

FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW WORLD: CINEMATIC OFFERS OF SPIRITUALLY RECUPERATIVE TRIPS TO THE EMERALD ISLE*

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ABSTRACT

The recuperative retreat undertaken by Yeats in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (*The Rose*, 1893) from the drab reality of London’s “pavements grey” to an Irish scenery of solitude and natural harmony where he would find “some peace,” has been persistently rehearsed by Irish expatriates. However, it is in the cinematic portrayals of Ireland, often made by outsiders, where, notwithstanding the changed economic, political and social circumstances experienced by the Republic, the idealisation of rural Ireland and the healing powers of the island’s supposedly primitive lifestyle and values that people escaping from the stresses of urban life and competitive environments have endured longer. By considering the presence, and frequently random use, of anachronistic and clichéd cinematic signifiers of Irishness, the paper highlights both the recent proliferation of offerings of an Emerald Isle that does not exist beyond the screen and a regret concerning the films’ missed opportunity of interrogating and building on the vast corpus of the Irish diaspora’s narrativised history.

KEY WORDS: Cinematic Irish clichés, Ireland as an Arcadia, exogenous expectations of Ireland, Celtic spirituality, romcoms, travel cinema.

RESUMEN

La restauradora escapada que Yeats hiciera en “La isla del lago de Innisfree” (*The Rose*, 1893) desde la realidad monótona de las “aceras grises” de Londres a un paisaje irlandés de soledad y armonía natural donde encontrar “un poco de paz,” ha sido persistentemente emprendida por generaciones de expatriados irlandeses. No obstante, es en las representaciones cinematográficas de Irlanda, realizadas a menudo por extranjeros, donde han perdurado por más tiempo la idealización de la Irlanda rural y de los poderes curativos que los supuestamente arcaicos valores y estilo de vida de la isla aportan a las personas que huyen de entornos competitivos y del estrés de la vida urbana. El análisis de la presencia y el uso, frecuentemente aleatorio, de anacrónicos y estereotipados indicadores cinematográficos de lo irlandés evidencia la reciente proliferación de imágenes de la Isla Esmeralda inexistentes más allá de la pantalla, al tiempo que lamenta que dichas películas desperdicien la oportunidad de interrogar y matizar la vasta historia narrativizada de la diáspora irlandesa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estereotipos cinematográficos sobre Irlanda, Irlanda como arcadia rural, imágenes exógenas de Irlanda, espiritualidad celta, comedias románticas, cine de viajes.



In 2009, the news that the TV series *The Simpsons* had set its 434th episode, entitled “In the Name of the Grandfather” (S20E14), was received in Ireland with mixed feelings: pride at being featured in the influential animated cartoon and at having the episode broadcast in Ireland on March 17th, prior to its airing in the U.S., but also concern when anticipating that the show would indulge in “paddy-whackery.” An article on the front page of *The Irish Times* three weeks before the airing of the programme warned Irish people to “[e]xpect half an hour of begorrahs, leprechauns battling over pots of gold and fat, drunk men in scanty emerald-green pants painting the town yellow when the hapless Homer drags his family across the pond for an Irish-set episode” (Doyle 1). However, apprehensive comments like this proved unfounded for the episode seems more bent on redressing than on propagating such clichés. Built around Homer’s realisation, and regret, that “the Irish have become hard working and sober,” the Simpsons’ Irish-set episode hinges on the Republic’s spectacular economic advancement, liberalisation and grasp of material goals, and portrays pubs that are empty because Irish people are too busy working in high-tech firms named Hewlett FitzPackard and Mick-Rosoft, exercising outdoors or displaying their homosexual gay affections in public.

Notwithstanding the changed economic, political and social circumstances experienced by the Republic, a remarkable number of recent films, many of them coming from Hollywood—or at least featuring American protagonists—cast an amused and condescending look at an Ireland invariably depicted as rural, quaintly traditional, and imbued with a redemptive quality for protagonists who are usually female and come from an urban and competitive environment. The films that specifically fit this description are *Laws of Attraction* (Peter Howitt 2004 UK/IR), *Irish Jam* (John Eyres 2006 USA/UK), *P.S. I Love You* (Richard LaGravenese 2007 USA) and *Leap Year* (Anand Tucker 2009 USA/IR). However, several related films concurrently released over the last decade will also be briefly considered, for their plots are also built around the arrival of urban visitors to the west of Ireland and they offer unrealistic representations of contemporary Ireland and the Irish. These include the romantic comedies *The Matchmaker* (Mark Joffe 1997 USA/UK/IR), *The Nephew* (Eugene Brady 1998 IR), and *Dead Long Enough* (Tom Collins 2005 IR/UK), the arthouse movie *Nothing Personal* (Urszula Antoniak 2009 IR/HOL), and the ghost and horror films *High Spirits* (Neil Jordan 1988 USA), *Escape to Nowhere* (Scott P. Levy 1996 USA), *Trance* (Michael Almercyda 1998 USA), *Puffball* (Nicolas Roeg 2007 CAN/UK/IR), *The Daisy Chain* (Aisling Walsh 2009 UK/IR), *Yesterday’s Children* (Marcus Cole 2000 USA), *The Legend of Samhain* (Christian Viel 2003 CAN), *Shrooms* (Paddy Breathnach 2007 IR/UK/DK), *Ghostwood* (Justin O’Brien 2008 IR) and *Wake Wood* (David Keating 2011 IR/UK).

My aim in analysing these cinematic (mis)representations of contemporary Ireland is not to apply criteria of authenticity with a view to spotting unrealistic screen images and setting them against a ‘real’ Ireland, but rather to consider the ways in which the island has become inflected with a number of reductive signifiers and to what effect. To this end, I will briefly consider a number of factors that, to my mind, may well have contributed to this apparently anachronistic, and much



maligned, cinematic trend.¹ These factors range from the close, and at the same time evolving, ties between Ireland and America as reflected in the long-standing representation of such relationship on screen, the idealisation of rural Ireland and its western seaboard, and the generic filmic conventions of both romantic comedies and travel romances in which a protagonist travels to another country, usually with little, or misconceived, knowledge about it.

