

IN AMERICA AS JIM SHERIDAN’S POLITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL STATEMENT

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Motto: “Ce n'est pas l'illusion qui dissimule la réalité. C'est la réalité qui dissimule le fait qu'il n'y en a pas”

Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* – 1991-1995

ABSTRACT. THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO ANALYZE THE ISSUE OF EMIGRATION FROM IRELAND TO AMERICA AND THE DEPICTION OF THE IRISH DIASPORA OF THE 20TH CENTURY. THE MEDIA TEXT THAT OFFERS US THE GROUNDS FOR DISCUSSING THESE THEMES IS JIM SHERIDAN’S SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MOVIE CALLED IN AMERICA, WHICH EMERGED IN 2002. MOREOVER, WE ALSO ADDRESS THE PARAMOUNT THEMES OF CINEMATIC REFLEXIVITY AND, BY USING JEAN BAUDRILLARD’S THEORY OF THE SIMULACRA, WE ATTEMPT TO PROVE THE POSSIBILITY OF USING FILM AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING IDEOLOGY. FURTHERMORE, JIM SHERIDAN’S MOTION PICTURE MAY BE REGARDED AS A VISUAL MODE OF DE-MYTHOLOGIZING BOTH THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE IDEA OF CINEMA’S AESTHETIC AUTONOMY. THERE IS A STRONG POLITICAL SIDE APPERTAINING TO THE MOVIE IN QUESTION WHICH RUNS IN PARALLEL WITH THE FAMILY DRAMA DEPICTED. THE LATTER IS THUS OFFERED IN TURN A HEIDEGGERIAN READING IN THE PAPER BELOW. THE PHILOSOPHICAL COUPLES OF IDENTITY AND ALTERITY AND OF REALITY AND SIMULATION REVERBERATE AT MULTIPLE LEVELS IN THIS MOVIE AND THIS IS ONE OF THE REASONS FOR WHICH WE CONSIDER THAT IT IS WORTHWHILE TRYING TO PROVE THE FACT ALTERITY, REALITY AND POLITICS ARE ULTIMATELY CONNECTED.

KEY WORDS: CINEMA, EMIGRATION, SIMULACRA, ALTERITY, POLITICS, IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY.

Jim Sheridan’s semi-autobiographical movie called *In America* is a media text which can provide considerable insight into the matters of Irish emigration, Irish diaspora and its chances of integrating into the American society of the 1980s. Besides the deeply personal note appertaining to the film, the viewer cannot help remarking its very serious political side which runs in parallel with the depiction of the family drama, as well as the fact that the motion picture is constantly underscored by a multitude of philosophical and theoretical ideas that can only be deciphered at a close look.

Lawrence J. McCaffrey offers most useful information as far as the status of the Irish in the United States in the 1980s is concerned in his book called *Textures of Irish America*: “Beginning in the 1980s, a new type of Irish immigrant arrived in the United States. Many

thousands, escaping a collapsing Irish economy, illegally entered the country. Quite a few of these newcomers are university educated and could make a significant contribution to the American economy. But because visibility would lead to deportation, they have to take unskilled jobs as waiters and waitresses, housekeepers, baby-sitters, and handymen repairing homes and maintaining yards.”[1] One can easily realize that this is precisely the case of the Sullivan family depicted in the film – the father, Johnny, is an actor who auditions at many theatres, but does not manage to get a part, whereas his wife, Sarah, is a teacher who starts working in an ice cream parlour in order to keep the finances of the family going.

There is a distinct sense of irony that permeates the movie from the very beginning – the first scene shows a huge American flag being waved while we can hear Christie, the elder daughter of the family, talking about magic in connection to her deceased brother, Frankie. Apparently, he told her that she has three wishes to use. The association between the American flag and magic is a clear reference to the manner in which the United States was regarded by the Irish population throughout history, starting with the period of the Great Famine. That is, as a magical container. This idea will soon be deconstructed in the movie, when the family is confronted with all sorts of obstacles in their pursuit of the American Dream.

