

Book review: *Women in the Irish Film Industry. Stories and Storytellers*. Liddy, Susan, 2020. Cork: Cork University Press. 258 pp., £28.67 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-78205-373-6

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Abstract

In *Women in the Irish Film Industry. Stories and Storytellers* (Cork University Press, 2020), editor Susan Liddy and contributors present an informed and comprehensive analysis of women's roles and participation in the Irish film and screen industries. This collection is an important account of the gendered aspects of Irish culture, negotiating, through its seventeen chapters and contributors, the intersecting cultural, social, and artistic dynamics of a changing and changeable Ireland. In her introduction to the volume, Liddy acknowledges the importance of reclaiming hidden and oppressed histories, noting that 'the processes and practices that can foster and normalise such exclusion are important to excavate, analyse, and challenge' (Liddy, 2020, p. 1), something this collection does carefully and comprehensively. The research represented in this volume is timely and necessary, and gestures towards the need for future research. This volume provides a multitude of starting points for thoughtful interrogation and presents a visible map towards future research.

Keywords: Ireland; film; feminism; film industry; film policy

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Women in the Irish Film Industry. Stories and Storytellers (2020) edited by Susan Liddy, is a necessary and urgent contribution to Irish screen and film studies, providing a comprehensive and well-balanced account of the role of women in the Irish film industry. This volume is also an important account of the gendered aspects of Irish culture, negotiating, through its seventeen chapters and contributors, the intersecting cultural, social, and artistic dynamics of a changing and changeable Ireland. In her introduction to the volume, Liddy acknowledges the importance of reclaiming hidden and oppressed histories, noting that 'the processes and practices that can foster and normalise such exclusion are important to excavate, analyse, and challenge' (Liddy, 2020, p. 1), something this collection does carefully and comprehensively.

Liddy draws on statistical research that outlines the dearth of female involvement in the film industry internationally, noting that 'women of all ages are significantly underrepresented as protagonists and central characters in film' (Liddy, 2020, p. 3). Liddy posits that this may be because of the domination of men in creative roles and considers Ireland's own recent socio-political context as a means of interrogating this. Her introduction frames the contributions in this volume, in terms of significant shifting points including *Waking the Feminists*, highlighting the need for an increase in academic scholarship that examines gender balance in Ireland's creative industries. At the core of this research

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is the socio-political context and Liddy observes, correctly, that during the Celtic Tiger and subsequent austerity period ‘discourses of gender equality were sidelined’ (Liddy, 2020, p. 6). The economics of representation are carefully addressed in *Women in the Irish Film Industry* and it is significant to see the relationship between economics and gender at the heart of this investigation and intersecting with multiple other credible contexts and concerns.

The volume is structured into four sections. The first ‘Revisiting the Past’, is a reclaiming of Irish women’s film history. Díóg O’Connell considers the career of Ellen O’Mara Sullivan and her role in early Irish cinema. Sarah Edge reclaims *Maeve* (1981) and *Mother Ireland* (1988) as exemplars of 1980s feminist film practice. Both O’Connell and Edge interrogate the alternative methods of creation by women filmmakers, noting that these methods are often not included in broader readings and investigations of Irish film practice. O’Connell (in Liddy, 2020, p. 21) notes that:

The hierarchy of evidence places the written record as more reliable than other sources. In researching women’s history, the written record is treated the same. New knowledge can be established in the unwritten records when they are appropriated in less conventional and mainstream ways.

Edge also explores feminist methods of making and creating, acknowledging that feminist methods allowed ‘for different modes of documentary storytelling to emerge’ (in Liddy, 2020, p. 44). O’Connell highlights the challenges of engaging in this reclamative work, aiming to ‘piece together, from a limited source and base, the contribution of O’Mara Sullivan to early Irish cinema’ (in Liddy, 2020, p. 17). Acknowledging and reclaiming women’s contribution to Irish cinema is at the core of this volume’s intention and this section is a fitting beginning to the volume as it provides a clear lens through which the reader can view this important scholarship.

