

1-1-2005

Irish Representations in the Films of Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan

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Irish Representations in the Films of Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Humanities

by

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November 2005

Abstract

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Jeffrey K. Jack

This thesis explores four films from “second wave” directors Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan: *The Crying Game*, *The Butcher Boy*, *The Field*, and *The Boxer*. In these films, Sheridan and Jordan add complexity to previously static film representations of Irish society and culture. The study analyzes the modifications Sheridan and Jordan make to the cultural and political representations of the “first wave” of Irish films, relating theoretical developments more traditionally used in literary studies, including “postcolonialism” and “postmodernism.” It also explores how these four films have influenced more recent developments in Irish cinema, including the recent shifting of the settings for “Irish” films to more international settings exemplified by Sheridan’s recent film, the Oscar-nominated *In America*.

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Irish Representations in the Films of Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan

Chapter One: Introduction

The Irish have been prominent in world literature since the early 1900s. To date, Ireland has four Nobel Prize recipients: William Butler Yeats (1923), George Bernard Shaw (1926), Samuel Beckett (1969), and Seamus Heaney (1995). And Yeats, along with J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey were major figures in the early formation of the Abbey Theatre, one of the earliest national theatres in the world. Today the plays of Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness command the major theatres. James Joyce amazed the literary world with *Ulysses* (1922) and served as godfather to subsequent generations of such novelists as Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, and Roddy Doyle, whose *Paddy Clark Ha! Ha! Ha!* won the coveted Booker Prize in 1993. In addition to literature, the Irish have reputations in dance and music. Traditional Irish dance has gained an international following largely through the touring group *Riverdance*; Irish music has been exported by artists as diverse as the Chieftains, the Corrs, Van Morrison, and U2. Clearly, Ireland's contributions to world culture have been substantial.

Irish cinema, the focus of this thesis, is also gaining in influence and reputation, as can be attested by the recent successes of *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Disco Pigs* (2001). From John Ford's 1935 filming of Liam O'Flaherty's *The Informer* through the more recent wave of "heritage films," such as *Fools of Fortune* (1990) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), the new Irish cinema is indebted to the more established Irish literature for many of its sources and themes. Authors Roddy Doyle and Brian Moore have had several of their novels translated into film: *The Commitments* (1991), *The Snapper* (1993), and *The Van* (1996) from Doyle; *Catholics* (1973), *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1987), and *Black Robe* (1991) from Moore.

A discussion of this relatively new art form in Ireland must begin with definition. What, for example, is an “Irish film?” Often when people think of Irish film, they think of content not form, the images themselves rather than the means of presentation. From *The Quiet Man* (1952) and *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970) through the more recent, internationally successful (if critically panned) *Waking Ned Devine* (1998), many of the most popular Irish films have relied upon a catalogue of stereotypical images: the feisty colleen, the corrupt priest, and the dis-empowered patriarch. In addition to images of stereotypical characters, images of the bucolic scenery of western Ireland have predominated over those of Irish urban centers.

The very definition of an “Irish film” has been the subject of debate. Is an Irish film merely one that features Ireland as a subject, or is it a film that is indigenously financed, directed and cast? That most ubiquitous of “Irish films,” *The Quiet Man*, was shot partly in Ireland and partly on a Hollywood soundstage, with American funding, by an Irish-American director, John Ford. Critic Martin McLoone has argued this film is more an exploration of the Irish-American psyche than of Ireland or “Irishness” (4). Another well-known “Irish film,” *Ryan’s Daughter*, was shot entirely in Ireland, but by English director David Lean. Because film is a director’s medium, just as the theater is an actor’s medium, I define an Irish film as a film with an Irish director. I explore the representations of Irish themes and characters in the work of two of the most prominent Irish film directors, Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan. Understanding Sheridan and Jordan’s artistic strategies for representing Ireland to the world facilitates a larger understanding of Irish political and cultural identities and their reflections in Irish cinema at the present.

In addition to Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan, the Irish cinema has given us a number of other talented directors. These include Robert Flaherty, whose *Man of Aran* (1934) is a classic documentary of Irish island life; Thaddeus O’Sullivan, who directed *December Bride* (1990);

and Joe Comerford, the “first-wave” experimentalist whose *Reefer and the Model* (1987) is one of the first Irish films to deal with homosexual subject matter. More recent examples are Kieron J. Walsh, director of the recent hit *When Brendan Met Trudy* (2000); Peter Sheridan (Jim Sheridan’s brother), director of the critically-praised adaptation of Brendan Behan’s memoir *Borstal Boy* (2000); and Kirsten Sheridan (*Disco Pigs*). Experimental cinema has had a particularly rich history in Ireland. Other experimentalists include Cathal Black, Vivienne Dick, Bob Quinn, and Paul Greengrass, director of the cinema verité reenactment *Bloody Sunday* (2002), a dramatization of the Irish civil rights protest march and subsequent massacre by British troops on January 30, 1972.

In addition to the successes achieved by Irish directors, the Irish cinema has launched the careers of a number of notable actors as well. Peter O’Toole, Richard Harris, Maureen O’Hara, Liam Neeson, Gabriel Byrne, Pierce Brosnan, Albert Finney, and Fiona Shaw are among the more established actors. Now a younger generation of actors is charting a new course for the future of Irish cinema: Stephen Rea, who acts in many Jordan pictures; Daniel Day-Lewis, who is British but is associated with Sheridan; Colin Farrell, Irish film star turned Hollywood action hero; Cillian Murphy, who costars along with Elaine Cassidy in *Disco Pigs*; Aidan Quinn; Stuart Townshend; Jonathan Rhys-Meyers; Flora Montgomery; and Aisling O’Sullivan, who plays Ma Brady in *The Butcher Boy*.

For one scholar the development of Irish cinema can be described in “waves,” with Jordan and Sheridan being representatives of the second wave of Irish directors. The first wave, according to Martin McLoone, was the experimental Irish directors of the 1970s. Among them are Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford, and Kieran Hickey (2). The career of Joe Comerford serves as a particularly interesting predecessor to that of Neil Jordan. Comerford’s films were low budget

and, like the European avant-garde works he admired, rigorously experimental. Through movies, he sought to interrogate the stereotypical notions of Irish romanticism and landscape evident in *Man of Aran* and *The Quiet Man*. Critic Jerry White, in an article entitled “Resisting Convention: The Films of Joe Comerford,” compares Comerford to Sheridan and Jordan, finding they share a desire to challenge convention. Because Comerford worked with much lower budgets, White believes that he was able to attain a level of experimentalism and thematic complexity never approached by Sheridan and Jordan (136). Nevertheless, his influence can be seen in the more moderately experimental works of these two directors.

The Comerford film *Reefer and the Model* is an especially interesting predecessor to Jordan’s film *The Crying Game*. This film revises stereotypes of Irish people and places by examining a group of marginalized Irish characters: a spy, a model who is really a pregnant ex-prostitute, and a drug addict. Comerford’s focus on the previously ignored elements of Irish society is not the only aspect of this film that presages the films of Jordan. Comerford also embraces the aesthetic of the European avant-garde over the more conventional film styles typically associated with Irish cinema. McLoone observes Comerford’s use of “two styles – an austere, European art cinema aesthetic . . . and a pastiche of the Hollywood chase movie” (136). Jordan would also embrace, in many of his films, this focus on representing previously ignored factions of Irish society. He too is fascinated with the idea of blending genres and mixing mainstream with more avant-garde aesthetic sensibilities.

Comerford is not the only Irish artist critical of *Man of Aran* and *The Quiet Man*. Many scholars have also been less than thrilled with the representations in these two films. McLoone notes the success of these films with audiences but laments their standing in as “markers for a general ‘Irishness’” (35). He feels that *The Quiet Man* is especially guilty of “‘paddywhackery’”

and suggests that its popularity “is often the occasion of some acute national embarrassment.” McLoone concludes that “the relationship of these two films to the metropolitan culture that produced them and to the Ireland which they represent is very different, and their place in the contemporary cultural debate is more complex than the received wisdom suggests” (35). For McLoone, the ability of an experimentalist like Comerford to explore the complexly multifaceted reality of Irish identity places works like *Reefer and the Model* far above the more reductionist vision inherent in *The Quiet Man*.

Since the early 1980s, Ireland’s influence on world cinema has steadily increased. Beginning with Sheridan’s Oscar-winning *My Left Foot* (1989) and Jordan’s Oscar-winning *The Crying Game* (1992) through the more recent hits *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O’Connor’s 1998 adaptation of the Brian Friel play), *Disco Pigs*, and Peter Mullan’s critically acclaimed *The Magdalene Sisters*, Irish film directors have excelled in the realm of sound and images. The world of film scholarship, however, has lagged behind. It is only in the last decade that academia has caught up with the work of Irish filmmakers. The result has been a body of criticism on an increasingly diverse and substantial Irish cinema.

