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One cut too many? History and film: A practice-based case study

ABSTRACT

This article explores the different ways that film-makers and historians approach the narrating of the past. It draws upon a collaborative, practice-based case study of a feature film project, The Enigma of Frank Ryan, in order to explore the role of the history film as a vehicle for extending historical understanding. In the dialogue between film-maker and historian, a range of issues regarding the import of the history film for the practice or 'poetics' of history is explored.

KEYWORDS

historiography
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poetics
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Nazi Germany

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier paper I explored some of the complexities of transferring history to the screen, drawing upon my own experience as a film-maker and reviewing a range of historical films I have made over the last twenty years (Bell 2012). In the current article I seek to extend that analysis by joining with my colleague, historian Fearghal McGarry, to give an account of a project we have recently collaborated on – the fact-based historical drama *The Enigma of Frank Ryan* (2012). This was commissioned by Irish

1. The film premiered at the Dublin International Film Festival in February 2012 and subsequently played at the Belfast Film Festival and the West Belfast Féile, before being screened in the world cinema section of the Montreal Festival des Films du Monde in August 2012.
2. *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* (Taylor and Francis).

broadcaster TG4 and is currently being screened at a number of film festivals prior to broadcast in 2013.¹

In the earlier paper I posed the question of how historical films present the past and explored some of the ways that the approach of film-makers differs from the orthodox writing of history. Robert Rosenstone (2006: 3), a pioneer of academic research on history and film, identifies historical films as those that 'consciously try to recreate the past ... that seriously attempt to make meaning out of the traces left to us from that vanished world'. This making of meaning, he concedes, requires re-enactment, fabulation and a variety of dramatization practices that see the history film diverge from the historical record. Although Rosenstone does not explicitly draw the distinction, he is clearly concerned with feature films (fictional, documentary and experimental) rather than television series devoted to historical topics.

In my earlier paper, I asked whether the film genres through which history ends up on screen – in particular, the historical documentary and the historical drama – are irredeemably populist forms which involve a wilful departure from the historical record and the 'dumbing down' of traditional text-based history? Do the evidential concerns of historians necessarily conflict with the expressive and communicative drive of filmic storytelling?

Despite the popularity of the historical film, both in the cinema and on television, these questions are rarely addressed within Film Studies. As Robert Burgoyne (2008: 549) has noted, the history film has remained marginal as a research topic for film scholars:

The exploration of the way historical films narrate, visualize, and dramatically orchestrate the events of the past, the exploration of what Rosenstone describes as 'how that vanished world can be, and has been, represented in film' ... has for the most part not been taken up ...

Case studies of history films employing a practice-based methodology are certainly in short supply. As far as we are aware, this is one of the first based on the analysis of a 'live project'.

Woven through the reflective analysis contained in my earlier paper was a strand of critical discourse, which, for want of a better term, we might call 'postmodernist history'. This historiographical approach is represented by figures as diverse as Jacques Rancière (1994), Hayden White (1987) and Robert Rosenstone (2006) and by the journal *Rethinking History*.² Within this tradition, critical attention is paid to the rhetorical character (or 'poetics') of history in an approach which posits that conventional written history and filmed history are not as dissimilar in their figurative strategies as traditional historians often assume. As Guy Westwell (2008: 583) argues:

The poststructuralist turn persuaded many that there was no longer any clear blue water between written and filmed history; each were conventionalised constructions of the past, with their own formal and fictive logic.

That said, the impact of such ideas within academic historiography has been marginal: film-making and academic history remain very different professional worlds as Fearghal and I were to discover during our collaboration.

Our collaboration was facilitated by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through their Knowledge Transfer Fellowship

scheme, a programme designed to facilitate the dissemination of humanities research beyond academia by supporting a flexible programme of knowledge-transfer activity. Here we report on how – as historian and film-maker – we worked together on the production and exhibition of the film. We seek to explore a range of critical issues which arose in the context of our collaboration and, tentatively, to elaborate a model of good practice to guide future collaborative activity between historians and film-makers.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

As with many interdisciplinary collaborative projects, the film arose out of both academic and pragmatic factors. I first came across the story of Frank Ryan over twenty-five years ago when his presence still exercised a ghostly presence on the Irish left. Ryan (1902–44) had been prominent among those who sought to lead the inter-war republican movement in a left-wing direction. Although best known as the leader of the Irish contingent of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, he ended his life living clandestinely in Germany as a guest of the Nazis to whom he had looked for assistance in driving the British out of Ireland. To many, his wartime activities seemed at odds with his earlier career as an anti-fascist radical. Some on the left, however, preferred not to dwell on his sojourn in Berlin. Biographical accounts by earlier writers (Cronin 1980) and television documentarists (Mulholland 1978) emphasized Ryan's courage in Spain, but shied away from critical analysis of the implications of his presence in Germany.

A number of film-makers have been attracted to the Ryan story, in part because of its epic quality and tragic elements, but also because of the enigmatic character of Ryan's trajectory. Ryan – or a character based on him – figures in *The Eagle Has Landed* (the 1976 film directed by John Sturges starring Donald Sutherland as Liam Devlin, the Ryan cipher), although subsequent attempts to film Ryan's story have failed.

