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THE BUTCHER BOY
as canvas for interpretation.

by

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Introduction

The medium of film is one of the various media for the visualization of many stories related to man's condition. It has been used to record events, stage works of fiction or visual experimentation. The way we usually do encounter films, though, is in works of fiction, screened in the cinema. The film *The Butcher Boy* was released in February 1998. It was marketed as a black comedy, based on the award winning novel of the same name by the Irish author Patrick McCabe.

This thesis started with the intention of finding the meaning of this film; how and to what extent it represents Ireland and its culture. The diversity of interpretations of the film, though, opened the question to the notion of meaning itself. The control of the artist over the production of a work needed to be identified. The value of an art work becomes a work which can create a premise for interpretation.

Art has always be in need of defining itself. Although the artist and art work have often been mystified, the place of art in society has always been challenged. The Greek theorists based their definition of art on the notion of art as imitation. Modern theorists identified art, not just as a form but also as having a content. The great paintings of all time have all been described one way or other as narratives.

Narratives are part of a social discourse identified as communication. Communication is primarily based on a system of signs, coded by their social context, called language. The study of language (semiotics) in itself demonstrates the difficulty of providing a fixed meaning to the word. Each social context creates its own meaning for the word on what seems to be an arbitrary basis. The discoveries of semiotics were further applied to other areas in society, explaining in the case of film the limitations of the control of the filmmaker in the process of the creation of meaning.

Meaning is therefore made not found. By identifying various levels of meaning, a difference is made between the notion of understanding and interpreting a narrative. Interpretation is the highest level of understanding of the message. It is what the film critic wants to do with the narrative. A good narrative is therefore a narrative which opens itself up to interpretation, whatever the approach used. The film *The Butcher Boy* is a good example of premise for interpretation.

Because the film is an adaptation it shows the way the medium influences the decisions made by the creators, Patrick McCabe and Neil Jordan. By pointing to the differences in the two works, it becomes apparent that the film based on the narrative of the novel becomes a narrative in its own right. The meaning that can be created from the film will differ from the one of the novel. Neil Jordan's decisions created an ambiguity fertile for the creation of meaning.

In order to generate a meaning for the film, the narrative needs to be studied. Basing my analysis on semiotics, I propose to deconstruct the storyline by identifying the various signs which reveal the structure. Roland Barthes, by defining the mechanism of the narrative, hoped to demonstrate the construction of the fiction. Nevertheless, he moved away from pure structuralist theory identifying the need for a context for the creation of meaning.

The film was well received both in a national and international context. The interpretations differed, according to the various social and political concerns of the culture. The study of the narrative of "The Butcher Boy" in an Irish, an American, and a British context demonstrates the impossibility of creating and maintaining control over a message. The author's control is in the ability to organize concept in such a way that it opens up to interpretation.

1 Making Meaning

Thus comprehension is concerned with apparent, manifest, or direct meanings, while interpretation is concerned with revealing hidden, nonobvious meanings. To speak of hidden meanings, level of meanings, and revealing meanings evokes the dominant framework within which critics understand interpretation. The artwork or text is taken to be a container into which the artist has stuffed meanings for the perceiver to pull out. Comprehending and interpreting a literary text, a painting, a play, or a film constitutes an activity in which the perceiver plays a central role. The text is inert until a reader or listener or spectator does something to and with it. The sensory data of the film at hand furnish the materials out of which inferential processes of perception and cognition build meanings. Meanings are not found but made.

(Bordwell, 1991, p 5)

1.1 Art As Communication

We do not apprehend Art on a purely aesthetic basis. Narratives are an important part of the work of art. Previously, however, the debate centred around the artist as sole participator in the making of this meaning. Making meaning is an important part of the appreciation and justification of Art in society. Art is not just the personal expression of an individual. As soon as the work is presented to an audience it enters social discourse as part of the communication process. Certainly, within society, art has always been in need of definition and justification. Plato proposed to see Art as merely the representation of reality, being itself the representation of God's will. Art is an "imitation of an imitation" and can therefore not be trusted.

The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation. It is through this theory that art as such—above and beyond given works of art—becomes problematic, in need of defense.

(Sontag, 1983, p96)

From the renaissance onwards, the notion of the artist as a genius and medium for God's own expression served to define and justify art in society. The artist therefore

has full control in terms of form and content. As a modern medium for the visual representation of reality, cinema needed to be introduced into this discourse. The specificity of the medium and its potential to become solely a product for public consumption made it clear that, in order for a film to have a value, it needed to be defined as part of an older tradition of representation, or "high art". The *Cahiers du Cinema* critics of the 1950s argued that certain filmmakers ought, by virtue of their technical and intellectual uniqueness, to be considered as *auteurs*. In this respect the filmmaker was an artist using the medium for self-expression.

Authorship was for Cahiers a relatively simple concept, essentially the idea that the film auteur was to be considered as fully an artist as any of the great novelists, painters or poets. As Eric Rhode summarized their views; "they required one consistency only: that the director should have a strong personality and that he should be able to project his convictions.

(Hillier, 1985, p5)

The personality of the filmmaker as an artist, and the consistency his/her career potentially elevated the film to the status of work of art. This veneration of the filmmaker, whether as creator of high art, or even for commercial reasons, was based on the assumption that the artist had the key to the meaning of the film. The cultural revolution of the 1960s challenged the whole of theoretical thinking, and brought a general democratic feel to film criticism. Research in various theoretical fields was introduced into film theory. Structuralists critics such as Roland Barthes demonstrated in their application of semiotics to film the difficulty for the filmmaker to retain control over the meaning of the work, because of the nature of the medium itself. By using language as the basis for their research, they put film in the context of communication.

1.2 Principals Of Communication

Communication of any sort can be broken down into two parts: the sender of the message and the receiver. In order to communicate, the creator of the message uses a

system of given signs, understood by the receiver. A sign can in turn be separated into two components: the signifier or physical form of the sign and the signified or mental concept referred to. Language is the system of signs which defines the relationship between the two. It is a medium or support for communication. Ferdinand de Saussure whose writings initiated the theories of semiotics, identifies these rules as the products of social interaction.

Saussure's work was a based on a concept of language not as an instinctive or innate faculty but as a social institution, a "language system" (langue) to which " each single act of speech"(parole) has to conform. He argued that individual self-expression through language is neither spontaneous nor totally unrestricted, but that it takes place within a circumscribed network of linguistic conventions which could be seen as a contract signed by the members of a community, always eluding the individual
(Cook, 1985, p222)

These conventions dictate the meaning of the work as a whole. The creator of a message uses signs recognizable by his/her "audience", organizing them in his/her own way. The problems of language lie in the fact that words do not simply name things: the relationship signifier/signified can shift.

There is no intrinsic relationship between a word (the signifier) and the concept, or idea which it designates (the signified) - a fact proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages.

(Cook, 1985, p 222)

It is impossible to find a universal meaning for a word, translations being merely the approximation of the meaning. Even within the confines of a given society, definitions of words are arbitrary and can take a local meaning.

This study of language was extended to all sorts of systems of signs from which one can select and combine elements in order to communicate. In this way, it was possible to study the visual medium through semiotics.

When we deal with images it is especially apparent that we are not only dealing with the object or the concept they represent, but we are also dealing with the way in which they are represented. There is a language for visual representation, too, sets of codes and conventions used by the audience to make sense of what they see. Images reach us as already encoded messages, already represented as meaningful in particular ways.

(Turner, 1988, p45)

1.3 Identifying Meaning

Film as a language therefore follows the rules of semiotics and requires visual analysis. This process of making sense, as David Bordwell suggested, is the process of making meaning. He identifies four different types of meanings: 1) the viewer makes sense of the narrative by creating a spatio-temporal framework and refers to concrete information. This is the *referential* meaning. 2) the viewer creates an *explicit* meaning by abstracting the message into a concept 3) An *implicit* meaning is therefore a further degree of research into the non stated elements of the film to create a problematic 4) These three types of meaning assume the message of the work "knows" enough not to contain unconscious layers of meanings. But there is yet another level called *repressed* or *symptomatic* meaning which is contained in the subconscious level of meaning of the work. What the critic hopes to reach is this last level of meaning. In order to achieve this task a theoretical tool is needed. In the 1970s the work of Saussure on semiology was used by Roland Barthes and applied to film analyses.