This thesis explores the work of Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan, two of the most discussed Irish filmmakers. I examine four significant films, two from each director: Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* and *The Butcher Boy* (1997) and Jim Sheridan’s *The Field* (1990) and *The Boxer* (1997). The theoretical orientations I use to aid in understanding these four films are “postcolonialism” and “postmodernism.” “Postcolonialism” is a theoretical approach developed in an influential 1978 study by Edward Said entitled *Orientalism*. Said analyzes how imperialists name and define cultural elements and peoples as inferior to their own. He calls this “othering” denigration to facilitate ease of subjugation. Said’s work deals with British

colonialism's "othering" of the East, countries such as India, China, and Japan. For Said, "oriental" is a word that is less a description of a race or ethnic group than an assertion of claims of ownership by a colonizing power. Declan Kiberd, an Irish scholar, has applied these same ideas to Britain's historic subjugation of Ireland by the British. I look specifically at what he has to say about the impact of colonialism on the psyches of those people who are its victims. The ideas of Said and Kiberd are particularly useful in understanding the work of Sheridan, who self-consciously and overtly addresses these themes in his films. In contrast, Neil Jordan more covertly addresses themes of colonialism in his work.

The theoretical mode most useful in "reading" Jordan is "postmodernism," which, according to Jeremy Hawthorn's *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*:

Would include the rejection of representation in favor of self-reference – especially of a 'playful' and non-serious, non-constructive sort; the willing, even relieved, rejection of artistic aura and of the sense of the work as an organic whole . . . the substitution of confrontation and teasing of the reader for collaboration with him or her; the rejection of 'character' and 'plot' as meaningful or artistically defensible concepts . . . even the rejection of meaning itself as a hopeless delusion (142-143).

Substituting "viewer" for "reader" provides an apt description of some of the film strategies employed by Neil Jordan. Critic Frederic Jameson defines "postmodernism" as a "weakening of historicity" characterized by "the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past" (Falkenstein 268). This perspective allows us to engage both Sheridan and Jordan under the rubric of postmodernism. I suggest that Sheridan, in *The Field* and *The Boxer*, is employing the stylistic device of "nostalgia" in the sense to which Jameson refers, as an attempt to remedy the postmodern schism, the growing rift between historical narratives and postmodern audiences. Jordan, on the other hand, is interested in creating new narratives, ones that address but do not attempt to remedy the schism.

Sheridan's films, however, are also complex. In a monograph entitled *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation*, published in 2002 by the Liffey Press, Ruth Barton discusses *The Field* as an intertext of *The Quiet Man*, and Sheridan's *The Boxer* as an intertext of American director Elia Kazan's landmark film *On the Waterfront* (1954). An "intertext" is a text created by the interaction with an already existing text. The text that results from this interaction can then be "read" differently, and with different results, than either of the two original works.

Barton feels Sheridan both positions his films into a framework of expectations raised in the mind of the audience through exposure to previous films dealing with similar subject matter and revises the ideologies of the previous works. The ways in which *The Field* dialogues with *The Quiet Man* reveal the extent of Sheridan's use of "nostalgia," in the sense to which Jameson refers, as an attempt to bridge the gap in the audience's understanding of Irish history. *The Field*, according to Irish film scholar Barton, "can be read as an antidote to the kind of 'stage' Irishness celebrated in John Ford's *The Quiet Man*" (54). Jordan's use of postmodernism and Sheridan's use of intertextuality are similar in that each technique facilitates the situating of new films into an evolving Irish cultural *milieu*.

The techniques of postmodernism are amply evident in Jordan: pastiche and fragmentation, doubling and tripling of characters and plot lines, comparison of reproductions with their originals, crossing genres and violating social norms. Before Jordan was a filmmaker, he was the successful author of numerous short stories and novels. The impact of this experience can be seen in his orientation toward filmmaking. He favors complicated narratives and aesthetic effects over action. His training as a writer -- he first experienced success as a writer of short stories -- influences his preference in cinema for aesthetics and complication of themes over, or perhaps as a means of, delivering messages.

Jordan's short story collection *Night in Tunisia and Other Stories*, published in 1976 by the Irish Writers' Co-operative, significantly foreshadows his later career as a director. In the stories Jordan addresses most of the themes that would later occur in his films, including the instability of personal and cultural identity, the alienation attendant upon male adolescence, and the complexities of male and female romantic relations, frequently expressed as some variation on the Oedipus complex.

Sheridan, on the other hand, employs cinematic strategies that emphasize performance in the service of epic, mythical stories featuring readily recognizable archetypes. His early experiences as a writer, a theater director, and most importantly an actor influence his later class politics and filmmaking strategies. He learned to use art as a vehicle for political discourse. Sheridan was a cofounder of the Dublin Arts Center, an experimental theater where he worked with Gabriel Byrne, Daniel-Day Lewis, and Liam Neeson. In the early 1980s, Sheridan emigrated with his wife and two daughters to New York where he worked as an actor and ran a small theater. These early experiences with acting and directing actors inform his film work, particularly his early films.

Sheridan favors films that deliver a strong message. As a result, he employs actor-centered techniques of direction, making generous use of close-ups to register the nuances of feeling passing over an actor's face. He also uses restrained camera movement and a simple, straightforward editing style to focus the audience's attention on the visceral dialogue. His own self-effacement, as we shall see, is often but not always a hallmark of Sheridan's direction. He restrains his camera in order to emphasize the human dimension of his stories and to give the audience time to engage with the themes and characters. His journey as a director, however, is away from self-effacement and toward the type of technical virtuosity more typically associated

with Neil Jordan's work. Sheridan's latest film, *In America* (2002), features extensive use of hand-held camera work and more use of music and rapid-fire, disjointed editing than did his earlier efforts. *The Boxer* thus represents a transitional film for Sheridan, one positioned halfway between the mythic power of *The Field* and the more sophisticated aesthetic effects of *In America*.

Jordan and Sheridan represent two sides of the Irish artistic sensibility. Their backgrounds help to explain their artistic orientations and representations of "Irishness." They have opposing strategies for content and form. Both are interested in delivering messages; however, Jordan's meanings are less readily perceptible. He prefers to work indirectly, by generating a complex discourse that is allowed to remain unresolved. Both directors use archetypal images to communicate with audiences directly, quickly plugging into our pre-existing knowledge of types rather than engaging in a lengthy explanation. This is a type of cinematic shorthand. Each, however, uses the convention differently: Jordan, in keeping with the tenets of postmodernism, employs archetypes and stereotypes in order to play with, destroy, or deconstruct them, while Sheridan's methods suggest a nostalgic reinforcement of the value of traditional mythologies.

The cinematic innovations of Sheridan and Jordan would never have been possible without certain innovations within the Irish film industry. In the early 1980s the IFB (Irish Film Board) was established to provide financing for a new breed of ambitious indigenous film projects. It was disbanded after disagreement among its members over whether to finance fewer big-budget productions or a greater number of low-budget films (*Cinema and Ireland*, 119). After the IFB was re-instituted in 1993, producers and directors were still required to raise a

portion of the necessary funds from international sources, but for the first time substantial funding could be generated from within Ireland.

The result was a new level of creative autonomy, which made possible the production of *In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan-1993) and *The Crying Game*. Irish directors had finally acquired the freedom to make films that were more faithful to their personal visions and experiences. Since the advent of the IFB, film scholars have engaged in a vigorous debate over the degree of quality and fidelity to the Irish experience reflected in the finished products. Two such recently completed scholarly works on Sheridan and Jordan are Emer and Kevin Rockett's monograph *Neil Jordan: Exploring Boundaries* (2003) and Ruth Barton's *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation* (2002). Kevin Rockett and John Hill's *National Cinema and Beyond* (2004), Martin McLoone's *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (2000), Lance Pettit's *Screening Ireland* (2000), and James MacKillop's *Contemporary Irish Cinema: From The Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa* (1999) all are recent publications attesting to the growing popularity and significance of Irish film scholarship. These books, in addition to specific articles on Jordan and Sheridan, form the foundation for my "readings" of the films.

The scholarship on Irish cinema follows a pattern from the broadly conceived overview presented by an early work such as *Cinema and Ireland*, to the more narrow focus of a monograph such as the more recent *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation*. What this thesis is doing, comparing works from different directors, sometimes gets neglected in the scholarship. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to examine how different styles achieve intensity and sophistication. Sheridan and Jordan are engaging in different varieties of Irish filmmaking, yet both are correcting the misconceptions of previous generations of Irish films. The first wave of Irish filmmaking, represented by avant-gardists like Comerford, Quinn, and Cathal Black

shocked viewers by challenging the stereotypes. Their boldness created an opening for second wave directors like Sheridan and Jordan to make films that more finely tune the previous cultural representations. Using specific films as examples, this thesis addresses how these second wave directors have challenged the stereotypes in commercially viable films.

Following this introduction are two chapters and a conclusion. The two inner chapters feature discussions of paired films – one from Jordan examined in comparison to one from Sheridan. The first chapter discusses Jordan’s groundbreaking *The Crying Game* in relation to Sheridan’s *The Boxer*, for a comparison of directorial styles and strategies in the service of political filmmaking. Both films employ a multi-layered discourse on identity politics and both explicate the process of “othering,” emphasizing the difference of the other as a means of perpetuating cultural and political repression.

