

"Hush a Bye Baby"

by G. S. White

Le film "Hush a Bye Baby" (1989) de Margo Harkin a amené l'auteure à étudier ce mélodrame à la fois puissant et complexe qui traite des paradoxes que les femmes de l'Irlande du Nord doivent affronter.

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Produced in 1989 in Northern Ireland, Margo Harkin's *Hush a Bye Baby* has as its project the easily mishandled synthesizing of the personal and political. This story of a pregnant teenager in nationalist Derry juggles a remarkable number of concerns whose relevance to a rapidly changing Northern Irish society are difficult to understate. Among these are the use of Irish culture as resistance to colonialism, the role of women in that anti-colonial struggle, and the aspects of national life in (Northern) Ireland that continue to keep women in a position of subservience. The film feels like an inscription of the ideals of *Clár na mBan* (Women's Agenda for Peace) in the form of a cinematic melodrama. Harkin clearly knows that it's not enough for only the British to leave: the patriarchs must leave with them.

With an opening sequence set to Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," the film is placed clearly in the early '80s, during the debate over the Republic of Ireland's 1983 referendum on abortion. The narrative centres around a teenage girl named Goretti, who becomes pregnant by her activist boyfriend Ciaran. Before she realizes her predicament, however, Ciaran is rounded up by the British Army and detained "indefinitely." Goretti is overcome with

shame, refusing to tell her friends or family. She does try to tell Ciaran, but does not want the prison officials who censor his mail to know. Hoping to circumvent them, she writes to him in Irish. When the letter reaches the censors, however, it is destroyed, since no language other than English is allowed, in spoken or written form, in British prisons. Goretti takes Ciaran's unknowing silence as a rejection, and wracked with anxiety and shame, she tries to decide whether to have an abortion. From beginning to end, the pregnancy is defined by Goretti's fear of condemnation and rejection, fear that is shown to be inherent in the tightly knit, highly traditional communities that define much of Catholic Northern Irish life.

The film starts out as a typical coming of age story, a tale of a young woman looking for satisfaction beyond the boredom of family life and the hopelessness of her bleak urban landscape. She begins to find that satisfaction, in keeping with the coming of age narrative, through a sexual awakening. The film draws upon popular convention, in hopes of making its political concerns accessible and inviting to a wider audience. This strategy may be somewhat unfamiliar in a European or North American cinematic context, where film culture is generally broken down along high art/political and popular art/apolitical lines. *Hush a Bye Baby* uses the familiarity and emotional impact inherent to popular forms in the service of a more unorthodox political project.

Goretti's boyfriend, Ciaran, is passionate about Irish culture, and republican politics. The premise for their first date is for him to help her with her Irish homework, since she complains that the language is too strange. Ciaran cares passionately about the language, which in the North especially is seen as a site of

resistance to British (and English) domination. Indeed, the fact that they are taking an Irish language class in the first place has nationalist impact, since it is very difficult to maintain funding for the Irish language education system within the United Kingdom. This linguistic/nationalist punch is enunciated explicitly throughout the film. The first example comes when Ciaran and Goretti are stopped by an Army officer. Ciaran says something nasty to him in Irish, thinking that it will go right above his head, but is taken aback when the soldier snaps back in Irish. Goretti asks him what they said, and Ciaran squirms, answering that it doesn't translate well. If she had understood the language better, she would understand the confrontation better, too. Ciaran berates Goretti on several further occasions for not being more interested in national culture and politics.

The subversive character of the language is emphasized when Goretti writes to Ciaran to tell him she is pregnant. But this subversion is far from the romantic vision of struggle enunciated by her jailed mate. The

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prison censors correctly perceive her letter in Irish to be a challenge to their authority. It is, further, Goretti's first attempt to assert her Irishness in an attempt to defeat the colonizers, which is exactly what Ciaran has been promoting as necessary. Not only does this attempt fail, however, but it actually makes Goretti's situation worse, as she is led to believe that she must

face the enormous shame that comes with being an unwed mother alone. The struggles of republicanism, along with ideas about cultural specificity, are shown to be woefully inadequate for dealing with the day-to-day struggles of women. What Goretti needs is not a sense of belonging to an autonomous nation, but a sense of security as an autonomous human being.

This inability to deal with the difficulties specific to women's lives is an ongoing critique of the republican movement. *Clár na mBan* is a group formed in 1992 in hopes of influencing the peace process, although the situation they looked to rectify was in many ways enunciated in *Hush a Bye Baby*, produced five years earlier. Margaret Ward has noted that "(t)he conspiratorial physical force tradition that has characterized so much of Irish republicanism is essentially male in its assumptions and in its operations" (48), and this film serves as a potent dramatization of that sentiment. The rhetoric of national struggle and self-determination that is voiced by Ciaran, by no means atypically, is one not about creating a more compassionate (and therefore non-colonized) situation, but about pushing "the bastards" out. Like the Black Panthers in the United States and the Mohawk Warriors in Canada, the republican movement is enamored of a warrior image, righteously violent and often hyper-masculine. While it may seem the easiest way to get the colonizers out of the picture, it doesn't lay very appealing groundwork for when they're gone.

