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FROM ARDMORE STUDIOS TO THE IRISH FILM BOARD AND BACK AGAIN: THE IRISH FILM INDUSTRY, 1967-1987

*DOS ESTÚDIOS ARDMORE AO IRISH FILM
BOARD E O RECOMEÇO: A INDÚSTRIA FÍLMICA
IRLANDESA (1967- 1987)*

*DE LOS ESTUDIOS ARDMORE AL IRISH FILM
BOARD Y VUELTA A EMPEZAR. LA INDUSTRIA
FÍLMICA IRLANDESA (1967-1987)*

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RESUMO

O artigo estuda a indústria cinematográfica irlandesa entre 1967 e 1987. Mais especificamente, o artigo analisa o longo processo de gestação do chamado Irish Film Board (IFB), a partir do desejo do Governo irlandês de equipar-se, após o fracasso de Ardmore Studios, uma forma eficaz para atrair produções internacionais para o instrumento país, e as expectativas dos cineastas irlandeses independentes, que assistiram-no como uma ferramenta para o cinema nacional. Em seguida, estudamos como estas duas visões colidiram no IFB, desde 1981, e como depois de uma primeira controvérsia em torno da concessão otorgada a Angel (Neil Jordan, 1982), os cineastas independentes assumiram o controle e reorientaram a política de subsidios do IFB para projetos não-comerciais, que, eventualmente, levaram ao seu encerramento em 1987.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Indústria cinematográfica; História; Irlanda; Irlandês Film Board, Ardmore Studios

RESUMEN

El artículo estudia la industria filmica irlandesa entre 1967 y 1987. De forma más específica, el texto analiza el largo proceso de gestación del Irish Film Board (IFB) a partir del deseo del Gobierno irlandés de dotarse, tras el costoso fracaso de los Estudios Ardmore, de un instrumento eficaz para atraer producciones internacionales al país, y las expectativas de los cineastas irlandeses independientes, que lo contemplaban como un instrumento al servicio del cine nacional. A continuación, estudiamos cómo estas dos visiones colisionaron en el IFB desde 1981 y cómo, tras una primera polémica en torno a la subvención otorgada a Angel (Neil Jordan, 1982), los cineastas independientes se hicieron con el control y reorientaron las subvenciones del IFB hacia proyectos no comerciales, lo que terminó por provocar su clausura en 1987.

PALABRAS-CHAVES: Industria filmica, historia, Irlanda, Irish Film Board, Estudios Ardmore

ABSTRACT

The article looks into the Irish film industry over a twenty-year period, from 1967 to 1987. More specifically, the text first examines the long birth of the first Irish Film Board (IFB) out of the Irish government's wish to create, after the costly failure of Ardmore Studios, an effective asset for luring international film projects into Ireland, and the expectations of independent Irish filmmakers that a film board would bring about a national cinema in the country. Next, we study how these opposing views clashed bitterly over the IFB from 1981 and how, after an early controversy about the IFB grant to Angel (Neil Jordan, 1982), the independents took control of the executive board and reoriented the IFB's funding policy towards non-commercial projects, which eventually led to its closure in 1987.

KEYWORDS: Film industry; History; Ireland; Irish Film Board; Ardmore Studios

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 20th century, the Irish have been very much aware of the importance of film for tourism promotion. For quite some time, however, this awareness failed to translate into a proper film industry and production depended almost entirely on British and American crews choosing to shoot on location in the island. Well into the 1950s, a scarcity of capital resources, private and public, fears of a politically engaged national cinema and the uncontested dominance of a backward-looking Catholic nationalist mindset coalesced to block every attempt to develop a professional film industry in the Republic of Ireland.

While Hollywood was in its heyday, all Ireland had to offer was a handful of zero-cost amateur films, some documentaries and propaganda films produced by the Church-sponsored National Film Institute of Ireland and many delusions of grandeur, mostly grounded on the belief that US Irish-themed films, especially those shot on location in Ireland, were actually *Irish*. This type of films, however, would decline steadily from the 1930s and was almost defunct when the Irish government, hoping to capitalize on the phenomenal success of *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952) and the post-studio Hollywood idyll with the British Isles, agreed to joint venture with Emmet Dalton and Louis Elliman in a costly film production facility, Ardmore Studios, in the late 1950s.

