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Contemporary Irish Film: From the National to the Transnational

AN INVITATION to consider contemporary Irish cinema suggests a number of potential frames and approaches. The most obvious might be the identification of dominant genres, themes, or practices of representation that reflect something about Ireland and the Irish a century after the 1916 Rising. Within a specific understanding of the role and function of a late-flowering national cinema, 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 social structures such as the Catholic church, family, sexuality, and gender. Yet as our earlier attempt to categorize the output of the Irish Film Board (IFB) between 1993 and 2003 revealed, deriving a unifying narrative of Irish cinema centered on textual concerns is fraught with oversimplification and exclusion, eliding a range of variables around production policies and practices, the complexity of which have increased enormously with the proliferation of formats and circuits that characterize the digital era.¹ A comprehensive overview of Irish film in 2017 needs to reckon with a diverse industry worth €550 million annually, which incorporates productions as disparate as large international television dramas with budgets in millions of euros and micro-budget feature films (under €50,000 or even under €10,000) produced by tiny crews and struggling to find an audience even in the face of an increasing proliferation of local festivals. In the nearly a decade-and-a-half that we have been assembling an annual review of Irish film and TV output, it has become increasingly the case that although still small by international standards, the

1. Roddy Flynn and Tony Tracy, "Quantifying National Cinema: A Case Study of the Irish Film Board, 1993–2013," *Film Studies* 14:1 (Spring 2016): 22.

Irish cinema today comprises an almost ungraspable spread of content across formats and genres (including comedy, drama, horror, documentary, experimental, and animation).² One key characteristic of contemporary Irish film as object, therefore, is the impossibility of synthesizing it.

Attempts to restrict ourselves to narrative features—the traditional locus of discussions around national cinema—do not simplify the task, as the opening credits to Yorgos Lanthimos’s 2015 film *The Lobster* indicates (figure 1). Of the eighteen companies and institutions involved in its production, only two—the Irish Film Board and Element Pictures—are located in Ireland. Across a range of textual and industrial categories—finance, actors, setting, production, and postproduction crews—the film confounds a straightforward correlation of text and production contexts. *The Lobster* is nevertheless held up as one of the breakout successes of recent Irish filmmaking, a critical and sleeper box-office hit in Europe and the United States (where Colin Farrell’s performance earned a Golden Globe nomination) and one of four films (along with *Brooklyn*, *Room*, and *Song of the Sea*) that feature on the cover of the Irish Film Board’s 2016 strategy document “Building on Success” (see figure 2).³

The Lobster cannot therefore simply be relegated to the status of an outlier, exception, or “accidental” product of co-production convenience, unlike, for instance, *When Harry Became a Tree* (2001), a comparable co-production (an absurdist narrative written/directed by a Serbian director on location in Ireland) generally perceived as an oddity at the time of its release and widely ignored in academic discussion and in IFB promotion of Irish cinema.⁴ The foregrounding of these films in IFB publicity and reports suggests a decisive 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. A consideration

2. These annual reviews are available in the journal *Estudios Irlandeses*, <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI>.

3. Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board, *Strategic Plan, 2016–2020: Building on Success*, 4 July 2016, <http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/files/IFB%20Five%20Year%20Strategy%202016.pdf>.

4. See Tony Tracy, “Inventing the Past: Perspectives on How Harry Became a Tree,” in *Contemporary Irish Film: New Perspectives on a National Cinema*, ed. Werner Huber and Seán Crosson (Vienna: Braumüller, 2011), 13–23.

Film4, Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board,
Eurimages, The Netherlands Film Fund, Greek Film Centre
and BFI present

*

In association with Protagonist Pictures

*

An Element Pictures, Scarlet Films, Faliro House, Haut et Court
and Lemming Film co-production

*

In association with Limp

*

With the participation of CANAL+ and CINE+

*

With the participation of Aide aux Cinémas du Monde,
Centre National du Cinéma et de L'image Animée,
Ministère des Affaires Étrangères
et du Développement International and Institut Français

FIGURE 1. Production Slate for *The Lobster*.



FIGURE 2. The Irish Film Board's 2016 Strategy Document, *Building on Success*.

of the diverse styles and thematic range as well as the complex funding and crewing of *The Lobster*, *Room*, *Brooklyn*, and *Song of the Sea* suggests that a primary challenge for scholars of contemporary Irish cinema is not simply the interrogation of themes or representations (although these will likely remain central) but also finding paradigms in which the text and its production contexts can be held—to varying degrees—in productive tension.

While Anglophone media studies (particularly in the United Kingdom) have approached film within a tripartite nexus of texts, institutions, and audience, writing on Irish film has traditionally tended to privilege textual analysis—the subject—within a framework of national cinema. Notable methodological developments, however, have emerged in recent years that offer a range of less explored histories and contexts, including the cultural construction and reception of gender (notably masculinity), “new cinema history” approaches to silent-film spectatorship, a growing interest in gendering the history of indigenous film production, and recuperated and critical histories of experimental and “expanded” cinema and of the roles of space and place, to name but a few.⁵ This essay sets its discussion of contemporary Irish film within developing analytical frameworks of “production studies” and transnational cinema. By drawing attention to shifting patterns of funding and production within the Irish audiovisual sector, we hope not only to indicate a more commodious framework within which the diversity of audiovisual output might be approached, but also to foreground how Irish film is shaped and reshaped by public industrial policies. An understanding of such policies and practices within a paradigm of transnational cinema opens a route out of a narrowly cultural conception of national cinema—a paradigm that was never fully adequate to the complex history of Ireland on screen anyway—while nevertheless maintaining one eye on the shifting status of the nation as a persistent but also multidimensional and dynamic site of identity formation and patron of cultural production.

5. See, for instance, Barry Monahan, ed., *Ireland and Cinema: Culture and Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site, and Screen* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009); Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Denis Condon's “Early Irish Cinema,” Blog, *Film Ireland*, <http://filmireland.net/tag/denis-condon/>.

IN SEARCH OF NATIONAL CINEMA

Published in the interregnum between the dissolution and reconstitution of the Irish Film Board, the seminal work *Cinema and Ireland* (2nd revised ed., 1987/1988) by Rockett, Gibbons, and Hill is widely considered the foundational study of Irish film. Although it included varied approaches (historical, political, and cultural) as well as nuanced and often pioneering readings of Ireland's relationships to the moving image, the book was also crucially influential—if only perhaps through a coincidence of timing—in how it established a benchmark for an indigenous national cinema within the output of a handful of contemporary filmmakers. That the work of this “first wave” of art-cinema practitioners should be lauded was not surprising. It represented the most sustained output of cinema in the history of the state, but more importantly, it was unified in its determination to offer critical and hidden counterrepresentations of Ireland in such films as *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984), *Poitin* (Bob Quinn, 1978), and *Reefer and the Model* (Joe Comerford, 1988). But the longer-term effect of this moment was the cultural attention that it received over the coming years through scholarship, newly emergent film-studies courses, festivals of Irish film/culture, and the leftist energies of key individuals involved. All of this meant that it cast a long shadow over the nature and discourses of Irish film production for many years. These films were produced against the backdrop of wider arguments around the cultural status of film in Ireland in general, a context that notably resulted in the creation of the Galway Film Fleadh and in the reestablishment of the Irish Film Board, the Irish Film Institute and Archive, and the recently decommissioned Cinemobile (“Ireland’s mobile cinema”).⁶ This diverse investment in the cultural importance of film within a discourse of the national led to a critical consciousness in Irish film studies (perpetuated within film education and training);⁷ texts

6. The Cinemamobile, funded as a Millennium project, ran from 2000 to 2016 and was the brainchild of Lelia Doolan. Doolan was a central figure in the reestablishment of the Irish Film Board and producer of Joe Comerford's *Reefer and the Model* (1988). See IFTN, “Cinemobile to Close,” *Iftn.ie*, 11 July 2016, <http://www.iftn.ie/news/?act1=record&only=1&aid=73&rid=4289411&tpl=archnews&force=1>.

