

Chapter 13

***Brooklyn* and The Other Side of The Ocean: The International and Transnational in Irish Cinema**

Maria O'Brien and Laura Canning

Definitions

Celtic Tiger

Referring to the 1990s-2000s period of rapid Irish economic growth, the term is a play on the term 'Asian Tiger' used to describe economic growth in Asia. During this period, the Irish economy grew from one of the poorest in the Western Europe to one of the richest. Marked by over-reliance on foreign investment, a rapidly-expanding banking sector, unstable property market, and unlimited access to cheap credit, the boom ended in 2007/08 with an economic crash, part of a wider recession throughout Europe (see Kirby et al 2012).

Diaspora

Most simply, the term refers to the dispersion or spread of a people from their homeland. The rise in self-identified diasporic groups in recent times has been linked to various causes, including improved modes of communication, transportation and increased movement of peoples. The term often implies a desire to return to the homeland, and the recognition of a diasporic community can be seen to empower a group that may otherwise be marginalised.

Heritage film

A critical term describing a diverse range of texts representing historical nostalgia, romantic costume films or historical drama. Primarily associated with the British heritage film, the term evokes a form of cultural nationalism and in the British context generally represents a traditional upper-class privileged society. The heritage film is problematised by issues of cultural diversity, lack of representativeness and re-inventions of past events (see Higson 2002).

Introduction

Film in Ireland, both as an industry and as a cultural product, has been international since its inception. From the making of a number of feature films in Ireland in the 1910s and 1920s by the American studio company The Kalem Company (affectionately dubbed the O’Kalems) aimed at the Irish diaspora in the USA, to the recent use of UNESCO heritage site Skellig Michael (*Sceilig Mhichíl*) as a location for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), film production and exhibition cross national boundaries, bringing stories and images of Ireland around the world, and creating images of elsewhere in Ireland. Whether filmmakers engage directly with notions of ‘Irishness’, employ Irish landscape and heritage as simple backdrops, or engage Irish production facilities and technical expertise in the production of international narratives, Irish film production illustrates the complexities and paradoxes around producing meaning-making cultural products within a national setting, and operating simultaneously within a globalised industry.

This is particularly the case in a nation where a distinctive national industry has struggled to establish itself, caught between the competing dynamics of free-market funding which privileges ‘entertainment’ and the economic contribution of film, and an implied ‘cultural value’ framework. Thus, the relationship between Ireland and cinema is marked by contradictions and paradoxes: between the commercial and cultural, the global and the local, the national and the transnational. However, rather than perceiving these as oppositional, it is more productive to consider them as interacting with one another. The industry reflects the nature of film production in an Irish context (as in other nations) as part of the cultural industries which operate within a capitalist society, thus complex, ambivalent and marked by contradiction (Miège 1989).

Similarly, when the film industry ecology is conceived of as a continuum, rather than in terms of oppositional binaries, we can consider the local *within* the global, the national *within* the transnational (and vice versa). This chapter investigates the dynamic at play in this continuum, both in films produced in and about Ireland, and in the film production landscape that supports such works. It also takes into account that these contexts are problematised by Irish history, geography, and culture. As a diaspora nation at the very Western margin of Europe which retains strong links to the UK and USA, Ireland’s status as an Anglophone – but crucially not Anglophile, given its status as a former British colony – nation means that its mainstream

cultural and entertainment traditions have arguably been drawn from British and American influences, and its generic and narrative models for film largely from the Hollywood mode, rather European film culture. This chapter, rather than considering the ‘Irishness’ of representations and production contexts, looks to examine how Irishness intersects with, inflects, and engages in dialogue with the international and transnational.

The case study, *Brooklyn* (2015) reveals the international and transnational tensions at play in terms both of production contexts, and thematic and representational issues. While film may be seen as an expression of national culture and identity, performing an important role in “negotiating cultural identity and articulating social consciousness” (Gao 2009: 423), the globalised relationship between capital and creativity can create multiple – sometimes competing, sometimes intersecting – visions of Ireland from within and without the nation. This is particularly evident in regards to films which engage with the diasporic nature of Irish society, whether in terms of second- and third-generation Irish filmmakers engaging with their heritage (*The Guard*, *Calvary*), Irish filmmakers telling stories which mobilise Irish history for both Irish and diasporic-origin audiences worldwide (*Black ’47*), or Irish filmmakers moving internationally in a career trajectory which sees them ‘transcending’ Irishness (as in the work of Lenny Abrahamson).

Twentieth Century Film Production

A brief history of the film production landscape in Ireland illustrates the importance of the relationship with other jurisdictions, particularly the USA and UK. For a number of reasons, Ireland had no indigenous film industry of note (with some few, but significant, individual exceptions) until the latter part of the twentieth century. While films were produced in Ireland, they were, for the most part, the product of foreign finance and expertise. The Film Company of Ireland was set up in 1916 and, per Rockett (2012) “the 1910s was the most productive decade for indigenous Irish film production until the 1970s.” However, a number of different factors, including small box office returns in Ireland, the fragility of the post-independence economy, and the conservative attitude of the Irish government towards the medium of cinema, meant that an indigenous cinema was not established in Ireland (Rockett 2012; Holohan 2009; Condon 2008; Hill 2006). As such, Ireland was represented on-screen between 1920 and 1970 primarily in international productions that originated outside Ireland; while some of the films made in this time were highly influential representations of Ireland, these were mediated

through outside eyes, and Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952) are both problematic, in their own ways, in their depiction of Irish life.

