

Between discrimination and glorification:**Irish Travellers, the cinema and (anti-)Traveller racism****Andrea GRUNERT****University of Applied Sciences, Bochum, Germany**

“There’s a bit of a Traveller in everybody of us,” says John Riley, the male protagonist in Mike Newell’s *Into the West* (UK/IRL, 1992), to his twelve-year-old son Tito, who has asked him whether the Travellers are Cowboys or Indians. This evasive answer is matched by the film’s happy ending, which masks the fact that the film presents the Travellers as Ireland’s Indians: an excluded and forgotten minority living on the social margins.

Today an estimated 23,000 Travellers live in the Republic of Ireland, 15,000 in Great Britain and 7,000 in the United States of America. Their Irish origins have been the object of speculation. Some writers trace them back to landowners made homeless during Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland or during the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century; others argue that Travellers have dwelt in Ireland since the Middle Ages.

These nomads have their roots in Ireland and must be distinguished from Gypsies, even if they share many similar customs. In the past, they played an important role as messengers in isolated rural areas. The term “tinker,” which today has negative connotations, refers to one of their main occupations, tinkering. Industrialisation and modern technology have destroyed this economic basis of their life. Having been forced to adapt to new social

and economic conditions, Irish Travellers or Pavee¹, as they now call themselves, have found new occupations such as collecting scrap. However, many of them have been forced to abandon their traditional life on the road. They quite often lead a life of poverty in some of the most deprived areas of the country: in the slums on the outskirts of Dublin or in temporary camps with poor hygienic conditions provided for them by local authorities. In recent times, increasing government pressure has been put on them in an attempt to assimilate these nomads into the settled majority of the population. "The very openness of the Irish economy since the 1960s," observes Jim McLaughlin, "is in sharp contrast to the closed nature of Irish society. This has had serious implications for the survival of Traveller culture and indeed Traveller communities. As Ireland developed into an exceptionally open *economy*, it developed many of the characteristics of an extremely closed *society*. This is nowhere more noticeable than in contemporary attitudes towards Irish Travellers. It is also reflected in the status of Traveller issues in Irish political discourse. Thus the very terms that we use in addressing Traveller issues effectively close them out of respectable political discourse."²

Literary works have developed a number of different views of this nomadic community as mistrusted outsiders of Irish society, a rejected minority, the idealised guardians of Irish traditions or the heroes of romantic love stories.³ However, it is not only playwrights and novelists who have become interested in the community but also film-makers in Ireland, England, and the United States. Paul Rotha (*No Resting Place*, UK, 1951) and

¹ The term means "trader" in the language of the Traveller and refers to one of their traditional preoccupations, horse trading.

² Jim McLaughlin, *Travellers and Ireland: Whose Country?, Whose History?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 69.

³ For literature in which Irish Travellers are depicted see Paul Delaney, "Representations of the Travellers in the 1880s and 1900s," *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 9, n° 1 (2001): 53-68.

Perry Ogden (*Pavee Lackeen* [The Traveller Girl], Ireland, 2005) have depicted the harsh conditions in which the Pavee live. But Travellers have also been represented as the heroes of romantic love stories (*Chocolat*, UK/USA, 2000, Lasse Hallström), road movies (*Traveller*, USA, 1997, Jack N. Green) and black comedy (*Snatch*, UK, 2000, Guy Ritchie). They also appear in episodes of various Irish and American television series such as *The Riordans* (IRL, 1965-1979), *Glenroe* (1983-2001), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (USA, season 2, episode 18, 1989⁴), *Criminal Intent* (USA, season 2, episode 21) and, without being clearly identified as a specific community, in *The Riches* (USA, 2007).