7. See, for instance, Tony Tracy's *Film Ireland* interview with Donal Foreman on the limiting influence of “Irish film” as taught in film school. See also Steven

foregrounding inquiries into Irish history and society attained a privileged status, while those which could not be read in light of social themes (experimental cinema, for instance) were often undervalued if not discarded.⁸

This problem was especially acute in relation to considerations of the fiction feature film, the standard-bearer of an identifiably Irish cinema, with television drama generally relegated to a second tier. While contemporary films such as *A Date for Mad Mary*, *The Young Offenders*, and *Sing Street* (all 2016) continue to contain sufficiently readable markers of Irishness to allow readings in which setting, themes, and social context might be linked, some of the highest-profile Irish productions of the same period—*Room*, *Viva*, and *The Lobster*—cannot easily be integrated within a national-cinema paradigm in terms of subject matter or topos. Furthermore, what, if anything, should we say about the work that currently accounts for most of the turnover and employment in the Irish audiovisual sector, namely, overseas TV-drama productions such as *Penny Dreadful*, *The Vikings*, *Ripper Street*, and *Game of Thrones*? Produced by overseas companies and primarily targeted at cable audiences in the United States and the United Kingdom (although also available to Irish audiences), they are de facto considered irrelevant to Irish screen studies. But failing at least to consider their impact and place within a wider audiovisual ecosystem is akin to attempting to understand the Irish software industry by focusing on startups to the exclusion of the likes of Twitter, Facebook, Google, eBay, Airbnb, and so forth. The local and global may differ in scale, but particularly in creative skills, today they interact, intersect, and overlap.

In recent years a still evolving conceptual framework of transnational cinema has emerged within film studies in response to a range of practices that fall outside of national-cinema boundaries yet connect to and expand upon such definitions. While transnational cinema remains a vague, variable, or even contradictory term, we wish to invoke it here to explore the tensions at play within contemporary

Galvin, "Interview: Donal Foreman, Writer and Director of *Out of Here*," *Film Ireland*, 17 Feb. 2014, <http://filmireland.net/2014/02/17/interview-donal-foreman-writer-and-director-of-out-of-here/>.

8. See Maeve Connolly, "Sighting and Avant-Garde in the Intersection of Local and International Film Cultures," *boundary 2* 31:1 (Spring 2004): 243–65.

Irish film. In a foundational essay Higbee and Hwee Lim (2010) identify three broad uses of the term transnational cinema: 1) “a subtler means of understanding cinema’s relationship to the cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained within national boundaries”; 2) “an analysis of the transnational as a regional phenomenon by examining film cultures/national cinemas which invest in a shared cultural heritage”; and 3) the discussion of “diasporic, exilic, and postcolonial cinemas, which aims, through its analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, to challenge the Western construct of nation and national culture.” Clearly, this third sense is not germane to our efforts here, which develop from the first and second senses. Nevertheless, Higbee and Hwee Lim warn:

The danger is that the national simply becomes displaced or negated in such analysis, as if it ceases to exist, when in fact the national continues to exert the force of its presence even within transnational filmmaking practices. Moreover, the term “transnational” is on occasion used simply to indicate international co-production or collaboration between technical and artistic personnel from across the world, without any real consideration of what the aesthetic, political, or economic implications of such transnational collaboration might mean.⁹

Mindful of such dangers, this article seeks to articulate a transnational understanding of Irish cinema that foregrounds the force of the nation within such endeavors while also considering the “aesthetic, political, or economic” tensions within contemporary screen production. In her consideration of the term Rosalind Galt reflects that “there’s a value to bringing these relationships into critical focus, and at its best, transnational cinema studies leverages this focus to make connections among these various levels (institutional, industrial, textual, etc.)” In so doing, the “trans” in transnational “is not merely a bridge between more traditional national approaches, but rather it finds something quite different in that transition. The transnational promises to transform the object of cinema. By shifting our attention to the mode of movement between things, the transnational

9. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies,” *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010): 7–21.

asks us to look at cinema in terms of processes and transits rather than objects and states.”¹⁰

IRISH FILM POLICY: A BALANCING OF PRIORITIES

That Irish screen policy might invite discussion of a transnational industry owes much to the long-established emphasis on encouraging overseas production in Ireland. Even before he and T. K. Whitaker reoriented overall Irish economic policy toward encouraging foreign direct investment in 1958, Seán Lemass had spent two decades at the Department of Industry and Commerce attempting to create conditions conducive for U.S. and U.K. film production in Ireland.¹¹ The construction of Ardmore Studios in 1957–58, which was financially underwritten by two Industry and Commerce institutions, was clearly designed with the needs of temporary, large-scale (i.e., U.S. and U.K.) productions in mind. Given the nascent status of Irish production in that period, the two large sound stages included in the complex were far in excess of the immediate needs of any potential indigenous industry. Even when the legislation that created the Irish Film Board in 1981 was being drawn up in the 1970s, its primary genesis lay not in the need to support a native industry; rather, the legislation was intended to allow Ardmore (then the National Film Studios of Ireland) to compete more effectively in attracting footloose overseas funding in the emerging international division of cultural labor. That, in practice, the first incarnation of the IFB concentrated on indigenous material owed as much to the happenstance reality that such work constituted the bulk of funding applications placed before the board as it did to any deliberate, culturally inflected policy.

Even in the decade after the establishment of the IFB in 1981, overseas-originated projects such as *Da* (1987), *The Commitments* (1990), and *Far and Away* (1991) remained prominent, accounting

10. Rosalind Galt, “What Is Your Definition of ‘Transnational Cinema?’” in Austin Fisher and Iain Robert Smith, “Transnational Cinemas: A Critical Roundtable,” *Frames Cinema Journal*, n.d., <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/transnational-cinemas-a-critical-roundtable/>.