That the studio relied on British crews and did not even provide apprenticeships to indigenous aspiring filmmakers shattered the expectations of Irish film professionals, mostly trained and working abroad, that an Irish-based studio would catalyze the development of a national cinema in Ireland. Also, it angered them that Ardmore very soon proved to be a financial fiasco that needed an ever-increasing supply of public funds to keep operating. As a matter of fact, from the mid-1960s, the studio and the few, heavily subsidized international film projects made there came to be regarded as the main obstacles to the development of Irish cinema by indigenous filmmakers.

For the Irish government, Ardmore and a policy of grants to international producers were the best chance to make a film industry happen in Ireland and ensure that the country got properly promoted abroad. Still, the government well knew that a film industry that ignored the local film community and was unable to generate revenue by itself was unlikely to succeed in the long term. In 1967, a national film board was first proposed as the safest way out of the crossroads. The Irish Film Board, however, would not be set up until 1981. As controversial and unprofitable as Ardmore, the board turned out to be a short-lived endeavor, as in 1987 the Irish government decided to disband it and go back to square one.

This article aims to look into this turbulent 20-year period in the history of the Irish film industry. The first section focuses on the origins of the board and, more specifically, the significant role that John Huston played in its conceptualization. Next, we address the Ardmore-geared film policies of successive Irish governments and the organization of Irish filmmakers into trade associations that would lobby for a film board over the 1970s. In the following section, we assess the Irish Film Board Act

and its initial implementation. The fourth section studies the first great controversy that surrounded the then newly born board: the granting of funds to Neil Jordan's *Angel*. The fifth assesses the performance of the IFB from 1982 to 1987. Finally, a brief conclusion is provided.

THE FILM INDUSTRY COMMITTEE

Within five years of their inauguration in 1958, Ardmore Studios faced the first of many financial crises and ended up in receivership. After substantial investments by the Irish government, a short-lived British consortium, Brighton Tower International, took over the facility in 1967 (ROCKETT, HILL & GIBBONS, 1987: 99-102).

Also in 1967, legendary Irish-American filmmaker John Huston, who had settled in Ireland in 1947 and adopted Irish citizenship in 1964, invited the Irish *Taoiseach* (i.e., Prime Minister) Jack Lynch to the Ardmore set where he was shooting *Sinful Davey*. In the course of an informal conversation with Lynch, Huston made no bones about the sorry state the local film industry was in and remarked that, despite the enormous investment the government had made in the facility, most US producers still considered Ireland a rather inconvenient location, adding that his decision to shoot *Sinful Davey* at Ardmore had been much objected to.

It was at this meeting that Huston first brought up the idea of creating a national film board to develop a viable film industry which could also help promote Ireland as a tourist destination. Funded by the Irish government, private investors and taxes on film distribution and exhibition, the board should focus primarily on the "education of young Irish people in the film business" (FLYNN, 1996: 87) and help produce about six feature films every year.

Huston, however, was less alone in his worries about the Irish film industry than he thought. As a matter of fact, *The Irish Times*, an Irish national daily, had been running a series of articles¹ by documentary filmmaker Louis Marcus, in which he expressed rather similar concerns and put forward his own proposal for a brighter future: the creation of a *Griersonesque* documentary school in Ireland. Marcus, an Irish nationalist who naïvely believed that avant-garde, national and independent cinemas were about to take the world by storm, argued in his articles that Ardmore had been a waste of public money and that Ireland would best promote itself as a tourist location by producing low-budget documentaries and short films with no US involvement (CONNOLLY, 2004: 250).

In November 1967, the Irish government took up the gauntlet and formed an expert committee to assess the local film industry and outline measures that could be adopted to increase the productivity of the sector. With John Huston as chairman, the 23-member committee would meet over the following winter and spring. Discussions sometimes turned into bitter arguments on the role Irish-made documentaries and short films, the Irish government and Hollywood should play in the development of a film industry in the Republic of Ireland (MACILROY, 1988: 123; MARCUS, 2003). In July 1968, the committee handed in the 61-page *Report of the Film Industry Committee*, which took a middle-of-the-road

¹ The articles would be eventually collected in the booklet *The Irish Film Industry* (1967), published by the Irish Film Society.

approach and recommended the Irish government fully fund, with per project grants of up to £50,000 (€63,500), low and medium-budget feature films, short films and television commercials that could be used as training for directors and crews, develop a coherent body of film legislation, create a film archive and, most important, set up a film board through which film policies could be channeled.

