IRISH QUEER CINEMA

ALLISON MACLEOD
Irish Queer Cinema
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CHAPTER 1

Queerly National and Nationally Queer: Paradoxes of an Irish Queer Cinema

On 22 May 2015, Irish citizens voted in favour of legalising same-sex marriage. This referendum was the first time that a federal government had left the legal question of same-sex marriage to be decided by popular vote. Through the overwhelming yes vote, Irish citizens presented a more liberal and inclusive Ireland to the world that broke away from its historical image as a conservative nation. As well, the international campaign for Irish people living around the world to return to Ireland to vote in the referendum (documented on Twitter through the hashtag #hometovote) was evidence of how Ireland’s imagined national community extends beyond the nation-state’s geographical borders to become a global community.

In an article in The Irish Times, journalist Fintan O’Toole framed the referendum as more than a victory for ‘Liberal Ireland over Conservative Ireland’; instead, ‘it’s the end of that whole, sterile, useless, unproductive division. There is no longer a Liberal Ireland and a Conservative Ireland. The cleavage between rural and urban, tradition and modernity that has shaped so many of the debates of the last four decades has been repaired. This is a truly national moment’ (O’Toole 2015). O’Toole’s comment reveals the extent to which Irish identity has historically been defined through oppositions (Irish/British; Nationalist/Unionist; Catholic/Protestant) as well as underlines the potential for a new form of national imagining to emerge through the break-down of such divisions.

Irish Queer Cinema is located within this context of an Ireland in a state of national re-imagining. This book provides an analysis of representations of queer sexualities in contemporary Irish films to examine the complex role played by Irish cinema in the socio-cultural production, marginalisation, normalisation and interrogation of queerness. In recent years images of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) identities have become increasingly visible in Irish cinema. This growing queer cultural visibility has been linked to global factors, such as Ireland’s integration into a European community, global campaigns for gay political
rights and social inclusion, and the normalising sexual politics of neoliberalism. It has also been linked to political, socio-economic and cultural developments taking place within Ireland, including the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993, shifting demographics and cultural practices in response to Ireland’s economic boom and subsequent recession, and the Irish Film Board’s (IFB) revised mandate in 1993 of encouraging Irish filmmakers to cater to international audiences and mainstream appeal. This book investigates Irish queer cinema as a constantly shifting constellation of tensions surrounding the local and the global, shaped and reshaped by changes taking place in the Irish film industry, Irish society and the global economy.

While the term ‘national’ implies a unifying impulse, ‘queer’ operates as a disruptive tool that undermines identity categories, and those systems of power and language that produce and sustain them. By bringing these terms together, this book considers how the relationship between Irishness and queerness manifests in diverse ways through cinematic representations of non-normative sexual identities. *Irish Queer Cinema* draws together feature-length and short films released between 1984 and 2016 as depictive of an Irish queer cinema. It argues that Irish queer cinema is unlike the queer cinemas of other nations, where queer films tend to be manifestations of an oppositional and marginal culture. Instead, this book considers how Irish queer cinema emerges as a product of the complex, interdependent and inherently conflicted relationship between nationalist discourses and sexual politics in Ireland. Many of the films examined in this book were funded, at least in part, by the IFB, Ireland’s national film funding body, and are consequently tied to its nationalist agenda. The IFB has not only been instrumental in the development of an indigenous film industry in Ireland, but its organisational policies have had a direct impact on the shape of Irish queer cinema, as discussed in Chapter 2. An understanding of Irish queer cinema therefore needs to take into account the institutional context from which many of these films emerge, and how cinematic representations of queerness participate in the national imaginings promoted by public funding bodies such as the IFB.

Historical antagonisms between dominant strains of nationalism in Ireland and homosexuality have produced ‘Irish’ and ‘queer’ as mutually repellent terms. Writing in 1997, Lance Pettitt argues that these tensions have resulted in cinematic representations which ‘conceptualize “gay” as a highly problematic form of identity: socially, politically and morally marginalized within Irish culture and society’ (1997: 254). In films such as *Pigs* (Black 1984), *Reefer and the Model* (Comerford 1987) and *The Last Bus Home* (Gogan 1997), non-normative sexuality is framed as a form of
deviance that is subject to homophobic violence and discrimination. Yet more recent representations of queerness in Irish cinema are frequently tied to discourses of cosmopolitanism and neoliberalism. For instance, both *Goldfish Memory* (Gill 2002) and *Cowboys & Angels* (Gleeson 2003) present the Irish queer subject as a sexually liberated positive contributor to Irish society.

