

Degeneration Gap

Bob Quinn

There is a rule of thumb which says that whoever can write a personal cheque for a million is a rogue and a thief. Another rule states that whoever can't is a loser.

Are these also the ground rules for film? That nothing counts, not family or tribe, flag or country, not love or hatred, good or evil, only The Movie and the proof of its existence: money. The latter certainly brings clarity, melts the elements of talent, creativity and ethics into one useful solvent: corruptibility.

How fares the film maker's canvas in the Irish microcosm of this western experiment?

Are actors now only people who aspire to do commercials? Are novelists defined only as those who produce clit-lit? Are writers really people who manufacture soap opera dialogue on a piecework basis? Is everybody actually working on a film script? I know that producers manqué make deals, accountants and lawyers sense spare fat and move in. But must directors sublimate their imagination to technique? Are film editors allowed an attention spell of but three seconds max? Is the real subplot a comfortable life? Yes, film schools teach words like semiotics to get their cut from wannabe's and film boards offer money for dressing short film mutton up as if it were expensive lamb. It is certain that the keeper of new certainties, the marketeer, makes silk purses out of sows ears and that the tabloidisation of all media reinforces the illusion. But do we really need more moolah, must the global fundamentalists control the supply, must good cinema die? And so on and so forth, blah, blah, blah.

I've been asking these rhetorical questions for too many years and even I am getting tired of the device. As the commissioning person from TV3 serenely confided to me recently, in a drink situation: You're a fool, you've always been a fool. Pressed for elaboration she angrily told me to fuck off -twice. I did not obey, never have. But the lady was right. The illusion of power may make for arrogance but sometimes it can hit the nail on the head.

I had long before slumped into this fool condition after exposure to such accomplished films as *Trojan Eddie*, *When Brendan Met Trudy*, *Spin the Bottle*, *I Went Down*, *Dead Bodies*, *Man About Dog*, *Capital Letter* and all the other works of daring

tightrope walkers, the new breed of Irish film maker which tries to grapple with Sir A.J. O'Reilly's dictum: Ireland is a good place to tog out in but the real game is elsewhere.

Oddly, we are now in the same boat, Sir Tony and I, in that his and my generation is properly obsolete. Our only consolation is begrudging film criticisms applied according to taste i.e. social, economic and political context ignored; music too loud and too much; dialogue tripping off the tongue too rapidly, (how the West Wing won), most of it lost in the supranational dialect of DART, or in incomprehensible Belfast, Dublinese or fake Culchie; the repetition of the word 'fuck' as a substitute for humour; the cuts of pop video velocity. Ultimately, an air of desperation to achieve currency in an unforgiving market. Alas for us, our younger children and nieces and nephews 'get it', sense that these entertaining films truly represent their uprooted world of total insecurity. My generation, not reared on MTV, is lost in this new dispensation.

Gawd be with the oul days when Goethe could finish *Faust* in his old age. Bunuel and Fellini did great work from relative zimmer frames, Huston made *The Dead* wearing an oxygen mask. Tarkovsky and Kieslowski died a little younger – prematurely aged by horror at the discovery that market freedom is as unforgiving as Stalinism. Bertolucci, Altman, Godard and co., bless them, still sail aristocratically above it all.

Nevertheless the audience for the art of the 21st century is now under twenty five, ne c'est pas? No, said the ex-head of United Artists to me recently as we together furtively enjoyed a fine print of *Great Expectations*. In the USA, he pronounced sadly, the target audience is fifteen. The reader knows that Ireland is now a figment of U.S. economic fantasies - as Morgan O'Sullivan put it: 'We're a branch office to America' - so where does that leave us? Competing with the USA-made teenflicks that represented 19 of the world box office Top 20 in 2003. Is that the base pressure that's on film makers? This July I counted 119 cinema screens in Dublin alone. No Irish film was being screened, not even at the National Film Institute. Could there not be a continuous repertory of the by now substantial backlog of Irish film on show in this public institution? A good film has no sell by date.

In these strange times is it true that the more intelligent the script the less the chance of financing, the better the product the narrower the exhibition? For veteran film makers the telephone rings less frequently and then only from students doing theses. Age is a great leveller. Everyone over that quarter century watershed is a cinematic

curmudgeon. Must we now reverse the sixties adage and say: never trust anybody under thirty?

