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Abstract

Irish language cinema has experienced unprecedented growth and exposure in recent years, particularly with the critical and commercial success of *An Cailín Ciúin* [The Quiet Girl] (2022). Winner of The Grand Prix of the International Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2022, the film subsequently received a large number of further national and international awards including 8 Irish Film & Television Academy (IFTA) awards and culminating with its nomination on January 24 2023 for the Best International Feature Film Oscar, the first Irish-language production to receive such recognition. This article provides a historical context for understanding the achievement of *An Cailín Ciúin* in light of the development of policy with regard to Irish language cinema in Ireland. It will chart the emergence of the sector from the silent period through to recent developments, and identify key moments in the historical development of film production in the Irish language, including the establishment of TG4 (originally titled TnaG (Teilifís na Gaeilge)) in 1996, the enactment of the Broadcasting (Funding) Act 2003, and the launch of the Cine4 scheme in 2017.

Keywords: Irish language cinema; Irish cinema; Irish film production; Irish film policy

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Irish language cinema has experienced unprecedented growth and exposure in recent years, particularly with the critical and commercial success of *An Cailín Ciúin,* 2022 [*The Quiet Girl*]. Winner of The Grand Prix of the International Jury at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2022, the film subsequently received a large number of further national and international awards including 8 Irish Film & Television Academy (IFTA) awards and culminating with its nomination on 24 January 2023 for the Best International Feature Film Oscar, the first Irish-language production to receive such recognition. While Irish language films have previously been the recipient of significant national and international accolades (a prominent example being Tom Collins' London-set drama *Kings* (2007)), *An Cailín Ciúin* uniquely also managed to connect with a wide audience in a manner never previously achieved by an Irish-language production—by October 2022 the film had taken over €1,000,000 at the Irish and UK box office and broken box office records at several cinemas, including the Irish Film Institute (RTÉ, 2022).

This article provides a historical context for understanding the achievement of *An Cailín Ciúin* in light of the development of policy with regard to Irish language cinema in Ireland. It will chart the emergence of the sector from the silent period through to recent developments, and identify key moments in the historical development of film production in the Irish language, including the establishment of TG4 (originally titled TnaG (Teilifís na Gaeilge)) in 1996, the enactment of the Broadcasting (Funding) Act 2003, and the launch of the Cine4 scheme in 2017[1].

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

As will be evident from the survey below, as with film more broadly in Ireland, for much of the twentieth century a focused and informed state policy was largely absent with regard to Irish language cinema[2]. A key finding here is that the implementation of more focused and supportive policy regarding Irish language film production, and film production policy in general, from the 1990s onwards was critical to the development of the sector and recent successes. While the primary focus of this article is on the development of policy in the Republic of Ireland, important developments have also taken place in Northern Ireland in recent decades to support Irish language productions particularly following the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement on 10 April 1998 (Northern Ireland Office, 1998). Section 6 of that Agreement set out a commitment to support Irish-language broadcasting in the UK and this eventually led to the establishment of the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund in 2005, administered by Northern Ireland Screen, with funding of up to €400,000 currently available for individual productions under the fund[1]. Northern Ireland Screen and the Irish Language Broadcasting Fund have grown to become an important component of the funding infrastructure for Irish language productions, with productions (including Tom Collins' *Kings*), increasingly benefiting from multiple sources on both sides of the border to raise funding. In addition, BBC Northern Ireland has a dedicated BBC Gaeilge component that produces TV, radio, and online content in Irish.

The Irish language has an important cultural and historical place in Irish society, despite the ongoing decline of its use as a community language[3]. Once the first language of most inhabitants of the island of Ireland, the status of the language in Ireland was fundamentally undermined over centuries by the processes of colonisation, and the horrendous impact of the famine in the mid-nineteenth century which was particularly devastating for areas where the Irish language continued to be the dominant mode of communication. Despite efforts by the Irish Free-State post-independence in 1922 to revive the language in Ireland (following 'revivalist policies under the three themes of Pressure, Preferment and Projection' (McDermott, 2011, p. 25-31)), these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Nonetheless, the language continues to have an important place in Irish culture and society, and for many Irish people is a key component of their identity, including among nationalists (and a minority of Unionists) in Northern Ireland. However, the Irish language has been a hugely divisive issue north of the border, viewed with suspicion by many members of the Unionist Community, particularly due to the association of the language with militant republicanism and the nationalist movement more broadly.

