

# LIMINAL IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA

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## ABSTRACT

Since the period of the Celtic Renaissance and plays such as William Butler Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), the debate of authentic and de-anglicized versus colonized and out-directed Irish identities in Irish drama has long developed in new and different directions. In this process, the colonizing and alienating influence of Britain has been replaced by the United States as the dominant Other. Against this background, my paper will more specifically explore the portrayal, as well as the distortion, of Ireland and the Irish in film in two contemporary plays, Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (1999) and Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1998). Both plays focus on the intercultural representation of Ireland and the Irish in Hollywood movies. Both plays are intermedial or metadramas in the sense that they take film productions as their subject matter. Both plays will be analyzed against the background of Fredric Jameson's theory of global commodification and Jean Baudrillard's arguments on simulated realities.

**KEY WORDS:** Contemporary Irish drama, authenticity, Irishness, Fredric Jameson's global commodification, liminality.

## RESUMEN

Desde el período del renacimiento celta y obras teatrales como *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), de William Butler Yeats, el debate de las identidades irlandesas auténticas y des-anglicanizadas frente a las colonizadas y dirigidas por normas externas, en el teatro irlandés, se ha desarrollado largo y tendido con nuevas y diferentes direcciones. En este proceso, la influencia colonizadora y alienante de Gran Bretaña se ha reemplazado por la de los EEUU como el Otro dominante. Teniendo en cuenta este panorama, mi ensayo explora más específicamente el retrato, así como la distorsión, de Irlanda y de lo irlandés en el cine, en dos obras teatrales contemporáneas: *Stones in His Pockets* (1999), de Marie Jones, y *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1998), de Martin McDonagh. Ambas se centran en la representación intercultural de Irlanda y de lo irlandés en las películas de Hollywood. Ambas son metadramas intermediales en el sentido en el que tratan de las producciones cinematográficas como argumento principal. Ambas se analizan usando la teoría de la mercantilización global de Fredric Jameson así como los presupuestos de Jean Baudrillard sobre las realidades simuladas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** teatro irlandés contemporáneo, autenticidad, identidad irlandesa, la "mercantilización" global de Fredric Jameson, lo liminar.



Identities are inextricably tied to realities. Answers to the both ontological and existential question of what is real have become increasingly opaque, however. In *Postmodernism; or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), his seminal study of the postmodern era, Fredric Jameson argues that the paramount influence of media, electronic and otherwise, cause a collapse of the distinction between high culture and popular art forms as well as an erosion of the depth dimension of reality (see Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17, 2). This fundamentally affects individual identities. What Jameson calls the “centered subject” disappears. It is replaced by an ensemble of self-fragments marked by emotional numbness (see Jameson, *Postmodernism* 15, 16). The postmodern coalescence of subject and object, the imaginary quality of reality, and the itness of the individual change artistic expression. The imitation, reiteration, and reproduction of older styles become its dominant mode (see Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17). In both Fredric Jameson’s and Jean Baudrillard’s diagnosis, collapsing the distinctions between medium and message, reality and construct, self and other, pastiche and original expression, leads to a culture of the simulacrum, realizing Plato’s conception of “the identical copy, for which no original has ever existed” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17, 18). In Baudrillard’s view, postmodern culture thus turns into “a gigantic simulacrum: [...] exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Baudrillard 152).

Jameson’s and Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the postmodern age leads to the discouraging assumption that art seems to lose its critical potential. In “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue” (1998), Jameson suggests that American cultural hegemony, the dominance of Hollywood films and American television programs in global mass culture, amounts to “an allegory of the end of the possibility of imagining radically different social alternatives” (Jameson, “Notes” 62; see 63). Despite such pessimism, art and, notably, drama, have not lost their critical impulse. While it is impossible to evade the influences of globalization and commodification, contemporary drama, and specifically Irish drama, pit an existential world of highly individual human suffering, humor, and joy against them. This existential dimension reasserts the inescapable importance of home, love, and death vis-à-vis global consumerism. Contemporary drama thus projects liminal identities, mediating between anthropological necessities on the one hand and societies built on commodification on the other. Like persons involved in rites of passage and processes of initiation, contemporary plays, sandwiched between commodification and emancipation, may be said to be “no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 96) with regard to the transitional identities they suggest and develop. If liminality can be considered “as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner 97), as the ethnologist Victor Turner has suggested, the identities in contemporary drama may with some justification be called liminal, oscillating between adaptations to global capitalism and emotional gestures of subversion.

