

Meaningfully on the Margins

The '(An)Other Irish Cinema' Project

(An)Other Irish Cinema is a recently formed group of three filmmakers based in Ireland who have been prolifically, if quietly, creative over the past decade. Donal Foreman, Rouzbeh Rashidi and Maximilian Le Cain are linked by a shared dedication to artistic independence which has, by and large, led them each to opt for a low-or-no budget approach to production. Different as their films undoubtedly are, they also share a knowledge of and deep concern with the history of non-mainstream cinema(s) which is rare in Ireland.

To trace connections between their work, a fruitful starting point might be to situate them each in relation to experimental cinema, or at least to a certain aspect of it. Even though their films form a bridge from Foreman's narrative offerings, which exist on the margins of more mainstream art house practices, to Le Cain's unequivocally experimental work, which has embraced installation and performance contexts as well as cinematic presentation, there seems to be a common factor in the way they conceive cinema. This is a desire to surrender narrative to the senses, to ask of the film image that it be partly a law unto itself and not merely a building block of storytelling. In general, this is an urge that has been most fully explored in experimental film practices throughout the decades. As it manifests in Foreman, Rashidi and Le Cain, it concerns what we might call the perceptually tantalising, the desire not to tell a story but hint at its possibility. It seems that all three filmmakers here are often intrigued not so much by the suspension of disbelief, but the belief of suspension: how to hold narrative in abeyance.

If one thinks of Rashidi's *Grey*, where the focus is a man sitting on a bench, we see Rashidi is interested in what Noel Burch called the pillow shot in relation to Ozu's work. This was dead time filmmaking, with Ozu cutting away to objects, trains passing, or the sea, to create a meditative space within narrative focus. In Rashidi's film 'dead time' is more present than narrative time, but it creates the space for a story's possibility although not its inevitability.

Le Cain is also a filmmaker frequently fascinated by the possibilities in narrative filmmaking whilst being wary of committing to those possibilities. Now there may be several reasons for this. One is that he seems more interested in attending to the inner affect than the outer eye: his work often focuses on the hesitancy of perception over the comprehension of events. He once proposed that he was more interested in making sense of the world as an individual than trying to make sense of it socially, from a more external perspective, and this is clear from his work. Take his use of found footage as seen in *The Mongolian*

Barbecue, for example, where he cuts between an increasingly delirious viewer and sinister, erotic imagery appropriated from an Italian horror film. Le Cain wants memory never to belong to the public domain (as we so often find with archival images), but to private fantasy, recollection and emotional specificity. When, in one shot in *The Mongolian Barbecue*, Le Cain slows the image down to show an actress turning her head and putting her hand on her neck, this isn't only an avoidance of the archival, but also the iconographic as he wants us to ponder over the image, not immediately place it in a narrative and social context.

How often do we see films, or TV docs on the subject of cinema, denying the personal through the archivally established and the iconographically assured? Whether it is images of the twin towers collapsing, the young Vietnamese man shot in the head, Marilyn Monroe's skirt shooting up, or John Wayne exiting the homestead, these images are so established that anyone using such footage may be hiding their personality behind them. Le Cain's film clips seem singular and individualised, all the more fascinatingly hinting at narrative by lacking the iconographic certitude that immediately places them within their original story context. Even when the images or the dialogue come from better known films, Le Cain offers them in a manner that leaves us making sense of them from the edge of our consciousness, not readily name-checking titles from the knowing dead-centre. In *Private Report* this de-centring takes form and content apart as the film at one moment works as a zombie picture, at another as an observational document of a street, at yet another a flickering assault on viewer perception as the images, as in other Le Cain films, constantly ask the eye to adjust to new information. When critics talk of graphic editing, of the manner in which filmmakers often create smoothness of transition from one shot to the next by making sure there is coherence of visual stimuli, Le Cain is fascinated by graphic mismatching, by switching from black and white to colour, from visual non-sequiturs and from flickering effects that punish the retina for the rapidity of its ocular assumptions. Le Cain is the most prodigiously innovative of the filmmakers here. Without privileging one filmmaker over the other, Rashidi is the most fascinated by the *parti pris*, with creating certain fixed notions within which his aesthetic must adhere, evident for example in the frequent fixity of his framing and the absence of music. Le Cain, on the other hand, is the most restlessly determined to break with any notion that he feels he ought to establish.