The second section, ‘Practitioners and Production Culture’ takes a necessarily broad view of the Irish film industry and the political and gendered dynamics across creative roles. For those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Irish film industry, and who are approaching this volume from a more general Irish studies perspective, this section is useful exercise in “setting the scene”. In her chapter, Liddy delves deeper into the perceptions of a gender order within the film industry, highlighting the challenges and ideologies around getting women on-screen: ‘industry experience has demonstrated to these practitioners that there is “an unspoken preference for male protagonists”’ (Liddy, 2020, p. 57). As well as familiarising the reader with the broader production culture of Irish film, this section also illuminates the impact of the “old boys network” on equality in Ireland’s screen industries. Liddy notes that ‘The nature of men’s relationships with other men is widely seen as a key factor in sustaining such patterns, resulting in the unchallenged continuity of the “male genius” myth (2020, p. 59). However, Maeve Connolly highlights the work being done to create more inclusive peer networks through her examination of cinematographers, Suzie Lavelle and Kate McCullough. In her chapter, Connolly seeks to redress the limited scholarly engagement of women cinematographers. Like O’Connell, Connolly highlights the barriers that impede a scholarly correction of Lavelle & McCullough’s work: ‘Making the work of cinematographers “visible” is clearly fraught with difficulty, not least because of the fact that accurate data on the number of women working (or educated) as professional cinematographers is difficult to access’ (in Liddy, 2020, p. 84).

In Section Three, ‘Changing the Conversation: Education, celebration and collaboration,’ the volume turns towards the implicit and explicit activism across Irish film networks. Annie Doona considers the important role of education in promoting gender equality in the Irish film industry, noting that

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[al]though around 40 per cent of students on filmmaking programmes at third level in Ireland are female, there are few opportunities to participate in filmmaking formally at primary and second level, and few projects based around women in film (in Liddy, 2020, p. 150).

This observation highlights the gaps in opportunity for women as they progress in Ireland's film industry, making recommendations on routes forward that will promote more inclusivity. Karla Healion, Aileen O'Driscoll, Jennifer O'Meara and Katie Stone highlight the role of the Dublin Feminist Film Festival in supporting women in Irish film, highlighting the successful interventions of feminist organisations who use collaborative feminist methods. Laura Aguiar also highlights the influence of collaborative filmmaking, turning her focus towards the north of Ireland and carefully investigating the complex intersections, during the 1980s, of feminism and nationalism against the backdrop of second-wave feminism and the broader Irish Women's Liberation Movement. Aguiar highlights these moments of feminist creativity as moments of amplification for women's stories:

female filmmakers have explored women's complex lived experiences and employed "strategies to disrupt the audience's passive acceptance of the myths surrounding Irish nationalism and, in particular, the symbolic use of women (in Liddy, 2020, p. 174).

Finally, section four, 'Text and Context: Documentary, fiction and animation', considers the relationship between form and gender. Eileen Culloty considers Dearbhla Glynn's work documenting war and sexual violence in, noting that Glynn (in Liddy, 2020, p. 187)

believes her status as a woman has facilitated access to authority figures who perceive women as non-threatening and to victims of violence who perceive women as more emotionally sensitive than male filmmakers.

Lance Pettitt considers Pat Murphy's underrepresented female perspective on the conflict in the north of Ireland and, like Aguiar, highlights the importance of this relationship. Pettitt notes the significance of Murphy's 'use [of] cinema to critique Irish nationalist history, republican politics in particular, and practise 'herstory' through the medium of film' (in Liddy, 2020, p. 209). Ruth Barton turns her gaze towards the contemporary and interrogates the complex stasis of mainstream Irish cinema in relation to the changing position of women in Irish society. Her chapter examines how gender and space operate in contemporary Irish cinema examining how, unlike other art forms, '[c]ontemporary Irish cinema has struggled to respond to changing expectations' (in Liddy, 2020, p. 233) and that this is reflected in the treatment of space, domesticity, and motherhood.

In her concluding remarks, Liddy argues that the research represented in this volume is timely and necessary, while acknowledging that there is much more research to be done. All seventeen contributors in this volume have started a much needed conversation on the importance of representation in Ireland's screen industry. This volume provides a multitude of starting points for thoughtful interrogation and presents a visible map towards future research.

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