11. Roddy Flynn, “A Semi-State in All But Name? Seán Lemass’s Film Policy,” in *The Lemass Era: Politics and Society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, ed. Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2005), 166–90.

for more than half of the economic value of film-production activity in that period. In 1990 cultural comment may have focused on Neil Jordan's *The Miracle*, but the bulk of film-production expenditure in Ireland in that year went to unnoticed fare made for the U.S. and U.K. markets, such as *A Green Journey* (a romance featuring Angela Lansbury), *Fatal Inheritance* (a Northern Ireland-set thriller), and *After Midnight* (a Dublin Hotel-set comedy featuring Saeed Jaffrey and Hayley Mills). Nevertheless, the suspension of the IFB in 1987 clearly hurt local production, with indigenous-production levels falling from five projects in 1988 to just one in 1991. While arguing for the reintroduction of supports for a native industry in 1992, the influential Coopers and Lybrand report emphasized the importance of "offshore/foreign films":

While they can never be the catalyst in the development of the indigenous industry . . . , nevertheless, they do contribute substantially in terms of employment and make a positive contribution to the economy. In addition, they play a key role with regard to the sustainability of the industry infrastructure. . . . Both facets of the industry need to be developed in tandem, with the ultimate objective and driving force being the development of a strong, commercial, and enterprising indigenous industry.¹²

That the fortunes of the indigenous sector should be symbiotically linked to the presence of international productions found expression in the subsequent development of film policies and supports for the Irish audiovisual sector. Key among these was the revival of the Irish Film Board (1993) and an expansion of the Section 481 (formerly Section 35) tax break. The financial backing broke down along tacitly agreed lines: While the IFB would occasionally put funds into large-scale international productions such as *Circle of Friends*, most of its funds were committed to indigenous films. Conversely, although indigenous producers frequently availed of Section 481, the lion's share of funds raised through the tax break went to international productions. The retention of both supports was conditional on their resulting in a net return for the economy. Even arts minister Michael D. Higgins, the political figure most closely associated with a cultural

12. Coopers and Lybrand, *Report on the Indigenous Audiovisual Production Industry* (Dublin: Coopers and Lybrand, 1992), chapter 16, par. 91.

rather than an industrial perspective on Irish cinema, felt compelled to emphasize “pragmatic” rationales in 1995: “While I continue to promote my policy initiatives in the film area as primarily of cultural importance, I have made it clear from the outset that the significant range of direct and indirect state incentives which have been put in place for the industry *must result in tangible return to the Irish economy in terms of employment and value added*” (italics added).¹³

A series of annual reports by the Irish Business and Employers’ Confederation (IBEC) from 1995 onward appeared to demonstrate that taken together, indigenous and overseas production activity in Ireland was routinely achieving such a net return. But if one examined in isolation the indigenous projects supported by the IFB, one encountered a different picture.¹⁴ In 2003 PricewaterhouseCoopers concluded that “off-shore productions are more likely to make a positive return to the Irish exchequer than their often less well-resourced indigenous counterparts or co-productions.”¹⁵ The lobbying group Screen Producers Ireland responded to this potentially threatening headline by arguing for a cross-subsidization model: “Even in countries with relatively large domestic markets . . . , [the] viability of their domestic industry is only possible by accessing significant government support and using the financial benefits flowing from international productions to support local productions.”¹⁶

A new dimension to this tension between indigenous “local” productions and incoming “foreign” productions (with an implicitly understood contrast in subject matter and themes) emerged soon afterward. Although there was plenty of international activity in Ireland in 2003, changing international terms of trade saw this rapidly change. The total value of audiovisual output fell dramatically from €320.1

13. Michael D. Higgins, “The Development of the Film Industry in Ireland” (Address to the British National Heritage Parliamentary Committee, 17 Jan. 1995).

14. Most notably, two reports commissioned by the Department of Arts, Culture, and the Gaeltacht from consultants Indecon raised some doubts about the validity of the optimistic conclusions of the IBEC Report.

15. PricewaterhouseCoopers, “Review of Section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997,” *PricewaterhouseCoopers Report to the Irish Film Board and the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism* (2003), 35, <http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/files/reports/PWC%20Section%20481%20Report.pdf>.

16. Screen Producers Ireland, *Realising the Potential of the Irish Film and Television Industry: A Unique National Asset* (2003), 34.

million in 2003 to €152.4 million in 2005. This decline was particularly severe in film production, the value of which dropped by 85 percent—from €244.3 million in 2003 to just €33.5 million in 2005. After a decade of unexpectedly rapid growth the industry found itself in crisis mode overnight. And though it was not immediately obvious at the time, the response of the state to this situation would fundamentally alter the orientation and output of the Irish industry, encouraging a more sharply defined orientation toward international funds and markets.

THE GLOBALIZATION OF IRISH AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION

The rapid decline between 2003 and 2005 produced two decisive and far-reaching responses from the Fianna Fáil-led government. The first extended the proportion of a film's budget that could be derived from Section 481 from 55 to 80 percent in the 2006 budget, while also increasing the ceiling on qualifying expenditure for any one film from €15 million to €35 million. This was an attempt to lure back both private equity and the bigger international-studio projects that had begun to decamp to Eastern Europe based on a more favorable currency exchange because of a declining dollar. Alongside these changes the Irish Film Board was repositioned as an international development agency. In October 2006 it opened a regional office in Los Angeles—"The Irish Film Commission U.S."—headed by former Enterprise Ireland executive Jonathan Loughran, who was tasked with promoting Ireland as a location to Hollywood producers (that is, foreign direct investment by a different name).¹⁷ Furthermore, the introduction of the International Production Fund signaled a new orientation for both the IFB and the indigenous industry. In 2005 and 2006 arts minister John O'Donoghue secured additional funding (€1.5 million and €2.3 million respectively) to directly fund "high-quality international production that can demonstrate a strong

17. The CEO of Irish Film Commission U.S., Jonathan Loughran, had previously worked with Enterprise Ireland, the Irish government's trade and technology agency in Los Angeles. See Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board, "New Appointment Made to Irish Film Board Office in Los Angeles," *IrishFilmBoard.ie*, 9 Oct. 2006, http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/irish_film_industry/news/NEW_APPOINTMENT_MADE_TO_IRISH_FILM_BOARD_OFFICE_IN_LOS_ANGELES/471.

connection to Ireland.” This development contrasted strikingly with the refusal of the state in 1980 to accede to lobbying for the “ring-fencing” of funding for indigenous productions. Furthermore, “strong connections” were not understood as referring to subject matter: The first projects to avail of the scheme included British-set television dramas such as *The Tudors* (Showtime), *Northanger Abbey* (Granada), and *Kitchen* (set in a Glasgow restaurant).¹⁸ Instead, stress was laid upon the involvement of senior Irish crew in the productions and upon their economic impact. John O’Donoghue’s contention that the board needed to “balance” its promotion of indigenous film with support for incoming productions constituted a de facto shift in political emphasis that would be expanded in future years.¹⁹

Several Irish producers quickly responded to these policy signals. Among the most adept and ambitious was Octagon Productions, founded by veteran producer Morgan O’Sullivan in association with James Flynn and Juanita Wilson. While responsible for developing a relatively small number of recognizably indigenous features, including Pat Murphy’s *Nora* (2000), *Inside I’m Dancing* (2004), *Ondine* (2011), and *Calvary* (2013), Octagon’s principal activity since 2006 has been to act as the local producer on large-scale U.S.- or U.K.-originated television productions filmed in Ireland, including *The Tudors* (2007–10), *Camelot* (2011), *Foyle’s War* (2012), *Vikings* (2013–), and *Penny Dreadful* (2014–). Building on this success, Octagon has also acted as co-producer on the Neil Jordan series *The Borgias* (2011–13), a large-scale drama neither filmed in Ireland nor primarily targeted at an Irish audience. Operating on this scale shaped the company’s capacity to put together what were, by existing Irish standards, high-profile independent television dramas initially commissioned for the Irish market, including *Raw* (2008–13) and the highly successful *Love/Hate* (2010–).

