

Cowboys and kings: The coming of age film in 1990s Irish cinema

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Abstract

The article explores why in the 1990s many Irish filmmakers chose precisely a coming of age narrative to attempt to take the international box office by storm, and assesses some of the films that resulted from the attempt. First, it discusses the cultural roots and generic conventions of the Hollywood teen film, especially the rites of passage it has reified and its idealization of small-town, mid-century America. Second, it studies the economic and cultural reasons behind the (over)production of coming of age films in Ireland over the 1990s. Finally, we tackle how these films alternatively deviate from and rely on the conventions of the Hollywood coming of age film to meet investor demands and engage global audiences with Irish concerns.

Keywords: Coming of age film, Irish cinema, Hollywood, teen, Celtic Tiger, 1990s



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Carlos Menendez-Otero

Introduction

Early in the 1990s, the critical and commercial success of the Irish-themed UK films *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) sparked a wave of interest in film from the Irish government. As a consequence, a heap of public money was readily made available to lure Hollywood and UK productions into the country and help develop a local film industry to create AV jobs and hopefully put Irish cinema on the international film map with some low-budget surprise hit in the vein of *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997).

The article explores why in the 1990s many Irish filmmakers chose precisely a coming of age narrative to attempt to take the international box office by storm, and assesses some of the films that resulted from the attempt. The first section traces the origins of the Hollywood teen film and describes briefly the evolution of the genre into coming of age narratives. Next, we examine the economic and cultural reasons behind the (over)production of coming of age films in Ireland over the 1990s. The lengthy third section assesses some Irish coming of age narratives and studies how they appropriate well-established, recurring motifs, types and tropes from Hollywood in an attempt to 1) engage mainstream global audiences with contemporary

local concerns, and 2) meet tourism product placement, plot and/or cast demands from investors. The text ends with a brief conclusion.

Adolescence in popular culture. From the *bildungsroman* to the coming of age film

If you were asked what a coming of age film is, the answer that would most likely come to mind is *teen film*. The genres are closely related to each other, if only because in both coming of age and teen movies the protagonist is a character target audiences can unmistakably regard, whether by age and/or behavior, as adolescent. In a recent study on the genres, Catherine Driscoll (2011) considers *teen*, among many others, films as diverse as *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (George B. Seitz, 1938), *The Wild One* (Laszlo Benedek, 1953), *Rebel Without A Cause* (Elia Kazan, 1955), *Gidget* (Paul Wendkos, 1959), *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *National Lampoon's Animal House* (John Landis, 1978), *The Breakfast Club* (John Hughes, 1985), *Stand by Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986), *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and *Almost Famous* (Cameron Crowe, 2000). Certainly all these movies qualify as teen film, yet only those in which the ultimate goal of the hero's journey (Campbell 2008) is to complete the transition from childhood to adulthood — e.g., *American Graffiti* — would rightfully belong in the coming of age film genre.

The origins of the genre are found in the remarkably similar three-stage — separation, liminality and incorporation — rituals with which most world cultures mark the transitional phase between childhood and full, adult inclusion into a social group. The rituals, which Arnold van Gennep first called *rites of passage* in 1909, have existed since at least 40,000 BC, though it was not until the late 18th century that the individual dimension of the transition was first regarded. This was followed by the emergence of the *bildungsroman*, “a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood” (Wikipedia 2014). Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1794) is often cited as the first in the genre, which also includes Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), among countless others.

In the 1950s, unprecedented affluence, baby booming and universalization of secondary education ushered in a distinctive mass-produced teen culture in the US, which post-studio Hollywood reflected and shaped in films such as *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* (Arthur Brooks, 1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Doherty 2002). Then, as youth-obsessed boomers resisted adulthood, the hope of the Kennedy era faded into the Vietnam War, civil rights turmoil, Nixon’s corrupt administration and economic recession. Boomers reacted to these

traumatic events by looking nostalgically on their childhood and adolescence, and idealized the 1950s and early 1960s as the paradise lost or golden age latter 20th century popular culture would turn to “find / construct sources of identity, agency or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present” (Tannock 1995, 454).

