

Between Irish National Cinema and Hollywood: Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*

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Abstract. When Neil Jordan's film *Michael Collins* was released in 1996, it was seen by some as a Hollywood epic, by others as a great national film. I would argue that *Michael Collins* combines these two traditions and occupies a space between Irish national cinema and Hollywood. The subject matter, the creative talent and the locations were Irish and the film was produced by using the Irish filmmaking infrastructure and the Irish government's support mechanisms, but it was largely financed and distributed by a Hollywood studio. Also, to make it more appealing especially globally, but probably also locally (since Hollywood is now the international standard), it makes use of Hollywood conventions, making it accessible to international audiences as well. Despite the Hollywood mode, the fact remains that *Michael Collins* is a national film text, and Jordan does not make too many concessions to the non-Irish audiences.

Key Words. Ireland, national cinema, Hollywood, *Michael Collins*, Neil Jordan.

Resumen. Cuando la película *Michael Collins* de Neil Jordan se estrenó en 1996, unos la consideraron una epopeya Hollywoodiense, otros una gran película nacional. Yo sostengo que *Michael Collins* combina estas dos tradiciones y ocupa un espacio entre el cine nacional irlandés y Hollywood. La temática, el talento creativo y los exteriores son irlandeses y la película se realizó usando la infraestructura cinematográfica irlandesa y los mecanismos de apoyo del gobierno irlandés, pero fue mayoritariamente financiada y distribuida por un estudio de Hollywood. Por otra parte, para hacerla más atractiva sobre todo a escala mundial, pero probablemente también local (ya que Hollywood es ahora el estándar internacional), emplea convenciones de Hollywood que la hacen accesible al público internacional. A pesar del estilo Hollywoodiense, lo cierto es que *Michael Collins* es un texto fílmico nacional, y que Jordan no hace demasiadas concesiones al público no irlandés.

Palabras clave. Irlanda, cinematografía nacional, Hollywood, *Michael Collins*, Neil Jordan.

Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins*, called "the most important film made in or about Ireland in the first century of cinema" (Dwyer 1996: 1), was released ten years ago, in November 1996, with much anticipation. With its 84 locations and \$28 million budget, *Michael Collins* became the largest production ever sustained by the industry in Ireland, and the biggest film ever made by an Irishman in Ireland. The film broke all box-office records in the country and in 2000 was second only to *Titanic* (1997) in the all-time box-office

list in Ireland, having earned IR£4.0m (\$5.6m). *Michael Collins* was a hot topic already before its premiere, and fuelled discussions and debates in academic circles as well as in the media and among a wider audience. One of the issues the film raised was the question of the Irishness of the 1990s' more internationally-oriented Irish cinema. What was Irish about Irish cinema? The case of *Michael Collins* was particularly baffling – whereas some saw it as a very Irish film, representative of Irish

national cinema, others saw it as a Hollywood production (Dean 1997: 16; Cullingford 1997: 17). *Michael Collins* has features which might cause it to be attributed to either the category of Irish film or Hollywood movie. However, I would argue that *Michael Collins* eludes this binary categorisation and that it occupies instead a position between Irish national cinema and Hollywood. In this paper, I hope to make my point by discussing *Michael Collins*'s position at the intersection of national cinema and Hollywood, where the national and international, the local and the global, converge and merge.

Neil Jordan, the writer and director of *Michael Collins*, had become known for both his 'Irish' and 'Hollywood' films. In the first category one could include *Angel* (1982) and *The Crying Game* (1992), while the second category comprises such films as *We're No Angels* (1989) and *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). The successes of *The Crying Game* and *Interview with the Vampire* in the USA earned Jordan a place on the Hollywood A-list, and this, together with the IRA ceasefire, had encouraged Warner Brothers in 1995 to greenlight the project Jordan had been planning for twelve years – the filming of the life and times of Michael Collins. And given the big budget of the film, it was necessary to get a Hollywood studio involved. Jordan himself has said in an interview: "The way the industry is structured now, it's mainly dominated by America. ... I think every person who makes films now, unless they make very small, independent films, they have to deal with Hollywood, summarily" (Neil Jordan in *Irish Cinema – Ourselves Alone?*). In the case of *Michael Collins*, dealing with Hollywood meant that this film about a crucial period of Irish history was financed by the Hollywood studio Warner Brothers, which agreed to a \$25-million budget, backed by the ten percent Irish tax break. From the beginning, the international and the national cooperated in the production of this film.

