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It’s Good to Talk? Language, Loquaciousness and Silence Among Irish Cinema’s Men in Crisis

Given the apparently traumatic nature of Irish boyhood and fatherhood, as they have been articulated in the Irish films discussed so far, it might be reasonable to assume that, by and large, the makers of these films agree that Irish masculinity has long been undergoing some form of crisis. However, even though these films are essentially about men in crisis, there is no indication of a masculinity-in-crisis discourse at work within them. On the contrary, they have tended to direct a largely feminist-inflected attack on patriarchy and its ‘frontline troops’ (Connell, 1995), inviting sympathy for the young boys who have suffered at its hands. In a later slew of films, however, there was a shift away from a preoccupation with men as perpetrators of violence and oppression, toward a concern with men, including adult men, as victims. These films, which include Disco Pigs, Kings, Swansong: the Story of Occi Byrne, Ailsa, On the Edge, Eden, Garage, Small Engine Repair, Parked, The Looking Glass and Eamon feature male characters who are excluded from male hegemony. Powerless, misunderstood and emotionally adrift, the protagonists of these films are either depressed or deeply frustrated, manifested in an inability or reluctance to talk about their feelings, the creation of alternative linguistic universes (Disco Pigs, Kings) or, in the case of The Guard, In Bruges and Intermission, in the use of words to draw protective discursive boundaries around a fragile or threatened sense of masculinity. In this sense, they appear to articulate strongly with current discourses on ‘masculinity in crisis’.

The concept of masculinity-in-crisis is somewhat vague, and requires unpacking if it is to be used constructively as a framework here. In popular media discourse, masculinity in crisis is often understood as meaning men in crisis or patriarchy in crisis, the former having arguably become its dominant interpretation. In other words, it is used
to describe – in both sympathetic and unsympathetic terms – men’s
negative experiences of and responses to social change, usually per-
ceived to be the result of gains in female power and/or ‘political

The classic ‘explanation’ offered is that changes in women’s lives
and aspirations over the past thirty years have offered new identities
for women, but precious little for men. The price of female self-
determination and steady strides toward formal equality is, it seems,
males nihilism. The struggle for gender equality, rather than being
pictured as a pair of scales, is more like a see-saw: if women go up,
men must hit rock bottom.

While Whelehan might disagree with the view that men are actually
experiencing any sort of real crisis, or might posit that the suffer-
ing they experience is due simply to an inability or unwillingness to
accept that redressing gender inequality requires change on their part,
others contend that the impact of much earlier developments has
led to a genuine experience of crisis among men in the face of social
change. Psychologist Roger Horrocks (1994), for example, attributes the
contemporary disturbance of masculine identity to the Enlightenment/
Renaissance split between thought/intellect and emotion/feeling. The
social and cultural alignment of men with the former and of women
with the latter has, according to Horrocks, disadvantaged both men and
women in manifold ways. Women, however, because of their socialisa-
tion in emotional intelligence, have become better equipped to cope
with change and crisis than men, whose imperative to conform to the
strictures of rationalism has necessitated the repression of emotion.
According to Horrocks (1994: 122):

Women have been closer to the earth, closer to feelings, closer to life
and death. Men have moved amongst abstractions, have invented
things such as steam-engines, computers, have split the atom.

While some gender theorists disagree about the extent to which men
are currently experiencing psychological or identity crises triggered by
virtue of being men, most will agree that masculinity – meaning the
socially acceptable set of learned behaviours and characteristics attrib-
uted to ideal manhood at any given time and place – is always in a
state of flux or crisis, and that this is by no means a new phenomenon.
According to Michael Kane (1999), radical critiques of philosophical