The next chapter examines Neil Jordan’s *The Butcher Boy* against Jim Sheridan’s *The Field* for a comparison of representations of the psychological effects of colonialism and the tension between tradition and modernity in Ireland. I analyze the different courses taken and the different cinematic methods used by Sheridan and Jordan in their thematization of Irish Republicanism, as well as their weighing of the relative benefits of modernization, for a mass audience through the telling of four timeless stories.

A concluding chapter reviews the similarities and differences in representations of “Irishness” in the works of these two directors and further contextualizes these findings into a still expanding Irish film industry. The ideologies of the current crop of “up-and-coming” Irish filmmakers are considerably different from those of the “second wave” of indigenous directors exemplified by Jordan and Sheridan. It is important to identify the impact of this wave on more recent directors as we seek to understand the evolution of Irish cinema.

Chapter 2: Embracing the “Other”

The dearth of indigenous film projects in Ireland before the 1980s made outsider perceptions of Irish culture the only representations to which audiences worldwide had access. Representations by English directors often portrayed Irish men as violent terrorists (*Odd Man Out*), while those by American directors, often of Irish descent themselves, portrayed Irish males as deluded dreamers (*The Quiet Man*). While this was a less partisan representation, it was still a stereotype. In the 1980s local funding sources and avenues for distribution, including the *Irish Film Board* and *RTE (Telefís Eireann)*: Ireland’s public television station), were coupled with greater British and American interests to co-sponsor productions, enabling a new breed of Irish filmmaker to thrive. The “first wave” directors made low-budget, formally experimental films highly acclaimed by critics and scholars but little seen beyond the boundaries of the art house and academe. Not until the “second wave” directors, in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, did Irish cinema find an audience in the wider community of filmgoers.

The second wave directors addressed the dearth of representational diversity in a more commercial context. The result was the emergence of a cycle: increased financing produced better quality films, which created a renewed appetite on the part of critics, scholars, and audiences for Irish cinema. Of the films produced by the second wave directors, Jordan’s *The Crying Game* and Sheridan’s *In the Name of the Father* went on to win awards and international accolades, suggesting the cultural importance of greater investment in Irish cinema, as well as its potential financial rewards. The second wave directors have since been critiqued for deviating less from the original stereotypes than was initially apparent. For example, John Hill notes that Jordan’s film *Angel*, which, like his later film *The Crying Game*, deals with themes of political, paramilitary violence, “has more than its share of similarities with *Odd Man Out*, not simply in

its formal approach but also in the perspective on political violence which it then encourages” (*Cinema and Ireland*, 178). For Hill, both films make the mistake of condemning the violence of the “terrorists,” but not that of the repressive police or the corrupt state.

Experimental cinema had a rich history in Ireland in the 1970s but had rarely achieved success overseas. The second wave of Irish directors were interested in attracting a worldwide audience as well as in making “real” Irish films, ones that reflected Ireland’s diverse landscapes and people. They found, however, that they were far from entirely free in their representational choices. The perceived tastes of international audiences suggested the necessity of careful consideration of representational strategies. The experimental impulses of Sheridan and Jordan would have to be encoded into a finished product that would render complex themes and reconsideration of Irish identity palatable to the mainstream.

In his preface to the seminal study of Irish film, *Cinema and Ireland*, scholar Kevin Rockett explores the possible reasons for the dearth of representational diversity in Irish cinema. He feels that “Ireland’s peripheral (and ex-colonial) status has not simply hampered the possibilities for a native film industry but, in its absence, has also made possible a set of cinematic representations which have tended to sustain a sense of cultural inferiority” (xi-xii). Rockett believes self-definition to be a crucial aspect of revising and broadening the spectrum of Irish representations, for “whether it be rural backwardness or a marked proclivity for violence, the film-producing nations of the metropolitan centre have been able to find in Ireland a set of characteristics which stand in contrast to the assumed virtues of their own particular culture” (xii). His point is that we can’t rely on the world of filmmaking at large to modify its own antiquated representations. Irish directors must themselves take the lead and model for the rest

of the world a more honest approach to Irish subject matter. This is what Sheridan and Jordan have tried to do in the four films to be discussed.

Sheridan and Jordan address themes that are not new to the Irish cinema. Their films build upon both the formal innovations and the attempt to re-imagine the Irish countryside and rethink notions of family advanced by the first wave, while not ignoring the imperative to entertain and provoke their audiences. They challenge the traditional boundaries of representation in Irish film as they seek to add complexity to formerly static cinematic representations of “Irishness.” They embrace the challenge of engaging in a broader dialogue with Irish culture than has, in cinema, previously been the case. They are also, however, careful not to push too far. *The Crying Game* and *The Boxer* provide interesting examples of this push-and-pull dynamic. The films embody a tension between the impulse to promote more challenging and complex representations of the Irish/English conflict and to attract an audience with the prospect of enjoying a well-told story. Indeed, both films satisfy audience expectations while simultaneously provoking fresh ideas and a reconsideration of what it means to be Irish.

Each film complicates its portrayal of Ireland’s political situation by engaging in discourse on the “other” and “othering,” a colonial impulse wherein the colonist robs natives of their culture and thoroughly objectifies them in the quest for political, economic, and social dominance. The act of “othering” allows one to project perceived negative attributes onto the objectified peoples in order that the person or people doing the “othering” might preserve a sense of themselves as superior. In *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jeremy Hawthorn suggests that to characterize “a person, group, or institution as ‘other’ is to place them outside the system of normality or convention to which one belongs oneself,” to treat them as “irrelevant to what humanity demands – because they are other and not human” (165).

This idea can be applied to the situations of the Catholics versus the Protestants, Nationalists versus Unionists, or Ireland versus England. *The Boxer* and *The Crying Game* exemplify “othering,” while also suggesting the compromises a director must make between promoting his or her independent vision with the necessity of satisfying an audience. Sheridan’s *The Boxer* is the more ideologically and structurally conservative of the two; to no one’s surprise, it achieved moderate success with critics, but was less popular with audiences than his earlier efforts.

The Crying Game was nominated for six Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Achievement in Film Editing, and Best Original Screenplay. Jordan won in the category to which non-Hollywood films are traditionally relegated, that of Best Screenplay. In England, the film won the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for Best British Film (ironic in that, again, the British claim a work from Ireland of which they approve), and was nominated for five other BAFTA awards.

The Boxer won only moderately enthusiastic reviews, and it earned a respectable but not exceptional profit at the box office. However, it represents an artistic breakthrough for Jim Sheridan. Without the stylistic innovation he achieved in *The Boxer*, Sheridan might not have gone on to make his masterpiece to date, *In America*. Although critics admire Sheridan’s abilities as screenwriter and his facility with actors, they had previously found his films to be visually uninteresting (Barton 4-5). He eschewed directorial pyrotechnics, such as swirling camera work, extensive use of music and frenetic cutting, to privilege performance.

Sheridan’s earlier films featured static camera work, putting the film audience in the position of a theatergoer, riveted by great performances in a very good play. It was said of Sheridan that he was a populist, not an *auteur* director, like Jordan. For example, Martin

McCloone critiques Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father*, finding it "closes down the epic scale . . . after the opening scenes of street riots in Belfast . . . is shot largely in a shot-reverse-shot claustrophobic style [and] is often very stage-bound and static" (71). These stylistic choices on the part of Sheridan serve to increase the viewer's sense of the enforced closeness, and the resulting intimacy, of prison. The theory of *auteurism* says that the director is the author of the film. It is his or her sensibility through which the film's characters, themes, and stories must be filtered, his ideologies that are thus encoded into the finished product. *The Boxer* serves as rejoinder to this criticism. In this visionary treatment of Northern Ireland's grim political and social realities, Sheridan, for the first time, displays a compelling personal aesthetic, creating a context that heightens the effectiveness of his already demonstrated storytelling skills and facility for directing actors.

The Boxer represents the culmination of a much-discussed and debated film trilogy by Sheridan meditating on the nature of the colonial conflict. Because it is the third in a trilogy of films by Sheridan that address the ongoing Irish "Troubles," a euphemism for the situation in Northern Ireland, in *The Boxer* Sheridan allows himself to adjust the ideological perspective of the trilogy's first two installments. He adapted the screenplay and directed the first film in the trilogy, the controversial *In the Name of the Father*. He co-scripted the second, *Some Mother's Son*, with Terry George, his longtime collaborator and a first-time director. *Some Mother's Son* was perceived, especially by the British press, as even more artistically compromised than *In the Name of the Father* by the partisan nature of its sympathetic portrayal of Republican hunger strikers. Sheridan observes in an interview with Ruth Barton that *The Boxer* was his "reaction to *In the Name of the Father*" (147). He admits that his intention was to balance the rhetorical excesses of the trilogy's first two parts to achieve a more conciliatory tone.

