

An excellent essay which ably explores the work of one of Ireland's most significant film makers, Kieran Hickey, probing cinematically and thematically his films to identify their 'Irishness'. Through a concise mini-history of film making in Ireland the essay accurately locates Hickey's films in their cultural context. It reviews Hickey's need to contend with the commercial currents issuing from Hollywood and 'Pinewood' and their stereotyped views of Ireland before he can synthesise a unique aesthetic from realism and modernism. Hickey's struggle to combat the financial and distributing barriers in Ireland are similarly depicted; all this is done in the best tradition of film history. The chapters on the separate films are discerning in their examination of his forging dramatic and cinematic tools to comment on contemporary Ireland.

All very rewarding, absorbing and illuminating reading. The thesis is handsomely presented and well illustrated. The research is the fruit of original viewing, reading and interviewing and independent thinking.
Fine work.

KIERAN HICKEY - AN IRISH FILM MAKER

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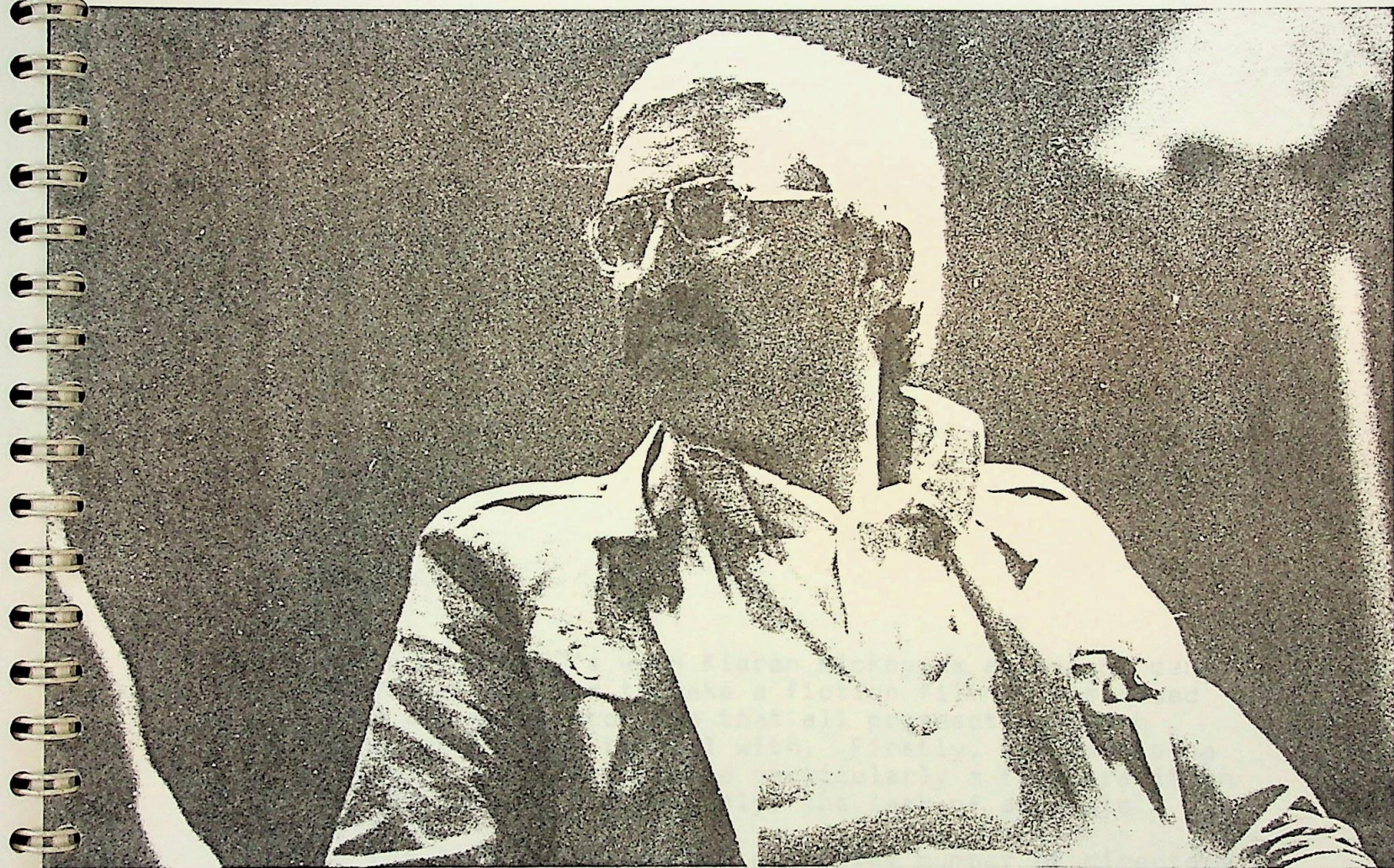
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INTRODUCTION

During the 1970's when Kieran Hickey, as an independent producer, decided to make a fiction film he was faced with two major problems that all prospective Irish film makers have to deal with. Firstly, the lack of a visual tradition and more particularly a film tradition in the country and secondly, the lack of adequate finance.

In the face of these odds a growing number of directors made a concerted effort to establish some kind of Irish film industry.

In this thesis I will try to gauge what Hickey's contribution to this emerging Irish film aesthetic has been to date. I will endeavour to place him in the context of Irish film making and examine how his work differs from that of other independent directors.

In discussing his films it is my intention to examine both theme and technique because I believe that to concentrate on either aspect to the exclusion of the other does not give a full impression of any film or indeed any work of art.

Consequently a film which is innovative in terms of technique but lacking in thematic interest, or a film that concentrates on a certain theme to the detriment of technique may only appeal to viewers with corresponding interests and therefore lacks impact. A good film must of necessity be a fusion of interesting theme and relevant technique.

I will devote a chapter to each of Hickey's films, in chronological order, in which I will examine what I feel the director was attempting to portray and how this affected the construction of the film.

In his two earlier fiction films, A CHILD'S VOICE and EXPOSURE, Hickey achieved a very interesting combination of theme and construction, being particularly original in the latter. On the other hand CRIMINAL CONVERSATION and ATTRACTA his most recent films, seem more concerned with theme rather than construction. He concentrated more particularly on presenting an original view of some aspects of modern Irish Society through a more traditional structure.

*

Films have been made in Ireland since the invention of the process. At the turn of the century there were numerous small film companies churning out sagas centring around the nationalist struggle. The Abbey Theatre also filmed some of their productions but these are essentially filmed plays. The same applies to the television drama produced by Radio Telefís Éireann. Hollywood spent some time in Ireland producing such varied material as MAN OF ARAN, THE QUIET MAN, RYAN'S DAUGHTER and FINIAN'S RAINBOW. Documentaries were also made throughout the 1950's and 60's by people such as Louis Marcus, Liam O'Leary and often sponsored by organisations such as Gael Linn.

However, in the realm of fiction film very few films that could be called 'Irish' were made. That is very few films had been made in Ireland by Irish film companies using Irish actors and technicians that had a valid place in Irish culture. So when people like Kieran Hickey and Bob Quinn began making films they were working in what was practically a void. In most cases they could only draw negative inspiration from previous films. Their work was a reaction against the traditional representations of Ireland on film, both at home and abroad.

The most frequently quoted film of this type is THE QUIET MAN, directed by John Ford. I do not want to denigrate such films. Taken in context they are harmless, amusing and highly entertaining. The problem is that in Ireland we had no film to counter the myth perpetrated by Hollywood and Britain. Thus every image of Ireland on film only served to reinforce this one particular, somewhat subjective, view of the country. Irish films are made in many countries but there are also directors such as Elio Kazan, in Hollywood, who felt they had a social responsibility and tried to make films that were more than merely entertaining. Kazan attempted to depict the reality of life in America, as he saw it.

Irish films are at last, however, beginning to counter balance the Hollywood image of Ireland. David Wilson, who revised Bob Quinn's MULLIN, pointed out that MULLIN is an attempt to show the reality of the Western. Quinn's film, however, was directed by Ford. While Irish films are beginning to emerge for their own sake, it is still necessary to find the area of the visual arts, where it is possible to establish an Irish visual style, or, at least, to emerge through the medium of film.

The definition of an 'Irish film' is a controversial subject. Can one describe a film that adopts the conventions of Hollywood film in terms of narrative structure, use of lighting and camera, editing and so on, as distinctly Irish? Is it enough for a film to be produced in an Irish cinema?

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN IRISH FILM AESTHETIC

There is no doubt that a film tradition needed to be established in this country - if only to counter the Hollywood image of Ireland. It is well known that when it came to making a film in Ireland the Hollywood director's eyes mist up and mythology takes over from reality. They unerringly depict Pearse's and de Valera's idyllic view of a country of thatched, whitewashed cottages and wild, but pure colleens. Nobody seems to bother with work and there is little sign of modern technology ever having darkened the shores of the emerald isle.

The most frequently quoted film of this type is THE QUIET MAN, directed by John Ford. I do not want to denigrate such films. Taken in context they are harmless, amusing and highly entertaining. The problem is that in Ireland we had no films to counter the myths perpetrated by Hollywood and Britain. Thus every image of Ireland on film only served to reinforce this one particular, somewhat dubious, view of the country. 'Cliche' films are made in many countries but there are also directors such as Elia Kazan, in Hollywood, who felt they had a social responsibility and tried to make films that were more than merely entertaining. Kazan attempted to depict the reality of life in America, as he saw it.

Irish films are at last, however, beginning to counter balance this Hollywood image of Ireland. David Simmons, in a review of Bob Quinn's POITIN, points out that "Quinn argues that POITIN is an attack on the misrepresentation of the Western communities of this island perpetrated by Bórd Fáilte and by John Ford in THE QUIET MAN"(1) While Irishmen have been recognised worldwide for their important contributions to the field of literature they have been noticeably absent from the area of the visual arts. I feel, however, that it is possible an Irish visual motif may be emerging through the medium of film.