According to Robbie McVeigh, anti-Traveller racism is “endogenous” Irish racism. As he puts it: “A mixture of mistrust and envy of their supposed 'freedom' ensured that Travelling people come to occupy a central position within the sedentary Irish culture as a symbolic ‘other.’”⁵ The use of the term “racism” in relation to Travellers is rejected in Traveller-related public discussion and political discourse, which denies Travellers status as members of an ethnic group.⁶ “Much more common,” notes Jane Helleiner, “has been a dominant construction of Travellers as a population distinguished not by 'race' but rather by a negatively evaluated 'way of life' exemplified by specific features including itinerancy, trailer-life, particular occupations and poverty.” “Inferiority” is based less on “racial” difference –

⁴ In the episode called “Up the Long Ladder,” the crew of the *Enterprise* encounters a society, the Bringloidis (a term referring to *brionglóid*, the Irish word for “dream”) whose accented form of the English language and whose culture is very similar to the way of life of the Travellers.

⁵ Robbie McVeigh, “The Specificity of Irish Racism,” *Race and Class* Vol. 33, n° 4 (1992): 41.

⁶ See Mary McCann, Séamas Ó Siocháin, and Joseph Ruane (eds.), *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*. (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies/The Queen's University of Belfast for the Anthropological Association of Ireland, reprint 1996). However, Travellers are recognised as a distinct ethnic group in the UK, which does not mean that they are not targets of racism.

colour, physiognomy or “blood” – and more on “notions of undesirable cultural difference.” By constructing difference in a way similar to racist discourse based on the idea of biological inferiority, this “culturalist racism” replaced other strategies of inferiorisation and exclusion.⁷

It is important not to forget that the filmic image is an art form, and as such part of the collective attempt to give meaning to questions of the origin and nature of a specific society. As a symbolic construction it is more than a means of communication or a denotation of reality – it helps to reveal the signification of social and cultural events. Therefore, film participates in a public discourse on mentalities and social and cultural identities, even if its impact and influence on the viewer remains a subject of discussion among scholars. Undoubtedly, movies reproduce and sometimes generate the symbolic and visual codes identities rely on. They confirm, challenge, and shape perceptions, contributing to the construction and propagation of Traveller images.

This article is concerned with the cinematic representation of Travellers and the idea of ethnic difference in mainly Irish productions. The films it deals with have in common that they are all directed by film-makers who do not belong to the Traveller community. I will examine the functions the figure of the Traveller has within the cinematic discourse as established from outside this minority group. Do films confirm or subvert received ideas about Travellers and their way of life? Can they show ways to change mistaken beliefs? Or is the Traveller just another symbolic Other, utilised in a discourse on social issues such as alienation, and a symbolic matrix in a consideration of individual and collective identity

⁷ Jane Helleiner, *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 8.

formation and national issues? To what extent is the minority used as a source in the construction and examination of Irish identity?

A standard repertory

An old man at a campfire, beating metal or preparing his frugal breakfast: this type of picture appears in the first shots of both *Into the West* and *Traveller* (IRL, 1982) by Joe Comerford as well as in Chris Hurley's very brief documentary *Agin' the Wall* (IRL, 2003). Similar objects are associated with each of the figures: a barrel-top wagon,⁸ a tent, horses, old black iron kettles. They refer to the image of an ancient lifestyle which is contrasted with other shots in *Into the West* and *Traveller* showing itinerant people in modern trailers equipped with televisions and other products of our modern world. The pictures of men in harmony with nature are quintessential images of vanishing traditions. In *Into the West* these shots imply the longing for freedom and peace as a desirable aim, one opposed to the hectic life of the urban world. The first shots in Comerford's film suggest the social difference between the old man in front of his tent and his neighbour, who lives in a much more comfortable modern trailer. Such repeated images fusing reality and clichés are codes for communication, allowing the viewer to identify the community the films are concerned with. By means of repetition, they identify the men as belonging to the Traveller community and echo the representational strategies that films deploy.

Two keywords should be remembered: poverty and tradition. Together with a few other topics and motifs, they are central aspects of the cinematic representation of Travellers. Poverty is the reality of many Traveller families in Ireland. It is in particular *Into the West* and *Pavee Lackeen* that depict the often difficult conditions in which Traveller people live. The semi-documentary *Pavee Lackeen* by photographer Perry Ogden focuses on its protagonist, ten-year-old Winnie Maugham, who lives with her mother and several brothers and sisters in

⁸ The type of wagon shown in the film was widely used by Gypsies in continental Europe from the mid-1800s. Irish Travellers mostly used much simpler hand carts without an awning. Cf. Judith Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 33.

two trailers parked illegally on a parking lot for trucks close to a motorway. During the film, the authorities evict the Maughams from the parking lot on the pretext that it is too dangerous for them. The family is allowed to camp in a worse location – muddy and rat-infested – where the only (cold) water supply is further away and less easily accessible because it is behind a high wire fence.

