



NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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Classical Realism to Social Realism – The Commitments, The Snapper and The Van

This period of the 1990's in Ireland, with pre-Celtic Tiger looming in the air, was the setting for a huge transformation in Irish cinema. Through years of lack of funding and infrastructure, the Irish cinema scene was finally emerging. Constructing the Irish identity was now coming to the forefront with *The Commitments* (dir Alan Parker, 1991), *The Snapper* (dir Stephen Frears 1993) and *The Van* (dir Stephen Frears (1996) appearing on our screens. These films, adapted from Roddy Doyle's novels represent Northside Dublin. They are quite different from one another yet what the eye sees is one of the same community.

The Commitments with a narrative driven by music and a Hollywood scale production conforms to the frameworks of classical realism, where there is a clear beginning middle and end. ¹*The Snapper* and *The Van* with a significantly lower production, move into social realist conventions where the ending is left open ended to reflect the instability of everyday life. Domestic life was shown on screen with *The Snapper* and *The Van*. These films portrayed a clear snapshot into working-class life in Dublin with a vivid portrayal of how Irish Society was developing. Authentic stories were being represented by portraying certain themes, language and aesthetics. This allowed working class to become visible.

With this one of the many challenges filmmakers faced was conveying local storytelling vs the expectations from international audiences. The tension between these two factors majorly influenced what films were coming out of Ireland. With funding for *The Snapper* and *The Van* coming from the

¹ Pam Cook and Annette Kuhn, *The Cinema Book*, (London: BFI Publishing 2007) p.159

BBC², the British broadcasters often had the final say in what could be made thus leaving local Irish stories on the back burner.³ Balancing the tension between authentic Irish life on screen and meeting expectations for international audiences, *The Commitments* holds the international side with classical realism and *The Snapper* and *The Van* hold the authentic side with social realism. This tension led to these films being able to depict working class life and making it accessible through narrative and visual tools.

Focusing on how *The Snapper* and *The Van* convey traits of social realism and *The Commitments* conveying classical realism, I will discuss how this framework is a mode of expression that is shaped by culture, language and aesthetic.

Film making in Ireland during the 1990s faced a massive turning point. With sparse funding, it was hard to define 'Irish Cinema' as it was heavily reliant on external factors. With productions being dependent on English and American money it was massively shaped what stories could and could not be told. Constructed through collaboration, Ruth Barton makes the point that national cinema is a reflection on local culture and identity.⁴ However, Irish Cinema is highly fragmented and does not neatly fit into this context. Constructing Irish Cinema was not only shaped by our own film makers but also the external factors which enhanced the complexities of representing Irish identity.⁵ This is evident in *The Commitments* where there was a big press release and marketing plan while the release of *The Snapper* and *The Van* was more grounded and catered towards the local audience.

² O' Toole Fintan." Working-class Dublin on Screen: The Roddy Doyle Films." *Cinéate* 1999 Vol. 24, No.2/3 (1999): pg 36 < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41689142> > [Accessed 08/10/25]

³ Ruth Barton. *Irish national Cinema* (Taylor & Francis Group 2004) p. 104

⁴ Barton p. 7

⁵ Barton p. 3

The Commitments had a Hollywood budget, global distribution and the narrative was mainly driven by music. Parker often dismissed television cinema, stating it ‘boxes in the cinematic imagination.’⁶ The production of *The Commitments* shows to be an example of the Hollywood collaboration that frequently occurred in order for Irish identity to be shown on international screens. With Doyle having to fight for his name to be on the final script⁷ and for the film to be referred to as Alan Parkers ‘*The Commitments*’⁸ it shows how dependent the industry was on foreign productions. In contrast, *The Snapper* and *The Van* although funded by the BBC there were much smaller productions which allowed Doyle to have a more hands on approach. Working with Frears on these two films, he gave Doyle the space to portray Northside working class life thus fitting into the conventions of social realism.

Martin McLoone argues that Irish Cinema exists in ‘a space between national and international’⁹. Further complicating the stance of Irish cinema in the 1990s as it highlights the hybrid workforce that is Irish cinema. *The Snapper* and *The Van* are local stories told through British funding.

Looking at the structure of classic realism in film, it shows that realism is not a singular style that can be defined. When talking realism in cinema theorists such as Colin Mac Cabe argues that there is only one system in cinema that reveals the truth. The camera provides a metalanguage.