The theatrical treatment of the impact of mass media on social realities is, of course, neither limited to Irish drama nor to the postmodern period. In the Irish context, both Marie Jones’s *Stones in His Pockets* (1999) and Martin McDonagh’s



*The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1998) focus on the intercultural representation of Ireland and the Irish in Hollywood movies. Both plays are intermedial or metadramas in the sense that they take film productions as their subject matter. Both plays also share a concern with the representation of Ireland on screen. In this context, I will not discuss both plays but concentrate on McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* exclusively.

## II

Martin McDonagh's play *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996/1998) is not as directly concerned with film representation as Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*.<sup>1</sup> It is set in 1934 when Robert Flaherty's semi-documentary *Man of Aran* was filmed on Inishmore (Huber, "Contemporary" 14; "(De-)Mythologising" 353-354; Lonergan 162; see also McMahan and Mullen). While the play's locale remains Inishmaan, a group of young people, including Cripple Billy Claven, the title figure, goes to Inishmore, the neighbouring and largest Aran Island, by boat, to watch the filming and, possibly, to become part of it (McDonagh 49). This misfires, as they arrive when the shooting is done and the film crew packs up to leave. Yet unexpectedly, Billy receives an invitation to go to Hollywood: "for a screen test for a film they're making about a cripple fella" (McDonagh 61).

Both geographically and chronologically McDonagh's *Inishmaan* adopts a strangely shifty quality. It is a virtual island shot through with different traditions and problematics, both Irish and non-Irish, "pre-modern and post-modern at the same time" (O'Toole xi). In McDonagh's drama, "the allegedly postmodern Ireland of Tayto crisps, Kimberley biscuits and Australian soap operas" is fused with "one drawn from theatre mysticism, nostalgia" (Waters 34). Therefore, his plays read like Synge "rewritten by an Irish Joe Orton" (John Peter cit. Laners 212) or "with a postmodern nod in the direction of Sam Shepard" (Waters 50) and "have the qualities of fairytales, of cartoons, but also of TV sit-com" (Waters 50). They have "as much in common with films like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* as they do with Synge's *Playboy*" (Laners 213). McDonagh's Ireland has, therefore, the compounded quality of collage or pastiche, reflecting a simulacral world of representational crisis in which the image often "precedes the reality it is supposed to represent" (Kearney qtd. Laners 214-215).

All of the characters in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* are branded by their tics and antics as near-caricatures. Among these eccentricities are Billy Claven's inclination to spend hours cow-watching (McDonagh 7, 33, 55), and his aunt Kate Osbourne's habit of talking to stones (McDonagh 55, 67-68, 79, 86, 89). The compulsions of

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<sup>1</sup> My discussion of McDonagh is based on my previous essay, "Staging." The most sustained assessment of McDonagh's drama to date can be found in Chambers/Jordan and in Russell; see especially Christopher Murray, and Mária Kurdi.



other characters are less quaint and more violent. By these mannerisms McDonagh's characters become so highly individualized that they are immune to Hollywood-style stereotyping. In the last analysis, many of these habits reveal themselves as a second skin which hides these characters' vulnerability and masks their weakness and compassion; in short, their humanity. In their own individual ways, these compulsive characters are psychologically as crippled as Billy is physically. Billy himself says at one point: "Well, there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows" (McDonagh 92).