"Semiology, as formulated by Saussure, focuses on the relation between a signifier in a sign system and a signified in a culture. Structuralism, on the other hand, is concerned in early formulation with the interrelationship of the various signifiers within a sign system. It assumes that a signifier derives its

meaning not only from its connection with the cultural signified, but also from its location within a sign system with its own internal logic. The aim of structural analysis is to reconstruct an object in such a way as to make clear the rules by which it functions."

(Cook, 1985 ,p 222)

In the process of reconstructing the message the audience becomes an active creator of meaning, even the ultimate creator of meaning. The structuralist theory soon acknowledged the strong impact of culture in the reading of the work. Levi-Strauss' ethnological research and Propp's work on the narratives of fairytale, connected the structuralist approach to a cultural and humanist one.

Odd as this might sound, what emerges is a body of approaches to film that is rich when applied to film but which is not confined to the analysis of film. In effect, film theory becomes part of the wider field of disciplines and approaches called cultural studies.

(Turner, 1988, p 38)

I propose to first describe the narrative of the novel which was the basis of the adaptation of the film. The changes that occurred in the adaptation process will show the specificity of each medium, and therefore create a new narrative for the film. This film narrative will then become the centre of attention for further structural and cultural studies.

The structural analysis uses as a structure the work of Roland Barthes in *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*. It demonstrates that the logic of the story is an essential element in its coherence , as the analysis reveals various layers of potential meanings . The visuals and spoken text create an ambiguity which converges with the *auteurs'* themes and social concerns. The audience and critic

therefore have space for personal interpretation. Meaning becomes something personal and the act of watching a movie a personal rewriting of it .

The second analysis is an examination of the cultural interpretation of the film in a national and international discourse. The different meanings arrived at by these different cultures indicate the local creation of meanings; meaning being a shifting notion, difficult to theorize. The text in order to be interesting for an international audience needs a fictional and universal basis which can accommodate locally constructed meanings.

2 Adaptation Of The Narrative Of The Novel

The driving tension of the novel is the relationship between the materials of the story (plot, character, setting, theme, and so forth) and the narration of it in language; between the tale and the teller, in other words.

(Monaco, 1981, p29)

2.1 Adapting The Structure

When asked what his intentions were when he first started to write the novel, McCabe replied:

I knew I was going to write another novel, but I had no idea what the novel was about, because every book I write starts off with a mood, an emotion or an atmosphere. There is never a theme, the theme kind of emerges after two years of writing. It either emerges or it doesn't emerge. This one, I didn't know it was about childhood, I knew it was about loss, longing, I knew it was about that, and about community, and a bruised and damaged community that has a past... a sort of a love letter to a community. And I knew it was about a murder of some kind, but I didn't know who was going to do the murdering or anything. I had no intention except to get rid of this feeling that I had.

(McCabe, 1998, p 1)

Neil Jordan when adapting for the screen was faced with several problems, one of which was to reorganize the narrative . He enjoyed the novel and decided to transfer it onto the screen because of the strength of its basic structure. Nevertheless the style of writing and the jumps between fiction and reality were obstacles to the visualization of the novel. Neil Jordan explains:

The book is a stream of consciousness, and Pat McCabe allows himself to drift in a phantasmagoric way through all kind of events; the film required that I impose some order on that drifting and organize it into a coherent narrative.

(Jordan, 1998, p8)

The film retains the logic and horizontal structure of the novel in order to be faithful, but Jordan had to simplify some of the action. For instance, when Francie breaks into the Nugents, the novel describes Francie in the abandoned house. But swiftly the description becomes a fantasy.

In that example when he breaks into Nugents', he fantasizes himself as Philip Nugent, then sees himself as a babe on Mrs Nugent's knee, then he becomes filled with self-loathing because he has betrayed his family, he has betrayed himself, and he has betrayed the class he comes from. He has also unleashed something within himself which might be vaguely sexual.

(McCabe, 1998, p2)

The breaking-in scene in the film is very different. Francie knows what he is doing. He is not in some kind of trance as the novel describes it. The swift move from realism to fantasy is very difficult to achieve within the visual medium, whereas the novel allows it. Also the introduction of sexual tensions within the character himself might have disturbed the reading of the film. Francie's character is quite complex as it is, a further description of sexual awareness would have over complicated the plot.

2.2 Describing Ireland

The book describes the Irish countryside, a specific historical context (the Cuban war), and make reference to specific sweets brands. This could indicate a certain nostalgia and interest in describing personal memories. McCabe, though, explains how one needs to draw on personal experiences, but that the work is a fiction about universal themes.

It has as much a connection with Ireland that it has with France or Australia or anywhere else. It's about human beings. The Butcher Boy is a very fantastic book. It is not rooted totally in reality. There are flashes of surrealism, and sort of fairytale and myths and all sorts of things. Although there are strong elements of reality in it that ground the narrative, it does move into the realm of comic book, and cartoon.

(McCabe, 1998, p1)

The film retains the surreal feel, with the introduction of two elements: the nuclear explosions of the planet with the visions of wasps-headed priests, and the character of the Virgin Mary(Sinead O'Connor).A novel enables the reader not to give too much importance to the space and time the character evolves in, but visuals do not allow the viewer to escape them. The signifiers that are the props, costumes, and sets, all give very clear indications as to what historical period the novel refers to. Neil Jordan himself was interested in representing the late 1950s, as he was around the same age as Francie at that time. With a cast composed of the best known Irish actors and shot on location in Clones, County Monaghan, the film could not but represent Ireland.

For me as a director, it gave me an opportunity to reinvent that extraordinary mixture of paranoia and paralysis, madness and mysticism that was the Ireland I grew up in in the fifties.
(Jordan, 1998, p3)

2.3 Francie's Voice

The novel describes death, institutionalisation, child abuse, and alienation, before it reaches Mrs Nugent's murder. These tragic events are described through Francie's narration, in a colloquial, naive and funny language. This "voice" remains the same throughout the narration. The character does not seem to change throughout the various institutionalizations and losses of people. Up until the very end, the reader doesn't have really have an idea how old the character is, nor does it matter. The difficulty of casting a child actor for the film made it even more difficult to see him grow up. This voice is so central to the novel and the whole logic of the narrative that Jordan needed to find a way of staying close to this representation:

The film as a whole was driven by a voice, the voice of Francie Brady, which runs in counterpoint to the whole film, wraps it around with Francie's wonderful logic, or lack of it, as the case may be. Anyone who has read the book knows this voice. Many who have read it can't escape it. And with Stephen Rea playing it,

the voice becomes the key to a film that had to invent its own aesthetic to exist at all.

(Jordan, 1998, p4)

Stephen Rea who plays Benny Brady, Francie's father, narrates the whole story. The confusion is created. There is no need for Francie to grow up. When the flashback ends, and we see Francie as an adult played again by Stephen Rea, we understand the voice at the same time, and realize Francie has become another version of his father. Because of this constant voice, we know he is still the same person inside, but he has learned about his differences, and that he needs to keep them for himself. In that respect he is different from his father who preferred to alienate himself from society through alcoholism.

As Neil Jordan explains the film had to "re-invent" itself and has become another narrative. It is a faithful adaptation of the narrative of the novel in terms of mood and theme. But the messages created by the visuals offer a different interpretation to the one of the novel.

