

**The Irish Film Society from 1936 to 1956:
An examination in the context of the Cultural Histories
of Ireland**

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Introduction

In the modern age of ‘home-cinema’, the shared experience of viewing films en masse in cinemas and other venues is under threat. ‘What we think’ of a particular film is an important influence on our friends’ and peers’ impressions of a particular film. But how we say what we think - who we say it to and why, when and where - is an integral yet often under-examined aspect of film culture. The fact that we may not say anything to anybody at all - and simply switch off the home cinema centre and go to bed - is a worrying trend. Cinema, in the absence of television, was a much more important vehicle for social interaction and subsequent discussion. Film societies were central to the generation of intelligent discussion on intelligent film. In an era of Irish culture which is often depicted as uniform and even backward, the Irish Film Society (IFS) was established.

There are various barriers encountered when assessing such an organisation. Firstly, the IFS has never been analysed in any depth prior to this analysis. Secondly, in any of the works which, analyse Irish cultural history – either specifically or in a broader historical context - the focus on film has nearly always been a focus on the commercial cinema which targeted the general public as a whole. Even when film is examined, it is often in the context of censorship. This omission appears due largely to the ignorance of the various authors to the existence of the IFS. It will become evident however that the IFS was a publicly active organisation recognised by both state and similar organisations – both home and abroad – as a nucleus for film activities and intellectual film commentary. Another reason for the absence of any detailed history of film and its effects in Ireland is that many of the histories of Ireland deal firstly with its political history, sec-

only with its economic history, then with its social history and perhaps finally with its cultural history. It is rare to find a study which deals first and foremost with Ireland's cultural history alone. Finally there is the level of reliability of source material. It is taken from archived minute books of the IFS. The records available give a coloured and varied account of the organisation however there is no consistent collection of data on a regular basis. The records are also heavily biased in favour of the main Dublin branch with only reports to the AGM or dealings with the Dublin and other branches necessitating mention in the Dublin branches' books. Unfortunately the source material available dates only from 1943 onwards. There is reference, however, to previous years' activities in the records available. This thesis will focus on the twenty-year period from 1936 onwards – the year the IFS was formed.

Before analysing any of the findings in detail, chapter one will detail briefly the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the IFS and its context in relation to film societies in general. Although the source material being used spans a twenty year period, for the purposes of clarity this thesis will break down the material into defined themes which can be easily compared to the depiction of these themes in the various historical texts on Ireland during that period. The next chapter deals specifically with the film productions of the society, their inspirations from abroad, the competitions they ran and the film archive the society established. Education is the focus of the next chapter; both adults and children were educated in the basics of filmmaking technique and the appreciation of film at different levels. This education was delivered through various guises including the Junior Film Societies, Film Circles (Discussion Group), Film Appreciation Courses and the Children's Film Committee to name a few. The issue of censorship and the film society's exemption from it is dealt with in the next chapter. Although technically exempt from censorship, the society was still subject to the watchful eye of

the censor but rarely attracted his focus. The society, aware of the power of the medium and capable of distinguishing films of good taste from others, was closer to the ethos of the censor than is possibly first imagined. Finally, the last chapter will examine Irish cultural histories of the same period in the light of this newly available information discussed in the previous chapters,

Introduction to the Irish Film Society

Little is known about the Irish Film Society (IFS) and even less is talked about the organisation. This seems highly unjust to an organisation that was to film in Ireland what Gael Linn was to the Irish language or the Abbey to Irish theatre. It is the aim of this thesis to highlight the activities of the IFS in the context of Ireland's cultural history and the accounts thereof. More often than not, the IFS contradicts the depictions of Irish cultural history and points to a modern, cosmopolitan organisation willing to adapt to new ways of thought. The essence of the IFS is not that of a protestant dominated, upper-class, exclusive organisation that drew little from the traditional values and goals of the Irish public or state of the time.

Film societies began to be established in the early 1920s with the first one being established in Paris. They were soon appearing in other European cities but it wasn't until 1936 that the Irish Film Society - or Cuman na Scannán to give it its official name - was formed. Generally speaking, film societies were formed because, as one author put it "foreign films with foreign dialogue were unwelcome to the general public. Consequently, commercial exhibitors shied away from screening these money losers." So from the outset, there was a non-commercial element to film societies. They were founded to facilitate the presentation of work from directors which would not otherwise have been shown - many from countries outside the UK and US, and to bring to local - generally urban - audiences an artistic cinema - in short, an alternative to the Hollywood style film. Despite this blueprint, the IFS did show its fair share of US and UK produced films and it was not until 1952 that the council made the decision to limit the numbers of US films it would show although this could be viewed as a reaction to the

post World War II surge in American film production. The earliest official constitution of the Irish Film Society that survives dates from 1948: It states that:

The objects of the society shall be the development of Film Appreciation in Ireland, presentation to its members of the best artistic and educational films of all countries, promotion of the study of film-making and film technique generally and a high standard of Film production in Ireland, and such other activities as are relevant thereto. (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive)¹

However this is a full twelve years after the society was formed. The 1956 Honorary Secretary’s Annual General Meeting report gives an impression of the society when it was first formed: “From the days in 1936 when the founder members sat on orange boxes and viewed 9.5mm versions of *Potemkin* and *Caligari*, the main work of the Society has been the presentation to its members of outstanding contemporary films and those of importance in the history of cinema” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive)

A Department of Finance official - a Mr. Carey - was largely responsible for the continued existence of the IFS. A film enthusiast and an IFS member, Mr. Carey is attributed with having inserted the clause into the 1939 Finance Act which managed to have films of an artistic or educational nature rendered exempt from customs duty. (Hayes, 2006) His wife – Mia – starred in one of the IFS productions - *Manon’s Acre* – and his son – Patrick – went on to become a filmmaker himself. The details of this Act largely dictate how film clubs were formed and run, namely:

- (i) that a positive cinematograph film chargeable with the said duty is imported by or on behalf of a club, society, or other organisation, and
- (ii) that such organisation is conducted wholly or mainly for the purpose of the study of film technique by the members thereof and is not conducted for profit, and
- (iii) that such film will be exhibited only to members of such organisation and persons invited to such exhibition by a member of such organisation, and

¹ The *Liam O’Laoghaire Archive* is currently held in the National Library of Ireland but is uncatalogued. References are indicated by year of entry into the Minute Books of the IFS from which this material was taken.

- (iv) that no payment (other than the annual or other periodical subscription to such organisation by members thereof) will be made by or taken from any person for admission to any exhibition of such film, and
- (v) that such film will be exported after the exhibition thereof to the members of such organisation(ii) that such organisation is conducted wholly or mainly for the purpose of the study of film technique by the members thereof and not conducted for profit, (Finance Act, 1939)

The IFS was founded by a Liam O’Laoghaire and Edward Toner in 1936. They were motivated by their desire to see more non-English language films in Ireland. This generally meant that these films were non-mainstream also, catering for an audience that sought intellectual stimulation – sometimes instead of and sometimes as well as – entertainment. Their first year consisted of the screening of 5 German feature length films and 1 Italian short film. Over the next 12 years alone, the Dublin branch of the IFS were to show a total of ninety-eight feature length films and one hundred and eighty one short films. Details of countries of origin of films screened are listed in Appendix I. This provides a fascinating insight into what countries films were shown in Dublin at the time when even films from Palestine were on offer.

Issues of supply of films arose from time to time. Members were asked regularly what films they would like to be included in the upcoming programme. On one particular occasion, fifty six separate film titles were requested by different members for the forthcoming season. This shows not only great awareness of the product by the members but also the number of films that the society didn’t show but could have showed:

Problems of availability, of showing of Films commercially, or of the illusions of a Distributor that he will show Films commercially, of cost, and of all sorts of possible contingencies are continually before the minds of the selectors and the programmes presented each season represent a compromise between what they consider should be shown and what can be obtained to be shown – usually with a settlement rather heavily in favour of the second factor. (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1949).

Although named the IFS from the outset in 1936, evidence suggests that there was no policy in place at the beginning to create a nationwide branch network - and the society could just as easily and more accurately have been called the Dublin Film Society.

Technically speaking, the society was prohibited from creating branches by the Revenue Commissioners. This obstacle was obviously overcome though how is not apparent. There were at least 15 branches in operation at some stage or another during the period 1936 - 1956. Unfortunately the records are seldom clear as to when a branch joined and rarely clear as to when a branch ceased operations or whether, in some cases, it had ceased temporarily. The Dublin Office was seen as the headquarters by the other branches; it had an actual premises from which to operate - on Earl Street. It was also the founding branch, hosted the AGM, had the largest library, most members and - debatably - the greatest knowledge base of all the societies' branches. All branches chose films from the same pool of available titles. While each branch had a council which chose the films on offer on behalf of their members, branch councils did sometimes defer to the main Dublin branch for their opinion on certain films. The Dublin branch also screened more films annually than other branches. It also operated the 'B' and 'C' programmes - for past classic films on 16mm only and documentary films, also on 16mm, respectively. Screenings for younger audiences were also operated by both the Dublin and Cork branches and began in Dublin as early as 1945. These consisted of the screening of about seven films per year which shown to schoolchildren. This strand developed into a highly successful venture and attracted large numbers of children.