In the Name of the Father garnered positive reviews but was negatively received in England because of its trenchant critique of the British court system (Barton, 70-71). *Some Mother's Son* provides an even more critical perspective on British justice. This film was, unfortunately, amateurishly directed and received negative reviews for its polemical oversimplifying of the political situation in the North. *The Boxer* addresses Irish intra-country colonial strife, with its portrayal of a Belfast that is, despite or perhaps because of the recent gains of the peace process, at odds with itself, almost exactly half Catholic and half Protestant. Rather than focus on the age-old enmity between England and Ireland, *The Boxer* examines divisiveness within Ireland's North. This film was more warmly received by the British press and was viewed worldwide as a more moderate perspective on the situation in the troubled North. In a *Sunday Times* article, critic Eoghan Harris called *The Boxer*:

A remarkable new film . . . set to blow British and Irish audiences out of their political apathy about the North . . . What makes it remarkable is that it is the first balanced film on Northern Ireland for almost 15 years, and a model of how to meld politics and drama that film-makers tackling Northern Ireland have too often ignored. (Barton 116)

The Boxer begins with an operatic helicopter shot. The camera sweeps through desolate gray skies over both Catholic and Protestant Belfast, giving the viewer a God-like perspective on the whole setting before settling down to examine the claustrophobic reality of life in modern Belfast. The city is a war-zone, with abandoned or rundown buildings scattered amidst barricaded streets patrolled by soldiers. As the camera settles, we see the people who actually live here as they go about their daily lives as well as the wall that divides Catholic neighborhoods from Protestant, reminiscent of the Berlin wall. Here Sheridan announces his new focus on the difficulties of life during civil war, the divisions within Northern Ireland rather

than Ireland's historic enmity with Britain, and a new aesthetic sensibility as a director, one which is more confidently personal, more visionary.

The new aesthetic of Sheridan is designed to embody rather than to distract from the film's content, its message. In *The Boxer*, for the first time, Sheridan reins in his lead actors. Daniel Day Lewis as IRA member Danny Boy Flynn plays the boxer of the film's title with compelling restraint. Emily Watson, as Danny's love interest Maggie Hamill, gives a performance that subtly emphasizes the price paid by the women of the community. She is subjected to constant scrutiny and must sublimate her erotic and maternal impulses in the highly oppressive and conservative cultural milieu of Ireland's North. Maggie still loves Danny, her childhood sweetheart, but must remain faithful to her husband, now imprisoned for IRA activity. To make matters worse, her father is local IRA leader Joe Hamill (Brian Cox). The community vigorously enforces the fidelity of Belfast wives to their political-prisoner husbands, as we see in the wedding reception sequence near the film's beginning where a young man is threatened with violence just for dancing with the wife of a prisoner. Although Maggie is technically "free," she is serving the same sentence as her husband.

We learn, with Danny's release from a British prison, that he has served fourteen years, having "taken the fall" for Harry (Gerard McSorley), the "bad" IRA man who contrasts with the peace-seeking "good" IRA man Joe Hamill. Danny has rejected the IRA and has taken the dangerous position of non-affiliation while serving time in a prison sharply divided between Republicans and Unionists. The prison is a microcosm of the North, in its divisions as well as in the danger of non-partisanship. Because of his self-imposed isolation ("self-imposed" because he doesn't affiliate with the IRA), Danny's verbal capacity has atrophied while behind bars. His dialogue, especially during the film's first half, is limited to brief utterances. This stylistic

choice pays off for Sheridan and Day-Lewis. The character of Danny achieves heroic status through his rejection of glib discourse about and easy political solutions to the “Troubles.”

Danny Flynn returns to his Belfast apartment, which has been, symbolically, barricaded. He forces his way into the apartment under scrutiny from English armed-guards atop a nearby tower. Danny also begins to renovate the run-down non-sectarian boxing club formerly managed by his trainer Ike (Ken Stott). Danny’s breaking of barriers symbolizes his breaking back into his old life. He has no affiliation and so must be wary of old IRA friends and enemies, as well as the English troops. By breaking into his old apartment he is making a statement: Danny has been released from prison but must break into his old life where he is considered, by some, an unwelcome reminder of the IRA’s failure to win the war.

Danny begins to renew his acquaintance with Maggie Hamill and befriend her teenage son Liam (Ciaran Fitzgerald), who was not yet born when Danny went into prison. Here we see the genre conventions of the boxing picture and the love story coming to the fore. Sheridan, however, tweaks both genres at every turn to further suggest the film’s political message of peaceful coexistence in the North. The love story suggests the conventions of the “love-across-the-divide” genre, which dates back to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Again, however, the genre conventions are modified. The couple achieves a happy ending and a promising future for their romance, instead of being doomed by their divided loyalties. This alteration of the genre conventions suggests a hopeful prospect for peace through neutrality in the North.

One genre convention of the boxing film is the trainer, or “corner man.” *The Boxer’s* trainer Ike is similar to many film representations of boxing trainers. He is irascible but loving, a father figure to his “boys,” much like Burgess Meredith in the *Rocky* series of films. In *The Boxer*, however, Ike is also, like Danny, a rebel. He lives and thinks outside the

Republican/Unionist dichotomy. He assists Danny in reopening the boxing club, a symbol of peace between warring tribes, or at least the limiting of warfare to sport where it can remain noble and heroic, rather than degenerate into a senseless and endless series of retributive murders.

At the film's end the audience is made to believe that Maggie's father has put out a "hit" on Danny due to his rejection of the IRA and involvement with Maggie. In actuality the target is Harry, the "bad" IRA man who resists the peace process and continues to plant bombs in Belfast's public places. In *The Boxer*, the "good" IRA representative triumphs through embracing a peaceful future for the North, one achieved through negotiation rather than political violence. This is an example of embracing the "other," rather than continuing the struggle for dominance. The "happy ending" of the film is complicated by the reality that Danny and Maggie must now leave the North in order to pursue their relationship.

The "good" IRA man enjoys a similarly adulterated "triumph" in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*. In fact, Sheridan and Jordan are not the first Irish artists to address the confusion attendant upon engaging in war and hostage taking. Two important sources in Irish literature for Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* are Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) and Frank O'Connor's short story "Guests of the Nation" (1931). Both Behan and O'Connor knew first-hand the risks of political activity, Behan as a member of the IRA and O'Connor as part of the revolutionary forces in 1922.

The Hostage, by Irish playwright and IRA member Brendan Behan, shocked and entertained theater audiences internationally. Written in Gaelic under the title *An Giall*, the play is set in a brothel and depicts events surrounding the execution of a young IRA member accused of killing a policeman and being held in a Belfast jail. The Republicans retaliate by holding a

British soldier hostage in a brothel. After the IRA prisoner is executed, the British soldier is killed in a gunfight when police attack the place. The irony of the prisoner being inadvertently killed by his own troops, by “friendly fire,” accentuates the ambiguities of the “Troubles” and provides inspiration for Jordan’s similar use of the plot twist in *The Crying Game*.

Frank O’Connor’s classic Irish short story “Guests of the Nation” is the second source for *The Crying Game*. In this story, men from both sides of the “Troubles” are thrust together. While they wait for orders from their superiors, the soldiers play cards, discuss politics, and inevitably gain empathy for each other. The climax of the story comes when the soldiers receive orders to kill their English hostage. The reader is privy to the thoughts of the soldiers, a technique O’Connor uses to humanize the participants on both sides of the struggle. Jordan uses O’Connor’s idea of the soldier acquiring empathy for the hostage, the psychological conflict that occurs in the essentially humane warrior who participates in inhumane acts.

In *The Crying Game*, Jordan has added another wrinkle to this already complex hostage-taking scenario: the theme of latent homosexuality and gender confusion. Some critics have argued that Jordan’s gender-bending take on O’Connor and Behan is unintentionally racist and homophobic. In a *Cineaste* article entitled “A Construction Site Queered: ‘Gay’ Images in New Irish Cinema,” Irish film scholar Lance Pettit analyzes what he sees as *The Crying Game*’s misogyny and racism:

Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* seemed to pull off a cross-over from independent to mainstream, being brilliantly marketed by Miramax to box-office and critical success in the U.S. The film did help to consolidate a growing profile for Irish talent on screens around the world, but although homo-, bi-, and transsexualities were central to the scenario of a film by an Irish filmmaker, such 'advances' in representational presence were coming from a 'straight' director at the expense of cinematic misogyny and the nullification of black identities (61).

One can't help but wonder if any representations of cultural and sexual diversity crafted by a straight artist could satisfy such a perspective.

Like *The Boxer*, *The Crying Game* begins with a grand helicopter shot over Northern Ireland. This time, however, we are not in the city, but rather at a rural seaside carnival where British soldier Jody (Forrest Whitaker) is lured into a trap by IRA femme fatale Jude (Miranda Richardson). The IRA takes him prisoner and holds him hostage in exchange for the release of IRA leaders held captive by the English at Castlereagh. One of Jody's captors, Fergus (Stephen Rea), seems less indoctrinated than do the others. Jody sets out to persuade Fergus to free him. The film's first half ends with Fergus receiving the dreaded orders to execute the prisoner, for whom he has begun to feel a real affection. He chooses instead to let him go. In an ironic twist, a British troop vehicle racing to launch an assault on the IRA compound hits and kills Jody while he is attempting to run away. Interestingly, if unrealistically, this compound is a greenhouse constructed entirely of glass, suggestive of proverbial "glass houses" as well as transparency, lack of privacy.