The Irish language also had a presence in cinema from the early twentieth century, and indeed predates the emergence of an independent Irish state. The first production to feature Irish prominently was *Aimsir Padraig* [*In the Days of St Patrick*] (1920), a retelling of the story of Ireland's patron saint which featured Irish-language intertitles and scenes of Patrick learning the language (Condon, 2020). Despite this early promise, post-independent Ireland (officially the 'Irish Free State'), informed by primarily Catholic dogmatic concerns, viewed film with considerable suspicion, choosing censorship as the principal state policy towards cinema in the decades that followed independence (Rockett, 2004). While state policies aimed to revive and promote the Irish language, a coherent film policy (whether with regard to either language or the broader industry) did not emerge until the second half of the twentieth century. In the intervening decades, productions in Ireland emerged from a number of enthusiastic entrepreneurs or organisations for whom film was an important component of their promotion.

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

The revivalist impulse, particularly the 'Projection' component concerned with ensuring 'that the language became a visible and normalised element of everyday life' (McDermott, 2011, p. 27) was also a factor in the decision to provide the first state funding for film in Ireland, the £200 granted by the Department of Education for the production of *Oíche Sheanchais* [*Night Of Storytelling*] (1935), the first film with synchronised sound in Irish. The eleven-minute film was directed by documentary film pioneer Robert Flaherty in London while he was undertaking post-production work on his Irish set feature documentary *Man of Aran* (1934) and featured cast members from that production listening to a story been told by Aran *seanchaí* Seáinín Tom Ó Dioráin. Ironically, despite *Man of Aran* being made and set in one of Ireland's strongest Irish speaking areas at that time—the Aran Islands—the Irish language does not feature in the film and cast members were required to speak in English (for the few dialogue sequences featured), despite several having limited fluency in that language (Mullen, 1934, p. 165). Such ironies also speak to the challenging broader context of trying to develop a film culture in the Irish language with hopes of reaching an international audience.

The advent of the National Film Institute of Ireland (NFI) in 1943 (incorporated in 1945), an initiative not of the state directly but rather led by members of the Catholic church with an interest in employing film primarily as an educational resource, was important for the increased use of Irish in film. Through government departments including Education, and Health, and funding from other major organisations (including the Gaelic Athletic Association) the institute began making its own films from 1946 onwards, and the Irish language was often a feature of these productions. Relevant examples include two information films funded by the Department of Health under Minister Noel Browne, *Gnó Gach Éinne* [*Everybody's Business*] (1951) and *Na Fiacla Sin Agat* [*Keep Your Teeth*] (1951). In an interview given in the 1990s, Browne indicated that he had been keen as a government minister to incorporate the Irish language into the films funded by his department (*Memories in Focus*, 1995). Perhaps as a result of this principal source of funding, as Jerry White has noted, Irish documentaries for much of the early to mid-twentieth century—including those in which the Irish language featured—were primarily in the Griersonian documentary mode 'a socially orientated, non-commercial model for film, a model that was closely linked to strong government and national unity' and also chimed with the ideological tendencies of the Irish state (White, 2003, p.107).

The advent of the institute coincided with a period of increasing focus in Dáil Éireann on the use of the Irish language in film and calls for the use of film to promote the language. Significantly, these early debates (as with the concerns of the NFI) viewed film's potential in terms of its role in education, rather than industry or entertainment. Following the establishment of the Institute the Department of Education provided £2,000 'le Leabharlann a chur ar fáil do scannáin oiriúnacha oideasúla a mbeidh cuid acu i nGaeilge' ['to make a library of suitable educational films available, with some of them in Irish'] (Ó Deirg, 1945, [author's translation]). The remarks of the then Minister for Education, Tomás Ó Deirg, at the time indicate already a recognition of the potential of films in Irish to support the promotion of the language:

> De thoradh na moltaí a rinne coiste eadar-rannach a bhunaigh mé tamall ó shoin atá an tairgead seo á chur ar fáil. Sén fáth ar bhunaigh mé an coiste seo le scrúdú a dhéanamh ar cheist na scannán oideachais agus ar cheist scannán teangaidh Ghaeilge.

