Framing History. Neil Jordan's Michael Collins

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When Peadar O'Donnell was asked on one occasion why he did not bequeath his papers to posterity for historical research, he replied, half in jest, that he had no desire to start the Civil War all over again. If the intensity of the debates provoked by Neil Jordan's film Michael Collins is anything to go by, it would seem that historical films are also capable of awakening old political animosities, not to mention darker forebodings concerning the present conflict in Northern Ireland.

Politics and the archive

O'Donnell's remark is of interest for it challenges the idea that historical knowledge is safe once the dust settles on the files, and historians rather than civil servants are left to pore over the details. Some state papers and official documents dating from the early decades of the century are still considered too dangerous for the public, as if decontamination - their historical half-life - has scarcely been activated by the passage of time. It is this relationship between politics and the archive which the film Michael Collins attests to, both in its internal narrative and the reception accorded to it by its most hostile critics.

This has important implications for perhaps the main criticism directed at the film—its alleged political bias in departing from the 'facts' of history, the 'objective' historical record. As the key role of information-gathering and intelligence work in Collins's own activities indicates, facts, even of the officially documented kind, are never innocent, and have as much to do with power, and political agenda-setting, as with truth. Setting a good example for subsequent historians, Collins burns the midnight oil in the State Papers Office in Dublin Castle, but is keenly aware that the facts do not speak for themselves, and are only as reliable as the slant put on them, the particular point of view which endows them with meaning. 'I've some information on a certain party - a right bousy, the lowest of the low, a gutter-snipe called Collins', he says in order to inveigle himself into the Castle, as if this is the only description that complies with the information assembled in the files.

The essentially - and bitterly-contested nature of this information is clear from the altercation later in the film when de Valera protests that 'our tactics allow the British press to paint us as murderers' - an interpretation so compelling that de Valera himself seems to accept it as he advocates a shift in strategy to more 'honourable' full-scale military engagements. Yet, while de Valera has qualms, some state officials are not even convinced by their own intelligence, as the 'gamekeeper turned poacher' character of Ned Broy shows. The power of the film is not that it sides with Collins on this particular point, sanitising his ruthless street warfare, but that it shows the complexities involved in even describing what took place, let alone passing judgement on the events. Are the assassinations, depicted with such graphic effect, murder or not? Even those on the same side cannot agree, partly because they are aware that the ultimate verdict lies with history itself, or rather in the hands of those who shape the historical process.

The issue here is one which historical drama - whether in film, literature or theatre - is particularly well placed to bring out, but which is seldom addressed in Irish debates on historical method. This concerns the crucial importance of the point of view or 'narrative frame' which organises knowledge, or gives coherence to data. John Regan (*History Ireland* 3.3, 'Looking at Mick again') makes a telling point that the myths surrounding Michael Collins have been greatly facilitated by the tendency of biographers to adopt 'a narrative rather than an analytical approach' to his life, but this argument is less than convincing if it implies that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. To the extent that any selection takes place, historical accounts presuppose narrative or interpretative horizons which determine the relevance of what is included or excluded. Dispassionate, analytical modes of historical writing convey an impression of 'objectivity' not because these framing perspectives are absent, but because they are buried, or obscured by the welter of detail. By contrast, the dramatic economy of 'fictional' reconstructions is designed precisely to accentuate these narrative forms, bringing to the fore the latent points of view which order - and orchestrate - the empirical data.

The perils of time-travelling

To grasp the importance of this, it is worth digressing to consider a historical series screened by the BBC some years ago entitled *Living in the Past*, which was intended to convey to contemporary viewers what it was like to live in Britain over two thousand years ago. No expense was spared in meticulously recreating a pre-historic village, extending to the minutest details regarding architecture, horticulture, clothing, domestic utensils, weapons, etc.. Volunteers then agreed to conduct a time-experiment and travel back to the past, dispensing with all modern conveniences in order to experience the rigours endured by our ancestors.

The series made riveting viewing, but not quite for the reasons the BBC intended. While everything factual - insofar as it could be established - had been attended to, the expectations of the time-travellers remained rooted in the twentieth century. Lack of the most basic creature comforts meant that everything that would have been the norm in a prehistoric age was experienced instead as deprivation - the filth, the unbearable cold, the miserable diet, the boredom. But even more important was the ineluctable presence of twentieth-century mentalities. As the series progressed, it became painfully evident that it was minds and not just the material environment that required decommissioning. The absence of ancient religious or moral values meant that modern codes stepped into the void, with hippy notions of free love proving particularly troublesome. When various love affairs could not be kept secret from the cameras, even the tabloid press discovered a sudden interest in stone-age scandals. To the dismay of the BBC, the travails of the fur-clad couples made front-page news, complete with tell-tale photographs.

