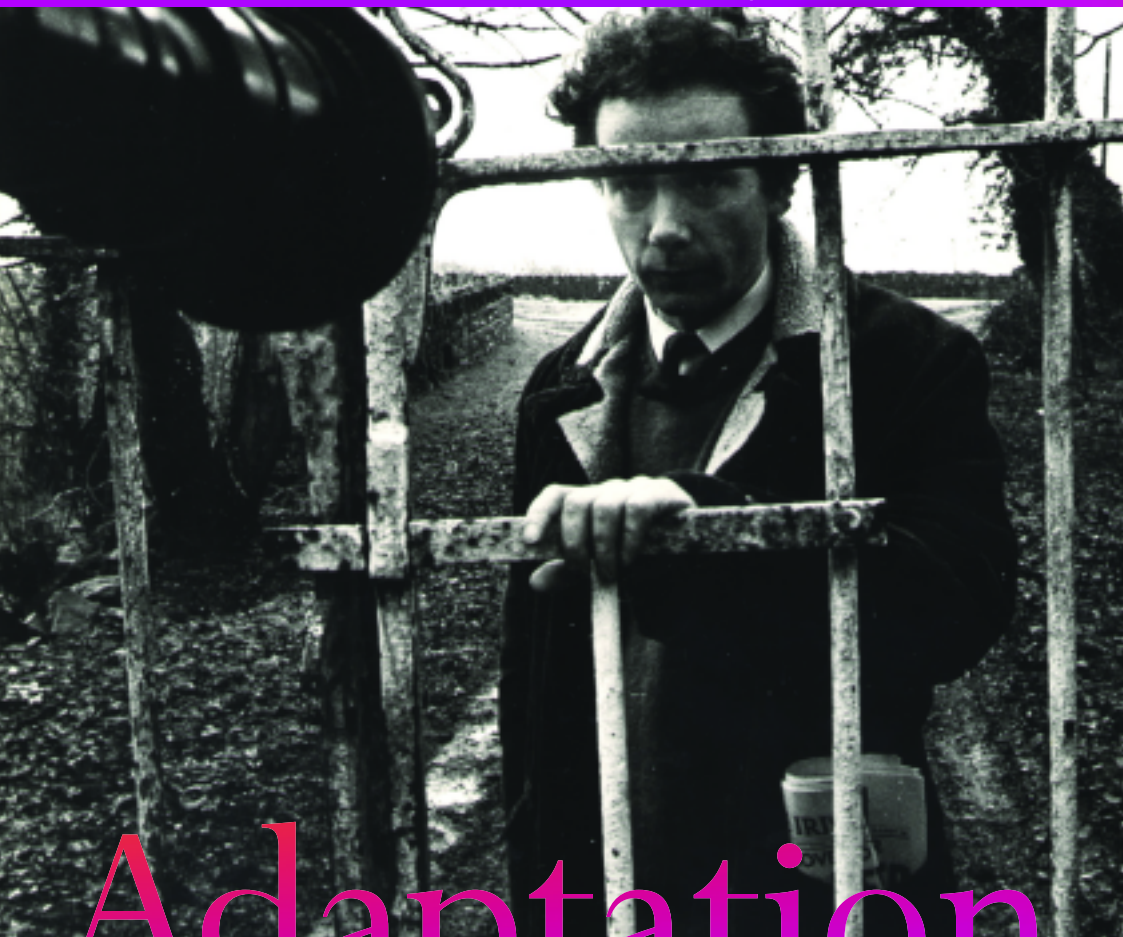


Leitrim Cinemobile

in association with the IRISH FILM ARCHIVE presents



# Adaptation

## McGahern On Film

Drumshanbo, Co Leitrim  
23 - 25 September 2005

[www.leitrimcinema.ie](http://www.leitrimcinema.ie)

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# Programme

## Friday 23rd

- 18.30 *A Private World*, Dir. Pat Collins 2005 (Documentary)  
20.30 *Wheels* 21mins Dir. Cathal Black 1976  
*Korea* 80mins Dir Cathal Black 1996 (35mm Projection)

## Saturday 24th

- 11.00 *Amongst Women* Episodes 1 and 2, Dir. Tom Cairns 1998  
14.00 *Swallows* 20 mins Dir. Michael O'Connell 2000  
*The Rockingham Shoot*, 59 mins Dir. Kieran Hickey 1987  
16.00 *Amongst Women* Episodes 3 and 4  
18.30 *A Private World* 52 mins Dir. Pat Collins 2005 (Documentary)  
20.30 *The Lost Hour*, 50 mins Dir. Sean Cotter 1982  
*The Key*, 47mins Dir. Tony Barry 1983

## Sunday 25th

- 11.00 *Amongst Women* Episodes 1 and 2  
14.00 *Swallows* 20 mins Dir. Michael O'Connell 2000  
*The Rockingham Shoot* Dir. Kieran Hickey 1987  
16.00 *Amongst Women* Episodes 3 and 4  
18.00 *The Lost Hour* 50 mins Dir. Sean Cotter 1982  
*The Key* 47mins Dir. Tony Barry 1983  
20.30 *Wheels* 21mins Dir. Cathal Black 1976  
*Korea* 80mins Dir Cathal Black 1995 (35mm Projection)

Screenings will be on DVD projection with the exception of *Korea* (35mm projection).

Individual screenings €7.00

Weekend ticket €30.00

For programme information contact 086-1569172/086-8221139

For bookings contact 087-9104532

The Cinemobile location is at The Mayflower Ballroom, Drumshanbo

# Introduction



When we approached John McGahern about this event, his response was characteristically economical but affirmative. "I have no objection and wish you good luck". This attitude reveals a relationship to these works which is remarkably lacking in possessiveness, as if they were the property of someone else.



