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Women and the Archive: the Early Years of the Cork Film Festival

It is sometimes difficult to assert the power of film as a social document. This is because cinema is still a relatively new art, and largely associated with mainstream Hollywood. Most people consume films that are excessively marketed and generically derivative.
But cinema is much more than the standard ninety-minute superhero romp. For well over a century, film has charted not only narratives, but transport, geography, fashions, inventions, social mores, rituals and traditions. For those of us who study film, and for all cinephiles, there is another cinematic world, beyond the blockbuster, of determined independence, where film is a visual, soul-stirring, conscience-pricking, experience-inciting art form. This is the cinema that will not be aggressively sold to you, but that you will have to work hard to find. On the quest to see these films, which are often hidden from our screen-saturated, hyperconnected lives of media bombardment, you will ask questions of yourself, as a viewer, that philosophers and poets have posed for millennia. Part of this path to alternative viewing will lead you to the stomping ground of artistic cinema – the film festival. Festivals offer a tantalising visibility for the films that lie behind the shiny façade of cinema: films that tell the stories of the marginalised, raise the darkest ethical questions and challenge our most uncomfortable prejudices, stereotypes and hypocrisies.



Star of the German screen Winne Markus signs autographs for Cork Dockers.

The economics of film production are inevitably linked to its artistic enterprise. It can be capitalist, communist, collective or even "no budget", and it is a crucial site of hierarchical labour. It is not surprising then, if cinema captures the core of humanity, economics and social endeavour, that it is currently, as it was from its birth, a battleground for gender politics. Cinema is both a vehicle for the liberation of ideas and, concurrently, a site of the worst abuses of power. It is uncomfortable to think that many of the films that were associated with bringing independent cinema to wider audiences were produced by convicted sex offender Harvey Weinstein. Even more disturbing that his bullying tactics and sexual power play were ignored by many because he was seen as one of the few mainstream crusaders for "intelligent" filmmaking. Cinema is both empowering and degrading; it must be challenged and celebrated in equal measure. There are few places for real discourse on cinema and the festival circuit remains one of these, championing the scrutiny necessary for any discussion of film as an art form. How individuals and broader society engage with cinema, and with art more generally, can tell us a great deal about the contemporary cultural climate. In this way the films that were produced and shown to audiences, and the ways in which they were exhibited, hold within these artistic products and their exhibition spaces, vital clues that capture significant cultural histories. Festivals are sacred spaces and it is imperative that their histories and activities are preserved for posterity, so that we can see and learn from "how things were done".

One such history can be found here, in the precious archives of the Cork Film Festival, a part of the fabric of the city's rich cultural heritage. The first iteration of the festival ran under the auspices of *An Tóstal*, as *Tóstal Corcaí* from 6th to 27th May 1956. The festival's founder, Dermot Breen, had managed the Palace cinema for eight years and later became Cork's first public relations consultant. He traversed the worlds of business and art, navigating the complex relationship between the two. He became a powerful figure in film circles and was appointed Irish Film Censor in 1972, "the first appointee with direct involvement with cinema".[i]



Festival founder Dermot Breen in 1972 with British actor Suzanna Leigh, goddaughter of Vivian Leigh. She appeared in Hammer horror films, starred alongside Elvis in Paradise, Hawaiian Style *(1966) and shared the screen with Tony Curtis and Jerry Lewis in* Boeing Boeing *(1965).*

Breen's appointment as censor was significant considering that his liberal tendencies occasionally led him into direct conflict with the Catholic Church, which previously maintained a strong influence on cinema exhibition in Ireland. One such instance was in 1969 when Dr Lucey, Bishop of Cork, demanded that a particular film be pulled from the festival programme, complaining "that the film's nude scenes would lead to immodest thoughts".[ii] *I Can't, I Can't*, released internationally as *Wedding Night* (Piers Haggard, 1969) included such controversial topics as contraception and suicide. After an emergency meeting, the festival's ruling body decided to proceed with the screening. In ways such as this, the festival challenged the Church's long hold over what had been deemed appropriate for Irish audiences to see and offered a space for discourse on women's bodies in ways that transcended that of simple cinematic spectacle.



French actor Barbara Laage enjoying the Irish outdoors in Cork, 1957.

