

## Small Nation—Big Screen: Film in Wales during the 1990s

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Film, as a part of culture, has a contribution to make towards national culture and national imagination. As Anthony Cohen says, “Culture in this view is the means by which we make meaning and with which we make the world meaningful to ourselves and ourselves meaningful to the world” (196).

Film contributes in its own ways to the construction of a national imaginary. Therefore, if it is a symbolic manifestation of national identity, the situation in Wales would seem intriguing, bearing in mind the comments of Wil Aaron:

Film was never made to feel very welcome in Wales. As a two or three year old infant, stinking slightly of gin and the sweat of the fairground, it ran slap up against Evan Roberts and the [religious] Revival of 1904-5 and was severely mauled. It survives—but remains retarded to this day. (297)

Aaron voiced these thoughts in 1979, but I would argue that there has been a significant change in the depiction of Wales on screen since the seventies that reached a crescendo in the nineties. During the nineties, there was a conscious move among young Welsh directors to realise their desire of putting a ‘new Wales’ on the cinema screens. These young directors flipped, twisted, mauled, satirised, or attempted to completely ignore Welsh themes of the past. But despite this thoroughly conscious drive to split with the past, the influence and significance of Wales’ cinematic past on these films is highly evident.

Ed Thomas, screen writer and director, said in 1997 that “The Old Wales [was] dead”:

The Wales of stereotype, leeks, daffodils, look-you-now-boyo rugby supporters singing Max Boyce songs in three-part harmony while phoning mam to tell her they’ll be home for tea and Welsh cakes has gone. (16)

The pursuit of the wider political, cultural, and social landscape in Wales during the nineties illuminates Thomas' mindset at the time. The nineties saw the Rugby World Cup come to Cardiff; it was the decade of devolution in Wales; a change which, for some, saw the birth of true democracy with the dawn of the Welsh Assembly. The Millennium Stadium was built as confirmation of an old successful rugby heritage, but a failing national team on the cusp of a new millennium. In addition to this, prominent Welsh personalities dominated the London media and entertainment scene once again. It was therefore possible, for the first time, to read and see Wales in the mass media at the turn of the century. Through this exposure on a 'British' and international level, the Welsh received external confirmation of their identity; they certainly were not invisible any more. It was felt, in the film world, that this was the chance to bury old stereotypes and prejudices on screen; this was truly the chance to wipe the cinematic slate clean.

The new image of Wales *appeared* to be dynamic, fresh, and confident. But underneath the fragility of the shiny surface lay a lack of confidence, a navel-gazing nation with an obsession with how others saw it, and how the Welsh saw themselves. The nineties also heralded the arrival of *Cool Cymru*—a label invented by the London media that was a short-lived, insubstantial gimmick, and yet another testament to the constant need for a seal of approval from the outside. In this context, in the final years of the last century, elements of the artistic community in Wales felt a need to show that the country had moved on in every way, including the way the country was portrayed on screen.

This obsession with the self in relation to others can be attributed to the colonial relationship that has existed historically between Wales and England. Many English and American directors who have attempted to depict Wales have, in fact, created in Edward Said's words, an 'Orientalised' view of Wales. In Said's *Orientalism*, he argues that the Western views of the orient are not based on what is observed to exist in Oriental lands, but often result from the West's dreams, fantasies, and assumptions about what this radically different, contrasting place contains.

Welsh film heritage has, to some degree, been over-simplified. Some films have traditionally been promoted as examples of the filmic heritage in the quest to identify some sort of pattern; thus creating a canon of 'Welsh' films. The features that have been traditionally promoted in these films are coal mining,

education, religion, music, rugby, and ‘bad national habits,’ such as alcoholism. Things, of course, weren’t as black and white as the stereotype suggested; nevertheless, it’s not possible to deny that the stereotypes are based on popular images. We see these in films such as John Ford’s *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), the film that spawned a million clichés about terraced streets and black-faced miners singing on their way home from the pit. *Proud Valley* (1940), *Valley of Song* (1953), *The Corn is Green* (1945) and *Only Two Can Play* (1962) have also promoted various Welsh clichés already mentioned. It was these stereotypes, based on popular images, which drove the discussion of change in the nineties.