The definition of an 'Irish film' is a controversial subject. Can one describe a film that adopts the conventions of Hollywood film in terms of narrative structure, use of lighting and camera, editing and so on, as distinctly Irish? Is it enough for a film to be produced by an Irish company using Irish technicians and actors and to be distinctively Irish in terms of theme, if its construction, which is central to how the film is read, is not inherently Irish. Obviously there is bound to be some influence from Hollywood. Even the French New Wave cinema grew out of a reaction against the Hollywood tradition. Yet, film makers such as Goddard, while being influenced by the American film industry, did manage to develop their own distinctive style. They played havoc with the narrative structure cinema audiences had become so familiar with and they killed the notion of film as a window on life by continuously drawing attention to the camera and thus to the fact that the audience were viewing a film, which is totally artificial contrivance.

In Ireland there has been some attempt to examine the structure of film. In CAOINEADH AIRT UÍ LAOIRE Bob Quinn examined the art of making a film as well as looking at a particular episode of Irish history in the light of its relevance to present day life. Joe Comerford also tried to look at how the structure of a film affects the narrative in TRAVELLER. Hickey, on the other hand, has tended to continue in the realist tradition of Lumiere-Griffith-Flaherty-Stroheim which can be distinguished by the use of unobtrusive camera angles, invisible editing and realistic settings. He is more interested in exploring certain themes through the medium of film rather than the actual structure of film. To this end he has made use of the Hollywood tradition that the general public seem to be more at ease with, and are certainly familiar with, to explore essentially Irish themes. He has succeeded in marrying the two opposed cultures very well, and produced four films that are distinctly Irish in terms of theme, if not structure. Bob Quinn also used the Hollywood convention, more particularly the gangster genre, as a basis for POITÍN. He claims that his reason for this was to prove that a commercial feature could successfully be made in Ireland on a low budget. In his review of the film in Film Directions Simmons intimates that "with POITÍN Bob Quinn has, perhaps, unintentionally, made an argument for narrative cinema as a part, through only a part, of an Irish film production." He continues, "surely a reasonable conclusion in a country where the art of story-telling has always been appreciated." (2) It is a little difficult to compare the films of Irish directors because their work is so diverse. What is the relationship between the traditional realist aesthetic and modernism. Those who ally themselves with the modernists claim that the realist approach is a conservative, perhaps even archaic, one. There is a problem in the inherent ambiguity in the term 'realist' when applied to film because, of course, the realist aesthetic is anything but real - it is a contrived, artificial world presented as being real. The realist would claim that only through artifice can one present a real version of life on the screen. Furthermore, he may add that even if the approach of the modernist (drawing attention to the camera and so on) seems more acceptable, the results are not always so. I feel that neither the realist nor the modernist approach can claim to be the 'true' one. The modernist approach can be every bit as conservative as that of the realist.

Each aesthetic has a certain validity depending on the situation.

Having said that, it is not so easy to put a film maker in a compartment and label him 'realist', 'modernist' or whatever. For instance, in EXPOSURE, a predominantly realist film, Hickey does draw attention to the fact that he is presenting a particular view of Ireland, be it however subtle. Attention is drawn to the fact that people perceive the world differently through their use of different viewfinders - camera and theodolite - and by extension Hickey emphasises the fact that he also is using a viewfinder.

In the context of Irish film making, Hickey has always been rather a lone wolf, preferring to do things in his own way. After attending the London Film School he came back to Ireland and set up his own production company, BAC Films. He started off making commercials, followed by government prestige films and documentaries. He has worked with the same team for almost twenty years now - Sean Corcoran, lighting cameraman and Patrick Duffner, editor. His approach is very much that of a professional, Hickey brings the same method to bear in his work in fiction films as he does in his documentary and commercial features.

This is where he differs from many of the other independent Irish film directors. Few of them have the solid base of a production company to work from, which means they operate very much on a day-to-day basis and with a different production team each film. However, the major difference is that directors such as Bob Quinn, Joe Comerford and Cathal Black are totally opposed to the professional world of the commercial cinema. "Everybody seems to expect us to want to 'progress' from being an independent film maker to being commercial film makers, whereas, if anything we want to do the reverse, that is, push the spectrum in the opposite direction" - Bob Quinn.(3) Consequently, one cannot talk about an Irish film aesthetic, or tradition, as if it were only going to encompass one ideal. The field of Irish film is as diverse as that of Irish literature, in terms of style, and it is as fruitless to claim that one film maker is better than another as it would be to claim that Behan is better than Wilde or vice-versa.

The problem of finance has always been a major deterrent to Irish film-making. Films are relatively expensive to make and Irish film makers have never been noted for their wealth. When Hickey began to produce films in Ireland Bórd Scannán na hÉireann was not in existence and the Arts Council was unable to grant money to such activities. It was also very difficult to attract private finance when there were no previous experiences to show that it might be a lucrative arrangement. Therefore when in 1967 Hickey decided to tackle what was for him an unexplored area and make a documentary film BAC Films had to carry the risk themselves. What emerged was FAITHFUL DEPARTED, a film which reveals the Dublin of James Joyce's 'Ulysses'.

Ten years later Hickey decided to break new ground again and make a story-film. As before he could get no support. It was becoming obvious that no money would be forthcoming until he proved that what he was doing was viable. So Hickey took another calculated risk and BAC Films also financed A CHILD'S VOICE. With its completion in 1978 Hickey showed that it was possible for an Irish production team to make a very good film. It got the official recognition it deserved when A CHILD'S VOICE was awarded first prize in the short category at the Chicago Film Festival in 1978.

If, as according to Thomas Allen Nelson in his book on Stanley Kubrick, he is "an artist who prefers to unsettle an audience's comfortable acceptance of the familiar", then Hickey is an artist who unsettles his audience by portraying exactly what they are familiar with but, are unused to seeing on the screen.

You let the character unfold himself gradually before the audience. You hold off as long as possible revealing the kind he is. He comes in like a nice guy, and when the audience finds out, they're trapped

Kubrick in KUBRICK: INSIDE A FILM ARTIST'S MAZE.
page 10.

Hickey's films begin seemingly innocently portraying an amusing story. However, they soon wallop the laughter out of an audience. You realise that what you are looking at is too close to the truth to be funny. As the films progress it is noticeable that the laughter becomes increasingly self-conscious and finally trickles away to an almost embarrassed silence. This is particularly true of the two

films which Hickey co-scripted - EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION. Their depiction of modern Irish life and attitudes is so truthful that it is painful. It is almost a washing of our dirty linen in public. Hickey is stripping the shawl of myth and innuendo from the sean bhan bhocht and showing her naked to the world. His films all build up to such a tense climax that you wonder if you can bear it. You do not come away from one of Hickey's films feeling relaxed and reassured but, quite the opposite; slightly upset and disquieted. Hickey is not so much interested in relating a comfortable, amusing story as in examining the culture we live in.

This of course leads into the question of popularity. Why should Hickey's films be considered good? Does this mean they are commercially successful? The dichotomy between artistic and commercial success is a vexed question and one does not automatically guarantee the other. One problem is that in film, unlike painting or writing for instance, a certain degree of commercial success is essential. A painter or a writer can continue his work even if it does not sell - canvas and paint, paper and ink, are relatively cheap. The production of a film, on the other hand, demands a large input of capital and it also involves more than one person. Thus the cost is prohibitive to self-indulgent 'artists' experimenting purely for their own edification. In order for a film to be commercially successful it must have an outlet. This problem of distribution has yet to be solved in Ireland. The only outlets for independent producers at present are Radio Telefís Éireann, occasionally BBC 2 or Channel 4, the Irish Film Theatre and film festivals around the world. There is a very definite need for a system that could provide for a more general release of films by independent producers, firstly in Ireland, and also on a worldwide basis. Unfortunately, there is rarely enough money available to finance 35mm films of feature length, which can then go on general release in commercial cinemas throughout the country. But, in one recent case where there was - ANGEL, directed by Neil Jordan - the film was not very successful financially.

This is a problem which I think can only be solved by time, and perseverance on the part of film makers. At present, Irish audiences faced with an Irish film suffer culture shock. We have become so used to seeing unfamiliar foreign scenes and hearing predominantly American accents on screen that we have become conditioned - we now accept it as normal and it seems somehow right. So when, suddenly

T P McKenna in the closing scene
of A CHILD'S VOICE



we see familiar landscapes and scenes and hear normal everyday Irish accents on screen it comes as a severe shock. Instead of losing ourselves in a fantasy world we are confronted with our own existence. It is often difficult to accept the truth about oneself, especially if it is a little critical.

However, it is worth noting by way of contrast, how patient and accepting we are of much of the foreign (particularly American) rubbish we endure on both television and cinema screens. Whereas we immediately become ultra-critical when we see an Irish production.

Hickey's fiction films could be said to deal with middle-class, nouveau-riche society in Ireland, as opposed to Joe Comerford who deals with working class life in his films. He is particularly interested in the individual roles of men and women in society and how, through their interaction, women are being exploited. The notion of people being trapped in intolerable situations is also prevalent in his films. For instance, the four main characters in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION have been forced into acting out different roles to each other, to themselves and to society.

It is possible to divide Hickey's films into two distinct groups. His first fiction film A CHILD'S VOICE and his most recent one ATTRACTA although totally different in terms of narrative have much in common in their underlying theme, that of somebody's mental balance being upset through being caught in an unbearable situation.

Interestingly, both films end on a similar note - a view, from the outside, of the main character looking out of a window, alone and imprisoned.

EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION on the other hand were originally intended to be the first two films of a trilogy dealing principally with the role of a woman in Ireland. However, the themes of the four films do overlap and in these two films we see people trapped in the vicious circle of tradition. ATTRACTA deals with a woman's struggle to come to terms with the sectarian violence which has ravaged the country. Curiously, women are noticeable by their absence in A CHILD'S VOICE.

First Prize in short category
Chicago Film Festival 1978
London Film Festival Choice 1978

A CHILD'S VOICE

with
T.P. McKENNA
narrated by
VALENTINE DYALL
written by
DAVID THOMSON
directed by
KIERAN HICKEY

production company B.A.C. Films Ltd. Dublin.

into the confined space of the studio, suffers a stroke which practically paralyses him and leaves him mentally unstable. This in turn causes him to be trapped in his own house, only being able to bear venturing outside under the guise of being dumb. This is the ultimate trap - Macreadie's mind is ensnared in his disabled body.

