

Exodus, Arrival & Return: The Generic Discourse of Irish

Diasporic and Exilic Narrative Films

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Film is particularly adept at detailing in a visceral way and, equally importantly, in an emotional manner, a diasporic and exilic experience. This experience carries deep resonances in Irish life and only now can it be relegated to historical memory as work opportunities have opened up at home, particularly for those secondary school graduates who have passed the once aptly titled Leaving Certificate. In the 1990s, in the wake of the so-called Celtic Tiger economy, the trend in emigration has been reversed. Peadar Kirby (2002: 55) reports that Ireland in 1998 experienced a net immigration of 22,800 people. Nonetheless, emigration/immigration narratives have informed and continue to inform popular cultural representations of the Irish in films, such as the ones studied here: Irvin Kershner's *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (1964), Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002), Atom Egoyan's *Felicia's Journey* (1999), and Nicola Bruce's *I Could Read the Sky* (1999). The corpus of films in this genre is plentiful, and would include New York-based and inspired Irish-immigrant films—Jimmy Smallhorne's *2by4* (1998), and Bill Muir's *Exiled* (1999)—discussed by Martin McLoone (2000:186) as indicative of an ongoing interest in blue-collar Irish ethnicity and its intersection with themes of masculinity and racism.

Historians Donald Harman Akenson (1993) and Kerby Miller (1985) have taken up the task of detailing Irish emigration and have mapped a remarkable terrain for others to tread. In particular, they have argued that the Irish rapidly assimilated in to American culture, notably through inter-ethnic marriage, and quickly moved out of the ghettos in which they initially found themselves, earning, as they did, the sobriquet of 'lace-curtain Irish ' or members of an *arriviste* middle class. Of particular sociological interest is the research of Liam Greenslade (1992) who adapts the theories of Frantz Fanon on the effects of colonialism to draw attention to the remarkably high incidence of Irish people who live in England diagnosed as suffering from mental illness. Cultural critics must, I think, initiate a discussion of the various species that belong to the genus of artistic productions which mediate this diasporic and exilic condition. By so doing, we contribute to the understanding of the effects of this experience on individuals. Emigration and the subsequent immigration are also at the core of the Irish experience. We tap into not just history, folk memory, perceived and real national and ethnic injustices, but may also broaden historical accounts of the disparate experience of the Irish immigrants through analyses of cultural representation.

The impact of immigration is often expressed via memory-pictures of the homeland, themselves filtered through trauma and nostalgia. Irish diasporic and exilic films naturally utilize exodus, arrival and return narrative structures. But any consideration of this genre would expect to struggle to find a suitable framework for describing, firstly, the great exodus from Ireland to North America, Australia, England, New Zealand or other territories due to famine, political and/or religious prejudice or simple economic advancement; secondly, the difficulties of these immigrants' settlement and assimilation in their adopted country; and thirdly, the return for some

of these immigrants to their native land. This tripartite structure provides the platform on which a diasporic and exilic generic discourse is played out.

In theoretical terms, perhaps the one major film critic to address specular displacement is Hamid Naficy. In 1993, he published *The Making of Exile Cultures* on the use of local cable and television stations and programmes run and produced, respectively, by the Iranian community in Los Angeles. He pinpoints their exile experience as liminal, or on a threshold between two cultures. What Naficy proposes for the cultural critic to consider is a case study of one group's reaction to enforced travel and resettlement. The Iranian Revolution in 1978-9, added to the eight year long Iran-Iraq war, drove many hundreds of thousands of people out of Iran seeking a better, or simply safer, life. Many of these individuals became refugees in North America. They faced numerous challenges, among which a foreign culture and a foreign language figured strongly. Naficy traces the development of Iranian television programming in Los Angeles, discovering that it is typified by secular and royalist emphases, within which constant reference to the homeland is evoked.