The film's second half features Fergus' journey to London to fulfill his promise to the dead British soldier to look after his "girlfriend" Dil (Jaye Davidson), who works as a singer in a nightclub there. Two of the original five IRA members are killed in the attack on the glass compound that ends the film's first half. The remaining two – "bad" IRA man Maguire (Adrian Dunbar) and Jude – follow Fergus to London in order to re-assimilate him into the IRA fold by coercing him into assassinating an elderly British judge. At the film's end Fergus goes to prison to protect Dil, who has murdered femme fatale Jude. Maguire dies when he assassinates the judge after Fergus fails to show up to do his "duty." Fergus intends to do the job but is prevented when Dil ties him to a bed after they make love in order to interrogate him about the

death of Jody. The discrepancy between deeds and intentions manifests confusion repeatedly in this allegory on the difficulty of achieving peace between England and Ireland after centuries of miscommunication and discord.

When Fergus arrives in London, he begins to fall in love with Dil, who is not a woman at all, but rather a transvestite. Clearly things are not what they seem. It is difficult to tell the “nature” of the “other” from the “nature” of oneself in the world of Jordan’s *The Crying Game*. Fergus mis-recognizes his own political and sexual orientation as well as Dil’s true gender, then takes “the fall” for Dil (as well as perhaps for Jody), much as Danny did for Harry in *The Boxer*. Fergus has the promise of reunion with Dil upon release. This is ironic in that the audience is unsure whether Dil’s feelings for Fergus are authentic or whether she is “playing him for a fool” (“running” yet another “game” in a film full of gamesmanship).

The idea of “taking the fall” is similar to the beginning of *The Boxer*. Danny Flynn, however, serves time in place of an evil man, one whom he despises. In contrast, Fergus serves time so that he might spend the rest of his life with his one true love, Dil, upon his release. Both protagonists reject the IRA, serve time in prison nevertheless, are lovers not killers by nature, and are vehicles for change in others. In *The Boxer*, Danny Flynn comes out of prison a changed man at the story’s beginning. Fergus, in *The Crying Game*, must make a journey before he can even begin to do penance. This journey is the movie’s plot. Danny Flynn’s story begins with an already thoroughly transformed protagonist. What he does with this hard-won wisdom propels the story of *The Boxer*.

In *The Crying Game*, games are played out again and again. The “rules” are well known to all of the film’s characters, or “players”: the Irish, who have been made miserable for centuries by British colonialism; the kidnapped British soldier, who pays the price; Fergus who,

like Danny Flynn, attempts to reject the IRA's violent ideologies; and Dil, who is triply oppressed as a half-black, male transvestite and a homosexual. Jordan, to a greater degree than Sheridan, undermines the traditional dichotomies between Ireland and England, black and white, female and male, gay and straight.

Both films are concerned with appearance versus reality, the idea that one can't trust appearances. Both films engage in stereotyping. The audience is shown violent IRA men and seductively passive Irish women. The films then deconstruct the images they present. The audience understands that the IRA is neither entirely noble nor corrupt; its women are capable of great heroism but are also capable of great treachery and violence. *The Boxer* and *The Crying Game* thematize the false comforts derived from "othering" as a means of subtly delineating the full spectrum of Irish identity and the political situation with England.

In these films, Sheridan and Jordan undermine the political by focusing, finally, on the private and personal, a level that engages the viewers with individuals. The protagonist of *The Crying Game*, Fergus, and *The Boxer's* Danny Flynn are on personal quests for wholeness. Each one's journey begins with psychological fragmentation and proceeds toward personality reintegration. *The Crying Game* begins with a Fergus torn by doubt, an IRA man who cannot stomach violence. Through the course of the story he rejects political violence and discovers a new Fergus, one who is capable of feeling love and of willingly enduring sacrifice for love. By choosing to "take the rap" for Dil, he sacrifices over a decade of his life hoping, perhaps naïvely, that she will be waiting for him when he gets out. Fergus does penance in hopes of attaining absolution for a crime he only imagines he committed.

The Boxer begins with Danny Boy Flynn's release from prison and his attempts to reestablish relations with his childhood sweetheart Maggie Hamill. The moment of personality

reintegration for Danny comes when he commits himself to loving Maggie and her son Liam, despite pressure from their family and community. He is Christ-like in his willingness to sacrifice his personal safety, even his life, for the love of common humanity, but also for the love of one woman.

Chapter 3: Sanity and Madness in *The Butcher Boy* and *The Field*

The Boxer and *The Crying Game* convey the spectrum of Irish political and cultural identity through the personal and private stories of the central figures. Their stories illustrate the impact of politics on the individual by highlighting a variety of personal coping mechanisms. *The Field* (Sheridan 1990) and *The Butcher Boy* (Jordan 1997) dramatize the catastrophic psychological effects of colonization on the individual and the community. The journeys toward self-realization undertaken by Fergus in *The Crying Game* and Danny Flynn in *The Boxer* exemplify rational choice as a response to an irrational reality. The journeys undertaken by the protagonists of *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy* are more ambiguous and, therefore, troubling in nature. Fergus and Danny Flynn are heroes. They exemplify courage, a willingness to look inward and recognize the political importance of changing oneself before undertaking to change the world. By contrast, Francie Brady and Bull McCabe, the protagonists of *The Butcher Boy* and *The Field*, take journeys that serve as cautionary tales. They exemplify the dangers of internalizing the dominant group stereotypes, the stress of adapting to modern life, and the tragic nature of political and personal violence.

In these films, Sheridan and Jordan transcend the political by focusing on the private and personal, a level that engages viewers in an individual's struggle. These protagonists of *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy* are on a downward spiral into fragmentation of personality and madness, separateness from self and community; their journeys are both heroic and tragic. Sheridan's adaptation of *The Field* emphasizes the humanity of the character as his fate gradually worsens, and the ensemble acting enables the audience to appreciate how others in the community, including his family, perceive Bull. In Jordan's *The Butcher Boy*, the sensuousness of the music and imagery, the inclusion of such experimental film techniques as layering of

images and fragmentation emphasized by rapid-fire editing, the inclusion of surrealism and a bravura performance by Eamonn Owens all contribute to making a memorable discourse on “Irishness.” It is one of the most discussed of Irish films due to its engagement with a number of Irish themes, including the tension between tradition and modernity, the impact of colonialism upon the individual and community, and the role of the Catholic church in the disenfranchisement of Irish citizens.

Unlike *The Crying Game* and *The Boxer*, which are film treatments of original screenplays, *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy* are adapted from other media. Irish author Patrick McCabe’s Booker award-winning 1992 novel is the source for Neil Jordan’s acclaimed treatment. Jim Sheridan’s *The Field* is adapted from John B. Keane’s play of the same name. By making significant changes from their sources, both directors subtly re-thematize the material.

The Field is a retelling of Cuchulainn, a Celtic myth from the Ulster cycle in which a God-like hero inadvertently kills his own son. The Cuchulainn myth is about fate and one’s inability to fight it. Bull McCabe, like Cuchulainn, is trapped by his destiny; try as he might, he cannot change his fate. McCabe is filled with rage over what he sees as worsening conditions in Ireland and his loss of personal value in a newly modernized country. These elements are symbolized by his rejection at the hands of his wife and son, and the widowed landowner’s decision to sell “his” field to an “outsider,” an American.

With *The Field*, Sheridan achieves a weaving of thematic threads. Deceptively simple on the surface, the aesthetic quality of the film evokes John Ford’s landmark “Irish” film *The Quiet Man*, which Sheridan feels, “surpasses every other Irish work of art in important aspects in that it’s a true, genuine love story” (Barton 151). Critic Ruth Barton has argued that *The Field* is in

fact an intertext of the Ford film, that in it Sheridan engages in a dialogue with that seminal film, suggestive of the influence of Ford on Sheridan.

This influence can be seen in the characters of the Irish patriarch Bull McCabe (Richard Harris), his oppressed son Tadgh (Sean Bean), and his wife (Brenda Fricker), whose name is never mentioned in the screenplay. Bull fought in the colonial wars and is a living symbol of Irish suffering during the Famine and the wars for independence. He is a community leader used to getting his way. He is violently anti-British and lovingly attached to “the land,” the field he farms as a tenant and which he inherited from his father who inherited it from his grandfather and so on down the line for generations. Conflict occurs when an Irish-American “Yank” (Tom Berenger) comes to Carraighthomond to purchase the plot of land that Bull considers his own. He plans to make a profit by “paving over” the scenic plot.

Additionally there are the characters of “Bird” O’Donnell (John Hurt), a spectral, foolishly comic presence with blackened teeth and a long black coat who follows around Bull and Tadgh on his bicycle. Similar to the Fool in *King Lear*, the “Bird” is a marginal figure: powerless and yet able to manipulate people and events with great subtlety, foolish yet capable of startlingly wise utterances. The “Bird” encourages Tadgh’s mischievous taunting of the Catholic “widow” (Frances Tomelty), the McCabe’s middle-class landlord. The “Yank” has symbolic qualities as well. Played by American Tom Berenger, the “Yank” represents hubris, the arrogance and domination of American capitalism.