The main Dublin branch was administered by a council consisting of a chairman, vice-chairperson and a fifteen person committee - although the size of this committee varied. There were several sub-committees; the selection committee was responsible for choos-

ing the year's upcoming films; The junior film society committee; the Production Unit not only made films but along the way educated willing members in the basics of filmmaking - from cinematography to editing; the Branches Committee; Publicity Committee; the 'B' and 'C' programme committees. There was also the discussion group or 'Film Circle' as it came to be known. This group discussed film technique and there was often overlap between it and 'B' members. Several educational courses were organised by the society and as well as focussing on the obvious topics of film appreciation and the impact of film, dealt with social issues. A full-time, permanent secretary and a temporary full time secretary (for the three weeks leading up to a season's launch) were employed by the society. It is not indicated in the records available whether other branches employed any staff but this is highly unlikely as all the IFS correspondence went through the Dublin branch. At one point a levy on branches was also proposed to help cover administration costs. Other branches also had smaller councils than the main Dublin branch. Apart from the staff, all positions were voluntary and expenses were only paid on trips abroad on society business.

Membership for the first year of the IFS was fifty. The accuracy of membership numbers is not always guaranteed since the figures were not always recorded at the same period in the society's calendar. Membership levels of branches were detailed in reports to the AGM. Again, this can be an unreliable source as not all branches submitted reports on an annual basis. This absence even leads one to question the continued existence of society branches in certain towns. At the time of first available records (1943), membership of the Dublin branch had reached its limit of nine-hundred and contrary to the perceived trend that intellectual activity was on the wane, membership of the IFS increased year on year from its inception. "The charge that intellectual and artistic life was stunted in its development during the Thirties, Forties and Fifties seems to fly in the

face of the facts”(Fallon, 1999, 24) “The increase in membership is encouraging and gives grounds for the belief that more people are taking a serious interest in the cinema and that the general level of taste and standard of discrimination are improving.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1947) There were perceived disadvantages for the society in this growth. “If we are now an established and accepted Institution, we can no longer be quite the same body of innovators or pioneers, and some of the old spirit of experiment and adventure must have departed” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1947). At one point or another during the 20 year period in question branches existed in Arklow, Athlone/Mullingar, Cork, Dublin, Drogheda, Kilkenny, Limerick, Naas, Portlaoise, Sligo, St. James Gate, Trinity College, Waterford, Wexford and University College Dublin. Branches were not only exclusively for adults; junior societies were formed in Dublin, Cork and Ennis from as early as 1945. These were not societies in their own right but formed part of the larger IFS. Indeed, records from 1945 show that the Revenue commissioners were not prepared to grant the establishment of separate societies. Despite this restriction, the society flourished with annual membership probably in excess of three thousand, depending on the number of branches affiliated in any particular year. The growth continued into 1954: “One of the most encouraging aspects of our eighteenth season was the wide-spread interest which the activities of the society have aroused in the provinces. This is reflected in the large number of inquiries which we receive from time to time from groups which are anxious to form branches in their home towns” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). This optimism continued into 1956: “The Cork branch may now consider itself soundly established. A measure of its success may be that one local cinema has this year turned almost exclusively to Continental films, a policy, which, only a few years ago, was considered quite impractical.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). Two such cinemas had emerged in Dublin a few years prior to

this. Despite the obvious competition in the societies two largest locations, no reference is made to any decline in membership figures.

From as early as 1947, the society became involved with its European counterparts. In the post World War II environment, an initiative to develop common ground among film clubs in Europe began. This manifested itself in the first ever Council of Ciné-Clubs held in Cannes in the second half of 1947 at which the IFS co-founder, Edward Toner, attended. In the same year, a representative from the Portlaoise branch attended the festival of Documentary films in Edinburgh. This is worthy of mention as it demonstrates that it was not only the city-dwelling members which were capable of or rewarded with the role of representing the society abroad. In the same year the society was represented at the Film Congress in Paris and was invited to Join the Federation of English and Welsh film societies. Such conferences and communication with organisations with similar aims must be put into its proper context. These occasions were one of the few methods of maintaining an accurate grasp of the nature, availability, cost and trends of a pan-European film resource.

As well as the conferences mentioned above, Specialist periodicals and magazines were available but could not match the immediacy of access to accurate and reliable information such conferences provided. The publications that the society subscribed to were available to all members and when combined, covered all topics of the film industry. The titles varied according to availability and relevance to the society's business. In 1947 the titles that the society subscribed to included: Documentary News Letter, Kinematograph Weekly, Picturegoer, Minature Camera World, Amateur Ciné-World, 16mm Film User, The Screen Writer, Penguin Film Review. One of the periodicals previously subscribed to by the IFS was Sequence magazine for which Lindsay Anderson

was a critic. In 1949, Anderson wrote to the IFS directly thanking them for their subscription. the society also had an extensive library of books on film theory and technique (153 in 1947). Such a library was not unique to the Dublin branch however. At the end of 1952 Westmeath VEC made enquiries to the society headquarters concerning the establishment of branches in Athlone and Mullingar. Less than one year later the branch in Mullingar had been established with a membership of just under two hundred. In their written submission to the 1954 AGM report they stated: “With the cooperation of the Longford/Westmeath county librarian, who is Vice-Chairman of the Branch, some forty books on all aspects of the cinema have been added to the local library and are in keen demand by members of the society.”

Brian Fallon recognises that Ireland was inspired intellectually and culturally by nations other than the UK and America. “Perhaps the last surviving outpost of French cultural influence in Dublin was in the cinema” (1999, 131). He pays particular attention to the IFS: “Enthusiasts such as Liam O’Laoghaire were pioneers of good taste and knowledge in this area” (1999, 131). While French cinema was no doubt influential in the IFS, it was only one of several countries whose films were screened by the IFS. During the period 1936 – 1948, the IFS screened 38 French films compared to 42 films from the United States. During the same period, the society screened 75 short British films compared to eight short French films. Fallon asserts that the “old magic which the term ‘French film’ exercised on people for a generation was no longer potent” (1999, 132). If cinema was an outpost for French cultural influence in Dublin, then it was the same outpost for Russia, Germany, Britain and over 20 other countries whose films were screened by the society. Fallon could be referring to his perception in the decline of non-mainstream cinema during that period. Referring to Irish writing and the visual arts, Fallon assumes that “Inevitably, the second World War cut off contacts with Continen-

tal Europe, but these were rapidly re-established after 1945.” In the case of the IFS, there was an increase in the supply of film from all European countries during the war.

Production

The IFS was not only involved in the exhibition of ‘non-commercial’ cinema. Much of their efforts were absorbed into the production of film and the teaching of production and film appreciation. On top of that, they established an Archive Committee which dedicated themselves to preserving valuable footage from old reels of film. Whatever references are made to film in the cultural histories of Ireland, none are made to the educational aspects of the society.

The driving force behind the IFS in its fledgling years was Liam O’Laoghaire. “Only the IFS provided a serious and sustained commitment to film-making and the person who was central to its emergence was Liam O’Leary.” (Rockett, 1987, 68). After retiring from the society’s council in 1944 shortly after the death of his father, he was awarded with Honorary Life Membership. His name often appeared in the notes of the IFS records even after his departure - the last record being in 1953 when he was appointed Assistant Curator at the National Film Library in London. O’Laoghaire is justly acknowledged by most of the cultural histories as a pioneer for film in Ireland. There are several mentions of other film society members and activities which have gone unrecognised in their film society context. Kevin Rockett acknowledges how, in 1944 he and a group of others including Cyril Cusack and future President of Ireland Cearbhall Ó’Dálaigh - disrupted a screening of the film - *Smiling Irish Eyes* (1929) on account of it being stage Irish. (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 1987, 55)

The society was active in its endeavour to encourage a native film industry. In November 1943 Liam O’Laoghaire, as Honorary Secretary of the society, requested:

That the council confirm the presence of a representative of the society on the Irish Joint Film Council and the Irish Film Board [...] The Film Council aimed to coordinate substandard film work in Ireland and the Film Board aimed at advising government action in the formation of a national film industry. Prof. Hackett proposed and Mr. Dalton seconded the acceptance of the Hon. Secretary as the Society's representative on these groups. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

In January of the following year Liam O'Laoghaire reported that "the Irish Film Board had reconstituted itself as the Irish Film Council, defined its aims and objects and had prepared a memorandum on National Film Requirements for transmission to the Ministry for Industry and Commerce". (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) There was no response - official or otherwise - to this memorandum and in July 1945 Liam O'Laoghaire reported that the Irish Film Council was no longer in existence. The efforts of the society continued up to and beyond 1956 when the IFS met with the National Film Institute to discuss the best means of coordinating film interests in Ireland.