Scholarship on early American cinema (Joseph Curran 1989, Kevin Rockett 1997, Barton 2009) corroborates that the Irish made up a substantial part of the cinema audience of the time and that Irish characters featured in films more prominently than other ethnic minorities. Since the period of silent American cinema coincided with mass scale Irish migration, not surprisingly one of the most popular themes in early films is the progress of the Irish from the rural homeland to urban America. The films stress the “potential for material and social advancement in the USA, but there is also a warning of the potential loss of ‘Irish’ values there” (Rockett 1997: 171), in particular the centrality of the family and the positively-inflected figures of the mother and the priest. As a result of the reduction of Irish immigration since the 1920s, sound cinema “was to become almost exclusively concerned with second and third-generation Irish-Americans, or, in its reflections backwards, constructing an imagined history of the Irish in America” (Rockett 1997: 178).²

On the other hand, by the mid twentieth century, partly because of Ireland’s low position in the political affections of the United States resulting from its neutrality during WWII and the growing partnership between the US and Britain in the Cold War period, Ireland hardly featured at all in Hollywood films. Apart from semi-fictional swashbuckling movies set in the past, which exploit the always productive theme of the weak outwitting the powerful (e.g. *Captain Lightfoot* (1955), featuring Rock Hudson as an eighteenth-century Robin Hood type of Irish rebel, or *The Fighting Prince of Donegal* (1966), based on the exploits of the legendary

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¹ Audiences and critics have often deplored Hollywood’s crudely clichéd depictions of Ireland in films such as *Darby O’Gill and the Little People* (1959), *Waking Ned Devine* (1998) or *The Closer You Get* (1999) as well as the weird Irish accents on screen of non-native film stars Mickey O’Rourke in *A Prayer for the Dying* (1988) or Brad Pitt in *The Devil’s Own* (1997), but the film that has generated more hostility in recent times is *Leap Year*, which can be said to encapsulate the worse features of the strand of films analysed here. After describing it as “offensive, reactionary, patronising filth” *Irish Times* film reviewer Donald Clarke (2010) suggested “that every reader buy [] a DVD of *Leprechaun: Back 2 tha Hood* and fling [] it at the head of any punter seen entering a screening of this upcoming atrocity.”

² Given that the experience of Irish immigrants in the new world has been for the most part urban, they have been mostly portrayed as urbanites. As Glazer and Moynihan point out in their book on New York’s racial minorities *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963): “When it came to portraying the tough American, up from the streets, the image was repeatedly that of an Irishman. James Cagney (a New Yorker) was the quintaessential figure: fists cocked, chin out, back straight, bouncing along on his heels” (Cited in Curran, 1989: 47).





sixteenth-century Gaelic leader Red Hugh), it was not until the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and key events such as Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972), the Hunger Strikes of 1981 and crucial US involvement in the Peace Process, when interest in Ireland was rekindled in the United States and a prolific vein of Irish-themed action movies began to flow from Hollywood. When not related to the Troubles, the most successful films of the period—*Far and Away* (Ron Howard 1992), *Angela's Ashes* (Alan Parker 1999) and *In America* (Jim Sheridan 2003)³—portray America as the place where the alienated protagonists can recover from the traumatic social and psychological experiences they suffered in Ireland.⁴

Still, the advent of mass tourism in the 1950s and the reawakening of the idea of ethnicity among minority groups in the wake of the Civil Rights Campaign of the 1960s prompted a re-examination among Irish Americans of their heritage which materialized with the setting up of Irish Studies programmes, a spectacular increase in tourism and root-searching in Ireland and the rise of a brand of sentimental and iconic Celtophilia that figures Ireland as the last enclave of simple, primitive lifestyle and values in Western culture and a redoubt of Celtic spirituality (often coexisting with a whimsical belief in fairies and magic legends).

This is the case in *The Luck of the Irish* (Henry Koster 1948) and *Top o' the Morning* (David Miller 1949), the first two cinematic examples, both dating from the late 40s, about the transformative powers that a trip to the island may effect on outsiders. Tyrone Power (in the role of a newspaper reporter struggling between seeking wealth and staying true to himself in the first film) and Bing Crosby (as an insurance detective in charge of investigating the theft of the Blarney Stone in the second) travel from America to Ireland and, after sorting out various encounters with leprechauns, legends and magic spells, they find love in rural Ireland, a place where, according to a local leprechaun in *The Luck of the Irish*, words like “hurry” and “important” are no use.

The recuperative visit to Ireland, enacted through a romantic relationship, would be repeated a few years later in John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), the amusing account of an Irish-American's arrival in Ireland in search of a simple life he could not find in the competitive and industrialised USA. This is not only the most widely-known film about Ireland but it has also been repeatedly accused of being the main purveyor of popular (and mostly fake) images about Ireland and the Irish. However, *The Quiet Man* contains a self-aware reflectiveness of its own myth-making that, with a few exceptions such as *High Spirits* and *The Matchmaker*, is absent from most American films set in Ireland, and certainly from those which are the object of this study.

³ Though written and directed by Jim Sheridan, *In America* was produced by Fox Searchlight Pictures (US), with Irish (Hell's Kitchen Films) and British (East of Harlem-UK) input.

⁴ Even though two low-budget films, *Gold in the Streets* (Elizabeth Gill 1996 IR) and *2by4* (Jimmy Smallhorne 1998 USA), depict the predicament of present-day Irish migrants working in building sites in the Bronx, given their limited international distribution, they have hardly undermined the deeply engrained cinematic myth of the Irish emigrant's success in the USA.