The Field takes place in rural Carraighthomond in the 1930s. The *mise en scene* of the film, however, suggests a mythic timelessness. In Keane’s play, which is set entirely within a pub, various characters discuss and describe the events happening outside. In the film, the pub is featured only intermittently. Sheridan externalizes the action whenever possible, capitalizing on

the medium's ability to convey emotion through rich sound and images. His decision to translate Keane's intimate character study in the play into the more sprawling and diverse canvas of film suggests his interest in the mythic dimensions of Bull McCabe's tragic story.

The pub is, however, still important both as a setting in *The Field* and in Sheridan's life. Sheridan has enjoyed pub-life and pub humor, and his liking for this staple of Irish living informs his films, especially this one. Bull interrogates deceitful Bird in a pub scene because Sheridan wishes to give the audience insight into Bull and the pub. It is a place where Bull still rules, where the other pub-goers will collaborate with him. His interrogation of Bird demonstrates to the audience the danger involved in betraying Bull; he knows that Bird is an informer, despite his (the Bird's) continual protests otherwise (he protests too much!). To be an informer is the lowest possible act: to renounce your Irishness and embrace the values of the "other," England or America.

For Ruth Barton, *The Field* is a film consciously at odds with itself. It both endorses the romanticized view of life in rural Ireland inherent in *The Quiet Man* and, not unlike *The Butcher Boy*, simultaneously undermines that stereotype. Postmodernist theory posits the unique feature of life in the late 20th century as "loss of historicity." Ruth Barton feels Sheridan's film effects a "conscious intervention in a public arena unsure over how to remember its past" (45). In adapting Keane's play, Sheridan increased audiences' awareness of the tragic nature of Bull's story by emphasizing positive aspects of his character. The Bull of Keane's play is bullying, autocratic, and less aware of the tragic dimension of his story. In *The Field* we have a Bull who is tragically aware of his ever-worsening condition. This awareness – not inherent evil – is what motivates Bull's destructive rage towards his family and, ultimately, himself.

The use of archetypes as names, such as “Widow,” “Bull,” and “Bird,” coupled with the pastoral setting in Ireland’s scenic west, further heighten the mythic qualities of the film. The widow represents the Irish Catholic middle-class, more than willing to sell-out her neighbors to the wealthy outside interests. She has a fondness for Bull McCabe, stubborn like herself as he is, but dislikes Tadgh for his dangerous pranks and disrespectful posturing. She feels a class-based disdain for the McCabes similar to that which we will see in *The Butcher Boy*’s Mrs. Nugent.

In *The Field*, the son feels worthless. He refuses to live the dream of his father Bull, who wants him to take a wife and settle down to tend the family field. It is difficult for Tadgh to ignore his father’s wishes because Bull is a mythic figure, a towering patriarch respected and feared by the community as well as his family. He is like the Old Testament Moses replete with white beard and staff he carries everywhere. The conviction of Richard Harris’s performance in the role of Bull earned him a Best Actor Oscar nomination. John Hurt is memorable as well in the role of “Bird,” in which he self-consciously overacts in the style of Hollywood in the 1950s. The performances of Harris and Hurt are heightened, even “over the top.” They work, however, in the context of a film that rejects realism in favor of the mythic and so embraces a visual style, similar to the one used by Ford in *The Quiet Man*, that is as artificial as the featured performances.

The bluntly pragmatic “Yank” invades the artificial world of Bull McCabe. Conflict arises over the land, but is also present between Bull and his wife and son. We learn that the elder son Seamie committed suicide on his eighteenth birthday. Bull’s wife cannot forgive him for the death of Seamie or for his years of mistreatment of her. She commits herself to death-in-life, stoically resigning herself to enduring her painful marriage to Bull in silence. Because Tadgh is incapable of confronting his father, he takes out his frustration on the widow, even

covering her chimney at night in order to “smoke her out,” while howling like a wolf. He is torn between the desire to win his father’s affection and the desire to be free, to break away from Bull’s regressive insistence on staying “tied to the land.” For Tadgh the land has no meaning, no mythic power.

The patriarch’s bullying can be understood in terms of Irish scholar Declan Kiberd’s postcolonial conception of Irish patriarchy. Kiberd stresses the impotence of the Irish patriarch within his own family, which he believes results from dis-empowerment at the hands of British imperialism. In his *Inventing Ireland; the Literature of the Modern Nation*, Kiberd suggests that “the evidence of Irish texts and case-histories would confirm the suspicion that the autocratic father is often the weakest male of all . . . Patriarchal values exist in societies where men, lacking true authority, settle for mere power” (390-1). Bull McCabe clearly fits into this paradigm. He resorts to mere exercise of power, never once attempting to get what he wants from his wife and son, the widow and townspeople, through negotiation. The difference between true authority and mere power is respect. This is what Danny Flynn and Fergus know and what Bull McCabe and Francie Brady never have the chance to learn.

Just as the themes and narratives of *The Boxer* and *The Crying Game* find deep roots in the literature of Ireland, so *The Field* presents another character common to Irish literature. For example, the disempowered patriarch is a central figure in John McGahern’s novel *Amongst Women*. Set in rural Ireland, this novel tells the story of Michael Moran. Now a father of five, Moran was an IRA member during the “Troubles” of the 1920s. Because his self-esteem is dependent upon his identity as a soldier, peace has made him an anachronism and he experiences what we today would call post-traumatic stress. He is detached from society and insists that his family stay apart from others as well. His wife and children pray with him every night and are

often the immediate focus of his violent outbursts. Like McCabe, his behavior has cost him his elder son, who has emigrated. Disillusioned by what he sees around him, Moran makes an observation that expresses Bull McCabe's sentiments equally well, "Look at the country now. Run by a crowd of small-minded gangsters out for their own good." Like McCabe, in his own home, Moran behaves like a tyrant.

The character of Moran in McGahern's *Amongst Women* offends but never entirely alienates his children's loyalty. In *The Field*, Bull McCabe's son Tadgh decides finally to leave his home and his father. He prefers instead to marry the "Tinker girl" and live the nomadic life of a gypsy, a symbolic rejection of father and land. The "Bird" implores Tadgh to return and redeem himself by stopping Bull from running the family's cattle over a cliff. This is the film's climax as well as the point of fragmentation for Bull. In an earlier scene, Bull destroys the family home and all their possessions with his walking stick. His actions force his wife finally to break her eighteen-year silence to implore him, "Don't you break!" She senses that his mind is about to crack. His response is to do just that, his identity and personality finally succumbing to the stress and fracturing irrevocably. Before he smashes the last intact object in their humble hut, a glass mirror in an antique frame, he gazes for a moment into the mirror at his reflection and murmurs, "Are you there Bull, are you there?"

The cattle represent the doomed patriarch's thoughts run rampant, an externalization of his inner turmoil. They are also a reference to the Irish myth *Cattle Raid of Cooley* or, in Gaelic, the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*. Bull's name itself refers to the mythic *Tain*. While attempting to head-off the stampede, Tadgh becomes trapped by the onslaught of cattle and falls to his death. The film ends with Bull, like the mythic Cuchulainn, ranting against his fate. He is angry until the end, attempting to beat back the waves with his walking stick as he wades deeper and deeper into the

ocean where he will drown, in an almost religious image of purity, cleansing, and return. His wife stands silently watching from the cliff above.

Sheridan's cinematic portrayal of madness can be profitably compared and contrasted with Jordan's adaptation of Patrick McCabe's vision. Despite their age differences, both Bull McCabe and Francie Brady, the young protagonist of *The Butcher Boy*, are resilient figures driven mad. *The Butcher Boy* is set in small-town Ireland in the 1960s, a town increasingly overtaken by anxiety over the atomic bomb, the Cuban missile crisis, global instability brought terrifyingly close, into Irish homes through the new technology of television.

Jordan's film addresses the tension in 1960s Ireland between modernity and tradition, the manifestations of colonialism on the Irish individual and group psyche. In it, Jordan makes memorable use of the techniques of postmodernism: multiple, intersecting plot lines, duplication of characters, and repeated replication of images in order to suggest inter-personal fragmentation. The result is that the viewer loses track of which images are real and which ones are copies. The same actor who portrays Da Brady, Stephen Rea, plays Francie the adult. This creates friction; the ironic voice-over narration effectively places the viewer inside Francie's distorted thoughts.

There are many markers along the way from sanity to madness for Francie Brady in *The Butcher Boy*. As the film begins, Francie seems to be like any other exuberant young boy. As the story progresses, he and his family are branded "pigs" by self-righteous neighbor Mrs. Nugent (Fiona Shaw), who is in a rage over Francie's ill treatment of her son Philip. Francie's mother (Aisling O'Sullivan) commits suicide and his father (Stephen Rea) dies from alcoholism. Francie serves a stint in a Catholic-run reform school for boys where a priest molests him. Upon release Francie confesses the details of the molestation to his "best and only friend in the world," Joe Purcell (Alan Boyle). His friend, disgusted with Francie's violence and repulsed by the

confession of molestation by a priest, subsequently rejects him and Francie is left, like Danny Flynn in *The Boxer*, with nowhere to turn.

Francie spends time in a mental institution, where he receives electroshock therapy. His departure from humanity is completed when he violently murders Mrs. Nugent, the woman whose pronouncements on the Brady family began the story. *The Butcher Boy* allows Neil Jordan to more subtly encode and embed Irish themes than in any other of his films. The director allows the audience to perceive the message without its being made overt.

