



## **Ireland, Nostalgia and Globalisation: Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* on Stage and Screen**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the context of an insightful comparison between Brian Friel and Tom Murphy in his recent *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999), Nicholas Grene links Friel's much higher profile to the different ways in which the two playwrights negotiate the rural trope, and hence the representation of Ireland as 'modernity's other' within the context of an increasing globalisation. Grene, however, finds no room in *The Politics of Irish Drama* for a discussion of Friel's most successful play to date, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). This article aims to explore the disparity between the phenomenal success of the play, as opposed to the critical and commercial failure of the film version (1998; dir. Pat O'Connor; script by Frank McGuinness). In the light of Luke Gibbons's (1996) argument as regards the role of nostalgia in late 20th-century Irish culture, and of Jean-François Lyotard's (1982) claim that the 'postmodern condition' is characterised by the absence of nostalgia, it is suggested that the divergent reception of the play and the film of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, both in Ireland and abroad, is a function of the different role played by memory and nostalgia in each. In addition, it possibly foregrounds a central paradox of postmodernity and globalisation, namely, the fact that a refusal of nostalgia is (inevitably) coupled with its 'other', i.e. a longing for origins, a desire for 'more authentic' modes of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Brian Friel; Irish drama; adaptation; film; reception; nostalgia; modernity; globalisation; postmodern condition; pastoral trope.

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## I.

In 1988, in his introduction to *Across the Frontiers: Ireland in the 1990s*, Richard Kearney described the current state of Ireland in the following bleak terms: "One third of the population of the Republic live below the poverty line; fifty thousand young people emigrate each year; over a quarter of a million are unemployed, with rates of up to 60 per cent in some of the new urban developments in Dublin; and inequality is growing rather than diminishing, with social welfare insufficient to meet the minimum needs of a large proportion of the people. The continuing bloodshed of the North speaks for itself" (1988: 7). Such a dismal situation signalled the collapse of the social and economic measures of the 1960s and 70s, implemented in the wake of Sean Lemass's appointment as Taoiseach in 1959, replacing Eamon de Valera (Gibbons, 1996: 82-84). The protectionist, backward-looking policies which had resulted in the stagnation of Irish political, economic and cultural life since the 1921 Partition Treaty were dismissed as the Republic embarked decisively on the path to industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation —welcoming foreign investment and multinational capital, joining the EEC in 1973, taking its place in the global communications village with the opening of Telefís Éireann in 1962, reforming the educational system, and relaxing its rigid religious and moral regime in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) (Brown, 1985: 241-311). While the positive impact of such transformations was not always evenly distributed, they were perceived by contemporaries as a major turning point in the history of postcolonial Ireland, and it does seem legitimate to claim that, in general, conditions improved and self-confidence increased in Ireland over the 60s and 70s (Brown, 1985: 241; Cairns & Richards, 1988: 139). Such momentum, however, was to flounder in the mid- to late-1980s, leading to the disheartening state of affairs described by Kearney, in the face of which the essays in *Across the Frontiers* ask crucial questions about the future, with a particular focus on how the movement towards European integration (1992) and globalisation may affect Ireland. In practical terms, part of the answer to such questions came in the 1990s, when Ireland experienced an impressively swift economic growth and integration into the international order which, despite some obvious black spots and contradictions, led economist Kevin Gardiner to coin the label 'Celtic Tiger' in 1994 to describe the 'new' Ireland (González, 2000: 199).