New Hollywood teen films — e.g., *American Graffiti*, *Big Wednesday* (John Milius, 1978) — added an *Et in Arcadia Ego* encounter with death to the rites of passage reified in the genre since the 1950s, namely “losing one’s virginity, graduating from high school, [...] using alcohol or other drugs for the first time” and taking “some sort of decision, the outcome of which will have a significant shaping impact on the rest of [the characters’] lives” (Fox 2002). In these films, the rituals are negotiated over a night, a weekend, a few days or some weeks in the summer break between academic years, while the narrative progresses towards a dramatic climax in which the main character has to decide whether they will leave for college/work or stay in the “youthful comfort zone” (ibid.) of the family home.

A cultural encapsulation of conflicting boomer desires for returning to the paradise lost and accepting the inevitability of change, New Hollywood teen films usually take the form of coming of age memoirs that nostalgically recreate small-town, mid-century America through the buffer of an adult homodiegetic narrator (Genette 1980, 245) that omnisciently reports the

past from the target audience's troubled present. Nevertheless, the narrator's subjectivity, often made explicit in voice-over, and "the viewers' foreknowledge of the represented events as contrary to expectations" (Mules 2001, 1) ultimately undermine the remembered past's claims to historical objectivity and coat them with a layer of irony that "always involves a 'chiasmic' reversing of time: the present contrarily anticipated in the past, the future contrarily anticipated in the present" (ibid.). In fact, like Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), these films usually dramatize the birth of a new, unstable social order within the old (Balló and Pérez 1997, 115-124) and, therefore, bittersweetly concede that the remembered past is not so idyllic after all.

The coming of age film. A convenient obsession for Irish cinema

In a review of *The Last of the High Kings* (David Keating, 1996), Hopper (1996) wonders why "so many Irish films are obsessed with coming of age narratives". By way of answer, he argues,

[...] it has something to do with the evolutionary state of Irish cinema; not quite in its infancy but only just out of short pants. In this case though I suspect it's partially to do with its literary origins. Many first novels tend to be semi-autobiographical and naively nostalgic, a dubious yearning for the long hot summers of our beautiful youth, etc. On film such nostalgia provides a certain retro chic: we can legitimately wince at the fashions (and marvel at how sophisticated we've become), while at the same time thrill to the sounds of the old rock gods.

These arguments, however, hardly capture the economics of coming of age films in 1990s Irish cinema. First, coming of age films are cheap to produce compared to other genres, a paramount issue for an industry largely dependent on two major public backers, British television and the Irish Film Board / Bord Scannán Na hÉireann. Second, most are intended to appeal to adults and teenagers alike and, in fact, some can also be marketed as family films, which increases the potential audience size and extends their life span in that they play longer than other movies. Third, the \$20 million *Circle of Friends* (Pat O'Connor, 1995), an American coming of age film set in 1950s Ireland, grossed at the US box office made it one of the most successful Irish-themed films ever and brought the industry's attention to genre and setting. Furthermore, these films meet quite easily the location placement and plot demands from Irish investors, who have long wanted mainstream cinema to promote heritage tourism representing Ireland "as a 'feel good' location with an Arcadian landscape" (Barton 2000, 420) inhabited by feisty *colleens*, charming elders and lovable children, where romantic fantasies of a feminine, maternal rural past come true.

Accordingly, many 1990s Irish-produced films were expected to suit the British colonial representation of Ireland, still very much alive in popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic, to the needs of the local tourism industry, and counterbalance the negative media

image caused by clerical pedophilia, political corruption and the Ulster Troubles. However, it should not be overlooked that this negative image was also largely built on the colonial representation of Ireland, which over the last centuries and depending on political circumstances has shifted between the anachronistic Edenic paradise we have just mentioned and a chaotic, violent dystopia populated with irrational, violent apes and suffering, passive women and children.

Constrained by public backers, 1990s mainstream Irish films seldom address contentious issues directly. Martin McLoone (2000) argues, however, that these issues lurk underneath the apparent shallowness and bonhomie of contemporary Irish cinema, so films “not politically engaged [...] can be engaged politically” (168), and suggests that the obsession with coming of age narratives and the recurrence of dysfunctional families in these narratives, “with either the mother or the father missing from the drama” (ibid.), would be both related to the string of cases of child abuse that shocked Ireland throughout the 1990s.