As globalisation and Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s have broadened national boundaries and redefined traditional signifiers of Irishness, representations of Irish queer identities have become more visible on-screen. Such visibility, however, does not necessarily equate progressive sexual politics, and this more visible image of the Irish queer subject often fulfils a largely symbolic role while perpetuating negative and homophobic sexual stereotypes. As Ed Madden (2011) suggests, Irish cultural texts about homosexuality are rarely about homosexuality; instead, as Michael G. Cronin has argued with regards to Irish gay fiction in the 1990s, ‘homosexuality inevitably functions as an icon of Irish modernity, symbolizing the social liberalization of the Celtic Tiger but defusing the radical potential of gay politics’ (2004: 254–5).

Through its different case studies *Irish Queer Cinema* explores how Irish queer films participate in the ideological construction of the Irish ‘nation’ even as they may use queerness to challenge social norms and dominant modes of representation. The reason for this book is twofold. First, it responds to a need to provide a sustained analysis of Irish queer filmmaking culture. This book extends on previous work on gender and sexual representation in Irish cinema, and on earlier debates surrounding Irish cinematic representations of queerness initiated by Lance Pettitt (1997; 1999), Jenny Murphy (2003) and Fintan Walsh (2008; 2012). Further works by Ruth Barton (2004), Debbie Ging (2008; 2013), Martin McLoone (2000) and Conn Holohan (2010a) provide invaluable insights into the role that Ireland’s film industry has played in both perpetuating and challenging dominant gender and sexual ideologies. *Irish Queer Cinema* builds on these works to offer the first extensive critical study of Irish queer cinema.

Second, *Irish Queer Cinema* offers a new approach to the study of Irish cinema via theories of space. Analysing spatial relationships between films enables new interpretations of individual texts. Within the wealth of critical work on Irish cinema, many discussions tend to focus on the same films and to analyse these films in relation to their historical contexts. This book broadens these debates by examining films in terms of space, focusing on how films represent specific socio-cultural spaces and how these spaces
operate through social and sexual norms. Social exclusion is frequently expressed as exclusion from space; as a result, ‘struggles for citizenship claims are increasingly expressed in the assertion of . . . the right to occupy space’ (Bell and Binnie 2000: 80). Cultural representations produce particular spatial meanings, and are a means through which sexual ideologies and social relations are legitimated and normalised. For Brian Graham, cultural landscapes are implicated within the construction of power within a society, whereby ‘social power requires space, its exercise shapes space, and this in turn shapes social power’ (1997: 4). Through an approach of close textual analysis that interrogates films in terms of a sexual politics of space, *Irish Queer Cinema* explores cinematic space as a complex system of signification that is at once produced by and implicated within dominant social imaginaries.

*Irish Queer Cinema* is centrally focused on feature-length fiction films. As Ireland began to develop a film industry in the 1970s and 1980s, fiction emerged as an arena where indigenous filmmakers could challenge the wealth of fictional representations of Ireland and the Irish produced by foreign filmmakers; Irish filmmakers ‘began to explore the contradictions of a changing society in a form of culture (the fiction film) in which there was little in the way of a national tradition or precedence’ (McLoone 2000: 131). Growing institutional support and financing opportunities for commercial filmmaking further made fiction an increasingly appealing form to work within (see Rockett 1987: 128). The production of feature-length fiction films can therefore be understood as intimately linked to the inherently political project of re-imagining Irishness for both local and global audiences. In addition, a central focus in this book is on the relationship between cinematic representations of queerness and Irish nationalist discourses. Feature-length filmmaking, which, out of financial necessity, relies more heavily on national funding bodies such as the IFB, offers a compelling case study for exploring this relationship. Although the focus of this book is primarily on feature films, Chapter 9 begins to open up this focus by considering the unique queer potential of the Irish short film.

This study of Irish queer cinema does not include films from Northern Ireland. The lack of queer films from Northern Ireland in comparison to the Republic of Ireland prevents the identification of possible representational trends. Further, in establishing an Irish queer cinema this book is focused on socio-economic and cultural developments that are specific to the Republic of Ireland. As Holohan (2010a) acknowledges, the political and cultural conflicts within Northern Ireland are a direct consequence of the historical relationship between Britain and Ireland, and are therefore an implicit presence within any study of Irish national culture. Addressing
the full complexity of these conflicts is beyond the immediate scope of this book. This book’s deployment of the term ‘Irish’ therefore refers to the Republic of Ireland, unless otherwise stated.

Although this is a book on Irish queer cinema, the majority of queer representations examined here involve male characters. At the same time that queer identities have become increasingly visible in Irish cinema, queer masculinities dominate this new cultural visibility. Madden argues that the proliferation of texts focused on issues of masculinity ‘are very much part of a cultural moment obsessed with the nature of masculinity and its possibilities for crisis, interrogation and transformation’ (2011: 79). For Debbie Ging (2013), the cultural visibility of Irish masculinities can be attributed to the deconstructive and polysemic impulses of postmodern culture, public debates about men’s roles in a changing society and the rise of masculinity studies out of feminist and queer scholarship.

