

## JOE COMERFORD: PAINTING A FEATURE

Joe Comerford's interest in film as experiment started when he studied at Dublin's National College of Art and Design in the 1960s. His first public short, *Emtigon*, made in 1971, ruminated on a modern Ireland balanced uneasily between tradition and cultural-political change. The director's trademark twinning of film narrative and visual-aural abstraction was at play from the beginning.

"From the start of my film making I had it in mind to paint a feature. This had I suppose something to do with working with paint and sculpture. I thought it might take two or three years to achieve the idea of telling a story via narrative live action with actors, and then retelling it via abstract subconscious images, before combining the two strands into a painted feature."

A transgressive first work, *Emtigon* introduced an independent young Irish filmmaker hellbent on cinematic subversion and social diagnosis. Today, in hindsight, he might suggest that he had somewhat underestimated the task before him:

"Now, decades later, I am still pursuing the action-abstraction objective. Over that time, five of my films, in various ways, experiment with that aesthetic, while three of my other longer films required aesthetic choices that were not overtly experimental. For example, after the traumatic experience of making *Withdrawal* (1973), an experimental work set in a psychiatric hospital, I only re-entered filmmaking via *Down The Corner* (1977) which was basically a community project set in Ballyfermot, on the outer edges of Dublin, which was not a work primarily focused on interior lives."

Comerford produced his first drama feature, *Traveller*, in 1980, with support from the The Arts Council of Ireland and the British Film Institute. A 'road movie', it followed the journey of a young newly-wed traveller couple sent to smuggle goods from the north of Ireland back into the south. As in *Down the Corner*, ordinary people made up most of the cast. Improvised filming captured actual events in the current lives of the actors and integrated them into the script. This process created an experimental 'realism' unique on Irish screens.

The 1984 short, *Waterbag*, funded by the Arts Council and the Irish Film Board, again blended narrative with abstraction. Using frame inserts and painting on film, it was Comerford's riposte to a film history that he felt was more about documenting, rather than expressing, the personal.

In the late 80s and early 90s, Comerford released two acclaimed genre-based features, *Reefer and the Model* (1987), a comedy-crime-thriller shot through with the director's political and social analysis, and *High Boot Benny* (1993), a deeply personal political drama.

"*Reefer and the Model*, was to have developed out of the aesthetic of the short, *Waterbag* (both dealt with 'reluctant' families and were shot on the same fishing trawler), but that evolution was not possible and indeed the very existence of *Waterbag* almost prevented *Reefer* from getting production support. It turned out that making *Reefer*, even with some financial input from a Hollywood production company, was a challenging learning experience towards the still distant objective of painting a feature".

*High Boot Benny*, shot in the wilds of the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal during the winter of 1992, was a deeply thoughtful reflection on the historical and personal nuances underlying the Northern Ireland conflict.

"It had at its core a personal family story, and seemed to provide a route to continuing what had evolved in the experimentation of the earlier works. But its setting on the border with Northern Ireland increasingly determined the nature of the storytelling, in particular relating to the portrayal of violent events. An allegorical form emerged as the necessary route to completing the project".

In 2008, Comerford finished the short, *RoadSide*, a vivid, time-juggling meditation on the events surrounding a prison suicide. It was subsequently incorporated into the innovative *RoadSide Film Sculpture* (2012).

"It's a response to how film has changed to meet the newer cinematic terrain and to attempt work that concurs with peoples' lived experience. Globalisation has narrowed the possibilities of indigenous filmmaking and it is now more about the corporate ethos than the personal terrain of storytelling. The aesthetic that had emerged in the film seemed to require a custom-built environment, a large prison-like sculpture, which is entered into to view and experience the work".

A DVD box set of Joe Comerford's four features and four short films will be released in 2016. He is currently developing a film drama, *Cave Head*.

"Its path is not to have a single script or a separate storyboard but to develop the live action story, and at the same time, in direct parallel, to develop the abstract version. The intention is to deliberately diminish my own flexibility and to leave myself no other choice but to finally paint a feature."