This wave-like process of economic, social and political transformations has triggered an ongoing ideological debate —Brown (1985: 267-311) refers to the 60s and 70s as the 'Decades of Debate', a term which may clearly be extended to the present time — that revolves around inherited notions of national culture and identity. Prominent among them is the pastoral trope, which lies at the heart of Ireland's cultural inheritance and national self-image. As David Cairns and Shaun Richards, among many other commentators, have argued, "The economic malaise of 1950s Ireland ... was substantially a product of three decades of financial, economic, and social conservatism, in combination with cultural attitudes which, viewing the farmers as embodying the essence of the national ideal, sacrificed the material and cultural well-being of other groups to their interests" (1988: 139). Indeed, in post-1921 Ireland the peasants were

proclaimed by organic intellectuals such as Daniel Corkery —picking up on a discourse of 'real Irishness' that had already been mobilised during the Revival of the turn of the century (O'Toole, 1985) — to be the descendants of the Gaelic society of the 17th century and earlier, and were therefore enshrined as embodying the 'true' essence of Ireland. Their conservative social, economic and cultural values, grounded in familism and Catholicism, became the backbone of the new State. Eamon de Valera himself, in his 1943 St Patrick's Day broadcast to the nation, articulated this pastoral self-image in a statement which has been parodied on innumerable occasions in more recent times: "... a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age" (qtd. in Cairns & Richards, 1988: 133). Such idyllic rhetoric obviously clashed with the harsh realities of rural life at the time which, among other things, lay behind the haemorrhage of emigration, amounting to 500,000 people between 1945 and 1961 (Cairns & Richards, 1988: 139). As both Fintan O'Toole (1985) and Luke Gibbons (1996: 85-86) point out, the rural self-image was a metropolitan myth constructed by urban-based politicians, intellectuals and nostalgic emigrants at the turn of the century, a myth which would feed into the emergent culture of Irish nationalism and eventually into the post-1921 Free State. Yet this pastoral myth of the land has proved to have a very powerful grip not only on the Irish national self-image, but also on what may be termed a global discursive construction of Ireland as a pastoral site of origin.

## II.

As two recent significant publications remind us, Irish drama since the turn of the century has become a crucial cultural practice in Ireland, deeply implicated in the construction and negotiation of discourses on the nation (Greene, 1999; Murray, 1997). A repeated focus of interest for playwrights has been precisely that of the pastoral trope. Indeed, in the context of an insightful comparison between the early playwriting careers of Brian Friel and Tom Murphy in his *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999: 194-218), Nicholas Greene claims that Friel's much higher profile is a consequence of the fact that his plays have tended to confirm for metropolitan audiences at home and abroad, in the 'global village', a discursive construction of Ireland as the place of the pre-modern other, while Murphy has resisted such an iconography, opting instead for a fiercely anti-pastoral mode. This has made Friel 'readable' to metropolitan audiences, both domestic and international, in ways Murphy is not.' Greene (1999: 3) also acknowledges that he

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<sup>1</sup> Greene's book, *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999), signals a major turning point as regards the historiography of 20th-century Irish drama. While previous explorations of the politics of Irish drama, such as Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to a Nation* (1997), have been concerned primarily with the politics of the nation's theatrical self-expression, Greene's basic tenet is that Irish plays that are self-consciously about the representation of Ireland are directed outwards towards audiences both inside and outside Ireland. Greene's approach yields a series of lucid, fresh, immensely thought-provoking analyses of the work of a range of playwrights.

has found no room in *The Politics of Irish Drama* for a discussion of Friel's most successful play to date, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). This paper aims to explore the reasons for the disparity between the phenomenal success of the play *Dancing at Lughnasa*, as opposed to the critical and commercial failure of the film version (1998; dir. Pat O'Connor; script by Frank McGuinness) —cinema being, of course, a fundamental signifying cultural practice of our time, one that operates within a global economy to a far greater extent than drama.<sup>2</sup>