The following decades saw some attempts to encourage the film industry in Ireland including the establishment in 1958 of Ardmore Studios in Bray, Co. Wicklow, explicitly intended to attract inward investment. However, while Ireland continued to attract both Hollywood and British productions, interventions in support for the film industry did not necessarily translate to support for an indigenous Irish cinema. Several early reports for the Irish government made proposals to imagine and establish an Irish cinema, including the 1942 Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on the Film Industry (Flynn 2007) and the 1968 Huston Report,¹ as it was colloquially termed. The Huston Report (led by Hollywood director John Huston, then resident in Ireland) proposed measures to support both an industry for inward investment productions (such as the already established Hollywood and British productions in Ireland) and an Irish film industry, reflecting Irish stories. The Report recommended the establishment of a Film Board, the provision of training and production facilities, and a National Film Archive, but its recommendations were not acted upon. It was only with the establishment of the Irish Film Board in 1982 that indigenous production flourished, and its axing in 1987 was a blow to the industry. Its re-establishment in 1993, led by then Minister of Culture, Michael D. Higgins, led to significant increases in indigenous production during the nineties. The dual objectives of support for the film industry in Ireland – to encourage indigenous production, and simultaneously support inward investment productions – are recognised in the legislation (The Irish Film Board Act, 1980) establishing the Irish Film Board: to “assist and encourage...the making of films in the State and the development of an industry in the State for the making of films” (Section 4(1) 1980 Act). The reinstatement of the Board in 1993 was a sign of support for indigenous film, and can be seen as an attempt to integrate the requirements of both commercial industry and indigenous film culture.

State Supports, EU Funding, and Indigenous Production

Ireland's film industry policy has historically been marked by the knowledge that a small island nation is unlikely to be able to construct and support an indigenous industry. The notion of 'market failure' – that under some circumstances the free market will not efficiently produce certain goods and services – is used as a justification of publicly-funded state support of the film industry on both cultural and industrial grounds. The commodification of the cultural

industries sees an increasing reliance on such industries to fulfil non-cultural goals. This process, known as instrumentalism, means the tendency “to use cultural venues and investments as a means or instrument to attain goals in other areas” (Vestheim 1994: 65), with the “attachment” (Gray, 2002: 80) of the interests of other non-cultural policy areas to cultural policy. It can be argued that an increasing instrumentalisation of culture within the Irish policy context has led to a contemporary over-reliance on purely economic grounds to justify state support of film production, although the history of state policy illustrates that such support has always been justified on both economic/industrial and cultural grounds. Recent policy developments around the *Creative Ireland* framework, including the publication of the *Audiovisual Action Plan* in 2018, offer various proposals to enhance the economic value of the audiovisual industries, without explicitly engaging with the cultural value of such (see O’Brien, forthcoming 2019).

The other significant mechanism in developing the Irish industry was the introduction of film tax expenditure aids, designed to make Ireland an attractive location for international audiovisual production². Initially introduced by way of Section 35 of the Finance Act 1987 (contemporaneously with the abolition of the ‘first’ Irish Film Board), and now known as Section 481 relief (after the section in the Taxes Consolidation Act), the tax expenditure initially required 75 per cent of production to take place in Ireland in order to qualify for the relief, although this requirement was later removed. State support of national cinemas attempts to foster cultural diversity through enabling support of film industry structures. However, in Ireland the tax expenditure regime is not limited to national productions only (and could not be, given the restrictions of EU policy which disallows discrimination on national grounds), but available to all productions, allowing for a tax credit of between 32 and 37 per cent on eligible spend in Ireland. The assumption is that a ‘trickle-down effect’ will benefit a national cinema through support of infrastructure, on-the-job training and a spillover effect through increased tax take. However, while a vibrant production environment may well encourage the development of a national film industry, the risk is that short-term gains for incoming investment production may be at the expense of long-term gains for the wider cultural industry in Ireland. Section 481 tax expenditure is explicitly shaped to actively encourage what are known as ‘runaway productions’ (primarily from Hollywood, but also farther afield, e.g. the filming of scenes for Indian blockbuster *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012) in Dublin). As McLoone (2009) suggests, Irish cinema must “live with” a dominant Hollywood industry. It is the nature of these living arrangements that is of most interest.

