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Smoke and Mirrors

A RESPONSE TO ‘TROUBLES AND NORTHERN IRELAND: REPRESENTATIONS IN FILM OF BELFAST AS A SITE OF CONFLICT’ BY PAT BRERETON1

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Pat Brereton’s critical practice issues from a historicist–contextualist discourse that has dominated Irish screen studies for over 40 years. At its best this paradigm has produced influential contributions to the study of Irish film and media culture; at its worst it has been an alibi for superficial sociology. In the opening section of his article, Brereton emphasises the complexities of historical contexts and the role of the past, and how popular narrative films about Northern Ireland remain haunted by its history of violence. Such issues

are important, of course, but not necessarily in terms of how films supposedly illustrate or represent historical events, personalities and places.

Writing on ‘the cinematographic forms of history’, Antoine de Baecque, for example, makes a point about the appropriation of the cinema by historians also relevant to a certain tendency in Irish screen studies:

Histories are not cinephiles: what matters to them is the development of a new epistemological method, a game of mirroring between film and the state of the society that produced it, watched it, and understood it. They have built a new discipline ... that fuels the whole history of representations. But they do so at a cost: the absence, if not of cinema itself at least of the passion for it, and of the immanent and intimate, rather than historicised, knowledge of it.\(^2\)

While the article does not neglect how the conflict in Northern Ireland is aestheticised through the medium and materiality of film, it does seem susceptible to the doxa that all cinema is propaganda, and the aim of film criticism—all criticism, perhaps—is political and historical interpretation. The films discussed—\textit{Odd Man Out}, '71 and \textit{Belfast}—are classified as ‘British’ films but from an alternative critical perspective this is a moot point: ‘national cinema’ is hardly a fixed category, and the provenance and production circumstances of any major commercial feature film are a complicated business. The problem then becomes one of trying to make an argument about the politics of film representation based on categories and assumptions that are themselves contingent, and questionable.

The function of (scholarly) film criticism is aesthetic as well as social, and exploring forms and histories within films remains essential to understanding not only their broader cultural and political significance, but also the nature of our own subjective and imaginative relationship with cinema as a popular art form: our ‘immanent and intimate knowledge of it’, so to speak. Brereton reminds us, for example, that \textit{Odd Man Out} seems haunted by the fatalism and expressionistic mise en scène of \textit{The Informer} (1935, John Ford). However, except for later passing references to films such as \textit{Battleship Potemkin} (1925, Sergei Eisenstein) and \textit{West Side Story} (1961, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins), such comparative connections, traces, possibilities are

left unexplored. This is not to claim that films necessarily exist in relation to other films, but rather that the best of them are often—obliquely, associatively, metaphorically—about filmmaking itself; or they are at least available to that expressive possibility.

Following this line of enquiry might then involve seeing the ‘ghost’ of *Pépé le Moko* (1937, Julien Duvivier) in *Odd Man Out*, or reflecting on the fact that Carol Reed’s regular cinematographer, Robert Krasker, also worked on *The Third Man* (1949) and had been the cinematographer responsible for the opening sequence from *Great Expectations* (1946, David Lean)—when Pip first encounters Magwitch in the graveyard. Krasker’s cinematographic style was highly expressionistic and consistent with the emerging varieties of film noir popular at that time. The film’s editor, Fergus McDonnell, had worked on *I Met a Murderer* (1939, Roy Kellino), a thriller in which James Mason plays another fugitive. Brereton highlights the ‘insistent tempo’ of William Alwyn’s score in *Odd Man Out*, but it’s perhaps also significant that Alwyn had just completed the score for another Irish-related espionage thriller, *I See a Dark Stranger* (1946, Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat), and a year later would compose the score for Launder’s *Captain Boycott* (1947). Such speculations can be attentive not just to the ‘game of mirroring’ between film and history but also to the affective, empathetic, paradoxical and intellectually creative possibilities that might be discovered within a given mise en scène. Alwyn also composed the score for *A Night to Remember* (1958, Roy Ward Baker), which brings us back to another ‘Belfast’.