I saw *All About Eve* again in Paris last year. The likes of such a witty and literate script could hardly be made again. Older lovers of theatrical film must now search beyond the anglophone world to enjoy cinema. We can't forever depend on the Coen Bros. We look for good stories, long confident takes, little blood, less sex, confident words in English, but must increasingly turn to films by furriners other than Yanks. We have become imaginative migrants to Iran, India, France, South America (subtitles can also turn a poor film into a good script): we are cinema tourists. But we must savour the occasional; the accidental gem stumbled on in the oysterbed of youthful consumption here. There are reassuring films which we may with luck come upon, *About Schmidt*, for instance. But they are generally lost in the ocean of tellyfilm in the cinema, capsized in the gushing springs of youth. I was among that minority at the Galway Film Fleadh a couple of years ago which laughed hysterically at every tiny Mylesian nuance of Wesley Burroughs *Rat* - a miracle film that never travelled, I'm told: not a naked thigh to be seen. Which brings me to a rather intimate point.

Considering that the *Guest of the Nation* theme had been previously worked out (by O'Connor and Behan *inter alia*), might *The Crying Game* have travelled so far if the heroine hadn't revealed her mickey?

This taste for tumescent gimmickry has been gradual and its coming has been, like Philip Larkin's sex, too late for me. A stain is left on life but not that stain which Beckett had in mind. But, hmm, it is thirty years since Ronnie Saunders of the long-defunct Irish Film Theatre at Earlsfort Terrace told me that even his avant-garde audience only packed out for tits and bums; a poor print of *The Decameron*, daring for its time, was showing. In retrospect, weren't we shockingly deprived of titillation? Alright, there was buggery in *Deliverance*, gay lavatory love in *Reefer and the Model*, gay kisses in *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, Kerrygold lubricant in *Last Tango in Paris* but, when you think of it, nothing explicit: respectable body parts only, all others powerfully suggested. The staple diet was love, kisses and tomato ketchup. Nowadays the biological imperative is naked and in our guilty faces. What next? Faeces, anybody?

On another occasion, when I queued at the old IFT for a second house of 8 1/2, the emerging audience looked as if Fellini had cast them: lovers of film had osmosed into his grotesque extras. Corollarologically their children, the majority audience of to-

days films, seem to be extras in a film version of Margaret Mead's *Growing Up in Samoa*; they look, oh my god, you know, SO like de Caprio, so beautiful, so sated. So sad. But they get it.

The optimistic view is that, in a twisted way, cinema now more explicitly reflects the suppressed fears, dreams and desires of the targeted audience who then imitate the actors. I began smoking like Bogart when I was nineteen. For the young, digi/celluloid narcissism appears to be the main, self-referential reality. Marketeers have learned this lesson well, quickly identified those with most disposable income. Middle aged parents and OAP's need not apply. Marketeers teach distributors teach financiers teach film boards teach television schedulers teach producers teach directors teach omnipoles who teach audiences. Recently in public, an RTE executive delicately referred to the sorry situation as the 'exigencies of the market'. TV people follow fashion rapidly. Come to think of it, they and their Big Brother, the advertisers, are largely responsible for the mess. We who are old and grey and nodding by the radio are thrown occasional crumbs. For instance I liked *When Harry Became a Tree*. It had a mittel-European surrealism which is an old-fashioned taste, now called intellectual snobbery. I don't think that film travelled far either. Nevertheless I wish to be inundated, soon please, with immigrant cinematic sensibilities from Eastern Europe and Africa.

I saw these developments coming long ago but let me now, without a blindfold, face the only pertinent truth: after forty years in film and TV I still can't write the above definitive personal cheque for a million. I can buy my round but I am a loser, backing the wrong nag. Which nag? Nag, nag, nag, maybe.

Instead of being focussed on making films to provide a cosy lifestyle I foolishly took the thorny Diego Rivera dictum literally: if its not propaganda its not art. In mitigation it occurs to me to ask film makers what, apart from an ego trip, is film for, if not to influence the *Weltgeist*? Does it do so? Does it ever? It does like fuck. There, I said it. But if deluded enough to want to change the world, start small: say, with a small Atlantic island whose hinterland virtues were totally denigrated and filleted for *Bord Fáilte* fodder; its hidden people buried alive, their history dismantled, regarded as rural idiocy by Stickies who had turned 'cúl le cine', ignored and overwhelmed by similar opportunist minds on a provincial learning curve in Dublin. The horse I backed was a small community in the West which represented for me the only coherent voice in this raucous trading post: the bilingual people of South Conamara who actually knew the US

and the UK intimately, whose sweat had built those faraway places, who were nearer to Boston than Dublin before Thatcher or her Irish gauleiters Harney, MacDowell and McCreevy were spawned. But this community, to which I subsequently attached myself like parasitical lichen to bedrock, still clung to its communal identity which had nothing to do with official nationalism. They and their fluent language were a tangible challenge. If we couldn't include them – on their terms! - in our *Weltanschauung*, what chance had Travellers, American Indians or black babies in our scheme of things? Come to think of it.....