TRADE ORGANIZATIONS AND THE NATIONALIZATION OF ARDMORE

The 1970s saw the birth of two film trade organizations in Ireland, the Irish Film and Television Guild (IFTG), established in 1972 as the Irish Film Workers Association and renamed IFTG in 1977, and the Association of Independent Producers of Ireland (AIP), initially an offshoot of the eponymous British association that became autonomous in 1978² (ROCKET, HILL & GIBBONSop. cit. 116; BYRNE,1997: 20; FLYNN & BERETON,2006: 325-327). Over the 1970s, the trade organizations would lobby indefatigably for a national film board and a film policy that favored native film companies.

In 1970, members of the Lynch government relied on the expert committee report to draft a film industry bill, which among other things regulated advertising and contained provisions for a seven-member film board and a film funding scheme, with grants ranging from £10,000 to £50,000 (€12,700 to €63,500). Alarmed at the possibility that the Irish national pubcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), could be made by law to broadcast only Irish-made commercials, the advertising industry complained. Irish filmmaker Kieran Hickey (1984: 16) believes that it was the advertisers that made the bill derail before it could be even debated at the *Dáil* (i.e., the Irish Parliament). However, truth is that the quickly deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland and the Arms Crisis, a scandal over a plot to smuggle arms to the Irish Republican Army allegedly concocted by Ministers Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney, monopolized the agenda for quite some time and, as a consequence, many pieces of drafted legislation, including the film industry film, were put off sine die (ROCKETT, HILL & GIBBONSop. cit. 115).

The year 1973 felt somehow like a new beginning in Ireland, despite the out-of-control spiral of violence in Northern Ireland and an intense worldwide economic recession. After more than fifteen years of Fianna Fáil governments, the March general election put Fine Gael and Labor back in office. The coalition government, eager to please the Irish culture industries, expressed interest in resuming the drafting of a film bill; greenlit the £450,000 (€571,000) acquisition of Ardmore Studios, which were in receivership — and under serious threat of being developed into a housing state — after having been briefly run by another short-lived consortium, Ardmore Studios International; forbade the hiring of non-nationals in advertising production, and passed the Arts Act, which first recognized that films can have artistic value and, therefore, be considered part of the national culture of Ireland.

For about a couple of years, Ardmore Studios were run by RTÉ,

² The AIP took the name of Association of Independent Film-Makers (AIFM) in the mid-1980s. Then, following the IFB demise, it became Film-Makers Ireland.

which focused on producing commercials. The facility, which managed to gather about 95% of all advertising production in Ireland, made a profit of £40,000 (€50,800) and £25,000 (€31,700) in 1973 and 1974, respectively (AGNEW,1981). In November 1975, Ardmore Studios were reopened as the National Film Studios of Ireland (NFSI), operated by a state-owned company with a board elected by the Irish government, who also appointed RTÉ producer Sheamus Smith as managing director and English filmmaker John Boorman³ as chairman. The appointment of Boorman, whom the AIP considered a Trojan horse of the British film industry, and the prompt allocation of public funds to attract international film productions into the studios, soured relations between the government and the AIP, which greatly resented the £260,000 (€330,000) granted to *The Purple Taxi / Un Taxi Mauve* (Yves Boisset, 1976), a French and Italian coproduction shot at the NFSI and on location in the west coast of Ireland.

³ John Boorman has been a Wicklow resident since the late 1960s. The Surrey-born director has made several films in Ireland, including *Zardoz* (1974), *Excalibur* (1981), *The General* (1998) and *The Tiger's Tail* (2006).

Un Taxi Mauve, a movie about a group of expatriates living in self-imposed exile in rural Ireland, would become a hit in France in 1977 and, despite causing an initial loss of £100,000 (€127,000) to the NFSI, has since attracted thousands of French tourists to the film locations in Connemara (GILLIGAN,2004: 159). In 1976, however, Irish filmmakers like Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Bob Quinn, who were badly in need of funding to make the leap from short to feature films, felt unfairly treated by the coalition government, who they thought was giving away Irish money to a non-commercial project devoid of artistic merit simply because it was a foreign coproduction. These complaints soon merged with an ongoing bitter hate campaign against the Labor Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the coalition government, Conor Cruise O'Brien, who most republicans and many nationalists regarded as an enemy and a traitor for having 1) banned Sinn Féin and IRA spokespeople from RTÉ, 2) suggested the BBC signal be extended to the whole of Ireland and RTÉ's to Ulster and, last but not least, 3) appointed John Boorman to the NFSI executive board.