Images of wastelands with trailers parked in the mud next to scrap and abandoned cars (which are signifiers of Traveller occupations) are shown in the documentary *Southpaw: The Francis Barrett Story* (Liam McGrath, IRL/UK, 1999), which also refers to housing problems. Travellers in Galway have been facing similar pressure from the local authorities as the family in *Pavee Lackeen*. Similar camps figure in the fiction films *Into the West*, *Trojan Eddie* (Gillies MacKinnon, IRL/UK, 1996), *Man About Dog* (Paddy Breathnach, IRL/UK, 2004) and *Snatch*, evoking poverty and neglect. Living from the waste of the consumer society, the children in *Pavee Lackeen* take discarded clothes out of the container. However, *Into the West* includes a short sequence in which a successful Traveller man is shown in his expensive modern trailer. John Powers, the patriarch in *Trojan Eddie*, is also a wealthy and powerful man, and Mrs. Kearny in *This Is My Father* (Paul Quinn, IRL/CAN, 1998) has settled and now runs a bed and breakfast business. If people trapped in poverty dominate the portrayals of the Travellers, these other examples suggest that “every economic level can be found among Irish Travellers (ranging from small groups of wealthy families to groups of very poor families). This is an important fact because it demonstrates the viability of the

Traveller's way of life despite the serious obstacles it faces."⁹ However, examples of social and economic achievement by Travellers remain the exception in the movies.

Alcoholism and illiteracy are two other problematic topics associated with Travellers in public discourse and repeated in the movies. Mrs. Maugham, the mother in *Pavee Lackeen*, is an alcoholic and so is John Riley, the father in *Into the West*. Deeply ashamed, he has to confess to being illiterate. His children have not been to school for months and Tito has difficulty reading a rather simple text. But he shows how resourceful he is when, stumbling over the word "journey," he replaces it with "trip." His father, who is not aware of this little trick, is proud of his son's reading skills. Moreover, the film presents Tito and his younger brother Ossie as clever boys who might lack formal education but are able to take care of themselves. Winnie in *Pavee Lackeen* is an inquisitive girl who discovers the world during her long walks in the suburbs of Dublin. She is banned from school for a few days when once again she is involved in a fight with some of her classmates who laugh at her because of her Traveller background. The mother's complaint about the school for Travellers, which has low standards (lessons do not start until 11 a.m.), reveals another problem: a school system marked by inequality in which Traveller children, considered less intelligent, are denied the opportunities given to children from settled families.

Poverty, alcoholism and illiteracy – problems which they share with members of more settled society – become labels applied to Travellers, form a part of Traveller life, and contribute to their stigmatisation. Associated with the ideas of dirt and deviant behaviour, poverty is part of the image of Travellers as pariahs and parasites. The sequence with the container in *Pavee Lackeen* implies that the children steal clothes. There is another moment in

⁹ McCann *et al.*, *Irish Travellers*, 122-23.

the film in which Winnie takes coins out of a fountain. The “add-ons” on the DVD of the film (Verve, 2006) include the explanation that the girl at first refused to be filmed in such situations which were too closely linked to the age-old reputation of Travellers and other itinerants for dishonesty and stealing. Although Ogden’s film questions the decision by the local authorities to evict the Maugham family, it does not suggest a different interpretation of the behaviour of his protagonists, relying as much on real experience as on standardised ideas about Travellers. In contrast to Mrs. Maugham, John Riley’s liking for alcohol is explained by the loss of his wife in childbirth, something he cannot come to terms with, and by the humiliation he has to face in the urban environment. This representation corrects the generalised view of the drunken itinerant and suggests a link between individual behaviour and social conditions.