Now if mainstream cinema's superego, its conscience, rests on how well it must tell its story, does experimental cinema's frequently reside in how consciously it questions its form? This questioning is certainly found in the minimalist style of Rashidi, or the fertile formalism of Le Cain. In *The Mongolian Barbecue*, note the aggressive use of red and blue, and also of sound. One has here images and sounds not serving the content but taking it over, usurping the form and creating rhythmic events out of the abstract. Parts of *The Mongolian Barbecue* would be as easy to dance to as sit and watch. This deliberately draws

attention to the undecidability of the body in the very viewing experience. At the other extreme, Rashidi creates, if you like, quite a decidable viewer. His lengthy shots, the minimal movement of the camera, the usually black and white images, create a certain expectation. Even when Rashidi uses colour in *The Blight* or *Entity of Haze*, it retains a consistency of tone: slightly subdued in the former, a brilliant grass green in the latter. If Rashidi is a minimalist, Le Cain is a sort of maximilist- entirely in keeping with his name!

From a certain point of view one can understand why those engaged in experimental film might find narrative cinema frustrating, but it is an inverse frustration: watching narrative film, one may feel the lack of possibilities available to the film as the story dictates the image, and the cause and effect chain takes over. The frustration of much experimental film is, for the narratively oriented, this very absence. There is a radical plenitude of possibilities which means those looking for logical patterns more than lateral ones will see only incoherence, but those searching out manifold perception feel cognitively assuaged. Thus it is perhaps better to see sense in certain strands of experimental film over coherence, sense in all its manifestations rather than its narrow logical definition. Le Cain, from this point of view, is more experimental than Rashidi, but Rashidi is the more deliberately rigorous. Consequently Le Cain's work makes more perceptual demands, but Rashidi's contains more mystery. Rashidi seems to *deny* narrative as it constantly threatens to develop. Le Cain is more inclined in films like *The Mongolian Barbecue* and *Private Report* to shatter it.

On the other hand, it would probably be misleading to categorise Donal Foreman as an experimental filmmaker at all. He is the most interested in behaviour, most intrigued by the moments of intensity that love gives rise to, and the emotional fallout when it moves elsewhere. But even he talks of sometimes being much more interested in the form than the situation, and there is an element of variation within repetition in his work. Indeed his cameraman, Piers McGrail, once proposed during a shoot that he was making shots of hands that resembled images in some of the other films.

There seem to be two not at all mutually contradictory but, at the moment, slightly disjunctive aspects to Foreman's work. One is intimate portrayal, evident in *Each Other*, *Let's* and *Pull*, and the other is the distance demanded in *Removal* and *Refuge*. It is to the intimate, however, that we'll pay attention. The long lens utilised in *Each Other* simultaneously brings people in close and keeps them at one remove, a condition accentuated by Foreman's use of glass and reflection. But this is distance as empathic immediacy, a literally narrow focus asking us to sense acutely the feeling of a character, but wary of creating drama out of that feeling. Whether watching them from across the street outside a bar, inside a cafe, or walking along by the water, the film is astutely called *Each Other*. They may be known to us by their names, courtesy chiefly of their mobile phone messages, but they remain an 'every couple'.

Often romantic films are about a couple in the singular, and we feel the importance of the relationship against the insignificance of all others: hence friends are on hand whose relationships are obviously much less significant than the central focus. Foreman is good on saying there are always relationships, not *a* relationship. This is both diegetically and non-diegetically expressed in his work. As in *Each Other*, the form, even though intimate, wants a sense of distance. When, for example, the central character in *You're Only What I See Sometimes* dances to music near the end of the film, it's a song that crosses over several scenes, so that when we see her apparently dancing to it at one moment, we wonder what exactly is she dancing to? Is it to the song's memory or is it also playing in the flat? Is she actually dancing to another piece of music altogether, as there is a slight mismatch between the dance and the song? Again Foreman finds a way of saying: *a* relationship not *the* relationship.

In *Pull* this is illustrated narratively through the Israeli central character, living abroad in Dublin, who moves from man to man, always looking it seems for the fix of the new. There is a fluidity of feeling here that cannot help but throw the notion of *the* relationship into irrelevance, and though Foreman has said people have disliked the character, it is better surely to see her as an exemplar of energy looking not for the home berth of the relationship but the possibility of the possible.

Aren't many 'relationship' films in one form or another really about this, about the shock of the emotionally new and its containment in the eventual creation of a couple? The contingent becomes the inevitable; but Foreman manages to find forms that often say it is the possibility of the possible that is most interesting. That we are all in states of emotional flux, looking not so much for ready berthing, but emotional conduits, however fleeting.

Here are three young directors all working on the fringes of Irish film to create a cinema of experimentation and possibility. Fergus Daly's documentary on Irish experimental film, *Experimental Conversations*, proposed that much that was interesting in Irish film came from the area of experimentation. The three filmmakers here can be added to that list of filmmakers working meaningfully on the margins.

(Tony McKibbin)