Despite the understandable resentment from Irish filmmakers, it is also understandable that the Irish government was anxious to lure international audiovisual projects into the costly NFSI, especially since the speedy departure to Britain of the entire film crew of *Barry Lyndon* following alleged IRA threats on director Stanley Kubrick in early 1974 (PRAMAGGIORE, 2014: 125-127) had severely damaged the country's reputation as a safe film location. This blow, along with the Ulster turmoil and an adverse economic environment, had caused a significant decrease in film production in Ireland. With the Irish government unwilling to make further investments, the studios quickly fell into loss and debt. According to Sheamus Smith, at the time managing director of the NFSI,

[...] neglect by successive Governments left the Studios in an impossible financial situation. The lack of capital and apparent unwillingness to provide it by the only shareholder, the State, meant that the company was burdened by a continuing need to increase bank borrowing, not for production or badly needed capital investment, but merely to pay interest on bank loans. This activity was seen by many independent film-makers, [...] justifiably so, as a drain on State funds which might otherwise have been available for

profitable investment in production. (cit. DWYER,1997)

GREAT EXPECTATIONS. THE IRISH FILM BOARD ACT

Against all odds, Fianna Fáil won the following general election by a landslide and returned to office in the summer of 1977. The AIP would show at first little enthusiasm for the new government, as it did not seem eager to make substantial changes in film policy. In December 1980, however, after months of intense political and media debate, the Charles Haughey-led executive got parliamentary approval for their Irish Film Board Bill, a momentous piece of legislation which paved the way for the creation of an Irish film board, dependent on the Departments of Finance and Industry, to plan, deploy and oversee film-related policies, set up and run a national film archive, and design, administer and grant state-sponsored tax incentives, loans and subsidies to film production in the Republic of Ireland.

The Irish Film Board Act, although a much-welcomed addition to Irish legislation, did forebode trouble. First, even though the text legally binds the would-be Irish Film Board (IFB) to “assist and encourage by any means it considers appropriate ... the development of an industry in the State for the making of films” and “have regard to the need for the expression of national culture through the medium of film-making” (IRISH FILM BOARD ACT,1980: Article 4), it also explicitly asks it to “assist and encourage by any means it considers appropriate the making of films in the State” and “participate and promote participation in international collaborative projects in accordance with any of its functions under this Act and, where appropriate, to enter into agreements with comparable bodies outside the State” (ibid.). In other words, the Act further acknowledged the role of film in Irish national culture and established public support for film projects, but also made very clear that foreign and domestic producers were doomed to compete for IFB funding.

The AIP, however, expected the IFB to be modeled on the Canadian and Australian boards, which they considered to have led their respective national cinemas into commercial success and worldwide recognition. Besides the rather delusional nature of these views on foreign film boards and national cinemas⁴, countering this was the fact that the Republic of Ireland could not compare to either Canada or Australia in terms of human, economic and material resources for film production (MACKILLOP,1984: 14-16; DWYER op. cit.).

That the IFB was actually going to do little to alleviate the chronic scarcity of funds for film production in the Republic of Ireland is also implicit in the Act. Allocation of state funds for the IFB is not automatic, but seems largely dependent on the subjective willingness of two individuals, the Ministers for Industry and Economy, who are bound to “from time to time make, out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas, grants to the Board to enable it to perform its functions and to meet its administrative and general expenses” (IRISH FILM BOARD ACT, 1980: Article 5) and, if need be, grant a special credit (ibid. Article 11). Incentives can take the form of direct investments, low-interest loans or subsidies to films produced fully

⁴ Recent Australian films, for instance, had been hardly as successful as the AIP believed.

or partly in the Republic of Ireland (ibid. Article 6), yet the Act states that every penny, plus interest, is expected to be eventually returned to the State, and makes the IFB responsible for claiming back the money. What is more, the survival of the IFB as an institution is closely tied to that responsibility, as the Act caps the IFB's debt at £4.1 million (€5.2 million) (ibid. Article 10).

Finally, it should also be noted that the Irish Film Board Act entitles the Ministers for Industry and Economy to appoint and dismiss at will the seven members of the IFB executive board (ibid. Articles 12 and 13). Acting on this provision, in the summer of 1981 the Irish government appointed John Boorman and Robin O'Sullivan, director of the Cork Film Festival, to the first IFB board, of which Louis Heelan, general manager of the Industrial Credit Company, was made chairman. The remaining four seats of the seven-member board were left vacant, something the Act also allowed. In August, the IFB started operating on a budget of £200,000 (€254,000).