⁶ Martin McLoone. ‘Boxed In?: The Aesthetics of Film and Television’ in *Big Picture Small Screen: The Relations between Film and Television*, ed by John Hill and Martin McLoone (University of Luton Press 1996) p. 78

⁷ *Back to Barrytown: The Commitments*. Dir Kenny Mac Giolla Phádraig (RTÉ 2021)

⁸ Alan Parker, ‘*Making the Commitments*’, Alanparker.com (1991) <<https://alanparker.com/film/the-commitments/making>> {accessed 02/02/26}

⁹ Martin McLoone *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (2000) p. 23-34

The image tells the truth more than any other filmmaking technique.¹⁰ Once the image on screen looks authentic, the audience trusts what they are being shown. However, David Bordwell argues this theory is too simple, if one is to construct realism on screen there are multiple factors of filmmaking that come into play.¹¹ Rejecting the idea that realism in film is a ‘monolithic metalanguage’¹² and enforcing factors such as narrative, performance and sound create realism in film. To further enhance Bordwell's point but also including the perspective of Christopher Williams realism is not a singular style¹³. In cinema there is a range of realism techniques used by directors to engage with their audience. Whether it is educating through documentary realism¹⁴ or highlighting everyday life through social realism.

To situate *The Commitments* within the frameworks for classical realism, we see Dublin as the dramatic backdrop to the bands up and coming fame. Through aesthetic, well situated shots and editing which also is a key factor in classic realism¹⁵, *The Commitments* blends in with Mac Cabe's idea. Each scene is carefully constructed to make an assumed image of working-class Dublin. Fintan O 'Toole makes an argument to say even Parker's way of casting amateur actors challenges the idea of realism.¹⁶ Despite choosing local actors he ‘misses the mark’ portraying them to be as what O' Toole comments ‘romantic Irish exotics.’¹⁷ What appears to be authentic is a combination of mise- en-scene and strategic editing from Parker.¹⁸ The narrative having a clear beginning, middle and end, with the

¹⁰ Julia Hallam with Margaret Marshment; *Realism and popular cinema*. (Manchester University Press 2000) p. 11- 12

¹¹ Hallam and Marshment p. 12-13

¹² Hallam and Marshment p. 13

¹³ Hallam and Marshment p. 13

¹⁴ Lay p. 11-12

¹⁵ Cook and Kuhn p. 161-162

¹⁶ O' Toole p. 37

¹⁷ O'Toole p. 36

¹⁸ Cook p. 161-162

making, rise and fall of the band,¹⁹ *The Commitments* exhibits closure that are within the conventions of classical realism.

The Snapper and *The Van* reflect life in Dublin in the 1990s thus creating Irish social realism. However, to get to Irish social realism we must look at the conventions of British social realism.

What began in the 1960's as 'kitchen sink' dramas in British Cinema. Characterised by location, dialogue and working-class protagonists²⁰ British social realism brought often marginalized groups to the centre on television cinema. Constructing authenticity through council estates, cramped shots and local dialogue, British Social realism reflects the historical context of England at that time. Emerging at the same time as the new wave of British filmmakers²¹, the idea of realism or British social realism does not classify as a genre but more so a 'mode of expression'²² that is reoccurring in national cinema.

In Doyle's second film *The Snapper* we are taken into the chaos of the Curley household. Meeting most of the characters in the first scene this cramped domestic space is central to the framework of social realism.²³ The film portrays the structure of a working-class home through movement, noise and language. From this faced paced setting within the Curley household it creates a sense of authenticity that resonates with audiences. The overlapping conversations, bickering and slammed doors reinforces the idea of social realism within *The Snapper*. Rather than just observing from a distance, the audience is placed in this cramped house which is a key component to the framework of social realism.

¹⁹ Cook p. 159

²⁰ Samatha Lay. *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. Wallflower Press 2002 p. 9

²¹ Lay p. 11

²² Lay p. 2

²³ Lay p. 23

Humour in *The Snapper* plays a central role in localising the film through a social realist view in an Irish context. Frears calling it the ‘best film he has ever made’²⁴ also goes on to describe the film as ‘funny and heartbreaking’.²⁵ Although serious themes of unplanned pregnancy, rape and gender are addressed in the film, the use of comedy make these topics more accessible for audiences.²⁶ The humorous familial bickering that functioned as a way of processing Sharon’s pregnancy aligns with the Irish mindset of using humour as a coping mechanism. The insults and sarcasm while acting as a comic relief also draws attention to how invasive the community was. Sharon often using cutthroat comebacks to take hold of situations that felt out of control. Her pregnancy was of public domain, capturing ‘uncomfortable questions about privacy and violation in contemporary Irish society’.²⁷

Throughout the film we see Sharon anxieties come to light as she prepares to be a single mother. Anxious about the gossip unfolding about her pregnancy, this issue is repeatedly shown as the film progresses. It displays the social change that was occurring in Ireland. While the film separates the Church from State²⁸ it still exhibits the fearful mindset that entangled so many Irish people. The emphasis of lack of privacy and gossip further demonstrates how *The Snapper* fits into the framework of social realism within an Irish context.

