

E. Guillermo Iglesias Díaz. 2013. *Cine, espacio urbano e identidades (trans)nacionales: The Commitments y Trainspotting*. Sevilla: ArCiBel Editores. 451 pp. ISBN: 978-84-15335-50-4.

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To address questions such as nation and nationalism in the age of postcolonial globalization and in the present context of European (de)construction is a risky enterprise that Guillermo Iglesias Díaz embarks upon through interdisciplinary research and which culminates in this intellectually engaging book.

He starts by situating Alan Parker and Danny Boyle within the context of English and Irish independent cinema produced in the 1980s and 90s by, to name but a few, Sally Potter, Ken Loach, Gurinder Chadha, Mike Leigh, Neil Jordan, Pat O'Connor and Jim Sheridan. These directors, nourished within the tradition of British social realism, epitomise the attempt to portray the rise and fall of British multiculturalism by stressing controversial issues of cultural identity, racial stereotyping, social exclusion and national (un)belonging.

In this light, the first chapter, "Europa frente a la identidad nacional" offers an excellent conceptual map which addresses questions such as nation, language, myth and identity that will frame the entire work. Drawing from Amin Maalouf, Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Salman Rushdie and Paul Gilroy among others, Iglesias stresses the need to re-imagine nations and nationalisms in the present context of cultural diversity produced by phenomena like postcolonialism, diasporisation and globalisation that contradict the "grand narrative" of a unified and homogeneous sovereignty. This set of beliefs (and disbeliefs) around an anti-essentialist idea of nation would explain the specific choice of Alan Parker's *The Commitments* (1991) and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) as two films that contest stereotypes of national identity. In doing so, they adopt a cinematic language that rejects cultural stereotypes and offers instead a defamiliarised perspective of both Irishness and Scottishness that (far from the romantic ruralisation in most nationalistic depictions of these territories) focuses primarily on urban and working-class scenarios.

This emphasis on the urban as the *locus* of the new postmodern and transnational identity depicted in the two films provides the backbone for chapter two, "Espacio urbano e identidad (trans)nacional" where Iglesias addresses the importance of the city

in contemporary film and literature. His notion of the modern city as a constructed and textual site of encounters and disencounters, and as exemplified by the Dublin and Edinburgh respectively described by Parker and Boyle, is reminiscent of the distinction formulated by Mazierska and Rascaroli (2003) between the “real city”—permanently sited and described by its map—and the “city-text”—the mutating product of countless and intermingled instances of representation (2).

In this vein, Iglesias makes a detailed account of the global city and its related problems of ghettoization, gentrification, environmental degradation and social disparities as the starting point for his analysis of the nation and national identity. Following prominent theorists in the field of Urban Studies like Henry Lefebvre and Manuel Castells, Iglesias emphasises the contrasts and conflicts (around notions of income, gender, race or education) generated in the modern metropolises as his focus is not on the carnival of transcultural consumption and exoticism where questions of class, power and authority conveniently seem to disappear, but on the explicitly unequal relations which the global and the postcolonial are inevitably associated with. Read in this light and though terms like class, power and exploitation seem to have “fallen from grace” if we consider their disappearance from most critical analyses, Iglesias’s work could be considered a neo-Marxist approach to urban culture and national identity in its denounce of the social injustices produced by global capitalism and its claim to negotiate the spaces and interests that conform contemporary citizenship. After all, his revision of the notion of citizenship includes the rights of people to occupy urban *loci* and to democratically participate in their design and utilization, in a proactive move that he calls “hacer ciudad” (144, 149).

But the author’s focus is primarily on representation and on how the modern city and its inhabitants are given access to cultural visibility through literary and cinematic language. Therefore, in the section “Espacio urbano y narrativa de ficción” he examines different instances of this all-too-evident nexus between film and city. Among them, it is worth mentioning his insightful analysis of the figure of the *flâneur* as a literary and cinematic icon of this mode of citizenship that experiences urban space without appropriating it. He suggests that the sinuous, chaotic and aimless roaming of the cityscape by these nomadic characters seems to defy the hierarchies of traditional cities and is a means to inhabit, experience and, ultimately, to resignify urban space by those deprived of rights, privileges and resources. The anonymity implied by the *flâneur*’s gaze inaugurated the twentieth century in its challenge of hegemonic discourses and practices, but it can be also taken as a precursor of the global citizen with a view of the city deprived of identifiable and emblematic referents.

Despite its sophisticated theoretical design, Iglesias’s work does not obviate the analysis of the specific material circumstances which condition the production and reception of film narratives in their making of national identities. In this vein, chapter 3 (“Narración cinematográfica e identidad nacional”) makes a detailed account of this socio-economic domain: from the colonization of European markets and tastes by the powerful Hollywood industry to the different governmental politics in the promotion and sustainability of

national filmographies, the author stresses the powerful uses of cinema for propaganda purposes, and more evidently so in the products with a more commercial dimension because they tend to accommodate their audiences into the dominant discourses. In his view, the films that circulate on independent circuits would be the only way out of this ideological status quo, because, in their very sense of “constructedness,” they openly question the hegemonic and totalizing perspectives of mainstream genres. Traditional cinematic representations of Ireland and Scotland have not escaped this institutional gaze inasmuch as they have been determined by cultural and ethnic stereotypes, often suggesting an idealised collective identity without fissures or contradictions and pivoting primarily around a romanticised and nostalgic rural imagery. In a book that is surprisingly missing from the selected bibliography of Iglesias’s work—*Cinema and Landscape: Film, Nation and Cultural Geography*—G. Harper and J. Rayner (2010) remind us that cinematic landscapes can articulate the unconscious as well as the conscious and “are both material and mediated” (21). Their theses can be related to Iglesias’s pronouncement about the construction of national identities through the highly politicised depiction of their territories, which would explain, for instance, the conventional representation of Ireland as a savage and pre-industrial land subjected to a quasi-mythical tragic destiny, thus obviating the political and social analysis of the so-called “Troubles”. In a similar vein, the postcard iconography of the *kailyard* and the *tartanry* so ubiquitous in cinematic depictions of Scotland would indicate a mythologised view that bespeaks a “situated knowledge” of this nation as explicitly ancestral and folkloric.