Even so, *The Quiet Man's* portrayal of Ireland as a place of bucolic ease where, despite the constant fighting, nobody ever gets hurt (as opposed to America where Sean killed his ring opponent) and where the traces of social, political and religious conflict as well as the high levels of unemployment and emigration experienced by the Irish population in the decade of the 1950s have been erased, is informed by an idealisation of rural Ireland that links and intersects with the myth of the peasant and the perception of the West of Ireland by writers of the Literary Revival and by the Irish-Ireland movement as a site of cultural purity and Arcadian innocence that offered the possibility of national renewal and personal regeneration.⁵

Irish writers have repeatedly engaged with, and challenged, such formulations. However, apart from isolated instances such as Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997IR/USA) and Kevin Liddy's *Country* (2000 IR) there is no equivalent on the screen to the relentlessly bleak vision of Irish rural life one finds in Patrick Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" (1942), in Martin McDonagh's *The Leenane Trilogy* (1996-97) or in stories of returned emigrants.⁶ The recent release of a substantial number of ghost and horror films in which the scenic west of Ireland becomes the locus of fearsome experiences could have provided a salutary balancing out of the mythopoeic construction of Ireland as a pastoral Arcadia. However, as it will be argued later on, these films' escapist vein is as strong as in the most clichéd romantic comedies.

This does not mean that recent Irish cinema has not shown a commitment to accommodating new realities such as shifts in gender relations and in attitudes to sex, as well as the mounting secularism and loss of confidence in the Church and the State. A number of Irish films have also portrayed urban Ireland,⁷ often in a way that is "both celebratory and mildly utopian" (McLoone 2008: 93), the city being represented as "either a threatening site of crime and disarray, or a site of

⁵ The othering of Ireland, the notion of its unique character was mainly prompted by the island's colonial experience but it was shaped by a large number of factors and ideological trends. The rural trope, articulated as a mark of lowliness by the patronising and often disabling imperial discourse, would not only be imbued with the positive implications of its regenerating potential upon being appropriated and reformulated by the suburban pastoralism of Irish cultural nationalism, but would also become informed by wider discourses ranging from the Romantic extolling of primitivism and exoticising of the Celt, and concerns over the disruptive effects of industrialisation and dehumanisation consequent on urban growth, to the mythopoeic impulse of Ireland's diaspora to construct the ancestral homeland as a pastoral Arcadia of the mind, or the current commodification of traditional landscapes and lifestyles for the sake of disenchanting urbanites.

⁶ Despite having transformed the island into a haven of peace and beauty during their absence, the emigrants' visit home very rarely has a happy ending. Sometimes, as happens to William Dee in John B. Keane's *The Field* (1965) and to Frank Hardy in Brian Friel's *The Faith Healer* (1979), the visit home proves fatal: William's intention to industrialise the land precipitates the drama and his own death, whereas Frank, who returns home guided by "some sense that Ireland might somehow recharge him, maybe even restore him" after the loss of his healing powers, is clubbed to death by drunken, vengeful countrymen.

⁷ The 2010 Spring/Summer issue of *Éire-Ireland* (Vol 45: 1 & 2), devoted to urban Ireland, includes several articles discussing the city in contemporary Irish film.



hedonism and liberation from societal and sexual strictures” (Holohan 2010: 112). Indigenous cinema, though, has been less prone than other artistic expressions to interrogate or discard long and deeply ingrained myths, as reflected in the fact that several of the unrealistic films analysed here have been produced in Ireland or have some Irish input.⁸ This is probably because market imperatives impel filmmakers to align themselves to the populist aesthetic of mainstream cinema and to reach a compromise between their personal interests and exogenous expectations of Ireland. Obliterating the country’s oppressed and poverty-stricken past, and the tensions deriving from the current economic downturn, the island’s scenic attributes and its otherness are still the main magnet luring people to Ireland on the screen. The recuperative imaginary trip undertaken by Yeats in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (*The Rose*, 1893) from the drab reality of London’s “pavements grey” to a scenery of solitude and natural harmony where he would find “some peace,” is being persistently rehearsed by Irish expatriates and by people who seek a consoling escape from the stresses of modern life.⁹

As argued by Diane Negra’s recent work on contemporary American popular culture (particularly ads, TV series and celebrity news), the turning-point in the perception and appeal of Ireland came in the wake of the tensions triggered by the events of September 11. Awareness of the disintegration of the nuclear family structure and a discourse of millennial nostalgic lifestyling, coinciding with Ireland’s increasing disassociation from the violence of the Troubles, conferred a marked therapeutic component on the island—positively figured as an economically rejuvenated, yet somehow still natural place—and on Irishness—constructed as an ‘innocent’ and idealized ethnic category (Negra, “New”; “Romance”). Moreover, the travel to Ireland of celebrities such as Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Hurley, Julia Roberts or Mia Farrow, all of them in the process of negotiating transitional moments in their careers, positions Ireland “as an antidote to professional difficulties and family or couple dysfunction” and corroborates its position as a “national site in which one can re-make or fortify one’s ‘family values’” (Negra, “Fantasy” 141).

The proliferation of films in which a visit to Ireland becomes a transformative and positive experience may also be considered a latter-day form of colonial narratives, for they display some of the conventions embedded in that genre. Having an outsider acting as spectator and mediator of the peculiarities of the visited country for a mainstream audience is a device productively used by colonial narratives and by films built around a visitor who initially casts a patronising look on the little-known and backward society, but who ends up undergoing a transformative experience. As Glenn Hopper notes, irrespective of the motives for travelling, the

⁸ Such is the case of *The Nephew*, *Laws of Attraction*, *Leap Year*, *The Matchmaker*, *Dead Long Enough*, *Nothing Personal*, *Puffball*, *The Daisy Chain*, *Shrooms*, *Ghostwood* and *Wake Wood*.