Into the West mocks the widespread idea that itinerants steal children or clothes when Tito takes his revenge on the rich Traveller who has cheated and threatened him by throwing his clothes, which are drying outdoors, into the dirt. One could interpret the scene in which Tito and Ossie spent the night together with the horse at the cinema, eat stolen popcorn, and leave chaos as a variation on situations in which Travellers are accused of illegal camping in public places and leaving their waste there. However, the situation is represented in a comic and exciting manner which is reminiscent of Pippi Longstocking and other heroes of children’s books and films. It must be added that Newell’s film deals with Travellers and Irish society in a critical manner but is also a film for children and that the two boys are figures that youngsters can identify with. Moreover, the Travellers in *Into the West* are clearly the victims of discrimination and corruption. John Riley is beaten down by a client and is forced to repair

his car for a very low price. The corrupt policeman steals the horse and sells it to a rich businessman. When the boys take it back they are criminalised and pursued by the businessman's cronies and the police. The adolescents in *Crush Proof* (Paul Tickell, UK/IRL/NL/GER, 1999) are criminalised too because they keep horses in Ballymun. The film shows them as victims of discrimination and of the arbitrariness of the authorities, but its insistence on violence, petty crime, and leadership fights emphasises an ambiguous youth culture and does not allow deeper insights into the social context. In contrast, the anxious reaction in *Into the West* of the owner of the fish and chip restaurant, who appears nervously from the back of his shop when the three Travellers enter, shows that their mere presence is suspicious. *Into the West* deals mainly with discrimination, with prejudices and segregation. The settled people frequently use terms such as "tinkers" or "knackers." "There is a funny smell," says one of the clients in the fish and chip restaurant when the Travellers arrive. When Tito and Ossie ask for shelter in a hotel, they are insulted and thrown out. This scene is a reminder that Travellers still are not allowed in some restaurants and hotels. The boxer Francis Barrett, who carried the Irish flag during the opening ceremony at the Olympic Games in 1996 and who became a national hero, was refused admission to a club in Galway in 1999 for the same reason.

But whereas *Pavee Lackeen* and *Into the West* try to explain poverty and deviant behaviour or reveal strategies of discrimination, other films reduce the Traveller image to what Michael Hayes terms "archetypal embodiments of deviance and anti-social behaviour."¹⁰ The link between Travellers and trickery is ambiguous in *Trojan Eddie*, Green's

¹⁰ Michael Hayes (Mícheál ó hAodha), *Irish Travellers: Representations and Realities* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006), 146.

Traveller, and *Snatch*, in which the community is defined almost exclusively by illegal activities. With regard to the allegations of stealing and trickery on the part of the Travellers, Hayes concludes that “the stereotype has no doubt magnified the extent of the problem beyond all realistic proportions.”¹¹ As McLaughlin points out “alcohol abuse and petty crime” are also “outlets for the frustrations they [the Travellers] experience in their day-to-day lives.”¹² Most of the films, however, avoid exploring psycho-social interrelationships of the kind that are at least suggested in *Into the West*.

Traveller and *Trojan Eddie* show essential rites, a wedding (*Trojan Eddie*) and a funeral (*Traveller*), accompanied by traditional Irish songs helping to establish the Irish roots of the community that is presented.¹³ In *Trojan Eddie*, famous Traveller musicians such as Pecker Dunne appear, linking the film by means of these prominent figures closely to the Traveller culture outside the silver screen. Moreover, Green’s film deals with questions of identity, opposing settled and non-settled people against one another. One of his protagonists is Pat, whose father had to leave the Travellers when he married a settled woman and, when he dies, Pat is welcomed only reluctantly at his father’s funeral. Despite this hostility, Pat’s only wish is to be accepted as a Traveller, and it is Pat who is opposed to his friend Bokkie’s intention to marry a settled woman. The film is, however, mostly a road movie, focusing on the illegal activities of the two heroes who live from fraud. Bokkie and Pat represent the criminal buddy couple and could be replaced by protagonists from many different cultural

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² McLaughlin, *Travellers and Ireland*, 3.