It appears that representatives from the society were also present at the first negotiations which led to the opening of Ardmore Studios. Kevin Rockett describes how Louis Elliman - one of the people involved in opening Ardmore - revealed in 1957 that the negotiations had been going on for the previous 2 years (1987, 98) According to the minutes of the IFS council meeting from 4th August 1955, a letter was received "from Mr. Cox, Dept. Industry & Commerce inviting the society to send representatives to a meeting to be held in the Department's offices on August 3rd re establishment of film industry in Ireland." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) Two representatives from the IFS attended. According to the feedback given by these members, the meeting was exploratory in nature but indicated that further meetings on the subject were to follow with representatives from the National Film Institute and film industry representatives present. This was the same department to which the Film Council (with Liam O'Laoghaire representing the IFS) had submitted its report on the film industry in 1944. It was also the same depart-

ment to which Seán Lemass returned in 1957 which - according to Kevin Rockett - was an encouraging sign for Elliman and his business partner Dalton. It is indicative of the esteem in which the IFS were held that they were part of this consultation process.

It is difficult to assess how many films the production unit of the IFS actually made as there are references to films in production and no reference to the screening of these films. These were all short films made with the primary purpose of educating the students of the film school in filmmaking techniques. It is not certain whether the bending of rules, as in October 1943, happened on a regular basis. "With regard to a request from the Secretary of the students of the school be allowed to collaborate with Mr. David Nolan on the production of a short sound film it was agreed that they could do so but that the name of the society was not to be used." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) The Production Unit drew from extremely limited resources and where necessary, made personal contributions towards the expenses involved. The first two films made were *Mannon's Acre* (1939) and *Foolsmate* (1940) by Brendan Stafford. Stafford went on to become a cameraman in England having also shot *Our Country* (1947) The limitations which the production unit encountered are encapsulated by their report to the general committee in October 1947:

It would seem that we have little to show for two months work but when we commenced to work we decided to shoot, as far as possible, only what we considered would turn out correctly. We were conscious not to waste any film if possible or to obtain indifferent results. We could, as some of the council members are aware, accumulate hundreds of feet of worthless film which might be a testimony to our industry but not to our aesthetic sensibility. Petrol: Cars were used for a month before the whole unit turned out. Therefore when the Petrol Ration was obtained we gave out coupons to cover the petrol used. We have since used 15 gals. When applying for the ration, Petrol Section agreed that we would need about 10 gals a month and accordingly issued coupons for that amount. However since the council is in doubt whether the amount of actual film shot justifies the use of that quantity of petrol, regardless of the fact that the unit turned out religiously each Sunday hoping for an improvement in the weather, I have not sought coupons for October. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive).

The unit was obviously concerned with the teaching of the aesthetics of film and the scarcity of celluloid no doubt focussed their attention to that fact. The unit was also amateur as they could only meet every Sunday to shoot film and then at evenings to learn about filming and editing techniques. The majority of costs were met by the society but a course fee was required from each participant. Despite these limitations, the school was an active body; the first year of available records show 28 meetings in one year. Not all was rosy in the school however as the comments of a Mr. Liam Gogan at that years AGM demonstrated. Mr. Gogan “did not expect his view on production to be popular and referred to film production to date in Ireland as “fantastically incompetent”.” The film in question [*Tilbradden* (1943)] “was more or less in the nature of “Five Finger Exercises”, but he considered these fiver finger exercises should be elimination on paper first and not via the screen”(Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). The unit used a 16mm camera initially but transferred to 8mm and 9.5 mm for tests while using the 16mm for main shots only. Given the situation, the society was not averse to accepting help from outside its ranks.

The council were also asked to approve the action of the school committee in attempting to discover outside sponsors for films to be made by the school. This approval was given with the stipulation that each proposed individual sponsorship would be considered in its merits. (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1944)

More evidence of the the shortages the unit faced was noted in a report to the 1949 AGM. While making a film called *These Are The Times* (1949) - a social documentary on the housing problem, members of the unit were dependent on the goodwill of friends and other society members for transport. “Even a camera had to be obtained on loan from outside and at present work is held up because no camera is available” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive) although the unit used its own dolly and track.

Competitions

Despite the shortages, success of a kind was forthcoming to the society's members.

“The Branch's [Dublin University] production for “Asylum” gained further honours by being awarded the rating of “Highly Commended” in the Amateur Ciné-World's Competition for amateur productions this year” (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive, 1949) The branch also produced a short film based on a short story by Ambrose Bierce - “A Horseman in the Sky” and a newsreel covering the events of Trinity Week. Although Dublin University were a separate branch, they used the society's camera, editing and processing equipment as all other members did.

In 1947 the society set up a competition for amateur filmmakers. The winner was to receive £5 and the judging panel consisted of Dr. Richard Hayes, film censor, Liam O'Laoghaire and GF Dalton. The competition was one of the less dynamic elements of the film society, due mainly to the low number of entries each year. Two films were entered for competition in 1949 and 1950. The former years films, which unfortunately went unnamed were described by Liam O'Laoghaire and Philip Rooney as follows:

The first film was a record of the Republic celebrations was naive and lacked purpose and over-all design. The camerawork tended to be jerky and exposures were sometimes incorrect. The second film definitely aroused anticipation. It presented a character, built an atmosphere about him and moved with pace. The photography was good and showed imagination in choice of angle. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

The competition continued into the following year when the criteria were noted as follows: “The film may be sound or silent, colour or monochrome, and upon any subject but must be made by amateurs and NOT have won any previous award” (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) The judges included Philip Rooney well-known novelist of the time and author of ‘Captain Boycott’. The society decided to accept entries from the UK and luckily so as they received no entries from Ireland in 1951. The entry from the UK

was stopped by Irish customs and despite missing the deadline for the competition was nonetheless rewarded the competition prize.

External Influence

As stated elsewhere in this thesis, the IFS was well aware of the strength of the American film industry and the popularity of that country's films among the Irish public. Despite the limited production capabilities of the society and of Irish production in general, the society was well aware of the potential for Irish produced films and the challenges it might face.

The question of distribution demands very serious consideration since distribution of Irish films could never recoup the costs of production in this country alone. Irish productions must aim also at foreign markets. This very fact would dictate the high technical standard to be achieved and, to an extent, the type of subject and its treatment. While foreign tastes would have to be considered, this does not mean that our films should ignore national or local themes. As an example the post war Italian cinema has reaped a well-deserved success from realistic portrayal of national characteristics. "Stage-Irish" treatments common to both foreign and Irish directors will have no place in these films. Finally, however good our films may be, it will, of course, require Government action to obtain access to foreign markets. The Film Society has always supported and will continue to encourage the promotion of a future film industry in this country by arousing public interest and by stimulating the ambitions of young and interested members through instruction in the basic operations of practical film-making. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive, 1951 AGM)

The above manifesto-like statement demonstrates awareness of the skill levels of film technicians at the time and also the levels they would have to reach to produce films of an acceptable standard. How far the society were ahead of their time in their calls for change can be measured by the number of years it took for Government funding to adequately promote the production and distribution of Irish films. It could be argued that an adequate level of support for Irish film has never been reached. Although the society was the pioneer for the cause of film as the report above shows, its call generally fell on deaf ears.

There was correspondence too between British film directors and the IFS: Paul Rotha not only wrote for the society's publication *Scannán* but also used the society as a source of information for other publications. In January 1947 he was a guest of the IFS over a five night stay. He began the long weekend by introducing a screening of his documentary *Land of Promise* (1945); this was followed with a speech at the Mansion House on 'The Documentary Film'. Interestingly the evening was chaired by Seán McEntee, Minister for Local Government, who was to crop up again in the life of the IFS. Rotha also spoke at the RDS on 'The Film in Education' and on Radio Eireann on 'The Film of Fact'. "After this broadcast Mr. Rotha attended a meeting of the Society's production group and talked engrossingly about his film making methods" (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive). Rotha was a major figure in the British documentary film movement and collaborated closely with John Grierson. *Land of Promise* looked at pre-war slum housing and how post-war reconstruction under a planned economy would improve the lives of the poor. As evidenced by Rotha's schedule *Land of Promise* would have greatly interested Ireland in its attempt to modernise,

Rotha was not the only director to make in impact with the society. Basil Wright, one of Rotha's contemporaries, visited the society in 1956 on his return from Cork Film Festival:

The recent visit of Basil Wright and his discussion seem to have given a new impetus to our groups. The atmosphere in Earl St. is charged with hopes of making more worthwhile films. "Free Cinema" in England is regarded by some as the beginning of what may become one of the most important movements in the history of British cinema. It is a movement that has started with amateurs, and consequently due to its success many amateurs, even in Ireland, are reconsidering their attitude towards their hobby. If we were unable to be in on the birth of the documentary movement, at least we could try to join this new one. We can "look at the life around us with new eyes", but our equipment is sadly lacking. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

Wright and Rotha, both disciples of Grierson, were filmmakers of international renown. They were known to members of the public outside film circles for their socially committed ideals. Both men eventually formed their own production companies International Realist and Films of Fact respectively.

