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Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation
(review)

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Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation, by Lance Pettitt, 320 pp. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. (New York: St. Martin's Press). \$74.95 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper).

No one who has a serious interest in Irish electronic media should be without Lance Pettitt's *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation*. In the relatively short space of just over three hundred pages, this book manages a clear and carefully researched synopsis of the history of film and broadcast in Ireland, a detailed account of the specific films and programs that defined Irish electronic media in the past century, and a useful commentary on the creative, cultural, and political forces with which individuals working in the film and broadcast industries had to content. There are other books, like James MacKillop's *Contemporary Irish Cinema*, that offer more detailed assessments of individual films or broadcast programs, but none have the scholarly breadth or social relevance of Pettitt's study. Indeed, this book stands as required reading for anyone interested in the cultural forces shaping twentieth-century Ireland.

Although throughout the work Pettitt ranges freely and comfortably between media, he divides his study into two parts: "Cinema" and "Television." The latter also gives a very good overview of Irish radio in both the North and the Republic. It progresses according to carefully detailed outlines—suggesting that its publishers hope that it will become a textbook for any number of Irish Studies courses—that give one a clear sense of each chapter's aims without succumbing to a plodding or predictable style.

Pettitt begins with a chapter on Irish history that would be extraneous to anyone familiar with the topic were it not for his exemplary treatment of the vexed issues of colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonialism (with and without the hyphen). While most studies invoking these terms move forward with superheated rhetoric toward foregone conclusions, Pettitt pays his readers the compliment of assuming that they have functioning brains, and so suppresses polemics in favor of exposition. The result is that readers come away with a far clearer and far more sophisticated sense of the terms than any number of studies by the holy trinity of Fanon, Said, and Bhabha could hope to produce. Pettitt also articulates the problems of defining a national cinema as cogently as one would expect to find anywhere. By the time that readers encounter his commentary on specific films, they already have both the lexicon and the background necessary to judge for themselves the merits of the works to which he refers.

Though by no means encyclopedic, *Screening Ireland* does a fine job focusing attention on representative films from early silent works like *Irish Destiny* to the always problematic *The Quiet Man*. In assessing these efforts, Pettitt takes a realistic look at the difficulties confronted by independent Irish filmmakers

and at the at times uneasy alliances between Irish, English, and American production teams. In every instance, Pettitt avoids the chauvinism to which lesser scholars would too easily succumb. Instead, while clearly articulating the financial and logistic problems that Irish cinema continues to face, he eschews didacticism, and leaves readers to reach their own conclusions on the efficacy of the solutions that have to this point been applied.

As he takes up films from the 1970s to the present, Pettitt offers a luminous and detailed account of the recent development of the Irish film industry. Pettitt has a clear sense both of the threat posed by the influence of Hollywood — dubbed “Californication” by Oliver St. John Gogarty three-quarters of a century ago — and of the desperate need for the resources that the American film companies can supply. In his overview of the range of films that have appeared on Irish screens in the past twenty years, Pettitt provides a welcome reminder of important works to those already familiar with the field and a helpful crib for anyone else trying to work up a bluffer’s knowledge of the subject. The second section, on television, is if anything even stronger, particularly in terms of cultural studies. Irish cinema, for all its independence, hews fairly closely to the Hollywood formula followed everywhere from West Los Angeles to Bombay. Television, and to a lesser degree radio, with significantly lesser economic demands on production, encourages greater independence and specialization.

Screening Ireland deftly assesses the way popular shows formed and were formed by Irish culture. Even readers who never saw Gay Byrnes on “The Late, Late Show” or Dermot Morgan in “Father Ted” will have a clear sense of the tremendous impact exerted by these and other culutral icons from Irish broadcasting. Pettitt has an unerring sense about what makes popular television popular, and he conveys it without condescension or a deadly scholastic tone that would turn the most creative into the most banal. He not only assures us that it is alright to like such programs, he also offers solid intellectual arguments to show why we should.

Perhaps the most beneficial section for non-Irish readers will be the careful examination of documentaries and docu-dramas (a term Pettitt himself is far too sophisticated to invoke). This is an area of broadcasting least familiar to those who do not watch Irish television on a regular basis, yet Pettitt’s economical prose highlights important works, details crucial scenes, and still manages to provide a thoughtful overview. Like the rest of the book, this section manages to be both comprehensive and insightful. All in all, *Screening Ireland* is a thoroughly enjoyable study. It provides details, insights, and coverage available nowhere else. And it is the next best thing to watching the films or broadcasts themselves.

∞ MICHAEL PATRICK GILLESPIE