A CHILD'S VOICE

starring

T.P. MCKENNA

with

Stephen Brennan

R.D. Smith

June Tobin

narrated

by

VALENTINE DYALL

Written by

David Thomson

Photographed by

Sean Corcoran

Sound Recording

Patrick Johns

Edited by

Patrick Duffner

Produced by

Roland Hill

Directed by

Kieran Hickey

Running time: 30 minutes

16mm Colour

Produced by B.A.C. Films Ltd, 11 Stephen's Place
Dublin 2, Ireland. Telephone 765081
1978

Distributed by Contemporary Films Ltd.
55 Greek Street, London W1V 6DB
Telephone (01) 734 4901
Telegrams Confilms London W1
Telex 298312 Cofilms G

YOUR APPOINTMENT WITH FEAR.....

A Child's Voice is a ghost story set in the days when radio was the centre of home entertainment.

Three nights a week, in suspenseful instalments, Ainsley Rupert Macreadie (played by T.P. McKenna) writes and broadcasts his own stories to rapt audiences. He is known as 'the disturbing gentleman of the wireless' and his chilling and intriguing tales are full of inventive horror, teasing his listeners into nightmares. But his latest cruel narrative, the story of 'The Great Orsino, a magician whose tricks cause the horrifying death of his boy assistant, becomes a reality in which Macreadie finds himself an unwilling participant when the character of the boy refuses to obey the writer's commands. Suddenly, Macreadie discovers that he is the victim of the kind of terror which, up until now, he has reserved for others....

a stylish expressionist piece.....

David Robinson *The Times*

excellent and chilling.....

Dave Pirie *Time Out*

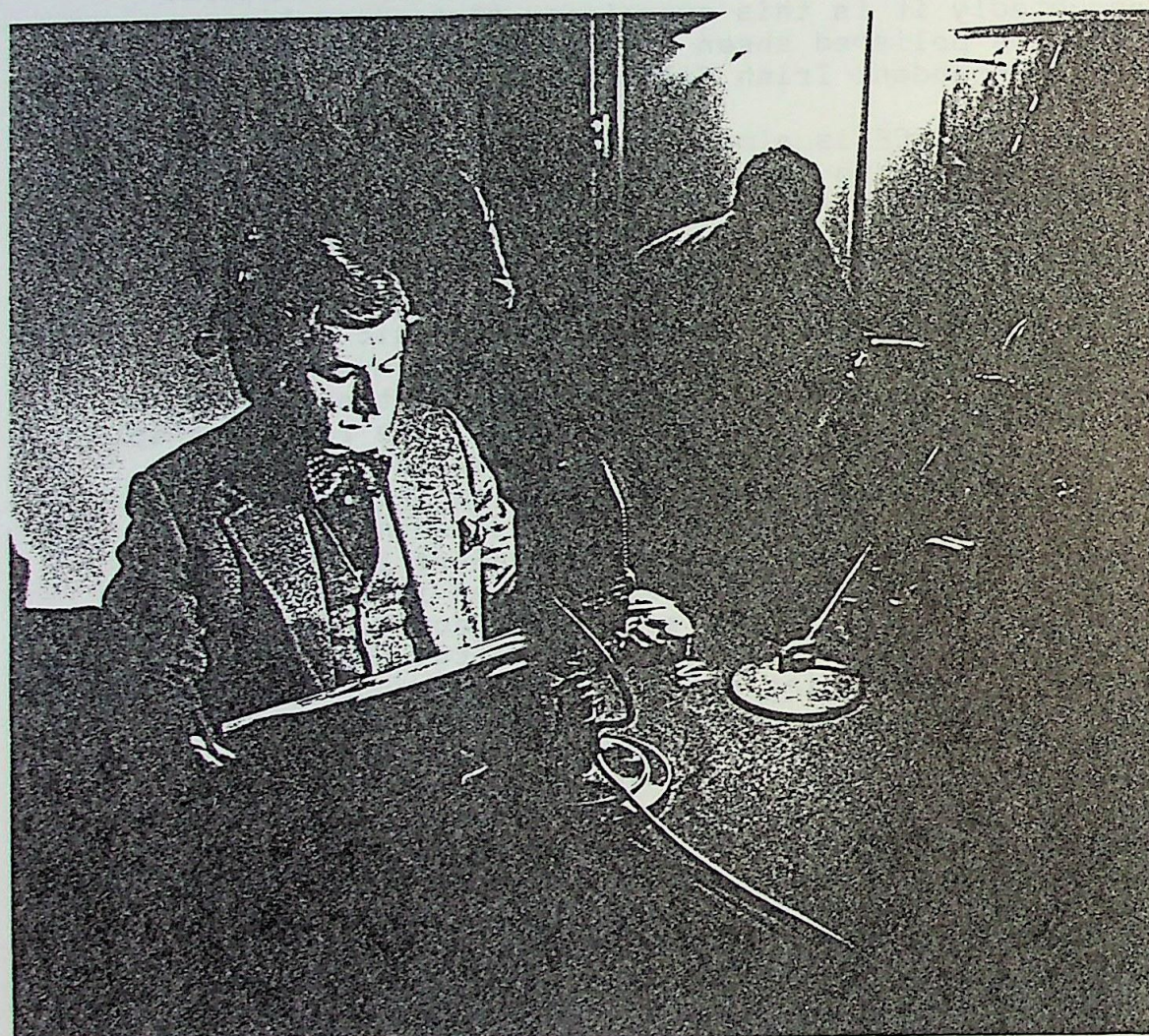
A CHILD'S VOICE

This idea of a person being trapped is what Hickey's first story-film is concerned with. The image is repeated again and again in A CHILD'S VOICE - the film could almost be regarded as a study in claustrophobia. It tells the story of Ainsley Rupert Macreadie who, three nights a week, in suspenseful instalments, writes and broadcasts his own stories. His latest story concerns a boy who is trapped in a magician's box and suffocates. One night, during a power cut, Macreadie himself is mysteriously locked into the confined space of the studio, suffers a stroke which practically paralyses him and leaves him mentally unstable. This in turn causes him to be trapped in his own house, only being able to bear venturing outside under the guise of being dumb. This is the ultimate trap - Macreadie's mind is ensnared in his disabled body.

In 1977 Hickey decided it was time to take a risk in an area that he felt was, as yet, unexplored in Ireland. He asked critic David Thomson, a friend since his film school days, to write a short screen play that would suit a low budget. Due to the fact that Hickey could not get any financial support whatever it was essential that the whole process of producing the film was very carefully planned before the outset if even a reasonable chance of success was to be expected. This planning down to the minutest detail was to become a feature of Hickey's work and a vitally important factor in his success. It is by no means accidental that his films do not overstretch either their budgets or their allotted shooting time. This professional attitude towards story-film making is the only hint of Hickey's work in the field of documentary and commercial features. Undoubtedly it is this experience that gives his films the polished sheen of professionalism that so many independent Irish films lack.

A CHILD'S VOICE is almost a textbook film. It could have been made to illustrate 'how to make a film'. It is a classically filmed ghost story and yet, it is a highly original and unique film, not in the least bit sterile or superficial as the description so far might suggest. It is in fact a very gripping and suspenseful ghost story in the classic style, that has very sinister undertones - the mysterious Macreadie, "the disturbing gentleman of the wireless" who lives alone writing his stories; the relationship between him and the little boy in his latest story; the way in which he reads his stories into a void, not knowing if anybody is really listening. It is almost as if, in his vanity, he prefers it that way. He shuns contact with people as if he is afraid of being forced to admit some dark secret. T.P. McKenna is excellently cast in the role of Macreadie, portraying perfectly the character of the vain orderly writer whose only risk in life is that he might not have a story ready in time for broadcasting. Living alone to keep alive the illusion of grandeur when in fact he is no more than a facile patronising coward, afraid to face reality and only reading his stories into the emptiness of the wireless in order that he will not know if nobody listens - at least the microphone cannot answer backor can it?

'Black Patches' in the radio studio



The film differs from Hickey's later films in that he handles it on a more expressionistic level than a realist one. According to David Robinson in the Times it is "a stylish expressionist piece". Just as in the early German expressionist films such as DAS CABINET DES DR CALIGARI AND RASKOLNIKOFF every detail in A CHILD'S VOICE is specifically geared towards enhancing the feeling of oppression. Nothing is left to chance.

The only exterior scene is of a covered narrow alleyway on a misty night, which gives a very strong sense of claustrophobia. As Macreadie walks down the cobbled alley his footsteps echo loudly giving the impression that he is actually in a super-real set rather than being out in the open. The interiors are shot in very confining spaces which echo the exterior scene. In the studio we see Macreadie in a small pool of light spilling from his reading lamp, and surrounded by an oppressive heavy darkness. At home in his study he writes by candle light which again surrounds him in a glow of, this time, fickle light. The candle is mysteriously blown out. The camera is used to intensify the sense of suffocation with close-ups of Macreadie and numerous extreme close-ups of the telephone and the microphone in the radio studio. The slow tracking shots in the studio also serve to increase the feeling that there is something waiting and watching in the surrounding darkness.

Joel Siegel in an article in the Washington paper Unicorn Times, suggests that A CHILD'S VOICE is "nothing less than a tribute to the RKO movies of the forties, particularly the films of Orson Welles and Val Lewton." There was certainly a similarity of circumstance. Lewton, who produced CAT PEOPLE, had also to work with very little money and therefore decided that the use of 'black patches' as well as being effective from the point of view of inspiring "viewers to terrify themselves by imagining something far more frightening than could ever be shown" would also be economical.

This of course was of benefit to Hickey who, being bound by similar financial constraints as Lewton, could pay tribute while saving money! However, I feel Siegel may have missed the Irish essence of A CHILD'S VOICE. The film exudes the atmosphere of an Irish winter - the suffocating darkness which descends on the country at three in the afternoon turning the city streets into mysterious tunnels, punctuated here and there by pools of light. Did Hickey consciously

set his first fiction film in this repressive atmosphere? One can almost imagine people huddling around the radio late at night to listen to Macreadie's stories in much the same way Irish people for generations gathered around the hearth to listen to the seanachai. It is precisely this type of oral tradition from which Hickey was trying to break free. Perhaps I am trying to imbue the film with too much meaning but there is no doubt that A CHILD'S VOICE is much more than a simple ghost story paying tribute to a Hollywood genre.

