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Institutional Boys: Adolescent Masculinity and Coming of Age in Ireland’s ‘Architecture of Containment’

The screen life of the wholesome, self-disciplined, Catholic family man of early propagandist filmmaking was a remarkably short one, and in the ‘doldrum’ decades from the 1940s to the late 1970s, filmmaking in Ireland was dominated by foreign productions. In 1980, however, a major breakthrough occurred with the establishment of the first Irish Film Board (1980–7), which fostered the beginnings of an indigenous film culture. Rather than endeavouring to construct ‘positive’ or entertaining visions of Irish life, however, much of the work that emerged out of this initiative served to expose the dark underbelly of the religious institutions which had shaped Irish national identity and, crucially, Irish manhood, as well as those which had been established to conceal aspects of life which did not conform to the nationalist ideal (Smith, 2007). By and large, Ireland’s new filmmakers eschewed heroic, patriotic and successful male figures in favour of male subjects who were socially marginalised, criminal, depressed, suicidal, abusive, abused, forced into exile, gay, queer or transsexual, violent and variously conflicted or in crisis.

There also emerged at this juncture a preoccupation with the pre-pubescent or adolescent male, frequently the victim of an autocratic male figure in the context of school or other state-run religious institutions. The centrality of adolescence in literary and cinematic fiction the world over is nothing new: from a purely dramatic perspective, coming-of-age has obvious appeal to storytellers – it is the time at which most anxieties and insecurities are experienced, and is also a crucial phase in identity formation (Van Heeswyk: 1997: 5). Nor is it surprising that Catholic institutions came into the line of fire in the specific context of Irish storytelling at this time, given the pivotal role that they had played – and continued to play – in diverse aspects of
young people’s lives. Up until 1980, with few exceptions, the entire education system had been run by the Catholic religious orders, as had orphanages, hospitals, mother-and-baby homes and mental institutions. The infamous residential ‘reformatory and industrial schools’, documented in detail in the 2009 Ryan Report, were not abolished until the 1970s. Thus, most of the people who were making films in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, even if they had not undergone a strict Catholic upbringing, had been born in Catholic hospitals and educated by the religious orders. Catholic institutions – in some form or other – had played a significant part in their formative years.

This probably explains why the trope of male adolescence survived in Irish cinema well into the 2000s: indeed, as I suggest in this chapter, the retrospectiveness with which Irish cinema is often charged may have more to do with individual filmmakers’ enduring personal, even therapeutic, need to do battle with the ghosts of the past than with a backward-looking, introspective nostalgia for a ‘golden age’ or a conscious desire to rewrite history using the male child as an allegory of the nation. Far from golden, the construction of male adolescence has been relentlessly negative in Irish cinema, which boasts an extraordinary number of films featuring young males experiencing emotional crises of varying intensity. These include *The Butcher Boy* (1997), *The Boy from Mercury* (1996), *Lamb* (1985), *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003), *Our Boys* (1981), *35 Aside* (1996), *How to Cheat in the Leaving Certificate* (1998), *A Soldier’s Song* (1997), *Country* (2000) and *Horse* (1993). Those which are not rooted in the dynamics of family – and there are sufficient of these to require a separate chapter – tend to be set in the oppressive and punitive environment of schools, reformatories, mental asylums and orphanages.

Two tendencies in the way in which Irish film scholars have interpreted the recurring theme of male adolescence to date are striking. Firstly, it has been common to read the male child in film as symbolic of the (adolescent) nation. According to Richard Haslam (1999), the child-nation motif in Irish film and literature is a reworking of the colonial personification of Ireland as a hapless and unruly child, which restores sympathy with the abused rather than the abuser. He claims that this ‘personification of Ireland’ is a feature not only of Irish literary and cinematic culture but also of cultural criticism. In other words, even when a director or writer has not intentionally or consciously allegorised the child, it is frequently interpreted thus, with individual psychoanalytical models being applied to collective entities such as the ‘national psyche’ or the ‘body politic’. Thus, for example, Martin McLoone (2000) has argued that *The Butcher Boy’s* Francie Brady represents ‘the abused