Throughout this period, Ryan's legacy remained something of a political football. Some historians – identified with the 'revisionist' historiographical tradition – have drawn attention to his presence in Berlin as part of a



Figure 1: Sean Russell, head of the IRA, greets Frank Ryan in Berlin, 1940.

3. Political commentators, including Eoghan Harris and Kevin Myers, have drawn on Ryan's life to critique the morality of contemporary republicanism. Ryan was for many years an emblematic figure for the republican left in Ireland: his efforts to commit the republican movement to a socialist programme (with the founding of Republican Congress), and his credibility as a heroic anti-fascist figure, proved useful in legitimizing subsequent attempts to bring armed republicanism and socialist struggle into a common anti-imperialist front.
4. I was greatly assisted in this by Bonny Rowan, a US-based picture researcher who largely works on the Library of Congress and National Archives (NARA) film collections.
5. This is often the case in film projects where historians have little say in the origination and scripting process but are later hired to act as consultants in a process of 'quality control', seeking to ensure the historical accuracy of the screenplay, or at least its defensibility.
6. This term was first used by Colin McArthur (1994: 112–25), borrowed from the Italian post-1960s' art movement Arte Povera. McArthur envisaged a cinema of the Celtic periphery relatively poor in production resources but rich in its cultural aspirations and adept in adapting to an emerging production landscape.
7. *Hard Road to Klondike* (1989) 55 min, Venice Film Festival RTE/BBC/N; *The Last Storyteller* (1991)

broader critique of the opportunistic or amoral nature of republican ideology, an interpretation more crudely promoted by media commentators hostile to the present-day republican movement.³ While well-researched studies of the relationship between republicans and Nazi Germany (Barrington 2000; O'Donoghue 2005, 2011) have appeared, their reception seems to have been determined as much by contemporary political and ideological considerations than historiographical interest in an obscure chapter of republican history.

Against this background, making a film about one of the more controversial republicans of the last century presented obvious challenges. Before the first scene had been shot, our film had been denounced by publications such as the *Irish Democrat* ('Film to slander Frank Ryan as Nazi collaborator'). At the first screening of the film at the Dublin International Film Festival, the film was attacked by audience members who believed that we had misrepresented Ryan's position. Others were troubled by the use of a fictive narrative device to depict this controversial period of his life: throughout the film Ryan is seen in discussion with Hans Hartmann, the head of the German service responsible for broadcasting Nazi propaganda to Ireland. These invented encounters provide the framing device, allowing Ryan's character to narrate his own past in a series of flashbacks.

Certainly we sought to rescue Ryan's story from both left-wing hagiography and ahistorical perspectives reflecting contemporary attitudes to republicanism. As the film's director, I was anxious to provide a sympathetic but searching portrait of Ryan, one that would interrogate his presence in Germany within the broader historical context of a period which saw Ireland and other small nations win independence after secessionist struggle; the Great Depression; the clash between communism and fascism; and the brutal transformation of the lives of millions of European citizens wrought by World War II. On this matter, Fearghal and I were in agreement. Hopefully the finished film gives a broader sense of a life lived, of commitments made and broken, of loyalties tested and relationships fractured: a life of contradictions certainly, but one rendered more explicable against the broader historical backdrop of the period.

Over the summer and autumn of 2011, whilst on a visiting fellowship at the Institute for the Advanced Study of the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh, I completed the script for the film (available at www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/TheFilm). During this period, I also undertook the picture research needed to unearth the archival imagery required to tell the Ryan story in a visually effective and historically informed manner.⁴ I also began the onerous task of applying for funding support. This development work took place before my collaboration with Fearghal McGarry began.⁵

How then to tell a story of this scale and narrative complexity, and how to do so within the sort of budget available to film-makers working in what remains a 'poor Celtic cinema'.⁶ From the outset, it was obvious that we were not in a position to restage the Spanish Civil War, nor reconstruct wartime Berlin! Nor did I see any necessity to do so. The distinguishing feature of my work as a film-maker has been the creative use of moving image archive and the interweaving of this with an inflected narrative voice (the unreliable narrator) and live-action sequences.⁷ Despite the Herculean efforts of designers of historical costume drama, there simply is no better guide to how things looked than the archival record. It can be fragmentary and partial but then so can memory, and both film-makers and historians are accustomed to working with such fragments.

The development of the script and archival search went hand in hand with the identification of points of narrative continuity and visual resonance between archival image and planned live-action sequence. Although there is only one moving image archival clip of Ryan in the film (his release from Arbor Hill prison filmed by a Pathé newsreel crew in 1932), a range of material dealing with Ireland in the 1930s, Civil War Spain and Berlin in the 1930s and 1940s was located for possible use in the film. It might be noted that historians, although highly attuned to the value and pitfalls of textual sources, remain relative novices in the evaluation of the provenance and evidential potential of visual evidence (Schama 2004).

Our film seeks not only to use archive to provide historical context and detail, but also to stimulate the audience's historical imagination and critical engagement. The aim is not to provide the open window on the past that traditional costume drama purports to offer. Rather, we combine fragments from the archival record and dramatic reconstruction (where no such archival traces can be found) in order to encourage the audience not so much to suspend their disbelief as to actively interrogate the historical narrative they are being offered. Commercial distributors presented with the film have expressed the view that the use of archive sequences disrupts the audience's viewing experience (and presumably pleasure), distracting from the dramatic dynamic of the piece. However, our experience across a range of screenings is that contemporary mainstream audiences have little difficulty engaging with a narrative constructed from disparate elements of live action and archival material. Besides which, as with more avant-garde film work, the film actively seeks to disrupt the processes of *suture* at play in the classic filmic text.

