ireland with a local and international impact.

The organizational structure and resources of Bord Scannán na hÉireann grew continuously from three operatives and a capital budget of £1 million in 1993 to sixteen staff and €12 million in 2002, keeping the

19 This is roughly the same ratio of monies as the early Channel Four deployed 'outside' to fund independents in relation to the resources spent 'inside' the infrastructure.

scale of its internal operation and infrastructure in proportion to the monies used to fund independent production: in general, ninety per cent of the Board's monies was provided for production and development.¹⁹

One key difference of the Irish enterprise in relation to European film activity on the continent arises from speaking the imperial tongue, that 'unsolicited gift of the English language', as Michael D. Higgins judiciously put it. On the one hand, English provides access to world markets but on the other, it facilitates a very high degree of penetration by US product at home.

Ireland, moving out from under the shadow of its nearby neighbour, positioned itself with closer alliances to the continent and strengthened relations across the Atlantic – and brought a sensible opportunism into play. One example of the continental connection would be our enthusiastic participation in Eurimages, a pan-European production fund which was set up within the Council of Europe in 1989, with Ireland becoming a member in 1993. The Eurimages committee included twenty-six different countries in often feuding groupings, shifting and grinding like tectonic plates. Sadly, strong projects were sometimes caught in the geopolitical motivations of a dysfunctional board; but for a subscription of about €200,000 per year, Eurimages provided over €8 million for Irish films over the period. Britain withdrew from this international body in November 1995, an unfortunate and irrational gesture from the then Tory government. Whilst it is not always easy to maintain the general ideal of European integration in the face of the actual experience of its bizarre institutional and operational functioning, it does offer a wider continental context, encourage contact and networking between independents in different national sectors, and provide significant additional funding.

In the background at this time, immense amounts of money were percolating through the EU in the form of MEDIA funding in successive budget phases:

MEDIA I	January 1989–December 1995	€210 million
MEDIA II	January 1996–December 2000	€350 million
MEDIA+	January 2001–December 2005	€410 million

The cumulative total of €970 million in fifteen years provided for some useful activities and soft subsidy for European companies and individuals. The Irish sector, for instance, received €8 million for MEDIA II alone from this source.²⁰ Yet, so many years and so many euros later, it is clear that only a modest proportion of this money was focused and effective; smaller independents are hardly stronger and the decline of the fifty most financially important European companies,²¹ including the collapse of Vivendi Universal, follows previous attempts to create a European studio. Perhaps the terrible epitaph on such formidable public expenditure is not that it decisively intervened to create the

20 It is also true to say that it has been wrapped in weird and wasteful bureaucracy which encourages the weak habits of subsidy mentality.

21 Polygram and Studio Canal+, for example.

22 Alan Parker, 'Building a Sustainable UK Film Industry', a presentation to the UK film industry, 5 November 2002. URL: <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/filmindustry/building/>.

23 Irish politics are not configured on a simple left–right spectrum but contain elements of a peculiar prism which still refracts the divisions of the civil war eighty years earlier.

24 However alliances are possible and there has been a continuously close and harmonious relationship with the Northern Ireland Film Commission run by Richard Taylor from 1994–2002 and Richard Williams after that, which focused cross-border strategies, encouraging the appropriate opportunism for both production sectors on the island of Ireland.

necessary resilience in the European film industry, but that it has managed to slightly slow an apparently inexorable decline.

There are many specificities of the Irish situation which have some resonance in other European territories, and one such is the need to guard against the side-effects of the service industry on indigenous filmmaking. Across time, despite the positive motives of encouraging incoming films (bringing finance to the industry, providing training opportunities), servicing foreign productions also debilitates and distracts companies from their own filmmaking. Through economic pressure it can lead to a dangerous diffusion of focus for small independent companies, a diversion from the precarious production cycle of making indigenous films. The mentality of servicing foreign films is not the same as that needed to initiate and drive veritable indigenous films into realization.

In Ireland it has encouraged the formation of deal-driven producers without the full creative and editorial focus to interact with directors, writers and other central components of production. Alan Parker's pronouncements in late 2002²² offered implausible arguments for new distribution emphases for the British structures; this is another version of the same problem and an imitative move towards the US industrial approach. There is also the longer-term strategic danger of a new, more rightwing regime²³ finding the appealing photo opportunities and financial figures of bigger-budget incoming films more attractive than those inconveniently argumentative little films of the local variety, which inevitably exhibit such an uneven commercial performance.