In his wide-ranging 2001 study, *An Accented Cinema*, Naficy distinguishes between and among ethnic filmmakers, exilic filmmakers and diasporic filmmakers. To Naficy, ethnic filmmakers are typically American born individuals, such as Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese, who have made their careers by exploring their own ethnic group in America. I would extend the phrase to ethnic films (by contrast, Naficy's aim is to reassert the primacy of auteurist approaches within film studies, and to bring attention to the courage of individual filmmakers) in which category one could put the Irish gangster films *State of Grace* (Phil Joanou, 1990), *Miller's Crossing* (Joel

and Ethan Coen, 1991), and *Road to Perdition* (Sam Mendes, 2002), works which utilize Irishness as an adjective rather than as an unstable noun. Naficy regards diasporic filmmakers as economic migrants by choice, including second generation immigrants, who are consumed by statelessness, his examples including black British films *Territories* (Issac Julien, 1985) and *Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986). He sees exilic filmmakers as unwillingly absent from their country, and thereby obsessed with the homeland. It is arguably true that both perspectives are at work in Irish and Irish-related films within this genre, and are not mutually exclusive, and that inclusiveness allows us to give recognition to this wider Irish community, pushing critics and commentators to reconsider what the nature of Irish cinema is. Inevitably, this genre places the national under a form of erasure, an instability that is both hybrid and transnational.

Naficy speculates that what distinguishes the exile from the emigrant (who, he argues, both deny the grief of loss) is a lapse by the former into childhood narcissism inflected by images of the lost homeland and by dreams of a glorious return. Naficy rightly implies, however, that these feelings of loss, and the various strategies to counter them, are worked through-- or simply exhibited-- in art, performance and cultural production in general. Exilic discourse has naturally been theorized as mapped to the experience of race (notably African-American), yet the act of immigration occurs within races and is undoubtedly more frequent. This commonality demands that we consider it carefully as it impacts on social and national relations much more forcefully than we may think. It also confronts a weakened identity formation within a deterritorialized psychological landscape, and it is one of the side-effects of globalization or, more historically, the rule of Empires.

Naficy provides a checklist of the ways such instabilities are evoked. He does not claim that specific formal strategies distinguish ethnic, exilic and diasporic films, but rather points to a cluster of techniques not usually found in combination in mainstream film. While exilic films are prone to more experimentation, diasporic films, since they are forward-looking, have greater potential for assimilation. In exilic films, then, it is common that the visual style is motivated not by action but by words and emotions, conveyed by an uneven pace, claustrophobic interiors, static shots of a rural homeland imaginary, and a concentration on transit points—boats, trains, buses. The narrative structure is often sparked by voice-over narration, native music, juxtapositions, flashbacks and a structured absence which laments lost people and places. The characters speak the dominant language with an accent and are often alienated and alone. Their general subject is identity and a journey forwards and backwards in search of a stable mental state/home. These features are most prominent in exilic films, less so in diasporic films, and may only be hinted in ethnic films, such as *Road to Perdition*. In both diasporic and exilic films, however, historicization is a necessary process, where a character will attempt to account for or recount his or her perceived failure. In turn, the homeland is often represented as a traumatic memory in exilic films, associated with an event in the past that was the catalyst for departure. In a more abstract manner, the audience is made aware of the tendency to embrace heightened emotions, a melancholy mood, hybridity, liminality, and even a fetishized tactility of objects, sounds and gestures (see Laura Marks' thoughts on a haptic cinema, 1999).

For many emigrants and immigrants, including this writer, the individual seems to progress through various emotional states. Do not all emigrants experience feelings of euphoria, escape

and adventure (witness the excitement and revelry of the Irish third class passengers in James Cameron's *Titanic* 1997), which are replaced gradually by a calm feeling as settlement and acceptance are achieved in the new land of their choice? This seems to be a period of hard work, routine, and certain kinds of reward. Then, I suspect, there come feelings connected to an Irish return, whether real or imagined. For some, this return is a nostalgic one, where they feel a particular warmth in remembrance, often dismissing the reasons for their original departure. For others, this return, I imagine, is a much more complicated affair, a bittersweet experience which calls into question the extent to which the Emigrant (now immigrant) has changed the attitudes the homeland country initially provided.