In the following lines, we propose that Irish coming of age narratives offer, either explicitly or obliquely, a more-bitter-than-sweet look at the past of the Republic of Ireland that goes well beyond child abuse to cover the myths, domestic and imported from US popular culture, half-truths and silences that, in the name of the Church, the nation, reunification or

economic progress, for decades shrouded widespread political and clerical failure, corruption and abuse, and kept the Irish people in a state of infancy. In these films, which celebrate the unabashed willingness of Celtic Tiger Ireland to shed light on dark chapters of its past, Irish teen heroes only achieve adulthood after looking into, and helping reluctant elders confront, long suppressed traumatic collective memories of abuse, emigration, death and especially conflict. Given the paramount importance of heterosexual romantic love in mainstream cinema, it is hardly surprising that many filmmakers approached these issues through the motif of forbidden love. As a consequence, many coming of age narratives are centered on contemporary Romeo-and-Juliet teen romances that stir up these memories by daringly challenging national, sectarian, social and class boundaries — e.g., Irish / foreign, Protestant / Catholic, anti-Treaty / pro-Treaty, big farmer / tenant — left by past conflicts.

From the dysfunctional family to adulthood. The journey of the Irish teen hero

Irish coming of age films are constructed as conventional three-act narratives and usually begin in the ordinary world of the hero's household, where the physical or psychological absence of either parent has rendered the family dysfunctional. The family, however, is living in denial and the protagonist himself has suppressed trauma by taking refuge in an imaginary, infantile world mostly built on American popular culture. The dramatic conflict arises when an external

force — usually a stranger to the local community — shatters the façade of stability and puts the reluctant teen hero on the path to adulthood. The hero's journey eventually climaxes in a cathartic confrontation with traumatic memories that reveals truth, restores order and brings about individual growth for both parents and children.

Early 1990s contemporary coming of age films *The Miracle* (Neil Jordan, 1991) and the remarkably similar *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992) and *Moondance* (Dagmar Hirtz, 1994) follow this basic storyline almost verbatim. Written by *My Left Foot* director Jim Sheridan, *Into the West* centers on Irish Traveler brothers Ossie (Ciarán Fitzgerald) and Tito (Ruaidhrí Conroy), who have settled with their ineffectual father, Papa Riley (Gabriel Byrne), in the infamous Ballymun tower block complex in Dublin after their mother died giving birth to Ossie. Their grandfather (David Kelly) keeps telling them traditional Irish stories; however, they daydream of becoming American cowboys. The dream seems to be at hand when the old man gives them a white horse symbolically called Tír na nÓg (i.e., Land of Eternal Youth in Irish Gaelic). Then, a corrupt *garda* (i.e., a policeman) takes the animal away, but they get it back and set off for the West of Ireland. The removal from the world of childhood climaxes on a beach on the Western coast, where they have to let go of the horse to complete the transition to adulthood. However, expecting Tír na nÓg to take him to the mythical Land of Eternal

Youth and remain forever in the world of childhood, Tito clings to the horse while it trots into the ocean. Papa Riley, who has left Dublin with Cathleen (Ellen Barkin) and Grandpa to search for the children, rescues Tito from a sure drowning death, which allows him to get over the loss of his wife and restore family order.

Made at the dawn of the Celtic Tiger era, *Into the West* is a complex text that manages to address contemporary cultural and social issues without ever abandoning the conventions of the coming of age and family film genres. The overwhelming influence of American popular culture in Ireland is increasingly questioned as the boys ride further into the Gaelic West, which eventually *de-Americanizes* their imagination and allows them to grow out of the infantile state of false consciousness induced by American cultural imperialism, fill the maternal vacuum left by British colonialism and be symbolically reborn out of the oceanic womb into a truly national Irish adulthood. Still, the dramatic climax warns against taking native fantasies at face value and holding on to them longer than necessary.

