ROUNDTABLE ON IRISH DOCUMENTARY CINEMA WITH ALAN GILSENAN, GILLIAN MARSH, AND PAT COLLINS

Chair: Seán Crosson[1]

Introduction

Alan Gilsenan is a multi-award-winning Irish film-maker, writer and theatre director. His widely diverse body of film work extends across documentary, feature films and experimental work, from his ground-breaking 1988 documentary *The Road to God Knows Where* to *The Great Book of Ireland* (2020), featured at EFACIS 2021; the recent feature film *Unless* (2016), based upon the final novel of Carol Shields with Catherine Keener in the lead role; and a range of acclaimed theatrical productions, including adaptations of works by John Banville and Samuel Beckett. Alan has also served on the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) (2000-2008); as Chairman of the Irish Film Institute (2002-2007); as Chairman of Film-Makers Ireland – now Screen Producers Ireland – (1995-1998); and as a member of the board of the International Dance Festival Ireland (2001-2007). From 2009 to 2014, he served on the board of Ireland's state broadcaster RTÉ. He is currently on the board of Fighting Words, a creative writing centre for young people.

For the last thirty years, **Gillian Marsh** has been successfully producing and directing both broadcast and corporate productions throughout America, Australia, and Europe. She is based in North Mayo where over twenty-five years ago she set up probably the most rural production company in Ireland, GMarsh TV. Her work has emerged often from the people who surround her or the world she encountered, including convincing her veterinarian husband to allow her to film his daily life and so archiving a way of life that is disappearing with many series of "Vets on Call". Her interest in the natural world was also evident in her work as producer of eight series (50 episodes) of "Living the Wildlife" – RTÉ's flagship natural history series covering the nature that lives right on our doorstep. In addition, GMarsh TV has had various productions broadcast on international channels including Channel 4, UTV, The Discovery Channel, Discovery Europe, Asia, and SBS Australia. Gillian has either directed or produced well over thirty productions to date, including the award-winning intimate portrait of the life and work of Irish collage artist Seán Hillen, *Tomorrow Is Saturday*, featured at EFACIS 2021.

Pat Collins is an award-winning director of over thirty films to date. A particular focus of his work has been on creative artists across a wide range of areas. He has made films

1 The following text is an edited version of the roundtable that took place on Friday 3 September as part of EFACIS 2021. The editors acknowledge Nathalie Lamprecht's work in transcribing the original recording.

on the writer John McGahern, the poets Michael Hartnett and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and the late Connemara-based writer and cartographer Tim Robinson – as well as the folklorist and writer Henry Glassie, the focus of *Henry Glassie: Field Work* (2019), screened at EFACIS 2021. Other acclaimed productions include *Abbas Kiarostami – The Art of Living* (co-directed with Fergus Daly) (2003); his 2017 feature film *Song of Granite*, focused on the life of the traditional Irish singer Joe Heaney; and the remarkable 2012 feature *Silence* (recipient of the Michael Dwyer Discovery Award at the 2012 Dublin International Film Festival) which follows the journey of a sound recordist from Berlin to his Donegal home in search of landscapes free from man-made sound.

Seán Crosson: You're all very welcome to this afternoon's roundtable on Irish documentary cinema. My name is Seán Crosson, I'm Senior Lecturer in Film in the Huston School of Film & Digital Media, NUI Galway [now University of Galway]. It's my great pleasure to chair this session today and to be among people I hugely respect, three of the finest film-makers working in Ireland today. They are people who have worked across a range of platforms and media forms and have made extraordinary contributions in each. So, thank you Alan, Gillian, and Pat for being with us today. I want to begin if I could, by asking each of you to tell us a little about your path into film and perhaps particularly into documentary film-making.

Gillian Marsh: When I'd finished studying communications in Rathmines, in Dublin, I went abroad for about ten years or so and when I came back to Ireland, I knew nobody in film or anybody in television or anything. And it was luck really, knocking on doors and I just brought ideas to companies and ended up getting *From the Horse's Mouth*, the history of the Irish bloodstock industry which I had sort of grown up in, so I had a fair knowledge of it and managed to get Emdee[2] to pitch that for me and so – I think it was luck in lots of ways. I got an idea off the ground that quite a big company eventually put forward to RTÉ and I got the opportunity to produce it at the time – nobody knew who I was or anything, I'd made nothing in Ireland so I didn't get to direct it myself unfortunately, but I was lucky because I worked with some of the best cameramen and soundmen in the country and learned a lot. Suddenly I was working with such fantastic crews, I kind of absorbed everything and I love just telling stories and working on things – while I was in Emdee I found a letter for the geological survey of Ireland wanting to make a 150-year series. I knew I had to try and keep myself in work; I put in a treatment[3] for this, not knowing anything about geology but sometimes that is the best way to do a documentary, learning the topic as you go. At the end of the day, I had rocks, they were grey, they didn't move – how was I going to make it interesting? I suppose it is all about the story for me, that's what drives me basically.