It is the mark of the canny writer contemplating adaptation of their work to know that once the book rights have been assigned to the film-maker or the production company the blackguards tend to go off and do their own thing anyway. The film-maker like the reader inevitably has their own interpretation and one cannot control the interpretation. For the original writer to become involved in the process of adaptation can involve at best compromise or at worst the loss of the touch of the independent mind that created the work in the first place. Memories come to mind of the Clifford Odets character in the film *Barton Fink*, disappearing into a bleak Hollywood Hotel having been lured to Tinseltown by flattery and never to be seen again.



The arms-length approach also recognises that a successful adaptation not only requires faithfulness to the original but also the space for metamorphosis to occur from one medium to another. While McGahern's writing is full of imagery, his concern - as he has said many times - is primarily with words. A film's primary concern is with images.



One of the most popular cinematic adaptations of recent years was of Irvine Welch's celebrated novel *Trainspotting* (a directorial tour de force by *Rockingham Shoot* producer Danny Boyle). The book, which was written in the Edinburgh argot and set in that city's heroin scene was both powerful and unrelentingly grim, as befitted the subject matter. In adaptation, it became a stylised, music driven and very enjoyable cinematic roller-coaster. The film could be read as having reinforced, at least, 90's "heroin chique". In its elevation of style over content it departed sufficiently from its uncompromising origins for a commercial bank to be able to hijack it's "choose life" slogan: a consumerist vision the book had quite clearly set out to attack. Despite this major departure from the original, the producers needed the credibility of the book: in fact the "trainspotting" scene which gives the meaning to the title does not appear in the film rendering the title meaningless without the book.

With over sixty per cent of all movies coming from literary adaptations, it could be argued that cinema has not done for literature what literature has done for cinema. In fact, books are increasingly marketed as films in waiting, their authors as star performers. This in turn has undermined media-shy talent, the writer who believes that the book is what matters and not the author.

Readers of John McGahern's work can make up their own minds the extent to which the films have departed from the original works. For lovers of the books, it will be impossible not to make comparisons. The exception in this body of work is of course the aforementioned *Rockingham Shoot*, an original work for screen by the writer.

The films, assembled for this event with our partners at the Irish Film Archive, represent a significant body of work in their own right, all the more so because the years in which they were made were sparse years for Irish film-makers. The work drew the finest of film-making talent, not least in the person of Kieran Hickey director of *The Rockingham Shoot* who is fondly remembered as one of the ground-breaking makers of Irish television drama. His untimely death in 1993 cut short this contribution. On the big-screen, McGahern has found his chief exponent in arguably the most natural directorial talent of his generation, Cathal Black, from whom there is undoubtedly more to come.

Untimely also describes the departure from the scene of screen talents such as Donal McCann, Pat Leavy and Tony Doyle who feature strongly in the work along with the best actors of their generation and indeed the next: watch out for an excellent performance from Tom Murphy, star of last year's Irish cinema hit *Adam and Paul*, playing the child lead in *The Key* and *The Lost Hour*.

It is an honour for Leitrim Cinemobile to bring this work together. In addition to our ongoing work of bringing the widest range of cinema to the county which includes close to 25 World Cinema titles annually presented regularly throughout the county, it is our hope that having raised the issue of the necessary if problematic relationship of cinema and literature that we can continue this exploration in years to come.

Our thanks to Sean KIELTY whose passion and singular vision has driven this cinemobile project and to John McGahern for the inspiration and generosity of spirit to let things happen.

Johnny Gogan,  
*Chair, Leitrim Cinemobile*

## Thanks

Further thanks are of course due to Sunniva O'Flynn, Aoife Coughlan and Kaz O'Connell of the Irish Film Archive, Bandit Films, Leitrim County Council, The Arts Council, The Glens Centre Manorhamilton, Red Eye Design, The Mayflower Ballroom Drumshanbo, Luke Gibbons, Jo Wheatley and RTE, the film-makers; B.B.C N. Ireland, Parallel Films, Hummingbird Films, Harvest Films, Cathal Black Films, The Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealíonn. Danny McLoughlin, Courtyard Studios, Ramada Hotel and Suites at Lough Allen, Rose McGovern and our main sponsor Bel Rainsafe.

## Leitrim Cinemobile

Administrative Offices

Community and Enterprise Dept.

Aras an Chontae, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim

Driver Projectionist: Tommy Aherne

Event Manager: Kate MacCarthy

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Bookings 087-9104532

Ramada Hotel and Suites 071-9640100

Board of Directors: Lelia Doolan, Joseph Gilhooly (Company Secretary), Johnny Gogan (Chair), Gerry Kelly, Paddy MacDonald, Kathleen McCaffrey, Sunniva O'Flynn

*For those looking at public transport options there are regular Irish Rail and Bus Services to nearby Carrick-on-Shannon. The Festival will be happy to assist with connections to and from Drumshanbo.*

The Glens  
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# The Leitrim Cinemobile

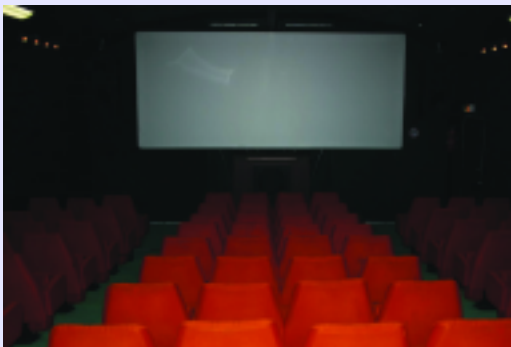
It is perhaps ironic that one of the country's most ambitious ventures into municipal cinema should occur in the country's most rural county. The brain-child of Leitrim-man Sean Kieilty, Leitrim Cinemobile - *Aisling Gheal* - raised its start-up finance through a country-wide competition to commemorate the 1998 centenary of Local Government in Ireland.