Kevin Rockett claims that Breen started the film festival "as a means of promoting tourism".[iii] His penchant for PR - a growing area of activity which had been pioneered by self-styled "father of public relations" Edward Bernays (nephew of another famous paternal figure, Sigmund Freud) - is obvious in many of the early promotional aspects of the film festival. Bernays was associated with landmark campaigns like the "torches of freedom" parade which encouraged women to smoke, thus expanding tobacco sales. Like Bernays, Breen realised that women were not only an important potential demographic for festival screenings as audience members, but that glamourous "starlets" could be used to promote the festival in a variety of ways. The result was a blend of exotic glamour with local scenes. Visiting stars were pictured enjoying themselves at various Cork landmarks, marketing the city as effectively than the films in which they appeared.

Bond "girls" promote Irish Tourism

Opportunities to capture the essence of the city were regularly mobilised in promoting the festival and its visitors. Molly Peters, who played Bond girl Patricia Fearing in *Thunderball* (Terence Young, 1965) was depicted reclining on the bonnet of a Mercedes-Benz W111, reading a local tour guide, with St. Fin barre's cathedral in the background in 1968.



Molly Peters in front of St. Fin Barre's cathedral, 1968.

Other Bond girls, such as Jane Seymour (who played Solitaire in *Live and Let Die* [Guy Hamilton, 1973] and Tsai Chin (who appeared as Ling in *You Only Live Twice* [Lewis Gilbert, 1967] and Madame Wu in *Casino Royale* [Martin Campbell, 2006] also attended the festival in the 1970s.

Festival Royalty

While her contemporary Grace Kelly swapped her successful acting career for life in Monaco when she married Prince Rainer III, English actor Dawn Addams chose to continue with her career when she married Vittorio Emanuele Massimo, Prince of Roccasecca dei Volsci. In fact, she brought the prince with her to the Cork Film Festival in 1957.





Dawn Addams promotes the festival while enjoying Irish agriculture.

Addams raised some eyebrows with her request of the festival team for a milk bath "and a black bathtub to show up the purity of the milk".[iv] Dermot Breen realised that this notoriety could be utilised for publicity purposes and Addams featured in a range of promotional activities. She is pictured above pitching hay and riding a tractor, keen to show that her royal connections did not stop her from remaining "down to earth"! She was also photographed fishing in the river Lee and acting as an operator at the telephone exchange.



Dawn Addams fishing in the Lee and operating the Cork telephone exchange.

Dawn Addams wasn't the only member of the aristocracy to feature at the festival. Maureen Swanson, who was later to become Countess Dudley, also appears in the festival archives. She left behind her acting career after marrying Viscount Ednam in 1961, and later sued Christine Keeler's publisher over claims that Swanson had been involved in a call-girl ring associated with the Profumo scandal. The countess, it transpired, had been romantically involved with Stephen Ward, who had introduced Keeler to John Profumo, but Swanson had never been involved in prostitution. She visited the festival in 1956 and even participated eagerly in some Irish dancing.



Sylvia Koscina at Cork Film Festival in 1956.

As with many female actors, the stardom of Sylvia Koscina is often vicariously associated with the male stars with whom she appeared on screen: Kirk Douglas, Paul Newman, Rock Hudson, Lawrence Harvey. Born in Zagreb in 1933, she demonstrated a wide acting ability in both Italian and Hollywood cinema, even playing herself on occasion. When she attended the festival in 1956 she caused a stir by wearing the first pointed-heel shoes in Cork, provocatively demonstrating the scale by posing with a strategically placed coin alongside her shoe. The film in which she appeared that year, *The Railwayman* (*Il Ferroviere*, 1956), won the festival's first ever award for best director with the Silver Tóstal harp going to Pietro Germi.

Sachiko Hidari (pictured left) received the first ever Cork film festival award for best actress in 1956 for *Kamisaka Shirô no hanzai* (*The Crime of Shiro Kamisaka*, a.k.a. *I am on Trial* [Hisamat-su Seiji, 1956]). The presentation of the award was made through the British embassy in Tokyo, but Hidari visited the festival in 1960 and the newspapers were keen to point out her admiration for the work of Irish playwrights J.M. Synge and Seán O'Casey, noting that she had played the part of Pegeen Mike in a Japanese translation of *The Playboy of the Western World*.[v] Hidari would go on to become the first ever Japanese female film director when she directed herself in *Töi Ippon No Michi* (*The Far Road*) in 1977. The film was financed by the Japanese National Railway Workers' Union and it followed the story of a railroad worker's wife over three decades.



First winner of the Silver Tóstal best actress award, Sahiko Hidari (left)

The "Miss Movie Girl" Contest



"Miss Movie Girl" contestants, 1975.

