

Filmic Portraits of Contemporary Ireland: 2003-2018

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Abstract: *Since the Peace Process signed in 1994, Irish national cinema has portrayed the change of a politically violent country to a place in fast development. The films about the wars of independence and the Troubles gave place to new topics related to the current economy, globalization, recession and its problems; universal anxieties and individual subjectivity began to gain strength, obfuscating national collective matters. This doctoral research aims to examine contemporary realistic fiction films that deal with social exclusion and marginality during the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath; it intends to answer the question: how can the themes of marginality and exclusion, which are still relevant in Ireland today, be voiced through universal paradigms? How have individuals that are excluded from society been represented in the cinema and what are their relations to the place they inhabit?*

Keywords: *Contemporary Irish cinema, Celtic Tiger, social exclusion, marginality.*

The aim of this research is to examine how contemporary cinema portrays the problems of a recently globalized country and how it emphasizes the experience of loneliness, exclusion, and alienation. It will explore the representation of socially excluded and marginalized individuals in realistic fiction films set in the last two decades. In its introduction, it will consider the history of the cinema in Ireland and how it has evolved, showing how Irish cinema created its own identity and how it tracked its path to reach international appreciation.

The idea to this project began during the research for my master's degree while writing the dissertation "*The Butcher Boy*, by Patrick McCabe: on stage and on screen" (2012), which was about the adaptation of the novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) to the play *Frank Pig Says Hello* (1992), and to the film also named *The Butcher Boy* (1997), directed by Neil Jordan. This research opened the doors to Irish Cinema Studies and aroused interest of knowing better this field of literature and the history of the cinema in Ireland. The studies done in Irish film theories brought some curious statements as Lance Pettit's (2010) arguing ¹ that Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996) and the adaptation of Patrick McCabe's novel to the film *The Butcher Boy* (1997) made a kind of high-water

mark for contemporary Irish Film. Such an affirmation raised a few questions as: what was Irish cinema like then? What has changed and why? How did cinema expose social exclusion and marginality then? How does it do it nowadays?

In *The Butcher Boy*, social prejudice is the theme which called my attention the most; it is fully preserved in the adaptations and what most especially guarantees this intimacy is the form of storytelling, fundamentally in place through the narrator on stage and the voice-over. Son of dysfunctional family in a small town in the 1960s, the first person narrator, Francie Brady, tells the story of his life, and how he came to commit a murder. He unfolds a series of traumatic experiences he went through: the prejudice in his interaction with the community, social exclusion, banishment from school, child labor, sexual abuse, low self-esteem and self-image, and the feeling of being running amuck.

Jordan's Francie is shown quite violent and preoccupied about the way the town despises him. He and his family are compared with pigs and this image of the animal is much elaborated in the story. The pig is used as a metaphor for class division and uncivilized behavior; it depicts the way that society saw the Bradies. Francie ends up believing he is a pig.

Another Irish film which aroused my interest in this theme was *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), also an adaptation of Patrick McCabe's novel *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998) by Neil Jordan. This movie has many similarities with *The Butcher Boy* in the structure of flash-backs and the voice-over; it pictures the 1970's generation who wanted to move out of the country because of the Catholic society that was very hypocrite, judgmental and prejudiced. It depicts the life of a travesty, son of the local priest, who scandalizes everyone in his small town with his behavior; he does not fit in any gender stereotype and gets together with other characters that are socially excluded to find his mother in London. In *Breakfast on Pluto*, there are many episodes of explicit prejudice and political terror of the period; however, the Troubles are not the main topic of the film. According to Patrick McCabe and Neil Jordan in an interview by John Maguire ² (2006), it would be unacceptable to talk about a person who was born in the 1970s in the border of Northern Ireland without talking about the wars of that time, a film that deals with the IRA would have to be much more complex. The political struggles were never the main topic of McCabe's novels, which are famous for dealing with dark, peripheral, socio-cultural issues of the country.

Most of the Irish films set during the 1970s and 1980s did not focus on individual subjectivity as *Breakfast on Pluto*; when showing this period, the national cinema represented much of the country's political history of the Troubles, depicting IRA conflicts and bombings. But, after the Peace Process, signed in 1994, there were no more episodes of political violence and, with the country's economy running fast, there was a change in the thematic nature of the filmic productions. Cinema started to explore modernity, bringing a new global visualization that is not centered only in collective national matters.