The absence of Irish queer women on-screen can be further linked to the general invisibility of lesbianism within Irish public and cultural discourses. In her introduction to *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, Éibhear Walshe notes that in contrast to the relationship that male homo-sexuality has had with Irish nationalist discourses, the issue of national identity for Irish lesbians has been ‘more complicated because of the lack of a public identity, even a criminalised one’ (1997: 6). Unlike male homo-sexuality, lesbianism was never criminalised in Ireland and therefore ‘Irish lesbians were both outside the law and at the same time rendered invisible by lack of official recognition or even condemnation’ (1997: 6). Such political invisibility has led to minimal cultural visibility, particularly in film. While queer women are found in five of the feature-film case studies in this book, only *Goldfish Memory* and *A Date for Mad Mary* (Thornton 2016) offer these female characters any strong narrative agency. In *Snakes and Ladders* (McAdam 1996) and *Crush Proof* (Tickell 1998) queer female characters only make brief appearances and are peripheral to the films’ central narratives, and in *Cowboys & Angels* non-normative female sexuality is invoked only to be immediately disavowed through a celebration of heterosexuality. The lack of queer female representation within Irish cinema is an issue explored in more detail in Chapter 5. The following sections establish the three key paradigms framing this book’s discussion of Irish queer cinema, namely ‘queer’, ‘Irish’ and ‘space’.

**Queer**

*Irish Queer Cinema*’s deployment of the term ‘queer’ can be read in two ways. First, *Irish Queer Cinema* uses ‘queer’ to establish its focus of study
on films which feature non-normative sexual identities that include homo-
sexual, bisexual and transgender identities. ‘Queer’ is frequently used as an
umbrella term for diverse sexual identities, desires and behaviours that do
not fit into institutional and socially sanctioned categories. Through such
a broad conceptualisation of ‘queer’, *Irish Queer Cinema* draws together a
group of films as representative of an ‘Irish queer cinema’ even as these
films represent very diverse articulations of sexuality.

Second, this book extends ‘queer’ beyond sexuality to more broadly
critique normative social structures and hierarchies of privilege. Queer
theory emerges out of the deconstructive strategies of postmodernism and
poststructuralism, and encompasses a wide range of theoretical approaches
and methodologies. Broadly, queer theory operates as a discursive tool
for challenging social norms and identity categories by exposing and
undermining those dominant systems of power and language that have
constructed and sustained them. It not only critiques heteronormative
systems that inscribe a heterosexual identity as a dominant norm, but
simultaneously exposes the constructed nature of identity; a queer cri-
tique ‘problematises normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality
[and] is critical of all those versions of identity, community and politics
that are believed to evolve “naturally” from such consolidations’ (Jagose
1996: 99). Defining itself against the norm rather than the heterosexual,
‘Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate,
the dominant’ (Halperin 1995: 62). Queer emerges then as a powerfully
disruptive position of alterity that encompasses new forms of social rela-
tions: non-normative lifestyles, oppositional and subcultural practices,
and alternative models of alliance and community.

The rise of queer scholarship within Film Studies demonstrates the
value of queer theory for rethinking issues around identity and repre-
sentation in film as well as exposing the ideological and cultural role that
film plays in the construction of meaning. By applying queer theory to
the study of Irish cinema, this book contributes to these ongoing debates
whilst investigating how ‘queer’ operates in unique ways in relation to
Irish culture. Even as this analysis of films reveals ways in which they
begin to unpack ideas of normality and disrupt dominant structures and
meanings, many of these films also delimit identity within stereotyped
representations, depoliticise and desexualise sexuality through allegory,
privilege heterosexist norms and appropriate mainstream conventions.
Subsequently, the most interesting and significant tensions emerge in
the ways in which Irish queer cinema is at once ‘queer’ and ‘not-queer’:
neither completely mainstream nor marginal, neither fully radically
subversive nor assimilationist.
As Walsh (2008; 2012) has noted, the difficulty in arguing for an Irish queer cinema stems from the lack of films which overtly explore the conceptual fluidity and slipperiness of sexuality. Rather than using sexuality as a strong affective, erotic and disruptive force, Irish films tend to use sexuality as allegory for the nation: as ‘an instrument of national reflection, rather than as a complex web of identifications, desires and affects’ (2012: 216). In an earlier essay, he suggests that Irish films perpetuate negative representations of homosexuality, with homosexuality typically linked to ‘trauma, perversion, paedophilia, and social and political tension’ (2008: 16). Focusing specifically on the on-screen male homosexual subject, Walsh argues that he tends to be largely evacuated of his sexuality to become a symbol of national dystopia and utopia: marking ‘the outermost limits of social degradation (usually associated with a past that we are trying to forget) and future possibility (the ideal Ireland we imagine, and attempt to purchase into being)’ (2008: 17). Further, as Murphy has argued, representations of queerness in Irish cinema tend to be subordinated within a heteronormative narrative, with films ‘suppressing the homosexual “threat” through the marginalisation of homosexual storylines’ (2003: 70).