*Dancing at Lughnasa* may be described as a memory play which uses the favourite Frielian device of a framing narrative that turns the main action into a sustained flashback. The young man Michael casts his mind back to the summer of 1936, when he was seven; he both narrates the events which led to the dissolution of his family and the breakup of their world, and he non-naturalistically speaks the lines of the boy Michael within the narrated action. The family lives in a cottage outside Friel's fictional Ballybeg, a microcosm of rural Ireland, and is formed by the five unmarried Mundy sisters —Kate, an unyielding, primly efficient schoolteacher, the main breadwinner in the household; fun-loving, spirited Maggie; Rose, the simple, guileless sister; Agnes, stiff and reserved; and the youngest, Chris, Michael's mother. Michael's opening narrative links together some of the events that were going to change his and the sisters' lives for ever: the arrival of Uncle Jack who, after twenty-five years as a missionary in a remote village in Uganda, has been sent home for "going native" (Friel, 1990: 39); the pagan festival of Lughnasa, the old Celtic god of the harvest; the sisters' purchase of a Marconi wireless set on which they would listen to Irish music that would suddenly set them dancing "like excited schoolgirls" (Friel, 1990: 2); and Gerry's, his absent father's, two visits during that summer, before leaving for Spain to join the Republican side in the Civil War. As if highlighted by these four circumstances, the claustrophobic Catholic narrow-mindedness of rural Ireland gradually comes to the surface and eventually leads to the play's sorrowful, even tragic ending —Kate is dismissed from her schoolteaching post because of Uncle Jack's abandonment of Catholic belief and ritual; Rose is betrayed by the false promises of a local man; she and Agnes lose their hand-

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including Sebastian Barry, Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, Dion Boucicault, Brian Friel, Lady Gregory, Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy, Sean O'Casey, Bernard Shaw, J.M. Synge and W.B. Yeats.

Indices of the success of the stage version of *Dancing at Lughnasa* are not far to find. The play's first landmark stage production had its world première at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on April 24, 1990, it transferred to the National Theatre in London in October 1990, and subsequently to Broadway, in all three cases meeting with widespread critical and public acclaim. It won three Tony Awards in Broadway for Best Play, Best Director (Patrick Mason) and Best Supporting Actress (Brid Brennan as Agnes), and the Laurence Olivier and Evening Standard Awards for Best Play in London. Reviews of the Abbey run were almost uniformly laudatory (Armitstead, 1990; Coveney, 1990; Finegan, 1990; Harding, 1990; Hassett, 1990; Houlihan, 1990; Mamone, 1990; Nowlan, 1990; O'Donnell, 1990); *Variety* recorded that theatregoers were "vociferous ... in support of Brian Friel's new play" (Anon., 1990); and the play remains third on *The Irish Times*'s list of the top 10 Irish plays chosen by readers, after such undisputed classics as Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). The film *Dancing at Lughnasa* does not even figure on the list of the top 10 Irish films on the same website (<[www.ireland.com](http://www.ireland.com)>). In addition, it registers the lowest takings for a Meryl Streep film at \$2,202,000, a far cry from the \$106,300,000 for *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), the \$87,100,000 for *Oui of Africa* (1985), and even the \$27,920,909 average gross of Streep movies in the 1990s (<[www.the-movie-times.com](http://www.the-movie-times.com)>).

knitting job when a new factory opens ("The Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg" [Friel, 1990: 59]), emigrate to London and die there, destitute, years later; Chris is definitively abandoned by Michael's father and is kept ignorant, by the older Michael himself, that all along his father had his own family, a wife and three children, in Wales (Friel, 1990: 61); Michael eventually emigrates, "happy to escape" (Friel, 1990: 71), as he says, from the confines of Ballybeg.

Ostensibly, then, the play is a critique of the pastoral trope, revealing as it does the mean realities of rural Ireland. It may even be argued that the non-naturalistic narrative frame enables such a critique by functioning as a powerful distancing device. Prapassaree Kramer (2000) takes one step further when he claims, in a recent essay, that by never allowing Michael to cross the boundary between his role as narrator and his role as character in the action, Friel aims to problematise his status as a reliable 'recorder' of the past. The narrator himself, according to Kramer, is demystified in the play as his dubious motives for reconstructing the past come to the surface—guilt over his abandonment of his family and anxiety over his illegitimacy (Kramer, 2000: 174). In short, "Friel offers us the spectacle of Michael presenting his memories of 1936 not as a design to bathe the little town of Ballybeg in a glow of nostalgia but to highlight the process ... by which memory, fallible but creative, serves both to haunt and to fortify the fragile ego" (Kramer, 2000: 179). Persuasive as Kramer's contention is, I want to suggest, firstly, that the playtext is far more deeply fissured between a critique of both the rural trope and the process of "remembering it", and the casting of a "glow of nostalgia" over the whole thing, than he is prepared to admit. Secondly and relatedly, I will consider the question as to why the highly successful and influential Abbey production of the play palpably opted for such a "nostalgic inflection"—a question that will take us outside the text itself, back to history and culture, a dimension that Kramer's purely textual approach fails to take into consideration.