The Butcher Boy is a darkly comic kaleidoscopic fairy tale, a feast of sound and images the audience comprehends only gradually, in stages. The film begins *in medias res*. We are dropped into the middle of Francie's chaotic existence and must decide for ourselves what is real and what fabricated. *The Field*, by contrast, achieves its sense of timelessness, of the inescapability of the past, through stylistic conservatism. The beginning of *The Field* depicts Bull and Tadgh gathering seaweed near the shoreline and then laboriously transporting it home to the field where it will become fertilizer. This is a long sequence illustrative of the difficulty of toiling on the land and reinforcing Bull's right to the field he has lovingly tended all his life. *The Butcher Boy*, by contrast, suggests themes of the "eternal return" both in its story line and musical montage/editing style. Songs and images return in the film again and again in order to suggest the connections between the various parts of the story. When Francie journeys into the world at large, it always ends with him returning home, to where he began.

"Slippage" exists between the narrative voice-over from the adult Francie, who unreliably describes events and the events as they "actually occur." Irony is introduced through the use a detached narrator. This is similar to the use of irony to distance the audience in *Sunset Boulevard*, American director Billy Wilder's acclaimed gothic film noir in which a corpse tells

the story of his own demise at the hands of an aging Hollywood star gone mad. The uncomfortable reality of life for Francie, the only son of an alcoholic and dissolute Da Brady and a suicidally depressed Ma Brady, is bleak; nevertheless, the tone and words of the voice-over describing Francie's feelings remain relentlessly upbeat.

Francie Brady seems doomed from the start. His only respite from the violence and emotional abuse of his home life lies in fantasizing about the stories he sees in American television and movies and those he reads in American comic books. He shares his love of these stories with his best friend Joe Purcell. It is Joe, after all, who makes them blood brothers. In an early scene he cuts their fingers and mingles the blood bonding them forever in friendship. This is hugely symbolic; their relationship now is like a marriage, a contract that Joe eventually breaks. Francie's rejection by Joe, the worst in an escalating series of emotional blows, devastates him utterly. Francie begins to compartmentalize his life in response to an untenable reality. He wants so badly not to be "a bad bastard." This is the beginning of the fragmentation that will eventually lead to schizophrenia and institutionalization for Francie.

In *The Butcher Boy*, the influence of American media is destructive. America can be seen as the new colonizer of Ireland, one that uses economic and ideological force rather than politics and religion. Additionally, the denigration of the Irish as "pigs" by the English informs the viewer's perceptions of young Francie Brady and his growing alienation from his community and all those around him. Language and the creation of the "other" it facilitates is so powerful, the impact it has on the self image of the victim so profound, that an innocent child is transformed into a monster.

Critic Martin McCloone, in his article "The Abused Child of History: Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy*," links the film's portrayal of the Bradys to its themes regarding a small town Irish

culture caught between its colonial past and modernizing future. McCloone feels that “it employs the metaphor of the dysfunctional or incomplete family to probe the psychosis of the nation . . . it is concerned with a moment of profound change, when an older order is fading and a newer order has not yet fully materialised” (223). McCloone’s “newer order” is capitalism and it is fully embraced by Mrs. Nugent, who is a petit bourgeois. The mother of prissy Philip Nugent, she denigrates the Bradys as “pigs” in anger after Francie and Joe steal Philip’s comic books. This is, however, just a pretext. She really calls them “pigs” because that is how they seem to her. She views the Bradys as “other” in order to preserve her self image as cultivated and civilized. Mrs. Nugent, recently returned from England, has become the self-appointed separator of the “cultured” Irish from the “crude.” Here we can see Jordan exploring the idea of class conflict within Ireland being more damaging than British colonialism.

Ma Brady kills herself while Francie is away in Dublin, escaping his parents’ seemingly endless brawling. Da Brady blames Francie for his wife’s death, becomes despondent, and drinks himself to death. This event strengthens the young protagonist’s perception of himself as inhuman and worthless. Francie confides to Joe that a priest molested him and Joe, in revulsion, ends their friendship. Francie becomes unhinged from reality, lives in a fantasy world inspired by the stories of cowboys versus Indians and science fiction fantasy adventures he loves. These images are mythic, uncomplicated, and reassuringly unlike his real life, which is filled with anxiety. As it progresses, the film becomes more fragmented, reflecting Francie’s increasingly distraught state.

The audience is also completely cut-off from reality. We see images of nuclear annihilation, a blossoming mushroom-cloud, Francie’s hometown completely destroyed by war, all its inhabitants transformed into blackened pigs. Into this landscape rides an alien on

horseback, complete with bug eyes and antennae. It speaks and thus becomes recognizable as the psychiatrist treating Francie in the hospital. The alien is also Anglophile Mrs. Nugent, the woman whose pronouncement upon the Bradys banished Francie and his family forever to the community's periphery.

The film's use of the techniques of surrealism suggests the profoundness of the change wrought on Francie. His personality is now thoroughly fragmented by the bleakness of his reality and the "treatment" he receives at the hands of the social institutions (industrial school, Catholic church, mental institution) meant to address the needs of the weakest members of society. The audience is reminded that it is not only Francie who has been failed by Irish social institutions. His ma was not "fixed" during her time spent in "the garage," as Francie and Joe jokingly refer to the mental institution where she is sent. Neither was Da improved by his time in the same Catholic-run workhouse for boys in which Francie was molested. It is alluded to, in a scene between Da and Francie when he visits his son in the institution, that priests molested Da as a child as well. All are suggestive of the fact that these social institutions are, at least, irresponsible and, at most, dangerously criminal in their neglect and disregard for the rights of the poor they seek to benefit.

The insensitivity of the priests gives way to the group psychosis of the townspeople in their adoration of the Virgin. In the scene in *The Butcher Boy* in which Francie slaughters Mrs. Nugent, finally and forever teaching her the lesson of humility, the townspeople are waiting and praying for an appearance of the Virgin Mary to rescue them from supposed nuclear annihilation. The Virgin declines to make an appearance; however, Francie's murder of Mrs. Nugent is mistakenly thought by the townspeople to be a supernatural manifestation, suggestive of ironic detachment in a narrative that explores the complexity of individual and collective guilt. The

director, Jordan, is winking at the audience by representing the townspeople as so naïve. It is a moment simultaneously comic and horrific: something exceptional happened but not what they hoped for and expected. The behavior of the Nugents, the townspeople, the priests and other representatives of the Catholic church all suggest the insanity of modern life in a rural Irish town. Francie's madness is an internalization of the stresses of modern life he sees all around him.

Both *The Butcher Boy* and *The Field* deal with madness as the only response by an individual who is trapped in an unbearably chaotic world. Both stories feature emotionally absent mothers and drunken or violent fathers. Kiberd has suggested one possible reason for the prevalence of these images in the Irish cinema, one that involves the psychological effects of colonialism on its victims. His ideas about the victim's internalization of the colonizer's ideologies apply to both *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy*, the former in its discourse on the "other," the latter in its examination of the friction of shifting ideologies. The protagonists of the two films are both limited in their capacity to react to their disenfranchisement. They act out of violent aggression or retreat into a private world of madness.

Bull McCabe embodies the past. He cannot adjust to the exigencies of life in modern Ireland. Mental breakdown is suggested in *The Butcher Boy* by the friction between the voice-over narrative of the adult Francie and the ever-worsening condition of the young Francie we see on the screen. What we see at times correlates with and, more frequently, undermines or is undermined by the narrative voice. In *The Field*, the horrible loneliness of madness is conveyed through the changes Sheridan made to Keane's play, changes which allow the audience to actually see Bull's life unraveling and his rage-filled, violent, and sorrowful reaction to the playing out of his fate.

These two films represent Jordan and Sheridan's most immediate and complex engagements with Irish themes. Both seek to complicate traditional romantic notions, which have privileged Ireland's agrarian past over its modernizing present and future. Both films seek to emphasize the inescapability of the past, its ongoing influence into the present-day. Jordan does so through embracing postmodernism, fragmentation of narrative into a jumble the viewer must then work to sort-out. Sheridan uses a more direct narrative, but suggests through plot and character the impossibility of escaping the past.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In these four films, we see representations of Irish males as both dreamers and warriors. Perhaps the most salient feature of this period of Irish filmmaking, compared with those that precede it, is a willingness to engage with themes of Irish Republicanism and civil strife. These films attempt to complicate the traditional cinematic dichotomies, to interrogate the notion of heroism. Which is more heroic, to die for a cause or to survive difficulty and become transformed as a result of involvement with politics? These works posit a number of answers to this question. Edward Said's "postcolonialism" and Jean Francoise Lyotard's "postmodernism" are useful in understanding the content and form of these films. "Postcolonialism" addresses the common features of de-colonized cultures, while "postmodernism," with its focus on work as text with multiple meanings, informs our appreciation of the stylistic differences between Jordan and Sheridan.