The film creates a totally artificial world of its own that is, nevertheless, chillingly convincing in a nightmarish way. The audience experience everything as Macreadie does in an almost dreamlike manner so that by the end of the film we do not know whether the events actually occurred or were imagined by Macreadie. In the best tradition of ghost stories the film neither denies nor concedes the existence of a supernatural world but merely leaves one with the unsettling feeling that all is not as it seems.

The interesting device of doubling the main character is one that reoccurs in Hickey's later films. In A CHILD'S VOICE the narrator parallels Macreadie. He tells the story in much the same style as Macreadie himself would have, were it one of his stories. The use of the narrator also helps to build up the atmosphere of the early days of the wireless.

In EXPOSURE Mickey has tackled three myths which are central to Irish culture. Firstly, the strong bond that seems to exist between an Irishman and his mother, to the exclusion of everybody else. Secondly, the notion that there is an innate violence lurking beneath the surface of every Irishman, just waiting for an excuse to surface, and when it finally does it makes the man more appealing to women. Finally, the male camaraderie that exists between drinking friends. These ideas appear again and again in Irish literature, drama and even Hollywood movies. Sygne's PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD centres around a man accused of 'playing off the huns' by pretending he was 'a fine lad with the great savagery to destroy your de'. More recently, Neil Jordan's film ANGEL was built around the theme of a young musician whose attractiveness to women and musical prowess increase in direct proportion to his involvement in violent activities. Mickey's film is notorious for presenting a young man who enjoys a good fight as in films such as THE FIGHTER, THE LAST OF THE DINAMITE and THE GODFATHER.

EXPOSURE concerns what can be regarded as three typical Irish boys, and their mother. Mickey is himself named as an independent person. The mother, however, acts as a catalyst in the film. It is only through her presence that the men are revealed in all their immaturity. Her sensitivity and emotional maturity is constantly contrasted with their insensitivity. The audience's first introduction to Lorraine is during breakfast at the hotel. She is seen sitting at a table by the window, lit very favourably by the soft morning sunlight. The men, on the other hand, are in the shadows of the dining-room, in harsh, ordinary light.

EXPOSURE immediately sets the tone for the rest of the film. In the following establishing exterior shots the three boys are shown in similar technical

EXPOSURE can be regarded as one of the first true 'Irish' films. Unlike A CHILD'S VOICE, which could have been set practically anywhere, it is a distinctively Irish film. It could not have been made anywhere else. In the January 1979 issue of Film Directions Liam O'Leary writes,

My first instinct is to say that I think it is the first mature, intelligent, skillful and unself-consciously Irish film I have seen.

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EXPOSURE concerns what can only be described as three typical Irish boyos, and their inability to accept a woman as an independent person. The woman, Caroline, acts as a catalyst in the film. It is only through her presence that the men are revealed in all their immaturity. Her sensitivity and emotional maturity is constantly contrasted with their insensitivity. The audience's first introduction to Caroline is during breakfast at the hotel. She is seen sitting at a table by the window, lit very favourably by the soft morning sunlight. The men, on the other hand, are in the middle of the dining-room, in deadpan, ordinary light. This immediately sets the tone for the rest of the film. In the following establishing exterior shots the three surveyors and Caroline are shown using similar technical equipment, the former a theodolite and the latter a camera, but in totally different ways. The men use their tools very mechanically and they see the surrounding landscape in very rigid and scientific terms. Everything must be made fit-in with their preconceived graph-paper-type notions.

Caroline on the other hand, sees the landscape in an interpretive and lyrical manner. Her attitude is not one of having to control her environment but rather one of accepting it as it is and enjoying it for what it has to offer. Through the viewfinder of her camera she follows the line of the land, sweeps out to sea and pulls in and out of focus. In contrast the view through the surveyor's theodolite is limited; it is static, immovable. A little later she is seen walking along a cliff path jauntily carrying her tripod and camera as opposed to the men who carry their gear as if it were a burden. They want to get the job finished with as soon as possible and return to Dublin while Caroline, quite obviously, enjoys her work.

The film begins almost as a comedy. Three men in a lonely west of Ireland hotel, the only other guest a foreign woman. Just the kind of situation that would traditionally be very humorous. But Hickey is always one step ahead. Just as the audience is settling down comfortably he literally wallops the laughter out of them. All of a sudden it dawns on them that the film is quite serious and they have been laughing at themselves. They are looking at their own lives on the screen. The film has become just a little bit too real and close for comfort. Throughout the film the three men's inability to relate to Caroline is juxtaposed with their easy acceptance of the proprietor of the hotel, Mrs. Sinnott. She acts as a mother figure towards them - telling them to come into dinner, scolding if they are late and disapproving when Oliver goes out with Caroline. They lack any initiative and allow her to make their decisions and she fusses about them just like a mother - she gives them drinks on the house, doting on them as if they were her sons. She even admonishes Oliver when he announces that he and Caroline are going to the local restaurant. She says she has already prepared dinner and he is about to agree to stay in when Caroline puts her foot down. To her, Mrs. Sinnott is no more than a hotel proprietor.

It is, however, important to note the apparent ease with which Mrs. Sinnott and the men adopt the roles of mother and sons. After Caroline and Oliver have gone out Dan says

We'll be staying in, Ma'am.

It is possible he used Ma'am as a term of respect but it is significant that it also sounds like 'Mam' as in mother.

The fundamental problem is shown to rest not solely with Irishmen or Irishwomen but, in their interaction. For some reason they cannot regard each other as equals.

Therefore, because Caroline regards herself as an individual, and expects to be treated as a mature professional woman, she poses a threat to the brittle status quo. The reaction of both Mrs. Sinnott and Dan, Eugene, and finally even Oliver, is similar. Mrs. Sinnott mutters,

*I ask you what kind of job is that for a woman?
What does her husband think of her off doing that?*

When the men discover that Caroline is divorced their solution to the 'problem' is to find her an Irish husband. The unspoken comment is that that would sort her out. In this way the vicious circle could be given one more twist. In the good old Irish tradition the problem would be glossed over rather than solved.

An Irishman, that's the kind of man you want.

Significantly, when it looks like she might be getting an Irishman, in Oliver, they undergo a sudden change in opinion.

It is interesting that the main female character in the film is a foreigner. The only Irish women represented in EXPOSURE are the slightly stereotyped Mrs. Sinnott and the sulky, almost totally silent servant-girl, Philomena. It would certainly be intriguing to imagine what the outcome would have been had Caroline, the professional, self-assured woman, been Irish. Would the men have been able to return to the bar and drown their memories of her so easily? How would Mrs. Sinnott have reacted to the more direct threat she would have presented to the status quo?

If there is a fault in the film it is that it deals exclusively with the men's attitudes to sexuality. However, in his next film, CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, Hickey confronts the idea of Irishwomen's sexuality more directly.

The turning point of EXPOSURE is when Oliver, slightly drunk, goes into Caroline's room when she is out photographing on the island. The men's world intrudes on Caroline very significantly. They are no longer ships that pass in the night.

In this particular scene Hickey uses a very effective shot that is reminiscent of John Ford. The camera is positioned behind Oliver and he is seen pushing open the door. Then, there is a sudden cut to the interior of the bedroom. Through the darkness we see the door burst open and the silhouette of Oliver blocking the brightly lit doorway. This gives a very strong impression of Oliver intruding uninvited into her life. It gives Caroline a sense of vulnerability. Even though she is not actually in the room, nevertheless we feel that she is trapped.

This shot is similar to one John Ford used equally effectively in THE SEARCHERS. However, he used it to emphasise the individuality, rather than vulnerability of John Wayne - his separateness from the community. In EXPOSURE Hickey also uses the shot to develop Caroline's individuality, she is alone and not in need of props and support as the men are. But, I think, it is also important that it increases the sense of her being trapped and the necessity for the men to capture and control her.

The scene is a premonition of the following night when Dan and Eugene, in a drunken stupor, ravage Caroline's room while she is out with Oliver. The scene opens in a similar way with the door being flung violently open to reveal the two men standing in the lighted corridor. However, this time the scene is much more agitated and the tension builds up to a much greater degree, to an inevitable confrontation. There is much drastic cutting from close-ups to long shots and the camera moves around the room almost as feverishly as the two men. All this combines to unsettle the audience, increasing the suspense so acutely it becomes almost painful. It is in scenes such as this that the experience of the production team is most in evidence. It would have been so easy to overdo this scene in which case the film would degenerate into farce, on the other hand, if it was understated the point would be lost. But in this scene, and in the picnic sequence, Hickey got the balance just right. Obviously the production team work well together.

Of the two men Eugene is obviously the more violent. It is he who instigates the break-in. He leads Dan on. Because he is having trouble with his wife he lashes out viciously at the nearest woman - partly out of frustration, partly out of desire and partly because he is envious of Oliver. Eugene is deliberately vicious. For instance he pauses, knowingly, before dropping Caroline's camera on the floor. He needs to destroy her as a professional person before he can go on to symbolically rape her. This he achieves by ripping her clothes from the drawers, strewing them around the room and throwing all her personal things on the floor.

Dan, on the other hand, is carried along by the force of Eugene's attack. He almost acts without thinking, as opposed to Eugene, whose actions are so much more despicable because they are so deliberate and pre-meditated. Finally he even lashes out at Dan by forcing him to look at his reflection in the mirror. As Dan gazes pathetically at himself, a pair of panties on his head, he seems, for an instant, to understand what they have done.

After the three men desert Caroline, leaving the sad figure sitting alone on the stairs, the pace of the film relaxes. The cutting becomes less erratic and the camera movements reduced. There is a quiet after the storm. But the sting in the tail is that although each of the protagonists is deeply affected, and probably hurt, by the incident only Caroline is emotionally stable and mature enough to admit it to herself, and possibly learn something from the situation. The three men, on the other hand, immediately set about trying to banish the memory - drown it in camaraderie and drink. They are determined not to learn anything from their experiences but to continue down the well trodden Irish path of ignorance and insensitivity. As Oliver says on the following night, in the bar,

Same again Mrs. Sinnott.

In EXPOSURE Hickey uses the three men to represent the development of one man, showing him at different ages. Each of the men represents a different possible crisis stage. Oliver, the youngest, and the only one unmarried is on the point of choosing how he will lead his life. Eugene is not long married, his first child is just learning to walk. However, he is beginning to feel alienated from his wife. Dan, the eldest, has been 'through it all'. He is constantly fighting with his wife and claims the only reason he has not left her long ago is because of the children. He is now past caring, preferring to drown his memories with drink.