Michael's closing narrative may be seen as the clearest piece of textual evidence that, as Grene has argued of an earlier Friel play, *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964), "What [Michael] here describes is being enacted for a theatre audience; Ballybeg, the claustrophobically lifeless and loveless small town, is in the process of being re-written as idyll" (1999: 204-205).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the critique is being transformed into a mood, nostalgia, and into a myth, that of Ireland as the pre-modern pastoral other:

*As Michael begins to speak the stage is lit in a very soft, golden light so that the tableau we see is almost, but not quite, in a haze ...*

And so, when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, different kinds of memories offer themselves to me.

Rut there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. In that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music

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<sup>3</sup> Much as Uncle Jack's Uganda is idealised in the playtext as a symbol for wild pagan energy and sensual release.

of the thirties. It drifts in from somewhere far away a mirage of sound a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems to be both itself and its own echo; a sound so alluring and so mesmeric that the afternoon is bewitched, maybe haunted, by it. And what is so strange about that memory is that everybody seems to be floating on those sweet sounds, moving rhythmically. languorously, in complete isolation; responding more to the mood of the music than to its beat. When I remember it, I think of it as dancing. Dancing with the eyes halfclosed because to open them would break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to inovement —as if this ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness .... (Friel, 1990: 70-71)

Reviews of the Abbey production of the play reveal that at its root there must undoubtedly have lain the strand in the text that emphasises nostalgia and myth-making. Several commentators, significantly including Michael Etherton's note in the Abbey programme (Etherton, 1990), point out that the play's action is relatively slight and what matters —what the Abbey production brought to the fore— is the mood, the atmosphere, recurrently described as pervaded by nostalgia (Armitstead, 1990; Coveney, 1990; O'Donnell, 1990; Pine, 1990). It is through the lens of nostalgia, reviewers suggest, that the play directs us towards "a singularly beautiful poetic vision" (O'Donnell, 1990) of "Lives lost in history [that] have been given substance in art" (Coveney, 1990). In the process of transforming the harsh reality of mid-1930s Irish rural life into a nostalgic pastoral idyll and fixing it as art, the landmark Abbey production of the play provided the "decent mirror to see ourselves in" (Friel, 1990: 2) that Chris longs for at the start of the action —a mirror casting a nostalgic image of rural Ireland and of Ireland as rural that audiences in the early 1990s, both at home and abroad, found truly spellbinding.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably, the Abbey production's marked inflection of the play towards nostalgia is intimately connected to its outstanding national and international success. In "Back Projections: John Hinde and the New Nostalgia", Luke Gibbons suggests that the historical recurrence of emigration shaped the experience of nostalgia in a late developing economy such as Ireland's in the second half of the 20th century: "The severance from the past which once characterized the emigrant's experience becomes a general cultural condition in a modernizing society ... The difficulty with nostalgia in these circumstances is not that it turns back on the modern. but that it is part of it, if by that we mean a particular view of social change which embalms rather than actively renegotiates the past" (Gibbons, 1996: 43). The Abbey's 1990 production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* caught Irish audiences at an uneasy moment, when the strains of rapid modernisation were making themselves intensely felt in Ireland. The glow of nostalgia it cast over rural Ireland in the mid-1930s —a time which the play depicts as itself uneasily caught