⁹ As documented by Maxine Feifer (163-200), the notion that travel from an urban to a rural setting is a form of improvement dates back to the Victorian period.



differences concerning the actual place of destination, the period and the material conditions of the journey, at the centre of travel there is always the opportunity to develop and/or reinvent oneself (xiii). But whereas fiction and cinema have tended to portray Western travellers being overwhelmed by the mystery of the ancient cultures of India and Africa and hardly embarking on any successful relationships across the race divide¹⁰ [Sunetra Gupta's *Memories of Rain* (1992) and Gurinder Chadha's film *Bride and Prejudice* (2005) being notable exceptions], for American tourists the transformative process of journeying has often involved, or even has just been reduced to, falling in love: these range from classic films in which a number of female protagonists travel to Rome or Venice (*September Affair*, William Dieterle 1950; *Three Coins in the Fountain*, Jean Negulesco 1954; *Rome Adventure*, Delmer Daves 1962)¹¹ to recent instances such as *Only You* (Norman Jewison 1994), *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Audrey Wells 2003), *Villa Amalia* (Benôit Jacquot 2009) and *Eat Pray Love* (Ryan Murphy 2010). The latter, in which 32-year old Liz (played by Julia Roberts) feels entrapped in her easy bourgeois married life and sets out to find independence and spiritual fulfilment by spending some months in Italy, India and Bali, is a particularly trite illustration of the notion of travel as a form of improvement. Despite Liz saying at the end, that

If you are brave enough to leave behind everything familiar and comforting (which can be anything from your house to bitter old resentments), and set out on a truth seeking journey, either externally or internally, and if you are truly willing to regard everything that happens to you in that trip enlighten you and everyone you encounter along the way to teach you something. And if you are prepared most of all to face and forgive some very difficult realities about yourself, then the truth will not be withheld from you.

Her own quest does not lead her to any ground-breaking experience or revelation for, after indulging herself by travelling comfortably and without ties for over one year, as soon as she meets a handsome divorcee, she promptly forfeits her newfound independence.

On the other hand, the movies' affiliation to the romantic comedy (or "chick-flick" genre, as the female-targeted romcoms where the characters' efforts are mostly invested in the pursuit of love are often labelled) determines some of the

¹⁰ For instance, in *Heart of Darkness* (Joseph Conrad 1898 / Nicolas Roeg 1993), *A Passage to India* (E. M. Forster 1924 / David Lean 1985), *Out of Africa* (Isak Dinesen 1937 / Sydney Pollack 1985), *The Sheltering Sky* (Paul Bowles 1949 / Bernardo Bertolucci 1990) or *Heat and Dust* (Ruth Praver Jhabvala 1975 / James Ivory 1983).

¹¹ David Lean's *Summertime* (1955 UK/USA) constitutes an interesting departure from the hackneyed Italian-set love story for it features Katharine Hepburn as a middle-aged secretary who finally makes it to Venice on holiday but whose dream of romance becomes a bittersweet reality when she starts a relationship with a handsome but married Italian man. The film also ridicules American tourists like the McIlhennys, who tour round Europe on a fixed and tight itinerary that only allows them two hours of IA (Independent Activity) every day.



films' predictable features. Thus, their light-hearted plotlines trace the progress of the (usually female) protagonists' search for Mr. Right and achieve narrative closure after the potential lovers overcome the initial hurdles that had kept them apart, and which are typically presented within the parameters of a 'battle of the sexes' confrontation.¹² Nonetheless, whereas classical Hollywood comedy was often structured by a temporary gender inversion of the social hierarchy of male over female through what might be called "the *topos* of the unruly woman" (Rowe 41)—a disruption which was eventually set right when the rebellious woman was brought back into line through marriage (Mortimer 12), since the 1990s comedies tend to depict gender roles that are much more traditional than those prevailing in contemporary society (Rubinfel). The Irish-set comedies under analysis are certainly underpinned by extremely traditionalist codes of "feminine" and "masculine" behaviour¹³ and, after a short period in Ireland, their protagonists morph from emancipated career women to giving up everything for a romance with a cute country Irishman.¹⁴ Another distinctive trait is that the difficulties faced by the protagonists, who arrive in Ireland as short-term visitors or accidental tourists with little knowledge about the country, tend to involve cultural clashes as well as social mishaps derived from an urbanite's ignorance of rural ways. Occasionally the clashes are plausible, particularly those arising from linguistic differences or idiosyncratic indigenous customs,¹⁵ but most of the times they hinge on bizarre and old-fashioned clichés such as the encounters with colourful local eccentrics who seem to spend all their lives in the pub drinking, fighting, matchmaking or bantering.¹⁶

¹² In her recent monograph *Romantic Comedy* Claire Mortimer lists 'battle of the sexes' as "the dominant theme [...] which provides the central dynamic of the genre" (4).

¹³ *Leap Year* stands up as being particularly reactionary since it is based on the premise that women have to wait for a marriage proposal. Despite being a spirited career woman, Anna can only take the initiative thanks to a tradition, supposedly still current in Ireland, that allows women to propose on Leap Day. Furthermore, the uppity young woman must be brought down to earth and wised up by the rather brutish rogue of a man she's destined to marry: she is ridiculed and variously subjected to mud, rain, hail, cow manure and vomit.

¹⁴ Mary Kenny, a relationship counsellor who also runs a dating website, stated in an *Irish Times* report that her service had noticed a large increase in overseas women seeking Irish men for relationships, to the extent that a quarter of all their female clients are now non-Irish (O'Connell). Whether the films analysed here reflect the attraction Irish men exert among foreign women or whether they contribute to promoting the trend is open to conjecture.

¹⁵ For instance *play hooky* and *mitching* in *The Nephew*; *have a bit of crack* (i.e. fun vs. cocaine) in *The Matchmaker*.

¹⁶ The following exchange prompted by seeing the protagonist couple kiss at the end of *Leap Year*, is typical of the silly banter that locals often engage in:

"It is good luck to get engaged on a Sunday"

"And end a journey"

"And dig a well."