2 Emdee Productions was a Dublin-based film production company.

3 A treatment is a document that outlines the story idea of a project before an entire script is written.

Seán Crosson: Would that be at the core then of your own distinctive approach to film and say the choices you make around the subjects and how you develop a scenario around those subjects?

Gillian Marsh: Yeah, a lot of the times I will be driven by the individuals. I suppose if the story is interesting, if it has heart then that's the one for me. I'd be driven very much on human stories and I tend to pick things that might take a bit of time, like *The Funeral Director* – I had to wait for people to pass away. For a story like *Tomorrow Is Saturday* with Seán – it's evolved a lot through the filming and the storytelling. It needed a loose approach to try and get the story and more importantly his personality through because that's what I really wanted to capture.

Seán Crosson: Yeah, we'll come back to that, but it's extraordinary the insight, the access, that you have in that documentary in terms of Seán's life, career, and remarkable talent as well.

Gillian Marsh: I think access is one of the most important things.

Seán Crosson: Pat, if you'd like to talk a little about your path into documentary film, I know you came from a very different background to Gillian in some respects.

Pat Collins: Yeah, I think I was in my late twenties or maybe thirty before I made my first documentary but I was working around film. I was editing a film journal, called *Film West*, in Galway for three or four years and I was programming the Galway Film Festival. All during my twenties I was trying to get into documentary film-making but I didn't really know how to do it. I'm kind of glad that I didn't now because I think the films I would have made wouldn't have been that great, but it was just a very slow process of discovering documentary. I didn't really want to make feature films or anything; I didn't want to work in drama, I think I just purely wanted to work in documentary. And I was interested in history and I was interested in music and things and that's what lead me very slowly, over the course of ten years, into documentary. I didn't study film or anything like that but it was coming out of Irish cultural subject matter. Like I was trying to find a way to work in that area I suppose.

Seán Crosson: And film provided your way in to tell those stories.

Pat Collins: Yeah, I think so, yes. And I think a lot of people involved in film that I've met over the years originally wanted to be involved in music and it didn't work out for them and they went into film or maybe twenty years previously it would have been poetry or it would have been maybe theatre. But I think by the time that I came into any kind of maturity in my late twenties, film was the thing of the time. But I would certainly have been interested in culture and art in my twenties and film was the thing that I thought I could do so that's what I went after I suppose.

Seán Crosson: Thanks for that, Pat. You were coming into film in the late 1990s, early noughties. It was a time when – well at least the Irish Film Board was there – there were structures in place or emerging to support film production and develop

film growth. If I could turn to Alan – when you were working on, say, *The Road to God Knows Where* and coming out of the mid-1980s, the board was shut down in '87 and Channel 4 came in to support you in that production – it was a very very different time and a different context. Even the thought of making a documentary, of making a film in Ireland at that time must have been, for many people, unimaginable.

Alan Gilsenan: Yeah, very different, Seán. And you know like Pat I didn't do film in college or anything, none of those courses. They were only starting to come through. And really to be honest I was a kind of an accidental documentary-maker. I was interested in writing, I was interested in theatre, I was interested in drama. I hadn't really thought about documentary that much, which might be apparent, but I think what's interesting about that time when we made *The Road to God Knows Where*, in the mid-eighties, I had made one short film which had been funded by the first incarnation of the Irish Film Board and then the Film Board was abolished. And as a result of that short film, Channel 4, which was just setting up, came to me and asked me to make a documentary, which at the time I was kind of blasé about. Now I realize how lucky I was. But it's also kind of interesting historically, if you think about a small investment of the Irish Film Board in one little short film leading to this bigger film with Channel 4.

Seán Crosson: Absolutely.

Alan Gilsenan: So, it was a very very different time. And also, I remember when I made that first documentary and I hadn't a clue really, I was totally going on instinct – the crew that I had (because the Irish film industry was so dampened at the time) were some of the best people in the country and I really learned. I was a total innocent and I really learned from them. And it's kind of hard now when you say to film-makers, young film-makers coming out – there's probably maybe 2 000 short films made a year and I remember when I made my very first short film there were I think two. And if you made a film, if you finished it, it was a cause for celebration. It didn't have to be any good, just get it done.