3 Structural Analysis

3.1 Revealing The Structure

The narrative of " The Butcher Boy " is complex and can be approached from various angles . In the opening to his essay " Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives " (from *Image - Music - Text*) Barthes comments

Faced with the infinity of narratives , the multiplicity of standpoints - historical , psychological , sociological , ethnological , aesthetic , etc . - from which they can be studied , the analyst finds himself in more or less the same situation as Saussure confronted by the heterogeneity of language [langage] and seeking to extract a principle of classification and a central focus for description from the apparent confusion of the individual messages

(Barthes, 1982 , p252) .

In the same way that semiotics deconstructs language ,Barthes divides the various elements of the narrative into groups each with a different function : a film of one hour and thirty five minutes can be compared to a one line sentence composed of words relating to each other therefore creating a meaning , and using as structure a tool called grammar . Still using the same analogy with language , a word itself can take various levels of meaning depending on its place in the sentence , its intonation or its own ambiguity . Barthes proposed that it is the integration of all these levels of meaning which create a higher level of meaning . If the relation between units is situated on the same level , they are distributional . If they are grasped from one level to the next , they are integrational . In other words , the narrative can be read both horizontally as a chronological story ,or vertically as a psychological story . It is the ability to read the story simultaneously both ways that creates this higher level of meaning .

The story of the fim *The Butcher Boy* is a tale of a young boy going through a psychological journey . The events leading to the conclusion make sense in a logical

way , and all lead to the final event . These events or units are understood as functions and their logical and chronological aspect create a narrative flow . The story needs to be rationally structured in order to reveal its complexity . Within the functions themselves , two elements can be identified : Nuclei and catalysers . Nuclei are the core of the scenes . They are the events to which catalysers lead . Barthes explains that in the translation of a story into different media , the nuclei are the elements of the narrative that will and cannot be either removed or altered . Changing these elements would mean changing the whole story itself (Barthes, 1982, p 267). In the translations of the narrative into a play and a film , the chronological order of events leading to the murder does not change. The short description of the story line given at the start of this discussion does not change throughout the various translations . The elements such as the death of Francie's mother , the death of his father or the murder of Mrs Nugent can be considered as the nuclei of the functions or scenes in which these events happened . Catalysers will create an understanding of how this event may have happened in time and space . The opening sequence of the film , for example , is informing the audience of what will or might happen later . Francie and Joe are stealing apples from a neighbour's garden . Francie runs home where the first encounter with Mrs Nugent happens . The sequence is important in terms of introducing the audience to the central character and his personality , to a physical space as he runs through the town to home, and to time in terms of sets and costumes . In this scene the audience moves from the point of view of looking at two boys playing , to a very private and personal encounter in a dark back street of the village . Mrs Nugent arrives shortly afterwards to complain about Francie's bad behaviour towards her son Philip . She blames Mrs Brady for her lack of competence in educating her son , and ends with an insult to the whole family : " Pigs - sure the whole town know it " . If the first elements of this scene introduce us to the physical space , Mrs Nugent's speech gives yet another type of information : the psychological or subtext of the story . These elements are the indices . In Barthes's theorisation of narratives , indices compose the vertical reading . This scene explains at once Francie's hatred for Mrs Nugent and his

obsession with pigs . We understand that the family is being judged as not fitting into the social structure of this town : they are compared to animals and their way of life is less than adequate . Mrs Nugent blames Francie's parents for not being like her , middle class , and believing in the ideals of this small town society . It is really the father's alcoholism and its consequences on his wife and son that she denounces . She feels sorry for them , and in particular for Mrs Brady whose romantic dreams of finding happiness in marriage have turned into depression and poverty . Another psychological aspect of the story is uncovered here in the relationship between Francie and his mother . It works as an introduction to what will happen in the course of the story . Mrs Brady is being let down by the people she loves and finds a release by killing herself . Francie will be abandoned by all the people he loves and will find his release in committing the murder of Mrs Nugent . All this can not be understood in the first images of the film , but serves as an introduction to what will happen later . Indices leave a great space for personal interpretation . They have no fixed meaning and although they set a psychological mood for the narrative , they are open to interpretation . In this way , a work of fiction is far more indexical than it is functional . Nevertheless , in order for a work of fiction to be believable , it needs to be rooted in the real world by a final type of units . These units are called informants . Informants authenticate reality . Later on in the film , Francie gets back from the Industrial School and has to take charge of the household as his father is ill . He goes to pay a visit to " The Ladies " , who use the local shop as a meeting point for town gossip . They discuss his new job at the slaughterhouse , and his father's illness . The sequence is very realistic in the sense that it links the boy's life with the real world : he needs to work , shop and take care of his sick father . In order for a fiction to work , and in particular a film which contains surreal sequences , the sense of reality has to be believable .

3.2 Actions And Narrations

One other characteristic of fiction is the stylization of characters . Characters play a part as actants in it and should not be confused with real people , even though a realistic method of acting may be used . They do not exist until they manifest themselves in an action . The story of *The Butcher Boy* focuses on Francie who appears in almost every sequence in the film . Every character he encounters will create an action with him and in this way bring forward the narrative . In classical narrative the story is organized around a basic principal of enigma and resolution . The story itself is therefore the resolution of problems in order to recreate in the end a new equilibrium . The specificity of classical narrative is the central position of human characters , in particular a main character or " Hero " . This hero will trigger a series of actions in which we can identify a beginning , a middle and an end . Ideally the narrative will reach a very high level of closure . In the film *The Butcher Boy* , the central character Francie carries the narrative through , but the particularity of this main character is that he never changes during his personal journey . In a classical narrative , the central character is forced to go through events which change his life and the character himself at the end . Here Francie goes from being a child to an orphan, a murderer and at the end of the film a patient in a mental hospital . Although he grows old , he does not grow up , and remains constant in his actions . When he comes back from the Industrial School for example , determined to behave and become a good and normal person , he immediately starts obsessing about Joe , knocking on the family door any time of the day or night . He does not seem to be getting any worse or any better as a result of his various institutionalisations ; he remains the same character . After the murder Francie tries to burn himself to death among the memorabilia of his old house . The police break into the house and rescue him from the flames . The character will not die and in that way be redeemed for his actions . He is an anti-hero without whom no story can be told .

At the same time we understand from the very start that he cannot die during the course of the action through his telling of the story . The spoken text in the form of narration and dialogue plays a crucial part in the film . It has a double effect on the story : it once again grounds the narrative in reality and at the same time alienates the viewer from a straightforward reading of the visuals . We first hear the voice of an adult telling his side of a story that happened when he was a child . The language is naive in a childish way . It also refers to television series and brand names of sweets which many members of an Irish audience can relate to and be nostalgic about . The dialogue which is very close to that of the novel is humorous at the most important moments and in serious situations . Having been arrested and held for questioning at the police station , Francie asks the sergeant if he is going to hang : " Will they hang me ? I hope they hang me . " The sergeant replies : " I'm sorry Francie but there's no more hanging " " No more hanging ? " says Francie " For fuck's sake ! What 's this country coming to !". The colourful and naive language is very real and funny , but the issues it deals with are extremely serious and dramatic . The spoken text is crucial to the film as it is . The visuals on their own have a much darker side to them . They describe a mother about to hang herself , child abuse , a child shooting a women in the hand in front of a mirror, and some apocalyptic visions of the world . Most of the film is set in winter time and in the dark streets of this town , except for some scenery with luxurious greens and blue lakes , which very quickly turns into a burning town after a nuclear explosion . A gap is created between text and images , reminding the viewer that what s/he sees might not be the true picture of reality , in the same way that s/he is getting only one side of the story .

3.3 Making Meaning

Roland Barthes concludes his work :

The function of narratives is not to "represent", it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order. The "reality" of a sequence lies not in the "natural" succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked, and satisfied ... Logic has here an emancipatory value - and with it the entire narrative.

(Barthes, 1982, p 294).