From the start there was great interest in Ireland in the Collins film and it turned out to be a truly national project, interesting and involving large parts of the population. Jordan wanted to shoot the film in Ireland, despite the fact that labour and materials were more expensive in Ireland than in England and much

of the skilled craftwork had to be brought in. Jordan and his crew were allowed to film on location in Dublin even though it meant occasionally closing down parts of the city (Neil Jordan in *Michael Collins – Production Information* 1996: 10). The downside of using real locations was the crowds of onlookers which the filmmakers had trouble keeping away when the shooting began in July 1995 (Jordan 1996: 25, 37). Jordan writes in his *Michael Collins: Screenplay & Film Diary*: "The subject in Ireland sets a fever running. A combination of things – the Peace Process, the gap of time, the sense that Collins always represented lost possibilities. And I suppose the memory this generation has of their grandparents" (1996: 14). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, it was not only Dublin's young actors who were keen on getting a part in the film; many people wanted to be directly involved in the making of the first great national epic. It was estimated that four or five thousand people with their own period costumes turned up in the first open crowd-call in Rathdrum, County Wicklow. In fact, there were so many voluntary extras that some of them had to be turned away (Stephen Woolley in *The South Bank Show* 1996). As *Film Ireland* put it, the unpaid extras were eager "to be included in what was perceived as not just a big budget film but a piece of history in the re-making" ("Monster Meeting" 1995: 6). And those who did not have the chance to participate in the re-making of history, to actually be in the film, got to share the experience by reading about it, for the press were present and during the following week articles and features on the film appeared in Irish newspapers.

People also had the possibility of visiting production designer Anthony Pratt's GPO and O'Connell Street set, the largest ever constructed in Ireland, which was opened to the public for the weekend after the film shoot ended. Tens of thousands of people visited the set and newspapers received letters requesting that the Irish government buy it as a national monument (*Michael Collins – Production Information* 1996: 10; Gritten 1995: 4). Even the authorities cooperated: the filmmakers were allowed to film on location in Dublin even though it meant that every Sunday, parts of the Dublin city centre had to be closed down. (Neil Jordan in *Michael Collins –*

Production Information 1996: 10). Stephen Woolley, the producer of *Michael Collins*, commented in *Los Angeles Times*: “It was absurd. It’s like we’re performing some service. We’ve been given this ticket, this key to the city. Because it’s Michael Collins, whatever we do seems OK. People just want to feel they’re a small part of it. I can’t tell you how exciting this is to the people of Ireland” (Gritten 1995: 4). As can be seen, the production and the pre-release publicity of *Michael Collins* brought filmmaking and history close to the general public and made the film available to the Irish audience even before its premiere. Allowing people to take part in the project also made the film more truly national.

And when the time for *Michael Collins*’s premiere came, the film was available to an unexpectedly wide audience in Ireland, for Irish film censor Sheamus Smith passed the film with a parental guidance certificate. Even more surprising than the PG certificate was Smith’s issuing a press statement explaining his decision. In the statement the release of *Michael Collins* was described as “a major cinematic event” and the film itself “a landmark in Irish cinema”. Consequently, the censor wished “to make the film available to the widest possible Irish cinema audience. Because of the historical significance of this film, many parents may wish to make their own decisions as to whether or not their children should see it” (Quoted in Sheehy 1996: 13. Quoted in Sheehy 1996: 13). Thus the film censor, too, played a part in making *Michael Collins* a national event.

