

# What sort of "breakthrough" does *I Went Down* represent for Irish filmmaking?

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As everyone knows, you can't argue with success. According to one press account, '*I Went Down*, a blackly comic crime thriller about a couple of mismatched, small-time Dublin gangsters, looks like doing to Irish film what *Trainspotting*, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* have done for the British industry. This darkly humorous gangster film (a sort of Irish *Pulp Fiction*, if you will, or 'the Coen brothers meet Roddy Doyle' as *The Irish Times* described it) did big business at the Irish box office, seeing off *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Volcano* and *The Game*, and even keeping *The Full Monty* out of the top spot.'

The Irish film industry is enjoying something of a boom. After a decade in which two or three films were produced in Ireland annually, a government report noted that '1993 saw a dramatic increase with some 12 films completed. In 1994 some 18 feature length films and 11 major TV drama series were commenced and completed.' The value of film and television productions increased from 50 million Irish pounds in 1993 to 100 million in 1995; the number of people employed in film and television projects jumped from 4,000 to 18,000 over the same period. Generous tax breaks and other incentives have lured foreign-based film and television companies to Ireland; the economic spurt enjoyed by the 'Celtic Tiger' and the new prosperity and self-confidence of certain social layers have helped nourish a new generation of film directors.

The director of *I Went Down*, Paddy Breathnach, born in 1964, is one such filmmaker. After making a number of documentaries in the early 1990s, he directed his first feature, *Ailsa*, in 1994. The film, apparently a moody, grim psychological drama, won a number of prizes at the San Sebastian film festival that year, including a substantial cash award.

It was around this time that Breathnach had the

following 'divine realisation,' according to a story on the director in the *Ireland Film & Television Net*:

'Arthouse cinema is an elitist, self-serving, self-indulgent, poloneck-wearing crock of shit that only elitist, self-serving, self-indulgent, poloneck-wearing people go to see. 'It was at the Oslo Film Festival in the middle of November, and having 30 people turn up to see your film on a miserable Wednesday night,' offers Paddy. 'That made me think, this is like playing for Scunthorpe [a lowly football club]. Is this what I worked 2 years for?'

Breathnach determined that the Irish film industry wasn't going to develop unless filmmakers could 'engage in some way with the people who go to ... any of the big cinemas around the country. So that's what we set out to do--engage with those people.' In another interview, the director commented, 'We wanted to do something that was popular and in the crime film genre.' His ambition is 'to make interesting, sophisticated films that are very commercially successful, and accessible.'

Why is one put on guard by these remarks? After all, Breathnach's characterization of contemporary self-absorbed 'arthouse cinema,' while somewhat sweeping, is not far off, and, certainly, the desire to speak to a large public is a healthy one.

Still, given the background against which Breathnach had his divine realization--the great success of *Pulp Fiction* and a number of other independent films, and the suddenly more favorable conditions for making and marketing Irish films--the decision seems suspiciously calculating. There is, after all, a considerable difference between making an effort to reach a wider audience with serious material, on the one hand, and determining that with a certain, apparently slight artistic reorientation one might be positioned to hit the jackpot,

on the other. Although to the individual involved, particularly in a social climate where so many aesthetic and social issues are blurred and where following the line of least resistance is standard practice, the difference might not even make itself felt.

In *I Went Down* a Dublin gangster sends two men under obligation to him, Git (Peter McDonald) and Bunny (Brendan Gleeson), to bring back an old associate of his from Cork. The pair are not told why. The whole business is uncertain and the people with whom they're dealing probably treacherous. Git and Bunny encounter a variety of mishaps and misadventures, in the process becoming friends and allies. In the end old secrets and old crimes emerge.

Breathnach's film has its charms. McDonald is particularly effective as the sad-faced Git, who can't seem to get away from people who are far less smart and capable than he is. Gleeson, when he's not trying too hard, is also amusing. When the two are simply talking, often at cross-purposes, and navigating about the Irish countryside the film has a breezy, relaxed quality. Those early scenes are enjoyable.

Unfortunately, the other elements in the film are not convincing. The essential difficulty is that a crime drama story with all its inevitable elements has been artificially grafted onto an essentially neo-realist script. The story never coheres. One doesn't care about the gangsters or their activities. The twists and turns, the threats and tough talk, the violence and the shoot-outs--all of that is flat and tedious.

As is too often the case, the filmmakers want to have their cake and eat it too. They want their characters to be hard-boiled yet sensitive, able to shoot a man at point-blank range yet capable of extraordinary intimacy, and so forth. It's just silly. And unnecessary. Some of it is simply the result of not really thinking things through, of laziness.

One result is that the sequences involving Git and two women--his former girlfriend and a young woman he meets in a hotel bar during his sojourn and sleeps with--ring particularly false. The scene with the second woman in which he pours his heart out, explaining how he ended up in prison for a crime he confessed to but didn't commit, seems entirely unlikely. The tone is badly off--self-pitying and falsely emotional. Suddenly he sounds like a middle class college student trying to impress a new conquest with his 'depth.'

One has the feeling that Breathnach is talented. He seems very assured about what he is doing and capable of getting something about human beings on screen in an interesting and entertaining fashion. But this is pretty lightweight stuff. It can't be the only possible response to the blind alley of 'arthouse cinema.' There will be a big audience too for more demanding material. To a certain extent such an audience has to be created. It will take longer to emerge if filmmakers keep telling themselves, self-servingly, that their only task is to come to terms with some largely imaginary lowest common denominator. If *I Went Down*, likable as it is, represents the 'big breakthrough' for Irish filmmaking, I'm afraid of the message it will send.

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