

Friday 19 January 2024, 3-5pm (Paris time)

***The Commitments* (1991): Hollywood, Anglo-Irish relations, and the micropolitics of film production in pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland**

**Nessa Johnston, University of Liverpool**

My research of the popular music-themed film *The Commitments* (1991) presents a fascinating case study of microlevel transcultural production practices, contextualised by acknowledgement of the macrolevel socio-economic moment for Ireland and a key historical shift in Anglo-Irish relations. A major hit both in Ireland and around the world, and frequently listed as one of the best Irish films of all time, *The Commitments* can be understood as both an Irish film (set in and filmed in Dublin) and as a British film made with American money. Despite the film's designation as 'mere' entertainment, there is a great deal at stake in the presentation of these two understandings of its origins, given the fraught relationship between Ireland and Britain. Furthermore, the relationship between Hollywood and the British film industry, as well as the historical links between Ireland and the US (including histories of Irish screen representations), provide additional forces of cultural and economic power within which the production was entangled.

The aim of my project was to focus on the film itself and the broader contexts of its production, moving away from prior dismissal of it as 'just' an adaptation of celebrated Irish author Roddy Doyle's novel of the same name. Drawing upon interviews with personnel, both 'above the line' (producer, writer, actors) and 'below the line' (extras, location assistant, session musicians), as well as archival research of British director Alan Parker's papers (held at the British Film Institute), Irish Film Archive and Irish National Archives, the interpersonal dynamics of processes of transcultural collaboration emerged which I propose as the focus of my seminar. Influenced by methodological approaches associated with critical media industry studies (Havens et al, 2009), I focused on how individual workers on the film, mostly at early stages of their career, made sense of the processes of production and their interactions with other British and Irish personnel and interpreted the filmmaking endeavour as a meaning-making process within a complex socio-economic and political context. Though broadly framed as positive, the power dynamics in terms of global capital and post-colonial legacies, as well as race, class, and long-standing cultural sensitivities, were an inescapable context of these interactions. Nevertheless, the changing status and fortunes of the Irish economy in the intervening three decades, and the subsequent domestic and international success of the Irish screen industries, allows for the legacy of the processes of production of *The Commitments* to be assessed in the long run, and reintegrated into a more pluralistic appreciation of Ireland's national cinema cultural and indigenous screen industries.

**References**

- Havens, T., Lotz, A. and Tinic, S. (2009), 'Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, Volume 2, Issue 2, June 2009, pp. 234–253.
- Tracy, T. and Flynn, R. (2017), 'Contemporary Irish Film: From the National to the Transnational', *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 169–97.
- Wollen, P. (2006), 'The Last New Wave: Modernism in the British Films of the Thatcher Era', in L.D. Friedman (ed), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, 2nd edition, London: Wallflower, pp. 30–44.

**Academic biography**

Dr Nessa Johnston is Lecturer in Digital Media and Culture at the University of Liverpool. Her expertise includes screen industries; low budget, cult and independent cinema; Irish cinema; sound studies; and sound and music in media. She is co-investigator with Dr Jamie Sexton on the Leverhulme UK funded research project Anonymous Creativity: Library Music and Screen Cultures in the 1960s and 1970s, and a 2022 Fellow of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, where she researched historical production studies in the 1970s USA. Her book, *The Commitments: Youth, Music and Authenticity in 1990s Ireland* was published by Routledge in 2022. She is also co-chair of the European Cinema and Media Studies (NECS)

Sound and Music in Media Work Group, and on the editorial boards of the journals *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, and *The Soundtrack*.

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CinEcoSA Digital Seminar Series  
**Transcultural Production Studies**  
**SEASON 3**  
**2023-2024**

**17 November 2023, 3-5pm**

*South Africa's Post-Apartheid Co-productions: Current debates regarding the role of production environments for multicultural exchanges, skills development, and knowledge transfer*

Natalie KOWALIK (University of Antwerp, Belgium) and Philippe MEERS (University of Antwerp, Belgium)

Discussants: Ana Vinuela (Sorbonne Nouvelle / IRCAV) and Joël Augros (Sorbonne Nouvelle / IRCAV)

**8 December 2023, 3-5pm**

*Spatialités multiples et régime de production des Afronovelas en Afrique de l'Ouest francophone : pour une approche sociospatiale*

Séverine MARGUIN (Technische Universität Berlin, Germany) and Daddy DIBINGA (Technische Universität Berlin, Germany)

Discussants: Patricia Caillé (Université de Strasbourg / LinCS) and Christel Taillibert (Université Côte d'Azur / LIRCES)

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Nessa JOHNSTON (University of Liverpool, UK)

Discussant: Cecilia Tirtaine (Nantes Université / CRINI)

**9 February 2024, 3-5pm**

*Les chefs opérateurs qui venaient du sud : Marius Raichi et Charlie Bauer dans l'industrie cinématographique finlandaise (1937-1940)*

Aymeric PANTET (University of Turku, Finland)

Discussant: Bérénice Bonhomme (Université de Toulouse-Jean Jaurès/IUF, LARA-SEPPIA)

**22 March 2024, 3-5pm**

*Hollywood in the Pacific?: North American Productions in Aotearoa New Zealand During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Sophie GILMORE (Harvard University, US)

Discussants: Katalin Pór (Université Paris 8/IUF, ESTCA)

**5 April 2024, 12-2pm**

*'Runaway' Foreign Film Productions from a Global South Perspective*

Wikanda PROMKHUNTONG (Mahidol University, Thailand)

Discussant: Nolwenn Mingant (Université d'Angers / 3LAM)

This seminar is held online – please register here for the Zoom link:

<https://forms.gle/LQAKKsN9DY3Ni2UQ6>