At the end of June 1955 John Huston was appointed as president of the society for a two year period. A council meeting which took place one week later noted "A letter from Mr. John Huston expressing his appreciation at being elected president of the society and indicating his willingness to help further the society's work in any way possible was read. Huston spoke at the launch of that season's 'B' programme which was recorded and in which he paid tribute to the ill Humphrey Bogart.

ARCHIVE

In July 1952, the IFS proposed the setting up of an Archives Committee to actively preserve Irish films including films on Ireland and currently held in Ireland. Their mandate was to "discuss ways and means of discovering the whereabouts of old films in this country, to catalogue the films and to seek information on the costs of keeping the films in good condition." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) Unfortunately the proposal of actual physical archiving was temporarily shelved due to the prohibitive cost factors involved. This did not prevent the Archives Committee from becoming involved in the archiving of films and footage however. Despite the fact that their small premises could not store archive films, the IFS met with and provided the National Library of Ireland with film considered valuable enough by both parties to be preserved and stored.

According to Kevin Rockett, it was in 1952 that "George Morrison began work on a catalogue of Irish film material and had indexed 300,000 feet of Irish actualities by the time Misé Eire [1959] was first shown." (1987, 86) George Morrison was in fact a member of the IFS and from records detailing the activities of the Archives Committee,

we can assume that he was a member of this committee. A record for October of 1952 shows a report by George Morrison to the general council of the IFS on the progress he was making in relation to old IFS film footage. The work of the archives committee continued for the next couple of years at least; in 1953 Alf MacLochlainn had viewed copies of two early Irish films on the NFI movieola. He would report to Dr. Hayes of the National Library on the matter, in the hope of having these copies preserved. The following year “A long newsreel covering the year 1917 was discovered and has since been acquired by the National Library.” Alf MacLochlainn was an active film society member with regular mentions in the society’s records. He was librarian in the National Library and went on to become its Director. He also wrote for *Scannán*, the society’s magazine.

It is ironic that an organisation which realised the value of such a young medium and sought to preserve accounts of our history in film format should firstly be largely ignored by the powers that be during that period and secondly be all but forgotten by today’s film community.

Education

Perhaps the greatest achievement during the period in examination is the work the society carried out in bringing film to a younger audience and providing educational supports relating to these films. Of notable achievement also was providing an educational service for film enthusiasts where none existed prior to the society's efforts.

Children

There is a reference in the society's notes of 1943 to the Children's Film Committee which appears to be the same organisation as the Comhairle na nÓg. This bilingual appellation mirrors that of the society itself which although officially called Cuman na Scannán but nearly always referred to by its English version. The minutes show that the CFC had recently met with Inspectors from the Department of Education. As a result of this meeting, the society council agreed "that in order to secure the best possible working of the Committee, that the CFC should be empowered to co-opt members of the society to act on the committee". The above entries point to the recent formation of the committee although this in no way guarantees our certainty of its age. In October 1945 another entry confirms this assessment: "The Children's Film Committee had grown in size and in activities and was now in, what might be called, the adolescent stage" (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive). The main activity of the committee appears to have been organising screenings of films for Children. Initially the screenings were held in a city centre location but the following year a proposal was accepted to screen the children's films in four suburban cinemas. One of these expeditions was successfully held in the Odeon Cinema, Dundrum. Financial reasons may have been one of the factors in expanding the programme beyond the city centre. "Had the full seating capacity of the theatre [Olympia] been availed of it would have been a financial success" (January 1944). There was

never any real concern over the finances of the committee however, as education was a priority not only of the CFC but also of the society as a whole. In the same month another entry to the council's minutes reveals not only the educational aspect of the CFC's activities but also the priority it had given to Irish. "It was agreed that in future essay competitions should be held in English as well as Gaelic". Lamentably there are no records which detail the films that were screened or the essay titles given to the children.

In December 1945, it was recorded that:

The Children's Film Committee has been laying the groundwork for a new organisation - Children's and Educational Association Of Ireland - to deal exclusively with children's films in education and entertainment. Details of the composition of the council were given - representatives are to be chosen from panels representing primary education, secondary education, technical education, cultural workers, sociological workers, film trade. The CEFA is to be called into being at a meeting to be held on 18th January 1946 (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive).

Although no explanation is given for the meaning of CEFA, one can assume it means Children's Education in Film Association. Personnel from the CFC continued to act on the board of CEFA after it became an independent body. Despite this 'independence', CEFA still received a grant of £50 from the society as well as the use of the society's library, equipment and processing facilities. The next mention of CEFA in the society's books was in 1947 when it became affiliated to the state sponsored National Film Institute.

Despite the development of the CFC into an independent organisation and its subsequent affiliation, the society eventually turned again to the business of providing films and education on films to children.

Following a full discussion on "The Child and the Cinema" at a meeting of the Society's Executive Council on 25th October, 1951, it was decided to plan an experimental "Junior Film Society" season operating on 16mm and catering for boys and girls of Secondary School age. [The aims of the society being] (1) The Junior Film Society ob-

jects would be to develop a discriminating attitude towards films and interest in film technique. (2) The lower age limit to be 12 year of age (3) The experimental season to consist of four shows, and the subscription to be 3/0 [...] Film Society members and schools were circularised, publicity material was issued to the Press and poster were displayed in libraries, cinemas and shops. A membership of 165 was enrolled. Before each show a committee member spoke a few words of greeting, and stenciled notes on the main film and supports were circulated. After the show the members were encouraged to complete a short questionnaire. 70 to 80 % did so (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive).

There was detailed analysis of the extensive questionnaire including:

“Modern war proved to be the most popular subject with the boys. They mentioned 2 films of this type as against one of any other. Furthermore, all the futuristic films mentioned (27) also dealt with war themes. The girls preferred Musicals while Comedies were in second place with both sexes. Other results worth mentioning were the very low place given to “Westerns” and the interest in Irish Themes. Senior members preferred human drama (e.g. “The Grapes of Wrath” and the Somerset Maugham films) (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive).

The plans for the new season included: “Age limit raised to 13 years with the intention of eventually raising it to 14 years.” This increase in the age limit might be a response to some feedback in the questionnaires which indicated some of the films were too grown up while there was also a call for cartoon films. The society valued its feedback from the junior members and even formalised links between it and a members representative group: “It is hoped to set up a “liaison committee” drawn from the members themselves”. Such information is fascinating. Although probably taking up where the CFC/CEFA left off in terms of age, educating youth in film appreciation was truly pioneering work.

The age limit wasn't raised the following year as indicated. In July 1953 8 films were booked for the next season for youth between the ages of 13 and 21. The feedback to the 1953-54 questionnaire read as follows: “27 films were mentioned by the boys and 15 mentioned by the girls. Shane was easily first choice with the boys followed by Julius Caesar, Quo i and The Little World of Don Camillo” (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive). Despite their success, the society hoped for the integration of their activities into

the classroom. “We are convinced, however, that although our work in this field [film education] is necessary and at the moment vital, the proper and most effective place for film appreciation is the schoolroom.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1953 AGM) In September 1954 the society recorded that teachers from different schools acted as committee members on the Junior Film Society committee. This was an important progression since it now was not only the society that was involved. Mainstream education - in the form of these teachers - became involved and obviously saw the benefit of educating these children in film. A special feature piece about the Junior society appeared on Radio Eireann in the same month and in June of 1956 “The Junior Film society continued to keep in contact with similar bodies in other countries principally Great Britain, Portugal and France.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). Despite the wishes of the society that the teaching of film be incorporated into the classroom, this practice was never implemented.

