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CINEMA AS HISTORY AND HISTORY AS CINEMA

MICHAEL COLLINS (1996) AND *THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY* (2006)

BY **CIARA CHAMBERS**





'For those trained to write history, film is suspect, something of a rival, an enemy, a medium which is not only stealing our audience and distorting truths hard won in the archives, but also (apparently) making a lot of money doing so.'
—Robert Rosenstone

When *Michael Collins* was released in 1996 it was, surprisingly, 'a success with the Tory press', which, as Seamus McSwiney noted in *Film West*, seemed 'relieved that the British got off so lightly in the film'. The reception for *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* ten years later was somewhat more hostile, with Ruth Dudley Edwards asking in the *Daily Mail* 'Why does Ken Loach loathe his country so much?' and Catherine Shoad stating that the film depicted the British forces as 'crass barbarians'. Renowned film critic Roger Ebert suggested that *Michael Collins* had 'the look and feel of authenticity' but described *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* as 'breathtakingly authentic', placing it amongst the best war films ever made by comparing it to Stanley Kubrick's enduring classic *Paths of Glory* (1957). Jordan's biopic involved the construction of lavish sets, including a replica of the GPO's façade, while Loach favoured the dramatic landscape of west Cork to tell his tale of two brothers on opposing sides during the Civil War. Marnie Hughes-Warrington makes the point that

Above left: Seen here directing Liam Neeson as Michael Collins, Neil Jordan was criticised for straying from the historical record in his attempt to produce an epic aimed at international audiences. (David James)

Left: Loach favoured the dramatic landscape of west Cork to tell his tale of brothers on opposing sides during the Civil War. A flying column accompanies landlord Sir John Hamilton (Roger Allam, centre) to his execution. (Joss Barratt © Sixteen Films)

Opposite page: The plot point is a symbolic marker of the deep familial divides that occurred during the Civil War. Brothers Damien (Cillian Murphy) and Teddy Donovan (Pádraic Delaney) end up on opposite sides of the Civil War. (Joss Barratt © Sixteen Films)



'being an "outsider" can help you to see that which passes by unnoticed "inside" a community'. It is interesting that Jordan, an Irishman with a degree in Irish history from UCD, takes the Hollywood approach, while Loach, an Englishman, produces a film that feels somewhat more 'Irish' (if it is possible to define a film as Irish).

MICHAEL COLLINS

The high production values, special effects and star power of Julia Roberts contributed to *Michael Collins*'s status as a blockbuster, but director Neil Jordan was criticised for straying from the historical record in his attempt to produce an epic drama aimed at international audiences. Ned Broy, the character played by Stephen Rea, was an amalgam of three real figures and, as Seán Crosson asserts, 'Jordan chose spectacle over substance in his re-enactment of Bloody Sunday'. Crosson also outlines how Jordan intended to go further in his distortion of history by writing this scene as a hurling match (rather than a football game) in the original screenplay, having Michael Hogan taunt the armoured car (which on the day was not on the pitch but in nearby Fitzroy Avenue) with a hurley before being killed. Jordan defended the film by stating that 'it's not a work of history, it's not a historical document ... [it is] as accurate a reconstruction as I could make'. He is right to point out that cinema cannot reconstruct the past in the way that is attempted by written histories, but he is also aware that his film will reach a much wider audience than any book on Collins, particularly in an age where visual media, according to Rosenstone, 'have become not just a rival of academic history, but in terms of audience, its master, the chief means by which the culture now describes people, events, moments, and movements of the past, at least for the general public'. Biopics in particular can leave an enduring mark in the minds of viewers about the life of the character depicted. They also make attractive projects, as they often achieve the much-desired accolades that propel directors into the limelight, as evidenced by their repeated success at the Academy Awards.

Roger Ebert praised Liam Neeson's performance as 'charged with zest and conviction' in the face of anti-hero de Valera, 'played with shifty conceit by Alan Rickman', but suggested that the 'unnecessary' character of Kitty Kiernan was there 'to provide obligatory romantic interludes between war and strategy'. Ebert forgives the historical elisions, suggesting that for audiences outside Ireland 'the facts in *Michael Collins* will be less interesting than the characters and the myths'. In his review he deftly illustrates the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative, which usually contains a tension between protagonist and antagonist, a concurrent love story, rising action towards a dramatic climax, and a sense of satisfactory conclusion, where any loose ends have been conveniently tied up. This formula, which is less likely to appear in independent, art-house or world cinema, is the structure favoured by the Hollywood system as the one most likely to please an audience and make money.

THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY

While Jordan was criticised for tampering with history, Loach was accused of anti-British bias in his depiction of the revolutionary period. John Hill offers a more nuanced reading of the film's politics, suggesting that, 'while hostile British critics dwelt upon the portrait of the violence of the British forces, there is also a sense in which the film itself seeks to show the tit-for-tat nature of the war and the IRA's own capacity for retaliatory violence'. The central character, aspiring doctor Damien O'Donovan, is repulsed when he is forced to kill two informers: 'I studied anatomy for five years and now I have to shoot this man in the head. I've known Chris Riley since he was a child. I hope this Ireland we are fighting for is worth it.' Damien does not go unpunished, as he is later killed himself on the orders of his own brother. The plot point is a symbolic marker of the deep familial divides that occurred during the Civil War.