The pressure of antagonistic political and economic forces is unrelenting; yet it is necessary to negotiate some degree of market cognisance without the full-blown embrace of commercialized culture. Progressive elements of the sector do not speak with a coherent voice and each separate entity and organization is competitively positioned and promotes itself through what Freud might have designated 'the fetishism of small differences'. Different micro-organizations push forward and there are always ambitious individual subjects who 'hope for preferment', in Trollope's phrase. There were at least half a dozen individuals who perpetrated various levels of attempted putsch in the ten years of my tenure.²⁴

Like any other autonomous semi-state structure, a national film agency must avoid being pulled into the vortex of party politics. There is always the danger of a new government preferring to 'do things differently' almost for its own sake. As the casual demise of British Screen and BFI Production and the creation of the *dirigiste* Film Council in the UK, or FCUK, illustrates all too clearly, the desire of any new governmental regime for change can have destructive side effects.

There are also specific cultural factors in a postcolonial country like Ireland. Apocryphally, when Micheal MacLiamoir (who was himself of English origin) was asked by Orson Welles how he would describe Irish culture, he apparently replied without hesitation and with the single

word ‘malice’. Both begrudgery and the general press tendency towards what is known as ‘knocking copy’ are manifest in many social formations, including those of the previous colonizer; however there may be factors of scale and history that inflect them in this case.

Any film funding agency exacerbates external negativity with the heavy attrition rate of the selection process – the negative response to the vast majority of applications involves rejecting myriad highly-motivated and carefully nurtured proposals. The normal way of accounting for perceived rejection is to displace the problem outwards – the delusion of exclusion. Inevitably many filmmakers will have to say, with Jonathan Swift, ‘I must complain the cards are ill-shuffled’ till I have a good hand’.²⁵ There are many sad international examples of increasingly experienced independents attacking their agencies as they cannot accept the ‘wrong’ result from the selection process.²⁶ This may also be a reflection of their underlying market vulnerability.

It is essential to utilize communications and marketing to retain an adequate degree of public, political and institutional support for the enterprise as a whole. The aggressive tabloid assault on Channel Four in its first year could have had potentially dangerous effects on the station; Jeremy Isaacs carried out a ‘touch to the tiller’, adding popular programmes like *A Woman of Substance* to adjust the perceived imbalance,²⁷ but it was the good ratings and consequent advertising sales that relieved the pressure in the end. There may be a broad support for the project of a national cinema in Ireland, but journalists will undercut this attitude in their ideological tendency to attack semi-state structures and provide begrudging copy and negative reviews.²⁸ The distractions of the flak and incoming fire involved in funding have to be kept at bay – denunciations of the structure as a whole from disappointed applicants can break out unexpectedly.²⁹ Rigorous transparency in decision-making and strong morale and solidarity between the team and the board itself is probably the best protection.

Any attempt at a balance sheet in relation to Irish Film Board involvement in the production of approximately one hundred feature films, eight television series, sixty documentaries and 150 short films would point towards the achievement of a critical mass of new filmmaking in ten years, with range and diversity, albeit with some unevenness and lacunae. Luckily there are a good number of lucid intensities, films which are coherently themselves. Features as different as *I Went Down* (Paddy Breathnach, 1997), *The General* (John Boorman, 1998), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O’Connor, 1998), *Some Mother’s Son* (Terry George, 1996), *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2002), *The Actors* (Conor McPherson, 2003), *Dead Bodies* (Robert Quinn, 2003) and *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003); documentaries like *Chavez: the Revolution will not be Televised* (Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brien, 2003) and *Rotha Mór an tSaoil/The Hard Road to Klondike* (Desmond Bell, 1999); and experimental work such as *I Could Read the Sky* (Nichola Bruce, 1999) and *Too Dark for Light* (Clare Langan, 2000).

25 Irish Film Board, *Review/Athbhreithniú* 1993.

26 Scottish Screen has experienced vivid examples of this, having been publicly attacked by Bill Forsyth when his project was turned down and at the centre of an aggressive kerfuffle about chief executive Steve MacIntyre’s personal life in June 2003.

27 Jeremy Isaacs elegantly and ironically describes his attempt to convince William Whitelaw, the then Home Secretary, of the argument for ‘repressive tolerance’ over a lunch of gulls’ eggs. Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm over Four* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), pp. 66–7.