Seán Crosson: And do you think that context, as you say, you didn't have formal training in film-making, you were coming into something in a context where making films was really challenging and where few films were made – do you think that that in some ways contributed [to the film] – because it's quite an experimental, innovative documentary. While a hugely significant and remarkable text, at the time some people just didn't know how to deal with it. It was perhaps ahead of its time in a way and some people were just not ready for the type of direct engagement that you gave with the really challenging 1980s in Ireland.

Alan Gilsenan: I think, I mean it was definitely – it wasn't planned. It was totally a result of my own innocence in a way and looking back I can appreciate that. And I think the whole landscape of film has changed, not just in Ireland but globally. And I think there's almost too much awareness and too much cynicism in how films are approached. And if you talk to film students now, they're far more educated, which is

good. They are far more cineliterate, which is fantastic. But they have been inculcated with a cynicism. It's not about, "Well, what do you want to do?" I sat down, thought: "I have a screen – what am I going to put on it?" There's a cynicism, there's a kind of career-driven sophistication which, I think, if you're a young film-maker, can be very deadening.

Seán Crosson: Yeah, absolutely. I might, if it's okay, move on to the question of approach (something Gillian addressed earlier): what is it that guides you in terms of the projects, the decisions you make around the projects you choose, and how you approach those projects?

Alan Gilsenan: I think for me, it's very instinctive, why I do something, why I choose a subject is usually some sort of gut feeling. I think also you have to have some curiosity; you have to think: I want to know more about this and sometimes I don't quite know why I do, sometimes it's like an attraction, you're drawn to something, sometimes you want to know, sometimes just a gut feeling, sometimes it's something personal that's happened in your life that sparks an idea. And then in terms of the process, and for me that's a bit of an article of faith, which I know frustrates funders and producers and all the serious people. I'd be a great believer in discovery, in that the process is about discovery. It's not going in knowing what you want. A lot of people think directing is about "what do you want"; it's "going to look", it's "going to find", it's "going to listen", "going to learn" and in that process, if you connect to that, and it takes a bit of concentration and effort – which are things that don't come naturally to me – but if you connect to a subject in terms of listening and looking closely, it can reveal itself to you. So, I don't really believe in this idea of imposing a story. I want to find something out. And a lot of that is an instinctive thing, which I know sounds kind of vague – well it is vague, but you go on a journey, every documentary is a kind of journey, it's a kind of searching. And the story comes out of that. Your job is to find it. And it's not necessarily where you start it, but it evolves and I think that's more interesting and that maybe harks back to what I said before: increasingly that's become a bit of a lost art, the idea that the documentary is in some old-fashioned way, like Gillian was alluding to, is about finding out the truth, or a truth, or your truth, or a sort of truth. I think there is a real trend now that documentary has become – has tripped into kind of creating truth and manufacturing truth, that it seems now that every feature documentary aspires to be a Hollywood thriller. And it's about imposing a structure, some sort of dramatic structure which may be of no relevance to the subject matter, but it makes for a good product. In lots of ways, you could say we're in a golden era of feature-length documentaries. When I started, the idea that people would be going to the cinema or turning on documentaries on Netflix would have seemed a distant hope. So, in one sense I can see that and that's very exciting. But part of that is that documentary has become less about finding a truth but more about manipulating and creating a truth that's kind of satisfying in some sort of faux dramatic way. So, end of rant.

Seán Crosson: No, not at all. I think it speaks as well to the kind of pressures that are on film-makers to make it "entertaining". That there is a concept of what an entertaining narrative is or what is required and often that's driving directors towards creating documentary works that are incorporating aesthetics we might more usually expect in mainstream fiction film and that can work against the documentary instinct or what documentary perhaps should be doing or can be doing. And I think that's a real issue in contemporary film practice. Pat, if I could come to you with the same question, just to talk a bit about your own approach and what brings you to the subjects.

