

Traditions and Transformations: Film in Wales during the 1990s

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In a paper discussing devolution in Wales and Scotland, Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan of Nuffield College, Oxford University noted in 2002, "And to a lesser extent Wales' is a phrase that occurs in every discussion of UK devolution."¹ Indeed, the term was ubiquitous during the early years of Devolution, so that in 1999 Geraint Talfan Davies, former Controller of BBC Wales and former Chairman of the Arts Council of Wales despaired, "A phrase that has burnt itself into my soul in recent times is 'and to a lesser extent Wales.'"² He proceeded to explain the reason for this:

It is irritating because it attempts to push the Welsh story into the Scottish mould. Wales is not a pale shadow of somewhere else, a more dilute version of the same juice or genes nor, in lager language, is Scotland-lite. It is not somewhere to be explained by reference to other places ... It's just Wales: individual, different, its own place, *sui generis* and, because of that, worthy of attention.³

Interestingly, the phrase resonates in the context of film appreciation in Wales. Although there has been a huge surge in international interest in issues of national cinema in recent years, as various countries acknowledge that film can contribute uniquely to producing imaginative national images,⁴ Wales has lagged behind England, Scotland and Ireland in their exploitation

¹ Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, *The Fiscal Crisis of the United Kingdom* (2002), 3, http://www.nuff.ox.ac.uk/users/mclean/mclean_fiscalcrisis3.pdf (accessed: September 2005).

² Geraint Talfan Davies, *Not by Bread Alone: Information, Media and the National Assembly* (Cardiff: Wales Media Forum, 1999), 43.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Key texts include: Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), Susan Hayward *French National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), Tom O'Regan *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), Pierre Sorlin *Italian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997)

of the power of film.⁵ Nevertheless, it may not be surprising that the Welsh have been slow to appreciate their visual culture, due to their having been reluctant to take advantage of new media, relying instead on a handful of visionary pioneers to reveal the value of each new medium.⁶ Furthermore, it has been claimed that Wales and film would never be natural bedfellows:

Film was never made to feel very welcome in Wales. As a two or three year old infant, stinking slightly of gin and the sweat of the fairground, it ran slap up against Evan Roberts and the [religious] Revival of 1904-5 and was severely mauled. It survives – but remains retarded to this day.⁷

Wil Aaron voiced this argument in 1979, a year of bitter disappointment to supporters of the national project, when a negative vote finally closed down, for nearly two decades, the proposal of devolution for Wales. However, since 1979 there has been significant progression in the portrayal of the nature and identity of Wales on the silver screen. As a result, film has served as a mirror, reflecting the political, cultural and social transformations of the nation.

Currently, there are a number of significant developments in the structure of funding and development of film in Wales, as a new Film Agency for Wales, dedicated solely to film production, takes the place of Sgrîn Cymru Wales by April 1, 2006. Additionally, the much heralded Dragon International Studios are being built in Llanilid, Rhondda Cynon Taff, with the first phase scheduled for opening by February 2006. This progression calls for scrutiny of the growth of this industry in its infancy, and for assessment of the evolution of film in a post-modern and post-Devolution Wales.

Gwyn Alf Williams, author of the influential *When was Wales?*, argued that Wales was a “*cenedl schizophrenig*” (a schizophrenic nation).⁸ Williams was referring to the duality of Welsh identity, and contended that the

⁵ See also Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: constructing a national cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), and *English Heritage, English Cinema: costume drama since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: the emergence of a contemporary cinema* (London: BFI, 2000); and Duncan Petrie, *Screening Scotland* (London: BFI, 2000), Lance Pettit *Screening Ireland: film and television representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

⁶ Grahame Davies, “Dechreuadau: Y Gymraeg a’r Cyfryngau Newydd” in *Cyfrwng – Cyfnodolyn Cyfryngau Cymru*, 1 (2004), 26-41 and Gwenno Ffrancon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion: Delweddu Cymru a’i Phobl ar Ffilm 1935-1951* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 10-42.

⁷ Wil Aaron, “Film” in *The Arts in Wales 1950-1975*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardiff: Welsh Arts Council, 1979), 297-308

⁸ Gwyn A. Williams, “Twf hanesyddol y Syniad o Genedl yng Nghymru,” *Efrydiau Athronyddol*, XXIV (1961), 24.

experience of being Welsh has been irrevocably fused to the experience of being British ever since the era of Owain Glyndŵr. According to Williams, Glyndŵr placed duality forever at the heart of the concept of Wales, a notion which had grown steadily since the age of the Normans:

Nid oedd dim gobaith bellach am ysgariad oddi wrth y Saeson.
Byddai'n rhaid byw gyda hwy a rhannu eu bywyd. Ar yr un pryd,
byddai'n rhaid, rywffodd, cadw personoliaeth briodol. Daeth y
gwrthdrawiad hwn i fod yn nodwedd parhaol bywyd Cymru ...⁹

There was no hope for separation from the English. One would have to live with them and share their life. Simultaneously, one would need, somehow, to ensure a separate personality. This collision became a permanent feature of Welsh life...