It is a similar device to that used more recently by Pat O'Connor in his dramatisation of the William Trevor story THE BALLROOM OF ROMANCE. This film also features three 'boozey boyos' who are reminiscent of Dan, Eugene and Oliver, if a little more extreme. However, it is the main female character who is shown at different stages of her development. Bridie is seen as an eager young girl at her first dance, as a spinster approaching middle-age with the sad realisation that she missed her one chance of happiness and finally, as the desperate, too-old, ridiculous spinster she might become - the laughing stock of the ballroom.

T P McKenna, Bosco Hogan and Niall O'Brien - exposed.



Of the three men Oliver is the only one not committed. He has a chance to break the mould and leave the stiffling world that Dan has created and Eugene is in the process of joining. However, his inherent weakness means that instead of acting positively and maturely and making his own decisions he follows the lead given by the other two men. He drifts aimlessly along, guided by the tide of events, taking the road of least resistance every time. When Caroline asks him what he is going to do with his life his reply is

I dunno. I haven't really decided.

What is worse is that both Dan and Eugene encourages him to make the same mistakes as they did rather than helping to learn from their errors. They are so selfish they could not bear to see him succeed in finding happiness where they have failed.

The photograph Caroline took of the three men on the day of the picnic nearly encapsulates the theme of EXPOSURE. Also it is a definitive image of Ireland. It shows Oliver standing between Dan and Eugene with his arms around their shoulders. Not only are they hemming him in and keeping him under control but, he is holding on to them, using them to prop himself up. He finds that they are as necessary to him as he is to them. They are all futilely propping each other up, each afraid to rely on himself.

Hickey co-scripted both EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION with Philip Davison. He himself feels that it is a collaboration that worked extremely well because rather than each individual writing a set part of the script, they combined to produce the whole thing between them. Therefore their work has none of the hallmarks of their individual work - it is as if their fusion has produced a third person. However, he also thinks that the more one tried to analyse the situation the less sense it makes - it just works.

Nevertheless, I think that the themes and ideas explored in the films were primarily Hickey's. Davison agrees with this point of view. His main interest, as can be judged from his other work is in narrative structure. He is more interested in how a story is told rather than what is told. But he does admit that it is impossible to say exactly who wrote what. They sat in the same room, at different desks, thrashing out the story between them, until they were satisfied. That they complemented each other very well is most in evidence in EXPOSURE. There is no sense of a disjointed script, or opposition of styles, as could very easily have been the case. The film runs very smoothly, from that point of view and there are no superfluous scenes or unnecessary shots.

One of the interesting things about Hickey's work on the script of EXPOSURE, and indeed CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, is the extra degree of control it gave him over the film than would otherwise have seen the case. This is important not only from the aesthetic point of view but, also from the production viewpoint. The fact that he was involved in the scriptwriting meant that Hickey was in control of planning the production right from the beginning, which was crucial if the film was to be completed within its small budget. Yet, even though Hickey worked from a tight script and, while shooting hardly deviated from it in one line he produced a very free and unconstricted film that flowed easily along. The planning did not give the film a sterile or superficial appearance. This is probably because, while the screenplay had to be adhered to, it was not despotic. There was room for the actors to develop the characters they were playing, and become involved in the story. Hickey himself also interacted with them. They tried to visualise the characters as real people, not just cardboard cut-outs or symbols, and discussed what their lives and backgrounds might have been like outside of what we see in the film. Indeed, it can be quite disorientating talking to Hickey about his films because he tends to talk about his characters as if they were real people. Hickey's ability to maintain control over the film while still allowing the actors a certain amount of interpretive freedom is demonstrated by the picnic scene in EXPOSURE. In the script there are simply a few guidelines as to the mood this scene should convey. The rest was improvisation. This allows not only the actors but also, the director, cameraman and editor a certain amount of freedom. However, Hickey was able to motivate the actors to be free and unrestricted within a very definite framework. Despite the surface jollity and the unstructured appearance there are important points made here. For instance, the men fool around the beach, unaware that they have placed the mother-role on Caroline, leaving her to cook the food. The scene, which works very well in EXPOSURE is the delicate type that could easily go wrong without the back-up Hickey has. It is vital that the cameraman and editor understand what the director is trying to achieve and have the experience and ability to make the most of the situation. It is in scenes such as this that the professionalism of BAC Films is more obviously in evidence.

Casting is a crucial factor in the success of any film and it is obviously an area that Hickey put much thought into. All of his films are cast very well. Peter Caffrey is totally convincing in the role of the blustering, good-humoured on the surface, advertising executive in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION. Wendy Hiller, even though not Irish, plays the lead in ATTRACTA with superb control. Even the minor roles, such as Aiden Crenell as Archdeacon Flower and Seamus Forde as Mr. Airy, the teacher, are excellently cast. T.P. McKenna, who played the part of the vain writer in A CHILD'S VOICE to perfection, was keen to take the part of Dan in EXPOSURE when he saw the script and did so magnificently.

Perhaps part of the reason for the good performances was the fact that many of the characters would have been so familiar to the actors. They were playing the parts of people they could see about them in real life every day. One could meet the couples from CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, for instance, on any suburban housing estate in Dublin. However, as important as good casting is, I think it is also vital that a director can motivate the actors correctly. This may not seem such an important point until one sees a film made by a director who, for one reason or another, has not that ability. More often than not the reason for this inability is that the director is not sufficiently familiar with Ireland. For instance, in the recent British production of Edna O'Brien's THE COUNTRY GIRLS Desmond Davis, the director, was unable to portray, with any conviction, a realistic image of Ireland. In common with practically every other foreign director to take an interest in Ireland he continuously resorted to using the old clichés - the devilish Irish colleen, and her pure and innocent friend, drunken father, long suffering, patient wife an nauseum. The film is full of inconsistencies such as characters hugging and kissing in a manner distinctly unusual for Ireland. The fact that the director was probably motivating the actors against their better instincts only guaranteed that the performances would be stilted and unconvincing. Because of this, even though the film was obviously shot in Ireland, and one might even recognise certain scenes, the overall impression is that the film was shot elsewhere. Only an exceptionally good actor such as John Kavanagh could give a first rate performance in the face of such adverse conditions.

Strangely, films such as THE COUNTRY GIRLS are hugely successful in Ireland as well as abroad. The romantic notion, fostered by them, of the "apartness of Ireland from the rest of the world rather than our membership of it" (4) seems to have a universal appeal. But such films cannot be taken seriously when seen alongside Hickey's films, or indeed, any independent Irish productions. They are shown up for what they are - ludicrous. Their basic spuriousness is exposed.

EXPOSURE was one of the early winners of the Arts Council Film Script Award. Considering the film was shot in a week it is a remarkable achievement. Understandably, there are some elements that Hickey feels could have benefitted with more time. He would have liked to have more establishing shots of Caroline stalking the men. The sexual response in the men is very much initiated by Caroline and there is really only a hint of this in the film as it stands. However, there just was not the time to do all this in a week, nor was there sufficient money to carry on shooting any longer.

Nonetheless, I think it is Hickey's most powerful film both in terms of theme and structure. The use of the camera and theodolite - one with a versatile viewfinder, the other with a rigid one - to mirror the fact that the film was shot through a versatile subjective lens but, has to be viewed through a static lens, is very effective. I do not think that one could say definitely that the film is founded exclusively in either the realist or the modernist aesthetic. Hickey, does not confine himself. He uses, unconsciously I imagine, the ethics of whichever style seems more appropriate in any particular area. This juxtaposition of styles, of opposing views, parallels the similar one in the narrative of the film - the rigidly defined 'reality' of the men as opposed to the sensitive, liberated 'reality' of Caroline. In all, there seems to be a more solid base to EXPOSURE than any of Hickey's later films. For some reason it seems more convincing.

CRIMINAL CONVERSATION

In his next fiction film Hickey again examines the peculiar relationships between Irish men and women but, this time in the context of the sub-urban Dublin nouveauriche - the lost generation of Ireland. I refer to them as the lost generation because they remind me of the lost generation of British and Americans in the 1920's. They returned from the war determined to banish their memories by going on a continuous round of parties. This gesture, this pretence of having fun is echoed in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, The four main

protagonists are a product of economic expansion and liberalisation. They would have grown up in the repressive society of Ireland in the fifties, and now find themselves floating in the void of affluent suburbia. They now not only have the money to do as they please but also the sanction of a liberalised society.

However, it is not enough superficially to throw off the bonds of repression. They find they cannot cope with the freedom, they are riven with guilt and haunted by hangovers from their youth. They need to be ruled by the standards and values that society no longer affords them. The film is not, however, a criticism of liberal society. It is concerned with the transition period between repression and liberalism. How do people cope? or fail to cope with their new-found freedom? What strains does liberalisation put on society? and how must people adjust their attitudes? This last point is of major importance in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION because the film is concerned with the changing attitudes towards women in Irish society. Hickey deals more directly with the role of women than he did in EXPOSURE, the main characters being two married couples. But the film does not take sides, it does not depict women as exclusively being wronged but, rather, makes the point that both men and women are victims of social circumstances. In other words, it is not merely a case of men keeping "women in their place" but also of women actively keeping each other in place. Not only do men see women as being no more than chattles of their husbands but women do too. On the whole the film is rather ambiguous, deliberately so, I think. As in life, there is no clear division between good and bad. Things are rarely black and white and consequently the viewer is left unsure about who to sympathise with. The only obvious character is Charlie - he is a bastard. He is typical of the type of loudmouth 'boy' that can be seen in any Irish pub. He is all blustering good-humour and geniality on the surface and gives the impression of being a direct, honest guy. Quite in character with the three lads in EXPOSURE. Hickey feels that there is a danger that the audience might come away from the film liking Charlie. For some reason that type of character, so common in Ireland, seems to appeal to many Irish people. This is possibly because of his public face of being a decent fellow with a sense of humour. The other characters seem too complex and open to interpretation by comparison and therefore

Leslie Lawlor as Bernadette in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION



Bernadette had jumped on the 'Irish awareness' bandwagon. She is involved in a sense of Ireland-type culturemobile which will tour Europe faithfully representing the depth of Irish culture. She is also behind the "Be Irish" campaign which Charlie's advertising agency is launching on television. She is building up a warped picture of 'what it means to be Irish'

Bernadette - *If that doesn't get really down into you, you don't really understand what being Irish is about.*

Frank - *I don't.*

Charlie - *You call yourself an Irishman*

I think this subtheme to the film is quite important. The situation the four main characters are in parallels the situation Ireland is in, to a certain extent. For hundreds of years the Irish people lived under repressive conditions imposed by English rule. Just as Charlie and Bernadette, Frank and Margaret emerged from the repression of the fifties to the liberalism of the sixties and seventies, Ireland emerged from English rule and had to begin learning to rely on herself. Thus we had the Celtic revival in the early part of this century which was followed by a certain amount of floundering around trying to define what 'being Irish' meant, if in fact it means anything at all. The search for a personal identity that seems to motivate the four main characters in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION echoes the search for a cultural identity that has dogged Irish people for generations. The danger is that people such as Charlie and Bernadette do not know very much about Irish history, literature or culture at all and are filled with prejudice. As Charlie exhibits when making the totally irrelevant comment concerning the culturemobile.

