'Scots Miserablism'

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Tuesday 16 February 2010

Overview

Since the 1970s Scottish filmmakers have garnered a reputation for producing *'miserablist'* films. Marked out by their tragic tone, they typically depict the lives of violent and addicted anti-heroes set against the backdrop of urban squalor from which escape is impossible. In this lecture film maker Eleanor Yule, using illustrative film clips and with a personal commentary, explored the genre, its origins and dominance.

Summary

By way of introduction Eleanor reminded us of the excitement of the 1980's, when she was a film student. At that time British film was enjoying both commercial and critical success, and on television one could still see the last vestiges of quality programme making, referencing an older and waning way of life and a range of perspectives.

An introduction to Miserablism

She introduced the audience to the genre of Miserablism through a clip from *Trainspotting*. In the excerpt, being Scottish is portrayed as being inescapably the lowest of the low, colouring all other aspects of life, and where addiction to drugs and/or alcohol is the only outcome for many men. She posed the question: *'where did this perspective come from?'*

To see ourselves as others see us

She then illustrated what others think about being Scots using clips from various films and in so doing suggested alternative perspectives to Miserablism.

Brigadoon: in which a village of happy kilted Scots guard the old way of life against change by only appearing every 100 years. In the clip shown, the main character was eschewing alcohol and the tavern to go home to "Bonnie Jean".

I Know where I'm Going: in which a young middle class woman leaves her home in Manchester to travel to Scotland to marry her older and very wealthy industrialist boss on the Isle of Kiloran, until bad weather forces her to stay on Mull where she falls in love with a local Scottish man, and she finds 'authenticity' though the Scottish people.

Whisky Galore: in which an island community works together towards the common end of salvaging a cargo of whisky from a shipwreck and keeping it from the excise man.

Braveheart: in which an army of Scottish warrior poets, led by a charismatic hero – William Wallace – stand against the military might of a larger nation in order to gain their freedom.

In sum she suggested that while some of these perspectives are 'sugar coated' they do offer alternative images of Scotland – a land of heroes in which community works well and liberated women are attracted to our Scottish menfolk.

She suggested that one could still see the last vestiges of this perspective in Scottish filmmaking during the early 1980s. She illustrated this with a clip from *Gregory's Girl*. Shot in Cumbernauld, everything was new at the time of filming, reflecting post war, modernist optimism. Here, the teenage male protagonist is allowed a rite of passage into adulthood and to hopefully, begin the process of growing up successfully. At around this time, post war optimism began to fade and Scots Miserablism can be seen as a legitimate response to this. People in Scotland began to suffer the effects of de-industrialisation and film showed this in an appropriate way.

Eleanor then showed a montage of clips from films in the miserablist genre to illustrate this:

Trainspotting: another clip in which Tommy, who represents the old ways, the countryside, and the open air, becomes seriously ill after becoming a drug addict and being diagnosed as HIV positive.

Just Another Saturday: in which the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Glasgow is highlighted through the staging of an Orange Walk along with associated violence.

Just a Boy's Game: in which a grandson meets with his dying grandfather. Both have made lives as 'hard men'. The grandson hopes for conciliation, redemption

and forgiveness with his grandfather as the latter speaks from his death bed, but finds none.

Sweet Sixteen: in which a young man is initiated into a criminal gang by an instruction to kill one of its members.

Ratcatcher: in which a family is caught in the very negative effects of poverty and the father's alcoholism.

The key characteristics of Miserablism

At this point Eleanor suggested that what had begun as a legitimate perspective on difficult social circumstances has not changed. There has been no progression in the argument or perspective which it has to offer and no alternative images of women or men.

She described the key characteristics of the genre as:

- A tragic hero as the lead character – a hard man, addicted to alcohol or drugs, or sometimes even the arts (as in Bill Douglas's trilogy, see later)

- The hero is often brutally ripped from the innocence of childhood

- Usually the hero is part of a dysfunctional extended family and/or collapsed community

- The plot often implies generations of dysfunction so that secrets, lies, unforgiven deeds, lack of redemption, no reconciliation and the absence of hope characterise story lines in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon their offspring

- Uncompromising violence

- There is no way out and no matter how hard a character tries, he always fails

- Women play secondary roles often chastising main protagonists encouraging them to change, but to no avail

- Black humour is used extensively to sweeten the bitter pill

- Urban squalor and industrial wasteland prevail as backdrops

- Low budgets often mean the films are often shot inside leading away from expressionism and towards realism.

Where did the genre originate

Eleanor went on to locate the genesis of the genre in Bill Douglas's Trilogy (*My Childhood; My Ain Folk; My Way Home)*. This trilogy, she suggested, was beautifully filmed and may be seen as expressionism in the European tradition, and one carried on by Peter McDougall. So, she suggested, the genre has indigenous roots. However Miserablism has now become a habit, with no alternative vision on view. Like other habits it has the power to incarcerate and having become an incarcerating habit, Miserablism leaves us with no message of hope to pass on to the next generation.

Miserablism has also become a commodity. It is a perspective on Scotland which sells well and so the temptation to continue making films in this genre and to satisfy this demand compounds the habit. At least some of the funding for Scottish film is locked onto this portrayal.

To illustrate this she used a clip from a BBC drama *New Towns* for which ten scripts were commissioned and written and a pilot episode made (and screened) only to be cancelled. Eleanor argued it was cancelled because its backdrop of middle class Edinburgh and its preoccupations did not fit the stereotype of what Scots programming should be about.

Mentioning "*The Spirit Level* ", a recent book by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, focused on inequality, Eleanor suggested that Miserablism is a portrayal of the consequences of an unequal society. An important question is how the portrayal of Scotland might move on from the dominance of Miserablism. How can film and television begin to reflect and be reflected by the diversity of population and culture which exists in Scotland?

In summing up she suggested that how we see ourselves in Scotland is mirrored in/by the persistence of Miserablism. A next step must therefore be to see ourselves as a nation where there is hope and for this be reflected in both life and film. There is likely to be resistance to such a shift from many quarters and it will require significant effort and autonomy if it is to be achieved.