In June 2001 the cinema commenced a weekly service to the county's main towns of Ballinamore, Drumshanbo, Manorhamilton and Mohill. With the closure of the county's last remaining single-screen cinema - Carrick-on-Shannon's Gaiety Cinema in 2004 - the service was extended to the county town.



One of the most successful strands for the cinema is its Autumn - Spring seasons of World Cinema, organised in conjunction with Manorhamilton's Glens Centre and Carrick-on-Shannon Film Society. This Autumn will see this service extended to Drumshanbo, Sunday nights. In addition, the cinema also provides a service to festivals, schools, hospitals, community and access groups. The most ambitious of these events has been the participation in the July 2005 Earagail Arts Festival in Donegal for which the cinema programmed a line up of Irish films with a particular Donegal appeal.



The cinema seats one hundred people comfortably, has full disability access and is operated by long-standing driver-projectionist Tommy Aherne. State-of-the-art 35mm projection is combined with DVD and video. The cinema is funded by Leitrim County Council which has been providing an important lead to local authorities nationwide who are increasingly being encouraged by film promotion bodies such as The Arts Council to get involved in Cultural or World Cinema provision.



## Korea 1996 80 mins

Production Company: **Cathal Black Films/Black Star Films**

Director: **Cathal Black**

Producer: **Darryl Collins**

Screenplay: **Joe O'Byrne**

Adapted from the (3 page) short story of the same name, *Korea* is a seething feature drama which tells the story of a young man and his father who make their living fishing for eels in the still waters of the rural lakelands. Upon finding that the fishing laws are soon to be changed, the father decides it's time for the son to move to America. Having long wanted to leave home, the son is now uncertain, his doubts reinforced by his developing relationship with a local girl whose own family have paid the price of emigration to America.

Shot in Cavan and the Dromahair area of Leitrim, *Korea* received a successful cinema release in Ireland on its release and secured a number of prestigious awards including the Audience Award at Seattle and the Asta Nielsen Award at Copenhagen. Donal Donnelly captures the lead perfectly as the troubled father who rules the roost, but appears as a remarkable non-entity in the outside world. The young leads, Andrew Scott and Fiona Molony, rightfully deserve their plaudits under the tutelage of one of the country's most accomplished directors of actors for the screen.

Cast: *John Doyle* Donal Donnelly *Eamon Doyle* Andrew Scott *Una Moran* Fiona Molony *Ben Moran* Vass Anderson *Mrs. Moran* Eileen Ward *Mick Farrell* Pat Fitzpatrick *Barman* Christopher Callery *Mrs. Maguire* Sadie Maguire *Postman* Peter McNamee *Dr. Whelan* Gus Ward *Luke Moran* Stephen Holland *Mary Doyle* Siubhan Dooney *Priest* Bill Hickey *American attache* Cathal Farrelly *Altar boy 1* Gary Reilly *Altar boy 2* Charles McGuinness *Veterans* Franci Smith, Dan Moynihan, Mick O'Brien *Sean Nos Singer* Catriona Canavan *Farmer 1* Tommy McArdle *Farmer 2* Hugh O'Brien *Ticket Agent* Jim Williamson *ESB speaker* Micheal Thornton *Accordion Player* Micheal O'Brien *Execution Boy* David Walsh *Older Prisoner* Maurice Keogh *British soldier 1* Marcus Cunihan *British Soldier 2* John D'Alton *Fisherman 1* Nigel Roffe *Fisherman 2* Sean McIntyre *Ice digger* Brian Reilly *Truckman* Sean Donnelly





## Wheels 1976 21 mins

Production Company: The Arts Council of Ireland

Director: Cathal Black

Producer: Cathal Black

Cathal Black's debut short film, shot by future director in his own right Joe Comerford, is an adaptation of the *Nightlines* short story of the same title. It tells the story of a midlands small farmer's son who returns to his birthplace from the city. His return is fraught with frustrations and bitter memories. His father remains hostile towards him but his stepmother is sympathetic. His return to the city is done so with a degree of relief, but a sense of frustration at being unable to move beyond the confined life he has made for himself.

*Narrator/Son* Brendan Ellis *Lightfoot* Paul Bennett *Labourer* Tom Jordan  
*Father* Michael Duffy *Rose* Maura Keeley *Priest* Alec Doran *Porters* Don Foley,  
Peter Caffrey, Paul Britton, Johnny Murphy, Con Weber, Grainne Weber Lorchhain  
O Treasaigh

*"At the time I thought that McGahern's 'The Dark' was a very revealing and original work. I thought that there was a dark heart to the country that wasn't being expressed but McGahern seemed to bring this out. The film was about your parents aspirations for you not necessarily being your own and about your parents wanting to become children again. The wheels had turned full circle and now the younger generation had to look after their parents as a reward for having brought them up. The son regrets this and disappears into the twilight world of the city. McGahern's writing at this time was very nihilistic, especially the short stories in 'Nightlines' (which also contains 'Korea'). This is to me the best writing he has ever done. Wheels was close to a lot of what I was going through in my personal life, particularly when, much to my father's disgust, I left RTE for the insecurity of film-making."*

Cathal Black in interview with Vincent Browne for *Film West*, 1996



# Amongst Women 1998

## 4-Part Serial

Production Company: Parallel Films for BBC N. Ireland, RTE and The Irish Film Board/An Bord Scannan na HEireann

Director: Tom Cairns

Producers: Jonathan Curling, Colin Tucker

Screenwriter: Adrian Hodges

"As he weakened, Moran became afraid of his daughters". Thus begins the story of the War of Independence veteran Michael Moran and his relationship in latter life with his off-spring. The adaptation for television proved to be one of the last major screen appearances of Tony Doyle in the commanding central role.