¹³ The Travellers living today in the US are mainly descendants of Travellers who emigrated from Ireland to America during the nineteenth century.

backgrounds. Sharing many stereotypes with the poor whites of America,¹⁴ the image of the Travellers in *Traveller* is, however, less exaggerated than the usual representation of poor whites in American films. The Traveller community is presented as an isolated group living in decent conditions in the woods, in a much more romantic environment than their counterparts shown in Irish films. This American film depicts a group which has the marginal status of the Travellers in Ireland or the UK and which is also the object of prejudice in public discourse but “there is perhaps less evidence of the overt racism that has often marked the Irish context.”¹⁵ By means of its emphasis on fraudulent activities, reminiscent of the trickster mentality attributed to Travellers and other itinerants, the film repeats a stereotype which is current in Ireland and other European countries too.

In *Trojan Eddie*, Eddie sells cheap (possibly stolen) household goods for John Powers, the patriarch of a settled Traveller family. In contrast to his Traveller fellows, John Powers lives in a big house, which looks like Ali Baba’s cave and in which he has stored his possessions. The description of the community, reduced to a mixture of crime and folklore, remains superficial. *Trojan Eddie* is, however, one of the few films in which Travellers appear who speak a few words in their own language, shelta.¹⁶ This is when a small group of Traveller men suddenly appear, walking alongside Eddie’s van. Emerging from the dark, they are uncanny silhouettes speaking a strange language and this short sequence creates an atmosphere of terror and brings together all the fears projected onto itinerants, Travellers or

¹⁴ Maeve Connolly, “‘A Bit of a Traveller in Everybody’: Traveller Identities in Irish and American Culture,” in Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2006), 290.

¹⁵ Connolly, “‘A Bit of a Traveller in Everybody,’” 291-92.

¹⁶ Like the origins of the Travellers themselves, the origins of their language, also known as “cant” or “gammon,” remains mysterious.

Gypsies. The action of *Snatch* takes place in England. The Travellers, identified as “Gypsies,” are presented as an ambiguous community defined by violence and crime. Brad Pitt plays a member of this group, a gifted boxer who speaks a gibberish which Pitt invented himself and which is presumably intended to be shelta.

Traveller and *Trojan Eddie* are not openly racist and do not present a clear-cut picture of Travellers. The emphasis on images of crime and/or poverty and violence, however, results in a problematic view of Travellers, as they are associated with deviant behaviour, trickery and fraud in a far too simplistic way. Emerging through stories dominated by crime, the Travellers become a more or less well-defined group of feckless petty criminals and cheaters. There is nothing to explain their way of life in these films in which they are effectively reduced to exotic extras. Especially in *Trojan Eddie*, but even more in *Snatch*, one might ask why the community figures at all, because the criminal world depicted in these films could have been situated within the framework of settled people.

The stereotypical and superficial representation of Travellers tends to confirm existing prejudices. One must not forget that if stereotypes seem to be confirmed in real life, they themselves contribute to this confirmation. Michael Pickering refers to the stereotype as a “form of power” and he points to the way it is utilised: “Stereotyping frames other people in a tight focus of fixity, of essentialized difference. A stereotype isolates one particular cultural theme from a general ensemble of themes associated with a social group or category, and conceives of all members of the group or category in terms of this one theme.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Michael Pickering, “The Inescapable Social Concept of Stereotyping” in Anthony David Barker (ed./sob a coordenação), *The Power and Persistence of Stereotyping/O Poder e a Persistência dos Estereótipos* (Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro/Departamento de Linguas et Culturas, 2004), 21.

Particularly stereotypical views are given of the female characters in *Trojan Eddie*, *This is My Father*, *Into the West*, and *The Field* (Jim Sheridan, IRL/UK, 1990). They all have a rather exotic appearance, with long, curly red or blonde hair. Their overt sexuality is combined with a provocative behaviour which imbues them with an air of immorality. The women in *Into the West* and *This Is My Father* are involved in fortune-telling, another traditional Traveller activity. Kathleen (*Into the West*) and Mrs. Kearny (*This is My Father*) cast spells on people, and this is an indication of the suspicion and even fear that such people stimulate towards Travellers.