The junior society continued in Dublin throughout the twenty year period in question and beyond. In 1955, a report to the AGM shows that members of the Junior Film Society had actually graduated to making films with under-sixteens making *Boy Wanted* and over sixteens *Here Comes Everybody* (both 1954). The former was assessed thus

The story and treatment of the film are simple but show an understanding of film technique and feeling for the medium which is very often missing in many commercial productions. [...] In this necessary work [teaching children how to make films] as in most other matters relating to the cinema we in this country lag behind. (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive)

Some time after the formation of the Junior Film Society in Dublin, one was formed in Cork. There is little mention of their size, activities or programme except for one occasion in 1956 when its members indicated their intention to show more continental films the following year instead of the old classics which they felt were over-shown in the

main cinemas. This sole entry is enough. The aim of the society to increase the appetite of youth for non-Hollywood cinema had succeeded.

Adults

The earliest reference to education in the film society archives dates to 1940. In a letter accompanying details of a conference organised by the IFS in 1940, Liam O’Leary wrote:

“For some time past it has been clearly felt that the problems of the cinema can no longer be overlooked and that now is the time to take constructive action in the matter of diverting this great medium of entertainment and culture into proper channels which will render it of greater service to the community.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive)

The conference consisted on the following topics and speakers:

Saturday 17/2/40

Paper 1: The social responsibility of the film. Liam O’Laoghaire

Paper 2: Visual Impressions: Miss Louise Gavan Duffy

Paper 3: Gaelic, The Child and The Film: Ernest Blythe

Saturday 24/2/40:

Paper 4: The projector in the school

Paper 5: Film and Child Recreation - B.T. Coote

Paper 6: Progress in Other countries – Miss Patricia Hutchins

Ernest Blythe was a member of the film society but was more importantly Director of the Abbey theatre. The society’s notes from 1944 mention a Teachers Production Group who were awarded £10 for the making of films on “Farm Life” and “Communications”.

There were 21 paid up members of the Teacher’s Group that year. No definition of the group exists but it is most likely that it was a sub-group of secondary and primary school teachers who were also members of the IFS. However the group could have been a client of the society’s ‘Film Show Service which “specialises in shows for special

groups, e.g. Doctors, scientists, teachers, schools, trade unions, societies” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1948) It seems that this service was not used that often. Nonetheless, in October of 1950 a request was received from a Dr. Alton who wished to establish a branch in order to show films of interest to the medical profession, however no further mention of this branch is recorded. In a strange entry in November 1944 a “Mr. Parker put forward a proposal that Comhairle na nÓg [the society’s youth education group] should sponsor Irish classes for teachers. The council gave c na o authority to go ahead if such a scheme was necessary.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive) Why the film society should be responsible for the teaching of Irish to teachers is baffling. One explanation is that it was necessary to teach film terminology to teachers. A more predictable course from the IFS was put forward at the society’s council meeting in February of the following year. The title of the course ‘Film Technique for Teachers’ was scheduled for that Summer. “It was proposed to seek official sanction for Vocational Education Teachers to attend the course. The scheme was approved by the council. It was decided also, that the application to the Department Of Education should be sent from the society.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). There is only one other reference to the summer school when a May 1945 entry notes that District Justice McCarthy was chosen as chair for the Summer School Symposium.

Unlike what most people would think the remit of a film society to be, the Irish Film Society also included the establishment of a film school. Since there was obviously no film board in the country at the time and no university of the time taught a course in film, this was a logical yet ambitious progression. A film school had been in operation by the society from at least 1940 onwards. The main aim of the school was the teaching of basic film-making techniques. In May 1946 the title of Film School was changed into Film Group. Whether the activities of the group lapsed between then and 1948 is uncer-

tain but in early 1948 a proposal was made at a council meeting to revive the film school in a format that would include a film appreciation course and a practical film making course. The production unit was to be associated with the school and recruit as necessary. This 'film group' may have transformed itself into the purely theory-based 'Discussion Group'. This group was set up some time in the first half of 1947 and held three meetings in its first year. "The meetings were decidedly more successful than could reasonably be anticipated for such a small attendance and the free interchange of views proved interesting and informative." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive). The topics discussed at the meetings were: Film Criticism in Ireland (which focussed on *Odd Man Out* (1947), Future of Irish Documentary Film and The Film Society Movement. In a November 1948 entry, the Discussion Group - with perception that is still sadly lacking today - found " that "The Well Diggers Daughter" was pleasant because it was French and because of Raimu. If the same film had been equally well produced and acted in Hollywood it would have been dismissed as "tripe"." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive). As can be seen from the entry below, there was regular overlap between the Discussion Group and education. In 1949 the group "held six discussion meetings and three lectures on the history of the film (illustrated with film strips) during the Season. Average attendance was about ten. Attendance and interest were better maintained this time than in previous Seasons" (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

Part of the remit of the school included the provision of Film Appreciation Courses. These were more structured than normal one-off lectures and were usually given by a figure recognisable by the society's membership. The earliest of these dates to 1943 but they continued throughout the years with a 1949 course delivered by FE Pardoe of Birmingham Film Society and a 1953 course delivered by deputy director of the British Film Institute Ernest Lindgren. The average attendance of the former was 59 members

over a six evening schedule. Perhaps because of this success, the National Film Institute approached the IFS in 1950 with the suggestion of pooling resources for future film appreciation courses as well as cooperation on production units and block booking of the same films.

As Kevin Rockett rightly points out “Awareness of the British documentary movement, and the socially committed documentaries produced in Britain and America, was generated by Liam O’Leary in the 1940s” (1987, 68). This awareness was continued formally when the society formed the ‘C’ programme as mentioned earlier. Even though this stream of the society was linked to exhibition of films, it had been created “for the purpose of encouraging the appreciation use and production of documentary films (a) As a form of artistic expression (b) as a vehicle of social education (c) As a means of stimulating discussion” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1949). The review of the programme’s first year was promising:

“This is a new venture designed to deal with the film as an instrument of social criticism rather than either as a means of entertainment or as an art form. Six shows were given and there was an average attendance of about thirty five, which is an encouraging beginning. At each show documentaries were shown dealing with a single central theme, and a speaker lead a discussion afterwards. Many of these discussions were both stimulating and highly entertaining, and it is to be hoped that interest in this programme will increase rapidly.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1950 AGM)

An example of the type of films shown together with their speakers is given below:

23/10/1951	The Woman in Society	Mrs. Patricia Rushton
13/11	Town and Country Planning	Patrick Delaney
11/12	The Structure of the film	JP Comberton
22/1/1952	Trade Unions	Jack McGougan
19/1	Farrebique	Fergus MacLochlainn
18/3	Psychology	Terence Noble

(Liam O’Laoghaire Archive)

Given the success of the society's education policy, it is not surprising that in 1954 the council proposed bringing lectures to regional branches. However there is no record of such courses being delivered outside of Dublin and Cork. This is not to say that demand in the regions did not exist. Providing such courses even in the built up cities of Dublin and Cork proved costly as the accommodation and transport expenses (often from England) of the lecturer had to be paid for. Yet again, such prospects died a death before they were born for want of adequate government funding.

Censorship

Although the case of film censorship has been extensively dealt with in dedicated studies, particularly by Kevin Rockett, it is necessary with this new information now available to contextualise the society's role in Ireland during the thirties through to the fifties. The period is synonymous with the banning of books and the exile of writers. In the case of cultural histories of Ireland as a whole, studies on censorship during the period in question focus mainly on literary censorship to the detriment of film. Even then, it is unfortunate that many of the references to film and cinema in any of the cultural histories of Ireland occur in the context of censorship. Although one of the defining characteristics of a film club is its ability to exhibit films without the censor's stamp of approval, the vast majority of films that were screened by film clubs would never have warranted his attention in the first place. According to a 1948 film society brochure its main objectives were "the encouragement of good Irish film production and the development of a proper taste in films." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) 'Taste' nor only infers the appreciation of a film's style but also the moral judgement of the films content and message. The prevailing taste of that time was obviously material produced by Hollywood and British studios. The society, while being exempt from censorship itself, promoted the cause of intellectual and cultural cinema by pro-actively educating its members - both adult and child - in the characteristics of good film. While the importance of subject matter remained an integral part of their teachings, the focus was firmly on the mechanics of a film and the technical aspects of its production. The notion of film as entertainment was a low priority on the curriculum. This emphasis on film as education rather than entertainment acted as a type of censorship itself.

While there are no excuses for ignoring the censorship of so many films viewed by the public, there are some explanations as to its lower pecking order in the focus of academics.

Films were often censored prior to their arrival in Ireland; since the majority of the fare entering the country was from the United States, their films were subject to their own censorship in the form of the Hays office. Similarly, the producer of most of the films screened in Ireland were major United States studios. While the director was the artistic drive behind these creations, it was the producers who called the shots when it came to financial decisions. Censorship formed part of these financial decisions and it generally made better financial sense to screen a censored version of your film than no film at all. Editing a film - although time-absorbing and costly - is a simpler process than editing thousands of copies of a particular book after its publication. One film can be edited according to the tastes of the censor in any specific country and even then it might necessitate the editing of only one reel from the four or five that make up the film.