Parental absence and fantasy, albeit of a far more personal nature, also define the ordinary world in *The Miracle*. Bray teenagers Rose (Lorraine Pilkington) and Jimmy (Niall Byrne) invent stories about people they see in their hometown to cope with their dysfunctional households and while away the summer. Rose lives with a well-off and largely absent father,

and Jimmy has been raised on the belief that his mother is dead by his alcoholic musician father Sam (Donal McCann). The arrival of Renée (Beverly D'Angelo), a glamorous thirty-something American actress, gets Sam's and Jimmy's stories into conflict, as the boy oedipally falls for her without knowing that she is actually his mother. Jimmy removes himself from the ordinary world by following Renée to Dublin, where he gets to steal a kiss from her after she takes part in a third-rate stage revival of the Western *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939) at a local theatre. The journey into adulthood, however, is not complete until Sam lets go of his own fantasy and reveals who Renée truly is. In a clear reversal of the conventions of oedipal narratives, truth does not bring about tragedy, but growth and reconciliation for father and son.

Beverly D'Angelo starred in *The Miracle* primarily because she was Neil Jordan's girlfriend at the time, and Ellen Barkin had a minor role in *Into the West* because she was then Byrne's wife. Even though neither was a blockbuster star in the league of Julia Roberts or Meg Ryan, their presence was used to better the prospects of the films internationally — a major preoccupation of producers throughout the 1990s given the small size of the domestic film market in Ireland. Also related to this is the fact that film veterans James Caan and Marianne Faithfull, rising stars John Cusack, Jared Leto and Christina Ricci, as well as several US and

European young unknown actors, landed roles in Irish coming of age films, usually as the character who disrupts the ordinary Irish world of the hero and sets the story in motion. In a few narratives, however, it is the hero who has to travel abroad to separate himself from childhood and make possible for the film to show (i.e., product place) foreign tourist locations.

In the German-Irish-British coproduction *Moondance*, whose ordinary world is pretty much a carbon copy of that in *Into the West*, the extended childhood of 21-year-old Patrick (Ian Shaw) and his 14-year-old brother Dominic (Ruaidhrí Conroy) comes to an end when German teenager Anya (Julia Brendler) arrives to spend the summer as a farmhand at their aunt's. The boys' father has died and the mother has gone on an anthropological trip to Africa, so the brothers live largely on their own in a rather neglected house in rural West Cork. Their aunt and the local priest see them as savages; however, they regard themselves as cowboys and spend the summer playing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), a Western also alluded to in Newell's film.

Patrick and Dominic fall for Anya. Patrick wants to become her only lover, whereas Dominic wants an Etta-Butch-Sundance relationship where he can be lover and son to the girl. The unexpected return of the boys' mother (Marianne Faithfull) temporarily restores family order by satisfying Dominic's childlike need of the maternal, although it fails to stop the boys'

transition into adulthood and their growing feelings for Anya, who sparks jealousy in Dominic when she consents to making love with Patrick. Then, the trio move into a derelict Dublin apartment. Conflict climaxes in the Irish capital, yet the current legal age of consent determines that Dominic never gets to consummate with Anya. Instead, he rather unconvincingly lets go of her as if she were a childhood fantasy, makes up with Patrick and sets off for Africa.

In the genealogical narratives (Rains 2007, 55-98) *This Is My Father* (Paul Quinn, 1998) and *The Nephew* (Eugene Brady, 1998), it is the unexpected and rather unwelcome arrival of a world-weary Irish-American visitor that brings about much-needed change in contemporary Ireland. Cinematic descendants of *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), the films have the visitor as the hero of the narrative, which starts as a rather conventional restorative trip to rural Ireland in search of the maternal. As in the famous Ford film, the Ireland he arrives in turns out to be quite different from what he expected. It does not take long before his stubborn determination to dig out long-suppressed memories of his Irish emigrant mother's youth get him into conflict with the locals and, therefore, the narrative is soon diverted from the Innisfree trail into coming of age territory.

As a matter of fact, *This Is My Father* does not present just one coming of age story but three. In order to tell these subplots, designed to complement each other, the narrative splits the

Irish-American character into a middle-aged high school History teacher from suburban Chicago, Kieran Johnson (James Caan), and his teen nephew Jack (Jacob Tierney), and moves back and forth between the 1990s and the 1930s. Introduced by an adult homodiegetic narrator, settled traveler and inn-keeper Mrs. Kearney (Moira Deady), the first subplot is the poignant interclass Romeo-and-Juliet romance between Kieran's parents, Kieran O'Day (Aidan Quinn) and Fiona Flynn (Moya Farrelly), which ends in Kieran's suicide and a pregnant Fiona fleeing to the USA to escape being locked away in a convent by her mother. The second subplot is the casual fling between Jack and the feisty local *colleen* Maria (Pauline Hutton), which self-indulgently celebrates the relaxed sexual mores of Celtic Tiger Ireland and acts as a rite of passage that helps Jack grow up. The third subplot is Kieran Johnson's own belated coming of age, which is closely intertwined with his findings about his mother's youth and climaxes in a visit to his father's grave, an *Et in Arcadia Ego* oedipal encounter with death that solves his personal crisis and restores family and community order on both sides of the Atlantic.