Both the appointments and the vacancies embittered the IFTG and the AIP, which had no representatives on the board and suddenly realized that IFB was not to be the independent film haven they had been expecting and, as we said before, they would have to share the scarce IFB resources with transnational, commercial film companies. Resentment kept brewing in the AIP, but it would be the backing of *Angel / Danny Boy*, Neil Jordan's directorial debut, that created an insurmountable rift between the trade association and the IFB.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER *ANGEL*

Although *Angel*, a bleak reflection on the pointlessness of sectarian violence, was mostly financed by Channel 4, the then nascent fourth British television channel⁵, and the contribution from the IFB was just £100,000 (€127,000), the fact that it was half the budget of the board for 1981 was considered outrageous by the AIP, which proceeded to call a boycott against the IFB. In their opinion, that Boorman was a close friend of Jordan's and that he was executive producing *Angel* through his own company, the Motion Picture Company of Ireland, proved beyond doubt that the IFB's decision to fund the film was based on nepotism and was, therefore, illegal.

Boorman claimed he had abstained from participating in the IFB project selection meetings⁶. This made no difference to the AIP and neither did that no other projects had actually applied for funding in 1981. Over the following months, the AIP would use the IFB loan to *Angel* to mount a hate campaign against both the IFB and Boorman, who was also blamed for the major economic difficulties the NFSI were going through at the time, with losses of about £600,000 (€762,000) and in 1981 an accumulated debt of about £2.5 million (€3.17 million) (AGNEW op. cit.), and accused of plotting with Louis Heelan, who also sat on the NFSI board, to divert the IFB funds into the NFSI (CONNORS, 2014). To make matters even worse, it would eventually come out that, even though about 50 Irish workers were hired for the production of *Angel*, some key members of the crew were British (e.g., the director of photography, Chris Menges), and that Boorman,

⁵ Connors (2014) considers that Channel 4's contribution was £400,000 (€508,000). Zucker (2008: 21), however, puts it at £900,000 (€1.143 million), making a total budget for the film of £1 million (€1.27 million).

⁶ Connors (op. cit.) questions Boorman's claim, stating that, had Boorman actually abstained, the executive board would not have had the required quorum to make funding decisions.

seeing that there were no applications for funding besides Jordan's, gave back the other half of the IFB budget for 1981 to the Exchequer. Very few in Ireland, however, cared to notice that there were no applications because on October 21, the AIP asked its members "to withdraw all applications to the Irish Film Board [and] not to make any new applications" (cit. *ibid.*).

By the end of 1981, Louis Heelan had resigned from the IFB and the NFSI executive boards. In early January 1982, he was replaced as chairman by an AIP member, Muiris McConghail, controller of television programs at RTÉ. The concession, however, did not appease the AIP, which was on to get rid of Boorman, whom they had regarded "as an outsider — an Englishman — who had tried to gain control of the financing of Irish film production" (SLIDE, 1988: 31) since his appointment to the NFSI.

Feeling hounded out, Boorman made the mistake of vilifying the Irish independent filmmakers on an interview on RTÉ, saying that he had "committed the unforgivable sin in Ireland of being successful... and that there was a small group of vociferous paranoiacs intent on a slur campaign" (cit. CONNORSop. cit.). In reaction to these comments, the AIP told its members to non-cooperate with the International Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Countries, due to be held in Wexford from March 28 to April 3, 1982, and to which Boorman was patron.

Things came to a head at the festival. With the aim of hindering the March 31 trade premiere of *Angel*, the AIP called a meeting on the date and time of the screening and reasserted their accusations against Boorman. Jordan fired back by questioning their integrity, while Boorman defended his tenure as NFSI chairman and the fairness of the selection process and criticized the scarcity of resources of the IFB and the AIP's sense of victimization,

I don't think this petty attitude is worth discussing. It was a relatively small investment (in 'Angel') from the Film Board. The Film Board will have its £100,000 back before the end of the year, plus their share of the profits. How could we have given money to Irish filmmakers when they had boycotted the Board? I have to be constantly reminding myself that they are a group of malcontents and mad dogs. They are in love with martyrdom. After years of this self-imposed martyrdom, they are in a position to make films. Instead they complain.