<sup>4</sup> One Irish reviewer was particularly candid in this respect: "I had better declare my interest; I belong to the same generation as Mr. Friel—and am just as much in love with the nineteen-thirties. It all came flooding back last night ..." (Houlihan, 1990). The production's treatment of the five sisters' 'explosion' into dance is revealing in this connection. While the playtext, in my view, is ambivalently torn between presenting it as a moment of liberation when the Lughnasa spirit seeps into the Mundy household, and stressing its parodic, grotesque nature (Friel, 1990: 21-22), the Abbey production chose the former track, thus bringing the dance scene into line with Michael's nostalgic closing narrative. Several reviewers record the dance scene as a bewitching moment in terms of audience response (Anon., 1990; Coveney, 1990; Finegan, 1990; Harding, 1990).

between the conflicting claims of tradition and modernity, on the threshold of a belated Industrial Revolution — seems to have functioned in the way Gibbons suggests. It contributed to fixing the past for Irish metropolitan audiences rather than opening it up for critical analysis. If, as poststructuralism claims, the other is always implicated in the construction of the self, then in Ireland the nostalgic rural idyll may be seen as providing urban audiences with a sense that in the face of rapid modernisation and industrialisation, such idealised yet reassuring otherness will continue to anchor the nation's sense of identity.<sup>5</sup> As regards the global economy, the stage version of *Dancing at Lughnasa* may be claimed to have operated in a related way as an icon of otherness for British and American metropolitan audiences, reinforcing the discursive construction of Ireland as the site of the pre-modern, as a pastoral locus of origin. Jean-François Lyotard (1984: 81) has claimed that the "postmodern condition" is characterised by the absence of nostalgia for a lost, idealised past, but the enthusiastic reception accorded to the Abbey production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in both Britain and the United States possibly foregrounds a central paradox of postmodernity and globalisation —namely, that the dismissal of nostalgia is unavoidably coupled with its other, i.e. a longing for origins, a desire for 'more authentic' modes of life. By ultimately upholding the trope of rural Ireland as modernity's other, the 1990 staging of *Dancing at Lughnasa* catered to such a desire.<sup>6</sup>

### III.

So did, ostensibly, the 1998 film version of the play. In addition to the strong performances by a cast led by Meryl Streep (Kate) and Michael Gambon (Uncle Jack), reviewers repeatedly praised its accomplished evocation of a feeling of time and place through accent work, costuming, charming landscapes endowed with a melancholic golden hue, and the pervasive presence of traditional Irish music (Armstrong, 1998; Blue Velvet, 1999; Fung, 1998; McCarthy, 1998; O'Brien, 1998; Weitzman, 1998). In other words, all the necessaries seemed to be there for yet another successful bathing in nostalgia, rooted in the discursive construction of Ireland

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One further aspect of Gibbons's discussion of the Irish experience of nostalgia via John Hinde's postcards is highly pertinent to Michael's role as narrator and his non-naturalistic physical absence from the main action in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. After defining nostalgia as "the painful desire to restore the sense of belonging that is associated with childhood, and the emotional resonance of the maternal" (1996: 39), Gibbons codes it as a male phenomenon by referring to "Freud's observation on the male desire to recapture an imaginary self-sufficiency associated with nature, childhood and the maternal" (1996: 40). This leads him to conclude: "The relative lack of males in prominent positions [in John Hinde's postcards] suggests not so much their absence as their presence behind the camera, irrevocably cut off from the field of vision ... the camera is invariably equated with a male point of view ...." (1996: 41). Ellen G. Friedman (1997) also genders nostalgia as masculine.