It is the logic of events that creates the fiction in *The Butcher Boy*. In this story the notion of reality is challenged, but everything is made believable by the structure of the narrative. Within the context of structural analysis, the symptomatic meaning of the film is the revelation that reality might not be what we think it is. The unease created by Jordan in his film leaves space for its audience to introduce their own experiences and knowledge into their interpretation of the work. Barthes's interest in the construction of reality comes through in this analysis of the film. This theme is recurrent in Jordan's body of work, but the structural analysis looks at its mechanisms and makes it the centre of attention. The auteur is present as a ghost figure in the work; s/he has created a premise for interpretation.

To some extent, the film-maker (being himself or herself also a perceiver) can construct the film in such a way that certain cues are likely to be salient and certain inferential pathways are marked out. But the filmmaker cannot control all the semantic fields, schemata, and heuristics which use the film for other purposes than the maker anticipated. There is nothing mysterious or surprising about this; any product of human labour can fulfil various functions.

(Bordwell, 1991, p270).

Structuralist analysis is a tool for personal creation of meaning within a work. Nevertheless, personal experiences are part of a larger discourse; the social and cultural context.

4 Cultural Analysis

4.1 Irish Context

Martin McLoone's article *The abused child of History* gives an historical and political interpretation of the film. McLoone acknowledges the psychological aspects of childhood in the film but prefers to look at how the film can be read in the Irish context. He proposes to look at the film itself as a metaphor for Ireland. In this article, he looks at the images of landscape and historical descriptions to demonstrate how the film is neither sentimental nor nostalgic. The inner and outside world presented in the film, he suggests, represent an historical debate, with at its centre the question of modernization.

The references to history are present throughout the various stages of the story. Francie's life is influenced by the cultural information he receives from comic books and television. The first year of transmission for the first national Irish television channel, now RTE, was 1962. In his inaugural address President Eamon De Valera compared television with atomic power referring to the double edge of the medium. McLoone shows the importance of television in the film :

Television images and references feature strongly in Francie's imagination. To that extent television is something of a cultural Trojan Hourse, leading modernity's assault on tradition and bringing into this sheltered world the powerful discourses of American popular culture. Television in Ireland, of course, was itself a product of this modernization process and went on to become the main channel for mediating its cultural implications.

(McLoone, 1998, p 34)

The notion of modernization is crucial to understanding Irish identity. The divide between revisionists and anti-revisionists opinions is, as it was in Jordan's previous film "Michael Collins" (1996), at the centre of interpretations of "The Butcher

Boy". On a basic level, revisionist thinking is committed to the modernization process in Ireland , and sees its opening to Europe and other cultures as necessary to move away from stifflingly conservative Catholic Ireland . Opposed to this train of thought, the anti-revisionists argue against this " collective amnesia " and for a need to acknowledge elements of the past as revealing the uniqueness of Irish culture . These social discourses bring McLoone to suggest we should see the whole film as a metaphor for Ireland itself .

As a metaphor for Ireland (the abused child of history), the film offers neither nostalgia or sentimentality nor does it endorse the certainties and complacency of the revisionist/antirevisionist debates. Francie's voice offers the audience no fixed point from which to assess his problem, the film challenging the audience to confront the complexities for itself .

(McLoone, 1998, p 36) .

The ambiguity of the film reflects the difficulty of the question of identity itself. Discussions around the question of national identity have been carried out for centuries in literature and theatre. The visual arts have also entered the debate. *The Butcher Boy* is part of this debate with its depiction of uneasy family life, lack of faith in authority and its anti-nostalgic depiction of Ireland.

Ruth Barton's coference paper delivered at the Triskel Arts Centre, studies the film as part of a body of contemporary Irish films, using the " unhappy family" as a metaphor for the state of the Irish nation. In this respect she demonstrates the link with a traditional representation of Ireland but also a departure from it; departure in its refusal to idealise childhood, but also in its ability to deal with local issues and yet be understood by an international audience.

[The first Irish independent films] are extraordinarily valuable for the cultural historian for their relentless critical re-examinations of cinematic representations of Irishness and in particular, the Irish family. The focus of the critique underlying

these films and the other independent films of this era is a questioning of the dominant ideology of post-famine Ireland, the centrality of family life and the self image of Ireland as "one happy family". These ruptured, violent, unhappy families have emerged as the return of the repressed of the Irish psyche; in their pursuit of the themes of the absence of love, the failure of communication, the trauma of birth, male violence and the unreliability of memory, the films are relentlessly counter-hegemonic. "

(Barton, 1998, p 4)

Film as a social discourse serves the purpose of highlighting relevant issues in a given society. It enables us to identify the core of the nation's concerns, and at the same time to comment on those issues: the personal becomes political. An Irish audience can identify the various Irish issues in the film and certainly can relate to the visual description of the Irish countryside, which has served the purpose of representing Ireland in literature and films.

The focus though is not just on the family but the way society reacts to this particular family. The humour of the film lies in its dialogue and in the use of the sound-track, but it is disturbed by the violence of Francie's behaviour, the description of child abuse and society's lack of interest in this child. The blame is not put just on the parents as Mrs Nugent suggests, but on Francie himself and on the community.

What characterises the community is its blanket inertia which will ultimately suffocate the only source of energy-Francie's.

(Barton, 1998, p7)

4.2 American Context

American critics received the film very favourably as an Irish product. "The Butcher Boy" was welcomed as having a fresher and independent touch that made it instantly

more challenging . Francie's family is at the centre of the descriptions and interpretations of the film . Michael O'Sullivan analyses the film :

Francie is the product of what is euphemistically called a troubled home . His musician father Benny is a violent , abusive drunk , while his emotionally fragile mother Annie is one step away from the madhouse . As you might expect, Francie tries to protect his psyche from this damaging environment by ducking in and out of an idiosyncratic fantasy world , populated by communists, cheesy movie aliens , John Wayne, Dr. Richard Kimble of " The Fugitive " and his own alter ego Algernon Caruthers .

(O'Sullivan Michael, 1998 , p 4) .

The influence of American popular culture is understood to play a role in Francie's psychological development . Strangely, the release of the film in the US coincided with the Jonesboro killings, when a adolescent allegedly influenced by his experience of virtual killing in video games, killed his fellow student in high school. The responsibility of parents and popular culture of course became a central concern in the case of violent children . In America the critical response to the film and indirectly to this social problem was directed at the issue of parental responsibility.

4.3 British Context

In the case of Britain , the analysis of the film also focused on the problem of child murderers.

Five years after the event, Britain still hasn't recovered from the murder of toddler James Bolger by 11 year old Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. We still don't know how to respond to such a crime. Conservative die-hards, blaming only the children(or their parents), insist the boy should stay in prison for life. The rest of us muddle somewhere in between, desperate for a solution that will be both hard-headed and tolerant.

(O'Sullivan Charlotte, 1998, p 13)

The response to the killing of James Bolger is part of the cultural and political discourse in the UK. Where American society seems to have clearly identified the roots of the problem in the family unit, the British response is less clear. The definition and complexity might have its roots within the structure of society itself. Charlotte O'Sullivan adds:

Francie is a killer, but we are not asked to see him as monstrous. Nor (even more surprising) are we asked to see him as a victim- we do not forgive his crime because he was denied a cosy, middle-class upbringing. Instead, this mainstream movie damns the middle-class family and its institutions, rejecting the whole natural order as a psychotic, ludicrous nightmare.

(O'Sullivan Charlotte, 1998, p13)

This focus is on society itself and its organization into specific social classes, each having their own values and rules, reflects a common British preoccupation with questions of class. Each critic uses personal and social experiences as tools for deciphering the film. Cinema as a whole is the experience of making, watching and interpretation a movie. The critic bring intellectual and social points of reference to the film creating in this way different symptomatic meanings.

Conclusion

This thesis has been concerned with film theory's response to the question of meaning . Studies of meaning in film narrative were formerly based around the question of authorship. In order to define film as part of the "fine arts" like painting or writing, it was desirable that the director should be seen to control the message. It was considered only possible to assess the strength of a film-maker's work on the basis of the personality of the auteur and the continuity of themes and concerns within his/her work. Nevertheless, these principals had to be challenged in the light of theoretical studies like semiotics. By applying the notion of language as a sign system to the visual medium, the difficulties of finding a fixed meaning for the signs emerged. The medium itself was seen to be the first obstacle to the creator's control over the message.

