

Deirdre O'Mahony *Aughty In Transit(ion): Are We There Yet?* essay commissioned for *Aughty* film and book publication by Tom Flanagan and Megs Morley.

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Aughty In Transit(ion): Are We There Yet?

Aughty is one of a series of temporary public art projects commissioned by artist and curator Áine Phillips in 2008 in order that artists might creatively engage with the Sliabh Aughty region, which straddles both the South Galway and East Clare counties. Phillips invited artists Tom Flanagan and Megs Morley to respond to the area through their collaborative film practice and the result is *Aughty*, a feature-length film that uses the language of experimental cinema to reflect and re-present aspects of rural life, culture and the landscape of the region. The film was received with enthusiasm by audiences in South Galway and Clare and has been also screened as part of *Tulca* Visual Art festival in Galway in 2012, at Guth Gafa Film Festival in Ireland and other international documentary film festivals. The success of the critical reaction to the film attests to *Aughty's* ability to communicate the particular character and complexity of the place to very different audiences.

Flanagan and Morley use a 'slow', poetic, documentary approach to their filmmaking, eschewing linear narratives and fast editing in favour of an arrhythmic, prismatic, subjective treatment of the region and its publics.ⁱ Although the film shares some of the conceptual concerns of recent public art commissions dealing with contemporary rural life,ⁱⁱ their work falls within the ambit of international artist cinema and parallels that of other artist documentary filmmakers like Sharon Lockhart, whose film, *Pine Flat* (2005) was shot in rural California over a four-year period, and Bela Tarr whose film *Satantango* (1994) on rural life in an unknown eastern European country was an important influence. Tarr's use of multiple points of view and prolonged shots is echoed in *Aughty* and no single perspective dominates. The camera traverses space and time moving across borders and boundaries, presenting and re-presenting multiple perspectives on the environment, human agency and social composition in the region. This resonates with philosopher

Félix Guattari's idea of an 'Ecosophy', the three ecological registers – environment, social relations and human subjectivity that he sees as disparate lenses through which to view global ecological disequilibrium.

Rather than remaining subject, in perpetuity, to the seductive efficiency of economic competition, we must reappropriate universes of value, so that processes of singularization can rediscover their consistency. We need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange – a whole programme that seems far removed from current concerns. And yet, ultimately, we will only escape from the major crises of our era through the articulation of a nascent subjectivity; a constantly mutating socius; and an environment in the process of being reinvented.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nicolas Bourriaud argues that for Guattari, artists have a special position, in that art can make visible the interconnected relations between and across different domains, between society, the individual and the environment.^{iv} The emphasis on subjectivity in Guattari's writing is what makes him so relevant to the often polarised dynamics at play in rural Ireland indicated in the film. Whether nature/culture; local/global; insider/outsider, these binary oppositions are often at the core of conflicts around landscapes and land use.

Flanagan and Morley reflexively use the tools of cinematic representation to point to the ecological implications of being part of what is now, a post-natural landscape. Through their focused observation of one particular place, they have highlighted certain refrains throughout the film; the role of culture in creating and sustaining communities, the value of tacit, place-based knowledge and culture, changes in the economic activities and agricultural practices, the regulation of landscape and the interaction between nature and technology. The introduction to the film serves as an indicator of the artists approach: a solitary cow stands immobile in the misty landscape, the only sound, birdsong: she wades towards us, the sucking sounds of her hooves pulled from the viscous ground a marker of the sodden land: the screen fades to the opening credits.

A crucial component of the film is the music. Different temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions are underscored by the editing and the soundtrack, highlighting shifts from the quotidian details of farm life to the exposition of place based-knowledge, heritage, history and politics within the region. An original score

from young pianist Caoimhe Morley, ambient psychedelic folk music from *Phantom Dog Beneath the Moon*, 'lower case' found sounds, everyday background media and the traditional music of the region add to the aural spatial experience.^v The piano introduces us to a series of panoramic images of hills, lakes, islands, bogs, isolated farmhouses, conifer plantations and wind-turbines crowning the distant hills. The camera shifts to focus on a hunter stalking deer in the woodlands, patches of cleared forestry visible in the distance. We enter a farm, a farm dog reluctantly leaves his food to go to work, and the relationship between farmer, dog and cattle is established as they go about the mundane tasks of feeding and cleaning. We get a glimpse of the reality of rural life - farming, schooling, recreation, industry - the signifiers and emotional refrains at the core of *Aughty*. The film moves in and out of life of a rural community, following events, looking at nature and pointing to the rich cultural life of the area. It resists privileging any single story, giving equal value to the human, natural and social worlds. It is not an 'objective' documentary nor is it a poetic response to the landscape, although it contains elements of both.

The region straddles two counties and very different kinds of landscape between Clare and South Galway – a 'soft' border of mutual alliances and a shared culture and from the picturesque hills to zones designated for industrial development, the film signals the complexity of ways it can be experienced: as an aesthetic, contemplative space and a 'practiced', farmed place. It reflects upon a human desire to experience a kind of utopia in the rural landscape and different ways that this is manifested in two, very different experiences of life on the land.