... I formed the company (Motion Picture Company of Ireland) to train and help Irish people to make films. One of the galling things is them (AIP) accusing me of using NFSI to my advantage. I have never taken a Chairman's fee, or any fees or expenses from NFSI, the Film Board or from 'Angel'. ... The problem with the Film Board is that the money at their disposal is so derisory. It's not enough to make half of one decent film. I haven't decided about resigning. I'm not going to get involved in dramatic resignations. I'm going to do whatever serves Irish film best. But I'm spread too thin. (cit. DWYER op. cit.)

On April 2, John Boorman threw in the towel and resigned from both the IFB and the NFSI. Two days later, the Irish government closed down the studios because, according to Albert Reynolds, then Minister for Industry,

they were not essential to develop a film industry in Ireland (BYRNE op. cit. 18). Although these events inaugurated an era of deep uncertainty for film production in Ireland, Boorman's resignation felt to the indigenous independent filmmakers like a great victory: the main obstacle between them and the IFB coffers was removed at last.

THE ROAD TO CLOSURE

After the resignations of Boorman and Heelan, Muiris MacConghail became chief executive of the IFB, and the chairs of the AIP and the IFTG, Tiernan McBride and Michael Algar, respectively, were appointed to the board. The seven-member board was completed with producer Noel Pearson, writer Carolyn Swift and casting director Nuala Moisselle, as well as one member from the first board, Robin O'Sullivan.

For a short while, the independents had *carte blanche* to place funds into the kind of projects they liked. Modest investments were made to support television and feature films, often mostly financed by RTÉ and/or Channel 4, and short films by both professional directors and students from the British National School of Film and Television. Although the IFB's debt was already mounting, in 1983 the board decided to raise the stakes and contribute £200,000 (€254,000) to the £600,000 budget (€762,000) of *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy, 1984) and £90,500 (€115,000) to *Pigs* (Cathal Black, 1984), budgeted at £130,000. Both films were maligned as pretentious by critics and flopped badly at the box-office, making virtually impossible for the IFB to recoup the investment.

In 1985 the tide began to change and several board members were dismissed from the board after just a few months in the job. Hoping to contain the rising debt and governmental anger at the financial performance of the IFB, the board made a concession and put some money into two overtly commercial productions, *The End of the World Man* (Bill Miskelly, 1985) and *Eat the Peach* (Peter Ormrod, 1986). Despite mildly favorable reviews and some international distribution deals, both fell short of box-office expectations and did actually little to alleviate the finances of the IFB.

In August 1986, the IFB was taken off the Department of Industry and Commerce and put under Arts and Culture, a move that immediately aroused worries about the future of the Irish Film Board and independent cinema in Ireland. Even though the Arts Council grants were non-repayable, they were much smaller than industrial incentives, so the likelihood of having to rely on them for filmmaking was received with a combination of fear and contempt.

A trade and academic campaign to save the IFB followed. Many of those who had been wailing against the IFB and commercial cinema turned into staunch IFB supporters overnight, coining in the process what was to become the Irish indie mantra over the following decade: Irish filmmakers were very talented and would be able to succeed artistically and commercially, in Ireland and abroad, the moment their film projects were fully financed by Irish public money.

Relying on the exhibition *Cinema Ireland, 1895-1976* (1976), the Irish Film Institute (IFI)⁷ sponsored film seasons *Film and Ireland* (1978)

⁷ Founded in 1943 as the National Film Institute of Ireland, the IFI was initially aimed at making documentaries for the Irish government and providing film education to the masses. Over the 1970s, it abandoned film production completely, took the name of Irish Film Institute, and focused on developing film culture in Ireland, preserving and promoting Ireland's cinematic heritage, and lobbying for the creation of a national film archive — a concept that began to materialize in 1987, when the IFI, with financial aid from the Arts Council and the IFB, bought an 18th century Quaker meeting house in Temple Bar.

and *Cinema and Ireland* (1984) and several academic papers by IFI board members, the seminal *Cinema and Ireland* (1987) elevated a highly selective corpus of Irish and Irish-themed films to the pantheon of national cinemas and, most important, reimagined the IFB-funded Irish cinema in the context of a postcolonial struggle for cultural independence, an Easter-like rising aimed at liberating the cinematic representation of Ireland from the yoke of Anglo-American cultural imperialism, which would end irremissibly in defeat for Irish culture if the IFB was disbanded and funds for a film archive were not allocated soon. Arguments in favor of the IFB also found an outlet, among other places, at successive editions of the Dublin Film Festival, first held in the Irish capital in 1985, and in *Access and Opportunity. A White Paper on Cultural Policy* (1987), which nonetheless also recommended furthering the tax incentives to film production the Irish government had introduced in 1984. Special taxes on blank videotapes and film tickets to keep the IFB running were also proposed by some independent filmmakers. It was all to no use — the board was axed due to financial constraints in the summer of 1987.