It's as good as anything the Brits could do.

Their image of Ireland is even more dangerously off the beam than the 'stage Irishman' and because it comes from within is more likely to be believed outside Ireland. Frank's opinion of the opening sequence of Charlie's television advertisement says it all

It's a frightening poem.

Frank and Margaret adopted a child in the hope that it would provide them with the anchor they needed so much. However, it seems to have had the reverse effect. Instead of bringing them closer together it has made them even more aware of their inadequacies and the child acts as a wedge driven between them.

All four are really trying to hide the fact that they are simply lost and frightened children living in a world that is strange and lonely and does not make any sense to them. They are all acting out their lives, lying to themselves, to each other, to society and even to the law. They are pathetically imitating life rather than really living. Ironically they can only finally tell the truth under the guise of an acting game - charades. The double irony is that the film is acted by actors who are acting characters who are acting! In order to underline the fact that it is only through acting the characters can tell the truth Hickey had the set for the charades game resemble a theatre stage. The couch is pulled back to give the impression of a stage area in front of the window, which is hung with heavy red theatrical drapes. Charlie even tilts the standard lamp shade in order to highlight the 'actors'. During the game the film reaches the tension point. The pressure builds up to such unbearable proportions that it is a very definite relief when it breaks. It is the counterpart of the scene is EXPOSURE where Dan and Eugene are confronted while in the process of wrecking Caroline's room. The charades game builds up tension in a similar manner. Firstly, the interesting question of who is a real person is posed when Charlie does "Miss Piggy out of the Muppets". He is told he is breaking the rules because she is not 'real', and he replies.

Well, she's real to me.

One is inclined to wonder if he considers the others 'real' people or merely puppets to be manipulated for his entertainment. Bernadette brings the game into very dangerous ground by imitating Charlie painting. Then things take the expected nasty turn when Frank imitates Margaret shouting at him to unlock the car door earlier in the evening.

The editing in that particular scene is superb. It begins with a long shot of Frank as he mouths the shout. "Open the door Frank". Then as he mimes it again there is a cut to a medium shot and the final shot is a close-up. The overall effect is very powerful in conveying that he is shouting when in fact there is only silence. One feels the shout, rather than hears it.

This seems to represent the situation of the characters, except Charlie perhaps. They are shouting but no sound can be heard. They are trapped and their pleas for help are inaudible. All this so successfully builds up the pressure on the audience that it waits with bated breath for the answer to Margaret's cryptic mime - it is obviously going to be a dangerous revelation. The answer finally breaks the now unbearable tension in the same way that Caroline and Oliver catching Dan and Eugene in her room does in EXPOSURE. However, whereas in EXPOSURE only Caroline is really affected, in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION all four are - within the next few minutes their relationships to each other change. In the scuffle that ensues when Frank attacks Charlie, his painting is knocked from the wall and smashed - as is their world of lies and deceit. The innocent also suffer. The present Charlie had bought for his godson, (Frank and Margaret's adopted child) is also broken. But, the suffering of the innocent will in turn cause the perpetrators more suffering because the toy had also been linked with Charlie and Frank earlier in the film, when they had played with it. The major difference between the themes expressed in EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION are inherent here. In the former film the three men are so insensitive and so unable to feel emotion that the tragic affair with Caroline has no effect on them. However, in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION this balance is shown to be changing. There is hope for men such as Frank. Whatever his faults he is at least capable of being hurt - he has feelings and he is not afraid to admit them to himself. He is generations removed from Charlie, whose place is with the three boys in EXPOSURE. One cannot help feeling that Frank could have been an Oliver who was not influenced by Dan. The generational difference is really defined by the young couple in the film, the babysitter and her boyfriend (played by Kate Thomson and Garret Keogh). They are presented as more liberated, more sure of their bodies. Their easy sexuality is played off against the tangled web of deceit surrounding the older couples, who are caught within a pre-sixties repression, a strangle-hold which they cannot escape except through deceit or verbal innuendo.

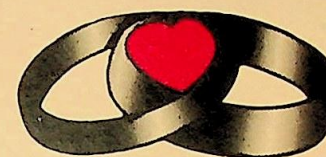
CRIMINAL CONVERSATION

CONVERSATION *n.*
Familiar discourse; general intercourse of sentiments; unrestrained talk.

Carnal commerce, legitimate or illegitimate, but most usually the latter; as, criminal conversation. **Criminal Conversation** (often abbrev. to *crim. con.*)

Law: (a) Adultery; specifically, illicit intercourse with a married woman
(b) The husband's action for damages for adultery.

CONVERSATIONAL *a.*
Pertaining to conversation; done in mutual discourse or talk.



with
Emmet Bergin
and
Deirdre Donnelly

Peter Caffrey
and
Leslie Lalor

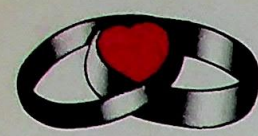
Written by
Kieran Hickey and Philip Davison

Directed by
Kieran Hickey

Produced by **B.A.C. FILMS Ltd.**
in association with **R.T.E.**

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more confident from the point of view of narrative.
It is evident that the scripts were written by experienced



CRIMINAL CONVERSATION

Four successful professional people, representative of the self-admiring 'new' Ireland and proud of their image in society, are trapped for one night into acting out the truth about themselves and abandoning the roles they play in public. When forced to remove these public masks and scrutinize their real selves, they find that their relationships are irreparably undermined.

CRIMINAL CONVERSATION (a legal term for adultery) examines the stress of failing marriage in a country where both Church and State prohibit divorce. Following on the same director's EXPOSURE (1978), which marked a breakthrough in Irish cinema, CRIMINAL CONVERSATION takes a cold look at the behaviour of Ireland's *nouveau riche* in the context of an emotional crisis.

EMMET BERGIN	Frank
DEIRDRE DONNELLY	Margaret
PETER CAFFREY	Charlie
LESLIE LALOR	Bernadette
KATE THOMPSON	Susan
GARRETT KEOGH	Student

Directed by	KIERAN HICKEY
Written by	KIERAN HICKEY and PHILIP DAVISON
Cameraman	SEAN CORCORAN
Editor	J. PATRICK DUFFNER
Production Supervisor	ROLAND HILL

Produced by B.A.C. FILMS Ltd. 11 Stephen's Place Upper Mount Street, Dublin 2 in association with RADIO TELEFIS ÉIREANN EASTMANCOLOUR 16mm 60 minutes	Television distribution by ANTHONY MORRIS-London Ltd. 6 Goodwin's Court St. Martin's Lane London WC2N 4LL
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Yet, there is something very mechanical in Susan and Trevor's sexual activity. Also neither of them recognises the irony of their being disturbed by the baby crying. Trevor merely tells Susan to hurry back as he reaches for a can of beer. Later, towards the end of the film, when Frank arrives home unexpectedly early, Trevor grabs his clothes without compunction and leaves with no more than a face-saving

Who d'you think you are, mister?

The thought never seems to enter his mind that he should not leave his girlfriend naked in another man's house. He seems to be developing well along the lines of 'Charlie'. I think the implicit warning is that merely less repressive attitudes alone are not the solution to the problems of relationships between men and women in Ireland. It does not automatically follow that because society is more permissive today than it may have been when Frank, Margaret, Bernadette and Charlie were growing up that the attitudes of Irish men towards women will change. Trevor proves to be no better than Charlie, he seems to regard women purely on the level of gratifying his sexual appetite. The fact that he may be more at ease with his body is no advantage if he is still going to be exploitative in his relations with women. Susan, just as Margaret and Bernadette before her, seems to be prepared to play along. She may have a different level of awareness and is likely to be insulated from the hurt both Margaret and Bernadette experience but, the situation is basically unchanged. The film makes the point that there is no good altering behaviour patterns if attitudes are to remain entrenched. It is, as Frank says

A slight case of the tail wagging the dog there, Margaret.

There is a very definite difference between EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, the films in which Hickey was involved in the scriptwriting, and A CHILD'S VOICE and ATTRACTA, the films in which he was not. The former are very intense and very directly concerned with the theme of the respective roles of men and women in Irish society. Their focus could be said to be quite narrow in that they are concerned purely with middle-class ideals and values. The latter seem more confident from the point of view of narrative. It is evident that the scripts were written by experienced

writers who were used to getting their ideas across in an entertaining way.

However, despite their similarities EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION are quite different films. I think EXPOSURE is a much more successful film, both on an artistic and an entertainment level. Hickey managed to produce a film which, while owing much to the Hollywood tradition, is a very original and distinctively Irish film.

CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, on the other hand is less successful cinematically. Despite the fact that in terms of sets, lighting and camera movement it is definitely a film, its construction is closer to that of a television play. The timescale, the sense of limitation, the feeling that no life exists beyond the walls of the house, while adding to the sense of isolation the characters are supposed to be living in, also serve to increase the unreality of the film. In cinematic terms I think it is not as successful as EXPOSURE but in thematic terms it is very important. It develops logically from the earlier film, which dealt primarily with the role of men, to deal with the social and personal interaction between men and women.

Hickey's original intention was for EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION to be the first two films of a trilogy. The script for the proposed final film, AFTERWARDS, has also been written by Kieran Hickey and Philip Davison and is ready for shooting. Unfortunately, there is no money available to enable the production to go ahead and it looks as if the film will not be made after all.