Film production policy is also subject to influence from outside Ireland's borders. As a member of the European Union (EU), Ireland is subject to regulations affecting the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons within the EU. Individual authorities are not axiomatically free to offer incentives to productions as this will upset the balance of trade within the EU, and so funding policies towards film industries within Member States of the EU are subject to State aid rules. Generally, these rules recognise that while nations are members of the EU, and thus subject to free movement rules, in certain situations aids to specific industries within their jurisdictions can be justified. It was recognised within the EU that aid to cultural industries may be justified under a cultural rationale, and a cultural exemption was introduced under Article 107(3)(d) TFEU (by way of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993). This further illustrates the dual nature of the audiovisual industries, as both industrial and cultural.

Funding in the Twenty-First Century: Ireland as International Co-production Hub

The fortunes of the second Irish Film Board (renamed Screen Ireland/Fís Éireann in 2018) in the post-recession austerity years have varied in accordance with governmental spending retrenchments. From a high point (itself not significant relative to overall production spend across Ireland) of €20 million, the state film funding budget was cut year-on-year from 2008, and only recently returned to pre-recession levels as part of wider proposals extending the remit of Screen Ireland, and recognising its increasingly important role in the area of animation, television and (potentially) videogames. Animation has become increasingly significant, with a range of Irish animation houses including Brown Bag, Cartoon Saloon and Boulder Media producing shows for television internationally, and Cartoon Saloon creating critically-noted (if not always commercially successful) features like *Song of the Sea* (2015) and *The Breadwinner* (2017). The former draws, in its sound and imagery, on internationally-known signifiers of Celtic mythology including the late nineteenth century Celtic Revival, and the latter displays the increasingly international dimension of Irish film narrative: Nora Twomey's feature debut is the story of a young girl in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

These shifting fortunes have inevitably affected the Irish production landscape, alongside 2014 revisions to the tax expenditure regime, Section 481, which extended eligible expenditure from European Economic Area cast and crew to those world-wide (see Murphy and O'Brien 2015). Through these revisions, dubbed the 'Tom Cruise Clause' by the Irish media³, the tax

expenditure regime is made even more attractive to inward investment productions. Many of these, such as Whit Stillman's *Love & Friendship* (2017) use Ireland as a production location for 'universal' stories (or those of other nations, as with this adaptation of a Jane Austen novella), rather than engaging with Ireland in narrative terms. However, the physical traces of Ireland can be surprisingly difficult to eradicate from the screen. One such example is that of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, where scenes from the planet Ahch-To were filmed in 2017 on UNESCO heritage site Skellig Michael (*Sceilig Mhichíl*); unable to (physically or digitally) remove the protected puffins from footage, Lucasfilm instead opted to account for their existence by digitally 'converting' them to a new species, the Porg.⁴

Section 481 is part of a wider mosaic of funding, within Ireland and outside. At a national level, Screen Ireland provides support for the full life-cycle of a film, from script support to marketing and distribution, under a number of different schemes. In addition, some (relatively limited) funding is available from national broadcasters, including RTÉ, TG4 and the BAI. An increasing tendency, in keeping with the international nature of contemporary film production, is for films to be produced as part of a set of international co-productions. Ireland has co-production agreements with a number of jurisdictions, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Luxembourg, and is a party to the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production, covering feature and documentary production. Signed in 1994, and revised in 2017 to take account of changes brought about by digital technology, the Convention sets out the minimum contribution of a territory to gain the benefits of a co-production agreement; countries enter into co-productions to gain access to national funding structures, subsidies, tax expenditures, and a wider distribution market.

This proliferation of co-productions is a factor in difficulties conceiving in large portions of Ireland's film output in terms of 'national' cinema. As Barton (2019: 1) points out, the contemporary Irish co-production is culturally far removed from the much-derided 'Europudding' of the twentieth century, "the indigestible outcome of mixing up multiple European funding sources with little or no investment in cultural engagement, and a dilution of the project of building a distinctive national cinema." And yet, a project like *The Lobster* (2015)⁵ – co-funded by Greek, French, Dutch, French and British sources as well as part financed by the Irish Film Board, shot by a Greek director (Yorgos Lanthimos), and filmed on location in Co. Kerry – makes not a single discernible reference to Ireland, although Ruth Barton (2019) infers that Irish audiences may have interpreted it as somehow discursively Irish

due to its setting and star (Colin Farrell). Tracy & Flynn (2017: 170) suggest that its position on the cover of the Irish Film Board's 2016 strategy document indicates "a decisive shift and permanent shift in the parameters of Irish cinema that acknowledges not only its reliance on co-production but also its deliberate pursuit of stories, markets, and audiences beyond the national." (Tracy & Flynn 2017: 170)

Irish Cinema in the Twenty-First Century

Describing it as "a late-flowering national cinema" Tracy and Flynn (2017: 169) note that "auteur and cultural-studies approaches have dominated readings of Irish film, which has frequently been called upon as a means of critiquing or negotiating key [Irish] social structures such as the Catholic church, family, sexuality, and gender." However, even towards the end of the twentieth century it had become obvious that considering Irish cinema in purely textual terms risked neglecting the way in which more complex – and in many ways more international or *transnational* – factors were key. This could be seen both in the turn towards the use of Ireland as a production location for international studios, and in a cycle of 'Celtic Tiger' films – often romantic comedies – which sought to represent Ireland, and particularly Dublin, as a cosmopolitan, modern site of international capital and sophisticated social and sexual relations, liberated from the traditionally oppressive Catholic imagination. These include indigenous films such as *About Adam* (2000), *Goldfish Memory* (2003), and *The Stag* [aka *The Bachelor Weekend*] (2013) but also international interventions, like the American *Leap Year* (2010), which *reverses* notions of Irish progressiveness – bed-and-breakfast landladies tut at unmarried couples renting a room, trains fail to run on a Sunday, echoing *The Quiet Man* – in service of a saccharine rom-com narrative.