"You eejit, do they look like they are digging a well"

"Ah, you know what I'm talking about."

"I never know what you are talking about."



Though viewers might not expect romantic comedies set in foreign places to provide ethnographic details, presumably they value a certain degree of coherence and factual accuracy. Watching the films *The Nephew*, *Laws of Attraction*, *Irish Jam*, *P.S. I Love You*, and *Leap Year*, though, one is frequently required to suspend one's disbelief due to the repeated presence of unlikely images and situations. Some of these are reported in the synopses of the films in Appendix 1. Here, rather than dwell on factual errors, I shall turn to the narrative structure of the films. It soon becomes apparent that the parallel stories of the films rely on hackneyed signifiers of Irishness, and are told within the parameters of a remarkably similar and highly codified plotline based, more or less closely, on the following formula:

- Brief introductory shots to establish the far from cheerful situation of the protagonist in her/his original milieu in America.
- The protagonist arrives in (rural) Ireland.
- According to the conventions of the romcom genre, following initial difficulties or misunderstandings, the potential lovers realise that they are meant for each other. What distinguishes these Irish-set films, though, is that the romance is invariably ignited by intense drinking, often accompanied by hectic dancing to Irish traditional music, at the local pub.
- The love relationship is then further cemented with romantic walks in the beautiful countryside, which is often dotted with picturesque castles and ruins.

Since characters embark on a life-changing journey from urban New York/Boston/L.A. to the open fields of Ireland, the films show hardly any shot of urban Ireland, while all traces of modern lifestyles are expunged from the films' imagery. At the time when Derek Mahon characterises Irish society through the image of "computer talk[ing] to computer, machine to answering machine" (15), the films depict an extremely unspoilt countryside, with a third world infrastructure. For instance, in *Leap Year* the protagonist's attempt to recharge the battery of her mobile takes down the power supply of a whole village, and it takes her more than two days and innumerable vicissitudes that strain the credulity of even the most naïve viewer, to get from Dingle to Dublin (there are no taxis, trains don't run on Sundays, she is stuck behind cows, then robbed, gets pelted by hail, rolls down a grassy hill, etc.). As illustrated in the stills of Appendix 2, from the moment the protagonists arrive, they find themselves right in the middle of the countryside, which in the case of *Irish Jam* is not even Ireland but Cornwall.

Whereas Irish locals live at ease with the natural environment, the visitors prove to be totally inept, providing funny situations in which they are stranded by cattle on the road (*The Matchmaker*, *Leap Year*, *High Spirits*), paralysed with fear in front of apparently tame dogs (*P.S. I Love You*, *Leap Year*), etc. Still, although the simplicity of life in rural Ireland and the intrusion of nosey and often malicious locals, cause minor problems to the more modern and sophisticated visitors, the trip to Ireland eventually leads to their spiritual renewal. Despite knowing that at the basis of cinema is make-believe, not prosaic realism, one cannot fail to see certain irony in the fact that while the shooting of *The Quiet Man*, the film that



established Ireland as a prelapsarian paradise, required bringing power generators and other technology to the unspoiled area of 1950s Co Mayo, five decades later a technologically modern Ireland built the economic feat of the Celtic Tiger “partially on a successful tourist [and film] industry selling Ireland’s traditional landscapes to the troubled urban dwellers of global capitalism” (McLoone 94).

Insofar as Ireland’s natural beauty is a potential asset for the films’ international distribution, couples always take scenic walks together (see Appendix 2), with the natives often contributing to the budding romance—the communal values of the close-knit village thus offering a sharp contrast to the individualistic and competitive spirit that prevails in the modern capitalist societies from where the protagonists hail. The films, though, clearly disregard the fact that it is becoming rare to encounter representatives of the native population serving in public spaces like bars, hotels and shops as these establishments increasingly tend to be staffed by migrant workers who have themselves come from abroad.

In the fantasy Ireland of the romcoms, where people are never seen working, unless pouring drinks at the pub, the visitors will soon discard professional ambitions and economic concerns for the sake of romance and a quiet life in the West of Ireland. The discerning viewer, though, is left to puzzle what exactly are the regenerative qualities Ireland offers the visitors as an antidote to the stresses of modern life. Given the arbitrary signifiers for Irishness and Irish culture used by the films, the motivations seem quite trite and unpersuasive. Indeed, in the majority of cases, the turning point in the romance, and therefore in the life, of the protagonists, comes in a rather banal way when they lose all their inhibitions under the influence of alcohol and/or a wild Irish dance. Notwithstanding the profuse literature available on alcohol consumption and drinking habits in Irish culture proving that in this area Ireland is a society characterised by an attitude veering between excess drinking and abstinence, insofar as the drink industry is a vital and lucrative sector of the Irish economy and tourism, it has been marketed abroad as a representational convention of Irishness.¹⁷ The films draw on this dubious imaginary, relocating to the Irish pub the intimate tête-a-têtes over a meal that Claire Mortimer (5) highlights as a staple fixture of the courtship ritual in the contemporary romantic comedy.

Another reductive cinematic signifier concerns the visual tropes of rural Ireland for, apart from featuring beautiful natural spots (whether Glendalough in Co Wicklow, the lakes of Killarney, the Giant’s Causeway, the Burren, or spectacular cliffs) castles and ruins have also become a staple image in most of the films (see Appendix 2). These buildings are invariably presented for the pleasure of the tourist gaze as a picturesque setting for the romantic tryst of the protagonists, disregarding the fact that in Ireland castles and Big Houses bear witness to the island’s troubled

¹⁷ Not surprisingly, then, the latest edition of *Lonely Planet Ireland* affirms that “Ireland’s social heart beats loudest in the pub... the broadest window through which you can examine and experience the very essence of the nation’s culture, in all its myriad forms” (Davenport et al. 80).



colonial past,¹⁸ and that images of empty, half-derelict houses are the visible scars left by the wounds of famine, poverty and emigration.¹⁹

Castles and Big Houses are also staple features of a large number of ghost and horror films where visitors to Ireland experience terrifying incidents rather than romance in a convivial site. Insofar as these films have been released concurrently with the romantic comedies, it is tempting to read them as an attempt to demystify the construction of Ireland as a pastoral Arcadia, as Neil Jordan had done in 1988 with his first big-budget Hollywood film *High Spirits*²⁰ and as a few other titles partly do as well.²¹ Ultimately though, the horror films prove to be as escapist as the romantic comedies analysed above; indeed, despite avoiding the quaint picturesqueness of the latter, the Ireland they depict is still that of a primitive, but spiritually richer, and hence supposedly superior, other.