1996 marked the closure of the last Mother and Baby home in Ireland, challenging the domestic norms the Church taught, the 1990’s saw gender at the forefront of society. Instead of conforming to the old societal event of sending Sharon into one of these institutions the Curley family accept her pregnancy.

²⁴ *Back to Barrytown: The Snapper*. Dir Kenny Mac Giolla Phádraig (RTÉ 2021)

²⁵ *Back to Barrytown: The Snapper*

²⁶ Cynthia Lucia. Interview ”The Complexities of Cultural Change: An Interview with Stephen Frears” (Cinéaste Fall 2004 Vol. 28) p. 11

²⁷ Mary McGlynn ’*Pregnancy, Privacy and domesticity in The Snapper*’ *New Hibernia Review* Vol.9 no.1 (Spring, 2005) p. 1

²⁸ *Back to Barrytown: The Snapper*

Dessie fights patriarchal norms with him becoming ‘absorbed’²⁹ in the role of becoming a grandfather. Dessie’s character is a representation for the social change that was occurring in Ireland during that period, which furthers the argument of *The Snapper* fitting the framework of social realism.

The humour and dialogue used in *The Snapper* as well as *The Van* make the language in the films become a representation of Irishness and a marker of class within Irish society. Mary McGlynn noted the differing accents between patient and physician³⁰ which continues to highlight social realism in an Irish context and class distinction. Composing a version of realism that is precisely Irish grounded in dialogue, family and resilience.

Reflecting the resilience of a working-class household, cultural identity is also brought to the centre of the story through humour. While *The Snapper* is set within a domestic context, *The Van* takes us outside of the home, broadening this social portrait of North Dublin. *The Van* shifts towards the impact of unemployment that was engulfing Ireland in the 1990s. Representing more than just a business venture, Larry and Bimbo’s chip van show the endurance of making ends meet in the midst of economic instability.

While Bimbo’s Burger’s chip van at the beginning brings hope and income as its success grows, the relationship between Larry and Bimbo begins to break down. The juxtaposition highlights the economic strain that is often seen with the framework of social realism.³¹ Consistent with Samantha Lays framework for social realism, *The Van* demonstrates working class relationships and the

²⁹ O’Toole p. 39

³⁰ McGlynn p. 154

³¹ Lay p. 21

hardships they endure.³² Larry and Bimbos relationship exhibit's the effects unemployment has on friendships and how it reshapes masculinity and identity.

Taking from John Hill he comments on British Social Realism, revealing the anxieties that were coming to the forefront about the decline of traditional working-class life.³³ Larry and Bimbo adapt this figure with their identity being rooted in work and community and it being stripped away from them .³⁴ Sticking with conservative social views that Ireland was trying to come out of, the role of the male being the breadwinner becomes deconstructed. With there being signs of a shift in gender roles such as Larry's wife being the provider of the family.³⁵ In a period where there was a decline in traditional industries and men were losing a sense of social status ³⁶, Bimbo's Burger chip van is an illustration of Larry and Bimbo reclaiming that lost status.

Differing from *The Commitments* and *The Snapper*, the tone of *The Van* feels heavier due to the economic strain the characters are under. With humour acting as a coping mechanism deflecting from the bleak realities that surround them, quick witted comebacks turn into moment of genuine rage. Despite banter acting as a release the change in tone reinforces the defining feature of social realism in an Irish context.³⁷

³² Lay p. 21-22

³³ Stephen C. Shafer An Overview of the Working Classes in British Feature Film from the 1960's to the 1980's: From Class Consciousness to Marginalization *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 59, Workers and Film: As Subject and Audience (Spring, 2001) pg 10

³⁴ Shafer p. 10

³⁵ Shafer p. 11-12

³⁶ Shafer p. 12

³⁷ Cynthia Lucia. Interview "The Complexities of Cultural Change: An Interview with Stephen Frears" (Cinéaste Fall 2004 Vol. 28)

While *The Snapper* ends on a heart-warming note, *The Van* closes on the harsh note of the economic realities of 1990's Ireland. However, acting as an escape Ireland's unexpected run in the FIFA World Cup quarter finals add another layer of social context to the film. Serving as a moment of national unity, the whole community gathers in the local pub, here we see the constructs of social realism. As Ireland plays, there is pride and optimism felt collectively in the pub. This promising perception foregrounds key elements of social realism, bridging together the public narrative and the private struggle. While Larry and Bimbo relationship carries tension the national narrative unities. Italia 90 is often reflected in Ireland where the nation was completely unified thriving off hope. Among the uncertainty of social change that was occurring in Ireland during that time, *The Van* depicts what many Irish people were going through.