The idea that "contemporary Irish cinema adopts conventions and techniques of the cinematic apparatus and synthesizes them into narrative form, remaining a subsidiary of an international model yet exhibiting clear and distinctive local inflections" (O'Connell 2010: 24) also helps in considering the work of John Carney, whose *Once* (2006) earned an Academy Award for Best Original Song despite (or perhaps because of) mobilising a somewhat ramshackle, even 'arthouse' approach to the musical. With busker characters known simply as 'Guy' and 'Girl' enacting a slim plotline in which they must decide whether their intense musical connection also signals a romantic one – Guy is mourning the end of a lost relationship; Girl, an Eastern European immigrant, awaits the arrival of her husband and child – foregrounds 'liveness' in its

performance aspects through the musical talents of its leads, (Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová), and emphasises soundtrack over (distinctly lo-fi) image in its appeal. The film speaks strongly both of the rich cultural heritage of Irish music, and acts as a kind of nostalgic ‘musical tour’ of a half-vanished Dublin simultaneously familiar to, and distant from, international viewers.

Barton (2019) identifies several key trends, along with increasingly globalised production and consumption practices, among which some may have roots in the internationalised nature of Irish film culture and industry: the significance of animation; a dramatic increase in horror films; and an upswing in the audiovisual industry in Northern Ireland, which largely facilitates ‘runaway productions’ including TV series *Game of Thrones*, 2009-2019, which has catalysed a burgeoning screen tourism industry in NI (for a critique of the role of policy interventions in this context, see Ramsey et al 2019). Barton also notes the “abandonment of history films” (Barton 2019: 15) during the Celtic Tiger period, with an associated waning of the ‘heritage film’, in which the Irish countryside could be “defined by pastness” (Barton 2019: 117) and which

had much in common with Irish Tourist Board (Fáilte Ireland) campaigns designed to persuade tourists that a visit to Ireland was a visit to a country of timeless and ancient beauty, populated by welcoming natives who had no axe to grind with foreigners (particularly the lucrative UK tourist market). (Barton 2019: 116-117)

For Barton, this has been largely replaced by “a series of high-profile history films that revisited the past as a site of trauma” (Barton 2019: 118), crucially made by non-Irish filmmakers, including Peter Mullan (*The Magdalene Sisters*, 2002), Stephen Frears (*Philomena*, 2013), Ken Loach (*The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, 2006 and *Jimmy’s Hall*, 2014), and Steve McQueen’s acclaimed *Hunger* (2008). Primarily these engage with the trauma of Ireland’s colonial past and its ongoing legacy, or its continuing – and belated – social and political acknowledgement of the institutional abuse wreaked on Irish women and children by the Catholic church. Why non-Irish filmmakers should be so drawn to these stories as a locus of ‘universalised’ trauma is perhaps difficult to fathom, but Barton relates it to their status as English-language stories, and notes that “these films invited global audiences to relate their own personal/national traumas to the Irish stories, while also reassuring them that the events depicted were over and safely in the past, indeed in someone else’s past.” (Barton 2019: 118-119)

However, changes in Irish funding regimes have also benefited more explicitly Irish films, including ones which dramatize Irish stories for a presumed international – and perhaps implied diasporic – audience. Lance Daly’s *Black ’47* (2018), a bleak western-inflected revenge drama narrativises the Great Famine⁶ not as a ‘natural disaster’ but by systematically unpacking language, class and religion as active elements of the structural oppression enacted upon the Irish populace by colonising British forces, Anglo-Irish aristocracy, and complicit local bureaucrats alike. Despite the distinctly Irish nature of the central tragedy, the cast is international; the two central roles are played by Australian actors, Hugo Weaving and James Frecheville, facilitated at least in part by the 2014 revisions to Section 481. Frecheville speaks *as Gaeilge* (in Irish), for much of the film, which embeds its historical commitments directly into genre-based action, including an action set-piece set around a convoy of grain being escorted, under armed guard, for export to Britain while the starving Irish look on hopelessly. In addition, the funding arrangements include support from Luxembourg Film Fund alongside financing from Screen Ireland and other sources, thus further illustrating the transnational nature of the industry.