In **Episode 1**, Moran is presented as a man who tries to put right in his family what he thinks is wrong with the world. His children struggle to live up to his expectations.

**Episode 2** sees Maggie re-united with Luke in London where she meets her first love. Back at Great Meadows Moran's other daughters confront their futures and begin to test the bonds of love and duty.

**Episode 3** features young Michael's infatuation with Nell Morahan and his developing reaction to the dominance of his father. Whilst Michael strikes out for freedom, Luke's star is rising, Sheila has met her match and Maggie is heading for married life.

In the **Final Episode**, the occasion of Sheila's wedding offers a last chance for Luke and Moran to be reconciled. For Moran's daughters, his decline reminds them that they were never able to leave him.

Cast: Tony Doyle, Ger Ryan, Susan Lynch, Geraldine O'Rawe, Anne Marie Duff, Brian F. O'Byrne, Demian McAdam

*Episodes 1 and 2 will be screened together as will Episodes 3 and 4*



# The Lost Hour 1982

## TV Drama 50 mins

Production Company: RTE

Director: Sean Cotter

Producer: Sean Cotter

Screenplay: Carlo Gebler

Adapted from *The Leavetaking*, the story concerns a young boy's experience of his mother's illness and death from cancer in 1950s rural Ireland as well as his relationship with his father, Sergeant Moran.



Cast: *Sergeant Moran* Donal Moran *Kate Moran* Kate Binchy *Patrick Moran* Tom Murphy  
*Mrs Rooney* Eibhlin Ni Mhurchu *Michael Rooney* Geoffrey Golden *The Specialist* Cecil Barror  
*Young Nurse* Catherine Byrne *Guard Mullins* Patrick Layde *Mrs Mullins* Sheila Flitton  
*Bridget Aine Ni Mhuiri* *Mrs Flynn* Maire Hastings *Maggie* Gabrielle Keenan  
*Ned* Brendan O Duill *Ned's Helper* Paddy Long *Priest* Seamus Forde  
*First Fisherman* Larry Murphy *Second Fisherman* Gerry O'Brien

# The Key 1983

## TV Drama 47 mins

Production Company: RTE

Director: Tony Barry

Producer: Tony Barry

Screenplay: Carlo Gebler

With the re-casting of Sergeant Moran with Donal McAnn and Tom Murphy's reappearance as Patrick Moran, this is a sequel to *The Lost Hour* and is based on the short story *The Bomb Box*. While set in the period after the death of wife and mother it displays a beguiling humour, most of it at the expense of Sergeant Moran, reinforced by a lightness of touch in the direction.



Cast: *Sergeant Moran* Donal McCann *Patrick* Tom Murphy *Garda Bannon* Darragh O'Malley  
*Dr. Neary* Robert Carrickford *Mrs. Ryan* Pat Leavy *Mrs. Wilson* Beryl Fagan

The existence of these two films was not known to The Irish Film Archive until, after a tip-off from Luke Gibbons, an enquiry to Jo Wheatley in the RTE Film Library confirmed their existence.

"I left the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield in 1979. The first job I got was adapting three McGahern pieces for RTE. I did the three but for some mysterious reason only two were made. I liked McGahern's prose hugely then and have seen no reason since to revise my opinions. His writing was and is clean and clear, lucid, sparse, direct and always emotionally honest. Turning McGahern's prose into television was a pleasure: good work may frustrate the adaptor because in the process of translation from the page to the screen things must be lost, but it was hardly onerous. The work fizzed and crackled and was full of energy and all I had to do was to re-imagine what already existed in a new visual form. It was a delightful introduction to my professional working life as a writer".

Carlo Gebler

# The Rockingham Shoot 1987 59 mins

Production Company: BBC N. Ireland  
Director: Kieran Hickey  
Producer: Danny Boyle  
Screenplay: John McGahern

"Pheasants for the peasants" declares the film's protagonist Aidan O'Reilly to the pragmatic local gardai as they receive their annual gift from The Big House. Scripted as an original work for screen by John McGahern, this one-off tv drama - made by BBC Northern Ireland for the channel's Screenplay Series - is set in rural Ireland in the 1950s. Reilly is an intensely nationalistic teacher (played by Bosco Hogan) with a deep loathing for British society, a loathing that explodes into violence when he learns that some of his pupils have skipped school to work at Rockingham for a pheasant shoot at which the British ambassador is a guest.



The film was directed by the late Kieran Hickey, one of the major Irish tv dramatists. Hickey's earlier work included the ground-breaking *Exposure* and *A Criminal Conversation*. *The Rockingham Shoot* was produced by Danny Boyle, then in-house producer with BBC Northern Ireland, who went on to direct the acclaimed *Trainspotting*.