Pat Collins: Yeah, I think it's similar in that it's coming out of my own interest, my own life and it's coming out of my own instinctual reaction. And also, I tend to make films if I want to find out more about a subject. I see it in the old-fashioned sense of "educational". Some film-makers never ask a question that they wouldn't know the answer to and I think I'm kind of the opposite in that I'm not afraid that I don't know about the subject – because I'm only learning of the subject as I'm going on. I sometimes say to commissioning editors – and I really shouldn't – that if I knew what I was going to do, I wouldn't start. I just wouldn't have the interest if I knew exactly what it was going to be. It's probably a kind of philosophical approach to a certain extent – learning to love what you have rather than always trying to get what you want. You're not chasing and trying to control everything; you're trying to almost get out of the way as much as possible, without imposing yourself. You're obviously present, but just that you are trying to – especially if you are making a documentary about a person – I think you are trying to get out of the way so that that person is communicating through you to the audience. I've been thinking about this recently about storytelling. Personally, I'm not that interested in storytelling but I've just kind of realized that. I'm interested in somebody telling me a story, in real life when I meet them, and I'm interested in story in other people's work. If somebody tells me an interesting story, I'm all ears but in my own work I'm not trying to tell a story as such or shape a story. I saw a documentary recently called *Three Identical Strangers* (2018), which is completely story-led and I would have much preferred to read a newspaper – a short newspaper article on it. The idea of having 90 minutes of a film just being a playing out of the story, a playing out of events – I genuinely can't see the point in it. People talk about the Irish story-telling tradition but I really don't think they mean the three-act structure. If you think about the Irish story-telling tradition it's around a fire side and it's stories that went on for days. And it's to do with the smoke from the fire, the light, the atmosphere, the people present. It's got nothing to do with a three-act structure. And I think in Ireland and maybe even in Europe that the three-act structure idea is still prevalent but I think, even in America, I don't think they are even thinking about it as much anymore. Sometimes I feel that documentary is slavishly chasing drama, but actually a lot of the Hollywood films are actually more honest than a lot of the documentaries that are being made. A lot of the documentaries are being made from one very narrow vantage or political view and they are being

kind of shaped in the same way that Hollywood movies are being shaped. And it's perhaps actually more cynical than the Hollywood movies. And that's coming from a pressure of screening in film festivals. There is something great about actually making a documentary that's just broadcast on television. It's an amazing thing to actually screen to 100 000 people or 200 000 people in your own country in one sitting. And the kind of preoccupation with screening at festivals all over the world like in Ireland or in Prague – wherever. Television is still one of the most powerful mediums, and sometimes it is the best way of actually reaching an audience.

Seán Crosson: Absolutely, Pat, you raise some really interesting issues that I will return to when we come to talk about your Henry Glassie documentary a little later. I might come back to you Gillian to talk a bit about the films that delegates had access to during the conference at this point and then we'll open to the floor in the next five to ten minutes as well. So, Gillian you mentioned the word "access" earlier and Seán Hillen is somebody that most of us at the very least will be familiar with his work, if we're not familiar with him as a person. And it was extraordinary to me, watching *Tomorrow Is Saturday*, the degree of access you had and the degree of vulnerability as well that was evident there in terms of Seán, his life, his profession, and the really extraordinary challenges he's had to face that I had no idea of and I'm sure most of us didn't. How did you come to meet and how did you come to build that kind of rapport with Seán Hillen to allow you to share that kind of insight?

Gillian Marsh: I was given his name by Chris Doris, an artist down here who works in counselling and meditation and he told me this fellow is really interesting and I should meet him, so I was in Dublin one time and I just gave him a call and said: "Do you want to meet up?" And I met up with him one day and chatted for about three hours. Seán is so articulate and so eloquent and he's just such a fantastic person. Paddy Cahill – Lord rest him – made a lovely short film on Seán Hillen a few years ago which won at the Galway Film Fleadh and it was beautiful and he actually allowed me to use it when I was trying to get commissioned with BAI. So, when I met Seán I just thought: This man has so much to tell and share with the world, and Seán's circumstances in ways have created Seán and his art: growing up in the Troubles, finding out he had Asperger's – I mean if Seán had had a manager back in the day, in the eighties, he'd probably be one of the wealthiest men in Ireland. His unbelievable intelligence, the things he invented when he was young, in his twenties. He invented computer pens, large printers, everything. If he had had somebody that could focus him and had been his manager, that man would have been massively wealthy. And he never knew he had Asperger's so he struggled.

I think what I wanted to try and do was let Seán tell his story and not confine it in any way like a normal documentary, to let it flow the way Seán is. This man started as a student, became a good artist, failed because his art was no longer popular – politically popular that is – and then just disappeared. This is his story as a human and his story with warts and all, the struggles that he encountered in life and, like, a

lot of us, [we] overlook them. One in sixty-five people are on the spectrum and there may be a little bit in all of us. So, Seán really told his story his way and I had a fantastic editor Gretta Ohle – it was not an easy documentary to edit – we could have edited it in hundreds of different ways. And we went down a lot of different rabbit holes but Gretta and myself started cutting, but then we parked it for a while because Covid hit and other commitments. This was great as we wanted Seán to get to the next stage of his life and maybe be entering a bright time in his life. He was hoping to sell his collages and photographs to the National Gallery. For Seán, one of the biggest things in his life is to be remembered and he wanted the Irish National Gallery to buy one of his collages. Which was actually wonderful because his love affair with Amy [Madden] continued into a different phase; she got locked-down in Ireland and we had a real positive ending rather than having to be forced to make one seem good.