We have seen that it was possible to identify different types of meaning corresponding to different levels of understanding. Symptomatic meanings are the last and deepest level of meaning. In order to reach symptomatic meaning, the study of a narrative needs to be informed by all other more explicit and implicit levels of meaning. Tools are needed in order to give an interpretation of a narrative: they correspond to the various approaches a critic can take in the understanding and interpretation of the work.

A study of the adaptation of the novel into the film has revealed the possibilities and limits of giving a visual representation of a literary work. In the case of the novel where the child's imagination simultaneously creates reality and fiction, the director needs to restructure the work. Furthermore, the addition and elimination of certain parts of the novel change the whole meaning of the work. The images describe very clearly a small Irish town in the late 1950s, and do not allow the audience to escape the Irishness of the film. The voiceover by Stephen Rea , and his appearance as Francie at the end of the film, create a very different closure than in the novel. The father/son

relationship is the final impression of the film. Francie is released again into the community accepting his difference but being the same person. The film therefore departs from the novel, and is opened to analysis.

An initial structural analysis, based on the work of Roland Barthes, serves the purpose of defining the structure of the film. The complexity of the narrative is firstly due to its fictional nature. A work of fiction needs to be strongly rooted in reality, but the signs not only permit an horizontal reading but a vertical one also. The gap that exist between the visuals and the narration and dialogue, demonstrate the desire to open the work up to multiple readings. The viewer is not fed with the director or writer's moral opinion, but simply presented with a dilemma. The author becomes a ghost figure. His craftsmanship is to use the medium in such a way that he can present problems or riddles for the audience to decipher.

Depending on the social context, the work will take on a different meaning as we have seen in the case of three different interpretations. The work put in an Irish context, was read as a commentary on Irish history and struggle to create a national identity. In considering the film as the metaphor for the state of Ireland, Martin McLoone discusses actual problems related to modernization, and the issues of internal communication. Ruth Barton reveals the film's critique of the "inertia" of society in terms of dealing with Francie's problems, but does not put the blame on one head. American criticism, on the other hand, sees the dysfunctionality of the family unit as a reason for the child to become a murderer. The British interpretation is not as clear cut, but relates the killing to a problem within society itself. Francie is denied a middle class upbringing which Mrs Nugents represents.

The film "The Butcher Boy" is therefore a work universal enough to accommodate Irish and international interpretation. It manages this difficult task by staying visually very close to reality, apart from a few surreal inserts, and yet distancing the audience

through the use of humour and nostalgic elements. Its structure creates a build up to the killing which comes as a catharsis for Francie and the audience. The centrality of the character creates a strong relationship with the viewer, making it difficult in the end to hate the character or like him. Instead we perceive him as the society that surrounded him did. In this way Jordan manages to create a spectacle on the screen, to be felt as well as understood.

This is the purpose of Art: to create a spectacle for the audience to experience in both form and content. Susan Sontag explains in her essay *Against Interpretation* how Art was first an instrument for rituals before it became heavily theorised. Understanding is part of the pleasure of watching a film but the semiotic approach gives a dry, technical feel to it. The cultural approach, while putting the narrative to use in a social discourse, manipulates it in such a way that the analysis deviates from the subject of the film. Interpretation is needed but more attention should be put to the form itself, keeping in mind the danger of mystifying Art and Artists again. Susan Sontag proposes:

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art-and, by analogy, own experience- more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.

(Sontag, 1983, p104)

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Interview

CHAUDET , Christel , " Interview with Patrick McCabe " , Sligo , 14 November 1998

Appendix

Interview with Patrick McCabe
14 November 1998
Sligo

Interview With Patrick McCabe

14 November 1998

Christel Chaudet: What was your initial intention when you first started to write the novel *The Butcher Boy*?

Patrick McCabe: I don't know if there was any intention at all, I suppose, I knew I was going to write another novel, but I had no idea what the novel was about, because every book I write starts off with a mood, an emotion or an atmosphere. There is never a theme, the theme kind of emerges after two years of writing. It either emerges or it doesn't emerge. So far I have been lucky, it always has, this one I knew it was about, I didn't even know it was about childhood, I knew it was about loss, longing, I knew it was about that, and community, it was about community and a bruised and damaged community that has a past, a sort of a love letter to a community. But that's all I knew, and I knew it was about a murder of some kind, but I didn't know who was going to do the murdering, or anything. So I had no intention except to get rid of this feeling that I had.

CC: It was something based on personal experience?

PMCC: They always are, but to what extent it's impossible to know. I mean it's a , I think you can only write really deeply felt stuff about something you have experience of on some level, whether it is some private hurt as a child or something you've observed or words you've overheard, a whole conversation half spoken, half heard. You fill in the gaps that way, so for me it would always have something to do with experience but never, I would never be interested in memoir, you know, I would have no interest in memoir at all because that's about you. Although it is about you it's also about the human race. You know, it's a bigger theme.

CC: I think this is part of my next question, you have a very strong relationship with the place and characters, but we are dealing with symbolic figures, when you're saying you are not interested in memoir it seems that in Irish tradition in literature a lot of the characters are fictional, why is it so and do you want to continue a tradition in that sense?

PMCC: I am not sure I understand the question. You're saying in Irish literature a lot of characters are fictional? How do you mean symbolic figures?

CC: The characters represent...

PMCC: Like archetypes.

CC: Yes, unreal characters.

PMCC: "The Butcher Boy" is a very fantastic book it is not rooted totally in reality. There are flashes of surrealism, and sort of fairytale and myth and all sorts of things although there are strong elements of reality in it that ground the narrative but it does

move into the realm of comic book, cartoon. So I am not saying it's a departure or anything from the Irish literary tradition, I mean Joyce did that. But my preoccupation wouldn't be solely with any tradition in Ireland. That would belong probably more to the world of cinema, and comic books, and popular culture maybe.

CC: Do you feel it was necessary for Francie to get rid of Mrs Nugent in such an extreme manner? And what does she represent, stand for?

PMCC: Well, it wouldn't have been done unless it was necessary because once you get a grip of an autonomous character-driven narrative, what happens must happen in a sense. Because in one of the other drafts, I thought it was Philip who was going to be killed, I also thought it was going to be a suicide. There were many things I tried that didn't work. So then it was as much a surprise to me as I am sure it was to the reader, the fact that it was Mrs Nugent. And I think what she represents hasn't really been picked up because the novel goes an awful lot deeper than some critics, I think, have actually acknowledged. There is a whole self-hatred and malignant shame theme which hasn't been really picked up on. A lot of people say it's just a damaged child who hates this middle class woman, but no it's much more complex than that, I think. In that for example when he breaks into Nugents' he fantasises himself as Philip Nugent and then he sees himself as a babe on Mrs Nugent's knee, and he then becomes filled with self-loathing because he has betrayed his own culture, he has betrayed his family, he has betrayed himself and he's betrayed the class he comes from. And he has also unleashed something within himself which might be vaguely sexual or might be vaguely... it can be many things but it's a complicated thing whether why she has to, why she dies. At the same time, while he's murdering her he says he didn't want it to be like this. So she dies for a number of reasons I suppose. Because there is an inevitability about what she's unlocked within him. His capacity for love I suppose, distorted I suppose by these other things that she brought. And yet even while she is dying, he said *if* you hadn't made me do this I could have loved you. It's the element of mythic tragedy there. That made that kind of an inevitable Greek thing almost. That was the way I figured it anyway. But I think a lot of people, critics, just didn't examine that particular passage which is the key to, I think, the subterranean complexities of Francie Brady's soul.

CC: From the beginning we don't really know if we are going back 20, 30 or 40 years, but because of political events we are able to identify a historical period. First of all why is it set in the past and why are you being ambiguous about time?