28 An editor of the Irish edition of *The Sunday Times* specifically instructed a critic about to review a new Irish film: ‘Half a page if you like it, a full page if you hate it’.

29 See *Hot Press* interviews with Patrick Bergin and Brendan O’Carroll.

New Irish cinema established a good relationship with its home audience, good returns for most theatrical releases, high levels of video hire and purchase and strong ratings on television. Fifty per cent of the Irish population has watched *The General* and twenty-five per cent *The Magdalene Sisters*, at a point when it was only available theatrically.

When the hype and spin is stripped away there is a revelation that something of the same proportionate configuration of success – the ratio between marvellous films and not-bad-but-uneven films, and films which did not work at all – is roughly consistent across commercial distributors, television commissioners and national film agencies. Variations of the same underlying performance pattern generally emerge from a relative perspective comparing different entities involved in film and even in other spheres such as music and publishing. This should not be a surprise where the underlying structures of curatorial taste are replicated in very different organizations.

Film in Europe and the row³⁰

While my attentions were focused on Irish film for ten years I gradually began to stand back and look at the wider circumstance and ask what is the general context for any national cinema emanating from a small European country? What are the prospects for independent work which is formally or politically innovative at the present time? What are the spaces for personal or visionary filmmaking, or films which engage with the body politic? Indeed what is the outlook for the various versions of indigenous cinema in a global context saturated by American product?

The overall exchange rate couldn't be much worse:
 94% of the films shown on Irish screens come from the US;
 European films comprise 4% of US market share;
 US films comprise 71% of European market share;
 Europe constitutes 60–65% of the total international market for US product;
 yet European films only comprise 22.5% of European market share.

Bankruptcies and restructuring in various distribution companies are indications of the breakdown of the European industry's very fibre.³¹ Within the niche market of art house production, distribution and exhibition continues to exist in a weakened, exposed form at this stage, especially in anglophone countries.³² The experience of previous epochs, when a steady and successive pattern of successful annual releases by European auteurs took place, are long gone. Occasionally a new film by US independents or non-mainstream fare from around the world, including films from Africa, Asia and Latin America, still achieves some profile and reaches an international audience, but this only serves to mask the general reduction in space for such work. Third-world cinema is understood in terms of its refreshing authenticity and often its urgency, but its reach is precarious at home and distribution abroad has

31 *Focus 2003, Tendances du Marché Mondial du Film* (Brussels/Cannes: Observatoire Européen de l'Audiovisuel, 2003), p. 5.

32 Rod Stoneman, 'All generalisations are false', *Film Ireland* (November/December 2002); *Kinema* (Autumn 2002). URL: <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/stonm022.htm>.

33 Rod Stoneman, 'African cinema: addressee unknown', *Vertigo* (Summer/Autumn 1993); *Ecrans d'Afrique*, nos 5/6; *Kinema* (Spring 1994). URL: <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/stonm941.htm>.

34 Many now see films on DVD – a format and an exhibition context which allows access to a much greater variety of cinema, formerly restricted, including esoteric and 'minority' films.

35 The other side to this is the old grumble from distributors: 'filmmakers always think that if it succeeds it's a good film, if it fails it was a bad campaign!'

deteriorated for all the reasons above.³³ The underlying economics of exhibition in the art-house sector have become more precarious, depending on the uneven pattern of rare crossover successes. The staple fare for this sector is less stable and is also increasingly squeezed by the omnivorous multiplex releases.

Even the notable examples of contemporary independent cinema from the USA are all too often superficial, meretricious. New generations of US independents follow Jarmusch, the Coen brothers and Tarantino in adopting mannerist or formalist approaches to generic filmmaking without any substantial social engagement. Lamentably, it is also true that European (including Irish) films often do not seem to be 'about much' and find it difficult to combine political concern, significant form and pleasure. Understandably audiences will revile versions of gender, class or race-by-numbers in a film, but remain open to projects undertaking subtle strategies of political engagement. Drama which plays through political issues and more intricate approaches to the dispositions of power and money is rarely seen.

The timidity of television schedules and the self-imposed inhibitions that constrain the transmission of subtitled films leave international cinema off the public airwaves. Maybe broadband access with a proliferation of internationally available digital channels may eventually open this work out to global versions of niche audiences,³⁴ although the US experience of multi-channel programming indicates an increase in vertical separation rather than horizontal diversity.