In the nineties, there were a number of social, linguistic, and research issues that led to changes in films. As previously mentioned, there was confidence and excitement, however superficial, in the wider social and cultural context. Linguistically, there were more Welsh films made in the English language, which resulted in Welsh films being exposed to a wider audience. Post 1993, S4C, the Welsh language broadcaster responsible for many films, (who had been accused of looking to history for inspiration for films) started to look at modern depictions and subject matter. Furthermore, Dave Berry’s archival work, in *Wales and the Cinema*, provided a significant development in the knowledge and understanding of the Welsh cinematic inheritance.

In the midst of these “cultural shifts,” as the cultural Marxist Raymond Williams calls them (qtd. in Williams xxxii), the concepts of ‘Old Wales’ and ‘New Wales’ became apparent and extremely relevant to cinema. There were shifts: from choirs to *Cool Cymru*, from uniformity to power, from servility to confidence, and from the heavy industries of coal mining and steel works to the new technologies of computers and call centres. The shifts happened from the world of *How Green Was My Valley* and *Run For Your Money* (1949), to the world of *Twin Town* (1997) and *House of America* (1997). There was a constant persuading of the self of these shifts, and a constant convincing of the self that this was the chance to break with the past. However, the picture is far more complex than it first appears.

In the Welsh films of the nineties, there is a stronger and broader representation of Welshness. This happened, in part, due to new directors having a better understanding of Wales, essentially, because the directors were themselves Welsh, or had strong Welsh connections. This resulted in the majority

of films being less stereotypical thus giving a more 'valid' representation of Wales. Script writers, directors, and producers such as Ed Thomas, Marc Evans, Paul Durton, and Kevin Allen are conscious of the way Wales has been portrayed in the past. They have made a conscious decision to modernize and refashion old themes, by satirization and distortion. Some have taken a conscious decision to avoid old themes, and have introduced new themes in an extremely effective way. Films such as *Human Traffic* (1999), *Diwrnod Hollol Mindblowing* (2000), and *Streetlife* (1995) are all films which have taken this conscious decision to avoid old themes, and, as a result, have taken the shape of less obvious genres, a road movie being one example. They offer a variation that did not exist before the nineties. Having said this, it's also important not to forget films such as *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain* (1994), *House!* (2000), and *Very Annie Mary* (2001) which continue to show a very 'Orientalised' version of Wales.

1997 was the year of *Twin Town* and *House of America*. Through both these films, what is highlighted is that, contrary to the belief at the time that these films reject and cast off Welsh filmic inheritance, they in fact satirize and distort some of the themes that are considered inherently Welsh. *Twin Town* is a black crime comedy. It's loaded with meaning for an audience that is consciously Welsh, and this film would lose impact to that audience if it hadn't been situated in the city of Swansea. Persistent Welsh themes present have been twisted or flipped for a new generation. Throughout the film there are interesting relationships with themes that have historically been part of Welsh films. Taking rugby, firstly, there is a memorable scene in which Bryn Cartwright, the medallion-wearing chairman of the local rugby club, describes a Phil Bennett try in an infamous rugby match, and a memorable moment which is ingrained in the Welsh psyche. In a clear subversion of the traditionalist values associated with rugby, masculinity, and Welshness, the brothers use a rugby ball to hide their stash of cocaine. In contrast to the imposed tradition of rugby, it is *football* that is the chosen inspiration and delight of the brothers. The brothers own a dog, whose name is Cantona,<sup>1</sup> and the only other dog that appears in the film is named Fergie.<sup>2</sup> The director, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> As a tribute to Eric Cantona, a French football player who played for Manchester United football team during the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Named after Alex Ferguson, the manager of the Manchester United football team.

has consciously satirised the rugby theme in *Twin Town*, twisting and deriding its dominance in Welsh sporting life and culture.

