Different Trajectories: Europe and Scotland in Recent Scottish Cinema

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Since approval was given via a referendum in 1997 for the advent of the Scottish Parliament, the benefits and constraints of Scotland's devolved role within and against the UK has, understandably, formed the primary axis of political debate, despite increasing evidence that Scotland, like other nations, is part of a globalised world. It has long been argued that nationalist Scotland exercises a preference for closer ties with a less imperialist Europe rather than with the colonially tainted state of the United Kingdom (Hechter 1975, 310). However, the precise meaning of Scotland's role within a changing Europe receives little attention in mainstream debate (Imrie 2006). Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) is engaged in the ongoing process of enlarging and renegotiating its boundaries. Despite the paucity of cinematic texts that address ostensibly Scottish-European concerns, I want to consider the meaning of Europe through a focus on how a number of films have been written into critical accounts of Scottish, British and European cinema while also examining how this relationship is given meaning in recent films produced in Scotland, in order to map the different manifestations of the relationship between Europe and Scotland.

The Idea of Europe

Europe initially referred to a terrain that stretched westwards from the Aegean and was associated with Christendom, civilisation and the values of human rights and freedom (Ichijo 2004, 71-72). The political institutionalisation of Europe as the formation called the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 meant that Europe increasingly became identified with Western Europe, as did an adherence to democracy and human

rights. This was confirmed in 1986 when the Single European Act reinforced the image of Europe as a market and a world economic power (Ichijo 2004, 70).

The relationship between this idea of Europe and cinema is maintained through the heading of 'European cinema,' and, despite the shift eastwards towards the study of Asian and world cinemas, 'European cinema' continues to function as a category of cultural distinction. Thomas Elsaesser's effort to pinpoint the current meaning of European cinema suggests that the label 'European' seems, in the era of world cinema, to make more sense when applied from without than when given substance from within (2005, 486). Similarly, Rosalind Galt argues that European space is invisible, existing as a political idea but not as a coherent location (2006, 179).

Despite these discursive impediments, the relationship between Europe and cinema endures and one of the critical functions of European cinema within a British context has been to highlight a perceived cinematic deficit in British national cinema. In 1969 Alan Lovell argued that it is often assumed that Britain had made no significant contribution to European cinema, hence such questions as 'Why is there no British Nouvelle Vague? Why do we have no Godard, no Truffaut, no Pasolini, no Bergman?' (1972, 2). However, the success of directors such as Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway and Sally Potter in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in British art cinema assuming a critical presence in European cinema (Orr 2000). Duncan Petrie has also charted the emergence of a Scottish art cinema within British cinema during the 1980s and 1990s (2000, 148-171). The legitimation of popular European cinemas, and the consequent expansion of the parameters of Europe that is referenced by European cinema, have served to deflect Lovell's argument, but it often remains the case that to summon European cinema within critical accounts of national cinema, particularly where that cinema is viewed as peripheral and emergent, is a means of conferring cultural capital onto that cinema (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992; Petrie 2000; Eleftheriotis 2001; Iordanova 2003). The ongoing legitimation of national and peripheral cinemas is questioned by Tim Bergfelder, who argues that 'most studies of national cinema in Europe remain couched in a rhetoric of cultural protectionism and fear of globalisation, and they still perpetuate in many cases, whether unwittingly or not, the illusion of 'pure' and stable national cultures' (2005, 321).

In a similar vein, Eleanor Bell urges Scottish literary studies to move from its often insular focus on tradition-inspired approaches in order to 'take account of some of the wider influences now affecting the nature of belonging at wider European and macro levels' (Bell and Miller 2004, 84; Bell 2004; Murray 2005). Following the direction of the arguments put forward by Bergfelder and Bell I want to consider those areas where the relationship between Europe and Scotland is manifest in a selection of recent films produced with some degree of Scottish involvement.

Scotland and European cinema

The first of these areas is the most conventional and is demonstrated in connection with Scottish auteur directors such as Bill Douglas and more recently Lynne Ramsay. The deeply personal and autobiographical films of Douglas and his poetic style offer the opportunity of aligning Scottish cinema with what John Caughie refers to as the 'sustained, hard edged and diverse European tradition of art cinema' (1993, 200). Underlying this tendency is a desire to buttress an emerging, though uncertain, national cinema with the cultural distinction of European art cinema. It confirms the idea of Europe as inherently civilizing and suggests a centripetal trajectory that looks southwards to the European continent, and to the canonical centres of European cinema formed by the auteurs of France, Germany and Italy.