What has led to this bleak predicament? It is easy to denounce the dysfunctional market, but that is of little use if we have no operative understanding of it, or purchase on it. To some extent, across time, marketing has worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Clearly publicity and advertising cannot achieve success for each and every specific film;³⁵ but it has had a cumulative and pervasive effect. There is fierce competition within the different types of cinema as well as between them. Many studio films fail despite significant investment in P&A (marketing costs for the average studio picture have risen from \$4.3 million in 1980 to \$31 million in 2003), even the most skilful marketing cannot guarantee success at the box office – it is necessary but not sufficient. Marketing is an overdetermination on the functioning of the equation of supply and demand.

The cycle of created demand is locked into specific audience targeting, often focused on a teenage male demographic. It forces commercial movies to perform in their first weekend, as this is the pressurized test for the prospects of a film which sustains its large-scale release. Across the last few decades mass marketing has determined an increasingly limited version of cinema and has shifted audience taste towards it. There has been a significant change whereby the US release of a new film twenty-five years ago, which would have initially entailed a small number of prints in major cities in order to build a success gradually, has now been replaced by 1000–4000 print saturation releases backed by

36 See John Boorman, *The Guardian*, 6 September 2003, and *Adventures of a Suburban Boy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), pp. 251, 295; Mike Figgis (ed.), *Hollywood Film-makers on Film-making, Projections 10* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 12.

37 Reported by G. Shirren, Terraglyph, Dublin.

38 The dichotomy between the artisanal and industrial modes of production is outlined in Stoneman, 'Under the shadow of Hollywood'.

39 44% in 2001 and 38% in 2002. *Screen Finance*, 26 February 2003.

40 *Focus 2003, Tendances du Marché Mondial du Film*.

\$30–40 million spent on television advertising, often making a third of the box-office return in the first weekend. This clearly predicated the kind of cinema which can immediately find a wide audience and succeed.³⁶

We are familiar with the ideological achievement of the market that has labelled itself as 'free' and describes itself as a neutral mechanism for responding to what the audience wants. In fact the market is a mechanism which is most efficient at fulfilling desires that it has itself created. The cinemagoing subject's desire (which has complex formative determinations from 'elsewhere') is held in dialectical tension with that which marketeers are suggesting should provide pleasure.

In some sense each film has to be 'the same but different' – similar enough to repeat the experience of pleasure in order to maintain its exchange value, different enough not to exactly replicate previous experience. But the creation of novel appeal depends largely on reference to what has already been enjoyed; people's preferences are a product, at least in part, of their past choices. In the aggressively competitive economic terrain that exists for film production, this has become an increasingly narrow and centripetal force. What is made is determined by the notion of the popular, which is based on what is made available, which itself is predicated on popular taste. A warning note about the mechanisms of marketing and the role of branding was sounded recently when a European animation feature was shown to a test audience in California and the ratings on the test cards were four to five. The same film was screened to a different audience with the Disney logo spliced at the front of the film, and the test cards came back with average scores of seven to eight.³⁷

The relative dominance of a mercantile mentality in the distribution and production sectors enhances this centripetal tendency; the process of convergence and the removal of difference leads to a more proficient process with less 'waste' in the system. Despite the resources of industrial filmmaking,³⁸ the endeavour to make supply and demand coincide exactly in terms of new movie releases will ultimately fail; but the continued movement towards this goal is clearly having deleterious side effects.

The signifying system of any one film is a complex construction, as are the reception parameters of its audience, but across large numbers of films a pattern is beginning to emerge: US films are achieving, despite the proliferation of screens in most countries by multiplex building, higher overall attendance figures with fewer films. It is significant that ten top films currently take approximately forty per cent of the UK box office each year,³⁹ and this is linked to the doubling of the average cost of the production of US majors' feature films from \$29 million in 1992 to \$59 million in 2002. On average European features currently cost \$5 million to make⁴⁰ and simply cannot compete with the dominant mode of production.