This is a pity because AFTERWARDS advances the theme running through the first two films to a logical conclusion. The main characters this time are three women - an embittered feminist, a plain, homely mother and a woman who realises, after twenty years of marriage, that she has lost her identity. She is neither a radical feminist nor a conservative, traditionalist, simply a woman who does not want to sacrifice her individuality for the sake of her husband and children. In AFTERWARDS Hickey would have advanced his theme full circle. In the first film he examined the male situation, in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION, the relation between men and women and the final film was to examine the woman's role in Irish society.

ATTRACTA

Kieran Hickey had long been an admirer of the writing of William Trevor and must have been delighted when RTE offered him the screenplay for his short story ATTRACTA.

Trevor's stories have become quite popular as films over the last few years. R T E had produced a television play of TERESA'S WEDDING in the seventies but it was their production of THE BALLROOM OF ROMANCE directed by Pat O'Connor in 1982 that heralded Trevor's return to the screen. It was followed by ONE OF OURSELVES and Tony Barry's ACCESS TO THE CHILDREN has been shot but not yet screened.

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All these films are very literal adaptations of the short stories they were taken from, which is not surprising considering Trevor wrote the screenplays himself. However, I think that in ATTRACTA Hickey came closest to portraying the particular mood and atmosphere peculiar to Trevor. He was most successful in depicting the certain nuances that define a Trevor story. That is not to say that the other films were unsuccessful, ONE OF OURSELVES may have been disappointing in that it was purely an exercise in nostalgia but THE BALLROOM OF ROMANCE was a very profound study of life in rural Ireland during the fifties. The individual styles of Hickey and Trevor bear certain similarities. It is not surprising to discover that Hickey had liked Trevor's work. If it could be said that the work of anybody influenced him in his screenplay writing it must surely be that of Trevor. The facility Hickey had shown for knocking the laughter out of his audience is present in many of Trevor's short stories, though not to the same degree. The slight feeling of unease and discomfort that Hickey liked to produce he also held in common with the writer. Each in his respective field had worked along similar lines on occasion. Therefore Hickey was an ideal director to film a screenplay by William Trevor, or to put it another way; Trevor was the ideal scriptwriter for Kieran Hickey.

The step from CRIMINAL CONVERSATION to ATTRACTA was a major one for Hickey. The latter was a much bigger and more complicated production, the narrative spanning almost sixty years and two countries. The script also called for quite a number of different interior shots and some difficult period exterior scenes involving many extras. The main cost of the film was also larger than Hickey had in any of his previous films. Consequently a bigger technical crew was required and the ranks of the old team had to be swelled. Most notably, Hickey brought in Douglas Kennedy as associate producer. Nevertheless, Hickey still remained the controlling guiding force behind the film. It is very distinctly a Hickey film. ATTRACTA thus marks an important shift in style for Hickey. It is not quite so obviously an independent film as his earlier work and despite the fact that it only runs to 55 minutes it gives the impression of being a feature-length film - possibly because it covers so much ground. Because the film is not notably innovative in the context of structure or narrative form, being classically constructed along Hollywood-film lines, I think it is probably one of Hickey's films that is more accessible to the general public.

Wendy Hiller as Attracta.



This notion of accessibility is an important one and all too often ignored by independent film makers. If one changes the structure of film to a great degree the resulting work can prove too obscure for the average film goer. It must be remembered that the public has been conditioned by American films with huge budgets. People now expect to see very slickly produced films that simply wash over them and do not require active participation on the part of the viewer. I do not advocate that Irish film makers should imitate this but it is very important that they are aware of it if they do not want their films to reach merely a limited or elitest audience. I think that accessibility both in terms of logistics and acceptability is a major problem faced by Irish film makers.

Hickey has demonstrated his understanding of this situation in ATTRACTA. On the surface the film can be enjoyed as a kind of mystery-thriller and it is shot in a corresponding style that most people would be familiar with. But if one wishes to delve beneath the surface there is also a lot going on that is of interest. Hickey managed to blend the tense, exciting plot with a relevant and important idea.

ATTRACTA confronts one of the most serious and yet often avoided issues of Irish life - that of sectarian violence. Just as in EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION Hickey tackles the problem of attitudes towards women in a very direct honest way, he focuses on this controversial area with his customary direct and relevant style.

The tension is introduced in the opening scene. A shot of a moaning bloodied girl crawling across a floor with hand outstretched is juxtaposed with one of an old woman standing in a deserted country graveyard on a cold November day, her hand reaching down to a grave. From there the old woman is brought to an institution and Attracta's story begins to unfold, through a series of flashbacks, as she tells it to one of the other inmates.

This scene is very important; it sets the tone of tension and expectation which has by this stage become a hallmark of Hickey's films. It establishes the relationship between Attracta and the girl - Penelope Vade - upon which the narrative revolves. The link is a tenuous one, however, in that it exists solely in Attracta's mind - she only learns of Penelope Vade through reading of her death in the newspaper. But it sparks off a memory in her mind which upsets her mental balance.

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Attracta's position is very similar to that of Macreadie in A CHILD'S VOICE. Each created a comfortable cocoon in which to insulate him and herself. Each had an audience that could not threaten their position, could not topple their private world - Macreadie's was his radio audience and Attracta's was the handful of protestant children she taught. Eventually their destruction came from within, and when it did the cocoon which had once been a defence now became an agent of their destruction. Hickey's work deals with isolated individuals, people who fail to communicate and so cause great suffering not only for others but also for themselves. This inability to communicate - in many cases on the part of people whose job it is to do so; Charlie who is in advertising; Macreadie who is a storyteller; Attracta who is a teacher - is the basis on which all of Hickey's films are built. This theme also seems to interest Trevor. Many of his short stories revolve around people who continually misunderstand each other. He always sets his stories at a time when the main character is close to some crisis point in his or her life. In THE BALLROOM OF ROMANCE, for instance it is when Bridie decides she is too old to continue looking for a man at the Saturday night dance. In ATTRACTA it is her mental breakdown. In some imperceptible way Trevor builds up the tension. Similarly Hickey's films are like the overwinding of a clockwork toy - you know that if you keep winding the pressure will become too great and the spring will whiplash free, and yet you cannot stop.

The storyline of ATTRACTA is in many ways more subtle and sophisticated than in Hickey's earlier films. For instance, there is no definite point at which the tension breaks as in the charade scene in CRIMINAL CONVERSATION. It is difficult to compare it with his earlier work because of the differences in budget, operating method, script, theme and so on but I do get the feeling that being freed from the responsibility of writing the script allowed Hickey to pour all his energy into directing the film. Trevor's experience as a writer is very much in evidence and I think it brings out the creative talents of Hickey as a director very strongly.

ATTRACTA does not merely deal with historical sectarian violence or current sectarian violence but draws parallels between the two. In examining Attracta's failure with her children Hickey makes a broader statement on how we all fail to accept our responsibility to deal with the problem.

30.

The film contains many parallels. The rape of Penelope Vade of which Attracta reads in a newspaper, forces her to remember her own 'rape' by Mr. Purce when he tells her the truth about how her parents were killed. This leads on to the two young couples needlessly killed - Attracta's parents and Roger and Penelope Vade. There is also the parallel situation between Attracta herself and her Aunt Emmaline. Both women chose to live single lives but still look after children. Attracta teaches her handful of Protestant children while Aunt Emmaline had Attracta thrust upon her care after the death of her parents. The crucial difference is that while her aunt carried out her sense of duty and actively forgave Mr. Devreaux and Geraldine Carey for their dreadful deed, and passed on her forgiveness, Attracta failed to do so. She only forgave passively. She did not instill the notion of forgiveness into the children under her care.

Are the sins of omission the worst sins of all?

Attracta asks herself this question after the article concerning Penelope Vade's death forces her to realise her failure, and also to realise that she is too late to remedy the situation. Her audience are no longer receptive - they are no longer capable of understanding. She could not explain to her children today precisely because she had not explained to their parents when they had been in her class. Attracta had had the good fortune to be exposed to a slight understanding through the miracle of her parents' murderers later becoming her best friends and because her aunt's forgiveness was tangible. But because she did not pass this on to her first generation of children, when the incident was contemporary and had meaning, they could not pass it on to their children and so on. Therefore the parallel between Attracta's situation and that of Penelope Vade's act of forgiveness in going to the city where her husband had been killed made no sense to the girl reading the newspaper article or to the rest of the class. By now the experience was too remote. Attracta then tells her story to another uncomprehending audience - Sarah Crookham, an inmate in the institution. Ironically, she is also telling it to what is probably the most uncomprehending audience of all - the cinema audience.

The scene in which Attracta realises her failure is one of the strongest in the film. Mr. Jameson, the vicar, visits her to break the news gently that she is to be retired. As she tries to explain her failure to him there is a shot of Attracta standing in front of the mirror over the mantelpiece. The vicar can only be seen in reflection. It is as if she has been separated from him and thus the rest of the town and from reality.