Pettitt (1997; 1999), Murphy (2003) and Walsh (2008) propose alternative frameworks for interpreting representations of queer sexuality in Irish cinema and, in doing so, suggest that the queerness of Irish queer cinema can be understood in unique terms. Pettitt claims that even as Irish films frequently use homosexuality to signify ‘a range of aberrant, negative types’ (1997: 254), these stereotyped images can be reinterpreted as subversive forms of resistance against a heteronormative society. For example, while Pigs and Reefer and the Model associate homosexuality with criminality and deviance, both films can be read in terms of their critique of the Irish State and the socio-political struggles that have produced these queer characters as criminals and deviants. In a later essay, Pettitt argues against simply documenting instances of gay characters in Irish film and instead stresses the need to more rigorously interrogate sexual categories. Referencing the influence of the US-based New Queer Cinema (NQC) movement, progressive political reform and the growing critical attention on sexual minorities in Ireland, he claims that ‘the point now should be to problematise the category “gay” itself’ (Pettitt 1999: 61).

As Irish cinema in the 1990s and 2000s has become increasingly guided by commercial imperatives, Murphy suggests the need to consider how Irish films can challenge heterosexual and homosocial norms even as they replicate mainstream narrative conventions. Expressing doubt about the possibility of inventing a new language of cinema that could represent
gay viewpoints, Murphy instead argues that the representation and interrogation of gender and sexual issues are best suited to mainstream narrative cinema, since it offers the greatest opportunity for accessing the mass audience and subsequently shifting cultural attitudes. She therefore proposes that the potential of a more subversive Irish queer cinema can emerge through the subversion of mainstream cinematic conventions. Specifically, Murphy identifies humour, and the use of homosexuality as a comic device, as a strategy for eliciting a new self-awareness and self-reflexivity amongst Irish audiences. Using *I Went Down* (Breathnach 1997) and *About Adam* (Stembridge 2000) as examples, she argues that the use of humour in these films reveals a possible new direction for Irish queer cinema: ‘through the use of wit, Irish society can see itself in all its bigotry and assimilate alternative images without ever feeling berated or threatened by the “other” on screen’ (2003: 76).

Murphy posits this strategy as one that will undermine homosocial norms to eventually lead to more progressive social attitudes and representations of homosexuality in the public sphere. While the transgressive potential of this strategy remains questionable, Murphy nevertheless introduces a new approach to analysing the queerness of Irish cinema in terms of its articulation via mainstream conventions. The influence of her approach is found in Chapters 5 and 7, where queer representation is analysed as a product of the mainstream, with a particular emphasis on how such images can be reread in more political and subversive terms.

Walsh extends on earlier arguments made by Pettitt and Murphy to consider the possibility of ‘a queer representational aesthetic in Irish film’ (2012: 216) that subverts and challenges aesthetic and cultural conventions. Shifting beyond overt homosexual representation, he locates the queerness of *Adam & Paul* (Abrahamson 2004) and *Garage* (Abrahamson 2007) in terms of how they feature ‘a range of non-normative identities and relationalities which, although not expressly homosexual, are queerly unfixed and unsettling’ (Walsh 2012: 218). Rather than using the sexual subject as a symbol of national trauma or economic success, these films situate their protagonists ‘within a complex, unresolved domain of desire and otherness’ to enable particular queer resonances (218). Walsh’s conceptualisation of queerness in terms of alterity is developed further in this book through a spatial approach, whereby queerness is analysed not only in terms of representation but in terms of inclusion (or exclusion) from space.

Subsequently, while ‘queer’ is initially used in this book to refer to films that feature non-normative sexualities, it is simultaneously used to reveal identity as a process of becoming rather than a static state of being:
‘always an identity under construction, a site of permanent becoming’ (Jagose 1996: 131). In positing identity as inherently unstable, discursively constructed and historically contingent, *Irish Queer Cinema* exposes how normative regimes maintain the perceived hegemony of social identities and formations, such as the national citizen and the nation, through the reiteration of gender and sexual norms. This book does not attempt to identify ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ queer images in Irish cinema; rather, it explores how cinematic queerness functions to challenge social norms and dominant modes of representation.