The deployment of a market process as the natural and neutral expression of individual choice is also central to electoral cycles and the

41 Danny Morrison, *The Examiner* (May 2003).

42 *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

43 In the UK the Social Democratic Party was a premonition of New Labour in this regard.

popular plebiscite in social democracy, and depends upon the pivotal pun in political 'representation'. This discursive circularity whereby what people want is what they get, and vice versa, is taken to be democratic expression in our societies, most visibly in the USA – a system recently and succinctly described as 'a plutocracy maintained by PR'.⁴¹

The effects of this conjuring trick have recently permeated the national film agencies and media institutions. It has achieved invisibility – 'It is when history is denied', Barthes writes, 'that it is most unmistakably at work'.⁴² Public service systems, television stations and film agencies are increasingly ideologically attuned to the bogus paradigm of the market and to the macho achievement of proximate financial returns. Hence there is an increasing role for distributors in anglophone public funding agencies and the deployment of a naive notion of the 'end-user'. They are now moving their versions of priorities, practices and criteria for commissioning inexorably towards larger budgets with stronger star casting. The exigencies of economic and ratings pressures that traverse television have led to the articulation of the same discourses, populist approaches that excuse their policies by espousing market mechanism and rejecting any more demanding cinema as 'elitist'; the film agencies also emanate from 'modernized' political formations⁴³ that formulate their policies passively in response to market research, attaching themselves to the same self-fulfilling prophecy, the same circular process. So that when television executives calculate ratings, distributors anticipate cinema audiences and film agencies consult sales agents, these all point to the same reduced parameters of taste which then consolidate and reinforce each other in a vicious circle. These discourses all work to narrow the field of cultural diversity – clearly we are witnessing a slow and uneven historical process, but it seems to be moving in one adverse direction.

Despite these underlying tidal movements in the economy of world cinema – international phenomena such as film festivals on the surface display an energetic cornucopia of myriad small films in all their bravery and diversity, and continue to expand. These short-term celebratory enclaves, glimpses of 'how it could be', play to a wider public in their locale and are populated with echelons of the 'people of cinema': professional cinephiles, critics-with-taste, other festival programmers, intelligent distributors who can only afford smaller and more personal films, art house cinema proprietors, film society aficionados. Festivals play a crucial role in delivering the delicatessen of cultural cinema to niche audiences. The spirited celebration of cinema in the marginal spaces of festivals and film magazines allows for those directly involved to maintain the delusion that such cinema is flourishing and to exist in a state of denial that the situation has not deteriorated in the last few decades. This is not to dismiss them as hobbyists, with all the associated fetishism of film buffs/buffoonery, but these activities must be seen in perspective and in proportion. What is the scale of general and public

attention to the different versions of cinema? What is easily available in theatres or on television for most of the rest of the year?

The increasing hegemony of industrial cinema during this period reinforces the predicament of isolation and marginalization for independent film and reduces the possibilities of regeneration via narrow specialist audiences. There seems to be a diminution of critical mass for this work in relation to a greater dispersion of attention towards mainstream forms of film in contemporary media.

In 1992 I wrote:

Meanwhile the British government has constructed haphazard legislation designed to release market forces which themselves, in the longer term, will lead to new, more congenial and conservative configurations. This is a subtle, British way of reshaping broadcasting in an ideologically more amenable form.⁴⁴

And indeed there has been further significant deterioration in the situation of public service television and European cinema in the decade since the article was written. There may be other shorter-term explanations of worsening conditions in television, and their replication ten years later in cinema, but we should also seek to understand the underlying structural changes – the audience mutations that underlie what was happening in television also reinforce shifts in cinema.

The results are clear – after long decades of uneven climate change artistically innovative and progressive approaches to making films and reading them are severely marginalized and normally represented as ‘out of date’. The very discourses in which film is discussed have undermined radical approaches. The new politically-correct line, that the politically correct is incorrect, is itself incorrect. Is this the nadir? On what basis and in what way could we imagine this situation may be reversed?

Of course we have to believe that the possibilities of renewal and change persist within the undeniably difficult conditions of the present moment. This is hopefully merely a transient time when the hegemony of the specious and the mistaken is pervasive, when progressive, imaginative or politically dissident work is hardly present. We can continue to believe in creative oppositional practices which still hope to summon a better world into being.⁴⁵

Horizons/orisons

Maybe it was always an illusion to think that progressive film would ever be more than a marginalized activity, a minority sport? Perhaps the aspiration for wider audiences for independent work was always ill-judged and mistaken. But for someone who joined Channel Four from the London Filmmakers’ Co-op end of the Independent Film-makers’ Association, and witnessed the way in which, presented correctly,

⁴⁴ Stoneman, ‘Sins of commission’, p. 144.

⁴⁵ See Isaac Julien, ‘Closing remarks’, *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 45 no. 4 (2003), p. 78.

creative and intelligent work could attract substantial audiences, the current remission is a sad retreat.