As Jean-Pierre Oudart (1990) argues, the classic film text must at all costs conceal from the viewing subject the passivity of that subject's position, and this necessitates denying that there is any reality outside the fiction (particularly the material reality of the production process itself). The assembly of archival segments alongside live-action scenes disrupts the classic text, offering the viewer a more critical subject position. This is the case even in our film, where, unlike many found-footage films, archival image and live action are combined in a manner in which continuity principles of editing ensure a relatively seamless narrative.

A commission from the Irish broadcaster TG4 unlocked support from film-funding bodies in Ireland but committed us to producing a version of the film in the Irish language. This was, in story terms, appropriate, as Ryan had been a keen *gaelgoir*,⁸ often using the language on a daily basis, particularly in clandestine situations. However, it also entailed shooting many scenes twice with performances in both languages. The budget eventually cobbled together was generous in documentary terms but meagre given the ambition to produce a feature-length drama, albeit with a significant strand of archive (approximately 20 per cent of screen time) running through the film. Shot over seven days on location in and around Belfast, and in the small Languedoc town of Lamalou-les-Bains, post-production took place in Belfast, London and Galway over a fourteen-week edit.

The AHRC Knowledge Transfer scheme provided research funding additional to the film production budget: this was granted to disseminate Fearghal's research on Ryan to a wide audience via film exhibition, television broadcast and Internet. We also proposed that our research project would provide a case study to reflect on the use of film as a medium to advance historical understanding in a divided society like Northern Ireland. In effect,

52 min, Venice Film Festival, RTE; *Rebel Frontier* 63 min, Minneapolis Film Festival, RTE; *Child of the Dead End* 83 min, Festival des Films du Monde, Montreal, TG4.

8. An Irish language speaker and enthusiast.

9. For more on this, see: <http://qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/Project/Conference/>.
10. Such a process would appear to leave untouched any interrogation of the methods of academic history or the structures of broadcasting. Public-service broadcasters and universities, like all hierarchical organizations, are prone to bureaucratic rigidity within which cultural and intellectual authority is jealously guarded and creativity or risk-taking viewed with suspicion.
11. An audio recording of one such debate, organized by the popular history periodical *History Ireland*, after a screening at the Irish Film Centre can be heard at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/NewsEvents/>. See also Fearghal (McGarry and Bell 2012).

the AHRC's support enabled an ambitious film project to be developed and produced within a broader research framework of practice-based enquiry. Our project proceeded from the assumption that in order to maximize the effectiveness of film – whether documentary or dramatic – as a mode of knowledge transfer of historical understanding, we need to forge more effective partnerships between academic researchers, film-makers, broadcasters and their audience.⁹

A 'live project' provided the experimental opportunity to investigate the challenges of putting history on screen. That said, in the light of the critical debate alluded to above regarding the contribution of the history film to historiography, and the challenges it poses to traditional modes of doing history, the knowledge-transfer model seems, in some respects, a limited one. The terminology of knowledge transfer suggests an unproblematic flow of information from the specialist historian, employing tried and trusted methods, through an essentially neutral media production process, to an expanded popular audience.¹⁰ In reality, the film production process is not a black box: as Rosenstone (2009: 24/25) argues, 'the history film comprises a separate realm of discourse on the past, one that stands alongside and comments on other forms of history, including the academic'.

On a more practical level, the AHRC's support allowed us to strengthen the historical dimension of the film by supporting archival research costs, and the involvement of a professional historian over an extended period. So, for instance, an interpretative website – which provided the historical contextualization and detail that the film could not (see <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/>) – was developed alongside the production. The website offered the film-maker and the historian the opportunity to share with the film's audience a range of critical considerations that were felt important in the reception of the piece, as well as providing historical resources (including interpretative essays and reproductions of key archival documents) that would support the film's critical engagement with the established historiography of the period.

Thus, one section of our website, 'Archival dialogues' (www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/archivaldialogues/), hosts clips from the finished film and analysis of these by the film-maker and the historian. Importantly, this section identifies explicitly where the film diverges from the historical record, exploring the creative reasons for these divergences. As part of the exhibition process, we also organized academic-led public discussions: these facilitated not only critical reflection by historians and political activists on the film but also a public dialogue (often critical) about the film. The lively debates that ensued at these events, conducted after a series of sell-out festival screenings in Dublin and Belfast, indicated considerable appetite for debate about Ryan's political career and the underlying historical and political issues of the period.¹¹ In short, the research support for the project enabled us to give the sort of attention to the reception and interpretation of the film not usually possible for hard-pressed film-makers, enhancing the credibility and value of the film as a meaningful engagement with history.