During the 1990s, there were a number of films produced for S4C which examined this "personality," as Williams saw it: films that scrutinized the trinity of dynamic tensions that existed between Wales, England and "Britain."¹⁰ Today, Britishness is seen in some fields as a postcolonial concept, and it is argued that the word is a misleading label which succeeds in hiding the hegemony of England within that relationship.¹¹ This concept has been discussed by J.R. Jones in his volume *Prydeindod*, where he emphasizes the importance of recognizing, and understanding, Britishness as an ideology.¹² According to Jones, the ideology of Britishness deludes the Welsh that they hold equal power within the framework of Britishness, despite their awareness that the reverse is true, and that their situation is futile. Jones says that this awareness leads to tension and bitterness in Wales, and some of S4C's films produced between 1986 and 1993 investigate these tensions. The ties that connect Wales, England and Britishness are examined in films such as *Milwr Bychan (Boy Soldier)* (Karl Francis, 1986), *Hedd Wyn* (Paul Turner, 1992) and *Gadael Lenin (Leaving Lenin)* (Endaf Emlyn, 1993).

Milwr Bychan, set in contemporary Wales and Northern Ireland, explores issues of national and personal identity. Wil Thomas, a nineteen-year-old Welsh man from a working class background, volunteers for service in the Army and is horrendously treated by his superiors after his arrest following a killing during a routine patrol. This was the first film from S4C which attempted to discuss Welsh identity. The film is a raw, powerful piece of work; it depicts Wil's increasing alienation from the army that makes him a

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 6.

¹² J. R. Jones, *Prydeindod* (Llandybie: Christopher Davies, 1966).

scapegoat, and from the British forces that suppress his affinity and identification with the Celts. During his time in Northern Ireland, Wil meets Deidre, a local girl, and they begin a romance. He feels unable to admit to Deidre who he really is, and the scene in which his identity as a “squaddie” is revealed is the most compelling of the film. Wil refuses Deidre’s accusation that he is “a squaddie and a Brit” with the simple explanation, “I’m not a Brit. I’m Welsh.” She replies, “It’s the same thing. Look, you can be a Brit. But a squaddie?”¹³ This scene explores Wil’s identity as a Welsh man, a British man and a member of the British Armed Forces. Wil alienates himself from the army, using his language as a barrier between him and his superiors, and when faced with extreme physical and verbal abuse, he defiantly speaks to his tormentors in Welsh. Although he has more of an affinity with the Irish than he ever has with his English superiors, the turning point for him is when he discovers that Deidre has been tarred and feathered by her own friends – to them, she is now, because of her relations with Wil, a traitor. Only because of this discovery does Wil realize the extent of his superiors’ xenophobia and violence. When his colonel speaks disparagingly of the ordinary Irish people, Wil replies, “As far as I’m concerned there are no Micks any more.” The film depicts the way that Wil is used as a political pawn; he is as much a victim as the Irish, a small cog in a vast system that he does not understand. The film succeeds in depicting the moral conundrum of fighting what is defined in the film as another country’s war.

Hedd Wyn (Turner 1992) is another of a body of films expressing the feelings of Welsh men who are fighting the British cause in wartime, despite their being at odds with aspects of the conflict and the priorities of a Westminster government. Set during the conflict of the First World War, Ellis Evans, a young poet and farmer from Trawsfynydd, north Wales, was killed in his first experience of combat and was the first poet to win the Eisteddfod bardic chair posthumously. Evans’ death and subsequent honor resulted in his being immortalized in Welsh culture and mythology, and he came to symbolize a lost generation sacrificed in one of history’s most horrific wars. In the film, the war-mongering attitude is synonymous with England and Englishness, and the Welsh and English languages are persistently juxtaposed. In a tavern, a group of English soldiers sing war songs while Ellis begins to sing a sweet, traditional Welsh love song, *Myfanwy*. The soldiers’ war songs and Ellis’ romantic choice provide not only a linguistic contrast but a palpable distinction. In a separate scene, Ellis curses the “Saeson diawl!” (“Bloody English!”) when explosions litter the Welsh countryside during military target practice. Later, echoing Wil’s experience in *Milwr Bychan* of having to translate a Welsh letter from his father for the English officer to

¹³ *Milwr Bychan / Boy Soldier* (Karl Francis, 1986).

understand, Ellis must go cap in hand to seek permission to send his Welsh language poem, "Yr Arwr" (The Hero), to the National Eisteddfod. In both films, the Welsh language is a site of struggle, but by exploring its difference with the English language, it is also a means of defining and strengthening one's identity.¹⁴