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

> [This money is being made available as a result of the recommendations made by an inter-departmental committee that I set up some time ago. I set up this committee to examine the issue of educational films and the issue of Irish language films.] (Ó Deirg, 1945, [author's translation]).

When the same fund was reduced in the 1949 budget from £2,000 to £1,000, it was criticised in the Dáil by Gearóid Mac Phárthaláin TD who also stressed the importance of film in the promotion of the language: 'Ceann de na bealaí is fearr le labhairt na Gaeilge a chur chun cinn an drámaíocht chéanna … Is é mo thuairim gur ceart don Ríaltas, pé ar bith Ríaltas a bheas ann, cuidiú le daoine atá ag iarraidh scannáin i nGaeilge a sholáthar' ['One of the best ways to promote the Irish language is drama itself … In my opinion, the Government, whichever Government it may be, should help people who want to provide films in Irish'] (Mac Phárthaláin, 1949)[4].

The following year, Comhdháil Naisiúnta na Gaeilge [The National Council for the Irish language] (1950) published a short booklet *Films in Irish* in which the organisation stressed that 'Without films in Irish all the work done for the language in the schools, on the radio and by voluntary organisations is doomed to ultimate failure no matter how effectively it is done' (Quoted in White, 2003, p. 106). These concerns were also to the fore for the founders of Gael Linn (a non-profit founded in 1953 focused on the promotion of the Irish language) and their decision to focus prominently on film production to realise their goals of promoting wider use of the Irish language.

As noted in Gael Linn's own information, Gael Linn was founded by

> 'a dynamic group of graduates and undergraduates … searching for a way to raise and invest funds to pressurise the Irish government to take a more pro-active role in promoting the Irish language and associated culture' (Gael Linn, n.d).

Influencing government policy with regard to the Irish language, and its promotion was therefore a critical concern of the organisation, and film would be a key medium for the organisation through which to do so in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Gael Linn received limited state support for its efforts: its funding came principally from its own endeavours and some sponsorship, including a Gaelic games pools competition it organised (based on the model of the successful English football league pools) as well as organising bingo events. Indeed, the state's position with regard to funding its film productions is perhaps exemplified in the response Gael Linn founder Dónal Ó Móráin received when initially seeking funding from Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge for the magazine style Irish-language newsreel *Amharc Éireann* [A Look at Ireland, or A View of Ireland] series Gael Linn produced from 1956 onwards:

> A former government minister, Ernest Blythe, then chairman of Comhdháil Náisiúnta na Gaeilge, was persuaded to lend £100 to fund a short film for the cinema. He was sceptical about the proposal, but, as Dónall Ó Móráin recalled afterwards, 'felt that the worst that could happen was that the £100 would be wasted' (Gael Linn, n.d).

Gael Linn did eventually receive some state funding towards the *Amharc Éireann* series, significantly again as with the NFI via the Department of Education, which provided a one-year grant of £3,200 in 1957, and a further one-year grant of £6,000 from the same department in 1962 (Ó Ciaráin, 2024, p. 9). *Amharc Éireann* was distributed across cinemas in Ireland and reached an estimated audience of a quarter of a million each month before its eventual discontinuation in July 1964 (O'Brien, 2004, p. 105). By this time, Gael Linn were already moving away from newsreel to

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

focus on longer documentary productions made available exclusively with Irish commentary, and including the first feature length documentary production in Irish, *Mise Éire* [I [am] Ireland] (1959), directed by George Morrison. *Mise Éire* provided a romantic nationalist recounting of the emergence of the Irish state and brought together an extraordinary range of photographic and moving image material, particularly from the revolutionary period, combined with an innovative stirring soundtrack provided by composer Seán Ó Riada. Despite being narrated entirely in Irish and without subtitles on initial release to an audience most of whom were not Irish speakers, the film was nonetheless a very considerable critical and commercial success in Ireland and marked a key moment in the further development of film in the Irish language[5].