Building on their own Business Expansion Scheme (1984)⁸ and the neo-liberal prescription their admired Margaret Thatcher had just administered to British cinema, the Haughey executive cut off the safety net of public funding and replaced it with a tax incentive scheme aimed at corporate investors and production companies. In June 1987, an amendment to Article 35 of the Finance Act allowed any company with legal address in the Republic of Ireland to deduct taxes by investing up to £100,000 (€127,000) per year on commercial films by Irish production companies, which were allowed to meet up to 60% of production costs by deductible investments on condition that projects were completed within two years (COLLINS, 1987).

In the Irish government's eyes, the local independent filmmakers had just had a fair chance of proving their worth and failed miserably. For almost seven years, the IFB had ended up having an annual budget of about £500,000 (€635,000), but had wasted a large amount of money on administration⁹ and been mostly unable to recover loans, as the IFB-funded films failed to make a mark at the box office and filmmakers were bound to repay them only if the films made a profit¹⁰. As a consequence, the IFB debt grew with every film, but the board's helmsmen did little to alter the disaster-bound course, as they thought it was only the IFB's duty to support "projects that critically explored Irish society and history and challenged artistic and cultural norms, including previous cinematic representations of Ireland" (PETTITT, 2000: 39).

Unfortunately, government officials could not disagree more. For them, the main duty of the IFB, and the reason why it had been receiving public funds, was the development of a commercial film industry that could generate employment and revenue. Accordingly, helping produce unprofitable arthouse films was not just beyond the IFB, but at odds with its aims. With just a truly commercial film in six years¹¹, the controversial Angel, the Irish Film Board had very little to cling on to when the government labeled it expendable and told the Irish independent filmmakers to knock on the Arts Council doors for public funding, and raise the rest of the money from private investors.

⁸ The BES allowed investors to deduct taxes by investing in sectors identified as key to the Irish economy, including audiovisual production.

⁹ Funnily enough, the AIP/AIFM also blamed this on Boorman, arguing that only 20% of the IFB budget had been spent on administration and that the rate would have been much lower if the English director had not given back the unspent funds in 1981, "thus condemning future Boards to a similar fate" (GOGAN, 1987).

¹⁰ The IFB recouped only about £106,000 (€134,600) out of the £1,247,000 (€1,583,000) invested in feature films, that is, a meager 8.5 percent of the total investment (ROCKETT, 1993: 128-129).

¹¹ As if to further prove the government's point, the last three films the IFB was involved in — Reefer and the Model (Joe Comerford, 1987), Budawanny (Bob Quinn, 1987) and The Courier (Frank Deasy, 1988) — were all commercial failures.

In the meantime, although Albert Reynolds had regarded the NFSI as non-essential, the government made a huge economic effort to ensure that the facility did not fall into the wrong hands, that is, into hands willing to develop Ardmore into a housing estate. In September 1982, the studios were sold to yet another short-lived consortium, Ardmore Completion Communications, which soon put them into liquidation. Significant public investments had to be made to clean up the accounts and defuse the always-present threat of developers. In late 1984, Ardmore was purchased by Pakistani-American businessman Mahmud Sipa, who announced plans to shoot some international film productions in the Irish studios. In January 1985, however, Sipa's corporation went bankrupt and the studios were put again into receivership. In September 1986, a consortium of Mary Tyler Moore's MTM Enterprises, Irish producer Morgan O'Sullivan's Tara Productions and the state-owned National Development Corporation took the reins.

CONCLUSION

Since the early 1920s, the hegemony of Hollywood has made extremely difficult for national cinemas and film industries to emerge and / or survive, especially in small Anglophone territories like Ireland, where indigenous producers are very unlikely to recoup costs at the domestic box office and the development of a local film industry largely depends on state subsidies and foreign investment, more often than not, Hollywood's.