Gadael Lenin (Emlyn, 1993) is situated outside Wales. The film follows a group of sixth-formers from a Welsh medium comprehensive school in South Wales on an art trip to St. Petersburg in the company of their art teacher Eileen and her husband Mostyn, an old-type Communist. The dialogue in the film is in Welsh, English and Russian, and as Martin McLoone has noted, "the minority language is vying for public space with two of the great imperialist languages of the world, engaging at the same time with themes and issues of global as well as of local importance."¹⁵ As well as the film's use of multiple languages, its location succeeds in placing the Welsh experience in an international context. Mostyn's disillusionment and frustration at the collapse of the Soviet Union mirrors the disintegration of his marriage, and his present feelings are emphasized by his memories of his honeymoon spent in Leningrad in the 1970s, when his hope for the marriage seemed to correspond with the apparent radicalism in the country. The film explores the individual's responsibility – moral and artistic – as well as issues of cultural legacy. Parallels are created between the two countries, with the Welsh youth coming to terms with post-Thatcherite Wales as young Russians drift in post-Soviet Russia: for each group, coming of age is linked with their coming to terms with their own unique cultural and political heritage. The film is optimistic in its comparison of two societies during a period of change and of new beginnings, but it also acknowledges Wales' uncertain future in an unknown post-Thatcherite era.

As well as the tensions between Wales, England and the ideology of Britishness that are examined in these films, internal, parallel tensions exist within modern Welsh culture. As Katie Gramich has shown, Wales, although a small nation, has a number of internal rifts, such as those between north and south, between Welsh and English, between the urban and the rural, industry and agriculture, chapel and pub, and, recently, between Cardiff and

¹⁴ Interestingly, when the film was nominated for an Academy Award (Oscar) in 1994, the organizers, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, sought verification that the Welsh language did indeed constitute a bone fide "foreign language." See Martin McLoone, "Challenging Colonial Traditions: British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe," *Cineaste*, xxvi, 4 (2001), 51-4.

¹⁵ McLoone, "Challenging Colonial Traditions: British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe," 54.

the rest of the nation.¹⁶ “If there is one thing to insist on in analyzing Welsh culture,” Raymond Williams said while discussing the history of the nation, “it is the complex of forced and acquired discontinuities: a broken series of radical shifts, within which we have to mark not only certain social and linguistic continuities but many acts of self-definition by negation, by alternation and by contrast.”¹⁷ For Ed Thomas, one of those intrinsic shifts occurred in 1997, when he claimed,

The Old Wales is dead ... The Wales of stereotype, leeks, daffodils, look-you-now-boyo rugby supporters singing Max Boyce songs in three-part harmony while phoning mam to tell her they’ll be home for tea and Welsh cakes has gone.¹⁸

Thomas’ words are especially relevant to the contemporary film world in Wales. A transformation had occurred, since the 1970s, in the portrayal of Wales on the screen; this transformation reached a climax during the final years of the last millennium due to a conscious decision by young Welsh directors to transform the traditional image of the nation. Although these young directors returned to the old traditional Welsh themes and stereotypes of the past, they distorted, satirized and transformed them, and therefore, the influence and significance of Wales’ cinematic past on these films is highly evident.

Scrutinizing the wider political, cultural and social landscape in Wales during the 1990s illuminates Thomas’ mindset at the time. The 1990s saw the Rugby World Cup come to Cardiff, and it was the decade of devolution in Wales, a change which, in the eyes of some, saw the birth of true democracy in Wales with the dawn of the Welsh Assembly Government. The Millennium Stadium was built as visual confirmation of an old successful rugby heritage and as a lasting memory of historical triumphs, and that despite disappointing performances from the national team on the international stage at the turn of the millennium. In addition to this, prominent Welsh personalities such as singer Cerys Matthews and bands such as Manic Street Preachers and the Stereophonics dominated the London media and entertainment scene. Through this exposure on a British and international level, the Welsh received external confirmation of their identity, ensuring for a time that the nation was not invisible any more. It was felt, in

¹⁶ Katie Gramich, “Cymru or Wales?: explorations in a divided sensibility” in *Studying British Cultures*, ed. Susan Bassnett (London: Routledge, 1997), 97–112.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, “Wales and England” in *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture and Identity*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 16–26

¹⁸ Ed Thomas, “The Welsh: A Land Fit For Heroes (Max Boyce excluded),” *The Observer*, 20 July 1997, 7.

the film world and in the wider artistic community, that this was the golden opportunity to bury old stereotypes and prejudices on screen once and for all.

