

Between The Country and the City: Ireland and Suburbia in Guilttrip¹

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Suburbia has yet to figure prominently in the landscape of Irish art, despite the fact that large areas of Ireland, particularly Leinster, have been suburbanised to cope with an increasing commuter population. The Irish creative imagination seems unwilling, or unable, to tackle the suburban phenomenon, certainly in any sustained way. Some poets, granted, have engaged with suburbia; one thinks particularly of Eavan Boland, who has published a number of poems about suburbia—"The War Horse," "Ode to Suburbia," "Suburban Woman," and "Suburban Woman: A Detail" (*Collected* 29, 44, 50, 111)—and reflects on her own experience of suburbia in her memoir/book of literary criticism, *Object Lessons* (154-74). But Boland's is not a sustained attempt at treating the suburban phenomenon, and her interests have more to do with suburban women than suburbia itself.

Irish writers, and other creative artists, including film-makers, seem more engaged with two other landscapes, the city and the country, not that marginal space in between. Seamus Heaney is the great contemporary Irish poet of the country, for instance, and Thomas Kinsella of the city; or, in the generation before them, Patrick Kavanagh celebrated the country and Austin Clarke the city. In fiction, John McGahern and Patrick McCabe continue to anatomise country life; Roddy Doyle and others write about an urban world. The pattern is similar in film. Films like *The Commitments* (based on a Roddy Doyle novel), *Angela's Ashes*, and *Agnes Brown* treat of the urban environment, usually a grim place where the humour of the protagonists allows them to triumph over adversity. On the other hand, films like *The Field* and *The Butcher Boy* (based on a Patrick McCabe novel) place themselves in the midst of the rural world, a grim world also where often the delights of nature compensate for the particular difficulties the protagonists have to overcome. There seems to be little attempt in Irish film to represent the space in between country and city, to represent suburban experience.

In a sense, the failure of many Irish creative artists—writers as well as film-makers—to engage with the suburban landscape represents a failure to engage

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with the post-modern. If the country is the landscape for the Romantic (Wordsworth and his peers encouraged a return to nature), and the city the landscape of the Modernist (Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the great poem of urban decay), suburbia might perhaps be seen to be the post-modern landscape *par excellence*. Post-modernism involves the failure of grand-narratives: scepticism towards God, nation, and self define the post-modernist mindset. As Jean-François Lyotard writes, "[t]he grand narrative [in contemporary culture] has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (37). The suburb perhaps represents something of the death of the concept of community, of the notion of village and, indeed, of the idea of parish; one could suggest that suburbia is a domain where few living things move in daylight hours, where there is little "sense of place" (to use a cliché), little sense of belonging. Suburbia is, in one sense, a placeless place. Indeed, anyone who reads the pages in Irish newspapers devoted to property sales will notice that housing estates built in Trim, Co. Meath, strangely resemble new housing estates built in Arklow, Co. Wicklow, or those constructed in Kildare town, or in Dunboyne, or further afield in Piltown, Co. Kilkenny, or Youghal, Co. Cork: there is a homogeneity about suburban architecture that erases any sense of the uniqueness of a particular village or townland. This sense of placelessness is surely post-modern.

This post-modern sense of placelessness is visible in one recent Irish film, however: Gerard Stembridge's 1995 film *Guiltrip*. Stembridge, in an interview, hinted at the uniqueness of the film's landscape: "One of the things I've felt about Irish films is that they're either rural films set in the past or Dublin films, the 'urban wasteland' films. My experience is growing up in a small city, Limerick—and most Irish people actually grow up in towns of ten thousand and more... There's a sort of desperation in these places... places where the city collides with the country" (24).

The suburban spaces Stembridge refers to are placeless, in that, in his words, they are situated where the country and city "collide." *Guiltrip* centres on two characters, Liam (Andrew Connolly), a corporal in the Irish army, and Tina (Jasmine Russell), his wife. They live in a quiet housing estate in a town somewhere in Ireland. That town, however, is not identified and such is the anonymity of the place that really Tina and Liam could live anywhere. Theirs is the quintessential suburban experience, an experience characterised by the desperation Stembridge speaks of (interestingly, the film was, in fact, filmed in Maynooth—a commuter town, typical of the kinds of commuter towns that abound in North Kildare).

Guiltrip is arguably post-modern in a second sense. Frequently, Irish films of the

recent past have placed themselves within a particular religious landscape, invariably that of Catholicism. Probably the most common kind of character in Irish film is the priest, whether he be the dictator denouncing sinners from the altar or the young enthusiast organising the folk group. What is particularly interesting about *Guiltrip* is that there are no priests in it at all and no sense of religiosity (which is ironic, given that the film was made in Maynooth!). Neither a church nor a holy grotto appears in the film; no character is seen kneeling and praying, lighting a candle or going to mass or confession; God seems entirely absent here.

However, this is not entirely the case. A religious landscape to the film is glimpsed, very briefly, through what two characters say. The language of Ronnie (Peter Hanley), the rather pathetic proprietor of "Electric Dreams," a hi-fi shop, is significant. In serving his customers, he is heard to say, "please God." This is one of the only times God is mentioned in this film, and Peter is the only one who says the word. Tina also makes fleeting reference to someone's Holy Communion: she has to buy a present for a child making his Communion, and she mentions this in passing to her husband. These are the only references to God and religion in *Guiltrip*. These references are significant because they serve to draw Ronnie and Tina together; both are representative of another order than which prevails in the film. They are representative of a different mode of being to the suburban—they do not belong in the post-modern world of suburbia.