In revealing a “constructed” status of landscape, the two films selected by Iglesias coincide in dismantling the traditional *topoi* associated with these peripheral territories and the national identity related to them. As Anthony Smith (2000) states in another volume that is significantly absent from Iglesias bibliography, cinematic ethnoscape always pivots around a reciprocal dialectics in which the land belongs to the people as much as the people belong to the land. It is precisely the defamiliarised relation between the people and the land which deviates *The Commitments* and *Trainspotting* from conventional approaches to Irishness and Scottishness respectively.

Chapter four is entirely devoted to the examination of these two films by drawing special attention to (1) the characters’ relation to their national identities and their sense of belonging/unbelonging to their respective communities, (2) the interaction between these contents and the formal aspects in which they are formulated, and (3) the urban setting of these narratives and the specific working class status of their protagonists. Although the material of this section may appear a little bit disarranged (probably because of its wide-ranging design), on the whole, Iglesias’s analysis is exhaustive and all-inclusive. His evaluation of the two films’ soundtracks is worth mentioning inasmuch as pop, rock and soul music constitute a powerful intertext that Parker and Boyle employ to appeal to their respective audiences and in so doing, facilitate the digestion of an otherwise hardly palatable content (marginal characters and situations often depicted in an aesthetics of sheer ugliness). As the author states, in both films the

songs leave their place in the periphery of the cinematic narrative to occupy a central position where the Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, Otis Redding and James Brown repertoires articulate important *leit-motifs*, like, for instance, the sense of rebelliousness and counter-culture that permeates these stories.

In relation to other formal aspects of the films (the use of the voice-over, the travelling scenes, close-ups, framings and other narrative strategies) the author evidences a scholarly knowledge of the technicalities of cinematic language and he addresses them with precision and meticulousness. For instance, in his analysis of *Trainspotting*'s opening scene where two running feet are focused on from behind in a ground-level shot, Iglesias reveals himself as an expert observer of specific film modes and choices:

De esta forma, ante la singularidad de la escena y de la secuencia general con casi cuarenta planos en apenas dos minutos, se ponen de manifiesto al menos dos cuestiones: por una parte, el hecho de que no nos encontramos ante una representación cinematográfica convencional y, por otra, que el sujeto enunciador reclama nuestra atención al subrayar con estos “planos objetivos reales” a ras de suelo su intención de mostrarnos aquello que generalmente no se ve por encontrarse en la parte más baja de la escala social. (311)

Adopting the perspective of the narrators of the two films, Jimmy Rabbitte and Mark Renton, the author describes the marginal spaces of Dublin and Edinburgh respectively as epitomizing an eccentric experience of both the city and the nation. These two realms are always depicted in the process of becoming, as unfinished or “under construction” through images that deviate from the “emblematic” or tourist-like pictures, showing instead the underbelly of these urban and national scenarios and forcing spectators to rethink their temporal, spatial and ideological coordinates. In the author's opinion, streets, dark alleyways, hotels, train or metro stations, shopping malls, bars, discos and other in-between spaces of this postmodern cityscape attest to this provisional and disidentified quality and, in their complex liminality, resist their definition as either public or private and address the sense of dislocation and impermanence defining the youth (sub)culture of these two films.

If, according to Iglesias, the characters' relation to their urban environment is ambivalent and contests binary definitions, their sense of national identity is equally contradictory and vacillating: while their accents and idioms are undoubtedly Irish and Scottish, they openly refuse to endorse the values and traditions of their respective orthodox nationalities, thus avoiding the displacement of one hegemonic discourse (English imperialism) by another one (Irish or Scottish nationalism). An interesting example of this attitude, he notices, is provided by *The Commitments*' choice of Afro-American soul music, “atravesando así las barreras (una vez más) no sólo geopolíticas y temporales, sino raciales, culturales y sociales” (367). Such attitude echoes James Joyce's adoption of Greek mythology instead of the more indigenous Gaelic folklore as the cultural intertext for his *Ulysses*.

The book concludes by stressing the dissident proposals of Alan Parker and Danny Boyle (operating in a comfortable position between the mainstream and independent circuits that facilitates their commercial success) in their construction of ambiguous national identities contrary to the cultural stereotypes usually found in the traditional filmography about Ireland and Scotland. Nevertheless, in his description of an alternative model, the reader is not sure whether he/she is really confronting the two directors' proposals, or Iglesias's *desiderata* around a discourse in which:

(1) se sitúe la voz de la diferencia en un primer plano, muy especialmente la de aquellos sectores de la población que han sido previamente silenciados; (2) la construcción y producción de significado se descentralice; (3) la visualización de los espacios urbanos/nacionales periféricos sea un hecho; (4) no existan verdades insoslayables; (5) en definitiva, la construcción en proceso continuo abierto a la participación, sin un origen ni un objetivo final predeterminado. (432)

With the exception of these very few occasions on which the author seems to abandon the objectivity that is expected and advisable in academic writing, the work provides a rigorous and scrupulously accurate analysis of the films and of the theoretical questions that support their narratives. Written with exquisite precision, Iglesias's book offers an alternative (and at some points, even ironic) view of both Ireland and Scotland and stands as a highly recommendable piece of research for Film Studies and Cultural Studies scholars and students alike.

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