Emigration and Transience in Production and Representation

The transnational history of film, and the influence of Hollywood over Western cinemas (and particularly in exhibition in Europe) raises fears around American cultural domination and cultural diversity. Such cultural imperialist arguments hold that concentration of ownership and distribution leads to lack of diversity; however, counterarguments point to the complex relationship between Hollywood and other cinemas of the world, and note the European origin of many of its influential directors. The concept of ‘glocalisation’ (Robertson (2012) counters these negative tendencies, aiming to make explicit the heterogenising (as opposed to homogenising) aspects of globalisation, in which the relationship between the local and the global, rather than being one of polarity, with the local as resistance to the global, is imbricated *within* the global. This argument sees globalisation as “the linking of locales” (Robertson 2012: 200) in which

g]lobalisation – in the broadest sense, the compression of the world – has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality, a process which itself largely shapes, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole (Robertson 2012: 205).

This echoes Appadurai’s critique of arguments around homogenisation and heterogenisation which ignore the fact that “as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies,

they tend to become indigenised in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles [...].” (Appadurai 1996: 32) and of film.

While this argument can, clearly, be seen in terms of framing film genre and its indigenisation, it also has resonance when considering the flow of people from Ireland to the US. While American film has played a dominant role in shaping Irish understanding of cinema in a way that would not have been the case in a country (like France) with a strong tradition of filmmaking distinctively its own, Ireland’s diasporic relationship with America – in 2013 about 33 million Americans, or 10.5% of the population,⁷ reported Irish ancestry – has contributed to the production of that model of film. This is certainly the case in terms of the history of classical Hollywood’s first- and second-generation Irish production talent such as John Ford and John Huston – who, as demonstrated above, was arguably as significant to Ireland’s production and industry contexts, in championing Irish state investment in film, as he was in representational terms – and may also be the case in terms of contemporary Irish filmmakers like John Carney, John Crowley, and Lenny Abrahamson, who have developed international careers.

As Tracy & Flynn note, there is “nothing new in Irish directors traveling to other production contexts...until recently it would have been understood that indigenous Irish cinema functioned as a stepping-stone for ambitious actors and directors” (Tracy & Flynn 2017: 188) including filmmakers like Neil Jordan (*Angel, The Crying Game, Michael Collins, The Butcher Boy, Interview with the Vampire, The Brave One*) and Jim Sheridan (*In The Name of the Father, In America, Get Rich or Die Tryin’*). Their careers “blended local and international narrative paradigms and production contexts” (Tracy & Flynn 2017: 189), often alternating between Irish-themed films and genre-based ‘Hollywood’ projects, to slightly disorientating effect. Sheridan’s 2002 emigrant drama *In America* was followed by *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* (2005), loosely based on the life of and starring American rapper 50 Cent. This creates a sense in which the paradigm of cultural colonisation implied by American film’s domination can be ‘turned back’ on itself; the former film is the story of a family of 1980s Irish immigrants to a tenement community in New York’s Hell’s Kitchen, the latter a rags-to-riches story which in its own (not entirely convincing) way engages with America’s legacy of systematic structural oppression against its African-American community.

The career trajectory of a filmmaker like Lenny Abrahamson illustrates what Tracy & Flynn (2017: 190) describe as the “de-territorialization” – following from Deleuze and Guattari – of Irish narrative, his films moving progressively away from considerations of Ireland and towards more ‘universal’ stories and settings. His debut feature *Adam & Paul* (2004) told the story of two Dublin heroin addicts on a picaresque journey around an unmistakably familiar version of the city, and was followed by *Garage* (2007), a tale of rural Irish loneliness, and *What Richard Did* (2012), a portrait of youth in exclusive south Dublin, where “the privileges of white, middle-class masculinity are entirely taken for granted.” (Ging, 2012). By contrast, his following films have been (at least partly) Irish-funded, and facilitated through Abrahamson’s long-standing relationship with Element Pictures (producers of *The Lobster*) but are distinctly ‘international’. *Frank* (2012) features Irish actors Michael Fassbender and Domhnall Gleeson playing American and English characters, and with large portions of the action staged in America. Its success at the Sundance film festival also points to the increasing significance of the international festival circuit in promoting Irish cinema, at least for those films which can be seen to have some element of ‘cult’ or ‘indie’ cachet through which to mobilise the circuitry of contemporary festival ‘hype’. His subsequent film *Room* (2015), although adapted by Irish novelist Emma Donoghue from her own novel, bears no signifiers of Irishness at all: its difficult material (its protagonists are a kidnapped woman and her child born in captivity, confined to a 10-foot by 10-foot space from which they later escape) is grounded entirely in America.