An indication of the superficial confidence was the much heralded arrival of *Cool Cymru*, a label invented by the London media.¹⁹ Although the label was a short-lived, insubstantial gimmick, it caught on, and it can be read as yet another testament to the need in Wales for a seal of approval from the outside. This obsession with the self in relation to others can be attributed to the colonial relationship that has existed historically between Wales and England: as Michael Hechter has called it, “internal colonialism.”²⁰ Many English and American directors who have attempted to depict some aspect of Wales have, in fact, created what Edward Said would call an “Orientalized” view of Wales.²¹ In his famous work, *Orientalism*, Said sought to lay bare the relations of power and project of domination between the colonizer and the colonized which can lead to a distortion of knowledge. Many other films were made in Wales during the same period which created far subtler representations of Wales and Welshness, such as *David* (Paul Dickson, 1951), which sought to embody the true spirit of Welsh society through the small south Wales community of Ammanford. Despite the existence of these fuller representations, it is the Orientalized images, created by large American and English studios during the middle years of the last century, that have taken root permanently in the international imagination. It is a shorthand view of Wales that films such as *The Proud Valley* (Pen Tennyson, 1940), *Valley of Song* (Gilbert Gunn, 1953), *The Corn is Green* (Irving Rapper, 1945) and *Only Two Can Play* (Sidney Gilliat, 1962) offer. Among the cultural features that the films have promoted are the community (focusing on coal mining and working class solidarity) the family, education, religion, music, rugby, anti-English feeling, as well as over-fondness for alcohol.

Stereotypes of Wales and Welshness that are still in circulation today were fuelled by the popular images from these earlier films. Perhaps the most important of these films is John Ford’s *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), the film that spawned a million clichés about terraced streets and black faced miners, singing on their way home from the pit. Ford succeeded in stealing the Best Picture Oscar from under the nose of Orson Welles, who was

¹⁹ *Cool Cymru* was a media-led term coined in the late stages of the 1990s to describe the explosion of Welsh talent making a name for itself internationally. It was initially sparked by the success of Manic Street Preachers, Catatonia, Stereophonics, Super Furry Animals, 60ft Dolls and Big Leaves, but came to represent all things cultural in Wales at the turn of the millennium. It is comparable to *Cool Britannia*, a term coined in the mid-nineties as a response to the success of groups such as Blur, Oasis and Pulp.

²⁰ Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic fringe in British national development 1536–1966* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1999), 27.

²¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

nominated that year for *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), and he did so in part by distilling a view of Wales through the prism of Hollywood. As many film critics have noted, Ford's Welsh valley, created in the San Fernando Valley in Malibu, was sanitized of all traces of dust and dirt, and Hollywoodized beyond all recognition. The film pulled at the heartstrings of the world by depicting a community whose terraced houses had high roofs; whose tables were over laden with food; whose windows were draped in lavish curtains; and, most bizarrely, whose coal mine sat on top of a hill. The film is uncompromisingly anti-socialist, viewing the union as an unnecessary evil while also acknowledging the legacy of the Empire, with the Morgan family's ultimately separating and going to reside in various countries such as Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Nevertheless, the enduring image of *How Green Was My Valley* is the never ending stream of miners, as one body, snaking through the valley on the way home from the pit. Deirdre Beddoe has noted, in a broad discussion of the national image of Wales, that Welsh women, on the other hand, are historically culturally invisible:

Not only is the dominant image of Wales male and mass, it is also macho. Coalminers and rugby players evoke visions of strong male bodies caked with grime and of rippling muscles glistening with sweat: this hard image is brought into somewhat softer focus around the edges by the sweet harmony of tenor, bass and baritone voices ... The picture of Welshness is complete.²²

Although Beddoe doesn't allude to film in her discussion of the lack of portrayal of women, the description is especially relevant to the visual representation of men and women on the silver screen during the 1940s and 1950s. Within the worlds of *How Green is My Valley* and similar films, Wales is an uncompromising nation of men: coal miners, rugby players, male voice choirs and drinkers. Welsh cultural identity in these films is based solely on these groups of people, and the fact that they are depicted in groups is significant. The characters in the films are only representatives of these groups. The films' distortions are multi-faceted, constructing a Welsh cultural identity that therefore has a distorted foundation, with reference to – as Beddoe notes – only one sex, one class and one sector of the economic base, which is the industrial sector. Only one part of Wales is depicted, the south-east, and the portrayal of northern and western communities are scarce. In these films, Wales doesn't exist beyond Merthyr to the north, or to the west of Pontypridd.

²² Deirdre Beddoe, "Images of Welsh women" in ed. Tony Curtis, *Wales: The Imagined Nation* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales, 1986), 227–38.

