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Book Review: *Screen Workers and the Irish Film Industry* (Denis Murphy: Liverpool University Press, 2024)

Tony Tracy

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Corresponding author(s):

Tony Tracy	*University of Galway*	tony.tracy@universityofgalway.ie	https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2003-9749

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Abstract:

In *Screen Workers and the Irish Film Industry*, Denis Murphy analyses the history of the screen industries in Ireland and the part played by labour relations. Drawing on official records, interviews and using previously unused records from the trade union archives and other labour history sources, this is a chronological history of the growth of the Irish screen industries. While the emphasis is on film and television workers, the book acknowledges the essential producer contribution to building the industry as it exists today. However, it also emphasises producer obligations towards the screen workers they employ and the evolving role of trade unions in the industry. The volume covers both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Keywords: screen industries; labour relations; Morgan O'Sullivan; trade unions.

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In the early 2000s, while pursuing a PhD in film studies, I moonlighted on the fringes of the Irish film industry doing on-set interviews and writing press materials for various film and TV drama productions. The work was slightly glamourous and always interesting, drawing together the threads of a particular project and shaping the perspectives of writers, directors, producers, actors and various technical and craft personnel into a narrative for PR purposes. Unlike the cautious work of the academic thesis, the interviews offered direct and immediate access to the personalities and processes of film production. They also afforded a largely overlooked perspective on the activities and achievements of the relatively compact group of film producers and personnel that made up a highly flexible and rapidly changing Irish film industry. At the time, however, these zones of enquiry seemed poles apart; the one patient, largely text-based and centred on meaning(s), the other immediate, unfolding and focused on making. Denis Murphy's new book now reconciles what then seemed separate spheres, bringing a long overdue production studies approach to Irish film history and charting new territories for Irish screen/media scholarship.

Screen Workers and the Irish Film Industry is developed from Murphy's PhD thesis and its origins can be felt in its honed research focus and the clarity and rigour with which he develops his findings. Identifying that Irish cinema scholarship has historically emphasised the 'national' and textual studies, he shifts focus to the people who have worked within the screen industries and the labour contexts within which they have operated. Foregrounding what he describes as a political economy

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approach (taken from Vincent Mosco [1995]), he nonetheless allows that 'screen industries' is a somewhat imperfect appellation, given his primary focus on film and TV production (to the relative exclusion, for instance, of animation and advertising), but it suffices to encompass an evolving 'ecology' of relations between government policies, producers, trade unions and the workers who have shaped industrial screen production in Ireland for over sixty years.

The dynamic and developing tensions between this ecology of relations and economic realities give the book a narrative impetus that belies its somewhat dusty title. Murphy offers a clear cataloguing of the individuals, organisations, statistics, policy reports and developments, even when, as so often, there are several years and name changes in between. The story broadly parallels the roller-coaster history of Ardmore Studios (established 1958), through various phases of crisis, survival and success and its eventual eclipse by newer, bigger studios such as Ashford Studios, Co Wicklow and Troy Studios in Limerick. It thus tracks the Irish screen industries as a late arrival, post-colonial start-up, to a diverse postmodern production centre currently experiencing a boom on all fronts: inward productions, employment opportunities and international critical acclaim. The historical approach to the often precarious, informal and internecine structures of the Irish audiovisual workforce provides an intriguing story of how a small nation industry developed its labour policies and practices through a combination of ingenuity, charm, lobbying and government support, while provoking reflections on contemporary issues such as training and education for the sector, access to the industry by outgroups and, ultimately Ireland's place within an increasingly globalised industry.

Structured over six chapters from 1960 to the present, the book traces its histories using a variety of sources. An early chapter offers new and fascinating insight into the production difficulties surrounding the shooting of *Of Human Bondage* (1963) when British producers found themselves at loggerheads with Irish unions about the number of Irish workers to be employed on the shoot at Ardmore. While early chapters draw on material somewhat familiar from Rockett *et al*, reference to Irish Transport Workers Union (ITGWU) reports and archives quickly brings to light many new facts and underappreciated insights. One example is the deft manner in which the Irish Film Workers Association IFWA (established 1972) migrated *en masse* to the film section of the ITGWU in 1974 to secure employment for their members on commercials being made in Ireland, having realised that 'TV advertising, with an annual production spend of over half a million pounds, could be the "bread and butter" of the film industry in Ireland.' (p.51) In response, and to provide a structure for negotiations with the newly organised film workers, the Film Producers Association (FPA – the forerunner of Screen Producers Ireland) was formed in June 1974, thereby establishing a structure of relations that would endure for decades and shape the industry to the present day. While, in his conclusion, Murphy notes that this archive material is poorly catalogued, incomplete, and limited to records that the union had decided to archive (p.38), its use throughout the text allows him to piece together a helpful narrative account of how the worker representative bodies not only evolved over this time period but also shaped the priorities and practices of the nascent industry.

Combining this information with a plethora of state or industry reports – ranging from the Huston report (1968) to Olsberg-SPI 'Cultural Dividend' (2023) (14 in total) - Murphy also finds additional context in interviews with over twenty former and present film workers. Peppered throughout the text, these offer first-hand accounts of working in the Irish screen industries and shed light on specific productions or moments of inflection. As with all oral histories, some are more valuable than others, by turns anecdotal or insightful.