As Bimbo's Burger chip van sinks into the Irish sea, it carries heavy symbolic meaning. It takes with it pride, friendship and a failed business. This serves as a highly social realist image where despite all efforts to fight the failings of an economic structure, it unfortunately fails the people trying to fight it.

Both *The Snapper* and *The Van* illustrate that social realism is a mode of expression that can be portrayed through social environment.³⁸ Where British Social Realism shaped the term 'kitchen sink' drama, emerging from a post war period, Frears and Doyle portray these conventions in an Irish context. Originally rooted from a political movement as a call out for social change, Doyles' intentions never seemed political; his focus was on authentic storytelling, the lived in experiences of social change and happenings in working class North Dublin.³⁹

³⁸ David Forrester. *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2013) p. 16

³⁹ *Back to Barrytown: The Van*. Dir Kenny Mac Giolla Phádraig (RTÉ 2021)

The gossip that surrounded Sharon Curley's pregnancy and the breakdown that occurred with Larry and Bimbo failed venture exhibits Irish social dynamics specifically in the 90's. Conforming with Irish social conditions that does not fit in with British culture these films show the shadow the Church left on the traditions of domestic life. The language spoke in all three films become central in defining Irishness and representing the authenticity of working class. Mary McGlynn also makes a point that, the dialect spoke also become a signal for resistance for many, it was the first time to hear a north Dublin accent on screen.⁴⁰ Humour being used an emotional coping mechanism is also a marker on reworking the conventions of British social realism towards Irish social realism. All these factors coming together relate to Lays' idea of social realism being less of a genre but more of a form of expression.⁴¹

The Commitments despite being Doyles story, it is referred more as Alan Parker's film. With its Hollywood scale, the films narrative and production pull it away from social realism. Where The Snapper and The Van although using a British director and funding from the BBC, an authentic Irish story was portrayed thus engaging with McLoone argument of these films existing in a place between national and international.⁴² With the smaller scale production and Frears working closely with Doyle, it enabled working class Irishness to be shown.

Ultimately The Snapper and The Van demonstrate how social realism can be localised. The two films reshape and translate British social realism into a new cultural context. Using the shadow of the Irish church, domestic settings and working-class Dublin dialect, humour is a central device of processing life's hardships which is a key character in Irish behaviour. With Frears providing a detachment from

⁴⁰ Mc Glynn p. 154

⁴¹ Lay p. 21

⁴² McLoone p.

the social setting the film was set in, and Doyle providing that insight to the culture. Their collaboration resulted in an intimate insight and balanced portrayal of working-class Dublin, that conforms to McLoone's idea of Irish cinema existing in a space between national and international.⁴³

The Commitments operates as a completely different film in comparison to The Snapper and The Van. Despite sharing the same dialect and North Dublin setting it was shaped towards a Hollywood scale film, made for an international audience. With music driving the narrative compared to everyday social condition seen in The Snapper and The Van, it is clear that the film was made for global entertainment. While working class conditions are still shown, a romanticised view takes precedence which makes The Commitments remove itself from the framework of social realism and fitting in with Classical realism.^{44 45}

Focusing on the lived issues of unplanned pregnancy, unemployment, gender, privacy and community through authentic casting location shooting and intimate shots. Doyle and Frears made films that reinforce Samantha Lays point in social realism being a mode of expression rather than a genre.⁴⁶ Doyles non-political stance also stands out to challenge the conventions of British Social realism, which is seen to call out political authorities. The Snapper and The Van operate as a form of cultural expression.

⁴³ McLoone p.23

⁴⁴ Martin R George jr.' Recent Irish Film: A survey'. Journal of Irish Studies. The HARP, 1994, vol 9 p. 112

⁴⁵ *Back to Barrytown: The Commitments*

⁴⁶ Lay p. 2

At a time where Ireland was trying to ground its national cinema, *The Snapper* and *The Van* demonstrated that authentic local film making could be done. Emerging from the framework of social realism, these films remain authentically Irish portraying an honest working-class Ireland. Despite *The Commitments* romancing this honest view, it reminds us that authentic representation does not come from origin but intention.

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