Phil Mitchell's farm is typical of many in the west of Ireland. The options for full-time farming are now limited given changes in Common Agricultural Policies and both government and EU policies recommend diversification. Landholders are increasingly pursuing alternative land-use options such as wind-farming and forestry. For incomers like Eileen Thomas, the beauty of the place gave an opportunity to experiment with ideas of self-sufficiency and alternative ways of living. She engages help from Woofers, a global voluntary labour system, although one that is not, as we learn, without its problems. *Aughty* resists any sentimentality, what we see with both farms is a working relationship with the land; an idea of nature integrated into

everyday life, that is particularly evident in the relationship between both farmers and their animals. While at first the two modes of farming appear at first sight to be polarised both face the uncertainty of living with and adapting to a changing world today.

The provision of services - public transport, post-offices, libraries, shops has been affected by recession and this is alluded to in different ways in the film. The car, a necessity in rural Ireland, speeds us quickly through rural towns and ghost estates. Keeping people in their place - in the best sense of the word, is vitally important if regions like Sliabh Aughty are to survive. The film points to the future as we see children at school, learning, playing, being given skills in how to get on with one another. The hope represented by those scenes is later tempered as *Aughty* cuts away to other, earlier times when emigration and depopulation closed many schools with long shots of abandoned schoolhouses. Rural single and two-teacher schools are increasingly under threat as the primary and secondary education system is rationalised. For children who must travel beyond their locality to primary and secondary school, the daily journey marks the beginning of a migratory pattern, initially for education, later for employment. Whether this will bring with it a gradual distancing from the cultural knowledge specific to the area remains to be seen.

Traditional music has a long and rich history in the Sliabh Aughty area, a vitally important part of social and cultural life. The Tulla Ceili Band is known throughout the world and has been an influence on generations of musicians. Of importance here is that that heritage is not based on a fixed idea of 'tradition' - some of the music is inflected with jazz, the saxophones and skipping rhythm a reminder of the American influence that came back to Ireland on recordings made in the USA in the early 20th Century. For many, learning an instrument is a part of everyday life and the film brings home the inter-generational sharing of music and the integration of the musical tradition into everyday life. Peter Woods has written on spatialising the experience of place as a way of remembering tunes:

I might ... go over the twists and turns of the tune in my head as I walked, attaching notes to ditches and trees and to the twists in the road, hanging notes on bushes, gaps and gates. Wherever I went in the years after I could never think of the roads

around home without a part of a tune coming to me, or start to play any tune without thinking of those roads and ditches.^{vi}

Woods is writing about the diasporic experience of many Irish people and importance of music to retaining an embodied connection to place. This is evident in the observation of teaching music - both formal and informal, that is threaded through the film, from the session in the pub to the front room. This is not simply a social experience, it is a way of passing on the music. Globalisation has brought this music to a wider public and as local musicians like Martin Hayes have achieved international recognition for their cultural achievements the knock-on effect is felt as it validates a rich cultural tradition that is still active and authentic.

The signs of the economic collapse and political unrest are signalled by protests during the last general election around the implementation of new environmental regulations on landscape, land use and habitats. Natura 2000 legislation became law in 2012 and was designed to protect the landscape and natural environment and the designation of habitats [Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs)] has activated grassroot protests particularly in the west of Ireland. The recurring presence of the conifer, the wind-turbine and the bog, are indicators of the polarised perspectives around nature conservation that have dominated the political landscape in the area. The preservation of the Hen Harrier - not the most popular of raptors in rural Ireland – is a key priority under EU environmental law. The habitat that suits the Hen Harrier is a mix of cleared and planted forestry lands that also suits wind-farming. However the Hen Harrier is considered to be under threat from turbine blades. The paradox of one arm of the state advocating diversification into sustainable energy and another refusing planning in order to protect ‘wild’ nature is evident. Sharon Bryan notes that ‘while powerful lobby groups (both pro and anti designation) have enjoyed some input into line-drawing at national and EU levels, people on-the-ground played little or no part in these processes.’^{vii} The state has persistently failed to meaningfully consult and listen to local landowners when designating SACs, following a long established pattern of top-down decision making through first the Office of Public works and now the NPWS.^{viii}

The passions evoked by the regulation of Turf cutting evident in the film remind us of its symbolic power and importance in relation to Irish identity and this is reinforced by the recurring presence of the bog in the film. The subjectivities that surface when people are not heard and the ongoing, very real effects of rural poverty, are re-framed and made visible in scenes of encounters with politicians in the run up to the elections. The only staged moment in the film is when local historian and turf cutter Dermot Moran reads his poem, *Sarsfield's Way*. He appears several times in the film, showing a ramblers group Sarsfield's Way and speaking to RTE at protests, questioning politicians on policies. As a turf cutter, his knowledge of place and the politics of landscape is tacit, practiced and embodied. He connects the experience of trauma and displacement symbolised by Sarsfield's Way to the contemporary reality of rural life as once more, a generation is forced by necessity to leave Ireland.