After Ireland won its independence from Great Britain in 1922, indigenous film production virtually came to a halt on the island, and Anglo-American Irish-themed feature films became synonymous to Irish cinema, both in Ireland and abroad. Most of these films were produced on location in the Irish Free State and often represented it along the lines of the Irish Catholic nationalist ideal of Ireland and the Irish, so for decades successive Irish governments showed hardly any regard for developing either a national film industry or cinema in the country. Over the 1930s and 1940s, however, the waning Irish-American interest for the *Auld Sod*, Irish neutrality in World War II and the collapse of the studio system meant that fewer and fewer Irish-themed films got to be made, even fewer got to be shot on location in Ireland — a country with no film facilities and few film professionals at the time — and those which actually did were not so complacent with Irish Catholic nationalism as they used to. Still, against all odds, in 1952 *The Quiet Man* showed that films could be shot on location in Ireland, that Irish-themed films could be successful and, what is more, that film was the most effective medium to rehabilitate the image of Ireland abroad, and bring much-needed revenues to the country through tourism and direct investment in production.

The Irish government co-funded Ardmore Studios in the late 1950s with the hope that the facility would act as an asset for attracting international film productions (and their often fully foreign crews) which could get Ireland promoted internationally. In other words, Ardmore Studios had very little, if anything, to do with either a national film industry or cinema and was understandably met with resentment by the emerging local film

community, who as a matter of fact was practically banned from the facility. Mostly dependent on the British film industry — itself a de facto subsidiary of Hollywood for much of the 20th century —, Ardmore Studios started operations at a time of deep crisis in this industry and unsurprisingly failed to take off. The Irish government, however, decided to remain committed to Ardmore Studios and it soon became a heavy burden on the national budget of the Republic of Ireland.

Completely at a loss about what to do, the Irish government sought expert advice. In 1968, the Film Industry Committee recommended a national film board and a coherent policy of grants and training á la British Film Institute, but the recommendations took over a decade to be put into practice. In the meantime, the executive, despite minor concessions to indigenous filmmakers, stuck to its policy of commitment to Ardmore and non-competitive grants to handpicked international film projects, that is, it remained uninterested in either an Irish film industry or national cinema. For their part, the IFTG and the AIP, expecting the film board to develop a publicly funded national cinema in Ireland, lobbied intensely for its establishment.

Eventually, the Irish government gave in and set up the IFB in August 1981. Severely underfunded and initially governed by a three-member executive board made up of people closely connected to Ardmore, the newly born IFB came immediately under fire from IFTG and AIP members, who rightfully sensed that the government just wanted to appease them and continue its old film policy under a new guise. Angry at the decision to back Neil Jordan's *Angel*, the trade organizations set out to take control of the board they had fought so hard for. By early 1983, they had succeeded and the IFB was already funding arthouse films, critical of contemporary Ireland and the Anglo-American representation of the country.

Convinced that they were doing the right thing and were at least as indispensable as Ardmore for the future of Irish cinema, the IFTG/AIP members running the IFB were unable to see that the films they were supporting were completely at odds with the statutory aims of the institution and that, with their reluctance to concede to commercialism, they were pushing the board towards the edge. The inclusion of film production in the BES and the handover of the IFB to the Arts Council should have warned them that the government was working out an alternative to the IFB, but they did not.

From 1982 to 1987, the IFB was a blessing for independent Irish directors such as Joe Comerford, Pat Murphy, Cathal Black and Bob Quinn, who had been mostly unable to make feature films for lack of money in the 1970s. Although most were commercially unsuccessful and met with mixed reviews in Ireland and abroad, the IFB-funded films by these directors and some others gave substance to the claim that there was an indigenous cinema blooming in Ireland which qualified for the highly restrictive concept of national cinema dominant at the time, i.e. that of a state-sponsored, anti-Hollywood, arthouse cinema along the lines of Getino and Solanas' *Third Cinema* (1969) and what Crofts calls *European-model Art Cinemas* (1993). That notwithstanding, for both the Irish film industry and national cinema, the most important achievement of the IFB

was securing that an Irish-led commercial film project, the controversial *Angel*, got produced with the support of Channel 4, a British television channel which, funnily enough, over the years has also funded Third Cinema projects from Third World countries in Africa.

As a matter of fact, the much maligned John Boorman considers Channel 4's founder, Jeremy Isaacs, the true father of the contemporary Irish film industry (IRISH FILM INSTITUTE, 2003: 10). Without the channel's involvement, *Angel* would not have ever got made. Had it been unsuccessful, British television would not have given continuing support to films by Irish directors over the 1980s and early 1990s, including *My Left Foot* (Jim Sheridan, 1989) and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), the Oscar-winning international hits that, despite being nominally British, put Irish national cinema on the map and brought the Irish government round to restoring the IFB in 1993. But as they say, that's another story.

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