Gael Linn's success with film productions encouraged the organisation to submit a proposal for Ireland's first television broadcaster. However, the Irish government announced in August 1959 that both television and radio would be operated by a new semi-state body (the Radio Telefís Éireann/RTÉ Authority) that would be funded by a combination of advertising and licence fees. There was hope when the Broadcasting Authority Act (1960) was passed in 1960 that this station would have a significant role in the promotion of Irish as Article 17 (1960) required that:

> In performing its functions, the Authority shall bear constantly in mind the national aims of restoring the Irish language and preserving and developing the national culture and shall endeavour to promote the attainment of these aims.

Nevertheless, it became clear very soon after the establishment of RTÉ that the amount of time available to the Irish language would be very limited, amounting to only 6% of television airtime, and with relevant programming 'broadcast at an unfavourable time' (Dowling et al., 1969, p. 295; quoted in Watson, 2002, p. 742-743).

However, state policy regarding film was evolving through the 1960s and particularly into the 1970s and 1980s with gradual but increasing recognition of the need to have a coherent policy in place to cultivate an indigenous film culture. Ireland's first designated film studio, Ardmore Studios, opened in May 1958 with significant state support. Following a visit in 1967 to the Ardmore set of John Huston's production of *Sinful Davey* (1969), Taoiseach Jack Lynch invited Huston to chair a Film Industry Committee, which eventually recommended the establishment of an Irish Film Board to support the development of film production in Ireland (Geoghegan, 2009). While there were considerable delays in doing so following the publication of the committee's report in 1968, the board finally came into existence in 1981. In the interim, the Arts Act 1973 recognised cinema for the first time as a distinctive art form deserving of state funding by entrusting An Chomhairle Ealaíon/The Arts Council with responsibility for film. The council eventually established an annual Film Script Award in 1976 with the first recipients of the £11,000 fund Bob Quinn and Colm Bairéad for their script for *Poitín*. Quinn was a key figure within what was termed subsequently the first wave of Irish filmmaking that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s.[6] It is significant that in a period where there was precious little indigenous film practice in Ireland, Irish-language cinema was to the fore in the emergence of an indigenous Irish film culture (Quinn's previous experimental Irish-language production *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* [Lament for Arthur Leahy] (1975) is also important in this respect). Quinn moved from Dublin to the Connemara Gaeltacht and was actively involved in lobbying efforts made among the Gaeltacht community for a coherent policy and support for broadcasting (both radio and television) and film in the Irish language. Indeed, Quinn

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

was central to efforts in Connemara to establish a community Irish-language pirate television broadcaster—Teilifís na Gaeltachta—in 1987 which anticipated the establishment of Irish language broadcaster TG4 in 1996 (The Archivist, 2020). These efforts chimed with a broader movement among filmmakers in Ireland for state support for indigenous film production and would eventually contribute to a range of initiatives that have been central to the development of Irish film culture over the past forty years. This includes the establishment of Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board (BSÉ/IFB, now Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland) (1981), and the Irish-medium broadcaster TG4 (1996); the creation of the Irish government's Broadcasting Fund (2003); and the establishment of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI, now Coimisiún na Meán) (2009); all critical policy developments that have had a significant and ongoing impact on film production in the Irish language. These developments were in addition to the important contribution that film focused tax-related government policy initiatives have made to stimulating film production (including in the Irish language) in Ireland. Beginning with the introduction of Section 35 of the 1987 Finance Act (a tax-break to incentivise investment in audiovisual production in Ireland) this has been adapted over subsequent decades as Section 481 of the Consolidated Finance Acts of 1997 (with various later amendments), a crucial and attractive tax credit model, today worth up to 32% of eligible Irish expenditure on productions (Flynn and Tracy, 2019, pp. 521-525; 'Ireland's 32% Tax Credit'; on Section 481, see Brodie and Murphy in this issue). Its importance to Irish language production is evident in the fact that all of the Cine4 feature film productions discussed below have benefited from this credit.