Cast: *Aidan O'Reilly* Bosco Hogan *The Canon* Niall Tobin *Mrs O'Reilly* Marie Kean *The Magician* Tony Rohr *The Sergeant* Oliver Maguire *John Reilly* Ian mcElhinney *Mary Armstrong* Hilary Reynolds *Guard Mullins* John Olohan *Guard Casey* Gerard McSorley

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# Swallows 2000 20 mins

Production Company: A Boy Named Sue Productions  
in association with Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology  
Director: Michael O'Connell  
Producer: Michael McCauley  
Screenplay: Michael O'Connell

Filmed in black and white and made as a student piece this short film deals with an isolated rural Garda who is reminded of his passion for music when he meets a violin-playing Detective. This encounter throws the tedium of the Garda's existence into sharp relief.

Cast: *Sergeant* Sean Colgan *Surveyor* Simon O'Gorman *Bea* Una Minto



# A Private World 2005 52mins

Production Company: Hummingbird Films/Harvest Films for RTE

Director: Pat Collins

Producers: Tina Morgan, Philip King

In this minimalist and intimate documentary, John McGahern speaks of the family events that inspired his 1974 novel *The Leavetaking* and brings us into the landscape of the County Leitrim farm where he lives and writes. "You need to have a good, boring life in which nothing much happens except what's going on in your head. You want no excitements..." The film includes archive footage from the 1960s (more swinging times perhaps) when the writer began to be published and is enriched by the observant cinematography of Donal Gilligan. In one of the film's most unusual moments we step out of the Leitrim backwoods into a Tokyo subway, the writer looking like he might have just popped out for a message.

John McGahern, *Private World*

*I like a thing that Chekhov said: "When a writer takes a pen into his hand he accuses himself of unanswerable egotism and all he can do with decency after that is to bow!" I also think that the only difference between the writer and the reader is that each of us has a private world which others cannot see and that it's with that private world that we all read. It's a spiritual, private world. And the only difference between the writer and the reader is that he (the writer) has the knack or talent to be able to dramatise that private world and turn it into words. But it's the same private world that each of us possesses. Joyce once described the piano as a coffin of music and I see the book as a coffin of words. That book, in fact, doesn't live again until it finds a reader and you get as many versions of the book as the number of readers it finds.*

From *Studies* an Irish Quarterly review 2001

# Mythic Patterns

by Brian Leyden

This appreciation of works for the screen written by or based on the stories of John McGahern is as much a means of making innovative use of Leitrim's mobile cinema, the *Aisling Gheal*, as it is a celebration of the writer's contribution to Irish film and television. Although the enterprise is a timely and heartfelt tribute illuminating another facet of the work of an internationally renowned writer who chooses to live in Foxfield, Co. Leitrim, there is the intention also to help consolidate the future of what is currently the only dedicated cinema operating in the county.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect, by combining genuinely fervent with underlying economic motives, the occasion is in keeping with that time-honoured marriage between enjoyment and commerce, wholesome fun and filthy lucre, the film industry – a business from which John McGahern has, for the most part, kept his prosecraft at a careful and patrician remove.

Yet the themes that inform the writer's work are in many ways cinematic. Reviewing the recent *Irish University Review Special Issue: John McGahern*,<sup>2</sup> Liam Harte notes the constants of his fiction across five decades have been 'the mythic patterning of mundane experience, the revelation of the emblematic through the particular',<sup>3</sup> – each of McGahern's works executed within a small but universally knowable world: precisely the qualities that make great cinema.

Now it's hardly possible to mention mythic patterning and cinema in the one breath without your next utterance being the name, Joseph Campbell. Campbell, an American academic who died in 1987, was an authority on world mythology whose guiding idea was the 'commonality of themes in world myths pointing to a constant requirement in the human psyche for a centring in terms of deep principles'.<sup>4</sup>

According to Campbell, what each one of us is looking for is not the meaning of life (another constant in the work of McGahern) but the 'experience of being alive'. And if dream is a personal experience of the deeper grounds of being, then myth is the society's dream. Myth, therefore, connects us with the mystery that we are in a manner that brings us into harmony with the concerns of our society.

However, it is Campbell's belief that the ancient mythical symbols, figures, the mystery tales, the rites of instruction, initiation and transformation have lost their force so that nowadays 'there is no such society anymore as the gods once supported'.<sup>5</sup> Enlightenment ideals have usurped the relevance and efficacy of mythic story telling in practically all but one domain. It is only in the cinema, where screenwriters and directors have adopted Campbell's theories wholesale, that mass audiences still share and feel primordially moved by what amounts to the bedrock myth representing the most elemental human response to the riddle of life: the journey of the hero.

The hero's journey has many and complex manifestations and ramifications, but in essence it is the quest of the individual to overcome the dark passions thwarting him or her from coming to maturity. The individual is driven to confront and transcend his or her limitations by mastering the irrational and darker impulses in their nature and by acquiring greater resources of character to face down fear and live life to its fullest potential. In more matter of fact terms, this is the hard road to becoming oneself, and it is a road on which John McGahern's characters in his stories and screen adaptations often stumble or become enchained along the way.

To put these abstract notions in more concrete terms I recall how in mid-May 2004, I was working on a script for a radio documentary about the closing of the last of the original single-screen cinemas in County Leitrim,<sup>6</sup> when I became preoccupied with the question of what made going to the cinema so enjoyable? Even the most dedicated cinemagoers found it hard to explain precisely why they loved ‘the pictures’, the flicks.

Turning to my own experience of living in the rural hinterlands of Leitrim and Roscommon as a teenager I remembered the awful psychological and physical isolation – mentally and geographically I was occupying McGahern territory, albeit without being familiar with his work, owing to it being banned at first and then later dismissed locally as the work of ‘a pervert’ who having written some caustic home truths about the place he was from, I was told, he had ‘let people down’.