Since the 1990s, cinema has started to picture the change between an old Ireland and a country in rapid development. This economic boom, named Celtic Tiger, had its pitch around 2003 and then it started to decline; there was a crash and the problems brought by the recession began to appear. In *Celtic Tiger: the myth of social partnership* (2002),

Kieran Allen argues that while there was opportunity and wealth for a few, most of the people did not share the prosperity of the booming economy. His critical look draws the attention to the majority who suffered the consequences of a deteriorated quality of life. The tax cuts that attracted US investments and immigrants to work had a high price to the cities, which were gridlocked with the lack of public transportation, and to the people, who were in need of adequate housing.

In less than two decades, the country was transformed; contemporary cinema started to portray the dark side of the Celtic Tiger and the marginalized or alienated figures of Irish society. Movies of that kind raised questions as: what are the forms of marginality that these films expose? How do they relate to the current economy? How can the themes of marginality and exclusion, which are still relevant in Ireland today, be voiced through universal paradigms? How have marginalized individuals been represented in the Irish cinema?

In this research, the idea of selecting films that combine the theme of social exclusion/inclusion and marginality to the current economy will leave out movies about Northern Ireland and films set in other periods, as *Breakfast on Pluto*, or that have different thematic interests. In spite of dealing with the contemporary period, the topic chosen is not new. The representation of individuals who experience exclusion and marginality has been a trend in Irish literature since the colonial period, when the country was in the control of the British Empire. From many different ways, a myriad of artists like novelists, poets, playwrights and filmmakers were concerned about showing how these marginal identities have been treated unequally by society.

Nonetheless, the sociological concepts of social exclusion and marginality are broad; they oscillate in time and place and are related to culture, society, and nationality. According to Pilar Villar Argáiz, in *Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Artistic Renderings of Marginal Identities in Ireland* (2016)³, both concepts depend on external socio-political factors; she points out that the ones who typically have experienced marginalization and social exclusion in Ireland are the women mostly, but also ideological rebels, disabled people, the disaffected youth, migrants, and ethnic minorities among others.

Concerning the definition of social exclusion as set in “Degrees of exclusion: developing a dynamic, multi-dimensional measure”⁴ (2002), by Tania Burchardt, Julian Le Grand, and David Piachaud: “An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives” (2008. 374), the word “participation” is regarded as central to the concept in which they have identified four dimensions⁵ :

Consumption: the capacity to purchase goods and services

Production: participation in economically or socially valuable activities

Political engagement: involvement in local or national decision-making

Social interaction: integration with family, friends, and community (2008. 374).

The authors emphasize that the involvement in every dimension represents an outcome and those outcomes might be combined. However, the participation in every dimension is necessary for social inclusion, but the lack of participation in any of the dimensions is enough for social exclusion.

These authors affirm this definition of the concept is relative to time and place; moreover, there is an important question to be asked: is exclusion relative to whom? In the dimension of consumption, for instance, it may be gauged to your neighbor, your locality, or the country as whole and this is what they mean by degrees. Inclusion or exclusion on each of the dimensions also has to be analyzed by duration, more than a point in time, and by asking if he or she wants or not to participate in a certain activity.

In literature, social exclusion is typically represented by people living in deprived areas or by being a member of an ethnic minority, for example; it is featured as causes or risk factors rather than outcomes. In any case, as it appears in literature or as it is defined in Sociology, the concept must be distinct to the definition of poverty, which would be a lack of material resources, especially income. Social exclusion is a more dynamic process of being shut out; it might be seen as a non-realization or denial in civil or political rights.

Social Sciences also distinguish social exclusion from the concept of marginality, which is also nuanced and rich. Sociologist Janelle Wilson, in “Marginality: a key concept revisited”⁶ (2015), draws a map on the concept tracing it back to Robert Park’s (1928) reference of the marginal man as a “cultural hybrid”; he referred particularly to the immigrants who found themselves between two worlds. According to Wilson, by 1935, the Jews were the classic illustration of the marginal man; but, as time has passed, the concept has spread to all individuals or groups who are deemed “marginal” in some way as lacking power, resources, or chances at upward mobility for instance. In her point of view, nowadays, the current refugee crisis is certainly the most obvious example of this kind of marginality.