THE HISTORIAN AND THE FILM-MAKER

The script drew upon existing research on Ryan, including Fearghal McGarry's (2010a) biography. As a film-maker, I have had the opportunity to work with a number of historians across a range of documentary projects (Bell 2012). I have drawn upon their expertise both through filmed interview and

behind-the-scenes consultancy. In this project I was anxious to work with a professional historian in a more sustained manner. As the script evolved through various drafts, I became aware that I had embarked upon a project that was more explicitly drama based than documentary in character, as my previous work had been. Questions of historical interpretation, as much as historical fact, needed to be addressed, not least because the finished script takes liberties that no academic text would or should. Moreover, its interpretation in the heat and dust of the shooting schedule, and subsequently in the darkness of the cutting room, saw further divergence from the historical record. As in most historical dramas, characters are conflated, dialogue is imagined, encounters are depicted for which there is scant evidence, the dynamics of personal relationships are altered, and complex political debates and sequences of events are condensed into emblematic scenes.

As well as writing a biography of Ryan (2010a), McGarry (1999, 2010b) has researched the revolutionary period in Ireland, and the role of the Irish in the Spanish Civil War. He has served as a historical consultant on a number of documentary films and, unusually for a historian, has developed an interest in both the aesthetic and historiographical challenges of 'film history'. While Fearghal was happy to bring to my attention issues of historical accuracy, he accepted from the outset the need to give me considerable leeway in creative treatment of the narrative material. He was also supportive of my creative decision to push the project as a story-driven drama rather than a conventionally narrated or presented television documentary: although in some respects problematic for the empirical historian, the dramatic genre signals more clearly to the viewer than the conventional history documentary – with its voice-of-God narration and use of expert witness to establish a didactic, authoritative tone intended to emulate that of the historical text – that what follows is merely *one* interpretation of events.

Although our film aspires to historical reliability, there is an inevitable tension between the requirements of a dramatic narrative and the scholarly historiography it draws upon, a tension which our research project sought to reflect on. There is now a lively debate amongst historians and film studies scholars about the contribution of the 'history film' to our understanding of the past. This involves a recognition of 'cinema's unequalled ability to re-create the past in a sensual, mimetic form' (Burgoyne 2008: 547), and an awareness of the expressive potential of the medium as a historiographical resource. As Rosenstone argues: 'The fictive but true stories that history films tell to audiences have far more emotional impact than the works that scholars produce, and emotion leads to its own sort of knowledge.' More contentiously, a number of theorists, including Rosenstone (2009: 18), have sought to probe the implications of the history film for a more general understanding of traditional historical writing as a mode of discourse. As he asserts:

If we continue to look at the screen long enough, and if we begin to take what happens there seriously ... the experience may raise in our minds this question: does not history in the written word also smack of the artificial, the spurious and the concocted?

Rosenstone has identified a range of fictive techniques used by film-makers such as *compression* (several characters become one), *condensation* (where multiple events are conflated), *displacement* (moving an incident from one time or location to another) and *alteration* (where a character expresses the

sentiments of another). We are guilty of all these in *The Enigma of Frank Ryan*. However, Rosenstone is anxious to move the debate out of the arena of banal value judgments about the historical accuracy of film as a medium. As he argues, ‘the responsibility of the film-maker should be less to traditional “historical accuracy” than to finding ways of expressing and inciting emotional awareness of past events’.

Nonetheless, for many scholarly historians – whose approach to the past involves the measured evaluation of empirical evidence, the explicit acknowledgement of the limitations of the extant evidence and the evaluation of competing interpretive frameworks – the fact-based drama genre, like the historical novel, represents a real challenge. As Hse-Ming Teo (2011: 297) argues in a discussion of the contribution of the historical novel to historiography, which seems to have relevance for the analysis of the history film in its relationship to traditional history writing:

while there are many similarities between history and fiction, there is an important difference arising from historians’ communal practice of history and their accountability to other historians and to new evidence if it comes to light, as opposed to novelists’ God-like, near total control of our historical worlds once we start writing.

I am not sure that film-makers exercise the same degree of control over their productions as novelists, but clearly the filmic script and diegesis is not subject to the sort of peer scrutiny with regards to accuracy as the historical monograph. For the historian, the fictive techniques required by the film-maker raise problematic issues. Is it legitimate to depict scenes for which there is no evidence, particularly as most viewers cannot be expected to know which events have been invented? At what point does the dramatic licence necessary to tell a story through the medium of film fatally compromise the film’s value as an engagement with history? Is it sufficient to remain true to the essence of a historical narrative while altering the details?

As Burgoyne (2008: 552) argues, the distinguishing feature of the history film across the various genres in which it manifests itself – the epic, the war film, the biographical film and the topical film – is ‘the concept of re-enactment, the act of imaginative re-recreation that allows the spectator to imagine they are witnessing again the events of the past’. The practice of re-enactment that constitutes the core semantic structure of the historical film produces, in effect, a ‘second degree original’:

In re-enacting the past, the historical film employs a variety of techniques to produce a heightened sense of fidelity and verisimilitude, creating a powerfully immersive experience for the spectator. Many of the characteristic features of the historical film directly function to reinforce the experiential core of the genre, its impression of ‘witnessing again’.

Despite the ‘somatic intensity’ of the cinematic experience, and the modes of empathy and presence that effective enactment supports, in reality the viewers are ‘not there’ and can never be. The filmic re-enactment provides not a direct access to ‘how things were’ but rather a guide to how the past might be understood. Burgoyne (2008: 553) quotes philosopher Paul Ricoeur to good effect: ‘re-enacting does not consist in reliving but in rethinking, and rethinking already contains the critical moment that forces us to take the detour by way

of the historical imagination'. The film-maker depicts the past in order to re-imagine it, to perform it and to rethink it. The role of the historical imagination in historical re-enactment justifies and perhaps even requires the use of diverse material, what might ordinarily be considered fundamentally different orders of discourse, in order to bring that 'vanished world' to life.