Also Jordan himself emphasised the national significance of the film: “it is a period of history that needs to be seen. It’s part of my past, it’s part of our past as Irish people, it’s part of what we are, and for me to examine that is an important thing. I really made it because I thought it would make a good movie” (Jordan in Salisbury 1996: 84). And judging by the Irish people’s demonstration of interest in the project, I would say that Jordan was right. In the era of the rising Celtic Tiger, *Michael Collins* took part in the process of re-imagining Irishness by examining the relationship of contemporary Ireland to its own past and inviting the Irish audience to think about such questions as ‘where are we coming from and where are we going?’ In addition to dealing

with the much talked-about Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War, the film also brought the post-Treaty period and the civil war up for discussion and re-evaluation. And there seems to have been a great need for this period of history, however painful some of its parts might be, to be openly discussed at a time when the guns were finally silent in Northern Ireland due to the Peace Process.

Still, however important the making of this film was considered to be to the Irish audience, it had to be made so that it would be ‘a good movie’ in the eyes of American audiences as well, since Warner Bros could not, given the big budget of the film and the size of the population in Ireland, expect to recoup the production costs from Ireland alone. Ireland’s 2.8 cinema admissions per person per year in 1995 was above the European average, but only very modestly budgeted films were, and are, able to produce profits within Ireland’s own territory. Thus it is essential that a big-budget Irish film is successful also outside its own marketing territory and especially in the American market. And making a film accessible to American or other international audiences often means working within Hollywood conventions.

Furthermore, it can be argued that even to a national audience ‘a good movie’ means an international, or Hollywood, type film. This can be seen by the fact that in Ireland, for example, US products account for ninety percent of the market. Irish films do not usually tend to become huge crowd-pullers, and those that do, usually have distinct Hollywood features. As Andrew Higson, writing on British national cinema, has argued “for a cinema to be nationally popular, it must paradoxically also be international in scope; that is to say, it must work with Hollywood’s international standards” (Higson 1995: 9). Interestingly, documentary filmmaker Muiris MacConghail (1996: 20) wrote of *Michael Collins* in *Film West*: “It represents the coming into being of the first Irish filmic narrative. Not because the subject is Irish but rather that the storytelling is truly accessible and in the real tradition of the universal tradition of filmic storytelling”. So it can be argued that the popular success of *Michael Collins* in Ireland was due not only to the national subject matter and its continuing relevance for the Irish audience, but also to the fact that it was made utilising the conventions of popular Hollywood cinema. Now I will turn to

look at how the Irish subject matter and ‘the universal tradition of filmic storytelling’ are combined in *Michael Collins*.

The narration in *Michael Collins* seems to conform to the conventions of classical Hollywood films. David Bordwell (1990: 157) has noted that

the classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals...The most ‘specified’ character is usually the protagonist, who becomes the principal causal agent, the target of any narrational restriction, and the chief object of audience identification.

All this seems to fit *Michael Collins* pretty well. The film opens with a prologue which explains that the historical period depicted in the film will be experienced “in its triumph, terror and tragedy” through Collins’s character whose life and death, we are told, “defined the period”. So the focus in this film, as in most mainstream historical films, is on the individual, and as is so often the case, on a male character, through which the historical period is experienced. Jordan himself has explained in an interview:

I wanted to tell the story from the point of view of the protagonists themselves. You have Eamon de Valera, Harry Boland and Michael Collins who are republicans who set out with certain aims to make the British Empire unworkable in Ireland. I wanted to show what that led to in their own words. So, I share their point of view and share the confusion and in the end perhaps share the tragedy of it (McSwiney 1996: 12).

So, in a classical Hollywood fashion, the protagonists, Collins, Boland and de Valera, struggle to attain a specific goal, that is, to make the British Empire unworkable in Ireland, but in the course of the struggle enter into conflict with each other. Michael Collins, the film’s title character, becomes, first as a charismatic soldier and then as a compromising politician and statesman, the principal causal agent and the chief object of audience identification. In other words, what

we have here is a national film text in international form, that is, an Irish story, told from an Irish point of view, reflecting on the period of Ireland’s struggle for independence, but narrated in classical Hollywood style.

