

ABSENCES AND (IM)POSSIBILITIES **traces of an experimental cinema in Ireland**

When the **Irish Film Institute** asked the **Experimental Film Club** to assemble a programme covering the “history of Irish experimental film”, we were both excited and daunted at the prospect. Excited because this would give us an opportunity to bring some of Ireland’s most interesting and underappreciated filmmakers to a wider audience; daunted because, at the same time, Ireland has never developed a strong tradition of experimental and avant-garde filmmaking in the way that countries such as France or the USA have.

One of our programmers, Esperanza Collado, confronted this problem in her programme of Irish experimental film for the 2009 Márgenes festival in Madrid, which is undoubtedly the key precedent to this project. In her programme notes, Collado playfully defined her curation as held together by what it lacks, stating the

*Inexistence
of Irish cinema industry,
of Irish experimental cinema,
of thematic concerns common to these works,
of Irishness as a main feature present in these works,
of linking threads connecting Irish experimental films,*

Although “inexistence” may be putting it a little strongly, this list nonetheless touches upon some of the key challenges in putting together such a programme. Certainly, from the existing literature on Irish cinema, one would be hard pressed to find evidence of an Irish experimental cinema. An exception can be found in some of the writings of Maeve Connolly, one of the few Irish scholars who has dealt with the term. She has usefully highlighted the long-standing separation between Irish art and film from the viewpoint of academia and funding entities, and how this may have impeded the convergence and recognition of experimental film practice in Ireland. However, within the general discourse around filmmaking and film culture in Ireland, the word “experimental” is occasionally thrown around (as are “avant-garde”, “underground”, etc) but typically in a loose and inconsistent way, and often completely disconnected from the international and historical uses of the term.

Since the Experimental Film Club’s inception in 2008, we have attempted with our screenings to approach the idea of experimental film in a more serious way, curating programmes of important experimental works of the past alongside contemporary works both Irish and international. While in its more bastardised form, “experimental” is often used simply as a stop-gap category for that which is not easily categorised (if you don’t know what it is, it must be experimental) or, perhaps worse, a bonafide genre of film (defined by recurring familiar elements, such as structural archetypes, visual techniques or iconography) – we would like to assert a different meaning, one that is both more positive and open.

This is experimental film as “a cultural attitude [rather] than a particular work or body of work or mode of expression”, as the film blogger Tom Tsutpen put it. A cultural attitude that, in critic Nicole Brenez’s words

considers cinema not in terms of its uses or customs, but rather its powers; and it is just as determined to remind us of these powers, to display and renew them, as to contradict or efface them or render them limitless.

In order to explore these powers fully, it is necessary to take nothing for granted: to break the medium down to its fundamentals, or even further, and build it back up again in different directions, exploring “every potentiality”. If, as scholar Scott McDonald once observed, a common initial reaction to an experimental film is “This isn’t a movie”, it’s precisely this notion of the limits and (im)possibilities of what a movie is that experimental cinema exists to explode, forcing us to redefine “an experience we were sure we understood”. According to Brenez, while “the so-called standard cinema standardises emotions, sensation, perception and belief,” experimental cinema “re-opens the entire field of experience”. It’s the “exploration of all possible conceptions, which don’t pre-exist the exploration itself.”

Of course, at this stage in the history of cinema, these explorations and redefinitions have taken on some key identifiable forms – hand-manipulation of the film material, single-frame montage, the use of found footage, abstract imagery and the disconnection of image and sound are just some of the formal techniques that have become established in experimental filmmaking practices. Forms which have in many cases been co-opted by mainstream filmmaking practices, and once again subverted, deconstructed, reinvented by experimental filmmakers.

Ireland, as a colonised and economically underdeveloped nation for much of the twentieth century, has in the European context an almost exceptionally marginal place in this history. Nevertheless, when we delve deeper into the history of Irish cinema, it is possible to find a thin thread that links what could be seen as a series of attempts to access and contribute to this history.