The same applies to the scenes after the family’s entrance in the country, during which the cityscape of New York is accompanied by a tune whose refrain is “Do you believe in magic?”. Throughout the scene one can see the faces of the daughters of the family bathed in the light of advertisements and captions which read “yes you can”. This flashy scene is cut quite abruptly and we get to see now a frame of a grey house that automatically sends one to Dickens’ Bleak House. We soon find out that the place is called “the junkies’ building” and that it encompasses the outsiders of the New York society: immigrants, transvestites, Negroes, etc. The junkies’ building turns out to be a very eclectic and noisy place, a real Babel Tower, on whose staircase can be heard numerous foreign languages and a dangerous place because of the drug addicts that are said to live there.

Paula Murphy approaches, in her Lacanian reading of the movie, entitled “The Irish Phone Home: Reflections of Ireland in Jim Sheridan’s *In America*” a very subtle scene in the movie: “On their way to view what is to become their new home, a man loitering outside asks them nervously if they are the police, because of the camcorder that Christy is holding. When Johnny reassures him that they are not the police – they are Irish, as if the two were mutually exclusive, the man replies, “but all Irish are police”. Johnny’s first conversation with an American, aside from the border police, immediately evinces the gap between the perception of Irish-Americans in Ireland and in the USA.” [2] As Murphy rightly concludes later, “the scene initiates the de-idealisation of both American and Irish identity that the film will effect by showing that stereotypes are ridden with contradictions in both cases”. [3] This is truly the case with Sheridan’s movie, which may be seen as a struggle to demythologize both the American Dream and the deeply rooted image of Irish-Americans.

Furthermore, we will concentrate upon the use of the imagery of the alien in order to see to what extent it refers to the status of the immigrant in America. When the family arrives in Manhattan, Christie describes the passing through the tunnel that links the highway and Manhattan as the encounter with another planet. Could this be a premonition of the entire American experience? Another symptomatic aspect in the movie is that the family goes to the cinema in order to watch the newly released *E.T.* which will remain a point of reference

throughout the movie. And by far the most poignant scene is the one in which Ariel talks to Mateo, the Nigerian emigrant who has brought joy and peace to the family and who is dying from AIDS. Their lines read as it follows:

Mateo: I'm an alien, like E.T., from a different planet. My skin is too sensitive for this Earth. The air is too hard for me.

Ariel: Are you going home like E.T.?

Mateo: I suppose I am going home.

If one looks beyond the immediate, clear reference to the Steven Spielberg movie, one cannot fail to sense the deeply political message of these lines, in which the immigrant represents the ultimate form of alterity of the American society. The poignancy of the statement is further intensified by the use of the idea that the immigrant cannot find his place in this world, therefore only in death (instead of which is euphemistic 'home' is used) may he find solace.

Erika Noelle Mann's analysis of Jim Sheridan's movie in her thesis named "Cinema's Green is Gold: The Commodification of Irishness in Film" is very effective in the sense in which it draws attention to the metacinematic dimension of the film. In order to do this, the author of the study refers to Christie's video camera, by exposing its political role in the movie: "Part of In America's narrative is delivered with home-movie-ish footage. These moments in the film interrupt both the smooth movements of the camera and the seamless editing that lulls the viewer into the belief of the reality of the film, and, in particular, the possibility of personal identification with that reality." [4] Therefore, Christie emerges as a director who gives her own reading of the reality surrounding her. The fact that she films only certain things, that she can fast-forward whenever she wants, that she can select parts of the reality that fit her intentions best, acts as a reminder that cinema is not mimesis, but simulation. Not at all coincidentally, in Mann's words, "In America, rather than making claims of its authenticity, purposely calls attention to its nature as a simulation (biased through point of view and revisionary through re-creation), making it unable to be completely authentic." [5] The fact that Sheridan's movie may be regarded as emancipatory is very well argued in Mann's conclusion on the movie: "In America does not allow the viewer to be ignorant of the idea of film as commodity or as vehicle for ideology; rather, it convicts the viewer to assume responsibility as part of the re-creation its viewing generates." [6]