J.B. Jackson reminds us of the paradox that although we enjoy the solitary experience of nature we all still crave the social contact of community. Therefore he argues that 'no landscape can be exclusively devoted to fostering one identity.'^{ix} This truism is mirrored in *Aughty*, as we move between very different perspectives on place. The film complicates narratives - utopian aspirations are difficult and the rural retreat requires the same social interactions as everyday life. From the solitary farmer, to the evening music seisiún. From the hunt and all its rituals and attendant social business to the solitary hunter stalking the land, aware of the invisible movements of animals around the land. The turbine and the conifer haunt the film, and threaded through the unfolding narrative is the idea of the sublime. All the tropes are there; the sense of awe induced by the experience of nature, the mist shrouded bogs, the solitary figure, the moonlit paths, the looming windmills and the menacing forest. The cinematic space moves between an idea of the sublime made complicated by historical memory which returns us to the idea of place and place-based knowledge.^x This serves as a reminder of the way that humankind has looked to the wonders of nature *outside* ourselves to induce a sense of our mortality; its grandeur heightening our insignificance. The paradigm has now shifted and it is generally agreed that human activity, rather than nature is the most powerful agent

affecting change on the planet. It is no longer nature's grandeur that we fear but rather, that we humans are having more of an effect on the earth than was previously ever thought possible, as Bruno Latour has noted 'cultures used to "shape the Earth" symbolically; now they do it for good.'^{xi}

Guattari's aspiration for an 'Ecosophical' approach is reflected in *Aughty*, pointing to a politics of aesthetics that can acknowledge the complexity of agencies affecting this new, post-natural situation in which we find ourselves. By making visible the emotional, embodied connections between people and place Flanagan and Morley point to questions about the survival of communities, sustaining a rapidly shrinking natural landscape, the economic survival of rural places and the ever-growing need for energy and natural resources. However *Aughty* does not preach or moralise, it simply points to the complexity of the question. Perhaps one answer lies in Kate Soper's idea that we need to extend to 'nature' some of the empathy and concern we reserve for ourselves instead of worshipping it as 'other' or instrumentalising it as 'means'. In its own way *Aughty* contains Soper's sense of the need for us to feel towards nature, 'something of the anxiety and pain we experience in our relations with other human beings'.^{xii} This is Guattari's three ecologies in action, a continuum of material encompassing the 'fabric of everyday life, large-scale crises, and habits of thought.'^{xiii}

i Sukhdev Sandhu "'Slow cinema' fights back against Bourne's supremacy" *The Guardian* Friday 9 March 2012.

ii Examples include the *Ground Up* programme of public art in Clare 2003 – 2007 and place-based and community specific artist-led initiatives like *Aughty* and *X-PO* See <<http://guac.ie/>> and <<http://x-po.ie/>>

iii Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Parker and Paul Sutton. English Edition. (UK: The Athlone Press 2000)

iv Arguing that Guattari's writing has been significantly under-estimated, Nicolas Bourriaud places particular importance on his writing on subjectivity, arguing that 'subjectivity as *production* plays the role of a fulcrum around which forms of knowledge can freely pitch in and soar off in pursuit of the *socius*.'

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mattieu Copeland. (Les Press du Réel, 2002) 88.

v Phantom Dog Beneath the Moon are musicians Aaron Hurley and Scott McLaughlin.

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- vi Christy McNamara and Peter Woods, *The Living Note: Heartbeat of Irish Music*. (Dublin: O'Brien Press) 1996.
- vii Sharon Bryan, "Contested boundaries, contested places: The Natura 2000 network in Ireland". *Journal of Rural Studies* xxx (2011) 1e15. 3
- viii 'DAD' (Decide – Announce – Defend) was a term coined for the behaviour of the OPW during previous conflicts.
- Eileen O'Rourke, "Landscape Planning and Community Participation: Local Lessons from Mullaghmore, the Burren National Park, Ireland," *Landscape Research* 30. 4 (2005) 488.
- ix John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984) 12.
- x W.J.T. Mitchell, "Introduction" *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, second edition, 2002) 2.
- xi Bruno Latour, *Waiting for Gaia. Composing the common world through arts and politics*. A lecture at the French Institute, London, November 2011. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/lectures>
- xii Kate Soper, "Nature/'nurture.'" *Future Natural*. Ed. Robertson, Mash, Tickner, Bird, et al. (London: Routledge, 1996) 22-34. Rpt. in *Land and Environmental Art*. Ed. Jeffery Kastner, and Brian Wallis. 1998. (London: Phaidon Press, 2005) 287.
- xiii Gary Genesko, "Prospects for a transdisciplinary Ecology" 5., quoting Guattari, "La, grand-peur écologique", handwritten mss. Fonds Félix Guattari (IMEC) ET 10-03. 5.