Finally, since Ireland had no film industry or filmmakers of its own, there was no great outcry from the indigenous intelligentsia at the censorship of one of their peers. Because there would have been less publicity regarding the censorship of a film compared to that of a book, the public would have been less aware of the ‘controversy’ surrounding an edited film. According to Brian Fallon, “the average writer or intellectual usually had relatively little difficulty in obtaining the books he or she wanted” (1999, 205). The availability of a book and the subsequent knowledge of its contents was fuel to the fire of the censorship critics whereas the absence of possibly contentious films from such circles negated any discussion.

Despite the fact that censorship was carried out by the Hays office in the United States, censorship by an Irish office was also deemed necessary, and shortly after the literary censorship board was set up, the office of the Irish film censor was established. F.S.L. Lyons contends that although “Aimed ostensibly at preventing what has been called ‘Californication’, the censorship has not in practice been restricted to the cruder fantasies of Hollywood, but has also been used, often with devastating effect, upon some of the masterpieces of modern cinema.” (Lyons, 1985, 688) As discussed elsewhere, it was often the studios themselves that made these cuts prior to the censor’s viewing. Although the number of American films that the society exhibited grew steadily since 1936, a certain amount of concern grew over these films and the US producers. In November 1945, obviously in a post World War II environment, the following entry appeared in the IFS minutes: “Conway Maxwell mentioned a report in the newspapers that American Film Companies were acquiring a monopoly on film production in Europe. If this were true, it should be combatted” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive). Only well aware that this type of film was proving popular with millions of Irish people, the society saw themselves as offering more than an alternative to these films - censored or otherwise: “the necessity of all film societies to undertake some form of community service was stressed. The most promising type of service was that of providing shows to the general public on health, education, agriculture and current affairs.” ((Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1947 AGM). With the surge in American films becoming available after the war, the society were provided with a wider selection than ever from which to choose. While the number of films to choose from increased, the type of film which to society wished to exhibit didn’t. In February of 1951 the minutes of the society council meeting recorded that “a general policy discussion had taken place at the last Selection Committee meeting. It had been decided that to keep the bookings of English and American films down to a minimum.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive).

The view given by the chairman's report of the 1956 IFS AGM seems to row in with this position.

No one would tolerate the placing of "Mona Lisa" in a frame which concealed her head yet the public are expected and to some extent are willing to pay to witness similar treatment being meted out to cinematic works of art. There is yet another example of the film trade's callous indifference to its product – the cutting of films before they are submitted to the censor in an effort to anticipate his directions and the arbitrary cutting of films when their bookings at first run houses. (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

Here again we witness the society adopting an ethos closer to that of the censor rather than the generally perceived stance as one of being beyond or immune to his office. Indeed, the censor appears on the list of invitees to the opening screening of the IFS as early as 1949, and prior to that acted as judge in the IFS film competition. (Interestingly, the first sentence of the above paragraph refers to the poor standards of projection after the introduction of widescreen and cinemascope introduced two years earlier.)

Although the 1939 Finance Act provided for the duty free import of films, there were still concerns surrounding the censorship obligations of the IFS. There is only one record of official interaction between the censor's office and the society during the period and that occurred during the war in relation to films about the war:

Mr. Coyne [controller of military censorship] expressed his doubt as to the suitability of *Les Otages*, *Lone White Sail*, and *Fear and Peter Brown*. Prof. Hackett raised the question as to whether a promise was ever made to submit films to the censor. There was no evidence on record of such a promise. The report was accepted (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive, 1944)

The films - French, Russian and British respectively - would all have been considered propaganda at the time. At the next meeting of the council a resignation letter from a Miss McAleese was read. She resigned in protest at the banning of *Les Otages* (1938). At the same meeting the following point was recorded: "Controller of Censorship: Hon. Sec. Read report. It appeared that disquieting reports as to our mutual relations were in

circulation, but these were without foundation” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive) The impact of the war seems to have finally caught up with the society.

The Honorary Secretary outlined the difficulties existing with regard to film supply for next season. It was decided to instigate enquiries at once as to what films were available. The following categories were considered: 1.

French Talkies 2. Russian talkies 3. Contemporary english films . 4 Revival of past society shows 5. German Films 6. Films from smaller countries 7. Specially designed programmes of an anthology nature 8. Silent classics 9. American Films – Revival & Contemporary (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1944)

It is interesting to note the position which American films appear on the list. This difficulty appears to have been overcome in February of the following year as a distributor which had previously refused to send films ‘owing to war risks’ had now agreed to send the stock once again. Waterford society, citing the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defense Measures statement that war films could be shown under certain conditions, made a request to the Dublin office of the society to import such films. “The chairman said that this matter had been discussed before and that the Council had decided that it was not the society's policy to show war films” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive, 1945) The society had obviously decided to remain strictly neutral in its exhibition policy. Films from both the Allied and Axis powers had been exhibited right throughout the war.

It was generally assumed that the IFS remained outside the remit of the film censor’s office. There were elements of doubt expressed by council members from time to time concerning the exemption status of the society. Technically, the IFS had no interaction with the censor’s office as they imported and returned films directly to either the distributor or other suppliers. In May of 1945 the society reiterated that it would never be willing to accept a government grant as it would no longer be an independent body. It was assumed - and generally still is - that executive officers of film societies were in-

formed enough in film discourse to detect material that may not be suitable for their membership.

Had the society been subject to censorship, its structure would have been radically altered. The mechanism for reporting 'suspicious' works to the literary censorship board would have been unworkable in the case of the society's screenings. Firstly, one had to become a member of the IFS before one could see any of the films on offer. This involved disclosing one's name and address to the IFS – which may not have suited anyone looking to report any of the films in question. Secondly, becoming a member of the IFS involved paying for all of the years films up front. Paying for membership of several films in order to label one as unsuitable would have been extreme - and costly. Viewing and objecting to a film was also different to reading and objecting to a book on the basis that going to the IFS was a shared experience. Members were constantly encouraged to share their opinions with other members via discussion groups and lecture courses. The chance that outrage would be expressed by the majority of viewers on any particular night would have been extremely unlikely, thereby discouraging complaint from any potential individual objector.

The business of the IFS was carried out with the aim of bringing educational and artistic films to as wide an audience as possible. This was achieved partly by providing comprehensive notes on each film prior to each screening. The viewer therefore was aware of the setting for each film and – if any film were to come close to breaching the boundaries of decency – this potential breach was put in its cultural context. As well as the notes on each film prior to each screening, the society also published a programme containing a list of all films to be exhibited that season. This advance publication would have given the censor's office sufficient notice of any films that could breach the limits

of taste - even for the society's membership. It would only have been of use, of course, had the censor prior knowledge of the contents of the films listed. The chance of exhibiting a film that had a high risk of attracting the attention of the censor was reduced even further by the links the Irish society had forged with its European counterparts. Given the sensibilities that the IFS shared with these European clubs, it is unlikely that these societies would have recommended films which they knew might cause controversy in Ireland or which may already have caused controversy in either their own or other countries' clubs. Objecting to an IFS screening was also rendered difficult as the film only entered Ireland for a short period of time. Once the film had been screened, it was immediately shipped back to England in order to avoid further rental charges from the distributor. Therefore if one had an objection to a particular film and had reported it to the Censorship Board, the film would have to be re-imported from the distributors again in order to view the 'offending' sequence. This may have been very costly indeed as the films often came from mainland Europe and may have gone onto other European locations before the initial complaint from Ireland was received.

Much fewer films were actually screened by the IFS, of course, than in commercial cinemas. In its first year in 1936 only 5 feature films and 1 short film were screened by the IFS. However this rose to 10 features and 24 short films in the 1943 – 44 season. This was still an extremely tiny number compared to the number of cinema tickets purchased in Ireland in 1943 – 22 million (Ferriter, 2005, 429). Therefore the numerical likelihood of many society films being censored was slim at the outset. In later years there was often confusion over the legislation that governed the IFS and although clarification was sought over its status, calls were never made to solidify the legislation which guaranteed its existence.