What emerges from this is the futility of the historical pretence to 'tell it as it was', by concentrating solely on the accuracy of the facts and objective details regarding a period or a specific culture. Clearly there is a need to have some understanding of the value systems, the mind-sets through which people in different periods organise their lives, and this is precisely what narrative enables us to do. As Neil Jordan himself expressed it, in reply to those who accused his film of countless inaccuracies: 'I told the story from the point of view of the protagonists themselves; showing their aims, methods, and politics from their perspective; and showing the havoc that these wreaked upon them in the end'. As the coda to this statement shows, however, the film did not entirely restrict itself to contemporary perceptions. In a sense, a historical verdict is passed (which we may or may not agree with) from a vantage point which was not open to those participating in the action.

The incorporation of these multiple points of view into the narration acknowledges that, try as we may to transport ourselves to the past, and empathise with other periods, we can never fully stand outside our own time and space. Historians frequently set themselves the ideal of interpreting periods or events solely in terms of what people knew or assumed at the time, rather than what we know (or assume) to have happened subsequently. But this is an imaginative conceit, an ideal as far removed from reality in its own way as de Valera's pastoral ideal of an Ireland of cosy homesteads. The link with de Valera's imaginary Ireland is not as far fetched as it might seem, for romantic nationalism is often taken to task for its nostalgia, its dream of reverting to an idyllic past devoid of all trappings of the modern world. Yet knowledge is also subject to nostalgia, and no more so than in the desire to represent a bygone era 'as it was', bracketing off everything that has happened since. It is, of course, vital not to let hindsight dominate the view, as in the historicist fallacy which sees nothing of significance in the past but the links in the chain leading up to the present. But this is not the only option. It may well be that retrospection allows us to re-open roads not travelled, to re-appraise alternative courses of action that were overtaken by events, and the dominant historical paradigms subsequently imposed on the past. This undermines the 'inevitability' of historicist accounts, not least because it also raises question marks over the certainties of the present.

The shadow of *The Godfather*

In this sense, historical films are often more candid about their approach to the past than more 'objectively' inspired historical accounts. Landmark films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Godfather* series (1972,1974,1989) are valued as much today for the light they throw on the late 1960s and early 1970s, as on the decades they set out to represent. (By the same token, histories of the 1798 Rebellion, as Kevin Whelan has argued, often say as much about the period of their own production as about 1798 itself, but this lesson seems to be lost on many other historians who pride themselves on writing from a position which they consider, somewhat perversely in view of their own calling, to be 'outside history'). For this reason, the main task in evaluating a historical film is not the pedestrian one of identifying 'inaccuracies', but the more difficult one of determining the point of these inaccuracies, the extent to which they are required by the 'logic' of the film. This involves addressing the film as a film, examining the specific stylistic and generic conventions which are brought to bear on the story.

In Michael Collins, both film-noir and the gangster genre preside over the action. With its half-lit figures and moody expressionistic shadows, the alleys and back-lanes of Dublin come to resemble the 'mean streets' of urban America. In his published film diary, Jordan acknowledges the influence of *The Godfather*, which can be seen particularly in the intercutting between romantic interludes (the love interest or [future] marriage sequences) and the slaughter taking place elsewhere. At one level, this might be taken as a marketing device, a narrative hook to render the story intelligible to non-Irish audiences unfamiliar with the historical background. But Jordan works these allusions into the texture of the story, giving additional, often poignant, resonances to certain sequences. Hence the staging of the elimination of the Cairo gang in terms of the St Valentine's Day Massacre, a set-piece from gangster films, allows for an ironic prefiguring of Collins's own death at Beal na mBlath ('the mouth of flowers'). 'You've sent the boys out', Kitty remarks in the hotel bedroom, 'like so many Valentines, delivering bouquets...Do they deliver a love note, Mick, with the flowers?' When she hears the sound of sirens later on, she remarks cynically that the flowers have been delivered: ‘Do you think they got the message?’

The message relayed by the generic conventions of the gangster film is that the real enemy is not outside the organisation, but within. In *Godfather II*, this reaches a tragic denouement, the trail of destruction extending to close friends and even members of the family (which is, perhaps, intimated in Michael Collins by the screenplay’s suggestion that Collins and Harry Boland ‘could be brothers’). Though the animosity shown in Neil Jordan’s film between de Valera and Collins had, of course, its basis in reality, the recourse to the shadow text of *The Godfather* for purposes of narrative coherence intensifies this opposition (to the detriment of de Valera, in the eyes of many critics of the film). That there is an underlying rationale for this, however, becomes clear if we attend to transformations wrought by the new wave of gangster films in the genre in the 1970s - innovations which, as we have observed above, reveal as much about the anxieties and uncertainties of American culture in the Nixon era, as about the roaring twenties or thirties.