PMCC: Well now, it is to state very, very clearly that human nature over two thousand years doesn't change, and it doesn't really. I mean you can have the Spice Girls now and something next but fundamentally, despite cultural kind of blips here and there, human nature was pretty much the same in the time of Sophocles and Shakespeare as it is now. And that is stated very clearly from the word go. It doesn't matter when this story happened, it could happen to anyone or it could happen at any time on this earth so it's to be very clear about that. It's also there to introduce the mischief element. There is a lot of cheeky, wicked, playing around with words in this book. It's to telegraph that as well. And it's also to illustrate that you may not be getting the whole truth, you are getting it from his side only. I mean, for example, imagine if Mrs Nugent had told the story. She didn't do anything wrong, she did nothing wrong. So it's to say all those things at once, it was the last sentence I wrote and the first sentence of the book.

CC: What is the connection with Ireland today?

PMCC: Well it has as much a connection with Ireland that it has with France or Australia or anywhere. It's about human beings. Just happened to be, it could be about Colombia or it could be about Mexico or Carolina, anywhere as far as I am concerned. Just happens to be the world that I know of, a small village in Ireland, a small village in New Mexico, I don't know. I don't think there is that much of a difference at the end of the day you know. People are born, live and they die in a small community in much the same way. Cities may differ a lot but I don't think that small communities do.

CC: Why is it set in a small community?

PMCC: Pocket universe, like a zooming camera, lifting up a stone, you know, that kind of world.

CC: About Irish identity. The setting is perfect for nostalgia, but it is not what it is about?

PMCC: Well there are elements in it. For example, people keep coming up talking about flashbars. They remember now the world they haven't used for years, they talk about "The Beano", all that stuff. I mean, that's good fun, I don't have anything against nostalgia but that is not the drive, it's not a soft centred book. There are these things there but they are just to illustrate the kind of kaleidoscopic warped world in which the child might live, the magic of it. I suppose comic books or an oil can lying in a ditch, colour in a drab landscape, everything can be significant.

CC: I think you are being very critical with the characters and this society. Why be so critical?

PMCC: Remember it is told through the eyes of someone who is damaged. So you've got to go with them. It's not me. This is the way that person sees the world. And if it's about the death of love, the rerouting of love, or whatever you'd call it, because it is about that really! Well if the character is disappointed, heart broken, here is this man locked away for 42 years. He's a heart-broken man! He's looking back, if only it could have been otherwise. Obviously he's not going to praise everything. He's not going to say it's wonderful, and it's still wonderful: it could have been, so that why it has to be critical. Because you have to be true to the character. If I intervene and say "hold on, it's wrong", it would make the book fall to pieces. You have to see him through and hold it, hold it fast all the way.

CC: Who is Francie?

PMCC: He thought that love would last forever and he was wrong. And that's part of human experience too. I mean it's the whole idealisation, when you think love carries you through. It doesn't carry people through. Death intervenes, disappointment, misunderstanding, all sorts of things... so that's who he is.

CC: The film was very well received in America. They described it as the story of a young boy growing up in a dysfunctional family. What do you think is a dysfunctional family?

PMCC: I suppose I can argue that every family is dysfunctional. I suppose what they mean is that by society's standard a society that cannot operate by the rules which have been laid down for order, orthodox society, and cannot operate within that. But then, are hippies' families dysfunctional? Or I mean, I don't know... it depends what you... it depends what rules you want to live by. I mean I have seen families which have been described as functional, which I think are intensely dysfunctional. Where there is a lack of communication going on, there is still puritanical orthodoxy, that would make me vomit, you know. So I don't know what the definition of dysfunctional really would be. I suppose if there is a serious absence of communication or affection, and they cannot seem to find the language or the structures for it, then that might be some kind of dysfunction but this is many things and it depends on the society and it depends on the place. Families differ from society to society.

CC: In America a dysfunctional family would be described in a different way as in Ireland for example.

PMCC: I imagine they would. A lot of Irish people would see American society as totally dysfunctional. If you look at Oprah Winfrey, or this kind of stuff, to the Irish perspective. (which is still quite conservative in terms of the enclosed family unit.) The facts that we are told, divorce can be obtained but that's not the case. People haven't gone for it at all, you have to wonder why! Because you still have a quite conservative view of what the family is. Americans would be to them completely dysfunctional... divorce every five minutes, different partners, I mean none of that... I have no view either way on that. It is just, I would imagine, that that word "dysfunction" is a variable term. So I don't know, I wasn't writing about a dysfunctional family, I was writing about a dysfunctional world, a world that doesn't know how to function; and that is beyond family, that is a bigger picture. In the middle of writing it they were harm chair general stanging of. They were on TV every night about wiping out Baghdad, and this kind of reducing old women to mince-meat and they were delighted and they were being encouraged and generals were there in their battle dress, salivating at the prospect. That's what I was writing about as much as anything else. How these people could stand in front of the camera reasonably and logically and enthusiastically talk about blowing old women to pieces. You know that to me is what the book is about, about the death of love... because if you can do that, and argue you're doing the right thing, well that's obvious... that's mental illness of some kind in a world that is kind of going astray. And they're at it again now! And who do you think they are damaging, Saddam Hussein? He'll be fine, but you know, Omagh Bombing, we didn't even see the pictures. Those bombs reduce people to mince-meat, literally like a butcher shop, that's insane. Anyway, I only mention that because "The Butcher Boy" was written at that time. It got in, without even being mentioned it's in there.

CC: Because of different societies and values, do you think a work produced in a given country can be understood in the same way in another country?

PMCC: No, I think there are problems depending on the culture. I think for example, "The Butcher Boy" was really well received in Brazil and there is a kind of interesting... there is a kind of Catholic culture there. There is a village culture too. There is flamboyance, and a like of... sort of fondness for lyricism and poetry and things like that, for I can see could do well there. Another country like... where else would it go... where it might to do well... I can't imagine it doing very well in Denmark or somewhere.... So I think there are surface problems. France didn't do particularly well, what the reasons are I don't know. There are all sorts of reasons, but then again it depends on the translations. It depends on so many things, that I really cannot quantify. I would have to be able to read the languages to elucidate why it would do well in a country and not do well in another.

CC: About the form. What are your influences?

PMCC: Well very much from the song and ballad. It's constructed like a ballad. An Irish ballad. First third sets the scene, then you have a sort of cataclysmic middle and then at the end, tears running down his face which is always how the ballad ends. So it was first of all the ballad form, then comic books. The characters are like cartoons in some respect. And music. And then I suppose in the literary side people like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, maybe Gareth McCullen, definitely a bit of Joyce, so bits on that terrain. Only for that book though, not for other books.

CC: You worked on it in a different way?

PMCC: No, every book has a different outcome, because it was like a ballad it had to be a lyric, kind of constant flow, like a waterfall of words, where as the next book had two separate narratives, so it had to be a different thing. And the book after that again has a completely different structure. So as the theme emerges you know, hopefully, organically, the structure declares itself. If it doesn't you're in trouble. Because I can't sit down and figure out objectively or empirically, this is the structure I want; it evolves, as I am sure musicians work like that. They don't go into the studio and decide "I'll write three verses, then a middle bit", they don't any more than they say "We'll use a cello", they are bringing the cello as the song evolves... so I would imagine this is a similar process to a musician.

CC: Would you have felt comfortable with any other director but Neil Jordan?

PMCC: No. I wouldn't have given it to anyone else. I told him that. I can't imagine anybody else doing it, except maybe David Lynch, and he wouldn't have the Irish in him to do it... so I don't see how he would get it. No I wouldn't have felt comfortable with anyone else, no.

CC: Why Neil Jordan?

PMCC: Because he is a magician. He is also enough of a realist... so he is that fabulous combination of hard nosed realist and lyrical magician. Which is the perfect combination for this book.

CC: What kind of Irish film do you like?