According to Bordwell, in classical Hollywood films, “the opening and closing of the film are the most self-conscious, omniscient, and communicative passages. The credit sequence and the first few shots usually bear traces of an overt narration. Once the action has started, however, the narration becomes more covert, letting the characters and their interaction take over the transmission of information” (Bordwell 1990: 160). This is exactly the case with *Michael Collins*. The film begins with overt narration – the written prologue sets the context of the action, and this is then followed by a scene in which Kitty Kiernan lies on a bed in the background while Joe O’Reilly addresses the audience directly, saying: “You’ve got to think of him. The way he was...He was what the times demanded. And life without him seems impossible. But he’s dead. And life is possible. He made it possible”. Interestingly, this scene was added at the request of the Hollywood studio after the preview test screening. Jordan (1996: 62) writes in his *Film Diary*: “I realise this audience [i.e. the American audience] has no prior knowledge of the character, and, more important, doesn’t know he has to die...You have to tell them at the start that he dies, otherwise they’ll think he goes on to become president of Ireland and will be disappointed”. So Jordan agreed on “some limited extra shooting”, that is, he agreed to add a prelude to tip off spectators unfamiliar with Irish history about Collins’s death, a coda and a scene in which Kitty learns about Collins’s death. Jordan (1996: 62) explains that in the ‘original’ version “the film cuts from his death to a bridal wreath being placed around her head in the wedding shop. And in the great European tradition, emotion is implied rather than presented”. Thus by adding the extra scenes, the film was modified using Hollywood conventions to better fit the expectations of American audiences. For audiences unfamiliar with Irish history, there are also these other little means, such as the written prologue and graphic titles like *Dublin 1916 Easter Rising*, to help them place the events in the right historical context. However, the use of such

devices is limited in this film, which suggests that Jordan did not want to make too many concessions to the non-Irish audiences.

The classical Hollywood film usually has two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance, the other dealing with a more public sphere, like work, war or a mission. According to Bordwell, in most cases the two spheres are “distinct but interdependent. The plot may close off one line before the other, but often the two lines coincide at the climax: resolving one triggers the resolution of the other” (Bordwell 1990: 157-158). Again, this reads like a description of *Michael Collins*. We see Collins involved in a love triangle between him, Harry Boland and Kitty Kiernan and in a political triangle between him, Boland and de Valera. These triangles affect one another and resolving one triggers the resolution of the other: while Collins wins Kitty, he loses Harry to de Valera. However, all this does not mean that the film conforms to the formula of Hollywood filmmaking all too easily. For example, in depicting the love triangle, Jordan has focused not just on the men’s ‘competition’ over Kitty but on the relationship between Boland and Collins as well. If Julia Roberts’s Kitty Kiernan has the important part of making the revolutionaries, especially Collins, more human, the relationship between Collins and Boland is not devoid of meaning either. Jordan has said that it was interesting how “the men were almost in love with each other” (The South Bank Show 1996). This is conveyed on the screen in the film’s slightly homoerotic undertone and its representing of the relationship between Boland and Collins in marital terms.

It could also be argued that Jordan’s appropriation of features from Hollywood genres, such as film-noir and the gangster genre, and their use in the storytelling and visual look of *Michael Collins*, serves multiple purposes. As Luke Gibbons (1997: 51) has noted, with its reference to *The Godfather* films and exploitation of the gangster genre in its depiction of the War of Independence, *Michael Collins* draws analogies between the 1916 to 1922 period and the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. In the 1970s and the 1980s, when describing the activities of the republican paramilitaries, British authorities often invoked the image of the *Godfather* and used it as a rhetorical weapon. Thus the leaders

of Sinn Féin could be labelled as ‘Godfathers’ and political violence as ‘organised crime’. *Michael Collins* uses the same means in an earlier historical context to a powerful effect. In Luke Gibbons’s (1997: 51) words “by extending the rhetorical range of this [*The Godfather*] metaphor into the foundations of the Irish state, Jordan’s film issues a powerful rejoinder to such simplistic readings of political violence”. Thus Jordan has used the conventions of these very American film genres not just to appeal to the American audiences or to make the film more accessible to non-Irish viewers but also, and more significantly, to make a point about the use of political violence in Ireland.

