

in the community and the mother in the home - which formed the regulatory core of Catholic Ireland is first ridiculed and then rejected by the film. Ireland, like Frankie, must move on.

Syd Macartney's *A Love Divided* (1999) recreates the political and cultural atmosphere of 1950s Catholic Ireland and documents a famous challenge to the Church's authority. The film is based on real events which took place in the small Wexford village of Fethard-on-Sea in 1957 and which generated considerable national and international controversy at the time. The Church's *Ne Temere* decree insists that a mixed marriage couple can only be wed in a Catholic Church if both parties pledge to bring up their children as Catholics. The Protestant Sheila and her Catholic husband Sean Cloney agreed to this at the time of their wedding. However, when the oldest child reached school age, Sheila changed her mind and sent her children to the local Protestant school that catered for the tiny and diminishing Protestant community. As the dispute between her and the Catholic Church escalated she took the children away into hiding. The local Catholic clergy (including the bishop) responded by imposing a boycott of the local Protestant shops and ostracising the small and vulnerable Protestant community, arguing that this close-knit community must have colluded in the 'kidnapping' of the Cloney children.

At a time when the Irish government was keen to expose the sectarian and anti-Catholic nature of the Northern Ireland state, the brutal anti-Protestant sectarianism revealed by this incident was a particular political embarrassment. The then Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, appealed to the Vatican to have the boycott called off. Forty years later, in 1997, the Church publicly apologised for the boycott.

The funniest and at the same time the angriest humiliation of the parish priest occurs in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), an uncompromising study of institutional abuse in Ireland by Scottish actor/ writer/ director Peter Mullan. The film generated

considerable debate and controversy in Ireland (and also in Italy, after it was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2002 Venice Film Festival). It was dismissed at the time by the Vatican as crude anti-Catholic propaganda but the irony of this is that the film was based on documented testimonies of former inmates of the infamous Magdalene laundries at the centre of the film.

The Magdalene laundries were run by the Sisters of Mercy and became virtual prisons for countless of young women (usually teenage girls) incarcerated there for a variety of so-called 'crimes' (they became pregnant sometimes as a result of incest or rape) or because their simple-mindedness was seen to put them at risk.

One of the most complex and challenging films to have emerged from Ireland in recent years is Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997) – a film that recreates the Ireland of the early 1960s through the traumas faced by the twelve year old hero, Francie Brady (Eamonn Owens). As Francie's home life disintegrates following his mother's suicide and his alcoholic father's death, he is cast into the care of the Catholic agencies. Here, he is subjected to physical and sexual abuse and is victimised by an uncaring and brutal mental health system. In many ways, this is Irish cinema's most complete visualisation of Catholic Ireland at its most uncaring and most hypocritical. Jordan's film most brilliantly brings various elements together in a moving and deeply disturbing portrait of a dysfunctional society on the edge of frustration and violence. In a way, Francie becomes a metaphor for Ireland itself - the abused child of history - wracked by ignorance, guilt, neglect and abuse and descending himself into irrational, psychopathic violence.

The infantilisation of the Irish people, promoted by the Church through the alliance of the priest in the community and the mother in the home, produced this abused child as much as did the Famine and colonialism of an earlier era. *The Butcher Boy* is Irish culture's most brilliantly realised and most disturbing response to this traumatic history and represents the most complete 'settling of old scores'.

Conclusion

The secularisation of Catholic Ireland has been a major factor in the rapid economic development of the country over the last two decades. The indigenous cinema of Ireland has produced a series of subversive

and angry denunciations of the Church, focused on the image of the priest in the community. The cinematic image of the Church represents a kind of revenge - a settling of scores - by an increasingly secular younger population and the diminished status of the Church in the culture of the cinema reflects its diminished status socially and politically.

Two caveats need to be noted, however. First, it is important to remember that the Church still exercises great power and authority in Ireland - in the school system and in health - and that its diminished status can also be exaggerated. The influx, especially from Poland, of immigrant Catholic populations has also reinvigorated the Church as well as the Irish economy and Church attendances are on the rise again.

Second, as Ireland embraces global capitalism and develops an increasingly consumer-led sense of identity, there is now growing evidence – in alarming levels of alcohol consumption and a high suicide rate among the young – that the decline of Catholicism (and of nationalism) has left a kind of moral and ideological vacuum that economic success alone does not fill. Quite simply, the Irish do not seem to believe in any 'grand narrative' at the moment, other than that of hedonism and consumption.

The films that reflect this new kind of national angst are also now beginning to appear, suggesting that success may solve some old problems but that it also brings a set of new problems to replace them.

Martin McLoone is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Ulster. This is an edited version of a talk at the Humanist Summer School in Carlingford, 18th August 2007

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bowcott, Owen** (2006): '100 Dublin Priests Accused of Abuse since 1940' in *The Guardian* (Thursday, March 9: 22).
- Gibbons, Luke** (2002) *The Quiet Man* (Cork University Press).
- Inglis, Tom** (1987) *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Gill and Macmillan).
- McLoone, Martin** (2000) *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (Bfi publishing).
- Rockett, Kevin** (2005) *Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography* (Four Courts Press)