The 1970s saw the festival's "Miss Movie Girl" contest in which women were selected in competition after regional heats to compete in a final competition, judged by a panel of international film personalities during the festival. Both the regional heats and the final were sponsored by local businesses and there was coverage of the nominees and winners in the local papers. The winner promoted the festival throughout Ireland and abroad. The prizes, supplied by sponsors, included money, jewellery, clothing, holidays, cosmetics, makeovers, modelling courses, a car for the year, a trophy and in some cases, a potential screen test!

The Women in the Background

Cinema is full of powerful and creative women making significant contributions to the male director "genius" narrative from behind the scenes. Alma Hitchcock worked extensively on much of Hitchcock's oeuvre and her creative input was so great it could even be used to undermine Hitch's auteur status. Thelma Schoonmaker has edited every Martin Scorsese film since *Raging Bull* (1980) thus shaping the narrative of countless canonical films. In spite of this, she is arguably less known that her husband, Michael Powell, famous as one half of the Powell and Pressburger team responsible for such films as *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *The Red Shoes* (1948). Emma Thomas has produced all of Christopher Nolan's films and yet remains less known than Nolan and often referred to as his partner.

The presence of Dermot Breen is ubiquitous in the archive, and it was his charisma and energy that initiated the festival and ensured it became a dynamic and vital cultural event. His wife, Vida Breen (pictured below with English actor Tony Wright) appears in the archives more peripherally at dinners and events, supporting her husband, welcoming visitors to Cork and playing a significant role in developing the festival. She continued to support and attend the festival after her husband's sudden death in 1978 at the age of 54. In 1995 she opened the 40th Cork Film Festival as a guest of honour.



Vida Breen with English actor Tony Wright, 1956.

Press Coverage of the Festival

Part of the CIFF collection comprises a range of beautifully curated books of press clippings. These chart early coverage of the festival in a range of newspapers and the entries have been carefully chosen and arranged, often with accompanying notes. These books tell fascinating stories of the impact the festival had in Cork and beyond. One face that dominated newspaper coverage in 1959 was that of Jean Seberg, perhaps best known for her iconic performance in Jean Luc Godard's French New Wave masterpiece *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960). Seberg visited Cork to promote *The Mouse That Roared* (Jack Arnold, 1959) in which she starred with Peter Sellers. The press ran stories that her wig, which she wore to cover the short haircut she had adopted for her performance in *Breathless*, had fallen into the bath and that Seberg had to don a headscarf to attend public events. The commentary on her appearance, rather than on her acting abilities, has long been a feature of press coverage of women on screen. Seberg was also one of countless stars to be both glorified and vilified by the press, and suffered mental health issues as a result. She died prematurely, like many of her peers, ravaged by the excesses of the cinematic publicity machine. Her life was the basis of the recent political thriller *Seberg* (Benedict Andrews, 2019) starring Kristen Stewart.





The festival's press clippings books.

The images from the early years of the festival are very much "of their time" in the way that women are depicted. The camera focuses on glamour and fashion, and the women featured have often been asked to pose in ways that accentuate their figures, pandering to one of the most cited concepts in film studies, Laura Mulvey's "male gaze".[vi] But rather than providing images where women are simply objects of spectacle, they also capture women as agents of action – doing, working, playing and looking. The crucial role played by women in the early years of the festival is clear, and while we might need to contextualise these images in the current cultural climate, it is vital that they are shared and discussed. These archival gems belong to the people who supported and attended the festival: the people of Cork. As the archive grows, more and more of these images will be returned to the general public, to chart this crucial part of Cork's proud and vibrant cultural heritage.

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Independence Film Collection (https://ifiplayer.ie/independencefilms/) as well as on other projects with the IFI Irish Film Archive. She was screenwriter and associate producer on *Eire na Nuachtscannán*, a BAI-funded six-part series for TG4 based on her book *Ireland in the Newsreels* (www.irelandinthenewsreels.com).

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[i] Rockett, Kevin. *Irish Film Censorship*. Four Courts Press, 2004, 71.
[ii] Ibid, 213.
[iii] Ibid, 213.
[iv] Dwyer, Michael. "When colour came to cork." *The Irish Times*, 8 October, 2005 https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/when-colour-came-to-cork-1.503251.
[v] "Playboy Role That She Loved." *Irish Examiner*, 28 September, 1960, 11.
[vi] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, issue 3, Autumn, 1975.