The female figures symbolise various archetypal female roles which go far beyond Traveller clichés: the bitch and the mother, the Holy Virgin, and Celtic goddesses. Mary Riley, the dead mother, is an absent presence, still haunting her family: she comes back to earth in the form of a white horse to help John and Ossie. Her name associates her with the Virgin Mary, but her appearance as a horse links her with Celtic legend.¹⁸ According to old beliefs, which are shared by Travellers and Gypsies, the barrel-top wagon in which Mary Riley lived with John, gave birth to her sons, and died, will be burnt to set her spirit free.¹⁹ The wagon, the home, becomes synonymous with the woman's body. Images of maternity and of mourning and distressed males appear in *Into the West*, *This Is My Father*, *Trojan Eddie* and in the American-produced *Traveller*. The dysfunctional family and images of shattered masculinity were themselves current themes in Irish movies of the 90s, which examined a society traumatised by its violent history and facing sudden economic and social

¹⁸ The horse also recalls Epona, the Celtic goddess who assumes the form of a horse. This horse signifies fertility in the cycle of death and rebirth. As late as the twelfth century, Ulster kings were "wedded" to a white mare, the incarnation of Epona.

¹⁹ See Okely, *The Traveller-Gypsies*, 247 for more details on the ritual burning of wagons.

changes. John Riley embodies the primitivised, infantilised Other, and in the age of the Celtic Tiger²⁰ the Traveller replaces the Irishman whose country has been colonised. “You dance like an animal,” says one of the policemen to him when he rather brutally interrupts the ceilídh²¹ in the Traveller camp. Just like animals, John and his friends are caught in a net by the businessman’s associates who want to regain possession of the magical horse. John’s lack of self-esteem, directly associated with a pariah syndrome²² invoked by social exclusion and the internalisation of negative stereotyping, creates another link with similar colonial practices and their results and is a further means used by the film to condemn anti-Traveller racism.

The Other in Ireland

The Field explores the essential conflict between the settled majority and the nomadic minority whose way of life is contrasted with the importance given to real estate by the Catholic Irish (excluded from owning land for generations), as exemplified in an extremely ambiguous manner by Bull McCabe. *The Field*’s central question is the ownership of land, which in Bull’s case has turned into an obsession. In a moment of fury, he kills his son, who tried to escape his father’s despotic rule, and thereby destroys his dreams of property and inheritance. Bull’s desire for land brings him into conflict with a group of Travellers who are depicted as violent and abusive. Their way of life offers, however, a promise of freedom for Tadgh, who runs away with a young Traveller woman.

²⁰ The term used to describe the Irish economy during the period of rapid growth between 1995 and 2007.

²¹ A social gathering with traditional music, dance and storytelling.

²² See Gearóid Ó Riáin, “Why cultural action?,” in *A Heritage Ahead: cultural action and Travellers*, Nóirin Ní Laodhogh (ed.) (Dublin: Pavee Point Publications, 1995), 16.

The Field, as well as *This Is My Father, Country* (Kevin Liddy, IRL/2000) and *Into the West*, deals with the national identity of the Irish, with memory and the exploration of cultural heritage. *Into the West* is a complex blend of intertextual and intercultural references created by historical and mythical patterns, by realistic photography and fairy tale, and by Irish and American iconography and themes. The title *Into the West* is highly significant because it refers both to the landscape of the west coast of Ireland and to frontier America. As a visual reworking of cultural patterns, the film imparts a strong sense of location loaded with ideological signification in which the Travellers are presented in a double-bind situation as the blackened “Other” of Ireland and the forefathers and guardians of Irish traditions as recreated by the cultural nationalism of the early twentieth century. Not unlike the Irish revivalists of the early twentieth century, the producers of this film revitalise myths and legends to explore national issues.

Cultural references for the children in *Into the West* are, however, much more inspired by the productions of Hollywood, and mainly by westerns. The children experience their journey to the West of Ireland like western heroes.²³ As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford points out, Tito and Ossie’s escape is modelled on the escape to Bolivia of the two outlaws in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, USA, 1969).²⁴ Moreover, the thematic and visual material that connects the film with the legendary past of the United States has implications which are directly related to anti-Traveller racism. The Irish have been

²³ For references to American westerns see Andrea Grunert, “Figures of Otherness: Images of Irish Travellers in *Into the West* and *Traveller*,” in Borbála Faragó and Moynagh Sullivan (eds.), *Facing the Other: Interdisciplinary Studies in Race, Gender and Social Justice in Ireland* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2008), 155-56.