Early examples such as *Escape to Nowhere* (also entitled *House of the Damned*), and *Trance* (alternative title *The Eternal*) feature American families travelling to Ireland in search of healing: in the first case a couple with a young daughter wish to get their marriage back on track and in the second a couple with a young son expect to give up their hard-drinking lifestyle in their Irish ancestral home. Three recent films, *Puffball*, *The Daisy Chain* and *Wake Wood* also deal with couples who,

¹⁸ Indeed, for centuries, castles and Big Houses in Ireland stood as physical emblems of the political, social and economic status of the ruling class. The first castles were fortifications built in the twelve century by the Anglo-Normans in order to defend their recently conquered land, whereas Big Houses were commissioned by the prosperous landowning Anglo-Irish Ascendancy during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—a time when the Catholic native population were utterly disenfranchised by the Penal Laws and could hardly survive as tenant farmers. Despite the picturesque appeal of ruins, the crumbling state of so many Irish castles and Big Houses is the result of their having been attacked or set on fire during periods of unrest, from the Land Wars to the War of Independence and the Civil War.

¹⁹ According to some U.S. journalists invited by Fáilte Ireland to a week ‘press trip’ of Ireland, castles, green fields, sheep, music, roots, and a friendly welcome are what the typical mature American tourist seeks from Ireland: “Castles are legendary, story-book like... The castles are what everyone wants to see. It’s a dream to see a castle, and the biggest dream of all is to stay in one” (Boland).

²⁰ *High Spirits* is a humorous take on American expectations of Ireland. The owners of a dilapidated Irish castle advertise ghost-tours to attract gullible American tourists, only to find out their castle really is haunted. According to Maria Pramaggiore (52) “In many ways, Jordan’s film presages the commodification of Irish ethnicity that took place in the 1990s [...] Made in 1988, the film is surprisingly prescient in its treatment of real estate, tourism and entertainment as the growth industries of post-industrial global capitalism.”

²¹ These are the comedies *The Matchmaker* and *Dead Long Enough*, and the arthouse movie *Nothing Personal*. The comedies contain humorous touches that add a refreshingly mocking twist to the otherwise formulaic plotline and characters (see synopses in Appendix 1). *Nothing Personal* also resorts to the much used formula of the trip of a young woman to the west of Ireland but it differs from the American romcoms: moving to the austere landscapes of Connemara will be beneficial for the Dutch protagonist who is coming out of a distressful (though unexplained) situation, but not by means of the usual romance. Another original aspect of the film is that it portrays rural Ireland as beautiful but unusually austere and without whimsical locals in sight, but then, quite unimaginatively, it makes the young woman’s stubborn aloofness begin to thaw with the customary visit to the local pub and a wild Irish dance (see stills in Appendix 2).



escaping from the London grind in one case, and the tragic experience of losing a baby in the others, plan on starting anew in a remote Irish village. *Yesterday's Children* offers a variant of the healing trip pattern for the rural Irish west facilitates the protagonist's unearthing of her hidden traumas through a symbolic encounter with the past. The film portrays a married pregnant American woman, Jenny Cole, who travels to Ireland after her apparent happiness is disturbed by recurring dreams about an unfortunate Irish woman who had died in the 1930s at the age of 37 and who, as Jenny eventually finds out, happened to be herself in a previous incarnation. Given the chance to recover her past, Jenny will take on the mission of reuniting the scattered children she lost in her former existence.

A feature common to all these films is that rural Ireland is portrayed as being saturated in Celtic beliefs about druids, changelings and fertility rites and, as a result, the protagonists have to overcome frightening ordeals posed by otherworldly forces. The Irish cottages and mansions they buy or inherit (since many of the protagonists are of Irish extraction) and their surroundings are invariably haunted by tricky creatures from Celtic mythology or by the ghosts of their ancestors. Eventually, though, the taxing move of sophisticated and troubled urbanites to rural Ireland becomes a rewarding journey. Indeed, it is probably the case that in cinematic terms Ireland has become the main signifier of Old World's uplifting values vis-à-vis the trivial shallowness of capitalist modern society. Significantly, *Puffball* and *Yesterday's Children* add an Irish or Irish/American dimension which was absent in the books of the same title by Fay Weldon (1980) and Jenny Cockell (1993) on which they are respectively based: the screen adaptation of the first relocates Weldon's fictional story from Somerset to Ireland and the second turns the autobiographical account of a woman from the English East Midlands into the story of an American woman.

Despite Ireland's prominent output of ghost and horror literature and the presence of Irish motifs such as the leprechaun and the banshee as figures of fear in American cinema, it is only in the last decade that there has been an explosion of Irish-set horror films. They all follow a similar plot: foreigners or urbanites visiting rural Ireland have their positive expectations of the country dashed when, instead of coming across whimsical characters and fiery *colleens*, they find the place inhabited by disturbed people and nasty spirits stalking and serially decimating them. The fact that in most of the cases the visitors are American²² offers the films the opportunity of engaging, or even challenging, the romanticised vision of picturesque Ireland and of its potential therapeutic effects.