In *A Run for Your Money*, a film produced by Ealing Studios which, possibly, most orientalizes Wales, Twm and Dai, two miner brothers, win £200 and two tickets to see Wales play England at Twickenham by “filling more coal in a month than any other pair of pit butties in any field anywhere.”²³ The initial voice-over, “This is the story of how Welsh Wales came to town,” betrays the London metropolitan ideology of the film, despite the fact that it is spoken in a thick Welsh accent.²⁴ The brothers are portrayed as two innocents. They are separated from each other after arriving in London, and while Dai is wooed by Jo, a scheming girl from the city, Twm enjoys the city’s taverns in the company of Huw, an exiled harp-playing drunk from their own village. The cold, distant London audience is serenaded in a concert hall by Twm and Huw, and when singing *Ar Hyd y Nos*, the audiences is enchanted to such degree that their hearts melt and they sing along with the Welsh duo. At the close of the film, the brothers, reunited, along with Huw, arrive at the platform of their village, Hafoduwchbenceubwllymarchogoch, and the last line of the film, “Home,” is uttered to the strains of the national anthem. The brothers return to their remote village wiser men after their experience of the metropolitan center.²⁵ The film utilizes the same stereotypes that were common currency by the end of the decade, but in true Ealing fashion, contrasted the innocent, dim miners with the cold, cunning Londoners, and handing victory to warm-hearted integrity, allowing the Welsh to win the day.²⁶

It was stereotypes based on these and other popular images that drove the widespread desire within the arts and media community to transform the national image in the 1990s. In 1996, broadcaster John Humphreys highlighted the frustrations which lead to this aspiration:

We are defined in the English mind by our national caricature. The daftest cliché in the film director’s manual – coal dust covered men singing in perfect harmony as they trudge back to the cottages from the pit – may fade away now the pits have closed. But don’t bank on it ... And why must they all have IQs of 10 but be very very cunning? And why must half the characters sound as though they’re Peter Sellers imitating a doctor from Madras?²⁷

²³ *A Run for Your Money* (Charles Frend, 1949).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ John Humphreys, “Time to blow all the coal-dust clichés away,” *Western Mail*, 20 March 1996, 13.

During the 1990s, despite the advent of devolution, and further cultural developments, a frustration about the depiction of Wales continued to exist, as articulated by Talfan Davies and Humphreys. But the nature of film production had begun to broaden. In 1997, Sgrîn: Media Agency for Wales was established, and there was a rise in the number of English-medium films that were produced, which resulted in Welsh films being exposed to a wider audience. After 1993, S4C, the Welsh language broadcaster responsible for many films, and which had, since its inception in 1982, produced a number of period films, started to look at modern depictions and subject matter.²⁸ Additionally, Dave Berry's archival work provided a significant development in the knowledge and understanding of the Welsh cinematic inheritance.²⁹ In the midst of these cultural transformations, or "cultural shifts," as Raymond Williams might have called them, the concept of one version of Wales disappearing and another version taking its place is highly relevant to the film world in Wales.³⁰ The Welsh landscape was changing, with male voice choirs giving way to *Cool Cymru*; the heavy industries of coal mining and steel works were disappearing; and the new technologies of computers and call centers were dominating. There was a noticeable shift on the screen too, as films such as *How Green Was My Valley* and *Run For Your Money* (1949) gave way to *Twin Town* (1997) and *House of America* (1997).

There is without doubt a stronger and broader representation of Welshness in films produced during the 1990s. New directors had a better understanding of Wales, often because they were themselves Welsh or because they had strong Welsh connections. This close experience of Welsh culture made for more nuanced and complex representations than the distanced fairytale making that Hollywood could provide. The majority of the new films were less stereotypical, thus giving a more valid representation of Wales and its people. Some introduced new themes in extremely effective ways. For instance, *Diwrnod Hollol Mindblowing Heddiw* (Euros Lyn, 2000) borrowed technique and style from the Scandinavian *Dogme* movement, while *Camgymeriad Gwych/Beautiful Mistake* (Marc Evans, 2000) documented John Cale, the musician and former member of the group The Velvet Underground, improvising and working with a number of musicians in Cardiff. It is essential not to oversimplify the changes and overlook films such as *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain* (Chris Monger, 1995), *House!* (Julian Kemp, 2000), and *Very Annie Mary* (Sara Sugarman, 2001), all of which continue a tradition of presenting an

²⁸ Period films produced prior to 1993 include *Madam Wen* (Pennant Roberts, 1982), *Owain Glyndŵr* (James Hill, 1983), *O.M.* (Emlyn Williams, 1990), *Un Nos Ola' Leuad* (Endaf Emlyn, 1991), *Hedd Wyn* (Paul Turner, 1992), *Elenya* (Steve Gough, 1992)

²⁹ David Berry, *Wales and the Cinema* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994).