While the Act to establish Bord Scannán na hÉireann/Irish Film Board made no mention explicitly of a responsibility to promote the Irish language, in a broader sense the language was presumably implied as part of the board's responsibility (Article 4.2) to 'In so far as it considers it appropriate … have regard to the need for the expression of national culture through the medium of film-making.' However, it is perhaps not surprising given the very small annual budget available to the board in the 1980s (approximately £500,000 per annum) that the Irish language rarely featured in productions—even Quinn's Film Board part-funded *Atlantean* series was principally narrated in the English language, though the Irish language and its distinctiveness was a consideration of the series. It was with the second iteration of the board from 1994 onwards, following its reconstitution by then Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht Michael D. Higgins, and the partnerships that would develop with TG4 that would be crucial to the emergence of an Irish language medium film culture.

Indeed, TG4's establishment in 1996 was critical for the emergence and development of film productions in Irish. The result of decades of lobbying by Irish language communities and enthusiasts across the island, the arrival of the channel on Halloween night in 1996 was greeted warmly by many Irish speakers, though there was also much criticism in the media of the initiative as a waste of tax-payers money; as Cathal Goan, TG4's first *Ceannasaí* (Controller) remarked, such critics 'contrast[ed] the dire needs of a health service in crisis with the sinful extravagance of establishing a television channel in a 'dead' language' (McDougal, 2012, p. 198-199). From the start, therefore, TG4 was under pressure to provide both a meaningful service to Irish language communities while still attracting respectable audiences across the country by remaining accessible to a mainly non-Irish speaking audience (hence the decision to subtitle in English all programmes apart from live broadcasts, and feature English language films prominently in its schedule). Despite this challenge, TG4 nonetheless established a reputation for bringing a 'súil

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

eile' [another perspective] (its motto since foundation) to aspects of Irish culture and society. This was particularly evident within the Irish language film drama productions[7] that the channel supported and broadcast from its foundation. Indeed when the question was put to former Deputy CEO Pádhraic Ó Ciardha in 2009 where film fit into TG4's vision, he responded

> it is clearly a badge of honour or a symbol of maturity in a minority language broadcaster, in any broadcaster really, that you make film, and drama particularly […] When we were founded in 1995 our ambition was, like our Welsh cousins, to make a feature film that would show that the language was alive, could deal with the narrative form, could come alive in that art form (Interview with McDougal, 2012, p. 193).

TG4's initial focus was on short film productions, given the more modest budgets involved and the possibility of getting funding support from other Irish film agencies. Within two years of its establishment, it launched the *Oscailt* [Opening] scheme in 1998 in conjunction with the Irish Film Board inviting 'applications from film producers with imagination and visual abilities that can demonstrate that they are able to produce fiction, animation or docudrama that can provide a new insight into life in Ireland' (TG4, 1998). A budget of up to £60,000 was available for individual films (from a total budget initially of £290,000) with films to be between 10 and 26 minutes in length shot on celluloid with a view to potential theatrical release. Through the Irish Film Board's support, a considerable number of these films did circulate also in Irish cinemas as opening shorts for Film Board funded features[8]. In 2001, TG4 launched *Lasair* [Flame] in conjunction with Filmbase[9] which focused exclusively on production of films produced on digital formats with budgets of up to £8,000 available. Interestingly, neither scheme required the director to be fluent in Irish as long as he or she collaborated with an Assistant Director (AD) who was fluent and the principal language of the final production was Irish. This aspect contributed to accusations that some filmmakers may have been translating works originally developed in English (and for filming in that language) to Irish to get funding awards with limited focus on the language itself within the films produced. For Ruth Lysaght, 'English-speakers make their *Oscailt* in order to break through into the [film] industry in general, and disregard the language as a tool for expression' (Lysaght, 2002, p. 89). Fidelma Farley (2007) contended also that as many of the *Oscailt* and *Lasair* scripts originated in English and outside of Irish speaking communities, they had limited relevance to native speakers of Irish. 'Merely grafting Irish on to "universal' stories",' she argued, 'might appear to be an act of modernising the language, but in actuality has the opposite effect—by removing Irish from its context it becomes increasingly isolated and irrelevant to contemporary Irish life' (Farley, 2007, p. 174). Perhaps conscious of this criticism, subsequent short films schemes introduced by TG4, including *Údar* [Author] (2010) and *Scéal* [Story] (2012), required that directors submit projects based on established works of Irish language literature.