Seán Crosson: Yeah, it was extraordinarily uplifting as well. It had a real narrative coherence, because of what had happened. One of the things I wanted to ask you that was striking was: Seán himself was clearly going through a process of trying to get his life in order. Even physically you see him clearing out his house and then bringing things back and trying to bring some order to everything – was there any sense in which the production of the documentary around him was in some way an instigator for him to engage in those activities?

Gillian Marsh: Oh, totally. When I met him I was thinking: how do you tell this man's story? Seán is very good at giving his PR speak, he's so eloquent, he makes a fantastic positive story but it would be exactly what he wants and you may never get past the barrier. No matter where you walk in that studio I would knock things over or stand on something and it would crack and I'd go, "oh my god have I just broken something really precious". In Sean's studio everywhere you touched fell down – you had to walk through very carefully. I said, "if we're going to tell your story we got to clear this place out, we've got to look at every box as they each have a story" – and everything was discovered. I mean he had no idea what was in there, he had no idea of where things are. Seán couldn't remember the day of the week and he doesn't remember the time of the day so he would pull these boxes down and it was like a treasure trove of his past and it brought out a lot of emotion, as you saw in the documentary. I mean there was times when he cried. The whole Northern Irish Troubles had a huge effect on him and that influenced his art. I was trying to get people to understand his life. So many art documentaries are made for the art fraternity not the general public like myself. They go over our head and we're like, "oh right", but I wanted people to understand the passion he was squeezing into his art and into his collages and he wanted it to say something, and to mean something. And I think he really got that across. I couldn't tell that story better; he had to tell it himself.

Seán Crosson: Absolutely. It was a remarkable insight into an extraordinary artist. I might move on to Alan and *The Great Book of Ireland*. You were dealing with a remarkable subject here also in terms of this publication that Theo [Dorgan] and Gene

[Lambert] came out with in the late 1980s as well, out of a period not long after you had produced *The Road to God Knows Where* and also, I thought there were some interesting parallels – at several points they talk about the gloominess, there's a gloominess about some of the images, and about some of the poetry that may reflect that kind of dark period. But what was it that brought you to the work – was there something there that you connected with in terms of the project?

Alan Gilsenan: Well, it was quite an unusual project for me in that I was aware of *The Great Book of Ireland* when it was made and I of course knew Theo and Gene a little bit. And it's an extraordinary artefact. An extraordinary thing. And then it sort of just disappeared. For a variety of reasons, even though there was a huge amount of fuss about it at the time. But to cut a long story short, the University College of Cork acquired it, the librarian there, John Fitzgerald, a wonderful poet, saw the potential in this book and finally raised the finance. And so, in a way, UCC were going to re-launch this book to an audience who may have forgotten the history of it. So, there was a practical desire to tell the story of the Great Book. But I suppose when I came to that, I realized there was Tony Barry, another great Irish film-maker had made a documentary at the time which I thought served perfectly. You know, it documented the process. So, I felt we needed to do something else and I suppose what I imagined the film would be was to make it in the spirit of the book itself, and the book is made of all these pages and that I would make a series of stories, images, little short films that were like pages, like electronic pages, digital pages to the book, that would kind of respond to the book, but also in some way tell the story of the book.

Seán Crosson: It's remarkable. Some of the sequences are just stunning, I'm thinking in particular of the performance of Gerald Barry's *Sleeping Beauty* and how the actual text of the Great Book is blended in with the performance, and you do that several times in the documentary. It's visually stunning and makes complete sense in terms of what you're depicting there. Again, maybe in a similar way to what we've heard Pat and Gillian describe, the film is emerging from the subject rather than trying to – as you've described in other documentaries – impose a standard narrative on the work itself.