Moreover, although following the narrative conventions of Hollywood on the whole, there are also significant deviations from these, like the undramatic depiction of Collins’s death, which greatly differs from how the death of a protagonist/hero is usually represented in mainstream American films. Veijo Hietala (1996: 238-239) has noted that there is always something profoundly meaningful in the most memorable deaths of American films. Typically, the undoing effect of death is denied by mythologising, for which three strategies are used: ‘heroisation’, ‘aesthetisation’ and ‘distancing’. Although distancing is used in depicting the assassination of Michael Collins –the camera shows the young assassin, a nameless young man eager to participate in the action, and then, staying in long shot, the death of the Big Fellow– Collins’s death is not mythologised but instead seems futile. Unlike the death of the hero in so many Hollywood films, Collins’s screen death is essentially undramatic and devoid of profound meaning. Dying as just another casualty of the civil war admittedly makes him a lost leader but does not invoke a legend.

According to Bordwell (1990: 160), at the end of a classical Hollywood film, “the narration may again acknowledge its awareness of the audience (nondiegetic music reappears, characters look to the camera or close a door in our face), its omniscience (e.g. the camera retreats to a long shot) and its communicativeness (now we know all)”. Closely following this tradition, *Michael Collins* returns to overt narration towards the end of the film. This happens by the means of Sinéad O’Connor’s non-diegetic rendition of

'She Moved Through the Fair' during a montage sequence of Collins's death and Kitty's wedding preparations. This rendition echoes the non-diegetic lament in Irish which was heard during the prologue and thus tells the audience that the story is coming to an end (Hopper 1997: 23). This sequence is followed by a scene which returns the audience to the present: Joe O'Reilly faces the camera again, just like in the beginning, and comforts both Kitty and the audience. He says: "That's why he died, Kitty...No regrets, Kit. That's what he'd say." This coda is one more nod to Hollywood – it is one of the scenes added at the request of the studio and together with the non-diegetic music at the end of the film this scene marks the transition to overt narration in Hollywood style. The use of music here is especially interesting for it is a further proof of Jordan's ability to negotiate a place between Irish tradition and Hollywood conventions. In the film, we see and hear Kitty, too, singing a verse of 'She Moved Through the Fair', followed by Collins delivering his comic version of 'Skibbereen', the same song he also sings in a pub the night before he dies. An international audience probably just registers the music as traditional Irish music and perhaps, at least unconsciously, as a narrative device. For the Irish audience the use of music is probably more significant. As Keith Hopper

(1997: 23) has pointed out, "these various balladic renditions are important thematically, as they reinforce a sense of national community and historical struggle". Thus the Hollywood conventions, which make the film easier to watch for an international audience, are also used to address the Irish audience specifically.

As I hope to have demonstrated by now, it is difficult to categorise *Michael Collins* either as a purely national film or as a Hollywood movie for in this film the national and the international are combined in a joint effort. *Michael Collins* is a national film text, produced by using Irish filmmaking infrastructure and the Irish government's support mechanisms, as well as a Hollywood film studio for financing and distribution. The subject matter, the creative talent and the locations were Irish, but to make the film more appealing especially globally but probably also locally –since Hollywood is now the international standard– the film was made utilising the conventions of Hollywood film. These were, however, reworked or deviated from in places in order to make a point about Irish history or politics. Thus without selling out Irish tradition, Neil Jordan was able to deal with Hollywood and negotiate a place between Irish national cinema and Hollywood.

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