However, the idea regarding the continuous process of mimicking things so that they seem real not only to the viewer, but to the characters themselves, is caught in a single syntagm - 'make-believe'. This idea does not apply only to cinema, but also to real life, Sheridan's film seems to suggest. In Paula Murphy's words, "it is Sarah who articulates the crux of the issue and shows that there is not a division between acting and real life or fiction and fact in the way that Johnny imagines. On the contrary, as Lacan maintains, lived experience is by definition equally if not more constructed than discourses which are consciously created. Near the end of Sarah's pregnancy, the baby stops moving and Johnny tells her "it's gone. We can't make believe anymore". Sarah responds by saying, 'sometimes I think our entire lives are make believe. This is make believe.'" [7]

In such a context one may remark a strong influence of Jean Baudrillard's perspective upon the precedence of the simulacra over reality. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, we read that according to the French theoretician, "in the media and consumer society, people

are caught up in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra, that have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external “reality,” to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even “reality” no longer seem to have any meaning.” [8] It comes across as no surprise, in this case, that Johnny is an actor and that the film also addresses serious questions such as to which extent can one simulate anything. “At the height of the argument, she [Sarah] asserts that the reason he cannot get an acting job is that he refuses to allow himself to feel anything. Johnny retorts by shouting, “This is real! It’s not a fucking play!” [9] The reply is even more ironical, taking into consideration that it is uttered in a film whose so-called reality is constantly undermined by the director. Where can one find authenticity seems to be the question addressed by the movie. The main theme of the movie and the reason the movie was made in the first place, according to Sheridan’s statement, is Frankie’s death. Things become even more complicated when the viewer, who had just been through a cathartic process at the end of the film, cannot help remarking that the film is dedicated to Frankie Sheridan, who, after a short research, turns out to be not the lost son of the director, but the lost brother. Another short circuit takes place and this time both in the ‘real’ and in the cinematic world: the one among personas.

This is another intensely debated theme in the movie: “Johnny’s differentiation between real life and acting is questioned by Ariel later in the film. Upset when she wakes up during the night and remembers that her mother is in hospital, she begins to cry hysterically. Johnny is unable to comfort her, and she shouts at him, “I want my real Da!” The comparison that Johnny made is revealed to be inaccurate: for his daughter, the dividing line between fictional and actual does not lie between acting and real life, but between Johnny’s personality before and after Frankie’s death.” [10] A question emerges: where can one find authenticity? And the film gives its own silent response, in the most Heideggerian manner possible: in Being-towards-death. After Mateo’s almost sacrificial death and after Johnny’s final acceptance of Frankie’s death, we assist at Johnny’s transformation into an authentic Dasein, no longer leading a solipsistic existence, but being open towards the world. The brave New World, that is.

CONCLUSIONS. Jim Sheridan’s *In America* focuses upon the effects that a lack of real connection with alterity may have. In such a case, identity becomes a trace of the past, a mere spectre. Authenticity cannot be recuperated, in Heideggerian terms, except in a genuine understanding of what Being-in-the-World supposes and in an acceptance of the fact that one’s essence lies in its Being-towards-death. That politics and philosophy are ultimately connected is the main message sent across by the movie discussed.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *Textures of Irish America*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 1992, p. 46
- [2] Paula Murphy, *The Irish Phone Home: Reflections of Ireland in Jim Sheridan’s In America*, p. 61 (<http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/pdfPaulaMurphy.pdf>)
- [3] Ibidem
- [4] ¹Erika Noelle Mann, *Cinema’s Green is Gold: The Commodification of Irishness in Film*, P. 109 (http://etd.lib.umt.edu/theses/available/etd-05082008-102020/unrestricted/erika_mann_thesis.pdf)

[5] Ibidem., p. 110

[6] Ibidem., p. 112

[7] Paula Murphy, The Irish Phone Home: Reflections of Ireland in Jim Sheridan’s In America, p. 66

[8] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/baudrillard/>

[9] Paula Murphy, The Irish Phone Home: Reflections of Ireland in Jim Sheridan’s In America, p. 66

[10] Ibidem