The prevalent perspective on marginality involves hierarchical relationships between the marginal and the nonmarginal and might be expressed by center/periphery models. Judith Roberts (2014) observes that: “The groups or individuals that experience life on the fringes are denied full access to opportunities and resources that are normally available to dominant groups”⁷ (191). That perspective, however, overlooks other unexpected position of the concept, which is the potential for a positive experience. According to Janelle Wilson, the most striking example of this perspective is Bell Hooks’ (1984) declaration of marginality as a site of resistance, contending that it “offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (2). Other cultural critics, as Henry Giroux (1997), follow the same vein as Hooks, acknowledging that the presence and significance of the “different cultural logics” may not readily be reflected in the dominant ideology, but it will give voice to a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences, finding an opportunity for creativity and new possibilities.

Acknowledging the vagueness and dynamics of the terms marginality and social exclusion, this study intends to outline characters' types who have been put "out of the box" in the late capitalism in Ireland. All the films that are going to be selected in the research bring the drama of individuals who occupy a position that could be considered marginal. There is no intention of separating the characters in excluded or marginalized, even because, in literature there is no strong distinction. The analyses will uphold how the characters' experience shape their everyday life, how the sense of marginality affects their identity and relationship with others.

An initial corpus has been selected from two directors: Leonard Abrahamson's trilogy *Adam and Paul* (2004), *Garage* (2007), and *What Richard Did* (2012); and, Lance Daly's *Kiss* (2008), and *Life is a Breeze* (2013). All of them show, somehow, the relation the characters have with money and, most especially, their social interaction in the community. The film which I have studied in this stage of the research is *Adam and Paul*; it was very well received in Ireland, winning six awards, including the Best Director, as well as being nominated in ten categories for the 2004 Irish Film & Television Award.

Adam and Paul is set during the Celtic Tiger and portrays modern Dublin from the perspective of the marginalized; it is centered on a day in the life of two heroin addicts who wander in Dublin searching for the drug. Adam and Paul⁸ are from Dublin. Throughout the film, they are looking for a man to get drugs, but they know who he is or where to find him.

The way Adam and Paul communicate is something that really catches the audience; their talk is pretty inaccessible and pointless, they have circular conversations where it can be noticed an absurdity and existential lack of purpose, a failure to act. Edward Branigan (2004) states that: "The erratic, illogical or indecisive nature of many of the exchanges between Adam and Paul actually ironises the externalization..."⁹ (103); that is, the theatrical externalization, through dialogues, does not connect spectators with the characters intimately. Nevertheless, the film provides an alternative for us to have access to the characters by the cinematic device of internal focalization, so we align with the characters point of view; however, at the same time, we are not informed which of the characters are imagining or observing things.

The film dramatizes everybody's distance from Adam and Paul; it shows how contemporary society set them on the margins and treats them very badly. Indeed, Adam and Paul are dangerous; they are looking for something to rob or somebody to steal from and people are afraid of them; if they are not doped, they are shivering because of the abstinence.

The immigration issue is also present in the film because it is linked to the period. During the Celtic Tiger, many people from Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland moved to Ireland to work. There is a scene in which Adam and Paul sit on a bench next to a man who they think is Romanian, but the man is Bulgarian and gets angry for having his nationality mistaken. They ask the foreigner what he is doing in Dublin, nonetheless, he confronts them with the same question, explicitly raising the topic of self-awareness.

In the end of this scene, the Bulgarian says that Dublin is full of liars, maniacs, and Romanians.

However, drug abuse is the strongest topic in the film and the potential of the characters' addiction is dramatized in the scene of Adam's death. Paul wakes up on the beach and shakes his friend but he doesn't move. Paul shrugs, stays for a while, then the spectators can listen to the sound of the horn of the ferry. This noise can be heard in the soundtrack as to indicate they are sober or awake; it happens in three moments: in the beginning, when they wake up on the mattress; when they sober up and get in the pub; and, in the end, when Paul wakes up on the beach.

Adam and Paul resemble the flipped side of the society in an age of fast consumerism; they don't want to work or to gather more stuff; they are not typical consumers; they don't care for material things anymore; they want to get rid of everything, turn it all into money to buy drugs. They are apart from society not only because of their addiction, but also because they are unemployed and live on the streets; they are not seen as costumers or citizens, they are seen as part of a problem the city is facing, so it can be assumed they hold a marginal position.