Alan Gilsenan: Yeah, and you know what was lovely about it, my initial thing was to tell a story in some way but also make these little responses, but actually kind of the biggest story which I didn't imagine at all is that of course it was a huge thing at the time, both for the artists and for Theo and Gene creating the book and it was also very difficult, very stressful, pretty fraught and they had forgotten it too. So, we were kind of rediscovering things with them. It was like going back to somebody saying: "Remember that fabulous love affair you had twenty years ago? Tell me about it." So, like in lots of ways everybody in the film was kind of rediscovering this thing that they had also forgotten. A bit like Gillian was saying taking up a box – and there was even a moment which we used in the film where Sebastian Barry came along and I had a copy of the poem that he'd inscribed in the book just in case he needed to refresh his

memory and he looked at me and he said: “Oh I didn’t think that’s the one that I wrote down at all.” He had thought he had done something totally different. So, also in some indirect way it was also about memory and what we remember.

Seán Crosson: I think that’s the opening piece that you have in the documentary and there’s something quite moving about that as well because not only does he realize that he hadn’t remembered that that was the piece, but it’s also a poem about family division, or there’s a trauma there, he refers to that quite directly in his comments after reading the poem. I thought that was quite a moving and powerful opening to the documentary.

Alan Gilsenan: Yeah, and there were those things that you don’t imagine that happen, I remember going down to film with Derek Mahon, the poet, and everybody said to me: “Oh Derek won’t do it, you know he doesn’t do anything.” And I wrote to him and he said: “Come down”, and then very sadly he died not long after that. And lots of contributors had died, so you’re also aware that you were catching something before it evaporated completely.

Seán Crosson: Absolutely. Thank you for that, Alan. I might now turn to Pat if that’s okay and talk a little bit about *Henry Glassie: Fieldwork*. Henry Glassie is somebody that I, and I imagine many of the attendees here, will have encountered, particularly through his extraordinary book *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* and that revelatory text about the rural culture of a small village in Fermanagh and the music and story-telling traditions there, so it was extraordinary in your documentary, Pat, the manner in which again like we’ve heard described, the story emerges from Henry’s very unique approach to his life and to his work and the kind of dedication and integrity above all that he brings to his engagement with the various communities and cultures he studies. What was it that brought you to Henry Glassie as a subject or how did this project come about?

Pat Collins: I heard him speak on RTÉ Radio 1 one night with Vincent Woods – *Arts Tonight* is the name of the programme – and I was driving back from a shoot and there was the soundman who was on the shoot in the car in front of me and we were both listening to the radio and there was an ad break after half an hour and we rang each other and we said: “Are you listening to Radio 1?” and it was the most extraordinary character talking, this American, and it was just one of the best interviews I’d ever heard on radio. And so, about a year later I think, I wrote to Vincent Woods and asked him for contact details for Henry and he didn’t do email and he didn’t have a mobile phone and still doesn’t – so I had to write him letters and over the course of maybe five years he wrote back a few times – he wasn’t that interested in a documentary being made I don’t think. He didn’t want there to be anything to maybe distract him from his own work. But I suppose it was his philosophical outlook and his approach to art and the democratic way that he approaches art and talks about art and writes about it that made me feel that he had something very important to say and his books are maybe a little obscure. I mean they are not obscure in the aca-

demic sense but the general reader doesn't get the opportunity to come across his ideas that much. So, it was one of the rare occasions where I felt that I wanted to get his ideas to a wider audience. Because I think they are so positive and I think that they are so empowering for the ordinary person who creates art in a local situation that it doesn't have to be about the artist who is kind of selling a lot of work in Manhattan or London or whatever. The real important work is the stuff that's being done locally and it's nothing to do with the commodification of art, it's all to do with the practice of just making. And I suppose that was it really. And I wanted to learn as well, getting back to my earlier point, I wanted to learn myself from him and sometimes you pick people who are – who you feel you can learn something from. I remember making the documentary on John McGahern, which somebody actually asked me to direct, it wasn't something that I originated myself but I felt I learned a huge amount making that film and it's the same with Henry Glassie as well. It's a kind of a unique opportunity to study his work, think about the things that he's thinking about, and to spend a year or maybe six months in the edit concentrating on that. It's a real luxury and a privilege. And that's kind of what drew me to him. I was trying to figure out a way of getting out of the way so that he could communicate with the audience. And we shot in Brazil for about ten days and at the end of it we didn't even have almost any shots of him on camera after ten days in Brazil. Every time we'd film, he'd just slip out of the frame. And so, it was really kind of challenging – he said he didn't care if he was in it or not. And that's actually reflected in the film.

