



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Review

Tomáš Kejmar, "The Road Not Taken: An Analysis of Significant Events and Personalities of Irish History in the Period from 1916-1922 in Irish Film," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

The proposed topic of this BA thesis is certainly one with a great deal of potential. The selected films open many possible avenues of investigation and engage with major questions of how to represent a contested and traumatic period in Irish history. This potential is partially realised by the resulting work.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

The project is constructed around a relatively clearly articulated area of enquiry, namely the differing approaches to history deployed by Jonathan Lewis's 1991 television history drama *The Treaty*, Neil Jordan's 1996 *Michael Collins* and Ken Loach's 2006 *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* and questions of representation and misrepresentation. One area of concern here, however, is that the highly complex and much studied terrain of history writing, history creation and the reinvention and re-presentation of the past is dealt with in a very simple and basic manner with little reference to the very significant scholarly work that exists on, for instance, the notion of cultural memory, debates concerning historical revisionism, or even on memory work.

Structure and development:

After a rather brief introduction outlining the projects aims, the thesis turns to the matter of history and film. Robert Rosenstone's *History on Film, Film on History* makes a useful starting point. However as Chapter 2 develops, this book is often cited through another critical work in a manner that is at times less than clear. Rosenstone suggests the need to distinguish between the differing remits of writing history and the history film or film about historical events. While Mr Kejmar rightly notes this distinction, it is one that is less observed later in the thesis. Some acknowledgement of the critical work that leads up to Rosenstone's work would have been useful here since what he claims is a reiteration of some fairly well established attitudes to the work and creation of history. On page 7 it is asserted that history is often automatically assumed to be factual and truthful. Considering the very public and ongoing debates around the representation of the past, such an assertion (even in a popular sense) is hardly tenable. Additionally, the term "fictionalization" (p.7) introduced here seems ill-fitted to the central issues of perspective and accuracy that permeate both historiography and creative works that use history as setting or topic. Also somewhat misleading is the use of the term author for the director. Although it is indisputable that directorial vision may stamp a film, other factors may modify and distort this vision in complex and often invisible ways especially when the film is a big budget project.

Rosenstone's point that the way history is represented illustrates the views and values of the present moment echoes points often made concerning cultural memory (cf. Assmann, Bal and others). This engaging idea about the politics of memory and representation is one that could have been addressed more consistently throughout the thesis, and opens difficult questions especially when the filmmaker hails from a different country (in this instance Ken Loach).

More positively, the discussion of Michael Collins as a figure that might function as a lens through which the early twentieth century Irish independence movement and Civil War is well developed. Mr Kejmar observes the tensions inherent in the treatment of Collins in *The Treaty* and *Michael Collins* quite well, highlighting in particular Jordan's attempt to navigate between mythologizing and humanising his subject. Perhaps one matter that must be recognised with regard to the analysis of the



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two films in question is that despite the fact that they treat similar subject matter, they are in fact works of a different (sub)genre. Not all films that use history or present historical subjects operate according to the same principles; a low budget TV history play pitched at a local audience cannot be judged on the same terms as a costly Hollywood history adventure. Put simply, one does not demand that an apple be an orange and at times criticism of Jordan's film tended in this direction.

Ken Loach's approach to the Civil War is well contrasted with the preceding films and his depiction of the demise of republican unity and subsequent traumatic conflict is quite effectively described. Some further discussion of casting choices here might have served to connect to the discussion of Jordan's decision to cast Liam Neeson as Michael Collins (notably the choice to cast Alan Rickman as De Valera is not mentioned yet is hugely important). Similarly Cillian Murphy's recognisability is a factor in how the character is perceived.

The thesis concludes loosely. The question of the politics of representation: not just whose story is being told and how, but by whom and to whom deserve more attention than they are allotted here. So overall while the subject is a rich one, important dimensions of it are absent in this study.

Research:

There are a couple of useful sources here, not least Raita Merivirta's *The Gun and Irish Politics* (2009), but in general the project is built upon a rather light scholarly structure.

Use of sources:

Sources are cited adequately, however as mentioned there is quite extensive cross referencing between the Rosenstone and Merivirta texts.

Stylistics and language:

The register of the work is somewhat informal and minor language errors are frequent. Proof reading is needed.

Format:

Generally well done.

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "good" / 3 or "very good" 2 depending on the result of the defence.

10.6.2011

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