

Published in *Between Truth and Fiction: The Films of Vivienne Dick*, ed. Treasa O'Brien, London: LUX and The Crawford Art Gallery, 2009: 70-77.

An Alternative Archive: Vivienne Dick, Artists' Film and Irish Cinema

Maeve Connolly

A retrospective exhibition is a significant moment in the career of any artist or filmmaker, and this is particularly true when it brings together works that have evolved and circulated within many different contexts. Although retrospectives are ostensibly concerned with the past, offering the possibility to look backwards, they also have the potential to generate new perspectives, for their subjects and for others. The experience of looking back at Vivienne's work has already been highly productive for me. I first became aware of her early Super 8 work in 1997, when it was announced that, with support from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, her films were to be preserved in the Irish Film Archive. I attended a screening organised by the Archive at the Irish Film Institute to mark the occasion and this experience radically and irrevocably altered my perception of Irish cinema.

Even though most of Vivienne's early films were set and shot in New York or London in the 1970s and 80s – and wholly responsive to these cities - they still touched upon many of the issues explored by filmmakers who had remained in Ireland during that time. Vivienne's work seemed remarkable precisely because it articulated the experience of being in, but also *between*, several places. Not long after the IFI screening, I began to research Vivienne's practice in earnest, with the aim of situating it in relation to the wider context of feminist, migrant and oppositional film cultures and I became aware of her emerging interest in multi-screen installation. Her practice offered an alternative, and distinct, perspective on the relationship between 'national cinema', experimental film and artists' cinema, both in Ireland and elsewhere.

In 2002, I visited Vivienne's three-screen installation *Excluded by the Nature of Things* at Limerick City Gallery and was struck by ways in which it both echoed and refracted aspects of Irish cinema. Writing about these issues in an article for *CIRCA* magazine, I noted the differences between Vivienne's trajectory and the route followed by her most interesting contemporaries in Irish cinema. During the 1990s, while a new generation of visual artists

began working with film and video installation, filmmakers such as Cathal Black, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Pat Murphy all directed feature length period dramas. I suggested, however, that Vivienne's multi-screen work - featuring a Gothic female presence in 19th century dress - might offer a possible link between these otherwise distinct currents ...

[Excerpt from 'Excluded by the Nature of Things? Irish Cinema and Artists' Film', 2003; Revised 2009¹.] Although she has received relatively little critical attention within the context of Irish cinema studies, Vivienne Dick has explored many of the same issues as Joe Comerford, Thaddeus O'Sullivan and Pat Murphy, through Super 8, 16mm film and video (for festivals, film clubs and broadcast contexts) and more recently, multi-screen gallery installation. Born in Donegal, Vivienne Dick moved to New York in 1975. There she became active in No Wave film culture and produced a series of Super 8 works that include *She Had Her Gun All Ready* (1978), *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979), *Liberty's Booty* (1980) and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film* (1981). Together with contemporaries such as Beth and Scott B, James Nares and Eric Mitchell, Dick celebrated the seedier side of New York City life. Many of Dick's early films are melodramas staged around landmark New York sites such as the Twin Towers, Coney Island and the Statue of Liberty, featuring punk performers such as Lydia Lunch and Pat Place. Her work is characterised by a retro aesthetic, in terms of costuming, design and music, and it articulates a fascination with all forms of Americana, a quality that led J. Hoberman to define Dick as the 'quintessential No Wave filmmaker.'

But despite her fondness for overtly American settings and themes, Dick's work can actually be seen to explore some of the same issues as her Irish contemporaries. Most notably, she explores incest, abuse and familial violence in *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, in parallel with Irish works such as *Our Boys* (Cathal Black, 1981) and *Traveller* (Joe Comerford, 1981). Dick also began to represent Irish experience directly, through images of Catholicism and the Irish landscape in *Liberty's Booty* and *Visibility Moderate: A Tourist Film*. The latter film, in particular, features scenes of the Ring of Kerry that recall both Hollywood fantasy and aspects of Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *On A Paving Stone Mounted* (1978), an atmospheric exploration of memory and place, loosely structured around the experiences and recollections of a group of young Irish men living in London.