Music, a theme which has historically played a part in Welsh films and Welsh life, also has a prominent role in *Twin Town*; the traditional male voice choir plays an important role, as it had done in the past in *How Green Was My Valley* and *Proud Valley*, but so does modern day karaoke. The sound track has popular Welsh bands such as Catatonia and Super Furry Animals, bizarrely alongside sixties song starlet Petula Clarke.

*Twin Town*'s opening credits show the conscious drive to break with the past. There is a defiant, rousing but celebratory atmosphere. Following the long pan to establish the importance of the city of Swansea as the heart of the film, the audience is greeted directly by a host of different local people. Firstly, there are children, with a girl running in rollerblades. There is a young boy, running with a rugby ball, but wearing a Welsh football shirt. This carnival atmosphere is sustained with greetings by an old man in a vest, two nurses who provocatively raise their dresses, followed by greetings by a man carrying a can of lager, and a man fixing his motorbike who sticks up two fingers to the viewer. This is evidently a close-knit community, but what the director accentuates is that all these people are *individuals*, and this is highlighted in the colourfulness of the greetings. An intense individuality is apparent which is a direct response to the imposed uniformity of Welsh stereotypes in films of the past.

*House of America* is another film that seeks to explode stereotypes and 're-imagine Wales.' Gwyn Thomas in his introduction to his play, *The Keep*, says: "Some families burst apart like bombs and never again achieve unity. Others grow circular, deep like old ponds" (7). Thomas' description of two families perfectly illustrates the Lewis family in *House of America* and the Morgan family in *How Green Was My Valley*. At the heart of *How Green Was My Valley*, are the Morgan family with the brothers and father working in the coal mine, and the mother and sister cooking and cleaning. Their lives are dignified. In Marc Evans' *House of America*, the dysfunctional family explore suicidal fantasies, creating for themselves, in Gwyn Thomas' words, "a velvet tomb." In *How Green Was My Valley*, the mother is the stereotypical matriarch, and as Huw's character says in the film, "while my father was the head of the house, my mother was the heart."

Deidre Beddoe has outlined the icon of the traditional Welsh mam in

“Images of Welsh Women”: “She is hardworking. She is as clean as she is pious: she scrubs her floors and her husband’s coal-black back. She is, of course, a mother, mainly the mother of sons who like her husband are also coalminers” (229). The ‘Mam’ is strong-willed, and would do anything to protect her family. In *House of America*, Sian Phillips’ mother is a fragile, confused, and alienated figure. She is the polar opposite of Beddoe’s description. The three adult children of the Lewis family in *House of America* are locked in an incestuous embrace with their mad mother, unable to function in the world outside, excluded from any assumption of authority in their exclusion from public space of work.

In *How Green Was My Valley*, the U.S. is the land of opportunity; in *House of America*’s “bypassed town in a bypassed country” (Taylor 112), the relationship is much more problematic. It’s a threatening symbol, both mentally, and physically, with Michigan Mining digging dangerously close to the family’s home, and long wide roads, zippos, and Marlboros ubiquitous motifs in the film, while the Michigan Mining sign towers, Hollywood style, above the valley. For the young people in the family, Sid, Gwenny, and Boyo, their community doesn’t offer them anything. All that awaits them is a society empty of spiritual or social empathy, without a strong family unit or a close-knit community. This is the antithesis of the traditional Welsh community. The futility of their existence and their inability to change their situation results in extreme, dangerous behaviour. Between the worlds of *How Green is My Valley* and *House of America*, Wales has been transported from the chapel and its faith, to the club, its drugs and its sexual incestuous experimentation. The filmic inheritance has been used to satirize, to correct, and to modernize, and what appears is a darker, less romantic picture of Wales.