<sup>6</sup>In an illuminating comparison between two memoirs of Irish childhood, Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992), a novel that relentlessly deconstructs the fundamental tenets of the Irish national self-image, and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), a tale of achievement against all odds, Rosa González (2000) relates the former's lukewarm reception as opposed to the latter's enormous popularity to the resistance of international audiences to any representation of Ireland that challenges its stereotypical image as a pastoral, pre-modern other.

as the pastoral other. As one reviewer significantly argued, "Given the work's cultural pedigree, fine cast led by Meryl Streep and *even the current vogue for things Irish*, Sony Classics should be able to position this as a solid class offering in the US, where it opens exclusively in New York and Los Angeles in November, followed by wide specialized release at Christmas" (McCarthy, 1998; emphasis added). However, the film was found to be "less than the sum of its parts" (Armstrong, 1998). I would suggest that its diminished emotional impact on metropolitan audiences, as registered by several commentators in an implicit or explicit comparison with the Abbey production (Baumgarten, 1999; Blue Velvet, 1998; Ebert, 1998; Fung, 1998; Gleiberman, 1998; McCarthy, 1998; O'Brien, 1998; Walker, 1998; Weitzman, 1998), is a consequence of the fact that it does not match its nostalgia-inducing surface with a similarly inflected structure and thematic development.

The film goes a long way towards 'opening up' the play. While in the play the action is confined to the Mundy's kitchen and garden, the film wanders much farther afield. Among many other episodes, the camera shows Gerry going on several excursions on his motorbike; Kate cycling into Ballybeg, where she hears about the new factory, visits Austin Morgan's shop and coyly flirts with the owner, and is dismissed from her teaching job by the priest; the harvest and the cutting of turf; Rose and her local man, Danny Bradley —who is only talked about in the playtext— having a picnic on a boat on Lough Anna; the Lughnasa festival in the hills; Uncle Jack 'rescuing' Rose from a drunken Danny Bradley. Such an 'opening up' was found to distract from the nostalgic mood by making it all 'too real', or as one reviewer put it: "Why did *Dancing at Lughnasa* affect me so much more deeply on the stage than it does on film? Was it the physical presence of the actors? No, I think just the opposite: it was their distance. Up there on the stage, they took on allegorical dimensions, while in the close-ups of film, they are too present, too close, too specific" (Ebert, 1998). In particular, the film significantly departs from the playtext in its dramatisation of the Lughnasa celebrations. While Rose's account in the playtext is tinged with longing and melancholy —"[Danny Bradley] showed me what was left of the Lughnasa fires ... It's a very peaceful place up there. There was nobody there but Danny and me ... Then he walked me down as far as the workhouse gate and I came on home by myself" (Friel, 1990: 59)— the film shows the festival at its pitch: the rowdy dancing, drinking and fire-jumping, Uncle Jack's wandering into the crowd and eventually taking a scared Rose back home, just as previously it has revealed Danny Bradley's callousness by showing him rocking the boat on Lough Anna until a frightened Rose promises to go to the Lughnasa dance with him. Like the rest of the attempts at 'opening up' the playtext, this diminishes instead of enhancing the nostalgic construction of Ireland as the pastoral other.

Crucially, the film all but suppresses the framing narrative and completely does away with the non-naturalistic device of having the older Michael, the narrator, speak the lines of his seven-year-old self. The film's voiceover narrator —Gerard McSorley, who played the adult Michael in the Abbey production— delivers a shortened variation on the playtext's opening narrative, culminating in "Little did I know it, child as I was, that this was the beginning of



things changing, changing so quickly, too quickly", as opposed to the playtext's "And even though I was only a child of seven at the time I know I had a sense of unease ... of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be" (Friel, 1990: 2), which arguably conjures up a sense of loss and nostalgia much more effectively. When the film's voiceover narrator reappears at the very end with a drastically cut, reshuffled version of his last two speeches in the playtext (Friel, 1990: 59-61; 70-71), he clearly lacks the power to re-write the action as nostalgic pastoral idyll —despite the fact that the sisters' exultant dance is moved to the end in an attempt to underline the link between it and Michael's "When I remember it, I think of it as dancing ... Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement".

In the film, finally, it is Maggie who asks for a "decent mirror to see ourselves in" so as to smarten herself up when she hears Gerry approaching on his motorbike. The metaphorical, self-reflexive resonance of the phrase is lost, thus signalling the film's 'failure' to nourish the nostalgia of global metropolitan audiences by unproblematically confirming the construction of Ireland as modernity's pastoral other.<sup>7</sup>

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