Another key example of a shift in focus is Element Pictures, which over the last decade has diversified beyond a traditional emphasis on indigenous feature-film production through co-productions and

18. *Kitchen* was not renewed in the United Kingdom, but ironically the “strong connections to Ireland” that underpinned its production finance led to its being adapted as *Raw*, which ran for five seasons on RTÉ (2008 to 2013).

19. Speech by John O’Donoghue, Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism, at Cannes Film Festival, 21 May 2006.

relationships with international broadcasters/distributors across film and television. Since 2005 its television credits as Irish co-producer have included series of *Murphy's Law* (BBCNI), *George Gently* (BBC), *Ripper Street* (BBC and subsequently Amazon Prime), *Redwater* (a BBC *Eastenders* spinoff set in County Waterford), and *Quirke*—a three-part adaptation of John Banville's stories for BBC/RTÉ that was sold in many international territories. In 2015 Element developed and produced *Red Rock*, a gritty weekly drama series set in Dublin and commissioned by TV3 (to replace the popular British soaps *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*, to which it had lost the rights). In an unprecedented achievement for Irish-produced television, *Red Rock* was subsequently sold to BBC1 (where it attracted strong audiences and reviews from its first broadcast in 2016) and to Amazon Prime in the American market. This intensely transnational level of activity in television drama by companies that continue to be central to the development and production of feature films has transformed the economy and ecology of the Irish audiovisual industry today from where it was a decade ago.

Even as an increasing number of large-scale incoming television productions were supported on a recurrent basis via the IFB's International Fund, the board created a second initiative in 2007—the “Creative Co-Production Fund”—to allow Irish producers to become a minority funder in any European film so long as they are involved as a “creative collaborator.”²⁰ Nearly fifty features are listed as having received support from this fund in the IFB's annual reports from 2007 to 2014. While the guidelines state that “priority will be given to projects that utilise Ireland as a film location, depict Ireland for Ireland [*sic*], and where a number of key Irish HODs [i.e., heads of department] and/or Irish cast are employed,” in reality most cases do not fulfill these aspirational criteria. Since 2007 the features supported by the Irish Film Board have included a variety of titles that are (properly) never considered within any discussion of Irish film, such as *Das Vaterspiel* (2007), a family drama set in modern Vienna; *Contradora* (2013), an Italian ghost story; and *L'Accabadora* (2014), set in Sardinia during World War II. As part of its busy and diverse

20. Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board, “Fiction Creative Co-Production Loans,” *IrishFilmBoard.ie*, 9 Oct. 2006, http://www.irishfilmboard.ie/funding_programmes/Fiction_Creative_Coproduction/55.

slate of activities, Element Productions has often acted as a local go-between on these films, but for other companies (for example, Ripple World Productions, Subotica, Samson Films, Fastnet Films, and Newgrange Pictures); projects funded under the Creative Co-Production Fund constitute the bulk of its production activity.

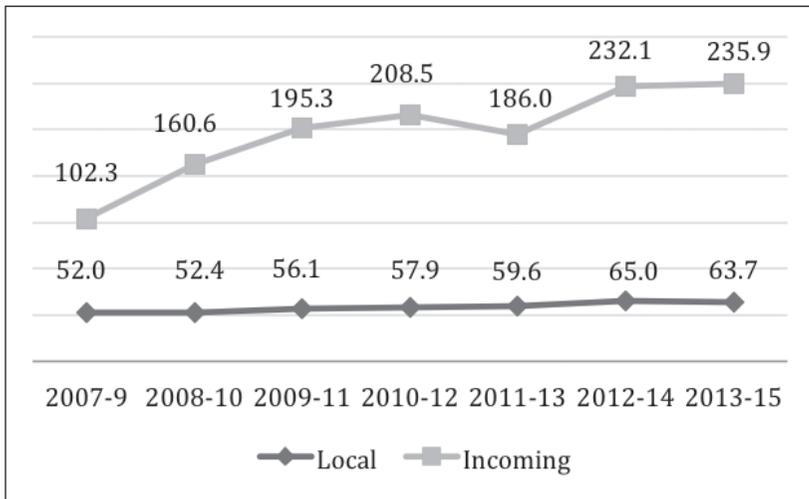
We might take Ripple World Productions as an example: Of the fourteen films listed on its website as produced or in development, arguably only *Parked* (2011) and the micro-budget *Our Wonderful Home* (2008) fit traditional (textual) definitions of an Irish film. A majority of its titles are set in non-Irish settings such as Scotland (*Moon Dogs*), Norway (*Little Grey Fergie*), or Turkey (*Iztambul*). Subotica is similarly illustrative. Formed in the late 1990s, the company initially produced a few modest art-house successes from an intermittent production slate that was characteristic of the industry at the time (with long periods of development punctuated by tightly budgeted productions). Since 2006, however, the company has increasingly positioned itself as an international co-production partner whose Irishness became circumstantial rather than crucial. Its website explicitly states this shift in its business model: “While based in Dublin, Ireland, the company operates globally and has worked in co-production with numerous countries, financiers, and sales agents. The company also provides global financing solutions for productions through its network of international contacts and knowledge of tax incentives and film funds.”²¹ Of Subotica’s ten most recently listed feature films, just two had Irish directors and two are set in Ireland, including a relocated adaptation of Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, directed by Liv Ullman and starring Colin Farrell and Jessica Chastain.

While small in absolute terms, the monies devoted to these schemes account for a significant proportion of the IFB’s modest budget. In 2007 the Creative Co-Production Fund and the International Production Fund together accounted for €3.2 million of the €10 million committed to feature production. While the proportion of IFB funds spent on these schemes has subsequently fallen, they continue to account for at least 15 percent of capital expenditure and have functioned to intensify the findings of the 2003 PricewaterhouseCoopers report previously cited in the relative value of indigenous-to-overseas

21. “About Subotica,” *Subotica*, <http://www.subotica.ie/>.

Figure 3

Local Versus Incoming Productions in Ireland, 2007–15
(Three-Year Averages in € Millions)



Source: Irish Film Board.

projects in Ireland. Precisely quantifying the scale of this shift is difficult because of the inconsistency of the relevant data.²² Nonetheless, if we focus only on the 2007–15 period (see figure 3), the increasing gap between the value of local projects versus that of incoming ones is evident. (Since there can be substantial changes in production levels from year to year, we have presented the figures as three-year rolling averages in order to highlight longer-term trends.)

Although the period since 2007 has seen a slight increase in the value of local production, this rise is dwarfed by the increase in incoming productions. It is important to acknowledge that this divergence is not necessarily mirrored in the numbers of projects: Thus

22. For the period from 1993 to 2011 the main sources of information are the annual reports produced by IBEC. For the period since then we must rely on IFB analysis of Section 481-certified projects. Although there should be a large degree of overlap between these datasets, the manner in which they code the local versus the incoming projects is quite different. The IFB figures allow us to compare how much is spent on local projects between 2007 and 2015. By contrast, the IBEC reports identify where production funding came from (Ireland or overseas), but not where it was spent.