In the late 20s, for instance, a group under the name Irish Amateur Films began producing films independently in Dublin. Many of the group were also members of the Dublin Film Society, which was attempting (apparently unsuccessfully) to organise screenings of art films from the Soviet Union and elsewhere that were not receiving distribution in Ireland. Our programme features two films from this group, which each represent unique Irish contributions to Europe’s pre-war avant-garde. Between this period and the emerging independent film activity of the 1970s, there was little production as far as avant-garde filmmaking and exhibition are concerned, although the foundation of the Irish Film Society stands out. The IFS or ‘Cuman na Scannán’, founded in 1936 and active for over twenty years, was a public voluntary organization for film activities; an intellectual forum whose aim was to introduce non-mainstream artistic cinema from abroad – mainly from non-English speaking countries – to Irish audiences as well as to produce artistic films.

But it was the early 1970s before the first real movement of independent, indigenous filmmaking emerged in Ireland – the aptly named “First Wave” – and with it the first flowering of a “cultural attitude” towards cinema that desired to challenge established norms both aesthetically and politically. The collective AIP (Association of Independent Producers) was one of the most identifiable formations to emerge from this period, with independent filmmakers Bob Quinn, Cathal Black, Pat Murphy, Joe Comerford and Thaddeus O’Sullivan as founding members. These filmmakers worked collaboratively, with many involved initially in the production company established by Bob Quinn in Connemara in 1973. The establishment in 1981 of the Irish Film Board, the country’s first state funding agency for cinema, was in one way a vindication of the First Wave’s efforts to encourage indigenous production – but it also served to displace their more radical aspirations towards a film culture that was critically engaged both formally and politically. According to Maeve Connolly, by 1982, Project Cinema Club (at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin), previously a centre of a vibrant indigenous film culture, was increasingly less active. In the years to come, some of the First Wave filmmakers, such as Thaddeus O’Sullivan, settled into more conventional narrative formats, while others, such as Joe Comerford, found their work increasingly marginalised.

So, what to do for a history of Irish experimental film then?

We will admit that this programme is in some ways a revisionist endeavour, and one in opposition to the common strategy in Irish film culture, as Maeve Connolly has observed, to historicise “in terms of the emergence of an indigenous industry.” But, rather than attempting to create an unquestionable and static statement, our intention is to trace a genealogical thread that links all these works in their critical nature towards established norms of art and cinema. Of course, we do not assert that this selection is definitive or comprehensive: we hope it will be the beginning of a new dialogue on this area of Irish cinema rather than the final word on it. Counter-arguments and counter-programmes are strongly welcomed. There have inevitably been some omissions in the selection of works and filmmakers represented; some are due to limitations of length, but others simply because there are, without a doubt, other great experimental Irish films that we have yet to discover.

“Absences and (Im)Possibilities” features a selection of films from 1897 to 2011, divided into three historical eras, chosen because of their relation to the *possibility* of an Irish experimental cinema in Ireland – in other words, these are films that, to varying degrees and in various ways, embody, aspire towards or hint at the “cultural attitude” that we see as defining experimental film. This is not a history of Irish experimental film but rather a programme of Irish film curated in a dialogue with a broader experimental film history. One could say this is in the spirit of what Fergus Daly called “the ethics of the experimental filmmaker” in his documentary *Experimental Conversations*, which forms the epilogue of this programme. He described this as:

a simultaneous commitment to “a legacy your work is made in relation to” (Gerard Byrne) and to multiplying the possibilities for perception and sensation of life in its most rich and raw state, even if it means finding new roads of access to “the most archaic, primal, ordinary sensations” (Philippe Grandrieux).

This is an ethics one can see embodied in the resurgence in experimental film activity in Ireland in recent years, especially since the turn of the century. In the case of our programme at large, we could say that the legacy in question is the traditions of experimental film, a legacy that while primarily international nonetheless belongs to all of us who claim it – and the possibilities and “new roads of access” we intend to multiply are those of an expanding formal innovation in Irish cinema, and a re-contextualisation of what has been produced to date.

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