SCRIPTING AND THE HISTORICAL RECORD

This section of the article makes explicit some of the ways our film departs from the historical record and the reasons for this. We discuss a number of episodes in the film (available for viewing online at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/frankryan/Archivaldialogues/>) as a means of exploring tensions between the evidential concerns of the historian (FMcG) and the creative concerns of the film-maker (DB).

Rosamond Jacob and Frank Ryan as lovers

FMcG: Our film alters the dynamics of personal relationships between some of the historical figures depicted for dramatic and narrative purposes. Greater weight, for example, is accorded to the relationship between Ryan and his lover Rosamond Jacob than the historical evidence warrants (Lane 2010). Although Ryan *was* the great love of Jacob's life, he attached less importance to their relationship than she, and their sexual relationship (highly unconventional for the period) had ended by the mid-1930s. Ryan also enjoyed serious relationships with other women; indeed, his good looks, physical bravery and masculine charisma, which won him the admiration of male as well as female peers, contributed to his contemporary and posthumous appeal. Our film also conveys the impression that Ryan and Jacob's relationship was a public one, whereas it was, in reality, clandestine, partly because of the repressive ethos of the period.

DB: There is historical evidence and then there is *point of view*: objective record and subjective position and emotional life. The history film tries to grapple with both. Historians search for sources that can provide evidence of an emotional landscape – in this case Jacob's diaries – but the film-maker has to



Figure 2: Jacob and Ryan break up.

provide a narrative dynamic to enable an audience to connect with this material at the expressive level through empathy with the characters. Audiences like romance, a sensibility that allows a richer drawing of a character.

However, the decision to give Ryan's relationship with Jacob prominence in the film is also influenced by my concern to bring a feminist critique of republican adventurism to bear. It is also an attempt to provide a point of view which in its concern with the emotional world of Rosamond (played by novelist Mia Gallagher who had thoroughly read the sources on Jacob) throws light on Ryan and his motives (played with great energy and insight by Dara Devaney, with whom I had extensive conversations about the character of Ryan). The actors brought their own intelligence and interpretation to their characters and to performing this relationship, adding gesture and expression and indeed changing the dialogue when they felt it could be improved. A script is only a template for the dramatic action which is transformed in its performance. While not accepting fully the feminist nostrum that the 'personal is political', the depiction of Jacob's failed attempts to get Ryan to commit to their relationship, and to question his motives for fighting in Spain, is intended to critique the vainglorious character of the republicanism of the period and the sort of personal sacrifices that radical politics during this period required – and still does.

The record does suggest that there was an imbalance in the relationship. Jacob was considerably older than Ryan and somewhat more libertarian in her views. I think we have captured these factors in the script, casting and performances. Film has been rather better at exploring the emotional life of its characters than conventional scholarly historiography. As Sarah Pinto (2010: 189) argues: 'Historical films ... make their pasts known on emotional terms – these emotions can have analytic and interpretative power.'

Seán Russell, Frank Ryan and the battle for the soul of republicanism

FMcG: Film inevitably struggles to provide the kind of nuanced contextualization expected of scholarly history; nor, in most cases, would it be appropriate for it to do so: this is particularly evident in the critical response by historians



Figure 3: Ryan leads the Republican Congress marchers at Bodenstown.

to films on the Irish revolutionary period, which, by relating events through the perspective of republican protagonists, inevitably marginalize or misrepresent alternative political perspectives. Our film also obscures important aspects of the wider political context, such as the impact of the rise of the quasi-fascist Blueshirt movement – which temporarily radicalized Irish politics after de Valera's election in 1932 – and the pressures placed on militant republicanism by Fianna Fáil's growing political success which ultimately eroded the IRA's support and sense of purpose. The marginalization of the IRA during the 1930s – which stemmed from political factors beyond the control of its leading figures such as Ryan and Russell – is only fleetingly hinted at in our film.

The Seán Russell character depicted in the film (played by veteran Belfast actor Frankie McCafferty) is a composite of several IRA figures who clashed with Frank Ryan during the 1930s. It was, for example, Seán MacBride (rather than Russell) who sought Ryan's removal from the editorship of *An Phoblacht* due to the latter's increasingly independent, left-wing stance (although Russell did court-martial left-wing republicans who left the IRA to join the Republican Congress). Our film simplifies the ideological conflict within the IRA to one between the left, represented by Ryan, and the right, represented by Russell. In reality, Russell's apolitical militarism was not as dominant an outlook within the IRA during the early and mid-1930s as our film suggests.

By 1938, however, Russell *had* won control of the IRA (albeit an IRA much diminished in stature, credibility and political significance), and his influence as chief of staff paved the way for the IRA's bombing campaign in Britain and the wartime alliance with Nazi Germany. And, despite previous ideological differences between Ryan and Russell, the wartime context saw both men agree to utilize German support to advance Irish republican objectives (a strategy, it should be noted, that was explicitly rejected by other prominent leading left-wing republicans).