This approach also raises the question of narrative, or rather the interpretative importance placed on film narratives and screenplays throughout this article. This is not a peculiarly Irish screen studies predilection, of course, but it invariably reinforces a conservative, conformist concept of cinema. Screenplays, and the dramatic rules and narrative conventions they impose, should be among the least important features of film criticism (and filmmaking, in my view), and to prioritise the centrality of ‘story’ rather than attending to how a given film extends or curtails the imaginative possibilities of film and screen language can only serve to further exclude responses that might be more eclectic, inventive, associative, playful even.

Brereton describes ’71, for example, as an ‘evocative and visceral video-game-like thriller’, with ‘a storyline [that] provides a good example of a soldier’s view from outside while striving to hold the peace’. The narrative of ’71 may offer a distinctive take on the fugitive/homecoming theme along these lines, but Yann Demange is also clearly a cine-literate director,
and that should be acknowledged: for example, the protagonist’s name in the film, Private Hook, like the ex-military doctor’s remarks about soldiers being used as ‘meat’ by the British army, evokes Zulu (1964, Cy Endfield), while nods to The Battle of Algiers (1966, Gillo Pontecorvo) are hardly surprising given Demange’s French-Algerian background. Similarly, while there may be a world of difference—in production values, if nothing else—between the depiction of rioting in ’71 or Belfast and that in various films from Hennessy (1975, Don Sharp) to In the Name of the Father (1993, Jim Sheridan), in strictly narrative terms they all share the same synecdochical function: the occasion of chaos from which the action will unfold.

Meanwhile, Belfast’s Oscar for Best Original Screenplay was awarded in recognition of its conformity to a typically Hollywood-style mode of production and representation. To ask whether its ‘story’ can be ‘decoded as an ahistorical, nostalgic love letter to the city of Belfast and its inhabitants’ seems rhetorical and detracts from an assessment of its filmic qualities, as do speculations about Branagh’s British/Irish/Northern Irish/Ulster identity. To lament that Belfast ‘provides little evidence of Catholics and Protestants actually intermingling on the ground, before or after the conflict begins’ seems to indict the film for failing to be something it doesn’t set out to be. It is, as Brereton himself acknowledges, more a musical in the making than a serious example of political filmmaking in which, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière, politics is put to the test of cinema, not cinema to the test of politics.3

The Belfast of Belfast is an imaginary place, every bit as unreal as the expressionistic urban world of Odd Man Out or the heightened pseudo-vérité urban labyrinth of ’71. Its black-and-white ‘utopian’ depiction of a North Belfast working-class community is of course being rendered entirely through a child’s perspective or viewpoint (and here, it might not compare favourably with, say, The Butcher Boy (1997, Neil Jordan), The Spirit of the Beehive (1973, Victor Erice) or The Enchanted Desna (1964, Yuliya Solntseva), while the opening (colour) aerial shots of today’s Titanic Quarter, tourism, etc. seem nothing more than a visually clichéd assertion of post-conflict progress, albeit of the late capitalist variety. The film’s references to the popular cinema of the period and narrative configuring of events and confrontations in terms of Westerns such as High Noon (1952, Fred Zinnemann) or Gunfight at the O.K. Corral (1957, John Sturges) are cosmetic rather than allegorical but do—like

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Van Morrison’s music—evoke a more complex history of postwar popular culture in Belfast. For all its formal conventionality and explicit sentimentality, I’m still disinclined to agree that its ‘filmic re-creation’ of Belfast—like that of *Odd Man Out* or ’71—‘need[s] to be framed alongside on-the-ground ethnographic-based investigations, coupled with a broad range of critical historical and political analysis’. Perhaps what we need now are ‘filmic re-creations’ of Belfast framed by cinematographic-based speculations and experiments, coupled with a more ‘immanent and intimate’ knowledge of film histories.