Seán Crosson: I was struck by that, Pat, I imagine it was something that developed organically as well in the production but it's well into the doc before we encounter Henry Glassie. And in a way, Henry I think would respect and would endorse that. It's not about him ultimately, right? And he says that himself, it's about the artist, the community, that he is recording or he is living among. And you captured that wonderfully, that focus on the artist at work in an extraordinary range of contexts. That was something else that was impressive: you move from Brazil, there's sequences from Turkey, from the UK, from Ireland, Japan – you're traveling around the world – much as his work does.

Pat Collins: Yes, after Ireland he went to Turkey and he went back and forward there for ten years and maybe he spent two years living there but he might get a grant of 5 000 euro and he'd go, he'd live in the poorest place in Istanbul and he learnt the language. So, it's real serious engagement. Even with Brazil [his partner] Pravina was working with him on the book and she is Brazilian and she's fluent in Portuguese and so it's a real – trying to meet the culture. He's written an amazing book on Turkish art and so it's kind of like I suppose a gift to artists in Turkey that he did do that – but it's a two-way transmission.

Seán Crosson: Okay, I see we have a question in the "chat" from our good friend Hedwig Schwall. Hedwig did you want to ask this directly to Alan about *The Great Book of Ireland*?

Hedwig Schwall: Yeah, it's just that Alan, I think from what I read on what you said about Banville you are attracted to that which is haunting and the dark side of things but what interested me most of all is that you said that making a documentary is like a process not a projection but a discovery, and something that's very receptive, not so much active, and so I was wondering when I looked at your film on *The Great Book of Ireland* – it's brilliant because it's so quick that you see all the pages and you open the book up literally to us and you also add a lot of literally colourful detail but on the other hand as you said yourself with Sebastian Barry it was very slow, a very meditative moment and with Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill as well and with a few others, so would you say that rhythm is an important ingredient in this process? Of making any documentary not just this one?

Alan Gilsenan: Thank you, Hedwig. I think hugely rhythm is so so important and I think a lot of that comes from the editor, in this case Bjorn Mac Giolla so I always feel somehow that film is aspiring to be music and failing. So, I think the rhythm of how it moves is really important and you kind of just find that again, that's an instinct of feeling out and even though I'm receptive to it, it's often the editors that take responsibility for the detail of that movement. And I think, certainly as I started to make films there was a fashion and we're all susceptible for things to get faster and faster. You know, the faster you could make it the more exciting it was. And slowly it appears I'm finding that – maybe it's just age – but I'm finding the pleasure of stillness and silence. Pat's films are an extraordinary example of that at its best. But I think in the case of *The Great Book* no two pages were the same and so I had to reflect that, that some things are slow and quiet and other things are frantic and then I had one strange notion that every page in the book – and, I don't know, maybe there's 300 pages – that every page should be in the film at least once, even if it's not even for a second. So, there's one very fast sequence (that features) I think literally every page in the book so that at least somewhere in posterity you know with a freeze frame you could stop and say: "Ah – there's my page."

Seán Crosson: Thank you Hedwig. I see a hand up as well? Clare Wallace – did you have a question?

Clare Wallace: Yeah, I have. I've only watched *The Great Book* once but it really struck me that there was a tension between this artefact that has some kind of timeless quality and then the very strong sense of death and mortality that is coming through all the interactions with those who contributed to it. Especially that reading with Brendan Kennelly and the kind of close-up and seeing his spittle as he's reading. Was that something that was on your mind as a friction in telling some kind of story about the book?

Alan Gilsenan: Thanks, Clare. I think it evolved. Partly, because it was about time, partly because we were going back to something from the late eighties and some people had died, a lot of people got older and so that sort of emerged. I've known Brendan Kennelly for a long time and we went down to Tralee and he is older now

and in some ways physically weak if not intellectually. You really felt that this was – these might be last moments of public iteration and I'm very conscious in documentary that you do that, that's important. Often people die and they say: "Oh there was never a great documentary on Henry Glassie" – well there is now. And I think those things are really important and I have a slight melancholy side which is probably drawn to that. But, no, it was very present in *The Great Book* and also, I think I remember many years ago I did a film with the playwright Tom Murphy and he said to me, Tom was a friend and he said to me: "Look, we really only do this so there's something left behind when we die." And I think there is that somewhere in all artists, and I think the people who inscribed their poems or their writings in that book those many years ago knew that this was one little mark on the universe and I think that has to be there somewhere.

Seán Crosson: Thanks, Clare. We're way over time so we might have to bring things to a close. We have one more question and perhaps it's a nice question to end on, it's from Stephen Boyd. Stephen, did you want to turn your camera on and ask it directly?