These compulsions and idiosyncrasies nevertheless contribute in unexpected ways to the simulacral shiftiness of Irish as well as American realities. McDonagh exemplifies the problem of the semiotic relationship between realities and their representations—also at the heart of the debate over movies about Ireland made by Hollywood—by the difficulty of finding American candy in an Irish sweets shop, for example. By his aunt, candy lover Bartley has been sent American candy from Boston, Massachusetts. The aunt in America has sent him a package of Mintios, which he has tasted, but only a photograph of Yalla-mallows, whose taste he can therefore only imagine. "Although the photograph of the Yalla-mallows did raise me curiosity about them" (McDonagh 18), as he says, he deplores the shortcomings of the sign vis-à-vis what it denotes. Viewed from a semiotic angle, the signified is tangibly present in the case of the Mintios, whereas the American Yalla-mallows' Irish existence seems limited to a pictorial signifier, which points in their direction but precludes their actual consumption. Bartley enters Eileen and Kate Osbourne's Inishmaan country shop in the hope of buying more Mintios and of finally getting a taste of the promising Yalla-mallows. To Bartley's stubbornly repeated inquiries whether Eileen has the real Mintios and also the as yet only signified Yalla-mallows in store, Eileen's equally monotonous answer is: "We have only what you see" (McDonagh 17-19)—a reply more than vaguely reminiscent of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get quality of computer technology. Although he looks as hard as he can, disappointed Bartley sees neither Mintios nor Yalla-mallows. Eileen demonstrates an Irish sense of the real which seems impervious to both the lure of exotic America and the taste of the imaginary. Much later in the play it transpires that there is more than meets the eye even to the seemingly adamant empirical realities on Inishmaan. It turns out that there were Yalla-mallows in the shop after all, that Ireland did provide the signified to the American signifier. But, as Eileen is as compulsively addicted to sweets as Bartley, she ate them all (McDonagh 56). Her stoic empiricism—"We have only what you see"—turns out to screen what you do not see—her obsession with sweets or, in poststructuralist parlance, her desire.

The negotiations between Irish realities and their American representations in the shape of Hollywood movies are similarly ambiguous. Billy's dying scene in a squalid Hollywood hotel room (Scene 7) plays with both the suspicions of ill health surrounding him and the Hollywood conventions of an appropriately stereotypical Irish death, including invocations to the Irishman's decent heart, head, and spirit "not broken by a century's hunger and a lifetime's oppression" (McDonagh 74). As in the case of the American Yalla-mallows in the Irish country shop, the reality status of this deathbed scene remains dubious:



However realistic Billy's dying may appear to the audience initially, it is only from the following scene that one is made fully aware that he has only been rehearsing a part and that his dying speech is a fabricated stage-Irish lamentation interspersed with snatches of the ballad of 'The Croppy'. (Huber, "Contemporary" 15; see Lonergan 165)

In Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*, it is Sean Harkin's irrevocable death which stays the slippage of both reproducible images and commodified narratives and triggers Charlie's and Jake's cinematic countervision. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, it is Billy's parentage and traumatic family history which, on the one hand, shares the arbitrariness of Hollywood film scripts but, on the other hand, reveals Billy's unquestionably real, existential suffering. By the same token, but on a bizarre rather than tragic plane, the simulacral irreality of the Yalla-mallows finally exposes Eileen's very tangible addiction to sweets, which in turn may function as a modest compensation for an otherwise joyless life. In both cases the simulacrum camouflages existential need. It remains unclear whether Billy's parents drowned themselves to save him, or because they were so appalled by his deficiencies, or whether they died trying to kill their son (McDonagh 23-25, 28, 96, 102-103). What Billy suffers from most is the coexistence of several versions of his life history whose veracity remains as undecidable as his self undefined.

The multiple versions of Billy's parents' death and their relationship to their son, which fundamentally affect him, as well as the unexpected ambivalences of several other characters, who all seem to hide a golden heart underneath their surface indifference, aggressiveness, and eccentricity, serve to demonstrate that the Lacanian sliding of the signified under the signifier may be built into the remote cosmos of the Aran Islands as well as into Planet Hollywood (see Lacan 87). Whereas Hollywood's fabrications are never a serious threat in the universe of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the outer-direction by one's own compulsions, psychic as well as physical deformations which render individuals even more indeterminable than celluloid realities, are of much greater import. These uncertainties may be overcome, however, by the genuinely human impulses which they sometimes hide. Eileen's compulsive eating of the sweets Bartley craves can be considered an expression of her worries about Billy. Her sister Kate's communication with stones is a compensation for the impossibility to talk to Billy, while he is absent in Hollywood (see McDonagh 56, 63, 67). Bobby hits everybody and everything that antagonizes him mercilessly and compulsively, including Billy. But he also earnestly tries to convince Billy that being "around your family and your friends is more important" than going to Hollywood (McDonagh 61). Some tics may be expressions of endearment camouflaged by their seeming absurdity. With some conviction, Billy can therefore maintain at the end of the play: "I know now it isn't Hollywood that's the place for me. It's here on Inishmaan, with the people who love me, and the people I love back" (McDonagh 88). As also in Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*, a fundamental existentialism shines through McDonagh's concern with constructs of the real. When all these constructs are being deconstructed, only a sense of home, love, and death seems to resist such relativization.