Growing up in a small community at that time, the biggest gathering of young people outside school all week happened after mass on Sunday. And for the rest of the time I sweated my schooldays away in a brutalised and clueless daze, sucking on the top of my biro for inspiration like it was the salmon of knowledge, and still having my hands blistered with slaps from the sally rod or the sharp edge of a two-foot wooden ruler.

Against this spirit-numbing existence the deep, dark well of the cinema auditorium was like entering my true church. The curtains rolled back and I experienced a quickening of expectations as the lights dimmed and the projector beam infused the dark like a cheap and potent, gut-level tonic for loneliness and boredom: a luminous elixir for being at a loose end and craving entertainment. And perhaps that’s what going to see a film is and ever should be: happy diversion.

This thought is reinforced by my earliest cinema memory of the parish priest in Arigna, Fr. Cummins, who organised a bus to bring a bunch of neighbours, my mother and me to the pictures as an Easter treat (or duty) to see an edifying Biblical epic. Falling short of the spiritually improving impact the film was expected to have on me, my head began to droop about the same time the apostles nodded off on Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, and I was carried snoring and crusty-eyed with sleep from “The Greatest Story Ever Told”.

My next trip to the cinema was to see agent 007, reassured by the neighbour who’d given me a lift that the new James Bond film was ‘a humdinger.’

And sure enough, when James Bond strode on screen he took aim and fired an imaginary bullet at the onlooker that pierced my imagination. From the opening sequence I was hooked on the sham heroics of the dashing, larger than life screen hero, with his gadgets and glib remarks; able to rescue dangerous situations in unexpected ways, he was impossibly proficient in everything yet he too possessed shades of the born cinema lover’s obsessive and solitary instincts.

Utter hokum at one level, the film brought home to me the possibility that I might also live heroically, love passionately and if called for, die well. Though these noble ideals didn’t stop me from rushing out the door at the end of the film before the fluttering tricolour appeared and everyone had to stand for the National Anthem.

Nonetheless, the silver screen struck me as having the quality of a window on the world; when the velvet curtains opened life and colour flooded in. And going back further in time, it’s possible that the enormous popularity of cinema in Ireland in the mid 1950s<sup>7</sup> not only inflamed and groomed a new level of romantic courtship and sophistication within the population, it made Irish audiences painfully aware of the contrast between their frugal existence and lives of infinitely more glamour and opportunity lived by the screen characters. Although it may be more realistic to believe that if economic circumstances had been better at home people would have remained in Ireland and worked here for a proper wage regardless of movie portrayals of impossibly lavish and sophisticated lifestyles abroad.



And there is something closer to the truth of what I felt as a young cinemagoer in the notion expressed by Norman Mailer that 'it's as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream'.<sup>8</sup> Exploring this idea further, Mailer goes on to suggest that, 'Quintessence of the elusive nature of film, the movie star is like a guide to bring us through the adventures of a half-conscious dream. It is even possible the movie star gives focus to themes of the imagination so large, so romantic, and daring that they might never encounter reality. How can an adolescent,' Mailer continues, 'have any real idea whether he will ever have sex with a beautiful woman or fight for his life.' Such events are so grand they may take years of psychic preparation'.<sup>9</sup> And what Mailer is suggesting finally is the possibility that the dream life of the film exists not only to 'provide escape but to prepare the psyche' for remarkable moments which most likely will never come.

Wherever the truth rests, the inescapable mythical patterning of life-experience operates on a spectrum ranging from the harmless fairytale to silver screen heroics to Freudian dream interpretation to full-scale religious doctrine. McGahern, who is acclaimed for the bareness of his prose style is a mythic pattern maker too, though he works at the most subtle, spare and 'existential' end of the mythical continuum, and pursues his themes with a dedication as 'implacable' as a small town guard out to get you. Or to put it another way, John McGahern uses his pen like a Hilti gun; what he nails stays nailed.

Often in his work there is a central figure whose determination to do what is right blinds her, or mostly him, to the oppressive and brutal hurt caused by actions motivated by what are perceived as good or at least moral intentions. And McGahern is unsparing in his exposure of human weakness, foibles and unintentional or deliberate wrong-headedness. Another of his major themes is power: power as a lurking threat, and power lost by its exercise – often through an irrational eruption of violence of feeling or actual physical violence. But there is too a constant yearning. The moments of greatest intensity and eloquence in his work happen where the greatest effort is made by one or other of his characters to open their hearts to the transcendental.

Yet at the very moment when revelation, or transfiguration even, is closest – less than a lover's heartbeat or the next tick of a wristwatch regulator away – this is the very moment when the mystery eludes realisation. Stubbornly refusing the hocus-pocus and unsubstantiated consolations of institutionalised religion, and dismissing too the self-aware mimicking of acceptable social mores and pieties of more pragmatic and crafty natures conforming to what's expected of them in order to suit their own ends (an unfailing source of black humour in McGahern's work), his heroes are not equipped to embrace the transcendental alone without props, and neither have they the capacity to go beyond the bounds of what would be considered socially acceptable behaviour within a narrowly provincial society founded on small farming, mass-going and decent inclinations.

More painful still is the fact that having made the effort to open their hearts, only to be abandoned on the cusp of the revivifying mothering embrace of the transcendental, his heroes are left all the more bereft – as when the narrator at the end of the short story *Gold Watch* says: "I stood in that moonlit silence as if waiting for some word or truth, but none came, none ever came; and I grew amused at that part of myself that still expected something, standing like a fool out there in all the moonlit silence..."<sup>10</sup>

Given how often his narrators find that life has no meaning other than what is, 'increasing or diminishing as it changes',<sup>11</sup> it may seem that this delving into mythical patterning and the age-old hero's journey is too grandiose to apply to work as locally rooted and earthy as McGahern's, or the existing offshoot screen adaptations of his stories in: *Wheels, The Lost Hour, Swallows, The Key, Korea, and Amongst Women*, or even his own screenplay specifically written for television, *The Rockingham Shoot*.