When films were viewed for reasons other than their artistic or intellectual appeal, the society's council seem to have been well aware: "The completely abnormal and rather unhealthy interest taken in the showing of *Brief Encounter* still leaves suspicion lingering in the mind. It is a good film but hardly one deserving the attention which it received in the last show of last season's B programme." (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive, 1949 AGM). Very few films screened by the IFS caused outrage among its members. In 1952, the screening of *Le Sang des Bêtes* caused one member to object in writing to its screening and one council member to resign. Both objectors to the vivid portrayal of Parisian abattoirs were female. In 1955 Naas branch, which that year had exceeded its membership limit of 150 by 41 applications, expressed reservations about the screening of *Los Olivados* (1950) by Luis Buñuel, citing that their membership mightn't be ready for a film about violence and crime in the slums of Mexico city. Naas ended up taking the film after they were informed that they would be billed for it whether they screened it or not. There were no subsequent complaints about the film. The chairman's report from the 1950 AGM mentioned that "Some of the films included in the "B" programme caused in Waterford a certain amount of despondency, and we are given to understand that the surrealistic programme comprising "Blood Of A Poet" and "The Sea Shell and the Clergyman" caused positive alarm" (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive) The latter film describes how the lust experienced by a priest causes him to indulge in bizarre fantasies. The film, made in 1928, was banned by the British censor at the time. The highly surrealistic *Blood of a Poet* (1930) from Jean Cocteau describes the psychologically creative journey of an artist. Despite the ages of both films, they were still obviously pushing boundaries twenty five years after their release.

The IFS did, however, attract some undue attention, mainly caused - it seems - by inter-party pre-election politicking. An emerging, left-leaning political party of the time

Clann na Poblachta secretly contracted Liam O’Laoghaire and cameraman Brendan Stafford (two former IFS members) to make a short film on the difficulties faced by the Irish public in recent years. O’Laoghaire seems to have preempted concern over the political tone of the film by writing to the chairperson of the society to request the selection committee to choose it as one of the society’s films. In his letter O’Laoghaire states “There is no reference to any political party living or dead. There is no attack on the government. The film is designed to encourage a responsible and informed democracy and therefore immediately qualifies for classification as an Adult Education Film.”

(Liam O’Laoghaire Archive) The chairperson, in his response to O’Laoghaire’s request, informed him that the selection committee’s “unanimous opinion was that, at this time, your film “Our Country” could not be taken or mistaken for other than Election propaganda.” (Liam O’Laoghaire Archive) Despite or perhaps because of this view, the chairperson proceeded to accept O’Laoghaire’s request to exhibit the film.

Although over 100 cinemas around Ireland were showing *Our Country*, only one cinema in Dublin had agreed to screen it, for reasons which are not apparent. It was not the acceptance of the Irish Film Society to screen the film which drew the attention of Seán McEntee TD. Rather it was the links between the film’s director and the society.

An article appeared in the Irish Press in January 1948 which reported on a speech given by Seán McEntee in response to Seán MacBride’s calls for investigations into certain public companies. MacBride was leader of Clann na Poblachta at the time. McEntee obviously sought to make some similar political ground in the same vein as MacBride by associating Clann na Poblachta with the IFS. Unfortunately for McEntee, Liam O’Laoghaire was not honorary director as he had claimed, merely honorary life member. And the society was not a public body despite the legislation from which it benefited. In the same speech however, McEntee went on to note with interest the number of

Russian films than had been screened by the society and the possibility of their use for propaganda purposes. This was a shot across the bows for a group that was not normally subject to censorship - perceived or real - of any kind.

The society took the matter seriously as proven by their records of the event. The chairman immediately replied in writing to the Irish Press as he dryly noted that McEntee had indeed used the society's screenings of Russian films for [his own] propaganda purposes. The society also made contact with McEntee to arrange a meeting with him so that representatives from the society could respond to his accusations. In the end, four members attended the meeting at McEntee's Dáil office where they presented him with details of country origins for every film they had screened since inception. McEntee publicly acknowledged his error in a letter to the Irish Press two months after the first article appeared, stating he had "greatly exaggerated the frequency with which Russian films have been shown under its auspices in recent years" (Liam O'Laoghaire Archive)

Cultural Histories and the Irish Film Society

Current impressions of the 1936 - 1956 period are often tinted by the application of the majority findings to all cases; ignoring the exception which proves the rule, attempting to square past events into present-day circles. These present day representations and accounts of the past often focus on a rural rather than an urban Ireland. While state legislation, institutional opinion and official reaction might have depicted one type of Ireland, the everyday practice in reality often contradicted this depiction. This section will attempt to depict a clearer impression of that era in the context of the IFS combined with historical fact and subsequent interpretations of that fact.

For a nation emerging out of the shadow of colonial rule, Ireland looked both inward to herself and her cultural past as well as outward to other countries in an attempt to define her new place in the world. Defining what Ireland was not generally required a comparison or contrast with our nearest neighbours. Defining what Ireland was required introspection into our past – both recent and distant - as well as comparison with our neighbours from further afield in ‘Europe’. As stated elsewhere in this thesis, film did not form part of Ireland’s past – recent or distant - as music or literature of the period did. As film was a relatively young means of representation, its place in Irish culture was always going to be a minor one.

The dominant ideology in the country was therefore in favour of achieving and maintaining as much self-sufficient Irish independence as was possible. The prevailing republican creed [...] assumed that the Gaelic Irish nation had finally thrown off the thrall of foreign subjugation and that her true destiny lay in cultivating her national distinctiveness as assiduously as possible. Economic nationalism was therefore but one aspect of a prevailing ethos (Brown, 2002, 134)

In terms of both general film consumption and society exhibition the above statement is laughable. ‘Dominant ideology’, ‘republican creed’, ‘foreign subjugation’, ‘prevailing

ethos' all combine to give the impression of an Ireland that was uniform both in origin and desire; one where those influenced from outside - no matter how large in number as long as they were not the majority - did not count. The activities of the film society points to a different type of Ireland where "the accepted picture of a culturally chauvinistic statelet shutting its doors (and windows) on international currents turns out, in several respects, to be almost the reverse of the truth." (Fallon, p.11) The IFS was inspired by socially conscious British directors and adopted a European framework and European sensibilities in its programming choices. At the same time it promoted an Irish industry making films about Ireland without the use of stage-Irish. It encouraged the use of the Irish language and educated not only its adult members but also more importantly children in filmmaking technique and the appreciation of film. Surely the ethos which drove the society then reflects the Ireland of today more than the perceived Ireland of the fifties. They recognised Ireland as a country among other European countries; one that could be inspired by Britain but not necessarily threatened; that could develop its identity through its historical strengths of creativity and education.

There is huge irony in the fact that de Valera, unwilling to acknowledge the medium of film as a means of fostering a national identity, permitted thousands of English language films to be lapped up by the fervent Irish cinema goer. This sense of irony is increased when one considers how willing De Valera was to use the relatively new medium of radio to get his own message across. De Valera's emphasis on traditional, rural-focused Ireland was, of course, an attempt to create a unique and individual identity; a rejection of the many characteristics Ireland shared with Britain at that time. "Pastoral imagery remained important in the 1930s, and the rural ideal" according to Ferriter "became even more pronounced owing to Fianna Fáil's courting of the small-farm electorate and their goal of self-sufficiency." (2005, 374). In terms of film entering the country, there

is little example of cultural protectionism. If any policy existed, it was a policy of *laissez faire*, as the most popular films at Irish cinemas - both urban and rural - were American and British.

Luke Gibbons in his essays *Transformations in Irish Culture* makes a salient point about Irish culture and our perception of it. In reference to an analysis put forward by Declan Kiberd that urban problems are caused by rural planners and politicians, Gibbons points to the idealisations of rural existence as a product of urban sensibilities; just like the stories and myths of the “Old West” were enriched by the writers from back East, so too was the myth of romantic Ireland promulgated by “urban-based writers, intellectuals and political leaders” (1996, 85). The relative youth of film has meant that its existence has post-dated the emergence of large towns and cities. It is an industry which has no historical affiliations to countryside or rural communities. On the contrary, the very nature of the film industry – skilled technicians requiring extensive access to modern technology and processes– means that the industry was disposed to urban life. One could argue that because of this and the obvious cost factors involving transport to/from these studio bases, that urban life was portrayed more often than rural life in the earlier years of the film industry. As was the case with all film societies, they relied on a sufficiently large number of film enthusiasts to survive. Such numbers only existed in areas of large population. The IFS, then, was not hampered by affiliations to a previous cultural heritage which other cultural organisations and traditions were historically bound to respect. Indeed, they were affiliated more closely to other film societies in other European capitals.

The ‘urbanite’ film-society member then would have been of little significance electorally to De Valera’s *Fianna Fáil*. Equally, the labourers of the Irish rural economy

would have been unlikely to participate in a film society – had one existed in their area. If they were to pay a visit to see a film, it would more likely have been for entertainment purposes – a means of temporarily suspending the reality of their agricultural existence. The likelihood of a concentration of specialist interest in film in the smaller towns was slim - and although cinemas were numerous throughout the country, they survived purely on a commercial basis.