Perhaps some elements of the bleak exposition sketched above connect with resignation, a midlife contemplation of passivity or defeat? Enhanced expectations grew from the privilege of participating in two such optimistic moments of brave aspiration; the cultural formation of a *soixante-huitard* were reinforced by the courageous stage of a new television station and the initiation of a new phase of national cinema in Ireland.⁴⁶ Now these hopes must be set against the backdrop of structural shifts of the cultural and political climate that have occluded and truncated progressive openings. Channel Four and the Irish Film Board are not to be viewed as experiments which failed but, together with other examples of progressive audiovisual constellations, as sketches of the future's possibility. There is always that complex delineation of the determination that one's personal and subjective perspective has in inflecting an understanding of the external and objective situation. I talked of the 'D'ou je parle' in the original 'Sins of commission' – is current pessimism merely a side effect of age and exhaustion?⁴⁷

A more hopeful prognosis can be imagined – the skirmishes of ideas continue, progressive cultural forms may evolve and, at some point, help create the reflux. We can persist, aided by the lubrications of irony, in confronting the current difficult predicament.⁴⁸ Then, frankly, there are underlying motives closer to the configurations of personal desires that retain involvement in alternative forms of cinema. Many of us are paid, modestly enough, for these esoteric activities. Persistence may seem a perverse pleasure, but the fact that independent film is not gaining ground after so many years of endeavour is not a reason for abandoning the field of contention.

Perhaps some version of these understandings can take us from naivete to a more pragmatic place; more honest and realistic appraisals, allowing us adequate complexity to navigate beyond the contemporary terrain. Emancipatory forces develop under different banners, with new names and new acronyms, taking new routes. Whole majorities of the world's populace are under-represented on our screens. Disparities of wealth and power will regenerate resistance in and through new forms of film and culture.⁴⁹

As smaller and more occasional interventions can become islands of counteraction, other more participatory images may emerge within the general noise of the Spectacle. Cultural spaces open up unexpectedly, windows of opportunity present themselves for brief moments in particular places.⁵⁰ Perhaps we need to recalibrate our expectations, concentrating on the interstitial, the interception of audiences' tastes and desires. Accepting that there are even some advantages of the marginal, the peripheral, the precarious. It is through defiance and perseverance that a new generation of initiatives will serve to keep these forms of questioning open, this scepticism alive, in a time of dispersion. As Oscar

46 Although I began drafting this essay in the last years at the Irish Film Board, I left the agency in September 2003 to become involved in setting up the Huston School of Film & Digital Media at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

47 Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/mi ritrovai per una selva oscura/che la diritta via era smarrita (And I found myself in the middle of my life/and lost in a dark wood/with no direction home). Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto I*.

48 'The only causes worth fighting for are lost causes', as Noël Burch and Thom Anderson suggested in their film *Red Hollywood* (1994).

49 See Stoneman, 'Sins of commission', p. 143.

50 There is some resonance between the narrower cultural contention discussed here with those glimpses of real political possibility in the wider historical terrain: say Orwell observing Catalonia in 1937, the guerrilleros liberating Cuba in 1959, Thomas Sankara's Burkina Faso in 1985, and perhaps Chávez in Venezuela at this time. It is not a surprise that the prospects and patterns of change in culture are as remote and precarious as the possibilities of thoroughgoing political transformation.

51 Perry Anderson envisages the renewal of utopian energies more historically in 'The river of time', *New Left Review*, no. 26 (March-April 2004).

52 Elizabeth Sussex, *Lindsay Anderson* (London: Studio Vista, 1969), p. 75.

Wilde wrote: 'A map of the world that does not include the territory of Utopia is not worth even glancing at'.⁵¹

The future is unwritten and cannot be second-guessed. In fact the only prediction we can be sure of is that our future history will not be as we have predicted it. However, in order not to descend into repetition or farce, analyses of recent experience will have to be brought into conjunction with the possibilities that unfold. It is the endurance of the glacial present that provides the conditions for renewal and the realization of systemic radical change.

Coda

As Lindsay Anderson suggested shortly after making *If* . . . , 'The older you grow, the more you are conscious of and believe in and have to accept the ambiguities of existence . . . and you know that in every truth the opposite is also true. The very important thing is to perceive *that* truth, and yet hold the opposite of *that* truth, which is that there *is* a truth.'⁵²

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