IFB figures suggest that, on average, 10 locally originated films and 13 overseas ones were made annually in Ireland between 2007 and 2015. Similarly, there were an average of 10 local television dramas made each year compared with just 6 overseas productions. Nevertheless, overseas productions tend to be far better financially resourced on a per-project basis than are indigenous productions. The distinction here can be quite stark: In 2014, a year that saw *Vikings*, *Penny Dreadful*, and *Ripper Street* shot in Ireland, overseas television—at €221 million—was worth ten times the value of indigenous television-drama production, even though there were twice as many local productions. In passing, it is worth acknowledging that Ireland has been a beneficiary of a global shift toward large-scale television production that Irish policy could not have brought about spontaneously. Nonetheless, given that trend, Irish policy placed Irish producers in a position to compete aggressively in order to succeed in the competitive marketplace that rests on the international division of cultural labor.

A final factor worth noting in this section is the impact of the economic recession from 2008 onward. Taken as a whole, the audiovisual sector in Ireland spectacularly bucked the downward trend in virtually every other sector of the economy, even though “austerity” directly and dramatically impacted the organizations that fund audiovisual production. Funding for independent television production from RTÉ fell by almost half (from €75 million in 2008 to €39 million in 2014), a cut clearly felt in the sharp decline in drama production during that period. The IFB also saw its funding cut by a comparable 40 percent over the same period. Although overall IFB funding has increased slightly since then, capital expenditure (the money actually spent on supporting production and development) in 2016 was just €11.2 million, well short of the €20 million spent at the overall funding peak in 2008. This dwindling state support has not only reduced the number of big- and small-screen productions at a time when stories reflecting on contemporary Ireland seemed more necessary than ever; it also created another incentive for Irish producers to look elsewhere for funding and revenue, with a discernable internationalization of sources and, arguably, a consequent effect on content and form.

The incentive to look elsewhere for funding was tacitly encouraged by a discursive shift in Irish screen policy engendered by the

recession. In 2009 the government-appointed Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (also known as the McCarthy Report) concluded that €20 million could be saved by abolishing the Irish Film Board and transferring its functions to Enterprise Ireland. Although the board survived, the recommendations of the McCarthy Report increased the embedding of a neoliberal, market-driven policy discourse around the Irish audiovisual sector. In 2011 the Audiovisual Strategic Review Steering Group published a series of recommendations in its “Creative Capital” report designed to maintain and expand the growth in the audiovisual sector. This report was characterized by a marked emphasis on film and television as industries—only one of its forty-seven pages adverted to their cultural significance. Similarly, the “Culture 2025” discussion document published by the Department of the Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht in late 2015 explicitly framed the IFB as an industrial-development body and—for the first time in its existence—entirely omitted any reference to its potential cultural function:

The Irish Film Board is the national development agency for the Irish film industry. It supports writers, directors, and producers by providing investment loans for the development, production, and distribution of film, television, and animation projects. The board also supports the Irish screen industries in international markets and festivals and promotes inward investment, including through the promotion of Ireland as a location for film production. The IFB incorporates Screen Training Ireland, through which it provides a strategic vision for industry training.²³

Considered as a whole, this shift in discourse leads us to suggest that contemporary screen-production policy in Ireland has encouraged producers to adopt a pragmatic, market-driven outlook, and not least as a consequence of the limited scale of indigenous funding, to assume an actively outward-looking perspective. Policy signals and support structures are, if anything, intensifying in this regard. In seeking solutions to a national financial catastrophe, the government identified film production—encouraged through financial

23. An Roinn Ealaíon, Oidhreacht, agus Gaeltachta/Department of Arts, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht, *Culture 2025: Discussion Document* (2015), <http://www.ahrrga.gov.ie/app/uploads/2015/09/culture-2025.pdf>.

incentives—as a potential growth industry. This would have been unimaginable when the Irish Film Board was abolished in 1987. Then, film production was cast as an unaffordable cultural luxury. What has been distinctive since 2008 is that lobbyists within the industry and the IFB have become more adept at mobilizing the (outward-looking) discourse of transnational economics in the place of previously dominant arguments around the social and cultural importance of supporting Irish film for its own sake. At a time of economic austerity for Irish citizens these generous incentives made sense within the neoliberal discourse of the future-oriented “knowledge economy” and the recognized value of intellectual copyright (“IC”). The privately organized Global Irish Economic Forum in 2011 (a by-passing of national structures by neoliberal entrepreneurship) also placed such arguments at the forefront of recommendations about ways that Ireland might recover its all-but-obliterated economy, and it identified Irish culture (and a contiguous concept of place) as “natural” resources to be exploited and monetized. Within this paradigm Irish film functions as a high-profile and glamorous contributor to a wider rebranding of Ireland in the digital era by reconciling the “anywhere” of networked and mobile creative industries with the “somewhere” of an authentic culture and sense of place. (The promotion of locations associated with *The Lobster*, *Star Wars*, and *Game of Thrones* coincided and overlapped with the development of the tourist coastal trail Wild Atlantic Way.)

A GLOBALIZED AUDIOVISUAL INDUSTRY?

The Irish film industry has been transformed over the past decade by a profusion of transnational co-production agreements, shifts in state-aid mechanisms, and a maturing sophistication of business practices, resulting in an overlapping grid of diverse audiovisual activity. Beyond local considerations, such developments must also be situated against the backdrop of a rapidly changing and increasingly globalized industry in which the concept of national culture and the rationale underpinning state support of indigenous production for local audiences have come under intense pressure. Mirroring the open, export-led Irish economy in general, the audiovisual sector has become increasingly transnational, more productive and valuable to

the economy, and more diversified in its content and formats. With all this in mind we are forced to ask, How has this transformation been felt at the level of text/content in contemporary Irish cinema?

On one level the impact is impossible to quantify given the depth and diversity of output outlined above. Certainly, there continues to be a recognizably indigenous “Irish” cinema that includes films as varied as *The Young Offenders* (2016), *Sing Street* (2016), *I Used to Live Here* (2014), *The Stag* (2013), and *What Richard Did* (2012), which demonstrate a strong sense of place and a distinct cultural outlook. But also noticeable has been a striking increase in the number of IFB-supported films with ever-looser connections to Irish themes and settings. Under the Creative Co-Production Fund a number of incoming films continue the old practice of mobilizing Ireland as a romantic setting for foreign audiences. Witness such films as *The Legend of Longwood* (2015), a Dutch/German/Irish fantasy aimed at teenage audiences, or *Happy Hour* (2015), a German-Irish comedy centering on three mid-life men who come to Kerry for a holiday from their everyday existence elsewhere. The Cecelia Ahern-scripted “Romantic Road” double bill (2016) for German ZFTV—*Zwischen Himmel und Hier* (*Between Heaven and Here*) and *Mein Ganzes Halbes Leben* (*My Whole Half Life*)—are recent, hugely successful television feature films, attracting audiences of almost seven million viewers and drawing on a view of Ireland that dates back to Heinrich Böll’s *Irishes Tagebuch* (1957) and beyond.²⁴ As previously noted, Ireland is frequently used as a “double” for period settings in large-scale TV dramas (*The Tudors*, *The Vikings*, etc.), and local location managers have become adept at the identification of usable built and natural environments for international productions. In 2016 the Dublin-based company Blinder Films led a Dutch/French co-production of *Love & Friendship*, a period comedy starring Kate Beckinsale and Chloë Sevigny that was adapted from an early Jane Austen novel by renowned American writer/director Whit Stillman. The production was striking in the confidence and ambition with which its relatively young producers pursued and clinched a deal after a chance meeting

