Teasing Out Allusions: A Reply to Des O’Rawe’s Response to 'Troubles and Northern Ireland: Representations in Film of Belfast as a Site of Conflict' by Pat Brereton

Pat Brereton

Irish Studies in International Affairs, Volume 33, Number 2, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South 2022, pp. 312-315 (Article)

Published by Royal Irish Academy
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2022.0016

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/859217

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=859217
Teasing Out Allusions

A REPLY TO DES O’RAWE’S RESPONSE TO ‘TROUBLES AND NORTHERN IRELAND: REPRESENTATIONS IN FILM OF BELFAST AS A SITE OF CONFLICT’ BY PAT BRERETON

Pat Brereton
School of Communications, Dublin City University

I thank Des O’Rawe for his fascinating response to my paper, where he highlights a range of issues with my reading of three ‘British’ films focused on Belfast. For a detailed exploration of the historiography of (southern) Irish filmmaking and debates over provenance and ownership, see Historical Dictionary of Irish Cinema, which suggests that funding and

---


---

Author’s email: pat.brereton@dcu.ie; ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1681-7202

Irish Studies in International Affairs, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 312–315, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South © 2022 The Author(s). This is an open access article licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Open Access funding provided by IReL.
directorial control serve as a shorthand for my provocative typology of these films, all the while accepting that so-called ‘national cinema’ is not a fixed category. To continue the debate and, it is hoped, encourage more reflection, let me respond to some of O’Rawe’s insightful and provocative comments.

First I shall respond to the claim that this paper ‘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’. Having spent decades teaching ‘Film History 101’ classes, I recall classics including D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Leni Riefenstahl’s homage to Hitler in *Triumph of the Will* (1935), alongside the explicit Soviet propaganda of Sergei Eisenstein, including most notably *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)—which has particular relevance to the current war in Ukraine—and how the infamous ‘Odessa Steps sequence’ might be reimagined and recontextualised. Certainly film and filmic history constantly negotiate tensions around propaganda and conflictual interpretations of historical reality, which are of course themselves open to contestation. But as a film scholar, I would argue that the medium has earned the right to be investigated, at least as a proxy, while not expecting historians to be cinephiles or to unpack audience perceptions and creative interpretations of history.

I totally agree, as affirmed by O’Rawe, that many comparative connections and traces from films like *West Side Story* (1961) are left unexplored. My excuses would include lack of time and lack of knowledge, but I agree that beyond intertextual connections with other films, teasing out allusions to filmmaking itself might be a very fruitful avenue to explore. However, I might suggest that only film scholars and cineastes would care that Carol Reed’s regular cinematographer, Robert Krasker, also worked on *The Third Man* and Lean’s *Great Expectations*. Audiences and readers might want it spelled out what this specifically adds to a reading of *Odd Man Out*, beyond a ‘game of mirroring’ between film and history.

I might specifically take issue with the critique of narrative strategies in ‘Smoke and Mirrors’. Again, I would suggest that this is what ‘ordinary audiences’ explicitly focus on when engaging with texts. As an environmental film scholar, having spent decades examining film to explore how it might promote—both explicitly and implicitly—environmental agendas, I would argue that it is simplistic to affirm that there is a monolithic ‘conservative, conformist concept of cinema’. This debate of course has been prevalent from the start of film scholarship, with tensions between Bordwell et al.’s ‘classical Hollywood cinema’ structure, which
dominates our reading of Hollywood narrative and its strict rules of engagement, as against avant-garde and more ‘radical’ modes of filmmaking. Irish ‘national’ film scholarship over the years has certainly fed into these debates.

However, to be provocative again and as an aside, I might suggest that film students and cultural historians could draw some fascinating comparisons between the classic romantic evocation of the Irish-American emigrant coming home in John Ford’s *The Quiet Man* (1952) and the stunning contemporary ‘art house’ evocation of female coming-of-age in rural Ireland in Colm Bairéad’s *An Cailín Ciúin* [The Quiet Girl] (2022). I certainly do not agree that ‘screenplays, and the dramatic rules and narrative conventions they impose, should be among the least important features of film criticism’. Audiences engage with film through storyline and narrative structures as well as through generic conventions and expectations. Nonetheless, I do concede that conventional narrative structures can of course be restrictive, and echo the call for more ‘eclectic’ and ‘playful’ modes of engagement. But for textual analysis of film, one needs the actual filmic text to speak to this rather than just setting up the prospect as a wishful fantasy. As for appearing to dish *Belfast* for winning the Best Original Screenplay Oscar and conforming to a typical Hollywood-style mode of production and representation: while I might agree at some level, as film (history) scholars I think we need to be careful of unilaterally critiquing mainstream and populist texts. My probably overly critical assessment that the story can be ‘decoded as an ahistorical, nostalgic love letter to the city of Belfast and its inhabitants’ is by all accounts striving to be provocative, but I attempted to illustrate these specific attributes through my textual reading. O’Rawe’s suggestion that this ‘seems rhetorical and detracts from an assessment of its filmic qualities’, I respectfully counter, requires more unpacking of what is meant, with specific examples.

Finally, I totally agree that the films under discussion represent imaginary places, with *Belfast* being ‘every bit as unreal as the expressionist urban world of *Odd Man Out* or the heightened pseudo-vérité urban labyrinth of ’71’. I would particularly love to hear more concerning how audiences and Irish society ‘post Troubles’ now need more ‘filmic re-creations’ of Belfast framed by cinematographic-based speculations and experiments, coupled with a more ‘immanent and intimate’ knowledge.

---

of film histories. One hopes that popular fare such as *Belfast* can spark such future innovation, since film as both a historical and a future-based medium speaks to audiences across the regions. Mass media including film generally needs to connect with audience pleasures, while helping to provoke new imaginaries and ways of seeing both historical tensions and political realities into the future.