This transition to ‘internationalism’ can be regarded in one sense as a loss to the Irish film industry of skilled creatives who can frame Irish stories in all their cultural specificity; and the notion of Irish stories being told by ‘outsiders’ can be seen as particularly contentious. However, an alternative current in the ‘internationalism’ of Irish cinema is the making of films in Ireland by diasporic filmmakers. Just as John Ford mobilised the emigrant gaze in *The Quiet Man* (1952), or John Huston adapted James Joyce in *The Dead* (1987), contemporary filmmakers are reincorporating the diasporic gaze into Irish film. Second-generation Irish (born in London) director John Michael McDonagh’s feature debut *The Guard* (2011) – a scabrous crime drama/Irish ‘spaghetti western’ centring a rollicking performance by Brendan Gleeson – provoked attention for its sharp evocation of Irish machismo and mocking dialogue, and the intensity of “its desire for an extreme ‘localisation’ of the genre...[which] swings into an intensely venial parochialism that, paradoxically, has a simultaneously wide common appeal” (Canning 2012). The generic elements and tone, may be more muted in McDonagh’s *Calvary*

(2014), but the sense of Ireland as a space evacuated of moral and structural certainty is stronger. Here a priest (Gleeson, again) is given a week to ‘put his house in order’ by a visitor to his confessional booth, after which he will be killed in metaphysical revenge for clerical sexual abuse committed against the man by another. “There’s no point in killing a bad priest, but killing a good one, that would be a shock”, declares the man, in a film Barton (2019: 190) describes as “drawing on intense contemporary anxieties about the failure of authority, and anger about the legacy of the Catholic Church.”

These ‘internationalised’ films and filmmakers can be seen as engaging in a discourse which harnesses Vanderschelden’s (2007: 38) perception that transnational films: “through a combination of national, international and post-national elements ... deliberately blend nations and cultures, rather than simply erasing cultural specificity.” The geographic direction of travel of this internationalism dictates the extent to which a film can be considered to “blend” nations and cultures. The visual aspect of location remains key, but a filmmaker’s engagement with a film’s generic aspects, source material, and mode of linguistic address are implicated alongside them. Lenny Abrahamson’s *Room* might as easily have been made by an American filmmaker, such is the discursive power of the American mode and form of cinema he employs, yet McDonagh’s *Calvary* speaks distinctively to, and of, Irishness in its attempted harnessing of Irish speech patterns, despite – or because – of McDonagh’s own ambivalence about Ireland, Irish film, and the relationship his own cultural heritage ‘allows’ him to have with his source material.⁸ This chapter now investigates a film whose dual location allows it to, potentially, lay claim to having a specifically *transnational* nature, given that it functions as both ‘national cinema’ and ‘internationalised’ Irish film, in its examination of both Irish and American identity.

Case Study: *Brooklyn* (John Crowley, 2015)

As well as highlighting the particular conditions of the Irish film funding environment, *Brooklyn* allows us to consider some of the ways in which industrial and textual attributes intersect and reflect each other, and how film can ‘perform’ the national and transnational simultaneously. Budgeted at approximately 11,000,000 USD and involving multiple funding and distribution partners including the Irish Film Board, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, British Film Institute Film fund, BBC Films, Telefilm Canada, and SODEC Québec, and availing of the support of the EU MEDIA programme and Government of Ireland Section 481

tax credit, and filmed in Ireland, the US and Canada, *Brooklyn* is an exemplar of the internationalised industrial process involved in producing contemporary Irish film. It stars two of Ireland's most bankable young actors, Saoirse Ronan and Domhnall Gleeson, both of whom have parlayed their 'Irishness' into distinctive characteristics of their emergent stardom.

Adapted from Colm Tóibín's 2009 novel of the same name, *Brooklyn* is the story of Eilis Lacey (Saoirse Ronan), an emigrant from Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford to New York in the 1950s. Sponsored to travel by local Catholic priest Father Flood (Jim Broadbent), the film's central dilemma is not whether Eilis can make a new life for herself in the new world – she adapts, despite homesickness, to new opportunities in the form of a job at Bartocci's department store, studies bookkeeping at night school, and finds love with Italian-American plumber Tony Fiorello (Emory Cohen) – but whether the lure of this new life is sufficient to overcome emotional ties to her homeland. This narrative core is mobilised when, after the sudden death of her sister Rose (Fiona Glascott), Eilis returns home, newly married in secret to Tony, and finds that her time abroad has equipped her with the skills and confidence to live an entirely new kind of life in Enniscorthy than the one she left. Romanced by the prosperous, eligible Jim Farrell (Domhnall Gleeson), Eilis must embrace an American future, or radically re-imagine what life in Ireland could provide for her. She decides, finally, to commit to life as an emigrant, and the film concludes with Eilis and Tony embracing on a sunlit, tree-lined Brooklyn avenue – book-ending the film's opening scene, set on a dark and empty Enniscorthy street, in a way that suggests a fruitful and prosperous future.

The film centres around the emotional drama and physical process of emigration, a key aspect of Ireland's national historical dynamic, and one which arguably structures many of its contemporary frameworks as well as its relationships with the rest of the world, most particularly America. The Irish cultural imaginary regarding emigration might previously have been considered in terms of a binary opposition between 'liberation' from repression and parochialism, and 'death', in the form of such historical tropes such as 'the American wake' – the gathering traditionally held before an emigrant departed Ireland, in acknowledgement that friends and family would be unlikely to see them again. This vision of departure, on the contrary, couches Eilis's emigration in terms of individualised choice set against a backdrop of family obligation and opportunities for betterment, and therefore speaks more to contemporary conceptions of the globalised flow of population from a privileged first world perspective; of people who are free to return, as well as free to leave. Therefore it speaks to a

(highly ideological) notion of contemporary 'Ireland Inc.' perpetuated in Irish public discourse throughout the Celtic Tiger years: the notion of the mobile, highly-educated Irish workforce who 'choose' to go abroad (and may come back) rather than being 'forced into exile' for socio-economic reasons.