³⁰ Raymond Williams, "Wales and England," 23.

orientalized version of Wales despite the fact that their directors are Welsh. The positive reviews that *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain* received in the United States,³¹ as well as director Sara Sugarman's resulting three-film contract with Walt Disney Pictures, suggest that an appetite for films in this tradition still exists outside of Wales.³²

There are echoes of *A Run for Your Money* in *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain* and in *Very Annie Mary*, for Wales is treated in both as a geographically exoticized Other. *An Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* follows English cartographers in unspecified and uncharted Welsh territory; the locals are depicted as being total buffoons. Likewise, in *Very Annie Mary* the Welsh are treated as innocent idiots, and the opening sequence, an exceptionally long drive to the village, reiterates the idea presented in *A Run for Your Money*, that Wales is remote and far away from civilization.

In 1997, both *Twin Town* and *House of America* explored the trauma of rapid deindustrialization in south Wales and the search for a modern national and cultural identity, in strikingly different ways. These two films best exemplify the filmic transition apparent in the nineties. Despite the belief at the time they were released that these films reject and cast off Welsh filmic inheritance, in fact they satirize and distort some of the themes that were considered inherently Welsh. *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1997) presents a number of interesting relationships with themes and issues such as rugby, music and community, which have historically been part of Welsh films. In this film, however, the Welsh cultural signifiers are distorted to create a contemptuous and scornful commentary on modern Wales. The trailer for the film sets out its agenda:

Rugby. Tom Jones. Male Voice Choirs. Shirley Bassey.
Llanfairpwllgynyngyllgoger ychwyndrobwlllantisiliogogoch.
Snowdonia. Prince of Wales. Anthony Hopkins. Daffodils. Sheep.
Sheep Lovers. Coal. Slate quarries. The Blaenau Ffestiniog Dinkey-
Doo Miniature Railway. Now if that's your idea of thousands of years

³¹ Peter Stack, "The Englishman vs., Welsh Village," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 December, 1995, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1995/12/15/DD3215.DTL> (accessed: April 2006); Roger Ebert, "An Englishman Who Went up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 May, 1995, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19950512/REVIEWS/505120303/1023> (accessed: April 2006).

³² Rob Driscoll, "From Rhyl to bling in La La Land" in "Box Office" supplement, *Western Mail*, 30 April 2004, 1.

of Welsh culture, you can't blame us for trying to liven the place up a little can you?³³

Twin Town's opening credits demonstrate the drive to break with the past. There is a defiant, rousing but celebratory atmosphere. Following the long pan to establish the importance of the city of Swansea as the heart of the film, the audience is greeted directly by a host of different local people, creating a grotesque and surreal tourist board video. Among the local characters, there are children, with a girl running while wearing rollerblades on her feet, and there is a young boy, running with a rugby ball, but wearing a Welsh football shirt. This carnival atmosphere is sustained as the viewer receives greetings by an old man in a vest, two nurses who provocatively raise their dresses followed by a man carrying a can of lager, and a man fixing his motorbike who swears at the viewer. The sequence emphasizes that its subjects form a close-knit community of individuals, and this is highlighted in the colorfulness of the greetings. An intense individuality is apparent in these images, a direct response to the imposed uniformity of Welsh stereotypes in films of the past.

Old themes are lampooned in this film to create a new version of Wales. There is a memorable scene in which Bryn Cartwright, the medallion-wearing chairman of the local rugby club, describes a magnificent try by Phil Bennett in an infamous rugby match. Cartwright is making reference to a renowned moment which is ingrained in the Welsh psyche. The film's clear subversion of the traditionalist values associated with rugby, masculinity and Welshness occurs when a rugby ball is subsequently used to hide a stash of cocaine. In contrast to the tradition of rugby, considered by most as an integral part of Welsh life, football is the chosen inspiration and delight of Julian and Jeremy, the brothers who are the main characters in the film.³⁴ The brothers own a dog, Cantona, and the only other dog to appear in the film is named Fergie.³⁵ Through such details, the director has directly satirized the rugby theme in *Twin Town*, twisting and deriding its dominance in Welsh sporting life and culture.

Music and singing, which has historically played a part in both Welsh films and Welsh life, has a prominent role in *Twin Town*. In one scene, the brothers urinate on Cartwright's daughter while she sings karaoke in a city centre bar, an act which triggers a spiral of revenge with devastating

³³ <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0120394/> (accessed: October 2005).

³⁴ The twins are played by two real life brothers, Rhys Ifans and Llŷr Evans.

³⁵ Cantona is a tribute to Eric Cantona, a French football player who played for Manchester United football team during the 1990s. Fergie is the nickname of Alex Ferguson, the manager of Manchester United football team.

consequences for the both the Cartwright family and brothers. The traditional male voice choir plays an important role, as it had done in the older films *How Green Was My Valley* and *Proud Valley*, but *Twin Town* satirizes the image by placing it in a surreal location. The choir is seen at the Mumbles pier head at dusk, singing *Myfanwy* while the brothers bury their father at sea in a bittersweet victory over the corrupt local police force.