Near the beginning of the film, a window-framed, subjective shot of the cooling towers of a thermal power plant leaves Jack wondering whether they have actually landed in Chernobyl. Despite the inescapable lushness of the Irish scenery, *This Is My Father* does not conceal the visible signs of modernity in the landscape and, therefore, makes clear that the

contemporary Ireland Kieran and Jack arrive in is quite different from the one Fiona emigrated from or, for that matter, the anachronistic, trap-and-horse island Sean Thornton sees through the station window upon getting off a steam train at the start of *The Quiet Man*.

The contemporary Ireland Irish-American mulatto teenager Chad Egan (Hill Harper) disembarks on at the beginning of *The Nephew* is somehow closer to Innisfree. Cars, music players, dumpers, community rituals and even racial outlook seem to be outdated by at least two decades on Inis Dora, a beautiful rural isle off the Irish coast where Chad's recently deceased mother, Karen, was born and the place she wished her ashes to be scattered at.

This Ireland is personified in the boy's stern farmer uncle Tony (Donal McCann), a Will Danaher-like figure who hosts him and soon intrudes in his romance with local *colleen* Aislín (Aislín McGuckin) as he did in his mother's with Aislín's father, the local publican Joe Brady (Pierce Brosnan), twenty years before. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the narrative, Tony's intrusion is revealed as the primary cause for Karen's emigration to the USA and the ongoing feud between Joe and Tony. Some other long-hidden secrets of the locals are brought out by Chad, like the past affair of Tony and Karen's best friend, Brenda (Sinead Cusack), out of which Peter (Luke Griffin), Aislín's ex-boyfriend, was born. For most of the film, Tony seems to leave Chad little choice but to repeat history and go back to the USA. However, in a

rather *deus ex machina* dramatic resolution, Tony makes peace with Joe, apologizes to Chad and blesses the romance with Aislín. Then, in a brief final coda, Chad, Aislín, Peter, Brenda, Tony and Joe scatter Karen's ashes off a cliff, showing that Ireland, as Mary Robinson would argue throughout her presidency (1990-1997), can only leave behind its traumatic past — and, therefore, truly come of age — with the help of the Irish diaspora.

Robinson's arguments also resonate in *Korea* (Cathal Black, 1995) and *The Last of the High Kings* (1996), two coming of age narratives that take up a rite of passage — the last summer before leaving for university — and motif — forbidden love — which recur in Hollywood teen films to trace the birth of Celtic Tiger Ireland back to the decline and eventual collapse of De Valera's Ireland in the early 1950s and late 1970s, respectively.

The rather ambivalent *Korea* unenthusiastically states the inevitability of change and US-influenced modernization, yet also shows a similar lack of nostalgia or enthusiasm over Old Ireland. For instance, at the beginning of the film, a visually striking shot showing the arrival of a star-spangled coffin with the remains of Luke Moran, a young Irish emigrant fallen while fighting as a US soldier in the Korean War, serves as an apt symbol of the dark side of the global capitalism that was about to penetrate Ireland through Seán Lemass's First Programme for Economic Expansion. However, it also stands as a reminder of the relationship

between the continuing, massive migration from post-independence Ireland and the isolationist, anti-modern economic policies that dominated the country for the period 1930-1950.

This crumbling old order is personified in two widower fathers. The first is John (Donal Donnelly), an austere eel fisherman whose traditional way of life is at odds with the advance of tourism and electrification in rural Ireland, two early signs of the impending modernization of the Republic. The second is Ben Moran (Vass Anderson), father of the dead US soldier and, in a clear reflection of the bitter social division of post-independence Ireland, John's nemesis since the Civil War (1922-1923). Ben is also the father of a teenage daughter, Una (Fiona Moloney), who sets off the dramatic conflict when she falls in love with John's only son, Eamon (Andrew Scott), after he approaches her to offer comfort for her loss. In the meantime, rumors spread about the compensation the already affluent Moran family may have gotten from the US government, poignantly reminding contemporary Irish viewers that their forebears often showed no qualms in profiting from the toil and death of the diaspora. The fact that Ben Moran is also in favor of the modernization process that would eventually lead to the Celtic Tiger puts a question mark on both the process and the audience's present.