²² In *The Legend of Samhain*, a group of American university students interested in the rituals of the ancient Druids and other Celtic legends come across the ancestors of an incestuous clan of cannibals; in *Shrooms* a gang of American teenagers arrives in Ireland to pick magic mushrooms but the experience leads to chaos and carnage: at the end of the film both the spectator and the sole survivor, young Tara, realize that a hallucinogenic mushroom has caused her to murder all of her pals; in *Ghostwood* a New York psychologist travels to a remote village in the west of Ireland where his father disappeared while searching for the spirits of a mother and child who were buried alive in the nearby forest over 1000 years ago.



However, the filmmakers' agendas seem to be totally alien to such revisionist concerns. Indeed, being rather light instances of the horror and supernatural thriller genre, the films' main efforts seem to be geared at building up a creepy atmosphere and the frisson elicited by the unexpected irruption of horrific events affecting characters who may be said to be ill-fated, short-term tourists rather than travellers in search of romance and life-changing experiences.

To conclude my rather critical survey of recent films set in rural Ireland, I would like to clarify that my reservations about the popular strand of travel-based romcoms do not originate from a film studies approach but in terms of cultural and national representations. In this sense, I do not consider the simplicity and predictability of the films' plots as a shortcoming for "[t]he formulaic nature of the genre is often at the heart of the pleasures experienced by the audience" (Mortimer 5). Moreover, as some recent literature on this dynamic genre has pointed out, the romcom at the end of the twentieth century is markedly conservative, embracing romantic love and traditional family structures against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis, soaring rates of divorce and single parenting (Mortimer 18). Tamar Jeffers McDonald calls these new comedies "neo-traditional" because they represent a return to a notional form of romantic comedy; she characterises these as paying lip service to such ideas as big-city alienation, the prevalence of divorce or the actual problems of forming a lasting relationship in contemporary society, "only to confound [viewers] with the perfect romance [they] then produce [] for [the] protagonists" (85), a love relationship characterised by a marked de-emphasizing of sexuality (97). Although McDonald does not explicitly refer to the Irish-set comedies but to those which repeatedly use New York as "*the* location for romance" (88), many of these features apply to them as well.

As I hope to have proved by highlighting the films' reliance on anachronistic and clichéd signifiers of Irishness, my objections would be for actions omitted rather than committed. Above all I regret their having missed the opportunity to function as a space for cultural negotiation, in particular a re-examination of the diasporic construction of Ireland as a pastoral Arcadia and reservoir of spirituality. According to a perceptive point raised by Stephanie Rains in her book *The Irish-American in Popular Culture 1945-2000* (2007), whereas before the advent of mass tourism "the diaspora's understanding of their cultural relationship to the 'old country' had been predominantly constructed through the use of narratives (fictional or historical) [...] [the new possibility of travelling] provided the opportunity for those narratives to be experienced within the context of contemporary Ireland" (139). Consequently, the recurrent cinematic trips of Irish Americans to Ireland could have fruitfully functioned as a "self-interrogating framework through which the diaspora negotiates a reconciliation between its narrativised collective history and its engagement with [the realities of] contemporary Ireland" (138).²³ Sadly, this opportunity has

²³ This happens in *This is My Father* (Paul Quinn 1998), not analysed here because it is not a romantic comedy. Through the story of an elderly history teacher from Illinois who travels



been missed by the films I have analysed, where Ireland is used as an emblem of the old world, a mere commodity to satisfy people's craving for anti-modern nostalgia.

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in search of his mother's past, the film offers a much more original and profound approach to the trip to Ireland of an Irish-American than the films object of the present study. Although in Ireland the teacher learns the tragic circumstances of his mother's emigration in the 1930s as an unmarried pregnant young woman, following her lover's suicide, precipitated by the constrictive ethos of rural Ireland, finding about his ancestry allows the character to return to his life in America with a strengthened sense of personal identity.



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APPENDIX 1

(Synopsis of the films in alphabetical order)

Dead Long Enough (Tom Collins 2005 IR/UK)

A film backed by the Irish/Northern Irish and Welsh national film agencies about two Welsh brothers—womanising successful archaeologist turned TV celebrity Harry and bored solicitor Ben—going for the latter's stag night to a Donegal seaside town where they had had a great time in their youth. Once in Ireland, they find that Ben's former girlfriend Sinead is now living with someone who runs a funeral parlour-cum-pub which in fact is a cover-up for smuggling booze and guns in a hearse from over the border. Eventually, Ben and Sinead rekindle their romance and he calls off his imminent wedding. At a visual level, the film offers amusing distortions of John Hinde's postcards, but instead of developing the parody to revise other clichéd representations of Irishness, it just repeats them in a totally banal way, with a loose plot and the antics of a string of eccentric types (e.g. a silly couple of gardaí, a gay soldier on border patrol).

Irish Jam (John Eyres 2006 USA/UK)

A farce about the people of Ballywood (a supposedly Irish coast town) which holds a poetry contest hoping to raise money to prevent English Lord Hailstock's plans to turn it into a Japanese-sponsored amusement park called 'Leprechaun Land'. They offer Finnegan's, their beloved pub, as the grand prize. Broke African-American swindler Jimmy Jam, who wants to get away from the bustle and squalor of his life in Los Angeles, as well as from his psychotic girlfriend, enters and wins the competition with a poem ending with the fiery line: "If it's freedom you want, then you gotta fight fight fight" which elicits from the local priest the approving comment that the author "must be Irish". But, in fact, Jimmy has cribbed the whole text from a rap CD, and in the town of Ballywood the fighting Irish spirit has degenerated into the brawling of drunken simpletons. The film is full of cartoonish characters and the arrival of the African-American provides little cultural clashes since more than a representative from another country and ethnicity he seems an alien from another planet. Still, he falls in love with the town's only colleen and learns about friendship, community, and trust.