House of America, (Marc Evans, 1997) Ed Thomas' adaptation of his successful stage play, advanced the evolution of the depiction of Wales, focusing solely on the experiences and tragedy of one family. Gwyn Thomas, in his introduction to his play *The Keep*, writes, "Some families burst apart like bombs and never again achieve unity. Others grow circular, deep like old ponds."³⁶ Thomas' description of two families perfectly illustrates the Morgan family in *How Green Was My Valley* and also the Lewis family in *House of America*. At the heart of *How Green Was My Valley* are the Morgan family whose brothers and father work in the coal mine, while the mother and sister cook and clean. Their lives are dignified, and a strong family knot ties them together. In *House of America*, on the other hand, a dysfunctional family explores suicidal fantasies, creating for themselves, in Gwyn Thomas' words, "a velvet tomb."³⁷ In *How Green Was My Valley*, the mother is the stereotypical matriarch, and as the character Huw says in the film, "while my father was the head of the house, my mother was the heart."³⁸ This mother, played by Sara Allgood, is strong-willed, and her family is her priority. In *House of America*, the mother, played by Siân Phillips, is an extreme and polarized contrast to Mrs. Morgan. She is a fragile and confused figure, utterly alienated from reality. The mad Mam and the three children of the Lewis family are irrevocably bound together in an unyielding knot, and their life in an American style ranch is a self-suffocating existence.

In *How Green Was My Valley*, the U.S. is the land of promise and opportunity; in *House of America's* "bypassed town in a bypassed country," the relationship between the two places is far more problematic.³⁹ Post-industrial Wales and the American Dream are persistently juxtaposed, and the effect is to highlight the twin forces in contemporary Wales, with devolution on the one hand and globalization on the other. America is a threatening symbol, both mentally and physically, with Michigan Mining digging dangerously close to the family's home. Long wide roads, zippos and Marlboros are ubiquitous motifs in the film. The Michigan Mining company sign towers, Hollywood-style, above the valley. The community offers

³⁶ Gwyn Thomas, *The Keep* (London: Elek Books, 1962), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1942).

³⁹ Ed Thomas, "The Welsh: A land fit for heroes (Max Boyce excluded)," 7.

nothing for the young people in the family, Sid, Gwenny and Boyo; all that awaits them is a society empty of spiritual or social empathy, without a strong family unit or a close-knit community. Sid and Gwenny immerse themselves in American fantasies; they create a bastardized hybrid myth that their dead Welsh father is living on a ranch in America, despite the fact that he's dead and buried a stone's throw away from their home. While Gwenny addresses her letters, "Clem Lewis, Dodge City, America," drowning slowly in the dream, Sid resentfully turns his anger on his homeland and refuses to believe that anything of quality has ever come out of Wales:⁴⁰

The point is, it don't matter if [John] Cale came from fucking Banwen, he's living in New York now, and I bet you that's where he'll stay. Huh, can you imagine Lou Reed walking around Banwen? Alright Lou? How's it going wus, like on the wild side? Not cool enough for him, no way, probably never even heard of Wales.⁴¹

In their search to find a way of coping with their situation, Sid and Gwenny flirt with "yankage" and, in their desire to sterilize their present reality, die a seductive cultural death, borrowing second hand myths entwined with crass commercialism from another culture.⁴² In this antithesis of the traditional Welsh community, the futility of Sid and Gwenny's existence and their inability to change their situation result in extreme, dangerous behavior. Between the worlds of *How Green is My Valley* and *House of America*, Wales has been transformed, and the community has been transported from the chapel and its faith to the club, its drugs and its incestuous sexual experimentation. *House of America* has plundered its filmic inheritance for satire, has corrected and modernized, and what it offers is a darker, considerably less romantic picture of Wales. Sid's question and answer, "Where are our heroes, where are our kings? One answer Boyo, we haven't got any," resonates throughout the film.⁴³

The terraced house in the valley, so often portrayed in the past, has evolved into an American ranch, its fragility emphasized by Sid's constant building of a house of cards. The family unit only exists, like Sid's final creation, by being glued together with a thin web of lies. Anna-Marie Taylor has noted the relationship in *House of America* between the dysfunctional family and wider cultural trauma, the cooped up family being a microcosm

⁴⁰ *House of America* (Marc Evans, 1997).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

for Wales.⁴⁴ This is illustrated when the Lewis boys receive a brutal and bloody beating from the workers of Michigan Mining, a physical expression of the psychological attack they suffer as a result of the domination of the locality by the American mining company. While Sid deals with his social impotence by enveloping himself in the mythology of Jack Kerouac, Boyo tries to grasp at an existence within the community. But as a disabled rugby player, the perversion of a traditional male stereotype, he is socially impotent. The future of his decaying community is symbolized by the baby his sister Gwenny carries, the incestuous product of fantasy-filled lovemaking with his brother Sid.