Wendy Hiller
as



Attracta

by
William Trevor

Attracta
Wendy Hiller
The young Attracta
Kate Thompson

Mr Purce
Joe McPartland

Mr Devereux
John Kavanagh

Aunt Emmeline
Kate Flynn

Geraldine Carey
Deirdre Donnelly

Sarah Crookham
Cathleen Delaney

Sound
Kieran Horgan

Costume Design
Consolata Boyle

Art Director
John Lucas

Associate Producer
Douglas Kennedy

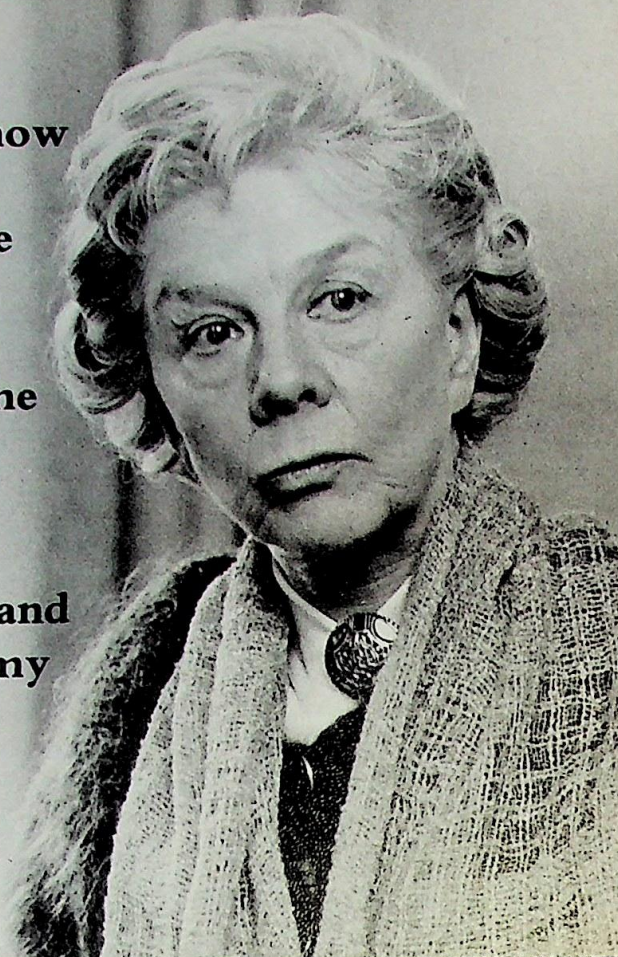
Editor
J. Patrick Duffner

Lighting Cameraman
Sean Corcoran

Screenplay by
William Trevor

Directed by
Kieran Hickey

**"I told them how
in this town
the two people
who killed
my parents
actually became
my friends.
It was a story
I should have
repeated over and
over again in my
schoolroom".**



William Trevor, one of Ireland's foremost living writers, has dramatized his austere, yet moving story of a woman who is forced to reflect on the value of her life.

The setting is a provincial Irish town. Attracta is a schoolteacher who has devoted all her life to the children in her care. So far her existence has been uneventful. Suddenly, in her old age, a story of horrifying violence unhinges her mind.

Academy Award-winning actress Wendy Hiller leads an impressive cast, playing the old teacher whose calm and ordered world is shattered by violence.

Kieran Hickey, whose previous films — A CHILD'S VOICE, EXPOSURE and CRIMINAL CONVERSATION — were major developments in the emerging Irish film industry, directs ATTRACTA.

ATTRACTA, produced by B.A.C. Films Ltd., is the latest production made in association with the new Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann and Radio Telefís Éireann.

**Produced by B.A.C. Films Ltd. for
Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board
and Radio Telefís Éireann**

Produced on 16mm film

**Running time
55 minutes**

World Distribution Rights:
Radio Telefís Éireann,
Donnybrook, Dublin 4,
Ireland.
Telephone 693111. Telex 30649

International Sales Contact:
Anthony Morris (London) Ltd.,
6, Goodwins Court, St. Martin's Lane,
London WC 2N 4LL, England.
Telephone: 01 836 0576.
Cables: AMATEL, London. Telex 267664.

Then as she walks towards the mirror her reflection appears also. She is now separated from her former self; her mental balance has been tilted. She decides to go to Haslemere - the place where Penelope Vade had lived.

Wendy Hiller played this scene with absolute sincerity. She did not fall into the trap of over-stating Attracta's break with reality but managed to convey with subtlety the change that occurs in the old teacher when she is relieved of her responsibility at the very time she is realising how she has failed. Kate Thomson was well cast in the role of the young Attracta and she bears quite a resemblance to Wendy Hiller. When one considers that the tight schedules of all involved meant that Wendy Hiller had gone back to England after playing her part before Kate Thomson arrived on the set one realises how well she performed. Seamus Forde is also very well cast as Mr. Airy, the old school master. He is so convincing one can smell the chalk dust from him.

As if to emphasise the parallell situations in ATTRACTA Hickey uses mirrors and reflections throughout the film. Geraldine Carey is first seen in the polished surface of the mahogany table. Later Devreaux sees her reflected in the glass door of the bookcase as she brings in a tea tray. There is also the scene where the vicar tells Attracta of her imminent retirement which features a mirror very strongly.

Hickey uses this device to emphasise the fact that the character is on the verge of a change or discovering something new about him or her self. Reflections feature in his previous films also. In A CHILD'S VOICE Macreadie stands in front of his bathroom mirror examining his face after his first poor reading of the new story. When Oliver goes into Caroline's room while she is out, in EXPOSURE, he looks in the mirror on her dressing table. Later, when they break into the room, Eugene forces Dan to look into the same mirror. At the end of CRIMINAL CONVERSATION Margaret stares into the bathroom mirror while taking off her rings. In each of these cases the characters involved are forced to examine their lives in a new light. Rather than looking at the reflections they are looking through them, they are looking below the facade they present to the world. It is not unusual to find a film maker using reflected images like this. In Hickey's case anyway, his work is a reflection of life; in his films he is also looking at something that is familiar on the surface but trying to see it in a new light.

CONCLUSION

Over the last ten years there has been an attempt by a few people to re-establish some kind of film tradition in Ireland. I say re-establish because, as I have shown, there has been a significant amount of film making in Ireland since the turn of the century. However, this modern movement is primarily concerned with fiction film, an area that has been neglected in this country, apart from the odd film such as THE PROMISE OF BARTY O'BRIEN (1951).

Kieran Hickey, along with directors such as Bob Quinn, Tom McArdle, Joe Comerford and Cathal Black, must be regarded as one of the major figures in this attempt to develop an Irish film ethic. They began with no official recognition or support for what they were trying to do and in the face of powerful odds managed to produce some films. Finally, the government relented under the pressure and recognised their existence by empowering the Arts Council to award money to film scripts. Eventually Bórd Scannán na hÉireann - the Irish Film Board - was set up. Obviously there were also many people working behind the scenes for these goals, but without people persevering in making films there would never have been a film board.

But, that is not to say that things are all rosy in the garden now, not by any means. Despite the fact that such talented directors as Pat Murphy, Robert Wynne-Simmons and Neville Presho are emerging it is still a struggle to have a film financed in Ireland. We are still a long way from having a booming film industry.

The next problem to be tackled is that of distribution. One of the major problems for independent producers as Bob Quinn sees it "is that the only real outlet they have is television ... one of the things to be done is to set up a distribution system for independently made films to be shown throughout the country." (5) Obviously, if a film maker goes to the trouble of making a film he wants it to be seen but, there is also the commercial aspect. The only means of recouperating the money spent on making a film is through the box-office. Apart from Neil Jordan's ANGEL, which was a box-office failure, and Robert Wynne-Simmons' THE OUTCASTS, no independently made Irish films have been released to the commercial cinemas. Part of the reason for this may be the prohibitive cost of shooting with 35mm, or blowing 16mm film up to 35mm, in order that they can be shown in these cinemas. But, what is also lacking, I believe, is some form of distribution system to serve as an outlet for Irish film makers. If such a system were set up it could provide a great incentive and go a long way to developing an Irish Film tradition.

Hickey's approach to film making is quite different from many other independent directors in that he strives to strike a balance between commercial success and, if you like, personal and artistic integrity. Rather than turning his back on the commercial cinema, as many of the independents have, he sees the advantages of the system. He sees how a director can work within the system without being drawn into the web of exploitation.

After all, many brilliant directors have produced fantastically innovative films under the auspices of commercial cinema - John Ford's THE SEARCHERS, Robert Flaherty's MAN OF ARAN and the films of Stanley Kubrick. I believe that working under financial constraints and having to come up with a film that not only makes sense to people but is also reasonably 'popular' can be beneficial. It keeps the director's feet solidly on the ground and taxes his ingenuity and creativity to the utmost. There is always the danger that the director may sink to simply pandering to the public but, if a director turns his back on the constraints of commercial cinema and just makes the type of films he feels like making there is a danger that he may end up being merely self-indulgent. Therefore, I do not think that commercial cinema should automatically be linked with loss of integrity. Many independent directors in Ireland seem to feel this. They see a division between independent and commercial film makers, the former being artists while the latter are exploiters. I do not think the situation can be summed up as neatly as that. There are, in fact, artists and exploiters in both fields.

One of the disappointments during a recent season of Irish films on RTE was how many of them were purely nostalgic. Films such as THE SCHOONER, NIGHT IN TUNISIA, ONE OF OURSELVES, THE KEY, although well filmed and structured were nothing more than exercises in nostalgia. There is, perhaps, a tendency in Ireland to dwell on the past and it could be a contributory factor to so many of the problems in the country today. It would be a pity if this obsession were to permeate Irish film also. It is refreshing to find directors such as Hickey tackling controversial and topical subjects that concern modern Irish society directly. Hickey does not deny the importance of history but neither does he indulge in nostalgia just for the sake of it. His concern with history is for its relevance to modern Ireland. In ATTRACTA he examines a particular piece of history for the light it throws on events today.

Hickey does not see the future of his kind of film making as being particularly bright. The choice, as he sees it, is to turn to making the kind of Americanised film that the market seems to be demanding or to continue in the vein that interests him, but which only seems to appeal to a particular section of his potential audience. The former does not interest him and the latter is not fantastically viable, in

commercial terms, due to the small population of the country, hence an even smaller section that may wish to see his films.

So where does Kieran Hickey go from here? The next obvious, and natural, step in his evolution as a film maker would be to direct, a 35mm feature length film. He is not only ready, but, anxious and willing, to do so. Unfortunately, the old bugbear of finance comes into play again. Ireland just does not have the population to support or justify such a venture. The only answer seems to me to be to look to foreign markets. If films made in Ireland could be marketed in other countries, as well as at home, the notion of a film industry would be more viable.

In the meantime Hickey is seeking development money for an adaptation by Douglas Kennedy (who was associate producer on ATTRACTA) of John McGahern's story THE PORNOGRAPHER.

One thing is certain, and that is that Hickey's enthusiasm will ensure that he continues to be a force to be reckoned with in the field of Irish cinema. I mentioned before that his film's could be likened to an overwound clockwork toy. This in fact is a pretty accurate description of the director himself. He is tense, hard-working, enthusiastic and full of nervous energy and I think all of this is conveyed in his films. The tension and energy ensure that his films are always lively and interesting. It is difficult to make a reasonable judgement considering he has only made four films so far but I think he will continue to be one of the leading Irish directors. I think that he has achieved a good blend of professionalism and originality. His films look good on the surface and if one wishes to delve further it is to discover they have a solid base too. There are always plenty of intriguing ideas to engage the active mind.

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