24. Derek Scally, “Cecelia Ahern’s TV Film a Hit with German Viewers,” *Irish Times*, 11 Feb. 2014, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/cecilia-ahern-s-tv-film-a-hit-with-german-viewers-1.1686667>.

with Stillman, who subsequently spoke of it as the best experience of his extensive directorial career.²⁵

The already mentioned film *The Lobster* provides an odd but interesting case-study among recent Irish co-productions (it received €500,000 via the Creative Co-Production Fund). Even though it was filmed on location in Sneem, Co. Kerry, with Colin Farrell in the lead role, the narrative exhibits no specific sense of place, instead offering a featureless setting compounded by a varied international cast from the United Kingdom, France, Greece, and the United States (John C. Reilly). This placelessness serves the demands of the absurdist script, which sets its action in a dystopian environment, generalizing its themes and—if its unanticipated critical and commercial success is any indication—its audience appeal as well. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the film is proudly claimed by the IFB within an increasingly broad definition of Irish film in which place is no longer a crucial cultural signifier. This same tendency can be seen across a range of films, to the point that a number of recent successes were not set in Ireland at all. While smaller-budget productions such as *Glassland* (2015) and *Mammal* (2016) are noticeably difficult to place in terms of both setting and cast (they are set in a vaguely defined Dublin, with Australian actors in lead roles), such films as *Frank* (2014), *Room* (2016), and *Viva* (2016) are substantially or entirely set outside of Ireland.

There is nothing new in Irish directors traveling to other production contexts (most notably Hollywood), and indeed, until recently, it would have been understood that indigenous Irish cinema functioned as a stepping-stone for ambitious actors and directors seeking to work in the United States or the United Kingdom. This was especially true in the 1990s when Neil Jordan and Jim Sheridan found success in the United States and moved on to bigger budgets and projects. Their success and choice of projects contrasted with the more local mindset of the first wave of directors, many of whom struggled to sustain careers based on the kinds of projects cherished within an oppositional model of national cinema. Sheridan's career blended local and international narrative paradigms and production contexts, from *My Left Foot* through *In the Name of the Father*, *In America*, the “50 Cent”

25. “Director Hails His Love and Friendship with Ireland,” *RTÉ*, 25 May 2016, <http://www.rte.ie/entertainment/2016/0524/790623-lkve-ireland-is-the-best-place-to-shoot/>.

biopic *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, and *Brothers*. Neil Jordan parlayed his success with idiosyncratic Irish narratives (from *Angel* to *The Crying Game*) into a “first-look” deal that allowed him to occasionally intersperse Irish-themed work (*Michael Collins*, *The Butcher Boy*, *Breakfast on Pluto*) with such generic Hollywood material as *We're No Angels* (1989), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *In Dreams* (1994), *The Good Thief* (2002), and *The Brave One* (2007). When Hollywood's business models radically shifted in the late 1990s, Sheridan and Jordan lost their lucrative “first-look” deals, and their relationships with American studios soured as they fell victim to a loss of creative control; Sheridan even went so far as to request that his name be removed from the credits of *Dream House* (2011).²⁶

Yet it is crucial to emphasize that in the 1990s and early 2000s a Jordan or a Sheridan could pitch an Irish story to a Hollywood studio with a reasonable prospect of success. Hollywood studios in those years underwrote the production of Irish content. But the scaling up of the Irish industry that occurred while Jordan and Sheridan were sustained by Hollywood witnessed Irish funding bodies supporting work apparently targeted primarily at U.S. audiences. That such work may work equally well with Irish audiences does not negate our central assertion as to which audience that work is aimed at.

The access of Irish producers to the U.S. market stems precisely from the shifting Hollywood business models previously mentioned. As the studios turned to blockbuster franchises and youth-directed genre films in place of riskier original material, “independent” cinema gradually replaced the mid-range drama and assumed a progressively greater prominence within the mainstream movie landscape, particularly in relation to the Oscar and Golden Globe awards. A key element in this shift has been the important role played by festivals such as South by Southwest, Telluride, Toronto, and Sundance. These function more and more as “open-mic” events in which the films generating the most buzz among audiences are most aggressively pursued by distributors hopeful of breakout hits and awards. Since John Carney's *Once* premiered at Sundance, where it was acquired

26. Catherine Scott, “Director Jim Sheridan Didn't Like *Dream House* Either, Tried To Take Name Off Film,” *Indiewire*, 10 Oct 10 2011, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/10/director-jim-sheridan-didnt-like-dream-house-either-tried-to-take-name-off-film-115885/>.

by Fox Searchlight and went on to become a phenomenon, these festivals have increasingly become the preferred places for Irish films to premiere in the hope of gaining critical attention and distribution across a range of platforms. Thus John Crowley's *Brooklyn* and John Carney's *Sing Street* premiered at Sundance, Lenny Abrahamson's *Room* and Paddy Breathnach's *Viva* at Telluride in Colorado, with Jim Sheridan's *The Secret Scripture* first screening at the Toronto International Film Festival. Indeed, Irish festivals are increasingly an afterthought for some Irish producers hoping to get a head start in a crowded and globalized marketplace. In this changed dynamic Irish filmmakers have found an opportunity to compete for awards and to gain access to the all-important American market while continuing to work within an Irish production context.

This strategy has resulted in a growing number of breakout films but also, as indicated earlier, in a notable “de-territorialization” of narrative.²⁷ Lenny Abrahamson's career development is perhaps the most striking in this respect. After a well-received debut short in 1991 (*Three Joes*), the film *Adam and Paul* brought him and screenwriter Mark O'Halloran widespread acclaim for their feature debut, followed by two further explorations of Celtic Tiger Ireland—*Garage* (2010) and *What Richard Did* (2012). Despite hugely positive reviews and a notable scaling up of publicity, none of these did especially well at the box office (although *Adam and Paul* has had a long afterlife on DVD), nor did they enjoy U.S. distribution. An increasingly close business relationship with producer Ed Guiney from the ubiquitous Element Pictures (the two men are longtime friends) precipitated a marked shift in focus away from a local, sociologically oriented cinema. The oddball film *Frank* (2014) was adapted from material by English journalist Jon Ronson, and while it featured two Irish actors in leading roles (Michael Fassbender and Domhnall Gleeson), they played American and English characters. The film's transnational narrative and cast (including Fassbender and Maggie Gyllenhaal) helped to turn it into a cult hit following a highly successful Sundance premier and put Abrahamson's name on the “indie” radar.

