

**Overlapping Perspectives:  
Liminality in Contemporary Belgian and Irish Cinema**

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*“Réal et imaginaire ...s'affrontent sans se concilier ni se réconcilier. De cet affrontement naît l'entre-deux: précisément l'œuvre...Ce pays de l'entre-deux, qui ne réussit à recouvrer son unité que dans l'imaginaire devenu langage: dans l'œuvre, c'est le pays où je vis.”*

*"Here the real and the imaginary confront each other [as opposites] and are never reconciled. An in-between state is born of that confrontation: precisely the work of art...That country of the in-between that can only recover its unity within the imaginary as it becomes language: within the work of art, that's the country I inhabit."*

*André Delvaux* (qtd. in Colvile, 115)

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## Foreword

When watching Irish and Belgian films, even the lay spectator would probably notice some characteristics that seem dear to both cinematic aesthetics. In an attempt to give a theoretical support to the observation of these similarities and to infer their origins, four films will be analysed in this paper: *Disco Pigs* by Kirsten Sheridan (2001), *Calvaire* by Fabrice du Welz (2004), *Adam and Paul* by Leonard Abrahamson (2003) and *Eldorado* by Bouli Lanners (2008). Due to the restricted length of this thesis, the focus is given on contemporary films, for they appear to express clearly the continuing in-between position of present-day Belgium and Ireland.

Therefore, the parallels between the films selected for this work will be apprehended with regard to the socio-political, cultural and economic situation of the two countries. In addition, several concepts, borrowed from various theoretical spheres such as sociology, postmodernism, psychology, literature and cinema, are needed to grasp the analogy between Belgian and Irish cinema. Throughout this thesis, several elements that convey the filmmakers' reflection on their nation will stand out. As the films originate from "minor" countries, they appear to reflect distinctive concerns and display different aesthetic features from their European counterparts. This thesis postulates indeed that liminality emerges as a constant feature in the films, which is to be investigated in an aesthetic, thematic and sociocultural perspective. In this way, the first chapter will deal with the magic realist aesthetic that emanates from the formal aspects of the films. In contrast, the second chapter will have a thematic approach and will focus on the protagonists and their marginalization in relation to the world around them. Finally, the third chapter will treat the filmmakers' depiction of places as vehicles for the expression of their nation's hybridity.

## Introduction

In this part of the introduction, I shall define several theoretical concepts that will serve the analysis of Belgian and Irish films. It has often been acknowledged that through their works artists express their own self and their feelings about the world that surrounds them. Besides their familial and individual education, the social and cultural background in which they were raised also depends on the nation to which they belong. As shall be explored as part of this thesis, the representation of the world conveyed in films is influenced by the artists' perceptions of their nation. This is reflected in various aspects of their films: in their aesthetic and *mise-en-scène*, through the characters and their interaction with the world, and in the places where the stories are set. Through these features, filmmakers tend to reflect on the dualisms that divide their nations. An in-between constant can thus be observed, which corresponds to the image that the Belgian and the Irish have of themselves. In such, these two nations appear as very different from other European countries such as France, Germany, England, Sweden, Norway or Italy, which are generally monolingual, and which have a coherent sense of culture and of the nation, as well as a united territory. Before tackling the theoretical concepts that will be used later on in the analysis of the films, it is necessary to highlight several elements in the history of Belgium and Ireland. This provides a framework of understanding for the liminal characteristics inferred from the Belgian and Irish films analysed in this thesis.

This hybridity could be read in the light of the historical pasts of both countries. Belgium is to be considered as a relatively young country as it gained its independence in 1831. Till then, Belgium, which was called the “Southern Netherlands” in the Middle Ages had been ruled by foreign sovereigns, successively Spanish, Austrian, French and Dutch. Although “there was no Flemish or Walloon

consciousness in the modern sense” (De Schryver 15) at the independence of Belgium, the present-day biculturalism of Belgium dates back from that period. The multiple provinces that formed the Austrian Netherlands, the rootedness of its inhabitants in their “individual age-old homelands,”<sup>1</sup> and the French and Dutch attempts of annexation, all played their part in contemporary fragmentation. The resulting linguistic divergences initiated in 1970 the state reforms and the subsequent federalization (“Aperçu”). This newly created nation-state definitely ended the original 1815’s “buffer-state” that had been created between Germany, the UK and France, united with Holland and then independent after its revolution in 1830 (Mean 21). From the beginning, the utopian attempt to create a united-Belgium concealed important linguistic divergences, as Dutch was not recognized as an official language until the 1930s (von Busekist xvi). Moreover, the division of the Belgian state also originates from the political opposition between the Liberal and the Catholic party, which ruled alternatively throughout the nineteenth century.