**Irish**

The homosexual subject, and particularly the male homosexual subject, has occupied a key role within Irish discourses in both historical and contemporary contexts, operating simultaneously as evidence of colonial perversion, a marker of national treason and a symbol of modernisation. By applying queer theory to the study of Irish national cinema, this book investigates how sexual norms are deployed within dominant culture to participate in the ideological construction of the Irish ‘nation’.

Ireland’s political history with Britain and the strong social influence and political power of the Roman Catholic Church in Irish affairs have shaped Ireland’s dominant national narrative and privileged political and sectarian identities over other forms of identification. Anxieties surrounding the nation and national stability in Ireland have historically justified and sanctioned State and Church intervention in the private realms of the individual and the family, and the public policing and regulation of gender and sexuality. Nationalist and religious discourses encouraged the tenacity of conservative values and moral ideals that were framed as integral to Ireland’s national character and cultural legacy. They also promoted rigid gender and sexual norms that in turn prescribed certain kinds of social roles of Irish men and women.

Michel Foucault’s assertion that ‘homo-sexuality threatens people as a “way of life” rather than as a way of having sex’ reveals that the threat that non-normative sexuality poses to the dominant social order is not rooted solely in non-procreative sex (1996: 310). In particular, queer bodies which refuse to comply with the State-sanctioned heterosexual imperative of citizenship are framed as ‘a profound threat to the very survival of the nation’ (Alexander 1994: 6). These queer bodies thus are positioned as anti-national deviants that need to be regulated and controlled by the State. For both British colonial powers and Irish nationalists, homosexuality has historically operated as a threat to national stability. Kieran Rose
cites Jeffrey Weeks’ explanation of the homosexual purges of the 1880s and the 1885 legislation, which criminalised sexual practices between men, as part of the general British concern with ‘imperialism and national decline’ (Rose 1994: 6). Homophobia was also perpetuated by the Irish nationalist press by pursuing ‘homosexual scandals’ in order to undermine officials in the colonial administration in Dublin. For Rose, ‘It is significant that Irish nationalist ideology developed during such a homophobic period in European history’ (1994: 7).

Anxieties surrounding masculinity, sexuality and the nation-building project are further evident in the cases of Roger Casement and Oscar Wilde. Casement, a British diplomat, was arrested for attempting to supply the Irish nationalist forces with arms for the Easter Rising in 1916. Kathryn Conrad (2004) argues that while the British case of treason against Casement was justified, he was further attacked by the press for his suspected homosexuality after the discovery of his diaries (known as the ‘Black Diaries’) which contained details of homosexual encounters. These dual accusations solidified a link between national treason and homosexuality. Yet Conrad notes that the Irish response to these accusations also implied the foreignness of homosexuality, whereby characterisations of Casement as an ‘Irish patriot’ were accompanied by rejections of his alleged homosexuality and dismissals of the Black Diaries as forgeries.

Drawing from B. L. Reid’s biography of Casement, Conrad suggests that the anxiety Casement provoked can be attributed to the fluidity and incoherence of his identity. Embodying conflicting identity categories and allegiances, he was unable to be easily accommodated within nationalist discourses and threatened the reproduction of a coherent national self-image. Similar claims have been made with regards to Irish playwright Oscar Wilde, whose multiple identifications position him at once inside and outside the nation. The cultural anxiety surrounding Wilde is examined in more detail in Chapter 4’s analysis of *A Man of No Importance* (Krishnamma 1994).

For Conrad, inherent assumptions regarding the foreignness of homosexuality and its threat to the family and, by extension, the nation reveal ‘a profound anxiety not only about sexual identity but also about the stability of the nation and state and the security of their borders’ (2004: 25). As Ireland sought to establish a strong post-colonial identity in the twentieth century, homosexuality was positioned as a potential threat to the nation-building project, ‘seen to threaten not only the reproduction of bodies but the system of alliances between men, providing affective bonds and allegiances that might undermine both the family cell and the public sphere’ (Conrad 2004: 7). Thus homosexuality operated within the
nationalist project as ‘a ready discursive tool that can be conflated with any enemy of the state, in the process becoming the enemy within’ (Stychin 1998: 194).

