

Hollywood and the Nation

Marcos Soares

Ruth Barton. *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation*. (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002).

Film-maker Jim Sheridan, key figure in the recent “revival” of Irish cinema on both sides of the Atlantic, is the theme of a comprehensive study by Ruth Barton. Her analyses begin with Sheridan’s first international success, *My Left Foot* (1989) and cover key – and also commercially successful – films such as *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *The Boxer* (1997). She finishes the book with a long interview with Jim Sheridan himself in which he offers illuminating comments on his work and its connections with Irish politics. Barton’s explicit claim is that Sheridan’s films, despite their often cold academic and critical reception, deserve a “political reading” which can reveal their “Irishness” from a larger historical perspective.

It is true that Sheridan’s films offer themselves as explicit comments on Irish history by consistently focusing on key political events: the decision of the Irish government to turn its back on its previous policies and embrace “modernisation” in 1958 (the context of *My Left Foot*), the consequences of the independence movement in the 1930s (in *The Field*), and the clash among the British Establishment and various anti-British acts (including those of the IRA as in *In the Name of the Father* and *The Boxer*).

However, one of the first crucial critical issues the reader will encounter is the somewhat uncomfortable clash between Barton’s insistence on the fact that the films “demand an allegorical reading” and her attempt to account for the films’ “populist” appeal in their effort to entice a large international – and particularly American – audience. Although the apologetic tone never quite vanishes, it gradually leads to a more consistent analysis of key aesthetic and political questions. The first step consists of a minute account of some of the main narrative frames employed by Sheridan: his use of archetypes and stereotypes, his insistence on structuring his scripts round his main characters’ oedipal conflicts and trajectories, the deployment of the conventions of genre-based filmmaking (the courtroom and family drama), the reliance on the “star-system” (and particularly on the superb performances given by Daniel Day-Lewis), his aspiration to the mythic and the “timeless” and, more persistently, the reassurance that the individual can triumph

over adversity. It is the use of those conventions (as well as international funding and distribution), Barton argues, that ensured the commercial success of the films worldwide, proving, therefore, that “Irish cultural production can appeal to the local whilst circulating within a global environment of capitalist exchange, namely the Hollywood film industry”. Judging from the huge success of Sheridan’s first film, Barton concludes that “the significance of *My Left Foot* was that it demonstrated that international audiences would watch Irish films if they were structured around universal themes and conformed to a recognised model of filmmaking; in other words, if they looked like Hollywood cinema”.

Although Barton makes an effort to show that large-scale controversial discussions on the Irish situation and the relationship with Britain have been triggered by the popularity of the films (the uproar around the opening of *In the Name of the Father* in Britain is a case in point), she also points out that it is here that the problems begin. For this is a case in which the historical content does not “fit” the narrative paradigms centred upon the conventions of the bourgeois drama. For if the focus remains a purely personal one, if the central issues remain the subjective relationships between sons and their parents (the case in nearly all of Sheridan’s films), how is it possible to emphasize the common, collective concerns that must necessarily constitute the core of historical reflections? The result, Barton shows, is invariably the transformation of History and the past into mere background against which personal dramas can develop or, worse still, into a collection of images and stereotypes that can be consumed by an international audience eager for novelty, the quaint and the exotic. An unhappy compromise, Barton argues, between “a slice of multinational funding” and the attempt to “advertise [the national] attractiveness as a location for non-indigenous productions”.

The discussion about the “anxiety about the ability of a small culture to retain its identity within the universalising practices of global capital” is seen by Barton as a deadlock, a dead-end from which no visible alternatives can be made out. Against the ubiquitous critical attacks on Sheridan, who is often accused of having abandoned “that commitment to radical left-wing politics that characterised a certain element in filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s”, Barton seems to offer no alternatives. The sort of Brechtian approach that is commonly associated with the political cinema of the preceding decades, she claims, “delimits its own audience and, arguably, simply preaches to the converted”. On the other hand, “it is simply not practicable to imagine that Irish films can be completed without international financing”. Further discussions of those statements, both highly debatable and controversial, fall outside the scope of the book.

Barton’s approach, however, does not dismiss the films in an act of intellectual snobbery and manages to map out a number of ambiguities and contradictions within the films’ structure which in turn illuminate key national paradoxes and conflicts. It is the very flaws and inconsistencies in the films, she argues, that better show can Sheridan “frames the nation” and its political muddles. From this perspective, one of the most compelling analyses is the chapter on *The Field* (1990), one of Sheridan’s less known but most controversial films. Here, Barton demonstrates, Sheridan indicts Irish radical

nationalism and gives the lie to an “inert society that has failed to transform itself into the nation imagined by visionaries that formulated independence”. Needless to say that from a political perspective this remains a crucial issue for peripheral countries being forced to integrate the new globalized economic and cultural order, where the nature of responsible interventions must at some time ask who are the “beneficiaries of modernisation [...]”; in other words, whether the rising tide has indeed ‘lifted all boats’”. Because Barton touches upon those central issues in an original and enlightening way, her book is bound to become a major reference in the area.