Further, the matter of the effect of imprisonment on the women who heroic freedom fighters leave on "the outside" is an ongoing concern in both republican and unionist communities. Goretti's need to deal with the trauma of pregnancy is emblematic of the difficulties often faced: while men serve their time and, in many situations, secure their revolutionary credentials, women are left with the very difficult and typically forgotten work of keeping the family together and alive. The enormous sacrifice entailed in prison time has a

unambiguous righteousness in each community that the messier work of making domestic decisions—like whether to carry a baby to term at the age of 15, for example—does not. Ciaran has behind him the support of the entire nationalist community, and he knows it. Goretti, on the other hand, experiences only fear about what that traditional, tightly knit group will think of her moral lapse. Most of those jailed in connection with the Northern Irish conflict are men and it is automatically assumed that while their men defend the nation (whatever nation that happens to be) a woman's role is to maintain hearth and home, quietly and stoically. To defy such an expectation is to let the nation down, not to mention the man who has given up his freedom for that nation. The men, however, eventually get out of jail (most of them, anyway); the sacrifices that women are called upon to make have a more endemic character, with female existence looking pretty much the same in both colonial and an idealized post-colonial situation.

Indeed, Harkin's attention to the failure of republicanism to deal with women's lives draws out crucial paradoxes in the struggle for Irish self-determination. What, after all, is Goretti supposed to be fighting for? The manifesto of *Clár na mBan* enunciates this ongoing crisis in Irish culture, warning that "if women of all shades of opinion are excluded from the deliberations on a new constitution for Ireland, then it will be no more representative than the 1937 Constitution which shaped the narrow and repressive society from which we are now emerging" (qtd. in Ward 43). Defending traditional Irish culture has limited appeal for many women because of its close ties to Catholic idealism and a generally patriarchal sense of civic life. Whenever Goretti turns on the radio, the only thing that ever seems to be on is debates about the abortion referendum in the Republic, a referendum that bitterly divided the nation. The end result was a constitu-

tional ban on abortion, passed by 70 per cent. These little radio blurbs serve as a reminder of what the nationalists in Derry are struggling to rejoin, and never let the viewer forget how little difference that would make in Goretti's life.

Indeed, it is the enforced ideal of female martyrdom that threatens to completely destroy Goretti. Brenda Gray has noted that

[i]mages of a suffering mother Ireland are frequently used to represent a unified Irish national identity. They serve to reinforce the location of the Irish woman within the family and to place her in a passive relationship with her national identity as the vessel in which national life, culture and death are encouraged contained.... Such perceptions of strength, however, tend to ignore the actual struggle and pain endured by many Irish women, while representing those who find it impossible to keep up this strength as weak and unmindful of the country's urgent needs. (87)

This is exactly the situation in which Goretti finds herself, feeling fearful of being seen as weak or decadent or indulgent for being sexual and then needing her partner to face up to his end of the responsibility. The spectacle of such cultural wrath being brought down on a 15-year-old, "a girl who just wants to have fun," is a big part of what gives the film its melodramatic impact.

Another important part of the cultural context surrounding the film, and one that helps to explain its critical attitude towards so many aspects of the republican struggle, is that of European unification. Ireland, both the North and the Republic, is faced with some very difficult decisions as they move towards a European community. Debates around that move often centre around the push and pull between modernization and the need to defend national traditions from the homogenization of "Euro-pudding." Among these moderni-

zations are open access to abortion (not to mention divorce) and among these national traditions are the idealization of women's role and the revolutionary romance of the Irish language. Harkin's ideal of Northern Ireland is clearly one closer to a unified Europe than a great Gaelic motherland, and she uses Goretti's story as a microcosm of just how far Irish culture has yet to go to in order to achieve that vision. On the whole, Ireland (again, both the republicans in the North and the Republic itself) has been happy to join the European Union, with its promise of help in improving infrastructure and its presence as a check against British hegemony. Nevertheless, the national culture is at odds with much of the rest of Europe, and this continues to create friction, both in Ireland and abroad.

Hush a Bye Baby, then, is a document of a culture in a crisis of transition. The nationalist Derry imagined by Harkin is a place where political struggle is gradually giving way to unified national and continental projects, and traditional authoritarianism is gradually giving way to more progressive understandings of the role of women in society. These kinds of transitions come with much pain, however, and she uses Goretti as a receptacle of a lot of that pain, showing how unnecessary and regressive such martyrdom is. Despite the film's skeptical eye towards nationalist struggle it is clearly anti-colonialist, showing the unjust and disruptive nature of British militarism in the North. Harkin refuses the easy pieties, however, interrogating romantic notions of Irish culture, demanding recognition of the struggles of Irish women,

and insisting on the centrality of their experience to Irish life. It is a critically political film seeking to expose the structures that tenaciously hold both a nation and a gender in a colonial situation.

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References

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ANN BRENNAN

James Miley's Pub

The dancing spirits are not here
 In James Miley's pub
 Glass globes are sparkling clean
 Antlers and a ram's head hang over the bar
 liquor bottles are placed carefully in a line
 The fireplace burns real wood
 Not the poor Catholic's dirty coal
 Windows reflect expensive panes of bubble glass
 And the prestigious door knocker is polished
 brass
 We never expect a guffaw from James Miley
 Not in fifty years of trade
 How boring, how dull,
 Oh hell, Oh well,
 We can always go to McCarthy's next door

Ann Brennan is a heritage artist who has travelled across Canada speaking to Canadians about their rich history. She is the author of The Real Klondike Kate (Goose Lane Editions, 1990), which chronicles the eventful life of Katherine Ryan, who joined the Yukon Gold Rush in the winter of 1898. Her writing credits also include several historical plays.

WINONA BAKER

Documentary

Oh you Aran Islanders
 your courage haunts

 Shawled and stoic women
 knitting family crests
 into sturdy sweaters

 If brother lover son
 is lost beneath the waves
 his body washed
 into some strange tide-pool

 They know who to send for
 by the pattern knit
 into his warm wool sweater

Winona Baker has published four volumes of poetry; her most recent is Behind the Lighthouse (Oolichan Books, 1993). In 1989 she won the Foreign Minister's Prize in Haiku. She has lived on Vancouver Island for the past 40 years.