The portrait of John, the other half of the old order, is no better. Embittered by the loss of his fishing license (which he blames on Ben) and the discovery of the romance, he buys

Eamon a one-way ticket to the US so that the boy can never see Una again and, should he be conscripted and killed in Korea, he may get compensation. This Cronus-like, oppressive social order, where fathers symbolically devour their children, begins to implode when Eamon gets seriously sick and John has to deal with the prospect of losing him. Softened by the experience, the fisherman allows Una to visit the boy at his house. Then, after a recovered Eamon stands up to him while fishing on the lake for the last time, John realizes the inevitable demise of his way of life, consents to the romance, reconciles with his son and, once the boy receives his good Leaving Cert results, allows him to prepare for a better future by going to college in Ireland.

Optimistic and politically correct, *The Last of the High Kings* shows a determination to stand close to the nostalgic mood of Hollywood historical coming of age films not shared by other Irish movies. Set in the picturesque Dublin coastal town of Howth in 1977, *The Last of the High Kings* is about the transition to adulthood of 17-year-old Frankie Griffin (Jared Leto), the eldest child of the eccentric, and largely absent, actor Jack (Gabriel Byrne), and the no less eccentric Cathleen (Cathleen O'Hara), who believes her children are descendants of the High Kings of Ireland and regards her Irish Protestant neighbors as foreign invaders.

Narrated in voice-over by Frankie himself, the transition takes place in the few summer weeks between the Leaving Cert exams, which he takes at the beginning of the narrative, and

reception of the results. During this period, besides being anxious over the results and partying hard to tunes by Thin Lizzy, Dr. Feelgood and Mott the Hoople, among other rock icons from the 1970s, Frankie is kissed for the first time and taught to express his feelings by Irish-American teenager Erin (Christina Ricci), loses his virginity to Jayne (Lorraine Pilkington), a liberal Protestant schoolmate his mother does not like, starts going out with another liberal Protestant, Romy (Emily Mortimer), votes in a general election for the first time and tries to organize a California beach themed party at the local beach.

The casual way in which the active sexual life of Frankie — the film contains several dreamlike scenes that convey his growing obsession with the female body, one showing his first time and even a passing remark about masturbation — and his use of drugs and alcohol is depicted is quite unusual for an Irish coming of age film, as is the overt sense of nostalgia with which the past is looked on. In *The Last of the High Kings*, Old Ireland cannot possibly be looked back in anger, as it is largely a caricature of itself, ineffectual, eccentric, dated, bigoted and hypocritical, yet rather harmless to Frankie and his friends, born with the First Program for Economic Expansion, brought up in prosperity, educated and tolerant.

The Last of the High Kings moves back to the summer the momentous 1977 Irish general election — actually held on June 16 — to include voting for the first time among the

rites of passage Frankie has to go through on the way to adulthood and, besides, make a subtle ironic comment on Irish politics, past and present. On a personal level, the general election allows Frankie to express his sense of self by refusing to comply with his mother's wishes and vote for the questionable Fianna Fáil (FF) candidate (Colm Meaney) before he is legally entitled to do so. On a sociopolitical level, however, the landslide victory of FF can be read as either the very last stand of Old Ireland against modernization or a bittersweet reflection on the future embourgeoisement of Frankie's generation, the continuing presence of an increasingly corrupt FF in Irish governments throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and the on-off willingness of the Irish Labor Party, a symbol of political change in the film, to support those governments.

Frankie's transition culminates in a series of rites of passage that play as rolling climaxes to the different subplots in the third act. Following yet another conventional trope in coming of age films, *The Last of the High Kings* intertwines the first encounter with sex and death by having Frankie have his first time --on August 16, 1977, the very day Elvis Presley — appropriated as the true High King of Ireland by Frankie and his friends — was found dead in his Graceland home. As a consequence, when one of Frankie's friends regards the death of

Elvis as “the end of an era”, the viewer knows that the meaning is also intended to cover the childhood of Frankie, which has just received a fatal blow in Jayne’s bedroom.