Ronnie, despite the fact that he sells electronics equipment, is the epitome of the old-school shop-keeper who loves his trade and the fact that he can make people happy. He even cherishes complaints for the chance to develop a relationship with customers they present. Ronnie further breaks down when he thinks his wife is going to leave him, though it is clear to all around that they are a gross mismatch as a couple. Ronnie loves his wife, just as Tina loves her husband. That Tina loves Liam is clear from a long sequence where they dance together, she looking up into his eyes adoringly. The order to which Tina and Ronnie belong is a moral order, an order where characters feel emotion, where characters care. This order is identified, fleetingly, with religion.

The kind of order to which Ronnie and Tina belong, however, is set against the order Liam and others in the film represent. Liam is emotionless, amoral, manipulative, possessive of his wife rather than in love with her. In a chilling sequence, Liam takes Ronnie home after a row in a pub with his wife. Liam places himself in the role of comforter to the distraught man. We expect him to place an arm around Ronnie's shoulder or to go with Ronnie into the house to be with him in his distress. Instead, Liam pushes Ronnie into the house and closes the front door without even looking

at the man. He murders Ronnie's wife, who is stolen—and simply leaves the woman.

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at the man. He then jokes with another soldier about Ronnie's crying. When Liam murders Ronnie's wife, he leaves the body outside in Ronnie's car—which he has stolen—and simply walks away. He does not attempt to hide the corpse—he simply leaves the woman's body sitting up in the front seat.

Although Liam is representative of an order and a way with the world that differs from that of Ronnie and Tina “the only two characters who mention God in the film,” the way in which Liam is represented, particularly in the final scenes, identifies him with the world of religion. Liam is represented in *Guiltrip* as a figure not dissimilar from the stereotypically oppressive priest of so many Irish films. The final scenes of *Guiltrip*, for instance, play out a kind of secular confession as Liam seeks to catalogue Tina's movements during the day. He writes down all she has done in a black book, all but asks her “How many times?”, and, at the end of the process, the following morning, says to her, “I forgive you.” Liam is concerned often in the film with washing his hands; the echo of the priest's ritual washing of his hands during the Mass is clear. Liam is authoritarian, a member, after all, of another great monolithic Irish institution, the army, and is obsessed with sex—he asks intimate questions about masturbation of a friend of Ronnie's wife and pursues Ronnie's wife through the town with the sole purpose of having sex with her. The way Liam appears in this film, therefore, is similar to the clichéd representation of priests in many modern Irish films. Interestingly, Liam drinks in a pub where the architecture is similar to that of a church: all marble and candles. Liam presides over this strange temple.

Liam, of course, is not a priest, and this is what is most disturbing about *Guiltrip*, that the character who most closely resembles the (admittedly distorted) version of the priest is also the most frightening and amoral. In this film, Liam comes to represent an Ireland after religion, an Ireland where God has died. Or, to put it another way, Liam comes to represent in this film an Ireland—a post-modern Ireland—that maintains the vestiges of religion, the outward appearance, but has abandoned the moral and spiritual content that is religion's core. Liam represents, in other words, religion without God. The title of the film is interesting from this point of view. In this film, characters do not experience guilt; rather, characters here go on “guilttrips.” Often, the guilt one feels when one is on a guilt-trip is misplaced; often, a guilt-trip is imposed on you by someone else who makes you feel guilty when you are not guilty at all. The feelings of guilt on a guilt-trip, in other words, are much less serious, much less important than real feelings of guilt. The characters in this film, then, experience guilt, but the film tells us that, in the world to which they belong, the world presided over by Liam, guilt is misplaced. There is nothing to be guilty for.

Guiltip is extraordinary as a piece of Irish art. The film is unusual in its depiction of the landscape of suburbia. The film's religious landscape—or lack of one—marks the film out also as different from other Irish movies. In these ways, the film resembles a Samuel Beckett play: the placelessness of the film resembles the “placeless” locations of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and much of Beckett's other writing for the theatre; the spare look of the film reminds one of the visual flatness of Beckett's work, and the absence of God perhaps reminds one of Beckett's universe. At the same time as Beckett writes “godless” dramas and novels, as Declan Kiberd notes, Beckett is a profoundly religious writer:

Three hundred years from now, Beckett will be remembered more for his prose than his plays, and not only because he wrote some of the most beautiful prose of the twentieth century but because he was in such texts such a supremely religious artist. In an Ireland whose institutional churches had for centuries policed spirituality, he confronted some of the great themes of the puritan conscience: work, effort, reward, anxious self-scrutiny, the need for self-responsibility, and the distrust of artifice and even of art...Beckett also wrote out of the conviction that theology was too important to be left to theologians. (454)

While Beckett examines the “puritan conscience,” Stembridge's film clearly draws on the Catholic perspective on the world. But whatever of these differences, *Guiltip* can be seen as a religious film: the movie confronts an Ireland where spirituality is no longer controlled by the institutional churches and, in fact, is almost entirely absent.

Guiltip's cinematic models are arguably American—it has more in common with films like *Blue Velvet* and *American Beauty* than *Angela's Ashes*. But the film is Irish in the sense that Beckett's plays are Irish (“The Irishness in Beckett's work seems part of its vital core,” writes Eoin O'Brien [qtd. in Junker 10]). The film's representation of desperate people living in a post-modern world, of a world on the margins—suburbia, between the country and the city—allows it finally to raise a vital identity question: “What does it mean to be Irish?”

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