The disconcerting convergence of the simulacral and the authentic in McDonagh's drama triggers the critical debate surrounding it, which is essentially a debate about the viability of concepts of national and ethnic identity as counterforces to colonization and globalization. In this respect a postcolonial paradigm, based on authentic ethnic identities, and a postmodern paradigm, based on transnational constructed identities, seem to vie with each other. These conflicting views are perhaps best illustrated by Victor Merriman's essay "Decolonization Postponed: The Theatre of Tiger Trash," originally published in 1999, and Sara Keating's 2006 response "Is Martin McDonagh an Irish Playwright?" Merriman challenges the view that McDonagh's plays derive their power from the fact that they are collages of literary, theatrical, filmic, and popular traditions. He implicitly measures McDonagh's characters and his world against recognizable political and economic Irish realities. From this angle, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and McDonagh's other plays appear as "a sustained dystopic vision of a land of gratuitous violence, craven money-grubbing and crass amorality" (Merriman 273). Ridiculing a cheap travesty of rural small town Ireland, they pander to the tastes of the new urban elite of Celtic Tiger-Ireland, a "neo-colonial society in the throes of globalization" which is only too glad that the universe of McDonagh's drama is a thing of the past, that Romantic Ireland's dead and gone and with O'Leary in the grave (Merriman 277; see 273). Thus, in Merriman's view, McDonagh betrays to the adherents of global capitalism any serious attempt to resurrect a viable national and cultural identity.

By contrast, Sarah Keating considers Merriman's postcolonial perspective to be essentialist and outdated. Keating embraces what Merriman loathes, the idea of a culture that "is not an essentialized strategy for the representation of an authentic national self, but a commodity of negotiation and exchange" (Keating 292; see 286). In his perceptive essay "Never mind the shamrocks'—Globalizing Martin McDonagh," Patrick Lonergan tries to reconcile Merriman's plea for cultural specificity with Keating's transnational postmodernism by suggesting an intermediate position of understanding McDonagh's plays "in relation to a globalized framework, grounded in Ireland but engaged with ideas from other cultures" (Lonergan 155). For McDonagh's drama, Lonergan claims a postmodern, as well as late capitalist, form of nationalism which defines Irish specificity in the way crocodile logos define polo shirts: "McDonagh's construction of Irishness operates as a commodified abstraction—or a brand—that can operate globally, being received reflexively, and selectively, by localized cultures" (Lonergan 170). Lonergan chooses not to consider this precarious regionalism as simulacral and deceptive but rather as surrounded by what he considers as its post-Benjaminian conceptual aura: "a brand may be controlled centrally and reproduced infinitely without a loss of authenticity" (Lonergan 171). Contrary to Lonergan one might think that brands cannot lose their authenticity because they have none in the first place and that the conceptual aura amounts to a sell-out of critical theory.

These conflicts and convolutions of critical discourse may remain as hard to disentangle as the amalgamation of representation, reality, and simulation in



McDonagh's drama by which they are provoked. The simulacral distortions of these plays may render them apt illustrations of the postmodern condition diagnosed by Jameson, Baudrillard and others. If the identities projected by these plays are liminal, however, and belong to Turner's "realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise," there is one possibility that remains strangely muted and repressed in the considerations of Merriman, Keating, and Lonergan. This is the recognizable existential dimension of these plays. McDonagh's characters often border on being grotesque caricatures. But Billy Claven's uncertainty about his parents' love or hatred of their son, his physical handicap and self-loathing, his life-threatening tuberculosis also render him a seriously and understandingly troubled character beyond being a cipher of victimization by larger forces such as global capital and cultural colonization. At least in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* McDonagh seems to suggest that a basic humanity, comprising a sense of home, friendship, love, and death, cannot be totally absorbed by the world of simulacral commodification. This may not solve collective problems of national and cultural identity, but it may map out a liminal space for the development of viable selves.

Received for Publication: July 31, 2013; Acceptance for Publication: February 28, 2014.

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