²⁴ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Ireland's Others: gender and ethnicity in Irish literature and popular culture* (Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day, 2001), 180-83.

considered by the English and white Americans as “the Indians of Europe,”²⁵ but the Irish people themselves were among the white settlers in America who regarded the Indians as inferior. The Travellers are shown in the film as victims of marginalisation and discrimination by the settled majority in contemporary Ireland and are thus given the role of the Native Americans.

While *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is one of those late westerns which end with the heroes’ deaths and the feeling that the frontier is closed forever, *Into the West* ends both with Ossie’s resurrection and that of his father, who has to rescue his son from death. The boys’ journey is an escape from disorientation among the anonymous tower blocks with their drunken father and his customary lethargy. John’s journey to the West is also a spiritual quest during which he is forced to take decisions and encouraged to overcome alienation. The filmic discourse in *Into the West* that is centred around the quest is inspired by the dream of utopia. Escape from social inequality is a step towards a new society and the re-discovery of a lost paradise. The small group of human beings gathered together on the Atlantic coast – John Riley, his sons, his father-in-law, Kathleen, and his friend Barreler – is an extension of the family, which is the microcosm of a society and represents an ideal community.

Attached to a prehistoric world, the Travellers in *Into the West* resemble the archetypal figure of the noble savage, another version of the Other as a projection mirroring the self. The nostalgic vision of *Into the West*, however, emphasises the necessity of re-kindling an awareness of the Irish past. At first glance, the social model proposed by the film is just a backward-looking illusion. However, the film makes use of the archetypal patterns it relies on

²⁵ Tom Hayden, dedication to *Irish Hunger: personal reflections on the legacy of the famine*, ed. by Tom Hayden (Boulder, Co.: Roberts, Rinehart, 1996 or 1998), 8.

within the framework of a critical discourse on the postcolonial state of Ireland, on globalisation and an imperialist cultural policy, and on the power of the imagination.²⁶ It demonstrates that film – and especially popular film – has become the bastion of culture in smaller countries against the attempt at domination by the hegemony-seeking cultural and economic power of a bigger nation. Like other products of popular culture, film addresses the crisis artistically by referring to a cultural heritage and also to more general conventional patterns, thus making its critical statements accessible to the wide audience it aims to reach.

In fusing the themes of the heroic quest, personal and collective memory, and cultural re-discovery, *Into the West* does not restrict itself to a nostalgic view. *Country*, on the other hand, remains largely a heritage film in which the highly romanticised image of the Travellers' lifestyle is presented as an alternative to the rural community haunted by the traumatic experience of emigration and Ireland's violent past. The film's ending suggests the disappearance of the idealised nomadic community, which is presented as a stage in the evolution of society, just as childhood is a stage in life.

In *Traveller*, Joe Comerford delivers a grim portrayal of the state of Ireland in the early 1980s, questioning the idealised vision of the Irish West. Michael and Angela, a young Traveller couple, travel through a hostile landscape. Their journey is punctuated by moments of frustration and violence. Comerford's film gives only few insights into Traveller life and customs. In the first sequences, two men negotiate the dowry for their children, a custom which is not Traveller-specific but perpetuated by this community. Angela is played by Judy Donovan, a member of the Traveller community, and other Travellers appear in smaller

²⁶ Cf. Grunert, "Figures of Otherness," 160.

roles.²⁷ On one occasion, the gardaí (police) brutally evict a Traveller family with small children from an abandoned estate. In church, the wedding of Michael and Angela takes place in a lateral nave, and as it approaches the wedding party, the camera slowly makes it clear that the Travellers are marginalised.