When he gets back home, he is thrown out by Cathleen, who cannot stand that Frankie might be going out with a Protestant. The following morning, in another climactic scene, Frankie confronts the local priest and his mother on their bigotry, which he shows to be based on the removal of the crucial role played by Irish Protestants in nationalism from the history of post-independence Ireland — a Protestants-are-people-too stance that, along with Frankie’s relationship with Jayne and Romy, evokes the determination of Celtic Tiger Ireland to come to terms with the Ulster Protestants. The arrival of his good Leaving Cert results, which will allow him to go to college, finishes the argument, reconciles him with his mother and puts another nail on the coffin of his childhood.

Even though the transition to adulthood is almost complete by now, it is the beach party subplot that fully completes it, provides the film with a sense of narrative closure and solves the conflict between Irish and American popular culture *The Last of the High Kings* shares with other Irish coming of age narratives. In the final sequence, the party Frankie has been planning throughout the film, inspired by the Elvis Presley beach party movies from the 1960s and quite unsuited to Irish weather, turns into a traditional Irish wake that mourns festively the death of

the King of Rock and the end of Frankie's childhood, and gives the hero the chance to round off his journey by maturely asking Romy out. At the very end of the film, Frankie is walking by the sea with Romy while his parents look on them with approval — a clear symbol of the hopes for sectarian and political reconciliation in 1990s Ireland.

Except for *This Is My Father*, which contains a few scenes in Chicago, all the films we have studied so far are entirely set in Ireland, so the physical journey with which coming of age narratives often signify the spiritual journey into adulthood never gets to leave the country. For instance, the protagonist characters in *Into the West* travel across Ireland coast to coast, whereas the farthest Frankie gets from Howth is central Dublin, about just 15 km from his home. *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Sue Clayton, 1996), *Drinking Crude* (Owen McPolin, 1997) and *Sunburn* (Nelson Hume, 1999) expand, however, the scope of the contemporary Irish coming of age journey into Lapland, London and Long Island, respectively.

In *The Disappearance of Finbar*, 18-year-old Danny (Luke Griffin), who also narrates the story in voice-over, comes of age while traveling across Lapland in search of his childhood friend Finbar (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), who disappears from their working-class home suburb of Tallaght, County Dublin, after flunking a tryout to play for a soccer team, much to the disappointment of his family and the local community. Three years later, following the

international success of *The Ballad of Finbar Flynn*, a cheesy pop song based on Finbar's disappearance, Danny receives a mysterious phone call from Finbar himself, who claims to have been living in Stockholm. Determined to discover the truth, Danny goes to Sweden and eventually manages to trace Finbar to the homophonous Finn Bar, a popular tango venue on the border between Sweden and Finland whose very *out-of-placeness* expresses topologically the multilateral, mobile and optimistic sense of globalization that permeates the story, characters, settings and soundtrack of the film. In the highly mobile world Sue Clayton presents, it no longer matters where a person, a song, a dance, a film, an idea or an agricultural product has been born, as it will soon travel across borders, be appropriated somewhere else and eventually claimed as that place's own... just before starting the process all over again.

Emigration and the Irish fascination with the Western, usually represented as negative outcomes of a globalization process also largely regarded as negative, turn into something positive in *The Disappearance of Finbar*. Even though the film was made at a time of economic prosperity, first Finbar and then Danny have to emigrate to grow up and have the chance to get into employment — two things, the film implies, that would be quite difficult to achieve in Ireland for low-skilled individuals from a rather deprived neighborhood where adults and children dress up as cowboys and play country music at the local bar to evade their

depressing everyday reality. Once the narrative moves to Lapland, however, country music becomes a profitable Irish cultural appropriation, as the popularity of Moving Them Doggies Along, the country song Finbar's father cowboy band plays at the beginning of the film, among the *deerboys* of the Scandinavian polar desert turns out to be a source of revenue for the boy's family.