Studies in this genre thus far have been mainly historical and in the nature of a survey (see Curran 1989, Lourdeaux 1990, McIlroy 1999, Mulkerns 1999, Pettitt 2000, Rockett 1994, Slide 1988, Woll and Miller, 1987). Recently, Diane Negra (2001a) has made a theoretical turn to the field of cultural studies, focusing on star actress Colleen Moore in the 1920s, *Born an American*, Moore was nonetheless promoted by her producers as a safe and wholesome Irish immigrant, perfectly suited to stirring up a nostalgic past in its audience. Negra (2001b) sees similar uses of Irishness in recent Irish-American characters on television series in the late 1990s, programmes freighted, however, with the apparent responsibility to reassert a white, heterosexual, ethnic identity in the face of many Black and Latino shows. Generally, however, there has been no specific theorization of this popular Irish genre, which naturally reproduces itself--Jim Sheridan's *In America* (2003) being the most high-profile release to date of films concerned with the 'coming to America' narrative. *In America*, with its themes of illegal arrival (via the Canadian border), of loss (the family's youngest child has died), and its sense of claustrophobia

(the family moves into a dilapidated tenement building teeming with other illegal immigrants, and visually rendered as ill-lit, cluttered and menacing), drawn from Sheridan's own recollections of life as a newly-arrived immigrant in America, suggests the exilic filmmaker, though Sheridan more correctly belongs to the category of diasporic practitioner. Hence, I would argue, some modification needs to take place in order to apply Naficy's ideas to Irish emigrant/immigrant narratives.

Naficy's work provides us with theoretical tools to revisit this genre, and to put the Irish experience within the forefront of contemporary work on migrations and diasporic studies. In what follows, I touch upon briefly the way in which the trauma of separation from Ireland seems less pronounced in those films that relate to the experience of the Irish in Canada and the United States as distinct from those of the Irish in England. Arguably, this is because my Canadian and American examples--*The Luck of Ginger Coffey* and *Gangs of New York* are diasporic films, whereas my "English" examples--*Felicia's Journey* and *I Could Read the Sky* are exilic films. Diasporic films, then, are about the process of integration and redefinition starting with arrival while exilic films are about the trauma of departure, do not envisage assimilation and are backward-looking.

Canada and the United States—The stuff that dreams are made of?

The Luck of Ginger Coffey is an adaptation of the Irish writer Brian Moore's 1960 novel, and the latter also wrote the screenplay. Moore's early fiction fluctuated between diasporic statelessness (*I Am Mary Dunne*) and exilic nostalgia (*Fergus*) (see McIlroy 1988 & 1989), although this

particular film narrative is mainly diasporic. Ginger has lived up to a year in Montreal, along with his wife and teenage daughter. His wife has decided they are to return to Dublin, and has her suitcases already half packed, and trunks already sent on. But Ginger has been unwilling to commit to buy the boat tickets. He strives to keep his dignity while his family struggles to pay the rent and even eat. Eventually, he takes a job as proofreader at the local newspaper, but its low pay convinces his wife to leave him. His daughter elects to stay with her father, who must now take a second job delivering diapers to make ends meet. But even this sacrifice is not enough, and he watches his wife take up with a senior co-worker at the newspaper. Feeling exhausted and emasculated, he drinks the night away and ends up being arrested for urinating in public, with his heavily accented joviality mistaken by the francophone officer as an attempt at bribery. His day in court, however, attended by his wife, allows him to face a degree of historicisation, for he must account for his behaviour by explaining his life's problems. He admits that he has not provided for his wife and child. The charge is dismissed, and he and his wife take a slow walk in the snow back to her apartment.

This open ending leaves unclear what their futures will entail. We are struck throughout the film by the claustrophobic interiors, the accented Irish voice of Ginger in the face of dominant English and Scottish tones. In one scene, when he argues with his wife at the newspaper office, the two-shot is "crowned" by a picture of Queen Elizabeth, raising the question whether the "Dominion" of Canada is just another form of prison for these characters. What this film develops more than others is that the children of immigrants are more able and desirous of fitting in to the new culture, illustrated by the daughter's enthusiasm to go to an ice-skating party. She does not seem to suffer the indecision afflicting her parents. But perhaps that is to emerge later in

her life. As a diasporic film, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* is imbued with a melancholy, suggested in its slow, often uneven pacing. We are privy to a seemingly endless number of shots of Ginger walking in the snow, getting on and off buses, entering cold, forbidding buildings. There is almost a documentary feel to the film created by the removed camera treatment. The film is a study of the trauma of arrival and the difficulty of assimilation. The homeland is never visualized or romanticized; Ginger never believes that a return to Ireland is an answer to their struggles. His wife Vera asserts her independence in Canada not just by leaving him, but by seeking a job, taking up with another man, letting her daughter live with Ginger, and rejecting any pull of religion to curtail her conduct. Ginger and Vera's relationship and their self-perception of themselves have arguably been enhanced by the knowledge of their diasporic statelessness.