Eugene Finn

## **Film Notes by Eugene Finn:**

### **Emtigon (1971)**

Joe Comerford's first film, involves a process that informs all of his other work. The combination of "elements of narrative with abstraction". A pitch-black Beckett-like vaudeville of impotence and aggression, Emtigon tragicomically details a homeless old man's covert intrusion on a young woman social worker. Claustrophobic framing and cutting refuses the viewer an easy interpretation or even a comfortable point of view but the abstractions hint and nudge at possible meanings. An associational montage of images from World War I suggests a collective memory that might somehow underlie the protagonist's behavior. The final image of a stolen house-key dropped into dark canal waters is emblematic of this filmmaker's opaque, poetic narratives.

### **Withdrawal (1973)**

Based on the writings of David Chapman and Jimmy Brennan, Withdrawal is about Jimmy, a heroin user in a Dublin psychiatric hospital. His thoughts and observations dominate, his subjective voice-over speculating on the lives of his companions. Jimmy leaves the hospital, returning to the city to reconcile with his loved ones, but his withdrawal leads ultimately to a dead end.

Reminiscent of American and European anti-narrative cinema, Withdrawal mixes drama, documentary, dance, music, unconventional shooting and editing techniques, to underscore the inevitability of Jimmy's backward journey.

Regarding the insertion of a scene from the 1935 film version of the War of Independence story, Guests of the Nation, Comerford explains: "It indicates my questioning of the foundation of the Irish state – what we aspired to become against what we actually became."

### **Traveller (1982)**

Following an arranged marriage, Irish Travellers Michael and Angela are sent to smuggle electrical goods across the Northern Irish Border. The faltering relationship of the couple is complicated along the way by their encounter with a diffident IRA man, Clicky. It's a journey that culminates in the murder of a patriarch with Angela finding a liberation of sorts.

An anti-romantic Irish road movie, Traveller radically sidesteps the genre, following the script to find the story, deflating narrative expectations. Comerford used non-professional actors from the Traveller community, adjusting the script to changes in the personal lives of the participants and filming in authentic wintry locations. It was, as the director states, "a mixture of the planned and the spontaneous".

The filmmaker's ongoing concerns about the failure of Ireland's historical struggles are neatly woven into the dense textures of Traveller. It's his most poetic, yet demanding, work.

### **Waterbag (1984)**

Waterbag was made as a preparation for the feature Reefer and the Model. Set on a fishing trawler, it involves the relationship between two fishermen and a pregnant woman and ends with an apparently self-induced miscarriage. Haunting slow-motion images of a swaying rocking horse accompany composer Roger Doyle's score (a music box nursery rhyme), bringing Waterbag to an enigmatic, moving finish.

As in Emtigon, and later RoadSide, the filmmaker experiments with combinations of live action and abstraction: "I was attempting to alter the form of the film's language, enabling an altogether different visual flow. The idea was to test the standard procedure of using dialogue to convey narrative by replacing it with abstract imagery. This meant shooting the film twice – firstly, in a conventional way, with actors, and, secondly, retelling the story in abstract form by painting frame-by-frame on transparent 16mm film, all with the purpose of asking: "Was it the choice of the foetus not to be born?"

**Roadside (2008)**

RoadSide, Comerford's first digital short, is a veritable assault on its audience – an audacious blur of ugliness and beauty. Mixing found footage from personal archives and his own unfinished short, Rough Touch, it outlines the brief encounter between a man on parole driving a stolen car back to prison and a woman hitchhiker. This simple action provides the narrative core while sensuous visual and sound abstractions replicate the man's subjectivity. An unsettling prison-cell hanging scene brackets the film, unbalancing the viewer, and underscoring unpleasant undertones of self-destruction, non-communication, the faltering of memory and its effect on history.

Following test screenings, Comerford developed the project into an installation, The RoadSide Film Sculpture (2012). He describes this new form of film exhibition as "entering a space that does not exist, to see a work that is extreme cinema...an attempt to suspend pain, within beauty."