Like Jordan, Loach defended his attempts at authenticity, suggesting in *Rebel County*, a documentary about the film made by Pat Collins, that, while the characters were fictional, 'the events they take part in, the public events, are as accurately represented as we can make it'. The director was quick to point out that many of the scenes were based on documentary sources and that ultimately no critic had actually 'challenged a single fact in the film'. Professional actors appeared alongside amateurs drawn from the local community, as well as a number of British ex-soldiers. The resulting performances were somewhat uneven, but this cemented the film's understated approach.

Both film-makers incorporate 'real' archive footage of the 1920s into their narratives. Jordan uses the



footage extradiegetically by ending his film with shots of vast crowds gathered for Collins's funeral. Amongst several titles summarising Collins's contribution to Irish politics, a speculative assertion is made: 'All parties to the conflict, both British and Irish, were temporarily united in grief'. Loach uses archive footage diegetically, in a scene set in a cinema as an angry crowd watches a newsreel depicting the signing of the Treaty. As we watch the spectators watching the cinema screen, we are reminded of the constructed nature of cinema, of political negotiations and of history itself. It is striking that the archive is embedded in Loach's narrative, while Jordan uses real footage to bring viewers swept up in the seductive escapism of classical Hollywood back to reality.

THE TREATY (1991)

Less well known than the films by Loach and Jordan, but perhaps more historically substantial than either, is RTÉ's collaboration with Thames Television, *The Treaty* (1991). Brendan Gleeson provides a skilled performance as Collins as he navigates the protracted negotiations. The film





Above: Loach uses archive footage diegetically, in a scene set in a cinema as an angry crowd watches a newsreel depicting the signing of the Treaty. (Joss Barratt © Sixteen Films)

Left (above): In *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* professional actors appeared alongside amateurs drawn from the local community as well as a number of British ex-soldiers. (Joss Barratt © Sixteen Films)

Left (below): Ken Loach said that, while the characters were fictional, 'the events they take part in, the public events, are as accurately represented as we can make it'. (Rebel County | Dir: Pat Collins | 2006)

Opposite page: In *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* Sinéad (Orla Fitzgerald) mourns the devastating loss of her partner, Damien, and their imagined future together, invoking a larger national loss. (Joss Barratt © Sixteen Films)

confines itself to an exploration of the battle of wills between the British and Irish plenipotentiaries, although there is a brief romantic interlude in the form of Lloyd George's interaction with his secretary and mistress Frances Stevenson (Kitty Kiernan is nowhere to be seen). Like Loach and Jordan, the series director, Jonathan Lewis, incorporates archival images. Just before the credits, photographs of the significant figures depicted in the narrative who died within a year of the signing of the Treaty (Henry Wilson, Cathal Brugha, Arthur Griffith, Michael Collins and Erskine Childers) are juxtaposed with shots of the actors playing each character. The final shot is of de Valera, along with an implicit judgement in the caption: 'Eventually took the Oath of Allegiance. Held high office for 50 years. Died aged 92.'

All three examples employ archival moving images as documents, subjecting the viewer to a sensation described by Jaimie Baron as 'the archive effect', a sense in the spectator that these images 'come from another time and served another function'. In this way the viewer is invited to consider, and reconsider, particularly through further engagement with these periods of history, their previous knowledge of the historical moments presented. These narratives are open to manipulation by those who are recording and disseminating the [his]stories concerned. But can these representations really offer viewers the stuff that history is made of? And why are historians so sceptical about the historical value of cinema? While Rosenstone acknowledges the 'suspect' nature of cinema, he also qualifies that film-makers can be historians, as long as their works are engaged with in different ways from those of written history. The rules are not the same for all forms of 'historying'. Equally, all histories are subjective and 'ultimately historical events can never be reconstructed as they really were but only constructed as they may have been ... No matter how much research we do, no matter how many archives we visit, no matter how objective we try to be, the past will never come to us in a single version of the truth.' In this way, filmic representations of the past may not be able to embody objective truth about the events and personalities depicted but they do contain broader truths related to human experience.

'WAS IT NEEDLESS DEATH AFTER ALL?'

In both *Michael Collins* and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, the bonds of friendship and brotherhood are tested, and in each case patriotism usurps fraternal loyalty. In their closing sequences, the shadow of Yeats's question, 'Was it needless death after all?', hangs in the air. The final scenes of both films depict a female character mourning the devastating loss of her partner and their imagined future together, invoking a larger national loss. What is crucial here is that these narratives raise important discussions *about history* that help us to process collective myths and memories. Film acts as a cultural barometer telling us about the values and concerns of a society, and in this way a historical film is as much about the era in which it is made as it is concerned with the era it depicts. Therein lies the value of art: historically flawed as these cinematic representations may be, they present opportunities for public discourse as well as becoming part of a social record representing two moments in time. Two of the examples mentioned above were made in the 1990s and cannot fail to be read against the progress of the Irish peace process. The third was made in 2006, and both Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty were keen to draw parallels with more recent British military intervention in Iraq to 'hammer home the human costs of a military occupation'.

Whether or not it is to be viewed as a useful historical source, what cannot be denied is that cinema brings historical moments and figures into the public sphere. Just as Loach shows his audience shouting their dissent at the British newsreel 'spinning' the signing of the Treaty as an optimistic (and misleading) news story, so too can the modern spectator dissect and analyse Loach's film, and his politics, as well as the Irish events that it interrogates. In viewing historical cinema in this way, we can reconsider it not as a medium that undermines and threatens historical authenticity but as a means to provoke discussion on topics that might not otherwise be encountered by members of the general public. Whether on a national or an international stage, both *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* and *Michael Collins* will continue to engage new audiences in debate about Ireland's complex past and uncertain future.

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Further reading

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