The ambivalence of the state towards film was exemplified once again when the status of the Irish language was highlighted in the 1937 constitution. Clause 1 of Article 8 made Irish ‘as the national language’ the first official language and in clause 2 recognised English as a second official language. The dominant force in producing film became the accepted force in ‘Irish’ culture. Sharing the same language as most of the US produced films was undoubtedly a huge factor in Ireland being satisfied with American films - even if many of them were censored. Although it may have been the case that “American and British accents in the cinema provided a rude shock to those who had been engaged in a struggle to establish a distinctive Irish cultural identity” (Rockett, 1987, 52), this shock did not provoke the powers that be into funding of Irish films which might reverse the trend. Lip service was paid to the idea of supporting the exhibition of more films other than those produced in the UK and US. “Sean McEntee eight months before becoming Minister for Finance after the party’s victory in the 1932 general election [...] called for a redirection of the policies of film distributors from dependency on Anglo-American product.” (Rockett, 1987, 51) McEntee cited *Storm over Asia* (1928) as an example of the type of Soviet film which should be distributed.

This apparent neutrality towards cinema and its various effects - including ‘advertising’ foreign countries to would be emigrants - demonstrated the low regard with which the

potential of film was held for most of that period. As Rockett notes “after the initial hostile reaction, this aspect of the effect of sound cinema in Ireland was largely disregarded.” (1987, 52)

While cinema was disregarded, music was held in high regard by officialdom. “The 1930s also saw the elevation of Irish Traditional music [...] to a position in official esteem, second only to the Irish language as Derrig [Thomas, TD Minister for Education] declared in March 1937 at the Dublin Feis:

That set of values which makes the Irish mind different looks out at us clearly from our old music – its idiom having in some subtle way the idiom of the Irish mind, its rhythms, its intervals, its speed, its build have not been chosen arbitrarily, but are what they are because they are the musical expression, the musical equivalent of Irish thought and its modes....the Irish idiom expresses deep things that have not been expressed by Beethoven, Brahms, Elgar or Sibelius – by any of the great composers (Ferriter, 2005. 353)

It is telling that if such were the beliefs of Irish politicians of the time, that cinema was always going to struggle to be accepted - firstly as an art form at all, and secondly as one that could adequately represent Irish culture. Firstly it was a relatively modern practice and more importantly, it was not a traditionally Irish practice. panacea

So, Language and Music received special attention from the governments of the period, while cinema as a whole was generally disregarded. Present-day accounts have also coloured our impression of that period. Referring to the film *The Ballroom of Romance* (1982) as an example of how Ireland had come to terms with “the reassuring belief that the fifties were no longer with us” Gibbons states that viewers could “confront the harsh realities of poverty, emigration, sexual repression, and the enforced domestication of women” prevalent in that period. (1996, 83) Attributing such characteristics to that period is over-simplifying the argument. Such references are apt and workable within the

confines of a film screenplay. *The Ballroom of Romance* and the very particular setting and circumstances which it depicts is not a catch-all for life in 1950s Ireland; yet the film - as Gibbons inadvertently demonstrates - has become a modern day panacea to the ills we ascribe to that period.

That is not to say that depictions such as *The Ballroom* do not capture some of the essence of that period. Seán O’Faoláin, referring to intellectual apathy in Ireland of that period asserted that for writers ‘the enemy is no longer external’ (Ferriter, 2005, 524). Censorship obviously took its toll on many of the writers of the period and it no doubt was the spur for much of O’Faoláin’s venom.

The population at large was protected from the incursions of alien modern thought and art forms not only by the admonitory fulminations of such critics, but of course, by the Censorship Board, ably assisted as it was by the zeal of the customs. [...] Between the years 1930 and 1939 some 1,200 books and some 140 periodicals fell foul of the censor’s displeasure.” (Brown, 2004, 136–137)

The self-imposed exile of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett reflects the desire of these writers to associate with intellect of similar standing – both choosing to relocate to mainland Europe. England was also home for many Irish writers. “John D. Sheridan bemoaned the death of the fiery idealism that had marked the national revival of the early twentieth century, suggesting most good Irish writers were abroad, seeing London as their literary capital.” (Ferriter, 2005, 524). Yet this national revival had coincided with a period of struggle for national independence. This independence was now all but achieved; the focus turned from revolution and civil war to stable government and political continuity. How long more could the ‘fiery idealism’ whose death Sheridan laments, have continued for? Irish writers were simply doing what writers from all over Europe and further afield had done; Migrate to areas of greater artistic intensity and dynamism. It cannot be assumed that this migration caused the cessation of all intellectual

life in Ireland. Despite O’Faoláin’s despair at the dearth of intellectual creativity, he does acknowledge that Irish life consists of more than the rural gombeen man. He responded to his critics of the time:

[They] hate the truth because they have not enough personal courage to be what we all are – the descendants, English-speaking, in European dress, affected by European thought, part of the European economy, of the rags and tatters who rose with O’Connell to win under Mick Collins – in a word this modern Anglo-Ireland (Brown, 2004, 146).

A similar view was aired long before O’Faoláin spoke out. Writing in 1926, ten years before the film society was formed, Harald Speakman observed:

It came to me quite conclusively that scattered all about Ireland there is a small, highly educated intellectual middle class which does not coincide with the moneyed people nor with the fox-hunting people at all – a class which, quietly living its own life and unobtrusively going its own way, is not often observed by a stranger.” (Brown, 2004, 33-34)

There was diversity then, in Irish opinion and practices during this period of perceived uniformity. Writing in the same year, AE, whether pointing out the direction the new Irish Free State should take, or fearful of the direction it had already taken, asserted:

“We do not want uniformity in our culture or our ideals, but the balancing of our diversities in a wide tolerance. The moment we had complete uniformity, our national life would be stagnant.” (Brown, 2002, 109) This was the view and hope of AE who promoted the Anglo-Irish literature revival. Brown states that “even in circles where he might have hoped for a more sympathetic hearing the ground was infertile”. Despite

Brown’s reservations, the IFS can be held up as a valid template for AE’s desires.

Patrick Kavanagh perhaps encapsulates the potential of Ireland yet the limits it faced when he describes how Irish life ‘froze for want of Europe’(Ferriter, 2005, 432).

So how was this period of perceived intellectual apathy supposed to have ended? J.J. Lee astutely observes that “Traditional Ireland worshipped its authorized self-portrait with an idolatrous fervour. [...] The portrait faded away. But no alternative self-portrait would emerge to command comparable conviction.” (1989, 652 – 653) This whole sentence is very telling and his use of the words ‘self-portrait’ are extremely apt. Ireland’s traditions and practices during this period were largely a constructed image comprising of past traditions. But this was not unique for Ireland in comparison to other countries or indeed in relation to other periods during Ireland’s history. The absence of an ‘alternative self-portrait to command comparable conviction’ is understandable. The period from the thirties to the fifties was unique in recent history; no period since has needed an identity to depict a young, small, independent state emerging from the recent colonial oppression by our nearest neighbours. It is lamentable that mostly traditional forms of Irish culture were deemed fit to act as subjects in this self-portrait, when the use of more universal forms - such as film - could have seen Ireland recognised on a larger stage, under a different yet still unique light.

Conclusion

The achievements of the Irish Film Society, even by today's standards, are worthy of study across a variety of media. Apart from one full-time staff member and one part-time - the IFS was a voluntary organisation. Over a twenty year period, the organisation grew from a Dublin based membership of fifty into a nationwide membership of over three thousand. Not only this, but the activities grew from exhibition only to include every possible aspect associated with film appreciation and production.

It is difficult to understand how such a public organisation that achieved so much came to be largely ignored - not only by the public in general, but more importantly by those who have attempted to analyse Ireland's culture during that period. One explanation is that the Ireland embodied by the society and its activities is so similar to the modern Ireland, that it simply didn't stand out. Another is that the society stood out so much from what was perceived as being representative of that period, that it was purposely ignored.

Lack of adequate funding is cited in the above thesis as a reason for the failure of Irish film production to take off. This is true in the case of proper training, education and provision of modern equipment and facilities - all of which the IFS attempted to remedy on a voluntary basis. The little attention focussed on the IFS and their activities only serves to ignore the indifferent treatment of the state towards film production and education. Had the IFS' activities been highlighted at an earlier stage, the imbalance would have been noticed and possibly redressed. As it stands, today's film culture is arguably better off - finally - than in the period in question - on a like with like comparison. The IFS have left a heritage of passionate activity involving all aspects of film in Ireland.

However much technology has advanced, we can still look to the IFS for inspiration on commitment and practices in advancing the intelligent discussion of film in Ireland today.

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