Stephen Boyd: Hi to everybody. I'm a big fan of all your work and actually *Living the Wildlife*, Gillian, I was a huge fan of on RTÉ because it's not often on RTÉ that you get a lot of natural history broadcasting. I was just curious because you all have amazing output and I was wondering what aspects of your own work or which piece of your own work you enjoy the most or provided you with the most satisfaction after you made it?

Gillian Marsh: It's hard – well I've always believed if somebody doesn't learn anything out of your programmes you didn't do your job properly. Or if it's not talked about in the pubs or somewhere, you know, that somebody goes, "Oh I saw this" then you haven't succeeded. And I suppose there's a few of them, in one way Seán Hillen and *Tomorrow Is Saturday* has kind of shown people how much a struggle life is being an artist, what a struggle life is in general, I feel he brought an awareness to a lot of things. When you are on the autistic spectrum, your life, it's tough and he's told that in not a moany way, it's just real, that hits everybody no matter who watches the documentary. Some parts of his life are very similar to your own, it makes you think. Another programme I made – *The Funeral Director* – after my father died, I realized how little I knew about the practicalities of death and I googled what to do with a dead man in your house at 3 a.m. in the morning and they told me how to do my tax returns and I just thought: "Nobody knows what to actually do", and it's one of the things that's going to happen to us all. So, I decided to team up with our funeral director and follow the process and I think it worked because we got so many emails and texts about the programme – it really touched people. The funeral director David McGowan got 600 texts and emails just thanking him and thanking the documentary-makers for taking the fear out of death. And that's the real satisfaction. I really felt this documentary did its job. When a programme teaches somebody, or people learn

something out of it or it changes the way they look at something, then I kind of feel like we've done our job, we've given something back. So, I suppose *The Funeral Director* probably is the strongest; we got an awful lot of thanks for that. Death is a hard time in people's lives, people were struggling with hard times and it kind of gave some people clarity, they weren't so afraid, and myself included you know. I just went to Kildare and I dressed my mother's grave in a way I'd never have dressed a grave. She just died last week and we lined it with flowers and palms so that it looked like we were putting her in a nest and people came from all around because they'd never seen it done before; you'd see graves dressed like that in the West of Ireland but not as much on the East coast. I don't know, I think if it's affected people's lives, that's the most satisfying thing that I get out of it.

Seán Crosson: Thank you Gillian, I know I speak for everybody here in expressing our deepest condolences on your mother's passing last week.

Gillian Marsh: Thank you.

Seán Crosson: The same question maybe to Alan first and Pat and we'll have to finish up on this. Alan?

Alan Gilsenan: Yeah, I think I look at every film I've made and I just die like and hate life and then you have to get over that and be proud of what they are. So, you know and probably the ones I like best are not always the ones that get the most acclaim or anything but really I'd have to say you know my favourite film is always the next one because maybe for once we'll make a good one. So, the next film.

Seán Crosson: Oh, I think you made a few good ones already, Alan. You might be excessively modest there. But we definitely all look forward to the next one. Pat?

Pat Collins: Yeah, I mean it's a very difficult – it's kind of the ones that don't get made I think are the ones you always – it's a little bit like Alan's next one – but it's all the unmade films are the ones that you really think – they would've been great if I'd have got the opportunity to make that film it would've been better than all the other films, but I think maybe just even for sentimental reasons I think that the couple of early films I made which – the one on Michael Hartnett, oddly enough, I suppose the second film I made was called *Talking to the Dead* and that was about the funeral tradition in Ireland actually and that had a very kind of big impact on me. Alan was actually supposed to direct it but Alan couldn't do it, I think, and I begged the producer to do it and it was my second documentary that I ever made and it gave me a huge education, the whole Irish cultural subject matter and actually with the importance of the funeral tradition within Ireland, just to echo what Gillian was saying. I mean it's one of the most powerful things we have in the country, I think, and it's one of the few continuums we have and we still do it pretty well. So, I would say the early films because even when I look back at them now, they feel like from a completely other time. You know, they already feel like archive and they feel like a different country or something. So, I'm kind of glad to have had the opportunity to work at that time but

it's only when you look back at the films that you made in your early days that you kind of realize how much the country has actually changed. Yeah, so that's – the early ones, the early funny ones!!

Seán Crosson: Yeah, thanks, Pat. And thanks, Stephen, for your question as well. We're way over time and I have to bring things to a close and as I hope Alan, Gillian, and Pat can see we've had a lot of very positive feedback on the chat there, people really really really appreciating what you've had to say today, the remarkable films that were screened or were available to view during the conference, and I want to thank you all sincerely for your generosity and the insights that you've offered here in this session.