Taut faces and rigid bodies express the distance between the protagonists, creating constant tension. With the exception of the IRA supporter Clicky, whom Michael and Angela meet during their journey, most of the characters remain mute and emotionless. The voice-over has the effect of detaching voice from body and divorcing, in temporal terms, the present (image) from the past (voice). Not unlike the fragmentation provided by framing and editing, this device reinforces the feeling of alienation. The film ends with an act of great brutality when Michael shoots Angela's incestuous father in the stomach and leaves him to die in his trailer. However, it is the latent violence permeating the film which creates a constant feeling of terror. The ending suggests that Angela, Michael, and Clicky will join the millions of Irish emigrants who have left their country in the past and will continue to leave it during the 1980s.

In Newell's and Comerford's films, the Travellers are instrumentalised and given a function within a cinematic narrative on dislocated social structures. The way the Travellers are represented points to shifts in the economic and social reality. The Travellers in Comerford's film illustrate the degrading social and economic situation in Ireland in the 80s, and both *Into the West* and *Pavee Lackeen* reveal the Travellers as the losers in the era of the Celtic Tiger. In Newell's film, the Travellers are the bearers of Irish traditions; in Comerford's film they are part of a population affected by social and economic decline.

²⁷ In *Into the West* or *Trojan Eddie* Travellers appear in small roles or as extras.

These cinematic portraits often remain ambiguous. The link to incest in Comerford's film anticipates the discussion of sexual abuse in Ireland in the 1990s. In the case of the Travellers it seems rather to confirm another stereotypical image of the Travellers, namely that they are sexually deviant.²⁸ Perry Ogden's attempt to give a multi-faceted picture of his protagonists and avoid showing them as mere victims of society fails. Many questions such as "how did Mrs. Maugham afford the new, expensive trailer?" remain unanswered. Ogden's (re)creation of Winnie's everyday life, relying partially on his own view of the minority group, results in ambiguity and a compromised view of the Travellers. *Pavee Lackeen*, however, points to the helplessness of the authorities when faced with a different concept of life and to the gap between settled people and nomads, groups that do not share the same values. Like *Into the West*, it reveals divisions within Irish society, the wish to overcome them, and the problems of transcending them within the cinematic discourse. The Travellers remain a community on the margins – of society and of the cinema, and both fail to give them full access to self-representation. It is perhaps *Into the West*, multiplying clichéd views but also trying to provide in a rather pedagogical manner information about the unknown minority for a wider, international audience, which shows Irish racism most clearly. The fact that it is not the voice of Judy Donovan we hear in Comerford's *Traveller* but that of an actress who dubs her is highly significant.

The cinematic gaze on the Traveller community is still the one of outsiders who do not belong to the community. The internet can offer the Travellers new access to self-

²⁸ The link between Travellers/itinerants and promiscuity and deviant sexual behaviour has figured in the stereotypical portraits that have become institutionalised since the nineteenth century.

representation, as is suggested in the video “Pictureógs” on You Tube with young Travellers expressing themselves both in word and image.

Filmography

No Resting Place (dir. Paul Rotha; UK, 1951)

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (dir. George Roy Hill; USA, 1969)

Traveller (dir. Joe Comerford; IRL, 1982)

The Field (dir. Jim Sheridan; IRL/UK, 1990)

Into the West (dir. Mike Newell; UK/IRL, 1992)

Trojan Eddie (dir. Gillies MacKinnon; IRL/UK, 1996)

Traveller (dir. Jack N. Green; USA, 1997)

This Is My Father (dir. Paul Quinn; IRL/CAN, 1998)

Southpaw: The Francis Barrett Story (dir. Liam McGrath; IRL/UK, 1999)

Crush Proof (dir. Paul Tickell; UK/IRL/NL/GER, 1999)

This Is My Father, Country (dir. Kevin Liddy; IRL, 2000)

Snatch (dir. Guy Ritchie; UK/USA, 2000)

Chocolat (dir. Lasse Hallström; UK/USA, 2000)

Agin' the Wall (dir. Chris Hurley; IRL, 2003)

Man About a Dog (dir. Paddy Breathnach; IRL/UK, 2004)

Pavee Lackeen [The Traveller Girl] (dir. Perry Ogden; IRL, 2005)