Over the past five decades, the cultural visibility and political support of LGBTQ people in Ireland have grown substantially. In Rose’s (1994) seminal historical mapping of gay and lesbian politics in Ireland, he argues that a series of political, economic and socio-cultural events starting in the 1960s were instrumental in establishing and increasing the visibility of gay and lesbian movements in Ireland. As Ireland became increasingly industrialised, a new economic policy was introduced that relaxed protectionism and implemented incentive strategies for encouraging foreign investment in Ireland. Ireland applied for European Union (EU) membership, gaining admittance in 1973. In 1962 the nation’s State television station, Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ), was established, and in 1964 and 1967, bills were passed that liberalised film and literature censorship laws, respectively. Furthermore, in 1965 a report on education in Ireland was published that sought to remove the school from the sacristy. These changes suggested Ireland’s shift towards becoming a more globalised and socially liberal society, creating the conditions for gay and lesbian movements to take shape.

Following the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969, the Irish Gay Rights Movement (IGRM) was founded in Dublin in 1974 with the social and political aims of creating a space in which gay people could socialise while working to neutralise Ireland’s anti-gay laws. Several members of the IGRM soon split off to form the Cork Gay Collective in 1980, with a Dublin-based counterpart established shortly after. Described by Rose to be ‘at the cutting edge of gay political action in the 1980s’, the Collective adopted a manifesto that encouraged gay Irish people ‘to have a positive view of their sexuality, to live fully and to challenge society’s control by coming out in the family, work, church and social life’ (Rose 1994: 16). The Collective also aligned its cause with other social movements, particularly the women’s movement in Ireland, by claiming that ‘gay liberation involves the freeing of all oppressed groups . . . recognising that our shared oppression derives from the abuse of sexuality as a tool of oppression which necessitated strict gender stereotyping and the denial of sexual fulfilment’ (1994: 16). The Collective’s stated aim of aligning itself with other social movements was not limited to Ireland; the group positioned itself as ‘internationalist’ and aligned itself with gay and lesbian causes worldwide (1994: 16).

Yet despite this early drive for the legal and social recognition of sexual minorities in Ireland in the 1970s, Rose notes that by the mid-1980s there
was a noticeable decline in political activism, not only within the gay rights movement but also within other political activist groups such as the women’s movement. He attributes this decline to the economic recession Ireland faced in the 1980s. This period has been widely characterised as a deeply conflicted period in Irish history, torn between the project of modernisation and industrialisation that signalled social and economic progress, and the continuing hold of those deeply ingrained conservative nationalist ideals of the Catholic Church and republican politics (Baudrillard 1996; McCarthy 2000; McLoone 2000; Barton 2004). The failed divorce referendum in 1986, a series of highly publicised scandals of violence, rape and sexual abuse within the family (namely the Granard tragedy in 1984, the Kerry babies case in 1984, the ‘X’ case in 1992 and the Kilkenny Incest Case also in 1992),¹ high unemployment rates and increasing emigration rates all suggested that Ireland was in a state of economic, social and political recession; as Baudrillard claims, ‘the equation of urbanisation and industrial development with enlightenment values of progress, secularisation and cosmopolitanism proved no longer viable in the austere cultural climate of the 1980s’ (1996: 84). Baudrillard’s statement resonates with Irish feminist and lesbian activist Ailbhe Smyth’s 1988 assertion that the confidence and energy previously driving the women’s movement was ‘well nigh quenched by the fundamentalist repression and the economic recession’ in the mid-1980s (Smyth quoted in Rose 1994: 21).

From the late 1980s onwards, the influence of global politics and economic forces on Irish identity politics has become increasingly apparent. Between 1988 and 2006, Ireland underwent rapid socio-economic and cultural transformation. Ireland’s economic boom, popularly referred to as the Celtic Tiger, is largely attributed to an influx in foreign investment and Ireland’s central position within the European market, and has been

¹ The Granard tragedy refers to the death of Ann Lovett, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl who died giving birth beside a grotto in Granard, County Longford. Her infant son also died. The Kerry babies case later that year involved the discovery of an infant stabbed to death and abandoned on a beach in County Kerry. A young woman named Joanne Hayes was arrested and confessed to the crime, only for authorities to discover that she had given birth to a different baby that she and her family had then buried in her garden. In the media storm that followed the case, police were criticised for intimidation tactics and unlawfully coercing a confession from Hayes. The ‘X’ case in 1992 involved a pregnant fourteen-year-old girl who had been raped by a family friend and was banned by the Irish State from travelling to Britain to get an abortion since abortion is outlawed under the Constitution of Ireland. Only once the victim was proven to be suicidal did the Supreme Court grant her permission to travel to Britain. Finally, the Kilkenny Incest Case refers to the case of a young woman who was systematically abused and raped by her father for over sixteen years and had a son by him.
linked to decreasing rates of unemployment and government debt, increasing patterns of urban living and rising standards of living (McLoone 2000; Coulter 2003; Barton 2004). While Irish history has been characterised by a narrative of emigration, with net emigration rates peaking in the 1950s, by the mid-2000s this became reversed as Ireland became an increasingly desirable immigration destination. In line with these changes, Celtic Tiger Ireland became a new commodity market, with consumer spending rates rising dramatically in the late 1990s. Ireland also began to find a place within the global export market, as local artists, cultures and traditions found popularity on the world stage.

