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## **Death-Defying Acts**

**Maeve Connolly**

Many of Gary Coyle's stories unfold in or around the Dublin suburb of Dún Laoghaire, the place that he calls home. But this is a home viewed from the perspective of someone who has travelled, most often between Dublin, London and New York, echoing the routes followed by Irish emigrants, seasonal labourers and, more recently, peripatetic artists. There is a long history of reflection upon experiences of movement and migration in Irish culture, whether through letters and everyday conversation or more ritualised and performative processes of narrativisation such as storytelling, song, literature or even film-making. Stories occupy a particularly important place within rituals of consolation and in earlier era it was typical for families and friends to 'wake' not only the deceased, but also the departing migrant through song and narrative. Storytelling and performance are central to the mediation of migrant experience in Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted* (1978), one of the most formally complex films to emerge as part of the 'new wave' of Irish cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Funded by the Production Board of the British Film Institute, this 16mm feature appropriates many of the conventions of documentary filmmaking but was largely improvised by a predominantly male cast, which includes Stephen Rea, Derrick O'Connor, Mannix Flynn and Gabriel Byrne. Much of the action is set within London pubs, parks and apartment buildings, taking the form of loose exchanges between Irish and English characters on the nature of identity and culture. But the film also features several dreamlike sequences shot at the seafront, amongst pilgrims climbing Croagh Patrick or revellers at the anointing of 'King Puck' in Kilorglin.

*On a Paving Stone Mounted* also incorporates performances by professional musicians, storytellers and other entertainers. These include a sequence filmed at a Christy Moore gig, shots of a female stripper in a London pub, and sections from 'In My Father's Time', a stage show in which Frank Kelly performs the role of a traditional storyteller. O'Sullivan's film actually opens on Kelly's set, which suggests a rural pub or a farmhouse kitchen (a distinction often deliberately blurred in the interior design of the contemporary 'Irish pub').

When Kelly finally appears towards the close of the film, it is in the guise of the village storyteller recounting a yarn based upon events that he supposedly witnessed. He describes a scenario in which a returned migrant attempts to explain the geography of New York to friends and family by drawing maps of Manhattan on a kitchen floor with ashes from the fireplace. The map expands so that the floor is covered by a grid of miniature avenues and streets and the narrative climax is reached when a dog curled up in front of the fire wakes up and begins to wag his tail, thereby destroying Central Park. Rather than simply recording Kelly's performance, however, O'Sullivan adds his own commentary by editing the sequence so that a section of the story is repeated, underscoring the fact that 'In My Father's Time' was scripted, rehearsed and routinely staged for paying audiences.

Coyle's performance *Death in Dún Laoghaire* is also scripted and it is largely autobiographical in content, taking the form of a chronological procession from childhood, through adolescence and adulthood, projecting forward into a doomed future. But unlike Frank Kelly, Coyle does not assert any claims to 'authenticity' associated with a rural heritage; the props for his performance consist simply of a lectern and a sequence of projected images. Even more significantly, Coyle largely ignores rural experience and focuses instead on the differences between urban and suburban identity, directing attention away from holy mountains and wild creatures (such as Croagh Patrick or King Puck) and towards the uncanny<sup>1</sup> qualities of suburban parks and playgrounds. Staged six times in the darkened auditorium of the Project Cube in July 2006, his performance occupies a position somewhere between theatre, contemporary art and a stand-up comedy routine in which the fear of 'corpsing' is especially vivid. Coyle's photographs are at the core of the work but they also function, to use the language of stage magic, as tools of 'misdirection'; he only rarely glances at the projected images during his fifty minute monologue, more often looking outwards into the darkness.

Although most of the projections are static, certain aspects of the performance seem indebted to the conventions of early cinema exhibition. This connection is most apparent at the mid-way point where the progression of images slows and eventually halts, so that a night time shot of Sandycove DART station becomes the setting for a succession of interwoven narratives concerning heroin. Here, the train tracks that disappear off into the darkness might

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<sup>1</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' [1919] and various other texts in *The Gothic: Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by Gilda Williams, MIT Press/Whitechapel, 2007.

be read as a literal reference to the descent into addiction but also evoke historical associations between cinema, narrative form and the railroad.<sup>2</sup> The performance even features a kind of ‘trick’ effect that would not be out of place in the work of the early film magician George Méliès<sup>3</sup>; a static shot of the dual carriageway (linking Dún Laoghaire with both University College Dublin and the city centre) that suddenly jolts into life. This jump from stasis to motion is deliberately jarring, accentuated by a burst of loud instrumental music, providing an ironic punctuation to a sequence in which the dual carriageway is figured both as a signifier of the desire for modernity and as the scene of a senseless death - that of a university ‘Fresher’ who once attempted to run across four lanes of traffic. Extending these associations with the scene of film exhibition, Coyle’s role as mediator of the image might perhaps be compared to that of the early cinema ‘lecturer’, whose commentaries supplemented the information supplied via intertitles and musical accompaniment. Clearly, however, Coyle is the star attraction rather than some anonymous mediator employed to explain the images. His audience also differs both from the raucous and diverse crowds that populated the Nickelodeon or the later, more obedient, mass of isolated spectators associated with classical Hollywood cinema. The audience in the Project Arts Centre could instead be described as an assortment of strangers, friends and acquaintances, some of whom are all too recognisable, seated in the front row just at the edge of Coyle’s spotlight.