In terms of content, films that did emerge from the TG4 short films schemes, while largely conservative and conventional in aesthetic approach (in line with practices more broadly in Irish film production), did explore a range of important and sometimes challenging themes some of which were less evident in English language productions at the time. This included the Irish famine (*Ocras* [Hunger], Sean McGuire 2003), the Troubles (*Limbo*, Anne Crilly, 2001), murder (*An Leabhar* [The Book], Robert Quinn, 2000; *Cosa Nite* [Washed Feet], Dearbhla Walsh, 1998; *Cáca Milis* [Sweet Cake], Jennifer Keegan, 2001; *Foireann Codladh* [Team Sleep], Danann Breathnach, 2008), suicide (*Idir Dhá Chomhairle* [Between Two Minds], Mary Crumlish, 2004), mental illness

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

(*Féileachán* [Driving Lesson], Cecilia McAllister, 2008), alcoholism (*An Teanga Rúnda* [The Secret Language], Brian Durnin, 2005), sport (*An Díog is Faide* [The Longest Ditch], Hugh Farley, 2004), and homosexual love (*Olive*, Neasa Hardiman, 2003; *An Cuainín* [The Cove], Chris Roufs, 2003). Perhaps as important as the themes explored in these films was the opportunity they gave to young directors to learn their trade and acquire experience, and several of the filmmakers to emerge in the more recent Cine4 initiative made their earliest films within these schemes, including Colm Bairéad (director of *An Cailín Ciúin*) who directed the short films *An t-Ádh* [The Luck] (2011) and *Pairtnéir* [Partner] (2013) under both the Údar and Scéal initiatives respectively.

A further support to the development of Irish language drama production in Ireland was the enactment of the Broadcasting (Funding) Act 2003. This fund was established to support the production of new television and radio programmes on Irish culture, heritage and experience with the Irish language among the areas prioritised. The fund is administered by Coimisiún na Meán (formerly the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) established in 2009) and while film was not a principal initial focus of the funding to be provided through the scheme, it would eventually make a critical contribution to the further development of Irish language productions in that area, particularly through the support provided from the fund for the Cine4 initiative[10].

There had been ongoing frustration among directors regarding the limited budget and length allowed in the short film initiatives of TG4 and directors lobbied for a scheme to emerge that would facilitate feature film productions in Irish. The success of Tom Collins *Kings* (2007), a bilingual production set in London among Irish speaking emigrants from Conamara which received a theatrical release, and considerable critical acclaim (including five IFTA awards), suggested that there was potential for the further development of the Irish-language film sector. Eventually in 2017, TG4 announced the Cine4 scheme in conjunction with BSÉ/IFB and the BAI. Uniquely the scheme was only open 'to live action feature film projects in the Irish language' but with 'the potential to appeal to Irish and international audiences.' A budget 'of up to €1.2 million' (TG4, 2017) was also permitted; while modest by international standards, it did allow some certainty to directors now shooting on cheaper digital formats.

To date six films have been supported and completed under the scheme, with a further four (at the time of writing) either in development or production. These films have been characterised by a focus on marginalised or vulnerable characters and their attempts to come to terms with challenging circumstance—in this the films have continued TG4's own concern with providing a 'súil eile' on the world. The first film to emerge from the scheme was Dathaí Keane's *Finky* (2019), a dark and somewhat surreal tale (co-written by Keane and Diarmuid de Faoite) of musician and puppeteer Micí Finky who escapes a troubled past by traveling to Glasgow only to be tragically paralysed following an accident. *Finky* was described by *Film Ireland* online magazine following its premiere at the Galway Film Fleadh as 'a celebration of the Irish language' that 'catapults the language onto an exciting new terrain, far beyond the traditions of Irish-language filmmaking' (McQuinn, 2019) and this description could well be applied across all the Cine4 productions to date in their concern with and prioritisation of the Irish language and its role in accentuating tales of marginalisation, vulnerability and precarity. Subsequent films released under the scheme to date include Tomás Ó Súilleabháin's *Arracht* [Monster] (2019), a famine-set narrative of personal trauma and revenge, *Foscadh* [Shelter] (2021), a raw, emotionally wrought and at times excruciating excavation of loneliness and human vulnerability, *Róise agus Frank* [Rose and Frank]