¹ For the full article with references, see Maeve Connolly, 'Excluded by the Nature of Things? Irish Cinema and Artists' Film'. *CIRCA* 106, Winter 2003, pp. 33-39, or www.maeveconnolly.net

Vivienne Dick left New York for Ireland in the early 1980s, in order to continue her film practice. But, although she was actively involved in the establishment of a film production course at Rathmines College, and showed her films in contexts such as the Ha'penny Film Club in Dublin, she was unable to secure funding for her work. She points out that, during this period, the newly established Irish Film Board simply did not recognise Super 8 as a medium for film production. She soon relocated to London, where she became a member of the London Film-Maker's Co-op. There she continued to explore explicitly Irish themes, often with the support of British funding agencies, most notably in *Rothach* (1985), *Trailer* (1986) and *Images/Ireland* (1988) and gradually achieved recognition as an Irish practitioner. She has now moved into gallery installation and *Excluded by the Nature of Things* was funded by Bord Scannán na hÉireann and the Arts Council.

In terms of its imagery, *Excluded* seems to reference an expanded history of film and art practices. It features images of pilgrims on Croagh Patrick and at holy wells, fragments of animation (like Joe Comerford's *Traveller*) and fleeting close-ups of Sheela-Na-Gigs and pre-modern sculpture. It could be read as a feminist corrective to O'Sullivan's *On a Paving Stone Mounted*, as Dick shifts attention away from vision and towards *other* senses (smell, touch, hearing) through close-up images of gorse, bracken and cattle, and sounds of driving rain on the lens and the windowpanes. She also disrupts the pictorial quality of the cinematography through animated sequences and a series of rapid camera movements, suggesting both motion and broadcast 'static'. The soundtrack is presented on six speakers and suggests a complex layering of predominantly natural sound, with fragments of conversation overheard at sites of pilgrimage.

The feminist critique that runs through much of Dick's work finds expression in the interplay between the three screens. In addition to a Gothic female presence, *Excluded* incorporates two contemporary figures: a man and a woman. In the course of the narrative, they appear on the left and right screens, each approaches the camera and retreats, approaches again and then jumps off to the side. The central screen remains empty throughout and these gestures seem to articulate a desire for a space *between* genders, emphasising the importance of multi-screen projection as a setting for this inquiry into space. Multiple screen installations, often diptychs, have been relatively commonplace within the gallery since the mid 1990s and the staging of an explicitly cinematic narrative

across several screens is often presented as a means of interrogating conventions of cinema spectatorship. The double screen works of Stan Douglas and Willie Doherty, for example, borrow and sometimes exaggerate aspects of film and television language – such as the shot/reverse shot structure used to generate narrative tension or to situate a character within time and space. Significantly, Dick's exploration of spatial dynamics in *Excluded By the Nature of Things* also recalls aspects of feminist filmmaking, post-colonial critique and Third Cinema, linking the gallery with broader traditions of film practice [...]

Returning to 2009, the current retrospective takes place at an interesting moment in the relationship between cinema and artists' film and video. The past decade has witnessed a renewed interest on the part of artists in the modes of production and exhibition once traditionally associated with cinema. This gravitation towards cinema takes many different forms² and might include Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), an artist-directed feature made for a theatrical context, or the various moving image installations by Willie Doherty (including *Ghost Story*, 2007 and *Buried*, 2009) that have been shot by Seamus McGarvey, a prominent and acclaimed cinematographer. Just as her use of Super 8 once differentiated her from contemporaries in the emerging Irish film industry, Vivienne's exploration of the moving image cannot be easily subsumed within this recent 'cinematic turn' in art practice. Instead, she continues to chart her own route as always, and in the process continues to raise questions about the limits, and the possibilities, of artists' film and Irish cinema.

² Many different examples are discussed in Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect and Chicago University Press, 2009.