Brereton (2016) identifies *Brooklyn* in genre terms as having its lineage in a cycle of 1990s Irish heritage film, itself drawing from the corresponding British tradition, as framed by Ruth Barton (2004). For Brereton, the "nostalgic, Edenic view of Ireland" (Barton 2004: 148) partially gives way to a "particular nostalgic appeal" (Brereton, 2016: 285). That nostalgic appeal is for an Ireland simultaneously clung to and rejected by Eilis, and critiqued by Jim, who defers to her new-found sophistication when he says "We don't really know anything of the rest of the world. We must seem very backward to you now." Her reply "Of course not. You seem calm, and civilised, and charming" is that of a woman who has been transformed by emigration, and with the majority of the action centred on New York, by the city itself, and can now only conceive of her country of origin from a position of emotional distance.

She consciously adapts to circumstances in Brooklyn, making the effort to become a successful emigrant; adopting the fashionable dress, makeup, and love interest which it seems will assist her assimilation. From deserting the newly-arrived (and thus representative of old Ireland) Dolores from Cavan at a dance, to applying lipstick with the assimilated girls from her boarding house, to dancing with Tony at the parish hall, Eilis moves away from her position as a homesick 'good girl' and embraces the new world. Tony's gentle note to her, in context of dancing, that "The secret is to look as if you know what you are doing" can, it seems, be applied to the wider Irish film industry. The secret to negotiating the liminal space between the globalised industry and the localised national industry is "to look as if you know what you are doing", taking on stories that are not necessarily representative of old Irish tropes, and utilising the influences that seem to speak most to an international audience. However, Eilis's process of transformation is not uncomplicated.

Just as this film is a story of emigration, it is also a story of immigration. The transnational dimension lies not just in the assumption that it speaks to Americans of Irish heritage as much as to Irish audiences themselves, but also in the way it speaks to the specificity of New York's place in the American popular imaginary, and perhaps to nostalgicised gaps between 'historical', multi-racial, Brooklyn, and contemporary gentrification of the area. With its

glossy costuming and detailed accumulation of period detail foregrounded – and with Montreal, another beneficiary of internationalised funding and production incentives, largely standing in for Brooklyn – the film attempts to conceive of the district as a ‘melting pot’, but in limited terms which privilege white Irish experience. Where tentative cross-cultural intersections and conflicts are hinted at – Eilis takes lessons in eating spaghetti before braving an invitation to Tony’s house, where Tony’s brother refers to “Irish cops” beating up Italian-Americans – the film is more shy of engaging with the intensity of diasporic and cultural intertwinement which tends to characterise cities like New York. One of the few moments when African-Americans are visible onscreen is in a brief scene of Eilis at a crosswalk (see Fig.13.1), with Eilis at the heart of a bustling, diverse New York street scene, surrounded by – but isolated from – Americans. This image shows us the immigrant destination as conceived of in resolutely individualist terms, a site of competition for place and resources. Both the presence and the framing of the shot, with its wide angle emphasising the streets’ diversity in visual terms only – placing African-Americans in the *mise-en-scène* but not in the story – serve to reinforce the narrative’s overall *de*-emphasis of cultural heterogeneity in the city. Indeed, as one nervous young boat passenger muses, as Eilis returns to New York to be reunited with Tony, “People say there’s so many Irish people there, it’s like home.”

INSERT FIG. 13.1 HERE Racially-diverse streets in *Brooklyn* (2015) are a backdrop to interrogations of Irishness in (white) America.

In this way the ‘national’ within the transnational reasserts itself at various moments. A key scene in which this process is mobilised is one set in the period in which Eilis, home in Enniscorthy for her sister’s funeral and a friend’s wedding, is persuaded to stay and take on some work as a bookkeeper at a local business. Newly self-assured following her successful assimilation into the Irish-American community in Brooklyn, and by extension, through marriage, into the Italian-American one, she sees Ireland differently when given the opportunity to earn her own money. This autonomy and power is heightened by her changed status at home, as can be seen in Fig. 13.2. At dinner with Jim and friends eager to hear about her new life, she confidently positions herself as the conversation’s leader, and they, noticeably, defer to her presumed sophistication. The reflected glamour of New York is emphasised in her fashionable clothes – which also include a chic and rather daring, by rural Irish standards of the time, swimsuit – and makeup, contrasting with the fusty, old-world surroundings of the ‘respectable’ Wexford hotel. However, when Eilis is asked about the

Empire State Building, her response is “Ah, but that’s Manhattan. I live in Brooklyn, and I work in Brooklyn, and if I go out I go out in Brooklyn. All the skyscrapers are across the river”. In this scene, Eilis’s cosmopolitan Irish-Americanness is dropped in favour of emphasising the historically clustered nature of the diaspora in places like Boston, Sydney, or London – with groups of Irish immigrants forming tight-knit communities which may be as supportive (or parochial, or restrictive) as those at home.