*Death in Dún Laoghaire* begins with a skewed photograph of a sunlit park with a church steeple in the background, identified in the book as *Duck Pond, Moran Park* (2004). This opening image is a reference to a traumatic ending – the accidental death of two young children, found drowned in the pond when Coyle was a child. The photograph of the pond gives way to more mundane shot of the new building on the site where ‘Jonniers’ playground once stood. The playground was a place in which the boundaries between actual and imagined deaths became blurred, where macabre children’s rhymes overlapped with rumours surrounding the discovery of a murdered baby in a nearby lane. Describing the endless Saturdays spent (or served) in Jonniers, Coyle recalls the chants that had to be performed under the supervision of authoritarian nuns while queuing for a ‘go’ on the swings or roundabouts, heightening the already interminable passage of time in childhood. A

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<sup>2</sup> See Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, Duke University/University of Exeter Press, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde’, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker, London: BFI Publishing, 1990: 56-62.

deliberately monotonous reenactment ('5...10...15...20...25...30') slows the pace of his own delivery and he begins to adopt a more relaxed manner, gradually eliciting laughter from certain members of the audience as they enter into a process of nostalgic self-mockery, recognising their own experience in a local history featuring characters such as the 'Dalkey Punks' and the 'magic postman'.

Towards the end of the performance, however, Coyle begins to lead his audience into darker territory as he proceeds to unfold multiple fantasies of his own death, imagined in the immediate future or encountered following his descent into the 'world of the sick'. Instead of merely fearing death, he is drawn towards it, continually placing himself slightly (or seriously) in harm's way. The proximity of death is perhaps most apparent in works such as the 'Lovely Water' photographs, which hint at the seductive qualities of the ocean depths.<sup>4</sup> Although Coyle is undoubtedly at the centre of *Death in Dún Laoghaire*, his narrative also dwells repeatedly on the adolescent frustration of being in the *wrong* place - at a slight suburban remove from the centre of the action. Frequently arriving on the 'scene' just after the real excitement had taken place, he rarely lays claim to the authenticity of the witness account, instead situating his own storytelling in relation to everyday processes of mythmaking.

The figure of the suburban 'punk' emerges as central to this intersection between personal memory, local history and social geography. Punks also feature prominently in one of the most compelling explorations of suburban identity and frustrated teenage desire found in graphic fiction; the 'Locas' stories by Jaime Hernandez. First published during the 1980s, these stories focus primarily on a group of Chicano teenagers in the fictional city of 'Hoppers' or Huerta, California, forming one half of the comic *Love and Rockets*. The other half consists of the 'Palomar' stories by Jaime's brother Gilbert, which are set in a fictional Latin American village. The brothers appear to draw upon distinct generic traditions; Gilbert favours magic realism while Jaime is more obviously influenced by science fiction. His heroine, Maggie the rocket ship mechanic, lives in a world populated by superheroes and dinosaurs as well as wrestlers and teenage punk rockers. Yet despite these differences, a powerful melodramatic current runs through both halves of *Love and Rockets*, as many of the

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<sup>4</sup> But swimming can also, clearly, be read as an act of resistance against death or other forces and there is an obvious connection here with *The Swimmer* (1968), which features a former circus performer (Burt Lancaster) in the leading role.

characters struggle to reconcile their desires and fantasies with the bonds that connect them to home.<sup>5</sup>

This mix of the ordinary and fantastical can also be found in *Death in Dún Laoghaire*, particularly when Coyle's words evoke memories of horror cinema. At one point, Dún Laoghaire Shopping Centre is described not only as a popular destination for suburban families in the 1980s but also as a place in which heroin addicts could often be found wandering aimlessly. This notion of a distracted junkie calls to mind scenes from George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which zombies are mysteriously drawn towards a suburban shopping mall, repeatedly and instinctively acting out the rituals of consumer culture. A more overt reference to the iconography of popular horror cinema can be found in the images of fog on the seafront and along Vico Road, in a section of the book entitled 'MY DEATH'. Given the fact that this area is the home to many of Dublin's richest residents, it is tempting to read these images through reference to John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980), in which the decaying bodies of those lured to their deaths by corrupt city founders are re-animated and rise from the sea to seek revenge.

While *The Fog* is concerned with the dramatic return of memories and bodies repressed in official histories, *Death in Dún Laoghaire* investigates forms of repression and disclosure that are perhaps more personal. This is particularly apparent in a sequence set in a location that is very close to home; Coyle's studio. Here, I am referring to a story in the publication, which centres upon the morbid obesity of Coyle's one-time neighbour and occasional smoking partner, who descends into ill health after a bout of flu. When this unfortunate man dies, Coyle's sense of guilt as a survivor is intensified by the realisation that he once overheard his neighbour having sex. The only visual representation offered is an image of the studio wall itself, heavily marked with tape and other traces of artistic production. This photograph functions very differently from the shots of Moran Park, where children once drowned, or the anonymous lane near Jonniers, where a murdered baby was abandoned. It provides another type of evidence – of the time spent in an ongoing and everyday engagement with a practice where 'death-defying' acts can take many different forms. In this

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<sup>5</sup> This play of forces is most apparent in the stories that fuse elements of soap-opera with the epic form, such as Jaime's account of 'The Death of Speedy', which meticulously charts the role of rumour, sexual jealousy and local rivalry in the shooting of Speedy Ortiz, the self-destructive object of Maggie's desire.

context, the everyday rituals of swimming and storytelling provide ways to continually confront, if not actually defy, the inevitability of death.

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