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

(2022), a drama-comedy featuring a dog (possibly a reincarnated dead husband) that helps a widow come to terms with her loss, and *Tarrac* [Pull] (2022), a drama focused on the return of emigrant Aoife to the Kerry Gaeltacht to support her ailing father and her subsequent involvement in a female Naomhóg (a local type of Curracgh or boat) racing team. While all of these films have enjoyed modest theatrical releases to date and some festival success, it was the release of *An Cailin Ciúin* in early 2022 that brought Irish language film to an unprecedented level of both commercial and critical acclaim. There is no single reason for why *An Cailín Ciúin* has experienced such unprecedented success. Certainly the impressive cinematic approach taken by director Colm Bairéad—characterised by restrained pacing, superb casting, and a willingness to allow the sophisticated visual compositions to communicate content and meaning rather than relying on dialogue for explication—was critical to the film's achievement. However, the choice to translate the source text —the novella *Foster* (2010) by Claire Keegan—and transform the film into an Irish language production was undoubtedly an important factor. Concerning a vulnerable early adolescent girl who is coming to terms with her family's decision to deliver her to distant relatives for an extended period (with strong suggestions that she may have been the victim of abuse), the Irish language itself—given its marginalised contemporary status in Ireland and uncertain future as a community language—accentuates the narrative heft of a story concerned with marginalisation, precarity and loss. However, as the history of Irish language production detailed above may suggest, the film is unlikely to have been produced without the emergence of a more progressive state policy towards production in the Irish language, firstly through the establishment of TG4 and subsequently the initiatives—particularly Cine4—that the broadcaster has led, with support from other state bodies, including Screen Ireland and Coimisiún na Meán.

Policy regarding Irish language film production was both slow to develop and generally (as in other areas) poorly applied for much of the twentieth century. Indeed, until the Arts Act 1973 entrusted An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council Ireland with responsibility for film (thereby recognising film as an art form deserving of its support), the fortunes of Irish language film production depended primarily on the initiative and dedication of private individuals and non-state organisations, who occasionally received state funding (rarely focused primarily on film) to support their endeavours. In this respect, we might view the different contexts within which the Irish language has been used in various media—from radio though film and television—as reflecting wider policies regarding the use of Irish in Ireland in any given period, policies that met with limited success, evident in the relatively small number of people who speak and use Irish regularly on a daily basis in Ireland today (less than 2% of the population) (An Phríomh-Oifig Staidrimh/Central Statistics Office (CSO)). Though both RTÉ and the Irish Film Board (now Screen Ireland) had statutory obligations to promote Irish culture and language, neither contributed significantly and it was the establishment of TG4 in 1996 that was a critical development in providing an appropriate support structure from which a recognisable Irish language film culture could emerge. While this support focused initially on short film productions, the launch of Cine4 (in conjunction with Screen Ireland and the BAI) in 2017 marked a key moment in the further development of the sector. A critical distinction of the Cine4 scheme that has distinguished it from previous state supports for Irish language cinema is that it provided dedicated and significant budget for a feature project in the Irish language, giving both certainty and confidence to directors and producers who rarely benefited from this level of support for Irish language productions in the past. As *An Cailín Ciúin*'s director Colm Bairéad remarked,

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

> If you take a step back and look at the macro picture of this, you could argue that all it is, is just the natural evolution in terms of the growing confidence of Irish film and Irish language filmmaking. There was always this latent talent pool, I think, amongst Irish language filmmakers, but there wasn't really any route to feature filmmaking in the Irish language (Griffin, 2022).