INSERT FIG. 13.2 HERE *Brooklyn* (2015) may be set in New York, but Eilis’s sights are more limited, as “All the skyscrapers are across the river.”

Irish audiences can be expected to read the film in these terms; an American audience may not. Richard Brody (2015) writing in the *New Yorker* emphatically rejects what he describes as the way in which the film “sanitizes” Brooklyn. For him, Eilis has “no sense of New York mythology, no curiosity. She...goes to New York as a blank slate with a blank mind.” (Brody 2015). Where an Irish viewer may read longing for community and familiarity, and the film as attempting to engage with the sense of (temporary or permanent) displacement that attends emigrants, and the emotional consequences of having to negotiate the de/re-spatialisation of the world, a New York viewer reads failure to engage adequately with the new world. While this is an international film, a universalist story of love, a coming-of-age narrative, or a tale of migration to ‘any’ location, it can also be read as a specifically transnational film; it tells one story to its Irish viewers, negotiating the collective absence of generations of emigrants, and it tells a different one to its American viewers, that of the emotional drama of its own history of assimilation and difference.

These threads, of old and new identities in competition with each other, come to a poignant juncture when Eilis, volunteering with her local parish at Christmas in an effort to stave off homesickness, encounters a group of elderly, isolated, perhaps indigent men – the Irish emigrants of perhaps fifty years previously. “These”, Father Flood, one of Irish cinema’s new ‘good’ priests alongside *Calvary*’s Father James, tells her, “are the men who built the tunnels, the bridges, the highways.” The moment in which one of them sings *Casadh an tSúgáin*, a haunting traditional air, is perhaps the closest the film comes to delivering a rebuke: to contemporary Ireland, which has exiled these men twice over by considering only the fluidity of emigration, and not its fixity; but also to America, which has forgotten their contribution to its development.

Conclusion

Brooklyn shows how a small national industry can – under certain circumstances – negotiate cultural production in the shadow of a dominant Hollywood industry. The film is in conversation with the globalised audiovisual industry’s economy through both its narrative structure, and its production structure, which is the product of ongoing debates around the commercial and cultural value of film. Problematizing the trope of the ‘successful emigrant’ by illustrating the emotional difficulties and dilemmas attendant on emigration, the film shows how Eilis actively negotiates the relationship between home and the new world. *Brooklyn* can be seen as an example of glocalisation, whereby it takes up the challenge set by McLoone (2009) of “living with” Hollywood, and arguably turns Hollywood’s gaze back on itself, to interrogate America as well as Ireland.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. Can you think of other films which explore diasporic identities or the diasporic experience on screen? What do they say about the ways in which identity can be constructed?
2. For you, has globalisation resulted in the American cultural domination of film? If so, what currents can you see challenging this?
3. Should national cinemas be supported by the state, or required to operate on the basis of market conditions alone? What are the implications for production and film culture in terms of each model?

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Notes

- ¹ The full title is the 1968 Report of the Film Industry Committee in Ireland, 1968 and it was commissioned by the then Minister for Industry and Commerce.
- ² The explicit use of the term ‘tax expenditure’ as preferred by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) instead of the more usual ‘tax relief’ or ‘tax incentive’ is a conscious decision to reflect the true nature of such subsidies, as expenditures on the public purse (OECD (2010), *Tax Expenditures in OECD Countries*, OECD Publishing, Paris).
- ³ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/budget-2014-spielberg-inspires-tom-cruise-clause-that-will-bring-hollywood-blockbusters-here-29667460.html>
- ⁴ <https://www.starwars.com/news/designing-star-wars-the-last-jedi-part-1-how-porgs-were-hatched>
- ⁵ See Chapter 17 for a more detailed discussion of the film.
- ⁶ The Great Famine (*An Gorta Mór*) 1845-1849 followed the failure of the Irish potato crop – the main affordable food supply of the population – due to infection by potato blight. More than one million of the population of eight million died of starvation, and two million more were forced to emigrate. Other food supplies were unaffected, but were exported to Britain; British government response to the disaster was slow, and condemned worldwide.
- ⁷ Statistics from US Census Bureau 2013 American Community Survey. An additional 3 million people additionally identified as “Scotch-Irish”, and whose heritage is that of Scottish/Ulster Protestantism. See <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>
- ⁸ Following controversial 2014 comments on the quality of Irish film, McDonagh noted “I didn’t want [Calvary] to be perceived as a small, parochial, ‘Irish’ film. This intention on my part has been wilfully misrepresented by a small section of the Dublin media with an axe to grind. What has been most dispiriting to me, however, is the low-level bigotry that has reared its head in the fallout from the interview. I am an Irish citizen, a child of Irish parents, nearly all my friends and work associates are Irish, and yet because I was born in London I supposedly have no right to comment on Irish film.” (Clarke 2014).