Anyway, I spent over thirty years highlighting *muintir Chonamara*, trying to persuade the monoglots of the east that these people were more than Boucicault poitin makers or gormless navvies, much more than an excuse for the *cúpla focal*; that they were tough, hard-working, sharp survivors, way ahead of the game and also the repository of a pagan tradition and mythology as basic and universal as those which every decent artist in history, as well as every political demagogue, has dabbled in for inspiration. I think of Wagner, Bartok, O'Riada, Picasso, Grimm, De Maupassant, Keating, Campbell. It wasn't inspiration I needed, just an end to romantic prejudices against South Conamara and its people (which, as with much prejudice, is based on urban guilt). When times were bad, I recorded their emigrant lives in London, in Boston, in Germany. Now that times are good I've lost interest. To be honest, it would take too much of my diminishing energy to tackle the fascinating subject of their childrens bourgeoisification: no more symmetrical and self-sufficient potato ridges but a proliferation of motor mowers, deep freezers, satellite dishes, septic tanks and suburban bungalows. And the kids now play in Simpsonspeak. More power to their evolutionary spirit; adapt or perish and to hell with the planet. A comfortable life is all.

Despite this early realisation, I and some native fellow conspirators put South Conamara on silver screens a hundred times, paid it attention. What was the fruit of these labours?

Perhaps a mite of demystification, no more.

Perhaps also, and quite unintentionally, barefoot bimbos as Gaeilge, a soap opera in Irish but a growing respect for documentary film. Who's complaining except Kevin Myarse? TG4 is a broadcaster that still commands a smidgen of respect only because its linguistic brief has so far inhibited its becoming quite as stale, predictable and profitable as its motherhouse in Donnybrook or the CanWest3 invention up in

Tallaght. TV in general may be debased but it is still the real battleground, a position that must be retrieved by film makers; good cinema in the free market anglophone world is a museum. Until, perhaps, somebody is fool enough to make the next 'first feature film' as Gaeilge.

Yes, I'm still ranting: it's like smoking, an addiction that confuses the taste buds. Who else but me could have seen Damien O'Donnell's comedic *East is East* as racist tragedy?

To return to the main theme: has not the new world of homogeneity (which depends on exclusion and inequality!) made the over twenty-fives cinematically redundant? It has certainly overwhelmed my own modest, if eccentric, ambitions. So I happily continue with the logic of the loser.

But stay!

There are intimations that the horse of Irish self-respect is, for all the right stubborn reasons, riverdancing its way back through the jemmied stable door, overcoming its self-disgust. The world works in mysterious ways. For a small instance, more young people are trying to learn Irish. Thousands more are poking the bows of their fiddles into the dopey eyes of boybands. Soon the audience might even dance to the music instead of just drinking to it. More film makers may slim down to make realisable documentaries for TV rather than imitation movies for investors. And give their minds a holiday from film, like going to the theatre, reading books – but only if theatre people stop insulting film as something any ego can turn his/her hand to. Some good documentaries might be made, films that do not confuse 'daring' with exposed flesh. Isn't it strange that not a single decent documentary has emerged about the political crookery of the past thirty years? Safe hatchet jobs on ageing members of a moribund Church, yes. But politicos or millionaires? Even when the threat of litigation has vanished with the tribunals? No. Forget the stolid, bourgeois state of the Nation, Joyce industry boredom that passes for documentary. Must we always wait for Michael Moore? Why do we think three-chip mini DV and computer programmes were invented? To produce imitation Rembrandts? No, to catch reality in flight.

Whatever develops, I won't have time to write that personal cheque for a million which may remain the only important thing. Too late to get smart, to practise networking.

Never mind, timing is not everything. There's always one last small film - in my case every couple of years for the past thirty years. But how will young and more streetwise Irish film makers survive without too much compromise or disillusion? I quoted it twenty years ago and I'll do it again: The artist is a micro-organism that can survive in a chemical solution that would dissolve a rhinoceros' hoof.

The motto? Keep on keeping on and good luck to you There is always hope.

And of course, I made up those loathsome rules in the first paragraph. Here's a better one: You're not dead 'til you're buried, so don't fret.

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