

***Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema.* Debbie Ging. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (264 pages). ISBN: 9780230232006.**

A Review by Barry Monahan, University College Cork

As its title suggests, Debbie Ging's *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* sets out to consider a broad historical track of films produced in or about Ireland, by engaging with them through a gender-focussed theoretical lens. Ging promises from the outset, and delivers across ten roughly chronologically unfolding chapters, a close analytical reading of the construction of masculinity from the earliest incarnations of the Irish male on screen to more contemporary representations. In doing so, Ging shows sensitivity to the various sociopolitical and historical contexts within—or against—which each of the gendered characterisations has emerged in over a century of cinema, of which, arguably, only approximately three decades could be offered as Irish film by Irish filmmakers. The succinct articulation of the book's overall endeavour comes quite late—in Chapter Four, where it is explicitly directed at films that represent the institutionalisation of masculinity and the masculinisation of institutions—but its focus is apposite for how Ging approaches her chosen films: “as texts that were and are about something specific to men or male experience in Ireland, and that offer us an explanation of how masculinity has been constructed and contested in violent, homophobic and sexually oppressive contexts” (60).

Early on, Ging asserts a foundational claim that will assist in allowing the core argument of the book, and her subsequent analyses, to unfold. Using the work of Paul Smith as a point of reference, and in concurrence with him, Ging notes the cultural propensity to concentrate on essentialised images of masculinity as heroic archetype; a tendency that has the effect of producing an immovable “monolithic” rendition that removes the complexity, volatility, vagueness, alterity and protean nature of the category. Pointing to contemporary studies in the field, Ging usefully—and optimistically—suggests how this notion of what Cohan and Hark have called “unperturbed monolithic masculinity” (4) has been increasingly deconstructed, problematised and fragmented to allow for a diverse plethora of identities to emerge. At its most instructive and critically innovative moments, *Men and Masculinities in Irish Cinema* celebrates the benefits and challenges the limitations of this development as projected on the Irish cinematic screen.

In order to establish the boundaries of her analysis, Ging necessarily and helpfully dedicates much of the introductory chapter to a provision of contemporary theoretical thinking in the area of gender studies. The frameworks emerge with specific attention paid to the ontological positions and epistemological constructions of maleness and masculinity. As Ging infers, some of the literature here deserves attention as it calls for more nuanced development or a more aggressive theoretical address: a distinction ought to be drawn, for example, between the effects of certain representations on audience behaviours (such as the emulation of the behaviour and demeanour of male icons by younger male audiences), and

the more subtle effects of the same representations on how audiences come to accept the masculinities depicted. Ging also points to the problematical discourse of “crisis of masculinity” (offered as “questionable” most openly on page 34); an often underanalysed categorisation that in its diagnosis, hermetically and hermeneutically reestablishes the classification of masculinity as a coherent entity, long after other sets of postmodern and poststructuralist identity discourses have rendered it complexly disjointed and discontinuous. Although, occasionally, Ging seems to imply an alignment with this discursive category, for the most part her theoretical line holds faithfully and securely to the inventive promise advocated by the pluralised “masculinities” of the book’s title.

In offering to deepen the analytical consideration of how contemporary Irish films have embarked upon reconfigurations of national culture and identity by engaging with the structural, aesthetic and narrative consequences of globalisation and the mainstream form, Ging promises to address a deficit in scholarly writing on Irish cinema on how these developments have been “considered in terms of their impact on the cultural reconfiguration of gender relations” (15). In doing this, she may overstate slightly other scholars’ relegation of the importance of these sociological changes (mentioning work by Martin McLoone, Ruth Barton and herself) on the Irish cinematic landscape; nevertheless the point made clarifies her intentions in a worthwhile way from the outset.