It should be evident even from this short summary that any attempt to do more than hint at the political complexities underlying the relationship between Ryan and Russell within the confines of a ninety-minute film would be both tedious and unrealistic.

DB: The politics of militant Irish republicanism in the post-civil war period are complex indeed! This presents a challenge for a film-maker in trying to engage a contemporary popular audience as likely to read the events through a contemporary optic as to dwell on these complexities.

The personal antagonism between Ryan and Russell – most dramatically portrayed in the clash between Republican Congress marchers and the IRA colour party in Bodenstown graveyard – functions as a cipher for a broader ideological rift between the socialist project and traditional physical-force republicanism in early 1930s' Ireland.¹² It also sets up the antagonism between the two characters, an antagonism which is stood on its head when Ryan and Russell meet in Berlin. The set-piece confrontation is intelligently played by Frankie McCafferty as Russell. Both actors bring to the scene a solid understanding of just what was at stake for their characters. In Berlin Ryan and Russell, despite their political differences, enter into an uneasy alliance in the context of Abwehr plans to transport them home to Ireland on a U-boat.¹³

Is this distillation of the ideological conflict between left and right within the ranks of republicanism into a personal and political hostility of two characters justified? All I would say is that the economy of filmic storytelling and the use of a classic mode of plotment based on conflict between clearly drawn

12. Bodenstown graveyard is the site of the grave of Wolfe Tone and witnesses annual commemorative marches by Irish republicans to the graveside. In June 1934 it was the occasion of a skirmish between the IRA and supporters of the left-wing Republican Congress faction.
13. Ryan was an agent of Abwehr II, the German military intelligence service that planned espionage and collaborative activities with foreign agents.

characters requires this – just as much as historiographical rigour resists such simplification. As Hayden White (2007: 149) says: ‘The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information’ – in this case the art of performance.

Imagining Ryan in Berlin

FMcG: Although there has been acrimonious debate as to whether Ryan was ideologically and morally compromised by his presence and activities in Germany, the evidence clearly indicates that he was motivated to return to Germany (following Seán Russell’s death on board their U-boat mission to Ireland) in order to facilitate a potential republican alliance with Germany. The most likely scenario in which such an alliance would have occurred would have been following a German invasion of the United Kingdom or a pre-emptive (defensive) invasion of Southern Ireland by British forces, either of which appeared highly plausible at the time of Ryan’s release from Spain in the summer of 1940.

Following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the likelihood of a German invasion of Britain receded, relegating Ryan to a marginal status. He responded to the invasion of the Soviet Union by emphasizing the value of Irish neutrality to Germany, and discouraging German attempts to draw Southern Ireland into the conflict. He also resisted attempts to draw him into closer collaboration, although – as is depicted in the film – he did visit Irish prisoners of war at Friesack to vet them for a mooted ‘Irish Brigade’. However, Ryan was not enthusiastic about this task or the other ventures that he participated in during his time in Germany. Although our film depicts Ryan making a series of recordings for Hans Hartmann, he rejected requests to broadcast propaganda to Ireland. He did, however, agree to undertake translation work for the propaganda service, an example of the increasing pressure he came under in the final years of the war, and the compromises he was forced to make to ensure his survival. As a result of his failing health, however, he never joined Hartmann’s radio service in Luxembourg.

Although German, British and Irish intelligence reports and other eyewitness accounts shed light on Ryan’s activities in Germany, these remain



Figure 4: Ryan in his Berlin apartment after a bombing raid, 1944.

problematic sources. Intelligence reports focus only on Ryan's political role in Germany, and inevitably reflect the views and interests of the agency that generated the report. For example, Abwehr's belief that Ryan would have acted in the deferential manner that its military plans (which were brought to Hitler's personal attention) for him assumed had his return to Ireland been facilitated can readily be questioned.

Accounts by those who were more intimately acquainted with Ryan during this period must also be treated with caution. For example, the testimony of Irish writer (and collaborator) Francis Stuart – who depicted Ryan as a willing collaborator intent on using German support for his own self-aggrandizement – may well have represented an attempt to sanitize his own presence in Berlin. Similarly, the subsequent testimony of figures such as Edmund Veessenmayer and Helmut Clissmann (both of whom are depicted in the film) concerning both their activities and their knowledge of the nature of the Nazi regime reflected the obvious sensitivities of the post-war context.

Consequently, the film uses considerable dramatic licence to imagine Ryan's life in Germany. There is, for example, no evidence that he questioned German officials about the existence of concentration camps. As a committed anti-fascist, however, he was certainly aware of the anti-Semitic nature of the Nazi regime, and it seems implausible that he was not deeply conflicted about his presence there, particularly after 1941 when it no longer served any useful purpose from a republican perspective.