Cine4 has provided that route and the fruits of a more coherent, focused and supportive structure for film production in the Irish language is already evident, within six years of its establishment. It bodes well for the future of the Irish language on film but it is not without continuing challenges. One of the legacies of the lack of a requirement of an Irish speaking crew for Irish language productions to date is that while the Irish language may be more prominent in front of the camera, the vast majority of productions are produced by crews operating through English (including productions funded under Cine4). There are practical reasons for this (the lack of sufficient Irish speaking crew, particularly at a time of high demand for crews more broadly in the sector). However, the impact of this decision was evident in 2022 when there were no applications made for an Irish Language Documentary Funding Award that emerged from a collaboration between TG4, Ardán and Galway City of Film. The requirement that '[t]he creative team must include at least two members with fluent Irish, one of which must be the Director, Writer or Editor' (Ardán, 2022) would appear to have impacted on the ability of potential teams to qualify for the funding award. In the longer term there may be a need to reflect on how the industry could develop increased numbers of Irish speaking crew or facilitate production contexts where the Irish language would be the working language of productions. Relevant examples exist internationally that could be drawn on in the Irish context, including in Wales where dedicated support for Welsh lessons for crew on productions is included as part of funding for Welsh language productions (Ffilm Cymru Wales, 2023). This can only contribute to a stronger basis for the continued and increased growth and relevance of the Irish language within the Irish film industry. However, policy is critical to this development and how the various support funding structures facilitate and encourage the increased use of Irish in the production of relevant films.

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Endnotes

[1] Though beyond the scope of this article, there are very relevant international contexts that share important parallels with the Irish experience referred to here, including in Wales, Spain and Canada. For further relevant research on these areas see McElroy, 2016; Dorland, 1998; and Moran, 1996.

[2] As suggested here the development of Irish-language production in Ireland should be viewed within the context of the development of film policy more broadly in Ireland post-independence. While major developments are referred to in this article, it is beyond the scope here to address

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

these in detail though significant research has already been undertaken including by Rockett, Gibbons and Hill (1988) and particularly Flynn (2019).

[3] A 2015 report commissioned by Údarás na Gaeltachta (the state agency responsible for the development of Irish-speaking regions) on the Irish language raised serious concerns about the likelihood of the language surviving as a community language beyond the current generation (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2015; BBC, 2015).

[4] For further Dáil discussion in the 1950s on the importance of Irish-language film see also Seán Ó Ruaidh, Dáil Éireann debate - Wednesday, 10 Jun 1953, Vol. 139 No. 7 Committee on Finance. - Vote 39—Office of the Minister for Education (Resumed). https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1953-06-10/22/?highlight%5B0%5D=gaeilge&highlight%5B1%5D=gaeilge&highlight%5B2%5D=gaeilge&highlight%5B3%5D=films&highlight%5B4%5D=films]

[5] For further information on the impact, including the commercial and popular success of *Mise Éire*, see Pettitt, 2000, pp. 81-82 and O'Brien, 2004, pp. 110-118.

[6] For further on this topic see Connolly, 2019, pp. 106-126.

[7] While this article focuses primarily on narrative fiction productions, TG4 has rightly received considerable recognition and acclaim for the quality of its documentary programming, an area in which the channel's 'súil eile' is also very evident.

[8] For example Hugh Farley's *An Díog is Faide* (2004) was screened in Irish cinemas prior to Irish Film Board funded feature *Man about Dog* (Paddy Breathnach 2004).

[9] Filmbase (1986-2018) was a not-for-profit film resource centre based in Temple Bar in Dublin city that provided training, facilities, and funding for filmmakers.

[10] A further recent funding initiative worthy of note is the The Western Region Audiovisual Production Fund (WRAP), an initiative of the Western Development Commission and Ardán (a West of Ireland based non-profit supporting creatives within the audio-visual industry) with the support of the local authorities across the West of Ireland, including counties with large Gaeltacht communities Donegal, Galway and Mayo and with support from the Gaeltacht regional authority Údarás na Gaeltachta. This fund provides Investment of up to €200,000 to a feature film, television drama, animation or game that undertakes a significant portion of its production (including post-production) in the Western Region. (Further information is available here: https://wrapfund.ie/wrap-funding/production/)

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/