Despite the desire of young directors to put a new Wales on the screen, there was a tendency to use stereotypes and myths that already existed, and an effort to try and explode them from within. *Twin Town* and *House of America*, however, are best understood not as the first of a new generation of films, but as the last of the old. They are engaged in an argument about the past, railing against a Wales that was already, when they were made, beginning to change. Looking back at *House of America's* contribution to the development of Welsh cinema, director Marc Evans has written, "I thought we were making something very modern, if not post-modern, whereas in fact we were having an argument with the past."⁴⁵ His words echo Gwyn Alf Williams' much quoted argument about the inherent remaking which is at the core of the Welsh experience, and this is highlighted in the cultural shift in the portrayal of Wales that exists between *Twin Town*, *House of America* and *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan, 1999).

Though set in the city of Cardiff, *Human Traffic* could, arguably, be set in any city. The only obvious Welshman is the ebullient drug baron Howard Marks, who plays himself. The young people in the film lack an allegiance to anybody or anything; as Jip says, "The weekend has landed; all that exists now is clubs, drugs, pubs and parties."⁴⁶ The young group is fused together by a commitment to drugs and clubbing. There are only a handful of references to the fact that they are in Cardiff, and this inherent placelessness and dislocation is an appropriate backdrop for their existence in a drug fuelled fantasy world. In one scene, Moff, one of the group, tries to convince a Welsh taxi driver that he could be "the Travis Bickle of Cardiff," and his words encapsulate the film; it is a film that looks more like an American

⁴⁴ Anna-Marie Taylor, "Welsh Theatre and the World," in ed. Anna-Marie Taylor, *Staging Wales: Welsh Theatre, 1979-1997* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 111-119.

⁴⁵ Marc Evans, "Looking Forward, Looking Back" in Ed Thomas, *Selected Work, '95 - '98* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2002), 259-293.

⁴⁶ *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan, 1999).

picture than a British one, with Tarantino and Scorsese noticeable influences.⁴⁷

At the turn of the millennium, Kerrigan's work sets up an interesting discourse. With the lack of anything notably Welsh in his film, what does the future hold for films from Wales? *Human Traffic* shows that the cinematic shackles of the past have been broken. Despite Martin McLoone's argument that this film suggests that the concept of national cinema "has been replaced by a cinema of fissiparous irreverence and unstable identity," film production in the two languages of Wales since *Human Traffic* suggests a contradictory response.⁴⁸ Although *Solomon and Gaenor* (Paul Morrison, 1999) appears to be a romantic period film, the narrative reveals a forgotten anti-Semitic and racist past in the south Wales valleys at the turn of the twentieth century. Although Amma Asante's *A Way of Life* (Amma Asante, 2004) is set nearly a century later, it also acknowledges present day racism, but also, just as importantly, reveals feelings of disillusionment, loneliness and lack of control suffered by the young people at the heart of the narrative. Poverty is central to this film, and the relationship between hardship and violence is examined thoroughly. *A Way of Life* resembles *Human Traffic* in the sense that there are no family ties supporting the young individuals; their deprivation and powerlessness bind the group together. Both films suggest a broad, multi-faceted, multicultural dimension for future films, for they succeed, finally, in shedding the weight of the past and creating a truly exciting national cinema. These two films destabilize dominant notions of British Cinema, but they are able to offer a comprehensive and inclusive notion of Welsh identity in entirely opposing ways.

The dearth of Welsh films released post-Devolution may make the transition to a new kind of filmmaking difficult. If film in Wales was, as Wil Aaron has noted, a "two or three year old infant" in 1904-5, then the nineties can certainly be looked upon as the teenage years of Welsh film, where directors battled awkwardly against their sometimes displaced heritage and struggled to find their own voice. This raw but necessary transitional period has freed directors to create and to respond to the process of nation building in artistic ways. But with S4C shying away from feature films and the Film Agency for Wales taking over only part of Sgrîn Cymru Wales'

⁴⁷ The biggest handicap to Welsh films during the nineties (especially *Twin Town*) stemmed from unfavorable comparisons with "British" successes such as *Trainspotting*, and even condemnation from *Sight and Sound* reviewer B. Thompson, who swiped at the picture's "eagerness to be to South Wales what *Trainspotting* was to urban Scotland" cited in Steve Blandford (ed.), "Introduction," *Wales on Screen* (Bridgend: Seren, 2000), 17.

⁴⁸ Martin McLoone, "Internal Decolonisation? British Cinema in the Celtic Fringe" in ed. Robert Murphy, *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 2001), 184-90.

responsibilities, it is yet to be seen whether contemporary Welsh directors will have an opportunity to guide Welsh film culture on the path to greater maturity.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Despite success in a number of European film festivals in the last three years, S4C has only produced one film which was cinematically ambitious, concentrating on feature length television dramas based on established drama series, such as *C'mon Midffild a Rasbri Jam* (2004).