When I interviewed Elizabeth Clissmann (one of Ryan's few friends in wartime Germany) in 2000 about Ryan's attitude to the Nazi regime, she volunteered that she had not known about the mass killing of Jews. The extent to which ordinary Germans were aware of the Holocaust remains a subject of debate but Ryan was close to well-connected military and intelligence figures. For example, Dr Veessenmayer, the German Foreign Office's special advisor on Ireland to whom Ryan personally reported, played a significant role in the mass extermination of Jews in Croatia, Serbia and Hungary. Despite receiving a twenty-year (albeit mostly unserved) sentence for war crimes, Veessenmayer continued to deny that he had had any knowledge of the existence of extermination camps.¹⁴

DB: Given the limited and problematic nature of sources on Ryan's life in Berlin, the film-maker has to work with scant written or oral evidence of Ryan's activity and indeed state of mind. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. In this context, the imaginative resources of film have to step in to reconstruct a sense of what Ryan may have been experiencing as the compromised nature of his position as an erstwhile radical involved in various collaborative projects with the Nazi regime became clear to him. This means employing the creative strategy of *re-enactment*: in this case, two imagined scenes between Ryan and Clissmann and Ryan and Hartmann. Historians tend to read a film as a text (often focusing on the script) to be evaluated against the primary text of history (as constructed by historians), but a filmed drama is in essence a performance in which the credibility of the re-enactment rests primarily on the believability of the actors.

In scripting the section of the film dealing with Ryan's last days in Berlin, I started from the assumption that it seems unlikely that Ryan, given his high-level intelligence contacts, could not have been aware of the highly repressive nature of the regime he was cooperating with and indeed of the concentration camp system. I accept that he may not have been aware of the implementation of the 'Final Solution'. In the re-enactment scenes

14. As, for example, during his testimony at Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial:

I chose to make his enquiries to Clissmann (and later to Hartmann) about the camps as the key dramatic encounters in a narrative of self-awareness and portrayal of his abject state at the end of his life. We can ask did Helmut Clissmann and, in particular, Hans Hartmann know of the existence of the camps? Interviews with these figures conducted after the war reveal nothing, and indeed, as with many others who lived through this period in Germany, such interviews are as much about forgetting than remembering, exercises in legitimisation rather than recall.

The portrayal of the relationship between Ryan and Hartmann is at the core of the film and rests on the performances of Dara Devaney and Barry Barnes. We are invited not so much to ‘witness again’ a historical event but to think our way into a highly problematic relationship which tokens Ryan’s generally compromised position as a guest of the Nazis. That is to say the scene operates in a figurative manner, as a synecdoche of a more general state. Historians, although they rarely dwell on it, employ a wide range of figurative techniques, metaphor, analogy, metonymy and synecdoche to move their descriptions from the particular to the general. The depiction of a series of interviews between Ryan and Hartmann is a conceit by the director (although Hartmann did encourage Ryan to participate in his broadcasting plans, and Ryan was an experienced journalist who had previously published and broadcast accounts of his political activities for propagandistic purposes in Republican Spain). However, these recording sessions enable Ryan to be established as narrator of his own story *within the diegesis of the film*.

I have experimented with the device of the unreliable narrator in a number of films since *Hard Road to Klondike* (1990), not because I have any interest in misleading the audience or mischievously eliding the boundary between fact and fiction but rather to signal *the contingency of memory and the performative nature of all life writing* whatever documentary claims are made for it. In addition I have been anxious to rescue the voice-over from the opprobrium it has received within critical work on documentary form. I have been concerned to restore the *vernacular voice-over* as part of the film-makers’ toolkit. It can play an expressive and reflexive role, in addition to the exegetical or didactic one of the traditional ‘voice of God’ narrator favoured by broadcasting.



Figure 5: Irish consular official Leopold Kerney confers with Ryan in Burgos prison.

The Kerney intervention

FMcG: Leopold Kerney's efforts to secure Frank Ryan's release from Burgos prison were more complex – and remain more disputed – than our film conveys. Kerney – an ideologically committed republican rather than a career civil servant – was both personally sympathetic to Ryan's plight and politically sympathetic to his militant nationalist objectives. Historians disagree as to whether Kerney's efforts to use German support to secure Ryan's release had de Valera's approval. Although the film suggests that de Valera authorized Ryan's handover to German intelligence agents, this seems (to me at least) unlikely, given the Irish government's concern that IRA collaboration with Nazi Germany would undermine Irish neutrality. During a subsequent fraught interview by Irish military intelligence – a record of which, along with other key documents, is hosted on our website – Kerney claimed that he had personally made the decision to agree to Ryan's release into German custody. The available evidence also suggests that Ryan knew that his 'escape' was to be brought about by German influence but that he had been assured that it would not bind him to any commitment to serve German – as opposed to Irish republican – interests.

DB: The Kerney scenes set in Burgos prison have an important narrative role in the film plotting the events around Ryan's escape/release from imprisonment by Franco. Kerney did visit Ryan in Burgos, so the re-enactments of these visits seems justified. The dialogue is invented but the script is informed by the accounts of Kerney of his visits to Ryan in prison.

As historians agree, the actual factors leading to his 'escape' are complex ones which the documentary record only partially clarifies. The exact nature of the links between Kerney's actions and those of German Military Intelligence, the Spanish authorities and the various intermediaries approached to facilitate Ryan's release are unclear. Our re-enactment of these events permits a variety of interpretations, ranging from the view that Ryan was a passive participant snatched from prison by Abwehr agents, through to the view that he actively participated in his escape and was fully aware of who was behind it. In the end I interpret my role as a film-maker as one of posing questions about Ryan's motive and actions with a view to letting the audience answer these. It really is a waste of time to expect a historical film to arrive at a definitive conclusion about a course of historical events – particularly when historians themselves find it hard to come to an agreed position!