In Chapters Two and Three, Ging considers various ideological constructions of idealised and state-endorsed masculinity as represented in early Irish cinema. Beginning with the assertion that Ireland’s transition from colonial to postcolonial state required a reconceptualisation of the national as “masculine”, Ging offers the paradigmatic social categories of sport, religion, the family and land as key instruments in the shift from the Irish male as “Celt” to “Gael”. This development in terminology marked a more specific geohistorical identification of nationality in the earlier stages of the anticolonial struggle in all of the cultural, political and sporting areas that Ging identifies. In her analyses, state apparatuses that were fundamentally bound to notions of a national identity—foremost, although not uniquely, the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Catholic Church—also facilitated and endorsed the construction of specific types of masculinity and male social performance. Such ideals of masculine identity, she argues, remain in much of the literature and hegemonic attitudes of these organisations today, and may have begun to be only tentatively addressed in contemporary cinematic representations. With detailed consideration of a number of Irish films from *The Lad from Old Ireland* (Sidney Olcott, 1910) to *Knocknagow* (Fred O’Donovan, 1918) through to Tom Cooper’s 1936 feature *The Dawn*, Ging matches the republican nationalist with a strong—and fixed—notion of masculinity in the emerging Irish Free State; formally recognised by the leaders of the former coloniser in 1922, but contested subsequently as six of the thirty-two counties were to remain—based on the Treaty agreement—a part of Great Britain. She carries this study into the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, where she references numerous films that continue to evoke the ideological strength and benefits of the stability of the male cinematic archetype: the hard-working, hard-playing filmic hero, who is clearly positioned within the patriarchal lot of heterosexual relationship, family, community and nation.

Chapter Four shifts towards depictions of the more Repressive State Apparatuses, and in it Ging considers the representations of institutional oppression and abuse towards (predominantly young) male characters. With more of a sociological context provided here, in provision of the background against which various institutional abuses occurred, Ging’s attention is turned to more contemporary films such as *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981), *Lamb*

(Colin Gregg, 1985), *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1997) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005). Her central argument in this section revolves around the notion that the institutionalisation of aspects of harassed and oppressed masculinities in Ireland has acted as a convenient national sublimation of identity of nonconformism; following James Smith she cites, particularly, “‘illegitimate’ children, unmarried mothers, people with depression and psychological disorders, sexual ‘deviants’” (70) as typical examples of ostracised, liminal characters.

Ging’s fifth chapter keeps its focus on the implications for maleness and the male character of shifting relationships of power within the traditional patriarchal family. By offering examples from a number of Celtic Tiger films, Ging marks the recurrent narrative trope of the ineffective or absent father character, or the presence of a highly problematically rendered maternal figure. Once again, Ging demonstrates that former questions of postcolonial identity and social structures have been completely relegated from these films’ thematic concerns with a shift to personally or privately rendered familial identities. In this chapter, Ging neatly explores how the peripheral minor national cinema comes to adapt international or mainstream paradigms and structures in ways that require the application of particular stereotypes of the male character. In addressing these, she also observes how contemporary Irish cinema challenges the same prototypes formerly and firmly established in mainstream practice.

The novelty in Ging’s next chapter resides in her consideration of how maleness relates to, or has been projected through, language and dialogue. Here, she looks at how inner and outer emotional worlds associated with changing understandings of masculinity are mapped onto domestic areas and concerns relating to the home, and the phenomena of the ghost housing estate and the crisis of alcohol abuse. In doing so, she revisits the older idea of masculinity as performance—or masquerade—in ways that are at times fresh and leave open the potential for further investigation (suggested here in passing consideration of other literary and televisual sources).

Ging’s closing chapters revitalise older paradigms of the male body, queerness and the traditional projections of associations between masculinity and violence, by reconsidering these through the lenses of “bromance”, the Celtic Tiger masculine underclass and “metrosexuality”. With her identification of such new forms of masculine performance, she continues with her faithful address to the ever-challenged homogeneity of the term “masculinity”, and follows through on the promise established in the introductory chapter.

All in all, this book invites refreshing rereadings of canonical Irish cinematic texts that have been long studied in the field of Irish film studies, but have been here drawn together under an umbrella of gender studies with specific consideration of the male character and the unstable category of masculinity. While reiterations and applications of contemporary theoretical discourses around gender are—inevitably—the less original interventions into the reflection on the films under analysis, the thread holding these studies together is interesting, important and original. This book will be of obvious interest to students and researchers in the field of Irish film studies, but will also be an important text for those wishing to consider the implications of developments in visual culture for the Irish sociopolitical and postnational identity landscapes.

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