Element and Abrahamson followed with *Room* (2015), adapted

27. Deterritorialization is a concept created by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972).

from the novel by Irish writer Emma Donoghue, who was instrumental in securing Canadian co-production finance for the film, resulting in a placeless North American setting and cast. Despite the difficult nature of its material, the film was a massive critical and popular success, with numerous award nominations and wins, including Academy, Screen Actors' Guild, Golden Globe, and BAFTA wins for lead actress Brie Larson and the AFI Movie of the Year Award for Ed Guiney—unprecedented for an Irish film and an Irish producer. Intent on building on this success and clearly emboldened by a dramatic shift of fortunes since moving away from narrowly local subject matter, Abrahamson and Element have since been linked with a wide variety of stories, all of which are set—both temporally and geographically—far from contemporary Ireland. Crucially, however, this does not seem to indicate an ambition or necessity to relocate (as was once the case for Jordan and others): With transnational models of finance and production now established, it is today possible—indeed desirable—to work within the sophisticated talent pool and financial incentives offered by the Irish film industry.

This growing de-territorialization extends beyond setting to language. Paddy Breathnach was in the forefront of indigenous filmmakers who came to prominence with the revival of the IFB in 1993 through such films as *Ailsa* (1994) and *I Went Down* (1997), but since the mid-2000s he has demonstrated a desire to go beyond local stories and audiences. While horror titles *Shrooms* (2007) and *Freakdog* (2008) reveal an ambition to reach U.S. teenage audiences, the Spanish language *Viva* (2016) went even further and was indeed nominated by IFTA as the Irish entry for the Best Foreign Language [Film] Academy Award in 2016. Set in Havana, the film is a sympathetic tale of a young gay man named Jesús (Héctor Medina) who dreams of working as a drag artist, but who must confront his conservative father's stern resistance. From a story conceived by Breathnach, *Viva* was scripted by Irish actor/screenwriter Mark O'Halloran (*Adam and Paul, Garage*) and subsequently translated into Spanish before being shot on location in Havana with Cuban actors.²⁸ Although not enjoy-

28. Carlos Aguilar, "Viva Director Paddy Breathnach on Making an Irish Film in Cuba and Visceral Transformation," *Indiewire*, 30 Nov. 2015, <http://www.indiewire.com/2015/11/viva-director-paddy-breathnach-on-making-an-irish-film-in-cuba-and-visceral-transformation-168347/>.

ing quite the same profile, Johnny O'Reilly's multinarrative *Moscow Never Sleeps* of 2016 (a Blinder Films Irish-Russian co-production) has structural similarities to *Viva*: an Irish director accessing IFB funding in order to partially finance a film set and shot in contemporary Russia, with Russian dialogue, and as seen through the eyes of Russian characters. Taken together, these films offer evidence of a new mindset among Irish filmmakers that any and all story contexts are available to them, and show a developing understanding between Irish producers and the IFB that funding support is not contingent on strong local connections at the level of narrative.

CONCLUSION

It remains to be seen whether the tendencies outlined above reflect a short-lived set of coincidences or emerging long-term trends. It seems undeniable that Irish screen policy over the past decade has increasingly emphasized employment creation over the production of culturally specific texts. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that Irish projects with a strong local sense of place have disappeared from local production slates, and indeed the IFB and producers would likely argue that the financial stability afforded by their involvement with large-scale and smaller international projects inside and beyond Ireland allows them to develop films with more engagement. It was Element Pictures after all that produced the Irish film that won the warmest critical praise in 2016: Darren Thornton's *A Date for Mad Mary*. Yet questions remain as to the impact of these developments on Irish cinema, or to rehearse the question posed earlier by Higbee and Hwee Lim, what are the "aesthetic, political, or economic implications" of such transnational developments? The answers to this question are complicated, but we might frame them via a tension between local and "universal" perspectives.

Tim Bergfelder notes that the texts regarded as most emblematic of national cinemas have "often been conceived by individuals who are cultural outsiders in more ways than one,"²⁹ citing the influence of Alexander Korda (a Hungarian) and Merchant-Ivory

29. Tim Bergfelder, "National, Transnational, or Supranational Cinema? Re-thinking European Film Studies," *Media, Culture, and Society* 27:3 (May 2005): 320.

(American-Indian) on U.K. cinema. The implication is that “foreigners” may bring a perspective that allows them to see—and potentially re-present—a culture in ways unavailable to those constituted by it. While there has been a long tradition of decrying foreign preconceptions and desires in representations of Ireland—*The Quiet Man* (1953), *Ryan’s Daughter* (1970), *Far and Away* (1992), *Leap Year* (2010), and others—the increasing presence of transnational talent in recent Irish productions has been widely seen as a positive factor. *Brooklyn’s* budgetary reliance on Canadian co-production finance may have been the primary driver behind the appointment of a Canadian cinematographer and art director, but director John Crowley has noted how these “outside eyes”—a crew without preconceived visual notions—helped him to avoid a “lapse into cliché” in depicting 1950s Ireland.³⁰ In a similar vein John Carney has emphasized how he was “really glad to shoot” *Sing Street* with a cameraman who was not from Ireland, not because of any doubts about the competence of Irish crews but because of the “great eye a Jewish guy from Israel . . . who lives in New York” could bring to representing 1980s Dublin.³¹ Jim Sheridan has made similar comments about Russian cinematographer Mikhail Krichman’s contribution to his adaptation of Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture* (2016): “When you have a Russian cinematographer, you have someone with a completely different sense of time to ours in Ireland—they have an extraordinary visual tradition to draw on, both in terms of painting and cinema. . . . I’m much more language based and he’s much more visual, so there’s an interesting and productive tension between our approaches.”³²

This raises the question of whether films like *Viva* or (to a lesser extent) *Room* might perform a similar function in reverse, offering new eyes through which to view their settings, or more laterally, offer new ways of thinking about shifts in the cultural perspective and position of Irish producers within globalized networks of production and distribution. In discussing his status as screenwriter of *Viva*,

30. Glenn Whipp, “With Indie Films Such as *Brooklyn* and *Room*, the Creativity Often Begins with the Financing,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Dec. 2015.

31. Lionsgate, *Sing Street* Production Notes, n.d., http://www.lgukpublicity.co.uk/uk/images/Prodnotes/SING_STREET_PRODUCTION_NOTES_UK_FINAL.pdf.

32. Jim Sheridan interview with Tony Tracy, July 2015.

Mark O'Halloran has acknowledged the extent to which Ireland has been subject to external representations: "I think that Irish people have had that done to them for a long time, up until the mid eighties. We were always being observed." But O'Halloran also identified the potential power dynamic at play when filmmakers from one culture presume to represent another: "It's a very difficult situation to go into another culture—as outsiders—and to take an outsider's perspective on their lives."

For the most part, however, the manner in which *Viva* has been discussed by its creators has downplayed the delicate dynamics of cultural appropriation. To a large extent this aspect has been elided because of the film's familiar central father-son conflict and drag being a transnational culture unto itself, but crucially because of O'Halloran's well-publicized immersion in the world of the story and his public identification with, and integrity within, queer culture and perspectives.³³ Breathnach has stressed O'Halloran's sensitivity to "the Cuban landscape but also the subcultures and the worlds that were within it," emphasizing how when "the Cubans got it—the actors and the casting director—they just couldn't believe that a Cuban hadn't written that story." Thus at *Viva's* premiere at the Telluride film festival (another key showcase of "independent" anglophone film favored by Irish producers for launching products), it was the universality of the narrative that was heavily promoted. The film deliberately did not seek to be "a gay film. . . . A film that is about homosexuality is going to be really boring." There is no doubt that such an aspiration would have been more problematic without O'Halloran's role in linking postcolonial white and queer identities in a Cuban context. His appearance as a particularly obnoxious Irish sex tourist in one scene suggests a knowing ambivalence about this issue.