Acts of definition and redefinition are also taken up by Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, a diasporic film rather than an ethnic one, not because the filmmaker is not Irish, but because the film focuses on Irish arrival and assimilation, and because it puts the state under question. The film explores the world of the Five Points, the lower eastside of New York, alighting briefly on 1846, and then mostly 1863. These two dates are not arbitrary. The first alludes to the Irish famine years, while the latter pitches us into the era of the American Civil War, incorporating the anti-black, anti-draft, and anti-immigrant riots of the period (see Ignatiev 1995). The arbitrary stoning of newly-arrived Irish is not exactly a warm welcome. We are introduced to Priest Vallon, the leader of the Dead Rabbits, an ethnic Irish gang that loses the challenge for dominance of the Five Points to Bill the Butcher and his "Nativists." By the latter term, we deduce that they are the American-born descendants of those who fought the British for

independence in the 1770s. The waves of Irish immigration, the abolition of black slavery, and the liberalizing stance of Abraham Lincoln's tendentious government threaten these nativists' sense of control. In an odd way, it is essentially a Protestant versus Catholic struggle, with both groups overshadowed by larger nation building events around them. The entrance of the troops *stylistically* recalls Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence, but the content is inverted in political sympathy, for here Yankee liberalism uses force (with Scorsese's apparent approval) to suppress recidivist tribal conflicts. With the knowledge that Scorsese first thought of adapting Herbert Asbury's 1928 book in the 1970s, it is tempting to draw an Irish parallel which depicts the naive hope of the time that British troops entering Northern Ireland would overcome the sectarian strife. We know differently, of course, and perhaps Scorsese realized this naivety by ensuring that the last shot we see in the film is Priest Vallon's son, Amsterdam, escaping the city which magically dissolves into the New York skyline of pre September 11, 2001. The World Trade Center's Twin Towers are a potent reminder that violent conflict has not been erased from the American psyche nor from New York's history; to the contrary, Scorsese seems to suggest that ethnic violence defines it (a somewhat simplistic erasure of the global dimension to the issue).

Amsterdam Vallon seeks revenge because of the killing of his father, but he achieves his overall success by mobilizing and reinventing the Dead Rabbits while simultaneously using the ballot box (albeit disingenuously), and the iconography of the Catholic Church in relation to martyrdom, to press the Irish Catholic ethnic case. A ballot and bullet strategy with a sprinkle of religion has many contemporary Irish resonances. As an Italian-American, Scorsese is clearly on the side of the new immigrants—indeed Amsterdam's friend has an Italian surname—but one can argue that the film's politics are fruitfully confused in places to further establish its

credentials as a diasporic, making allegiances provisional. The audience sympathizes with the new arriving Irish, who are abused and often conscripted for the army straight from the arriving boat (truly one of the great inclusive crane shots in cinematic history), and yet also has some sympathy for the nativists, who are only slightly less poor. Then there is the complexity of the Irish nativists in 1863 who were Dead Rabbits in 1846. For Scorsese, then, the Immigrant/American is a Derridean both/and construction. Scorsese himself is an Italian-American ethnic filmmaker who has made an Irish diasporic film.

England—The Old Enemy?

One of the filmmakers Naficy relies on for much of the structure of his book is the Canadian Atom Egoyan; it is, in retrospect, fitting that this disconnected Armenian, who was born in Egypt, and who immigrated to British Columbia at the age of three, would be the director of the film version of William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey*. The sense of dislocation so clearly apparent in Egoyan's earlier films, such as *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *Exotica* (1994), is brought to bear here on the relationship between Ireland and England. Within the structure of the film, flashbacks tell us the reason for Felicia's sudden departure to the English Midlands: she has become pregnant by an Irish boy who has joined the British army. For Felicia's father, she has disgraced the family's name twice over—by being pregnant outside wedlock and by consorting with a man reinforcing the power of imperial Britain. Hence his outburst that she has the “enemy” within her.