Not only is Irish cinema gaining a worldwide reputation for excellence, but Jordan and Sheridan are now moving the settings of their Irish films to a larger, more international context. The journey for Irish cinema has been from overly romanticized notions of idyllic western Ireland to a focus on all of Ireland to a focus on the world and the Irish diaspora. In his most recent film, *In America* (2002), Sheridan brings together many of the themes he and Jordan have addressed in their works. Nominated for three Oscars, the film recounts the adventures, both comic and sad, of an Irish family who emigrate to New York and inhabit a tenement apartment in a building populated by prostitutes and junkies. Set in the early 1980s, *In America* is Sheridan's valentine to America and, specifically, New York. Based partly on Sheridan's experience of living with his wife and two young daughters while seeking work as a theater actor, many of the film's seemingly mythic plot strands focus on the father's efforts to be a hero, to prove his worth

as a man and family provider. In the hellish heat of summer, he hauls an enormous air conditioner through traffic to cool the family's apartment; later he nearly blows the family savings trying to win for his youngest child an ET doll in a carnival game. Many of the film's minor characters resemble characters from *Jordan*: the powerful black man with a secret who eventually befriends the family, the ghost of the dead sibling which haunts and grants wishes to the youngest daughter, and the various hookers and junkies who turn out to be unthreatening, even likable. In a city filled with "others," the young Irish family does not attract much notice. They act as if they believe they belong, refuse to judge their new neighbors by their livelihoods, skin color, or sexual orientations; the new neighbors, in turn, welcome them. With this film, Sheridan logically expands the perimeters of Irish cinema to America, the new home of countless waves of earlier immigrants.

The focus of *In America* on perceptions of the "other" links this newest Sheridan film to *Jordan's The Crying Game*. For *Jordan*, Irish Republicanism, like any political movement, relies on perceiving the enemy as "other." This is what Fergus is unable to do, to view Jody as essentially different. During their time together as hostage and captor, Jody helps Fergus to see him as a complete human. It is not that Fergus is incapable of alienating Jody, but rather that he is open to another way of looking at things. Jody presents himself to Fergus as an equal, a human being, and Fergus eventually begins to see him as just that. Maguire and Jude, "hard-line" Republicans who have no difficulty seeing the British as inhuman, even begin to view Fergus with suspicion when he is no longer willing to follow orders. Dil, on the other hand, has no specific concept of the "other," being so thoroughly marginalized herself. She is not aware of whether Fergus's accent signifies Irishness or Scottishness. They are all the same to her, not English. London society marginalizes Dil because of her transgendered state and her profession.

She responds by rejecting mainstream society, preferring an “underground” existence in gay bars and drag clubs to the “drag” of a straight, work-a-day existence. In these specialized businesses, she can escape the dominant group’s prejudices and just be “herself.” Those who are viewed as “other” eventually begin to react by denigrating their oppressors. It is a survival mechanism.

The postcolonial dilemma is that transitions are always difficult, sometimes impossible to survive. Cultural nationalism is a form of viewing the oppressor as inhuman. In order to preserve or reinstate indigenous cultural values, natives turn the tables on the colonists. It is a form of self-preservation, re-insinuating the suggestion of positive qualities inherent to the indigenous culture that have disappeared or are quickly being lost through dehumanizing the aggressor. To view the oppressor as inhuman, however, can have a high price. A person may begin to lose his soul, his very humanity, and the thing that enables resistance. In *The Crying Game* there are layers of the “other.” Fergus’s job as an IRA member is to dehumanize the enemy. He is constitutionally incapable of doing this, however, as we see in the film’s first half, which deals with the hostage taking. His heroism consists in embracing the common humanity of his hostage Jody.

In *The Boxer*, Danny Flynn is seen as “other” by the British because he is an IRA man, worthy of no mercy but rather punishment, incarceration, containment. He was ostracized in prison when he refused to align himself with other political prisoners behind bars. He is an enemy to the British because he will not talk about the IRA or confess any involvement in their activities. Upon release he is independent of both sides in the conflict in his native Belfast because of his critique of Republicanism and its violent tactics. He becomes, however, the ultimate insider when he stands up to the forces of intolerance and wins the love of Maggie and Liam. He has become a father and the leader of his own family, a resolution that is rendered

slightly ambiguous as the price for their unification as a family is loss of home. They must now move from their native Belfast. If seen another way, Danny Flynn is absconding with another man's wife and child, an IRA political prisoner and Danny's former best friend.

The concept of the "other" plays an important role in *The Butcher Boy* and *The Field* as well. *The Butcher Boy* tells the story of the Brady family's suffering at the hands of Mrs. Nugent, but also suggests they are harmed by weak or corrupt Irish social institutions that fail to do their duty to help the poor and disenfranchised. Additionally, the Bradys and the town as a whole are dehumanized by modernization, the advent of the new technology. Television imports subversive ideologies into the private world of the home, both those that denigrate others and those that provide false hope for salvation in the form of mythic images of cowboys and Indians, like those fancied by Francie Brady. The film's focus on the tactics of the British gives way to an emphasis on America's negative influence as well as the inherent weakness of the social bonds in this rural Irish town.

In *The Field*, Bull McCabe dislikes the Catholic Church. He also dehumanizes and despises the British, against whom he fought in the colonial wars earlier in the century. The Catholic widow, despite her fondness for Bull, distrusts him. She blames him for the mischievous pranks of his son Tadgh. She obtains retribution by selling the field out from under them. Bull's exercising of power rather than persuasion alienates his entire family. Viewing people as inferior is always an imposition of power, whether it is done by one country or culture to another or by family members within a household. It denies their essential humanity, replacing it with a set of stereotypes.

The influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland is seen as negative in both *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy*. In *The Field* the Catholic widow sells the field and the Catholic priest ejects

the townspeople from “his” church when they refuse to inform on Bull for murdering the American. Additionally, in *The Field* the Bull rants extensively against the church for its alliance with England and lack of empathy with the Irish natives during the famine time. “No priests went hungry during the famine,” Bull reminds the other characters and the audience as well. In *The Butcher Boy* the Catholic priests are presented as child molesters; both Francie and his da have been their victims.

The Sheridan films are more concerned with envisioning a peace process for Ireland’s future. *The Boxer* represents Republicanism sympathetically and unsympathetically, as half good and half evil, as personified by Harry, the “bad” IRA man, and Hamill, the “good” IRA man. Also in *The Boxer* we have the IRA man who rejects violence and partisanship, Danny Flynn. He is represented as a Christ-like figure, one who can lead the entire community out of its fixation with violence and retribution. This film emphasizes “process,” as in “peace process.” In fact, all four films can be viewed as discourses on the usefulness of understanding the process in Irish-English politics.

In *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy*, the protagonists’ inability to adapt and emotionally evolve inhibits their ability to adapt to the changing times, even survive their advent. Bull, although he is much older than Francie, is an adolescent, at least emotionally. His naïve ideas about fidelity and loyalty, like Francie’s ideas about cowboys and Indians and the permanence of blood brothers, have trapped him and his family in a quagmire from which there is no release. Bull McCabe doesn’t seem to have gained wisdom from age. The two characters who succeed use the process. They change themselves in order to adapt to new situations. This involves being able to see others as human, gaining empathy for others. This is what Jody and Fergus, Fergus and Dil, Danny Flynn and Maggie Hamill, Tadgh and the Tinker Girl are able to achieve.

Tadgh objects to his father's teachings. He pursues the Tinker girl because he no longer sees her as wild, as essentially different. The two characters that do not understand process are victims and do not survive with minds and spirits intact. Rather they retreat into fantasies and outmoded ideas. They haven't the mechanisms to process the new information.

With these four films the directors have presented memorable stories with intriguing and moving characters in order to exemplify a variety of coping mechanisms. We have the fragmented (postmodern) character of the IRA man with a conscience in Fergus and Danny Flynn. We have history as memory and the justifiable but self-defeating pursuance of retribution in *The Field*, suggestive of postcolonialism. We have the Irish woman as femme fatale, as veritable killing machine, with Jude in *The Crying Game*, showing the influence on Jordan of postmodernism. We have Harry, from *The Boxer*, whose negation of his own guilt in the death of his son inspires round after round of murder and bombings. And we have Francie Brady, from *The Butcher Boy*, who is growing up in the fallout of partisanship and violent ideologies. Bull McCabe's lack of coping skills, his lack of understanding of process, dooms him and his family to endlessly defending an outmoded way of life. This is a form of denial. No matter how long they have tenanted the mythic field, it still belongs to another. They can be ejected from their field at any time.

The Boxer and *The Crying Game* are about British colonialism in Ireland and the destruction it has wrought. *The Butcher Boy* and *The Field* shift the focus from colonialism and the IRA to modernization, globalization, and the role of memory in keeping alive an understanding of history. In these films the new threat to Irish values comes not from England but from America, whose ideologies are exported wholesale to Ireland and the rest of the world through movies and television. Representations of Republicanism in these films suggests the

ability of Sheridan and Jordan to present more realistically the complex nature of previously simplistic dichotomies in film representations between the colleen and the IRA femme fatale, the deluded dreamer and the ruthlessly sadistic soldier, the pastoral Irish west and her “corrupt” cities. The films of Sheridan and Jordan challenge viewers to recognize the complex dimensions of Irish history and contemporary Irish society. Fergus is a new, more realistic “quiet man” in Irish cinema.

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