A shift has taken place from the terraced house in the valley to an American ranch, its fragility emphasized by Sid’s constant building of a house of cards. The family unit only exists, like Sid’s final creation, by being glued together by a thin web of lies. Ann-Marie Taylor notes the relationship in *House of America* between the dysfunctional family and wider cultural trauma (112). The Lewis boys receive a brutal and bloody beating from the American workers of Michigan Mining. While Sid deals with his social impotence by enveloping himself in the mythology of Jack Kerouac, Boyo tries to operate in the social world. As a disabled rugby player, the perversion of traditional male stereotype, he’s socially impotent. But on a trip to his local pub, which is, for Boyo, the only place of friendship and

security left, he realises it is spoilt by the invasion of Michigan men. His place of protection is now his place of pain. The future of his decaying community is symbolised by the baby his sister Gwenny carries, the incestuous product of fantasy-filled love-making with Sid.

*House of America* and *Twin Town* were not the first of a new generation of films, but the last of the old. They were engaged in an argument about the past, railing against a Wales that was already beginning to change. Later on, Justin Kerrigan's *Human Traffic* (1999), though set in Cardiff, could, arguably, be set anywhere. It blazes with style and wit; but it has made a clean break from the 'Old Wales.' The only obvious Welshman is the ebullient drug baron Howard Marx, who plays himself. The young people in the film lack an allegiance to anybody or anything: as Jip says "The weekend has landed, all that exists now is clubs, drugs, pubs and parties." There are only a few references to the fact that they are in Cardiff, and there are no apologies for being there, no sense of trying to discuss the concept of Welsh identity. In the scene where Moff, one of the young group, tries to convince a Welsh taxi driver that he could be "the Travis Bickle of Cardiff," in one sense we see a reflection of the entire film; it is a film that looks more like an American picture than a 'British' one.<sup>3</sup> The influences are Tarantino and Scorsese. Unlike the directors of *Twin Town* and *House of America*, Kerrigan is a director who is forming the type of Wales that Ed Thomas himself imagined.

Kerrigan's work sets up an interesting discourse; with lack of anything obviously 'Welsh' in his film, what does the future hold for Welsh film? It could be argued that the future consists of films that have nothing inherently Welsh about them, that are Welsh in name only. But in *Human Traffic*, what is innately obvious in the film is that the shackles of Wales' cinematic past have been broken. The future, hopefully, holds films where young directors will be free to explore a kaleidoscope of themes, in which a wide variation of experiences and people will be portrayed. "The fact that you can't sing, don't play rugby, don't consider Harry Secombe a hero or never wore a Tom Jones velvet dicky-bow doesn't exclude

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<sup>3</sup> The biggest handicap to Welsh films during the nineties (especially *Twin Town*), stemmed from unfavourable comparisons with British successes such as *Trainspotting*, and even condemnation from *Straight and Sound* reviewer, B. Thompson, who swiped at the picture's "eagerness to be to South Wales what *Trainspotting* was to urban Scotland" (qtd in Blandford 17).

anyone from making up an imaginary Welsh landscape that can take you somewhere good” (Thomas 16).

However, with the lack of Welsh films that have been released post-Devolution, the transition to a new kind of filmmaking may not be easy. In this respect, if film in Wales was, as Wil Aaron noted a “two or three year old infant” in 1904-5, the nineties can certainly be looked upon as the teenage years of Welsh film, where directors battled awkwardly against their heritage and struggled to find their own voice. This raw, but necessary transitional period, will hopefully free young future directors to create mature films which show the complexity of Welsh existence in the twenty-first century without having to consciously embrace themes which are considered traditionally Welsh.

“So where does that leave us? Free to make up, re-invent, redefine our own versions of Wales, all three million different definitions if necessary” (Thomas 16). *Human Traffic* is a signpost for future films that have no arguments with the past, where there is a plurality, universality, and inclusiveness within the Welsh experience, which holds hope for future depictions.

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