But in *Korea*, for example, I think straight away of that moment where a coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes is ferried out onto an Irish lake for an island burial, a scene compressing serene natural beauty, old blood feuds, trans-Atlantic politics, lost dreams, love, death and grief and even an Irish-style Greek Chorus offering wry commentary; Cathal Black has rendered on film a set-piece so profoundly lyrical and timelessly cinematic that it is imbued with that boundless power of the transcendental.

And there are many other powerfully moving and multiply layered moments and scenes in McGahern's work, in both his writing and the screen adaptations of his stories, each providing what his narrators so often yearn for but miss by a hair's breadth: those imaginative awakenings that summon us to full and openhearted human maturity.

#### Notes:

1. In the Golden Age of Irish cinema in the mid-nineteen fifties there were five cinemas in County Leitrim: the Gaiety in Carrick-on-Shannon, The Lyric in Ballinamore, The Castle in Manorhamilton, The Ritz in Mohill (with parking for bicycles) and The Roxy in Drumshanbo, (Billy Gilligan, 'Carrick-on-Shannon's Cinema Paradisio', in *Carrick-on-Shannon Remembered Vol. 1*, CK-on-Shannon and District Historical Society, 1998.
2. John Brannigan (ed., publisher) *Irish University Review Special Issue: John McGahern*, 2005.
3. *Irish Times*, Weekend Review, Sat July 9th 2005.
4. Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, 1988, p.xvi.
5. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, 1993, p.387
6. Produced by Lorelei Harris *The Closing of the Gaiety Cinema in Carrick-on-Shannon* was broadcast on the 30th June 04 on RTE Radio One.
7. In 1934 there were 190 cinemas in the Republic of Ireland with annual admissions of 18,250,000; by 1954 annual admission peaked at 54,100,000 (Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950*, Gill & Macmillan, 2004).
8. Norman Mailer, *The Spooky Art*, Little Brown, 2003, p207.
9. *Ibid*, p207
10. John McGahern, *The Collected Short Stories*, Faber & Faber Lt, 1993, p.225.
11. Tellingly, perhaps, McGahern in this passage writes 'what was'... becoming 'only what is'.

# The Irish Film Archive

In 1986, recognising the importance of protecting Ireland's moving-image heritage, the **Irish Film Institute (IFI)** - the agency charged with the promotion of film in Ireland - established what has grown to become the national film collection - **Irish Film Archive**. Since that time the I.F.A. has carried out a mission to acquire, preserve and make available Ireland's moving image heritage building up a collection of approximately 20,000 cans of film. This is work predominantly made in or about Ireland, or by Irish producers abroad. A complementary collection of documents, posters, and images are held in the document collection and the **Tiernan MacBride** library (also part of the Archive). These collections are held in custom-built climate-controlled vaults at the Irish Film Institute premises in Temple Bar, designed specially for viewers' access and the long-term preservation of film materials.

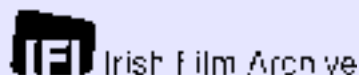
The Archive collection is a unique cultural and historical resource reflecting indigenous film production from 1897 to the present day. Amateur films, newsreels, sporting and social events are preserved alongside feature films and documentaries. Important national figures such as Behan, Beckett, Geldof, Collins and de Valera are all represented, as are the most important social, political and historical events of the 20th century. The material safe-guarded by the Archive is a vivid and tangible document of Ireland's past and present and chronicles the development of modern Ireland at a time of unprecedented social and political change.

We endeavour to make our collections as accessible to the public as possible and have regular screenings at the IFI and at venues throughout Ireland, including the national and Leitrim Cinemobiles. Irish film is brought to worldwide audiences through festival work and 'Reel Ireland', a touring package that includes new as well as archive titles. **Reel Ireland reaches venues from Sydney to Singapore and provides international audiences with a chance to enjoy the best in Irish cinema.**

Film is an important part of Irish culture and the Irish Film Archive collections are a valuable national resource, of benefit to everyone, not just students of film. Preserving a visual record of our activities and endeavours will allow future generations to understand and connect with their past. The things we have chosen to record and the stories that we have committed to film enable an exploration of our cultural identity. We at the Irish Film Archive will continue working to make sure Ireland's moving image heritage is meticulously preserved and available for current and future generations to enjoy.

*Kasandra O'Connell, Head of The Irish Film Archive, Irish Film Institute*

Website [www.irishfilm.ie](http://www.irishfilm.ie)  
Contact the Archive at [admin@irishfilm.ie](mailto:admin@irishfilm.ie)





# Adaptation

by Joe O'Byrne

It is now quite a few years since I did the adaptation of *Korea*, and as with most things then and still now in the film business it came about in a roundabout way. Cathal Black had been planning to make a short film of the story, and during a chance meeting, he mentioned the project to me, and the idea was mooted whether it could be turned into a feature film. I thought, of course, why not. Every film starts out as a germ of an idea, gets expanded into a story, then into a script. So why should a short story not also undergo that process?

Naturally, when you look at the short story *Korea*, the one thing you will conclude is that it is indeed short. It is the journey of a father and son on a boat out onto a lake. This would be the climax scene, but everything else leading up to this would have to be written. But in reading the story, the thing that hits you, is how dense it is, how sparse, how detailed in its economy it is. Delving into the story, it was possible to trawl through the many details, and use them as hooks for the writing of the events of the story of the film that would lead up to the final climactic scene. But it would also be necessary to add components to the story, add sub-plots that would allow the story to expand to the necessary length for a feature film.