The relationship between Scotland and European cinema is represented more directly in recent films such as *Prague* (1992) and *Morvern Callar* (2003) where protagonists leave Scotland on a journey that takes them southwards to significant encounters in continental Europe.[1] *Prague* features the quest of the young Scot Alexander Novak to discover the past of his Czech/Jewish mother during the Nazi occupation of the country. The film is less concerned with the nature of the connection between the country that Alexander has travelled from and the post-Communist Czech nation, than it is with the search for a fragment of the past preserved on film, somewhere in the Prague film archive. The significance of this film lies in the relocation of the protagonist to one of the former centres of Europe, though this is ultimately a lesser concern than the

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[1] *Tickets* (2005) is a more recent collaboration between Abbas Kiarostami, Ken Loach and Ermanno Olmi on the shared theme of a railway journey through Europe. This portmanteau film extends European cinema into World cinema, and the Loach film features a trio of Celtic football club supporters who have one of their tickets stolen by a young boy from a poor Albanian family. The charity and compassion extended to the boy and his family by the Glaswegians highlights the different status of figures who share a journey to the same destination.

triangular romance involving Bruno Ganz as Josef and Sandrine Bonnaire as Elena, both actors synonymous with European art cinema. The attempt to engage at different levels of signification with the legacy of the past in the formally oblique manner associated with European art cinema also effectively signifies the cinematic journey of the director Ian Sellar away from the Scotland of his previous film, *Venus Peter* (1989), towards the former centre of European cinema, via the production support of Canal+ and the BBC.

Alan Warner's novel *Morvern Callar* was adapted into a film by Lynne Ramsay. The standing of Warner as an established novelist and the visual style of Ramsay function as a combination that invites a particular type of critical discourse. J. Hoberman likens the female Morvern to Mersault, the male existential figure of Albert Camus's novel *The Outsider* (1946 [1942]) and the character of David Locke in Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975) (Hoberman 2002). The currency accrued by asserting the philosophical credentials of the film, again affirms a connection with both the European novel and European cinema.[2] However, the journey that Morvern makes with her companion Lanna to a Spanish resort, with the money acquired from her dead partner, reveals a less singular expression of alienation. Morvern's relationship with Lanna is compromised by the estrangement that she increasingly feels from an environment offering the conforming pleasures of mass tourism to the Brit abroad. She tastes some of the transitory pleasures offered by the anonymous resort in the shape of discos, drugs and casual sex before deciding to leave with the reluctant Lanna. The girls' walk away from the resort into arable Spain provides an encounter with a more authentic, lush and colourful part of Spain and an exotic location of temporary fascination that breaks up stylistic continuity since the West of Scotland landscape was shot with much less colour and bright light. The journey away from the resort and other people offers respite for Morvern's restless and disconnected subjectivity, but no meaningful cultural interaction. Morvern appears to be more drawn to nature than she is to other people and is frequently shown literally and self-consciously touching the surface textures of nature from soil, and tree bark to the worms and insects that permeate the soil. Diegetic music from the tape left for her by her deceased partner plays in Morvern's Walkman and isolates her from contact with other people while restricting the amount of dialogue in

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[2] The resurrection and film adaptation of Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi's existential novel of 1961 *Young Adam* (2003) performed a similar function.

the film. The texture of sounds from the computer monitor and keyboard, water running on to enamel, in addition to the foregrounding of diegetic music, signal the formal preoccupations of a director who confirms her art cinema credentials by significantly attenuating narrative impetus. The withholding of identification and narrative impetus that results from Morvern's emotional detachment, partly explains the alignment of her subjectivity by critics with the existential subjects of French literature (Jones 2004). However, what differentiates Morvern's subjectivity from her illustrious counterparts is her gender but also her friendship with Lanna, who is altogether more willing to submit to the hedonistic pleasures offered by the resort, and to retain a connection with her life back in Scotland rather than take flight from it. For Lanna 'here is the same crap that's everywhere, so stop dreaming.' Morvern values Lanna's companionship but does not depend on it as Lanna, like the spectator of the film, receives few indicators to what Morvern is feeling and thinking.

These versions of the travelling Scot show protagonists who leave Scotland but do not have to converse in the language of the countries to which they travel. The significance of these encounters between Europe and Scottish protagonists lies in the critical opportunity of aligning Scottish cultural production with the European novel and European art cinema. The limited degree of cross-cultural exchange in this manifestation of the relationship between Scotland and Europe renders this mode aesthetically expressive and its content culturally conservative as these examples of journeying protagonists are drawn to the continent of Europe yet also separated from it, seemingly unable on this evidence to be represented as parts of a shared cultural formation.