PMCC: Well there hasn't been that many great ones yet, has there? It's in its infancy I suppose, the Irish cinema. I liked "Angel" from Neil Jordan, I liked all his films. I liked "In the Name of the Father" okay. I liked the sound track more than anything. "I Went Down" I thought was pretty good. Some of them, you know I like some of them. I think it has a long way to go yet, to much preoccupation with scenery, wellingtons.

CC: Thatched cottages and rain...

PMCC: Oh tell me about it!

CC: Was the stage play a logical step for the novel and were you approached by Joe O'Byrne in the way you were by Neil Jordan?

PMCC: Well how that happened was... long before the book broke, we had been talking about doing a play together and I wrote this thing which was all dialogue, which is based on the novel, which I wrote at the time before it had been published. And then eventually the novel came out and at the same time, just by sheer coincidence, the play was produced at the same time. There was no money, literally no money, because I had no money and neither had he. The money only came later, and it was like a Cinderella story. The first night people saw that in a tiny little theatre, at the Dublin Theatre Festival, everybody knew it was special, it was one of those extraordinary things. But you'll never get it again. I can't imagine, it can only appear out of nowhere once. Everyone would get used to you then, the ante is up, and all the rest of it, but for the one time that it does happen, it's very exiting. Everybody was singing, people were crying, you notice that's what theatre is supposed to do. It didn't depend on money, it didn't depend on newspaper reports because there was none, it was great.

CC: How long did it run for?

PMCC: Well it ran for the duration of the Festival, then it was bought back then it went to Australia, it was all over the world then.

CC: It was in 1994?

PMCC: No, 1992. It was still running in 1994 all right, but it was 1992.

CC: In writing the stage play, was it important for you that the story stayed the same?

PMCC: Well I don't really know, because I didn't have that much experience in writing for the stage. I mean, in a way it's totally different because it's not the narrative content but the way it's done as a bouncy bouncy kind of Buster Keaton kind of language. So there are elements that had to disappear because it's only 90 minutes long, there are only two people on stage. I mean I probably would have liked to retain some of the things but no, it was more important for me that the form worked, the kind of musical, cheeky kind of pantomime aspect of it, and that did work, yes, it worked like a dream really...

CC: Fast moving scenes...

PMCC: Yes, like Comedia Del Arte really. Very much that tradition.

CC: Is this the reason why you reduced the cast to two actors?

PMCC: No, it's because we had no money, that's the reason. It started out at ten, then it went down to eight, then it went down to six, then it went down to five, then four, and eventually it was two. It's a fact. It's incredible, isn't it?

CC: Because of only two characters you get a very strong sense of madness.

PMCC: You do.

CC: In the play the sense of Francie's madness is stronger than in the novel or the film.

PMCC: Well again I go back to the thing, I never really thought he was mad. Obviously he is, but I really thought the world was mad. He is just stating what he sees. So it's very difficult for me to see with everybody else's eyes. I have lived with this character for so long, I mean if I really thought he was mad, then I'd be troubled, wouldn't you? I never really did. I thought it was the world around him that was dysfunctional and astray. All he was doing was stating facts. A bit like the magic realist, like Gabriel Garcia Marques. "What is everybody on about these are just stories my grandmother told me, I thought they were real". He didn't think of them as magic realism, he just thought this is what happened... something like that. You know what I mean? It is strange looking back at it now because it was seven years or so since I wrote that. I inhabit a totally different world now. What I mean, imaginatively, it's totally different. I look back on it as an interesting time.

CC: Were you approached by Neil Jordan after you produced the play?

PMCC: Well, I think Neil rang me up about early 1993. I had met him out in New York I think, about March '93. He hadn't seen the play at that time, and he asked me to write a script at that time.

CC: How did you feel about going from novel to stage to the screen?

PMCC: I felt very good about it. You get well paid for it. Because there is another side to a writer's life too, this is that you are always planning, trying to organise your life so that you'll be able to write full time. You've always got to have that because it won't happen by accident either. You have to take your opportunities when they come. So it was an opportunity for me to leave teaching, I had enough money to live on for a year so I grabbed it with both hands. It was exciting in all sorts of ways.

CC: Had you already written for the screen before?

PMCC: I had written small movies that were never produced. So I had some experience of it, not much, a little bit.

CC: Do you feel that your medium is the novel?

PMCC: I much prefer the novel, because of the short stories, prose anyway. Because if you have the wrong person putting their paws all over your work unless you're getting really well paid in which case you don't care... well you can organise it so that you didn't care, it would be heart breaking if something like this for example had been turned upside-down. I don't know, other works might not be so bad but something as special as this wouldn't be a pleasant experience. That happens all the time. But I suppose if you write the book, well that's it, it's there for ever, at least people will make allowances, but I am much closer to prose.

CC: You were very involved in the production side of the stage play. Did you want to get involved in the same way for the film?

PMCC: It was shot in my home town so I was very keen to be involved. I was living in the middle of the set, had a house up there and the cameras were all around. My two kids were up there, so I wanted to be involved from a social point of view. Because implicitly I trusted Neil. I knew well if there was a movie there he would get it. I knew he didn't need any help or criticism or monitoring from me, so it was just an enjoyable experience I was after. I thought I might learn something about the process, but it was great fun as well as being really productive and fruitful.

CC: You enjoyed the acting experience?

PMCC: I suppose I did really.

CC: In film there is a stronger emphasis on the work of the director, is it a problem for a writer?

PMCC: Not with someone like Neil, because it is not about ego, it's about art. Not at all. Not in the slightest. It's exciting for the writer really. When you see something done with such skills and confidence, panache. If it was something done badly and it was about ego and about showing off that would be a different thing but it is not, it is about servicing the narrative, so that's fine by me.

CC: How did you feel about seeing your character being acted out on the stage and then on the screen?

PMCC: I felt very gratified because I thought that was done very well. But equally if it has not done very well it can be a crushing experience in that case. It wasn't, it was great.

CC: The main problem with this film was the finding of the right boy to play Francie's character?

PMCC: Well I mean it was nearly an impossible search, 2,000 boys interviewed, no one coming even close, no one near it. We didn't think there was going to be a movie, down to the last three, it didn't look like it was going to happen. We couldn't have gone ahead, just abandoned it. It couldn't go ahead with an approximation of Francie, it had

to be the real thing. Most of them didn't have a clue, they didn't know where it was coming from.

CC: Then you got him and Joe.

PMCC: And the little brother, so we got three. The whole thing was a magical thing, it's almost like it was destined to happen. The gods were smiling on it. It didn't happen once, it happened three times, holy Trinity.

CC: Do you see yourself directing either your work or other people's work?

PMCC: I'd like to direct a short little film, that's all. I've written one now I wouldn't mind directing. But no, I don't have the time or the patience and I am too soft with people. I think you've got to be very hard to be a director, really uncompromising and hard hearted, vicious at times... when things aren't going your way. And I compromise, I would never compromise on my own when I am writing, but funnily enough when you're dealing with other people, I would take the line of least resistance probably. And that is not a good way to be if you're a director, I don't think. Anyway, I wouldn't have the patience for it, to work at the problems that you have. Coping with technology wouldn't have that either so I wouldn't really have the interest, no.

CC: Would you have preferred to see the film screened in Arthouse type cinemas? Were you happy with the distribution?

PMCC: No, I don't like Art Houses. I think ordinary people go to see this film, Art House people too, they are ordinary people. But I don't go to Art House, I don't like the atmosphere in them. Well I don't like multiplexes that much either, if there was somewhere, some half-way house. But no, there is no use to go to the Arthouse, there is only a handful of people to go and see your films there. I wanted the maximum number of people to see it. I don't think it's an arty movie anyway, I think it's somewhere in-between. There is an element of horror cinema in it.

CC: But it is not mainstream cinema.