The normal approach in the film business, particularly in Hollywood, is you buy up raw material, such as novels, short stories, even people's lives, then the attitude often is, you may do as you wish with the raw material, develop it in any way you want. This, however, wasn't how we wanted to proceed. It was a beautiful short story by John McGahern, and we wanted to be faithful to the spirit and content of the original.

It might seem odd to state this, but *Korea* is a romance, if a very muted one. In the short story, the central character of John Doyle, is a man of the land, a man of the lake. In his strong attachment to the lake, to the fishing, there is great passion, great romance. He is also a man who has lost his wife, and who still vividly remembers their honeymoon on Howth Head. He also has a great attachment to his son, and this becomes the crux of the story, the terrible conflict with which he is faced.

John Doyle a man of a now almost forgotten time, when children were one's offspring, but also one's assets. It is hard to believe nowadays, when parents can feel like the servants of their children, that at one time children were counted and accounted. The more children one had, either to work, or to export abroad to send home remittances, the wealthier a family was. John Doyle only has the one son. If this son were to leave, he, as a widower, would be left on his own. But economic circumstances force his hand. He is to lose his fishing licence, so that the fishing can be served up to tourists, and this means his small farm will no longer support father and son.

This would have been a fairly common set of events at the time, but McGahern pulls a master stroke in the way he draws world events into the story. Obviously set around 1950, one of the principal events in the world at the time was the war in Korea, hence the title. Many Irish people who emigrated to the United States at the time might have been unaware that when they swore allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, Uncle Sam had the right to come calling. And for quite a few he did. The son of a family in the village had answered the call, and paid the ultimate price. It is arguably one of the most poignant and beautiful moments in Irish cinema, as John and Eamon Doyle join the convoy of boats with the coffin draped in the American flag across the lake to the island graveyard.



It is then at the ensuing wake that John Doyle learns of the insurance payout that the American military make for soldiers killed in action. It is a bitter twist, a moment of fierce calculation, as John Doyle transforms his son from offspring to asset. This is how we have expanded and visualised the hook, the clue that McGahern gives in the story as to the reason for the murderous tension between father and son as they slowly progress out onto the lake. There were a number of other strands we developed and added, but all were part of the attempt to tease out a complete story from the cryptic clues offered by the short story.

McGahern's story is of it's time and timeless. Clearly he was drawing from events of that period, but also he was creating a story that has at its heart the questions: what price love? what price family? Nowadays, we in Ireland are no longer the subjects of such a brutal choice. We have moved up in the world, we are a society of affluence, and those that went abroad in times past now have the option to come home, just as going abroad to work is now generally a matter of choice. However, our new economy has drawn people from many nations who may be coming from societies or countries which are experiencing what we did in those dark days. We know of countries where children, girls are sold into slavery to feed the Western World's demand for paid sex. We know of countries riven by strife, by political upheaval. And the sight of a coffin draped in the Stars and Stripes is now a common sight, as American troops suffer casualties in unwise wars in far flung places.

Stories, cinema, can entertain. They can enchant. They can give one pause to think. John McGahern's *Korea* is one such story. Cathal Black's film does this in equal measure. What makes them more than just of their time, however, is their romance, their passion, in the muted key one associates with McGahern's writing. The task in doing the adaptation, was to do justice to his vision, and at the same time to create the basis for a film that would live and breathe in its own right.

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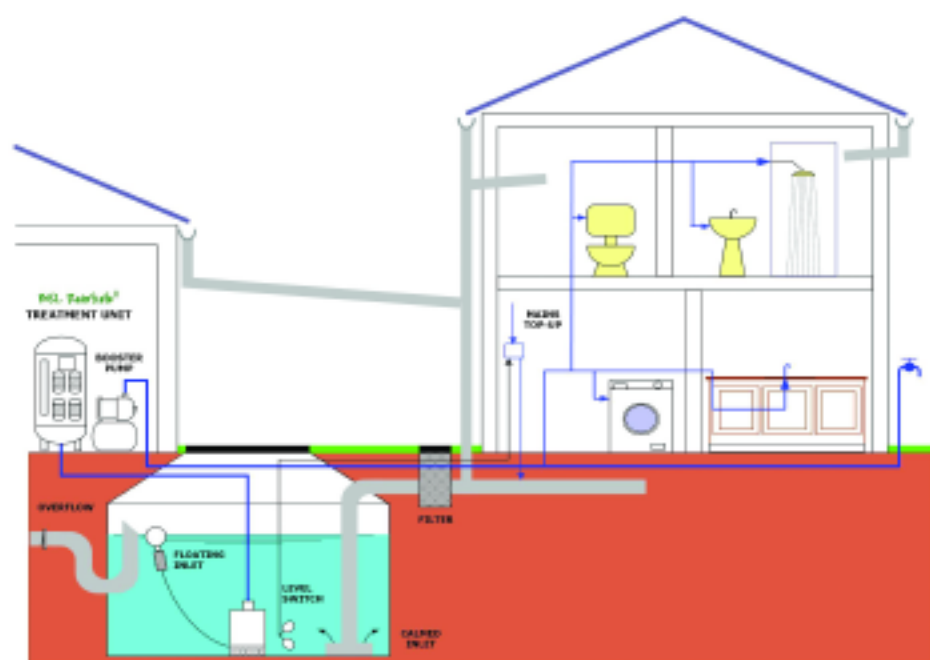
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