In Robert Warshow’s famous formulation, the gangster genre in its heyday represented the ‘No’ to the great American ‘Yes’. Whereas the Western celebrated the American dream, the gangster genre explored the dark side of this success story, at least as it was experienced by immigrants condemned to life in the urban ghettoes. Yet as the boundaries between crime and the law, good and evil, became increasingly permeable, exemplified by James Cagney’s oscillation between mobster and ‘G-Man’ roles, it also became apparent that the gangster was not really opposed to the system. He simply wanted to make room at the top for himself, his main offence being that he preferred to use the fast track in getting there. By the 1950s and 60s, as *The Godfather* films show, the boundaries between organised crime, corporate wealth and state power had become so blurred that what was legal or illegal was itself thrown into doubt - with fatal consequences for the Nixon administration.

Conservative revolutionaries

Considered in this light, we can see that the logic of the violence deployed so lethally by Michael Collins was not so much to oppose the system as to join it, albeit by taking over at the top. ‘We were probably the most conservative revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution’, observed Kevin O’Higgins at the time, sentiments evoked visually in the scene towards the end of the film in which Collins, standing alongside the British vice-consul in the yard of Dublin Castle, inherits the trappings of power - including an armoured car which, for all we know, was the vehicle that had earlier mowed down spectators in Croke Park. This complicity between political violence and state formation gives rise to a key ambiguity in the popular cult of Michael Collins which John Regan seeks to redress in his *History Ireland* article. Regan laments the fact that the ‘seldom published photograph of Collins at his departmental desk, the Michael Collins of the Department of Finance does not have the same appeal as Collins the gunman’. Accordingly, he emphasises the need to challenge the ‘romantic/militarist’ image of Collins, ‘bolstered, if not spawned, by the populist, almost pulp fiction, biographical genre’, by shifting the focus of attention to Collins the administrator, politician, and ultimately state-builder. The complex integration of both these aspects of Collins’s political persona into the narrative logic of the film, however, suggests that the archive and political terror may not be so far apart after all: the ‘rational administrator’ who finds his way with startling efficiency through the filing systems of Dublin Castle is also the terrorist leader who jokes about being ‘minister for gun-running, daylight robbery and general mayhem

It is these disturbing reminders in the film that the foundations of the state may itself rest on terror which has drawn the wrath of those historians intent on airbrushing the violence out of Irish history. But the film goes further than this for, in viewing the War of Independence through the optic of the gangster genre, it draws a set of uncomfortable analogies between that period and the present conflict in Northern Ireland. The fact that the implementation of a criminalisation policy towards republican prisoners in the North in the mid-1970s coincided with the vogue enjoyed by the *Godfather* films handed the British authorities a valuable rhetorical weapon in their propaganda war against republicans. From then on, the leaders of Sinn Fein could be denigrated simply as ‘Godfathers’, and political violence similarly dismissed as ‘organised crime’, perpetrated by the mindless thugs of the republican mafia produced by the nationalist ghettoes. By extending the rhetorical range of this metaphor into the foundations of the Irish state, Jordan’s film issues a powerful rejoinder to such simplistic readings of political violence.

Michael Collins is not, of course, the first film to do this: in 1958, the gangster genre was, in a sense, brought home to Ireland when James Cagney was cast in the unlikely role of leader of the IRA - surgeon by day, terrorist by night - in *Shake Hands with the Devil*. Many settings in Jordan’s film recall Cagney’s ‘underground army’, not least the placing of the IRA’s headquarters in ‘catacombs’ underneath the city, and the almost Mylesian effect of replacing gangsters’ black sedans by bicycles on the rain-swept streets of Dublin. There is, however, a striking difference in the moral sensibility of both films. Cagney's character is drawn from the psychotic personality which stalked his later gangster films, such as *White Heat* (1949), and is identified with the 'die-hard' republican element which refused to accept the Treaty: by contrast, Liam Neeson's playing of Michael Collins is of a character on the side of 'reason', and is more akin to the sympathetic figure of Michael Corleone, including his tragic flaws. By reworking the image of the gangster in the light of both recent developments in the genre, and the aura surrounding Collins, Jordan's film has, in effect, lifted the crude, sinister associations off the stereotype of the 'Godfather', thereby depriving revisionist demonology of one of its favourite tropes. It is this, perhaps, more than any other factor, which accounts for the extraordinary animus directed against the film in the British press, and by revisionist critics and historians in Ireland. Like the best historical films, it forces us to reconsider not only the past, but also many of the platitudes which pass for political analysis in the present.