Pan-European film

There is evidence of pan-European relationships involving Scotland, developing in film, more so than in television production (Eleftheriotis 2001). There is some overlap between this mode and Scotland and European cinema not least since films such as *Prague* and filmmakers such as Lynne Ramsay have benefited from the European co-funding facilitated by the Eurimages programme set up by the European Commission in

1988, and by that programme's successors.[3] These modes are separated with the intention of identifying, however slight, evidence of an increased level of cross-cultural co-operation and exchange, and a consequential loosening of exclusively national orientation (Wayne 2002).

Scottish films of the 1980s such as *Another Time, Another Place* (1983) and especially *Play Me Something* (1989) specifically address cross-cultural encounters with continental Europe from within the various and not exclusively urban settings of northern Scotland (Schlesinger 1990; Petrie 2000, 162-68). However, the most prominent contemporary manifestation of pan-European cinema involving Scotland lies in the northerly relationship with Denmark and the larger formation of Scandinavia (Murray 2005). This trend began with *Breaking the Waves* (1996), continued with the Scottish-Norwegian co-production *Aberdeen* (2000), and more recently has been sustained by the production plan formed by the Sigma and Antonine film companies in Scotland, and the Zentropa and Calyx companies based in Denmark. This agreement has produced films such as *Wilbur wants to Kill Himself* (2002) and *Red Road* (2006) (Laing 2000).

Breaking the Waves was an English language production directed by Lars von Trier, and whilst not an official Dogma 95 film it bears the influences of the Dogma technique (Hjort and Mackenzie 2003). The film was shot mainly in rural Scotland and its pan-European aspects are to be found in the cast, crew and sources of finance.[4] It relates to a north European and Scottish context through the representation of the experience of a female protagonist in a remote religious community. The treatment of Emily Watson's character Bess has generated discussion amongst feminist critics, but little attention has been devoted to the pan-European aspects of *Breaking the Waves*. The raw depiction of Calvinist excess in *Breaking the Waves* signifies an important aspect of a religious and

[3] The *Eurimages* programme has since been supplemented by the *MEDIA Plus Programme*, which in 2007 became *Media 2007*. The former provides financial support for the development of production projects in fiction, documentaries, animation and multimedia, while Eurimages is the Council of Europe fund for the co-production, distribution and exhibition of European cinematographic works. There are currently 28 member states of Eurimages but the UK has not signed up. Although UK film producers cannot apply directly for funds, a European co-production partner, if a member state, would be eligible. See: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/media/index_en.htm [accessed 13 August 2007].
[4] *Breaking the Waves* was co-produced primarily within Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and France. The cast and crew included Robby Mueller and Jean Paul Meurice (cinematography), Emily Watson, Stellan Skarsgaard (cast), and Lars Von Trier (director). Locations included the Isle of Skye, Mallaig and settings on the west coast of Scotland.

cultural inheritance that is distributed across north European countries, rather than represented as an experience that is exclusive to rural Scotland (Eklund 1982; Petrie 2000, 207; Gordon, 2004). The non-naturalistic style of the film does not establish or frame the characters in a landscape that exploits or rests upon the visual opportunities of rural Scotland. The manipulated level of contrast, dilution of colour, and the insertion of musical chapter headings create an unfamiliar and stylised look that is underlined by the dramatic extremes of the narrative that are concentrated by the intensity of Emily Watson's performance of Bess. The coastal locations of the northwest Highlands of Scotland function as markers of remoteness and isolation where the religious strictures of the local community circumscribe the life of Bess and her relationship with her paralysed husband Jan. This combination of unfamiliar elements and tone creates a film that could be located within the tradition of European art cinema, and the director Lars von Trier could also be aligned with fellow Scandinavian auteurs, but the spectator of *Breaking of Waves* is not orientated towards viewing the film in either an exclusively national or a classically European art cinema framework.