These scenes of the father's anger re-filmed in the small Irish town atmosphere, replete with an imposing stone church and in the countryside strewn with the ruins of ancient stone buildings. To this clichéd tale of woe, Egoyan grafts Trevor's narrative of how the young girl is taken in by Hilditch, the serial killer. Felicia is a transient, living at first in a bed and breakfast, then a shelter, and finally in Hilditch's house, narrowly escaping her own murder. Felicia's narrative is punctuated with transit points—the ferry boat to England, the bus station, the bus stop where she says goodbye to her boyfriend, the endless walking under and over bridges, and the car rides with Hilditch. The serial killer arranges the abortion to “cleanse” Felicia, and as she undergoes the procedure, she dreams of a happy family scene back in Ireland where her son is eagerly awakened by her father. Further, the time has come for her boyfriend to be accepted as the father of her son. It's another imaginary glorious return, as a foetus is literally sucked out of her. Felicia is representative of that other short exile to England that thousands of Irish women must take every year to receive abortion services. The positive ending, if we can call it that, is that Felicia remains in England to build a new life, though we sense her Irish past will continue to haunt her dreams. The desire of the main character to return successfully to Ireland is found in *Felicia's Journey* and *I Could Read The Sky*; at the same time, both films associate Ireland with trauma

This notion of a haunting past is developed thoroughly in Nichola Bruce's *I Could Read the Sky*, an adaptation of a Booker nominated work by Timothy O'Grady and Steve Pyke. Like Philip Donnellan's unbroadcast documentary *The Irishmen: An Impression of Exile* (1965) (see Pettitt 2000: 85). Bruce's film is a meditation on the Irish working class in England. While the film disrupts chronological time and material space, a fairly straightforward narrative of the elderly

Irish male immigrant to England is established. In this instance, the nameless man grew up in the country in the west of Ireland, and because he was not the first born male in the family, he could not inherit the farm. This is his first loss. He travels to work in England where he does odd-jobs all his life, punctuated by the sadness in losing touch with his brother Joe, the death of his Uncle, father, mother, and, finally, his wife Maggie.

In the man's reverie and contemplation, his historicization, we see his liminality. He lists all the things he could never do in England, including "acknowledging the Queen...follow cricket...speak with men wearing collars...understand their jokes..." He is an alienated individual, locked visually in a small rented apartment with only his memories to transcend his existence. Again, we see in his visions a return to transit points of boat, train, and car; we see a structured absence of lost people—family, friends, lovers; we see a focus on sadness, emotions, and inaction. Synaesthesia is also common, where all his senses are markers of loss—I have a sound inside of me but I can't find it," "I could taste the brine of tears coming into my mouth"; "Her touch, light as a small breeze"; and after his father's burial, he could smell the burning of a fire. Furthermore, fetishized objects and clothing convey the then and now. Of note here is the accordion he brings from Ireland, but after his work accident in England, he struggles to play; it remains, however, in his room. The second-hand jacket his mother bought him at a market, with the label "J.Brady," is particularly poignant. He wears another's jacket, and even uses this name for his own at work. His cousin's soliloquy sums it up best: "We are unknown and unrecorded. We have many names but none our own." Dissolves, juxtapositions and static shots meld with the shards of Irish culture desperately clung to in England—the radio to listen to Gaelic games,

and the pub where story-telling, dance and song can announce the familiar, if only for a short time.

Perhaps Naficy's major challenge in his work, and in any application and nuanced modulation of his theories to Irish-related films is the fluidity and instability of the categories of ethnic, diasporic and exilic films and filmmakers. As we have seen, this is most evident in *In America*, a film that effectively breaches many of the categories nominated by Naficy. What distinguishes *Road to perdition*, for example, from the bulk of films discussed here is that it, alongside numerous other films with second or third-generation Irish characters, presents Irishness as a fully assimilated ethnicity. I would propose therefore that, as well as taking careful note of Naficy's visual pointers to the construction of exilic and diasporic narratives, we should consider the common thread that binds together these films to be the theme of Irishness under stress. This is particularly related to a sense of past trauma and thus reverses the convention of Ireland as functioning as a therapeutic location. Where Luke Gibbons (2002) has argued that exists in *The Quiet Man* (1952) as the locus for Sean Thornton's working through of an event in his American past, these films propose the opposite—that in American or Britain their immigrant characters may find refuge from their Irish past. Whether forward-looking diasporic films, such as the mainstream *Gangs of New York* or backward-looking exilic films, such as the highly textured and experimental *I could Read the Sky*, a rhetoric of loss and grief burns at the core of these works, and reveals their distinctive discourse.

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