Celtic Tiger Ireland is further characterised by a series of significant political events. Both McLoone (2000) and Barton (2004) note that a series of political reforms in the 1990s, including the legalisation of divorce in 1997 and the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, indicated that Ireland was moving away from a past shaped by a tumultuous political history with Britain, the nationalist ideals of Irish republicanism and the repressive doctrine of the Catholic Church. In 1993, homosexuality was decriminalised in Ireland following a twenty-year campaign for reform that was linked to a broader struggle for liberalisation against censorship laws and repressive legal control around sexuality. Further, the Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000), which prohibit discrimination in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services, and the Marriage Equality Act (2015) have resulted in greater freedoms for sexual minorities.

In addition to cinema, a growing queer cultural visibility has emerged in Ireland through queer theatre and performance, the rise of Irish drag queen Panti Bliss as a cultural icon (she performed on the Abbey Stage in 2014 and was the subject of the 2015 documentary film The Queen of Ireland – Horgan 2015), and annual events such as the Dublin-based GAZE International LGBT Film Festival and the Dublin Gay Theatre Festival. There is also growing critical attention to this new cultural visibility, evidenced by such recent publications as Deviant Acts: Essays on Queer Performance (Cregan 2009), Queer Notions: New Plays and Performances from Ireland (Walsh 2010), Theory on the Edge: Irish Studies and the Politics of Sexual Difference (Giffney and Shildrick 2013), and Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation (Walsh 2015).

Space

*Irish Queer Cinema* approaches the study of Irish queer cinema through the sexual politics of space, exploring how social and spatial relations are
structured by gender and sexual norms and how these are represented in terms of cinematic space. It takes as an assumption the constructed nature of space, building on canonical theories put forward by Lefebvre, Foucault and Soja to conceptualise space in postmodern terms as heterogeneous, contested and dynamic rather than homogenous and static. Social identities and relations must be interrogated in relation to spatial practice; as Soja argues, ‘we are becoming increasing aware that we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities’ (1996: 1). The social is thus materialised through its spatialisation: ‘the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself’ (Lefebvre 1991: 129). Dominant systems of power and knowledge rely on the coherent and ordered mapping of space, and those bodies within it, to construct a dominant social order, and that social order is maintained through material actions.

Issues of space are central to nation-building and the formation of the national subject. An imagined national space is constructed by social imaginaries that operate through both ideological and material practices. The national ‘imagined political community’ (Anderson 1983: 6) is imagined not only as homogenous and cohesive but as bounded within a specific socio-physical space. As globalisation has transformed traditional understandings of the nation, such transformation can be understood in terms of the transformation of space. Ireland’s growing economic and cultural ties to Europe and the increasingly global mobility of people, information and capital have produced new spatialities and subjectivities associated with urbanisation, deterritorialisation and transnational mobility. "Irish Queer Cinema" explores how these changes are mapped out in cinematic space, examining how films shape an imagined national space even as they problematise the construct of nation by ‘exposing its masquerade of unity’ (Hayward 2000: 101). Within these films, space becomes ‘an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimised, contested, and obscured’ (Hopkins 1994: 47).

Just as issues of space shape the nation, they are implicated within the production of gendered and sexualised identities; for Browne, Lim and Brown, ‘sexuality – its regulation, norms, institutions, pleasures and desires – cannot be understood without understanding the spaces through which it is constituted, practiced and lived’ (2007: 4). The discursive positioning of homosexuality within the Irish nation-building project in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the recent campaign surrounding same-sex marriage in Ireland reveal how sexuality has historically been
and continues to be implicated within spatial models of citizenship. The characterisation of homosexuality as outside the nation, as a foreign threat or colonial pollutant, brings sexuality out of the private sphere into the public sphere only to position it as neither private nor public, subject to State monitoring and regulation. More recently the 2015 same-sex marriage campaign in Ireland revealed how private rights to marriage and family continue to be negotiated within the public sphere.

Work on the spatial politics of sexual citizenship argues for how sexual identities are organised, divided and confined across public and private spaces, and seeks to problematise the public/private divide. Private and public spaces are not natural and stable entities; rather, they are discursive constructions that are actively maintained through social practices. Sexuality is often assumed to be, or suggested that it should be, confined to the private sphere, with this assumption propagating an understanding of sexuality as apolitical. Yet the private sphere reproduces sexual ideologies that are inherently political and it should therefore be considered in dialogue with the wider public realm; as Elizabeth M. Schneider describes, ‘The decision about what we protect as “private” is a political decision that always has important “public” ramifications’ (1991: 978). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (2002) argue that intimacy is itself publicly mediated, and that the hegemony of heterosexual culture is achieved through ideologies and institutions of intimacy, such as marriage and reproduction; for example, as explored in Chapter 3, the Irish Constitution explicitly frames the heterosexual family unit as a necessary building-block of the nation and makes a direct correlation between the woman’s position in the home and the well-being of the State.