PMCC: No, it's not mainstream, no. But at the end again, who defines what mainstream cinema is? If you go back to the '70s, people were going to see movies that would now be considered miles away from the mainstream and would have not batted an eyelid because they were available and they were distributed. Now because the multiplexes chains run everything, unless it's "Deep Impact" or "Armageddon", anything that doesn't aspire to that kind of block-buster status is straight away condemned as non-mainstream or almost Art House and it's simply not the case. I mean, the '70s movies like "The Hustler" and even "Apocalypse Now", I mean, I remember seeing queues for miles down O'Connell Street to that kind of thing and I mean they're pretty heavy movies, they're certainly not mainstream fodder as we would consider it now. So maybe fads come and go, maybe it'll come around again, I doubt it thought.

CC: The novel, stage-play and film have a different feel to them. Do you see them as very different works?

PMCC: I think the book and the film are very close, definitely the stage-play is a different work. As I would see it... but no, I don't think the movie is. I think it's very close, as close as is feasibly possible to get to the book. You've got to leave some elements out. No, I would see them as very close, certainly brothers and sisters.

CC: Would you talk about a truthful adaptation?

PMCC: Without question. Well we were in constant contact when we were doing it, and if there was anything that had been disloyal to the book, or unfair or whatever, I don't know, I would have mentioned it, but we didn't come across any of that. I think again dealing with different mediums, as loyal, as faithful as is possible, and giving that it all happens in 90 minutes in that dark auditorium and the book happens ten minutes on the bus, half an hour somewhere else, two hours on the beach, it's all different, you know.

CC: Did you find one of the media limiting?

PMCC: Certainly the stage and the cinema are both incredibly constraining counterparts to the novel. I mean, you can skip across time in a novel, you can play about with language, you can go under the sentence, over it, you can go inside the person's head and back out again, describe them, describe the inside of... how can you describe the inside of their heads in the movie, you know, which is where I spend the most of my time, not in the physical world at all, but deep in the consciousness of the character, attempting to get to the bottom of it. I would find once you get a novel, I mean it's a very frustrating form, but when you get it, when you get to the point where you are able to keep all the balls in the air, as it were, then it's an incredibly liberating medium. But yes, there is a lot of hard work before you get anywhere near that and sometimes you never get near it and you feel like throwing yourself into the river. But you know, by and large, if you keep at it you can get it. So I would find it by far the most exciting and liberating form.

CC: The medium used to carry the narrative implies the question of a specific audience.

PMCC: I hadn't a clue who was going to read this, I didn't think anyone would read it. When I was writing this book I had no more thought about an audience now, than the man on the moon. All I was concerned with was getting the thing right and at the end of it, hoping that two or three people would read it. And I thought, well, if a hundred people read it that's fine, because I was completely unknown at this time and it's never uppermost in my mind who will read it. It's getting it right and hoping that if you do that properly everything else will follow. Even if it doesn't, who cares, you're going to write the next book anyway. But as it turned out, against all the odds, the book was just written on a run, stream of consciousness, about a small town element in 1959, who would have... if you pitch that as they say to the Yankee Hollywood money man, you can imagine the response yet, "What is it about? A crazy kid in a small town in Ireland in 1959, and he murders a middle age woman with a cattle bullet pistol? And then what, he goes to prison? Bullshit, we are not bank rolling this", that's what would happen, and even more so like, when you are described through an editor, "Oh, it's written in a stream of consciousness style and colloquial dialect, where you have words which have long been past out of current currency, and describes child abuse and everything". They

would say "No, there is no audience for this". And it's sold 150,000 now, but who would have believed it. I wouldn't have believed it, I wouldn't have believed it'd win prizes, so if it did nothing else it certainly gave a lie to the notion that the novel as a form is dead. And that there is only a limited audience for the novel. This reached people who are certainly not Arthouse. People in Australia, people in America, of all different shapes and sizes. Which is invigorating. You see the novel is not like an art gallery, you can have it in your pocket, there is no problem just picking it up, there is nobody looking at you. What do you think of it, have you got the language to describe it, are you sure you know what you're talking about, it's just a book. So it's still as powerful and it will continue to be, I think. This stuff about the internet novel now, it's not the same thing you know. A book is special, you develop a relationship with it. If you think back at the books you read in your adolescence they were like time bombs, even the copy of it you had then is kind of precious, whether it's *Steppenwolf* or *Catcher in the Rye* or whatever it is.

CC: How does the concept of an original idea fit into these three works?

PMCC: I don't know, it's really up to you to tell me if it is original or is not, I don't know if they are. I don't suppose there is anything original about the ideas in them, they are not intellectual works, they are not novels of ideas, they are about human emotions, naked emotions... so I don't know if I care that much about ideas, because I find novels of ideas tedious. That's just me, I mean some people love them, but I just get bored because that is not what I read a book for. Unless the book moves you, it touches your heart in some ways. I just couldn't be bothered. Rather read a three thousands physics, so I don't know if there is anything original. But how many plots are there in the world anyway? I mean, it's the same story over and over again. Why does the woman I love have to die, why... you know, all those, there is nothing new with any of them.

CC: Do you think Neil Jordan made it into his own work?

PMCC: Oh yes, I think so yes. I think that there are elements that he introduced to it that are his signature all over. I mean, that there are links with his other movies, like the blessed virgin, that was very much his. I think the way he used the nuclear bombs, very good, very cheeky and fairy-tale-ish, Company of Wolfish. I think certainly the fantastic elements, the post-apocalyptic town, with the horse back preacher and the alien head. That's very much his. But that just extended what I was hoping he would do anyway, I would be very much in concurrence with that.

CC: Can you say it's a collaborative work?

PMCC: Definitely, yes.

CC: There is a lot of collaborative work going on nowadays between young Irish writers and film makers in Ireland. Why?

PMCC: Well because of the nature of the medium, it is important that film makers work with good writers, because the writer/director thing rarely works, you have one, it's enough to be a director without starting to write your own bloody stuff unless you are really good...an extraordinary person. Neil is good at that but not that many others are,

so I think it's very important that alliances and allegiances are formed. Martin Scorsese works with the same people all the time, Woody Allen does, it's important to do that because then you develop a kind of a code, a nod and a wink let out in the bar is far more important than endless faxes. So I'd say yes, it's inevitable and important that that happens.

CC: Neil Jordan has brought the rights to *Breakfast on Pluto*. Is it going to be another collaborative work?

PMCC: Yes, I'm doing the screenplay right now. Yes, hopefully.

CC: Is the Irish film industry looking for status in its work with Irish writers?

PMCC: I don't really know enough about the Industry to say, "That's trying". I only know two film makers, so at what point the start to constitute an industry, I don't know. I think regardless of courting status it's important that they work with writers, I don't know if working with a writer confers any kind of status anyway. It's just a necessary constituent or ingredient of making movies that you have to have good writing. Because if you don't have a good script you are finished. Before you even begin you haven't a hope, you can manage to cobble together something out of good acting and dynamic directing but all the good movies, whether out of this country or out of any other place, you will see the script is impermeably good, whether it's "The Big Sleep" or whether it's "Taxi Driver", the words keep coming at you. And the architecture of the script, the way the thing knits together that's always there too...With a number of exceptions!. Cinema Verite and all that sort of stuff can work for all sorts of reasons, but by and large we are talking about really fine structured movies like "Chinatown", the script is what does it, without the writer it's nothing.

CC: Why would Irish writers not write directly for the screen?

PMCC: But they do. Conor McPherson writes directly for the screen, "I Went Down" didn't exist in any other form. This happens. There is nothing new about this. Some are made from novels, some are made from short films, well they are from anything. But just as many are written directly for the medium.

CC: You are a writer, musician and actor. How does the idea of being a renaissance man appeal to you?

PMCC: No, really because what you would have to say there is that I am a writer, a lousy musician and a passable actor which really does not constitute a renaissance man, sorry to disabuse you of the notion. But, no an anti-renaissance man. Certainly not no... writer, maybe put brackets, but definitely not the other two. Quite seriously.

CC: Thank you very much.