Universality is a loaded term in discussions of Irish film—a semantic catchall frequently deployed by indigenous filmmakers as a bridge to international markets. John Michael McDonagh's film *Calvary* (2015), a chronicle of contempt for Catholic values set in rural Ireland, would seem a timely and topical antithesis of universality in

33. Maggie Armstrong, "An Oscar Nomination Would Have Been Nice, But It's Not Why I Write Films—Mark O'Halloran," *Irish Independent*, 21 Jan. 2016, <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/movies/movie-news/an-oscar-nomination-would-have-been-nice-but-its-not-why-i-write-films-mark-ohalloran-34461548.html>.

its tone and themes. Yet during the film's publicity McDonagh notoriously upended such a view: "I'm not a fan of Irish movies; I don't find them to be that technically accomplished, and I don't find them that intelligent." Notwithstanding the heavily local story, actors, characters, and funding of the film, he contended that he was "trying to get away from the description of the movie as an Irish film." The Irish Film Board was not impressed by this disavowal and moved quickly to reclaim its investment, with CEO James Hickey affirming that *Calvary* was "a very successful Irish film, telling an exciting and challenging Irish story, with Irish creative talent in front of and behind the camera."³⁴ McDonagh's next film—*War on Everyone*—was a buddy-cop drama set in New Mexico, with solidly North American references and cast.³⁵ Bringing genre conventions central to *The Guard* "back home," it made little critical or commercial impact and sank quickly from view, with worldwide box-office earnings of just \$698,000 (compared to *The Guard*'s \$21 million). While it would be disingenuous to suggest that this disparity could be explained by the abandonment of local subjects in favor of Hollywood tropes (if only to satirize them), it is nonetheless clear that distinctively—indeed excessively—Irish elements do not reduce a film's appeal in a worldwide marketplace and may in fact enhance it.³⁶

Finally, we recall comments made by Lenny Abrahamson at an IFI Spotlight symposium in 2015 that "Irish film became interesting when it stopped worrying about what an Irish film was," thereby suggesting that considerations of nationality have been a straitjacket:

There was a phase when everyone was absolutely obsessed with it. . . . "Is this Irish cinema? Is this Irish cinema?" The answer is: [*What*

34. See Roddy Flynn and Tony Tracy, "Irish Film and TV Review 2014: Introduction," *Estudios Irlandeses* 10 (2015), 191–96, <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2015-5161>.

35. One coruscating review opined: "This ostensible satire on American cops, crime movies, American values or lack thereof, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, racism, and so on is so hackneyed, tired, labored, and overstuffed with contempt, not only for all of its targets but also its own self, that one gets the feeling that the talented Mr. McDonagh has gone mad with rage. Possibly during dealings with the American film industry." Glen Kenny, "Review: *War on Everyone*," *Rogerebert.com*, 3 Feb. 2017, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/war-on-everyone-2017>.

36. Laura Canning, "Not in Front of the American: Place, Parochialism, and Linguistic Play in John Michael McDonagh's *The Guard* (2011)," *Estudios Irlandeses* 7 (2012): 206–8, <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2012-1988>.

Richard Did] is a film absolutely rooted here, about characters that are absolutely of our society, but because it is true to them, it becomes a universal story, and it transcends that. I think all my stuff is very much rooted here, but I've never worried as to whether it's Irish cinema.³⁷

Abrahamson has made similar points about *Room* and *Garage*—“worlds where universal ideas can be explored in a very vivid way”³⁸—and he has elsewhere suggested that he considers himself as “coming from a European filmmaking tradition,” citing Bergman as an inspiration.³⁹ This self-assessment is borne out by the weakening significance of setting in Abrahamson's recent films. As his career has progressed, his guiding preoccupations reside in the explorations of identities in which place is treated as a philosophical rather than a cultural or political entity.⁴⁰

Taken together, screen policy and the activities of key business and creative figures in the industry indicate an increasingly explicit transnationalization of contemporary Irish cinema. This is neither surprising nor unique. First, the formation, outlook, and motivations that inspired the filmmakers of the first and second waves (1980s and 1990s) are clearly not those of filmmakers today. Second, Irish cinema by definition must respond to a dynamic and shifting nation that has been radically transformed in the past two decades as the economic and cultural flows of neoliberal capitalism bypass national structures and boundaries. Themes of instrumentality, job creation, and value for money become more decisive and prominent within debates around public spending, even as successive governments

37. Oisín Murphy, “What Richard Did: Lenny Abrahamson and Jack Reynor Interviewed,” *Totally Dublin*, 1 Oct. 2012, <http://totallydublin.ie/film/film-features/what-richard-did-lenny-abrahamson-and-jack-reynor-interviewed/>.

38. According to Abrahamson, “By removing everything except the mother and son and having this allegorically rich idea of a room as the full universe, we can look at universal stuff but in a very pointed way. That's true in my other films as well. In *Garage* you've got a very bold depiction of what it is to be lonely and separate through Josie's life. So maybe that's what I look for: worlds where universal ideas can be explored in a very vivid way.” See Helen Barlow, “Director Lenny Abrahamson on Working with Author Emma Donoghue to Film *Room*,” *Irish Examiner*, 4 Jan. 2016.

39. Murphy, “What Richard Did.”

40. See Tony Tracy, “‘A Wandering to Find Home’: Space and Place in *Adam and Paul* (2004),” in *The Vibrant House: Irish Writing and Domestic Space*, ed. Rhona Richman Kenneally and Lucy McDiarmid (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 210–25.

strive to defend and preserve low corporate-tax rates. At the same time these developments represent a significant shift away from the traditional underpinning rationale for the existence and function of organizations such as the Irish Film Board and RTÉ, the national broadcaster.

A tension between local and international forces now finds itself articulated in new and interesting ways at the level of both content and production. So far the IFB and those submitting proposals to it have managed to balance these tensions, whereas RTÉ, which seems to be in a perpetually downward spiral of cutbacks, continues to come up short on the level of locally produced TV drama aimed at local audiences. In recent times the IFB has moved increasingly away from the vocabulary of a national film culture and toward a view of itself as a supporter of creativity, irrespective of setting or even story. On the one hand, this combines (highly successful) policies and discourses similar to those of Enterprise Ireland (with which the IFB now has a close relationship) with a “New Labour” idiom of creative industries. But on the other hand, it is equally the case that young Irish filmmakers continue to produce fresh and challenging work rooted in the local. This is true of both fiction formats (*The Young Offenders*, *A Date for Mad Mary*, *Pilgrim*) and nonfiction ones (*Atlantic*, *One Million Dubliners*, *School Life*). What we are left with, then, is a complex and varied ecosystem in which place continues to maintain a strong pull for visual storytellers even as policy-makers and producers look outward in search of funding and audiences. While it is arguable that this tension has produced a recognizably “New Irish Cinema” in purpose and quality, it is nevertheless undeniable that we are living through a period of unrivaled creativity in moving-image production that enjoys wide appeal and recognition from national and international audiences. In an era when “the death of cinema” in general is frequently discussed, that is a considerable achievement.