Laws of Attraction (Peter Howitt 2004 UK/IR)

Rival New York lawyers Daniel Rafferty and Audrey Woods find themselves on opposite sides of a divorce case involving a celebrity American couple who own a castle in Ireland, the one piece of property each wants to keep from the marriage for its is "the most magical place on earth ... a fairytale castle". Eventually, the couple reconcile at the castle, and the lawyers, who have also travelled to Ireland to assess the value of the property of their divorcing clients, find themselves in a local festival in which fake weddings are performed. Audrey, a lonely and neurotic career woman goes on a drinking binge and wakes up the next morning married to Daniel.

Leap Year (Anand Tucker 2009 USA/IR)

A smart and over-organized young Bostonian named Anna intends to marry her long-time boyfriend, a successful heart surgeon, but he still hasn't proposed to her after



four years of courtship. As he is in Dublin attending a cardiologists' convention, Anna, who has been told that in Ireland on Leap Day every four years a woman can ask a man to marry her, decides to turn up in Dublin unexpectedly. Due to bad weather conditions she is diverted to Cardiff and from there she is stranded in Dingle (!). She hires a handsome and rough Irish pub owner to take her to Dublin, and this proves to be a three-day obstacle race in the course of which she has to endure humiliating tests to adapt to the slow and old-fashioned pace of life in rural Ireland, but in the process she learns about herself. In the end, she renounces her luxury apartment and fiancé and returns to Dingle saying: "I realised I had everything I ever wanted but nothing I really needed... and I think that what I need is here."

Nothing Personal (Urszula Antoniak 2009 IR)

Directed by a Polish-born filmmaker, the film presents a young Dutch divorcee who after throwing away all her possessions chooses to lead a wandering existence in the austere landscapes of Connemara and in a house by a lake occupied by a solitary widower. Both being extremely zealous of their independence and solitude, they make a deal: she will work for food, lodging and company but there will be no personal contact, no questions. After the sudden death of the man sees her as the heiress of his property and money, she makes another move, this time to Andalusia.

P.S. I Love You (Richard LaGravenese 2007 USA)

American estate agent broker Holly visits Ireland and falls in love at first sight with charming Gerry Kennedy. They marry and move to New York, but their happy marriage is cut short by his sudden death of a brain tumour. Before dying, though he had organised an elaborate series of posthumously delivered messages with directives for dressing up, party-going, karaoke singing, throwing out his stuff and a trip to Ireland, to help Holly cope with bereavement and start over without him. Quite predictably, in rural Ireland Holly finds a new love interest, re-establishes links with family and tradition and re-bonds with her embittered mother, who also finds love in Ireland.

The Matchmaker (Mark Joffe 1997 USA/UK/IR)

Directed by an Australian, this co-production is in part a parody of how the Irish perform Irishness for Irish-American consumption. A guide-cum-hotel proprietor describes Ireland to the newly arrived visitors as the "land of mystery, land of stones, land of tears, land of fish, land of shops and places to go, land where the voices of the dead whistle through the trees and the streets, and the past reaches out and touches your very soul", but upon arrival in the small seatown, a dog pisses on the American protagonist's luggage and the place is inhabited by roguish locals and ineffective gardai. The plot is built around Massachusetts senator John McGlory who, despite coming from Hungary, in order to boost his declining popularity in the forthcoming elections, decides to play the Irish card by dispatching his assistant Marcy to the west of Ireland in order to trace his Irish roots. Notwithstanding the amusing satirical take on Irish-American expectations of Ireland, the young woman's trip conforms to the formula of spiritually recuperative trips to the Emerald Isle for Marcy, a workaholic whose energies had been fruitlessly used in the services of a corrupt American politician, will learn to value 'authenticity' from Irishman Sean, who has abandoned the city



and a career in public relations (that he sees as morally bankrupt), to retreat to his family and a simple lifestyle in the west of Ireland.

The Nephew (Eugene Brady 1998 IR)

Chad, a young Afro-American-Irish orphan boy travels from New York to the island of Inis Dora after the death of his mother, who had emigrated to America twenty years before, running away from the conservative ethos of the island community and of her brother Tony, who is now the boy's only remaining relative. After introducing the disruptive premise of making the Irish-American visitor a young black man, the film does not address the issue. The possible conflict arising from the clash of cultural differences between the young visitor and the local population is simply reduced to an old family feud which is happily resolved: thematically, through his romance with a local girl and, at the visual and aural levels, with picturesque shots of verdant and spiritually-enhancing natural scenery (dotted with prehistoric remnants rather than the ubiquitous castle of the other films, and eccentric characters like two nuns fly-fishing in a stream in hip boots) and a soundtrack that includes Celtic music, 70s rock standards and rap.



APPENDIX 2
(Stills)

Arrival in (rural) Ireland

The Matchmaker



The Matchmaker



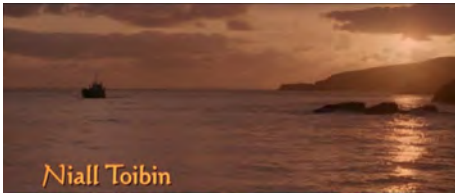
The Matchmaker



High Spirits



The Nephew



The Nephew



Laws of Attraction



Laws of Attraction



Irish Jam



Irish Jam



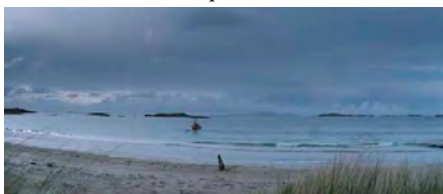
P.S. I Love You



P.S. I Love You



Leap Year



Leap Year



Leap Year



Dead Long Enough



Dead Long Enough



Nothing Personal



Drinking and Dancing at the Pub

Laws of Attraction



Laws of Attraction



P.S. I Love You



The Matchmaker



Leap Year



Nothing Personal



Romantic Walks in the Countryside

The Matchmaker



Irish Jam



The Nephew



Leap Year



Castles and Ruins

Leap Year



Laws of Attraction



Dead Long Enough



High Spirits