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One of these is with RTÉ presenter, turned producer, Morgan O'Sullivan. While there is ample credit to many individual politicians, union officials and industry representatives throughout, O'Sullivan emerges as perhaps the single most impressive figure in the book, so relentlessly energetic, far-seeing and perhaps underappreciated has been his contribution to Irish film. Indeed, one longs for a single study that draws together the information and insights gathered here. In the early 1980s O'Sullivan made several trips to US studios to study TV production methods, and having secured a deal to produce a TV film, *Cry of the Innocent* (1980) for NBC, he convinced the state training authority AnCO and the IDA to fund a US training trip for his crew. He subsequently introduced working practices observed in the US at Ardmore and in 1986 concluded the 'MTM labour agreement' with the local film union. From a management point of view, writes Murphy, the MTM agreement 'sought to eliminate work practices drawn from UK filmmaking traditions in favour of a more flexible regime geared towards the needs of US TV production, introducing 14-hour workdays and a six-day week' (p.93). Far from balking at such practices the ITGWU was convinced of the merits of O'Sullivan's approach. An interview with a union official in the book confirms O'Sullivan's motivation to build momentum for an indigenous industry: 'his remit was not culture or history; his remit was work' (p.94).

Reading this background - focused on in-bound TV production and employment rather than the cultural arguments that dominated so much discussion (and lobbying) around Irish film in the 1990s - contextualises my own brief experience writing press materials for three seasons of *The Tudors* (2007-2010) at Ardmore studios. At a moment where, due to changes in the tax incentives, there was a sense of crisis in the local industry, Sullivan convinced US producers at Showtime networks that he could bring local experience and skills (crew, locations, skilled technical and craft workers in costume, production design, make-up etc.) previously gained on incoming US feature productions to bear on a large scale and complex period TV drama. With the resounding success of *The Tudors*, he embarked on the long-running *The Vikings* (2013-2020) and later *Vikings Valhalla* (2024-2024) at the purpose-built Ashford Studios, creating steady employment, training and professional experience at the highest standards, for almost two decades. There is more work to be done tracing that period and legacy.

The increasingly bigger budget productions O'Sullivan brought to Ireland during the 2000s anticipated, and then firmly positioned the country as a viable production base for incoming international TV drama production in the digital era. Murphy demonstrates that while the content boom ushered in new streams of financing and employment for the Irish screen industry, far from being a radical departure, it developed and built upon a deeply embedded willingness of screen workers and producers 'to adapt local practices to suit the requirements of mobile international screen capital' (p.213) that have been in evidence since the 1960s. An ironic, albeit entirely legitimate, response to such an upswing in activity has been the revival of workers' organisations - including a plethora of newly created Screen Guilds - that have argued for a redrawing of labour agreements.

Murphy explores in great detail the ongoing negotiations between unions and producers over several decades, including the preparation and significance of a slim but hugely important document known as 'The Blue Book'. Published by SIPTU in 1988 this text outlined employment regulations for general work on most audiovisual productions including 'rules around night-time and holiday work, with overtime rates ranging from time and a half to 3.67 times the standard hourly rate, arrangements

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for meal breaks, location work and travel time, along with minimum crewing levels for features, shorts and documentaries' (p.100). While contracts would increasingly be negotiated on a project basis ('all-in-deals'), the Blue Book nonetheless set a benchmark for negotiations and future agreements, even as union membership would steeply decline among a growing cohort of freelancers hired on a project by project basis. The booming economy for producers, and specifically for the companies in which Morgan O'Sullivan was involved, would however beget a reconstituted Irish Film Workers Association in 2015, mobilising an old name for a new era and bringing a renewed zest and belligerence to employer-employee relations. The revived IFWA claimed that pay/contract agreements had not kept up with contemporary employment legislation or working conditions and accused other film unions, especially SIPTU, of not having worker interests at heart. Specifically, they argued that sustained employment (several years and even decades in some cases) constituted the right to a 'permanent contract' – and all the rights accruing from that - rather than a series of fixed-term agreements. Murphy explores the lengthy, complex and bitter battle between the IWTW and O'Sullivan's companies in recent years and, bringing the book's focus right up to date, reports that in a landmark decision that is sure to have considerable future impact and consequences: the Work Relations Commission (WRC) awarded almost €450,000 against Metropolitan Films International Ltd to members of the union for breaches of rights in early 2024.

In a reflective conclusion, the author summarises what he sees as the achievements and limitations of his study and sets out possibilities for further research, including future histories of producer/worker organisations and screen guilds as well as the potential for case studies/oral histories of screen work practices. Acknowledging the wide timespan of the work's purview, he reiterates that a dearth of previous research required a necessarily broad focus and suggests that other research might be more selective - 'narrow and deep'. That may prove to be the case, and certainly the rapid growth and at times dizzying amount of activity in Ireland's audiovisual sector since the turn of the century (and especially since the shift from Bord Scannán na hÉireann to Screen Ireland in 2018) will demand and facilitate finer-grained studies than earlier histories grappled with. Such work might usefully follow the mixed methods approach used here, particularly the ethnographic, given the challenges future scholarship might have accessing the thousands of emails generated by today's business practices. There is also clearly room, for instance, for analysis of individual producers/production companies, other audiovisual sectors (animation, independent TV drama, advertising), or Ireland's well-established post-production sector, using similar methods deployed here. For now though, Murphy's book stands as a touchstone text in Irish production studies, offering a panoramic, deeply-researched, and highly readable history of Irish screenwork.

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