Adam and Paul and *Garage* had the participation of the author and actor Mark O'Halloran in the scripts and he acted as one of the protagonists in *Adam and Paul*. But *Garage* has a quite different topic and its setting is different from all the other selected movies; it portrays the west of Ireland and its small-town lifestyle. With almost no sound and music, the cameras follow the quiet life of Josie, a man who lives and works alone in a distant gas station, spending days with no interaction with anybody. The film deepens in existential matters when it shows the character's loneliness and bad quality of life, and, especially, the bullying he suffers from almost everyone in the town because of his odd diction. Josie is socially excluded because he has no social interaction with family, friends, and the community, which mocks at him most of the time. His search for acceptance, love, affection, and his hunger for intimacy takes him through the path of depression and further suicide as he sees no way out of his situation.

On the other hand, the last movie of Abrahamson's trilogy, *What Richard Did*, made with collaboration of the screenwriter Malcolm Campbell, deals with class division and the matter of inclusion and exclusion through the point of view of the included. Richard belongs to the upper class in south Dublin and his family is part of the beneficiaries of Ireland's Tiger economy; he is a handsome rugby star and gifted student who shares good life with his buddies and a crowd of girls, they have parties at his parents' beach house, and he is seen more like a celebrity than as a good-natured guy. But, he gets involved in an accidental killing of a teammate, who is the allegory of the lower-class "included" in the group, the former boyfriend of his girlfriend.

The issues of guilt, confession, and moral crisis become the core of the story where we can see the character's change of social interaction status. Richard is not accepted in the group he used to hang out with, his friends and girlfriend grow to be afraid of getting caught as they knew the truth about what had happened.

In contrast, the film *Kiss* shows what it is like not having protective parents and a wealthy lifestyle; it is about two pre-teens who have a history of abuse and social exclusion and cannot put up with their dysfunctional families anymore. Kylie and Dylan are neighbours in a run-down estate around Dublin who run away from home when situation becomes unbearable; they go to the capital's inner city to find Dylan's brother, who had run away some years before. As they could not find him, they stay on the streets spending the money Kylie had stolen from her sister; they are on the mercy of good luck and face the dangers of the street life.

The life on the streets gets a special attention in *Life is a Breeze*, in which there is a wider picture of the crisis Dublin is facing. Problems as homelessness, unemployment, and the great amount of trash brought by the growth of the city and by the new market are shown through a comedy-drama. Daly portrays a family struggling to stay put in hard times in Ireland, depicting its increasing amount of unemployed citizens. The family gets united in the search of a mattress full of money that was accidentally dumped; they visit several landfills in the island, which is shown through its dirty, poor and dangerous neighbourhoods.

As said before, the themes of marginality and social exclusion are not new in Irish literature, but they got a new perspective. More and more contemporary realistic films portray those huge changes in the cities and in the people's lifestyle, so it can be asserted that cinema has an important role in the creation of modern Ireland imaginary. Nevertheless, the mode of communication of the cinematic language, through its audio-visual format, cannot have its evaluation only through the theme and narrative. The fundamental aspects of the film: the *mise-en-scène*, acting, editing and sound track will be fully explored in a deeper analysis that is yet to come.

Notes

- 1 In ABEI Journal, "Irish Cinema: The Last Decade", v. 12, 2010.
- 2 "The Rocky Mountain News". 09 Jan. 2006. Available at: <<http://maguiresmovies.blogspot.com/2006/01/interview-neil-jordan-pat-mccabe-rocky.html>> Accessed 11 Oct. 2011.
- 3 In the "Introduction" of *Nordic Irish Studies*, v. 15, p. 1.
- 4 In *Social Exclusion: critical concepts in sociology* (2008), v. 1, edited by David Byrne.
- 5 These dimensions are set for Britain in the 1990s.
- 6 Available at <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/stories-the-self/201509/marginality-key-concept-revisited>> Accessed 03/27/2018.
- 7 In "Discipleship with the Marginalized at the Centre", *International Review of Mission* 103 (2), 2014.
- 8 We never know who is Adam and who is Paul, they are always together, and they don't call themselves by their names. But for reference purposes, Adam is the one interpreted by Mark O'Halloran, and Paul the one by Tom Murphy.
- 9 In *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London, New York: Routledge.

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