The relegation of sexuality to the private sphere obscures the sexualisation of public space. While ostensibly a democratic space, public space operates through uneven power relations and hierarchies of privilege that reinforce the naturalisation of heterosexual norms. Jean-Ulrick Désert (1997) argues that the unequal claims to public space for heterosexuals and homosexuals means that heterosexual desire can be publically expressed while homosexual lives must be lived in secrecy. Yet he further theorises how queer bodies have the disruptive potential to reveal such space as both constructed and contested. A dominant strategy deployed within LGBTQ activism has been to transgress space to destabilise its heterosexual identity and undermine processes of homophobic oppression. Forms of activism such as public displays of same-sex ‘kiss ins’, large-scale protests and marches, and pride parades use the queer body to make visible the normalisation and spatialisation of sexual ideologies.

By exposing and challenging the heteronormativity of public space,
spatial tactics of queer politics become what Tim Cresswell calls ‘crisis points in the normal functioning of everyday expectations’ (1996: 22). Gill Valentine considers how such disruptive performances of dissident sexualities are ‘about empowerment and being “in control”’, re-territorialising space normalised as heterosexual and publicising ‘private’ identities to reveal the public/private divide as a heteronormative construction (1996: 154). In Ireland, public space continues to be a central site for sexual contestation. In 1974, Gay Pride Day was established when a small group of activists protested outside the Department of Justice and the British Embassy, and in 1983 Dublin’s first recognisable pride parade took place. Earlier that same year, Ireland’s largest gay and lesbian march was organised in response to the murder of a gay man, Declan Flynn, and the leniency given to his murderers, which was viewed as official tolerance of anti-gay violence. Protestors marched from the city centre to Fairview Park in the north of the city, and through the areas where Flynn’s attackers lived: as Rose explains, ‘It was to be a defiant public statement that gay people would not be frightened off the streets and out of public spaces’ (1994: 20). In one of the few early accounts of Irish lesbian feminist political and social activities, Joni Crone (1988) describes how lesbian activists in the 1970s countered their invisibility and challenged the media’s refusal to print any form of gay or lesbian advertising by printing stickers with the number of a gay and lesbian telephone support line and placing them on bathroom doors in pubs and hotels across the country.

Public space can therefore operate as a crisis space characterised by the complex negotiation of multiple sexualities and spatialities. In addition to the disruptive potential of queer bodies within heteronormative organisations of space, queer bodies may embody non-normative relations to time and space. Judith Halberstam uses Foucault’s assertion that ‘homosexuality threatens people as a “way of life” rather than as a way of having sex’ to propose a ‘queer way of life’ that encompasses ‘subcultural practices, alternate methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these wilfully eccentric modes of being’ (2005: 1). For Halberstam, such subcultural practices enable queer subjects to explore new life modes and social relations outside of the normative, linear life course of birth, marriage, reproduction and death.

2 Flynn was attacked by a group of young men who chased him through Fairview Park and beat him to death. The young men were given five-year suspended sentences and held a ‘victory march’ in Fairview Park where they proclaimed ‘we are the champions’ and celebrated homophobic violence.
Halberstam and Ahmed’s arguments for how queer ways of being open up alternative relations to time and space heavily inform the following case study chapters. Throughout this book, close textual analysis is combined with queer and spatial theory to analyse films in terms of a sexual politics of space. A key focus is on the relationship between bodies and space, exploring how gender and sexual norms are embedded within spatial practices and structures, how these in turn produce, shape and regulate social identities and life modes, and how these are represented in terms of cinematic space. Irish Queer Cinema argues that space plays a central role in the construction, articulation and transformation of social identities and sexual politics, and that cinematic space reflects, reinforces and re-imagines broader ideological and political processes taking place within the material spaces of the nation.

This book is structured by spatial models of queer sociality that are used to organise and analyse its different case studies. It consists of ten chapters that analyse specific films in relation to different socio-cultural spaces: the family, the pub, the city, the rural, the journey, diaspora and the short film. Within these spaces, tensions between public/private, visibility/invisibility, inclusion/exclusion and normality/deviance emerge as productive sites for exploring how Irish queer cinema re-imagines the parameters of national identity, sexual citizenship and Irish culture.