Unlike other Irish coming of age films, in *The Disappearance of Finbar* it is another teenager, and not an adult, who provides the childhood absence, mystery and fantasy the hero has to deal with in order to grow up. Also, it should be noted that neither Finbar nor Danny return to Ireland at the end of the film, which embraces a post-national, cowboy-like, *Kerouacesque* sense of adulthood at odds with national essentialism. Largely a Western-influenced road movie, *The Disappearance of Finbar* ends with the eponymous character disappearing again, a symbolical ride into the sunset that leads Danny to take over his job and girlfriend and settle in a contemporary frontier town between civilization and wilderness, a final destination point that also sums up the postmodern complex reality he finds on his coming of age journey across Sweden — a multicultural society where Irish pubs, Argentinian tangos and the English language have shed their nationality adjectives and assimilated into the local culture.

Far less complex than *The Disappearance of Finbar*, *Drinking Crude* and *Sunburn* center on conventional summer coming of age journeys that start and end in Ireland. *Drinking Crude* takes on the motives of the Leaving Cert summer, the dysfunctional family and the coming of age journey to construct the rather clichéd story of Paul (Andrew Scott), a Kerry 18-year-old who leaves for London after falling out with his mother over his bad exam results. Once in London, he is thrown out from a squat and robbed on the subway before meeting Al (James Quarton), a Scotsman who becomes a sort of surrogate father and gets him a job as his aid in cleaning out oil tankers. Eventually, the job takes them back to Kerry, where Paul makes up with his mother and finds out that he has been offered a college place.

In *Sunburn*, happy-go-lucky Davin (Cillian Murphy) sneaks into a group of Irish college students who are leaving for Long Island on a summer work abroad program. There, Davin, who plans to settle in the US to escape from a pregnant one night stand, befriends Robert (Barry Ward), a naïve boy he soon starts sponging on, and Aideen (Paloma Baeza), a savvy girl whom he falls for and makes him mature. Even though Davin avoids adult responsibilities for most of the summer, after getting Robert in trouble with his Mrs. Robinson-like employer, he gets a job as a builder to pay Robert back and eventually returns to Dublin with Aideen and Robert.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1990s, mainstream Irish cinema tried to maximize audience appeal, minimize costs, and showcase Irish and European tourist locations by producing coming of age narratives. Most films, however, were commercially unsuccessful and some even failed to get distribution abroad, so it is no wonder that the genre somehow lost momentum in favor of romantic comedies by the early 2000s.

Unlike New Hollywood teen films, which often look on mid-century America with fond nostalgia, Irish coming of age movies, though not oblivious to contemporary socioeconomic problems, tend to shed a rather negative light on De Valera's era (early 1930s – early 1970s) and its obsession with the traditional Catholic family ideal. In these films, parents are dead, absent or deeply troubled by the burden of an unspoken-of, unhealed past conflict. Irish children are, however, cut off from this suffocating adult reality by appropriations of popular American culture — especially the Western — until a foreign character and/or external force causes a crisis and sets them on the journey to adulthood.

The sense of alienation that adolescence brings about is exacerbated by class, race, religion, nationality and politics, as protagonist characters usually belong to social groups largely regarded as marginal in Ireland. However, rather than submitting passively to their

elders' boundaries on the way to adulthood, teen characters in these films show a staunch determination to question them and build an alternative, more progressive and open, sense of adult Irish identity for both their generation and their elders'.

As their US counterparts, a majority of fictional Irish teenagers pave their way to adulthood with love, sex, alcohol, travel and awareness of mortality in the summer between high school and college. American and Irish coming of age stories mainly differ, however, in that the latter tend to involve a confrontation with a divisive past that is largely absent in the US. The confrontation, often dramatized through forbidden love stories between teenagers from families who, behind a façade of peacefulness, have held silent grudges against each other for a long time, makes Irish teenagers' adulthood ultimately dependent on their ability to restore family order and, as a consequence, passes along to them the responsibility of healing the wounds of history and moving the country forward to the future.

All in all, 1990s mainstream coming of age films reimagine Celtic Tiger Ireland as a teenager striving to leave behind the infancy of British colonialism and the childhood of Catholic nationalism, and become an adult in their own terms. Significantly, the fictional teen characters studied are all able to achieve adulthood and restore order, which can be read as an expression of optimism and confidence in the capacity of the Republic of Ireland to deal with

its dark past and become a more inclusive, modern and forward-looking society in the 21st century.

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