Wilbur Wants to Kill Himself concerns the implications of the attempts of a young man initially determined to kill himself in response to the relationships that form around him. The generation of humour, romance, melodrama and most importantly, an unfamiliar dramatic tone for the setting of Glasgow, marks the distinctiveness of the film. *Wilbur* also benefits from a co-production arrangement between Scotland and Denmark and the backing of Scottish Screen, enabling Lone Scherfig, the director of the 2000 language comedy *Italiensk for begyndere* (called *Italian for Beginners* in its British release), to direct her first English language feature combining the locations of the city of Glasgow and the 'filmbyen' studio in Denmark. Like *Breaking the Waves*, *Wilbur* mixes cast and crew productively without departing from the global norm and export potential of the English language (Ives 2006). The cultural exchange of *Wilbur* is most evident in the desire to extract impassive and dark humour from the further reaches of male melancholy through the protagonist of Wilbur and the defamiliarized setting of Glasgow (Marks 2000).

This is most apparent in the restrained pacing of the script in scenes where humour emerges cumulatively rather than immediately in the manner made familiar by the succinct verbal economy of the joke or gag. It is apparent during the scenes in the film

where the forum of the suicide group provides the setting for suicidally motivated individuals to interact with hospital psychologists. Here individuals such as Wayne give accounts of their actions and motivations and rather than receiving the support and understanding of the rest of the group they are met with indifference and in Wilbur's case outright hostility from Ruby. Moira asks Wilbur 'What do you think would happen in a broad sociological sense if we all went around killing ourselves?' Shortly before Moira has completed her question to Wilbur a cut away from Moira's direct look at Wilbur to Ruby and Claire registers the impassive and disinterested response of these other members of the group. A cut back to a close shot of Wilbur shows him pausing before answering 'There'd be no more group.' A cut then follows showing the psychologist Horst smoking a cigarette and nodding gently in apparent agreement. The slow pacing of the scene and the cutting away from the leader of the discussion, Moira, to other members of the circle of group members breaks up the momentum of the scene and allows the black humour of the situation to register cumulatively rather than immediately. The refusal to treat Wilbur and the other members of the suicide group's plights tragically connects the film with the black humour of Theatre of the Absurd (O'Neill 1983). This disposition toward death is combined and eventually displaced over the course of the film by the romantic triangle that is formed between Wilbur's brother Harbour and the struggling single mother, Alice. Once Harbour is diagnosed with terminal cancer the brothers begin to exchange motivations for life and for the end of life respectively through their respective feelings for Alice. Harbour accepts that he has lost his wife to his brother, Wilbur, who also gains the will to live as Harbour's is taken away by cancer and curtailed by an overdose of tablets. This representation of masculinity and humour occurs through the north European combination of writing, setting and casting that releases the film from a rootedness in either Denmark or Scotland as well as the more sedimented representation of the hard man traditionally associated with Glasgow and Clydeside (Spring 1990).

In both of these films the setting of Scotland does not form a primary source of meaning but rather forms the setting for tonally and generically unfamiliar dramas that emanate from Denmark but are also a consequence of the relationships formed beyond the borders of Denmark through co-production with Eurimages and Sigma films in Glasgow. The filmic results of these trajectories of production problematize the critical framework of national cinema. This is demonstrated in Geoffrey Macnab's (2003)

review of *Wilbur*, which draws upon the familiar critical discourse of classical European cinema and the French New Wave in order to compare the decidedly unfamiliar and cross-cultural *Wilbur* with the indubitably French *Jules et Jim* (1962). The humour and dramatic tone of *Wilbur* and *Breaking the Waves* exposes the lack of critical vocabulary for situating films within a cross-cultural critical framework that extends beyond the level of production.

The articulation of the relationship between Europe and Scotland reveals how Europe can still be understood as a civilizing idea that lends a peripheral national cinema like Scottish cinema the cultural capital that is bound to the idea of European cinema. The protagonists of Scottish art cinema who journey to Europe, affirm a trajectory where Europe is discursively located and reached through association and movement south of Scotland, towards the Mediterranean and the old countries of the European continent that give substance to European art cinema. However, underneath this trajectory of north to south, where Europe is essentially elsewhere, lies a countering, bi-directional and residually pan-European film and television that suggests different co-ordinates for understanding the relationship. The co-productions between Scotland and Denmark reveal how cultural co-operation and cultural exchange take the relationship northwards, towards Scotland's Norse affiliations, within what is not an exclusively urban articulation of the relationship. This drift north echoes Peter Davidson's suggestion that one of the meanings of the north is that it represents 'a place of purification, an escape from the limitations of civilization' (2005, 21). These altering trajectories underline Heidi Armbruster's proposition of a shifting and tidal idea of Europe and indicate how the shifting contours of Europe and its meanings, extend to and emanate from Scotland through recent film, and how the changing articulation of this relationship should be acknowledged and understood (Armbruster et al 2003, 887; Jäckel 2003).

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