Film inevitably involves compression of the complexity of the historical record in the interests of narrative drive and expressive effect. The constraints of screen time and the concrete nature of dramatic action and dialogue are the key determinants here. In this case Kerney (played mischievously by Niall Cusack) –with his links to Eamon de Valera (Arthur Riordan) and sympathy for Ryan – is the character who provides a filmically intelligible way of communicating some of the historical complexity surrounding Ryan's release from Burgos prison. Arthur Riordan captures brilliantly the ambiguity of de Valera's feelings towards Ryan, which might be at least as important in historiographical terms as poring over the extant diplomatic documents.

Certainly, in the context of an incomplete historical record – both a boon and a constraint for the writer/director – the film-maker has an opportunity to hypothesize about the course of events and construct a coherent if re-imagined narrative to link these scenes to the overall story drive of the film: again we are talking about the grammar of re-enactment and the logic of performance.

15. As David Cannadine (2004: 3) has observed, academics and media people 'are engaged in similar and complementary enterprises if not always in shared or identical tasks: grappling with the complexities of evidence, and wondering what to do and what to say when the archives and the sources are simply not there; struggling with the competing claims of narrative and analysis, of telling stories and of explaining change'.

CONCLUSIONS

So a book was written and a film got made. Film-maker and historian collaborated on the interpretative work that accompanied the exhibition of the finished piece. As the above discussion between Fearghal and me probably suggests, we have barely scratched the surface with regards to the sort of detailed, case study-led debate on the history film and on the sorts of collaborative processes that might be developed between film-maker and historian. That said, it might be useful to draw some conclusions about our collaboration. We do so with the aim of providing a tentative model of good practice to guide others considering this path: no definitive conclusions are offered, just the identification of a few basic principles.

1. It is important from the outset for film-maker and historian to realize that they are operating within very different cultural and institutional milieux with different professional interests at work. This means mutual respect for each other's methodologies and an understanding of the difference, for example, between the worlds of a university and that of an independent film company working within a commercial environment. We have much to learn from each other. We can call this the *mutual respect principle*.
2. Narrowly defined, 'knowledge transfer' seems a problematic way of conceptualizing interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, film-makers and production companies/broadcasters. Meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration, on the other hand, requires collaboration from the earliest possible stage of production, something which innovative, flexible knowledge-transfer-type schemes can play a vital role in supporting. Genuine collaboration should start from the assumption that each party is 'doing history', albeit in different ways. Rather than seeing film as a second-rate form of history due to its inability to reproduce the complexity and nuance of historical scholarship on screen, historians should accept that film-makers operate to a different set of rules, material restrictions and communicational imperatives. Let's call this the *parity of historiographical esteem principle*.
3. Historians who wish to engage with history on film should become more acquainted with the production process. This will not necessarily make them more forgiving with regards to the elisions and compromises of the film-maker, but it will give them a better understanding of the formal features of filmic storytelling, the primacy of creative decisions for the film-maker and how the pressures of production can determine creative decisions and attention to historical verisimilitude. Conversely, film-makers would be well advised not only to familiarize themselves with the secondary literature on their subject but to have engaged with the documentary basis of these studies and reached some understanding of the methods of academic historians: *the appreciative understanding principle*.
4. In 'doing history', film-makers and historians – who share more in common than might appear – should reflect on the complementary nature of their skills and aims.¹⁵ Film's dramatic appeal, its storytelling and visual qualities and its ability to engage on an emotional level can vastly extend the reach and impact of historical knowledge. Historians should develop their capacity to exploit and interpret visual sources, particularly moving- and still-image archive, not simply for their illustrative qualities but also for

their evidential and indeed expressive value. They might then demonstrate greater awareness of the use of film archive in a figurative manner by film-makers. Conversely, film-makers – who tell stories primarily through images rather than words – have much to learn from historians in terms of embedding context, analysis and competing interpretations within their narratives: *the acknowledgement of complementary aims*.

5. Historians have a valuable role to play in the reception of historical films, whether through post-screening debates, interpretative websites or other means of providing the historical context, detail and nuance that a film cannot. Such resources offer a means of addressing the compromises necessitated by the historical film and an opportunity to promote a more meaningful public engagement with history. This might be called the principle of *promoting an expanded communication field for historical understanding* (we resist the temptation to invoke the term ‘multi-platform content development’ with its odious marketing resonance).

Writing an afterword to *Wolf Hall*, her historical novel on Tudor *éminence grise* Thomas Cromwell, Hilary Mantel (2010) seeks to distinguish between the different ways that the novelist and the historian deal with the past and historical characters. The remarks seem apposite in how the film-maker and historian operate. She writes:

Unlike the historian, the novelist doesn't operate with hindsight. She lives inside the consciousness of her characters, for whom the future is blank. Acting always on imperfect information and, like all of us, only half-conscious of their own motivations, they have to hazard the unknown. It is up to the historian to analyse their actions and pass judgement in retrospect. The novelist agrees just to move forward with their characters, walking into the dark.

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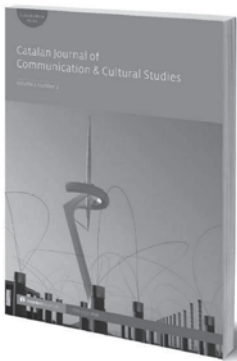
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