After the evangelization of Ireland by Saint Patrick and the Anglo-Norman invasions of the Middle Ages, the British state and its various policies have commanded the Irish political landscape since the seventeenth century. English leaders’ fierce attempts “to reduce the Irish people to savagery and to eradicate all memory of a national past” (MacCall 27) left important traces in the Irish construction of an identity today, as it can be observed in the increasing willingness to recuperate the Irish language on an educational and cultural level. The colonization of Catholic Ireland through the plantation policy and the massacres perpetrated by both Protestant and Catholic English sovereigns, resulted in an

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<sup>1</sup> The county of Flanders, the duchies of Brabant, Luxemburg, the county of Hainaut, among others. (De Schryver 15)

antagonist situation opposing Catholics and Protestants that “was to be the great dividing line in Irish life” (Beckett 38). Colonization, the Great Famine and the important waves of mass emigration throughout the centuries, also left indelible marks on the Irish’s self-image as a minor and silenced people. After the insurrection of the Separatists in 1916, the policy of partition excluded six Ulster counties with a unionist majority from the home rule act, which finally led to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921. The subsequent controversies and war upon the treaty, the opposition between Unionists and Republicans, and the worsening relationships between Protestants and Catholics, everlastingly divided Ireland culturally, territorially and politically (O’Dowd 79-81). Similarly to the French and Dutch languages that reflect the historical authority of Belgium’s neighbours, English, besides being the colonizer’s tongue, was perceived as closely linked to Protestantism (Neville 25). Those historical circumstances impinge on people’s image of themselves and hence on the artists, who have been raised in those still divided countries. Belgian and Irish’s common lack of an asserted past – unlike their powerful neighbours among which France, the UK and Germany –, induces the artists to question their belonging to a community and to reconstruct a national imaginary (Pickels 13).

Since the historical similarities between the two countries have been highlighted, it is now essential to analyse the concepts of ‘national cinema’, ‘nationalism’ and ‘nation’, which must be considered with regard to the fragmented specificity of Belgium and Ireland. According to Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ are ideological concepts that have been imagined at the hour of modernization to ensure political cohesion and, in a way, to hold people together in times of wars (Anderson 7). Anderson conceives the nation

as a utopian concept that places all the people on a same social level, whereas the sense of community remains impossible, since face-to-face contacts do not exist between all the people of the so-called nation (6-7). Gellner regards nationalism as a “general imposition of a high culture on society” that, while pretending to maintain folk culture, reduces its complexity to establish an “anonymous, impersonal society” (56). Precisely because nationalism “imposes homogeneity both inside and, to a lesser degree, between political units” (Gellner 120), it does not have the same impact on Belgium and Ireland as on more politically, historically and linguistically unified countries of Europe, such as England, France and Italy. On the contrary, a multitude of nationalisms – or what could be called “communautarianisms” – divides Ireland and Belgium on historical, political, cultural, linguistic and territorial levels, which impinge on the very states’ union or separation.<sup>2</sup> As Astrid von Busekist explains, Belgium faces a very different nationalism from revolutionary France, for example. The variety of patriotic feelings in Belgium contributes to the fragmentation of the structure of the state (279) rather than to its cohesion, in a similar way as in Ireland. Politics as well tend to divide the very nations rather than uniting them: Walloon and Flemish political parties display similarities with the two Irish leading parties, in their disagreement on policy priorities between unionism/separatism or economy management.<sup>3</sup> This thesis postulates that the filmmakers of these two nations express the fragmentation and biculturalism of their

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<sup>2</sup> See McLoone 2000; O’Donnell 2007; von Busekist 1998; Lijphart 1981.

<sup>3</sup> The Right-wing CD&V being the leading party in Dutch-speaking community, while French-speaking community is governed by the socialist party PS. The importance of nationalist parties in the Flemish government also differs from their near absence in Wallonia. (“Elections”)

Fianna Fáil pursues its commitment to a united Ireland in the long term, while Fine Gael prioritize the economy of the country (O’Donnell 200; Gilland Lutz 47).

national environment rather than defending, protecting or building a national culture (a sort of nationalism) as it is often the case for national cinemas (Jarvie 77-81).

Besides being a product of philosophers' thoughts, nationalism also draws its origin from modern social conditions, Gellner argues, as the pervasiveness of media communication "automatically engenders the core idea of nationalism" (121-22). The media provide a seemingly cohesion to a particular nation, contributing to the shaping of a nationalist feeling. Whatever the actual content of the message, they participate in the creation of a common cultural background between people. In Ireland and Belgium, on the contrary, the media have played an important role in the "de-nationalization" of the nations. As explained by Martin McLoone, O'Brien's proposal to extend British television to the whole island of Ireland in the hope of reducing anti-British nationalist ideas in the 70s, acted in fact "in the detriment of Ireland's sense of national identity" (95-96). The "shared heritage" between Irish and British people, can be compared to the one between French/ Dutch and Belgian people. Nowadays, both countries, in addition to sharing their media communications with foreign countries, also have different television channels in the North and in the South of their territory, RTBF opposing VRT in Belgium and RTÉ opposing BBC on the island of Ireland.<sup>4</sup> This divergence in media production and broadcasting appears as both a cause and a consequence of the nations' lack of unity. Moreover, "language is at the core of what we mean by culture," Jarvie asserts (79); hence, the common language that Belgium and Ireland share with their neighbours also contributes to the weakening of people's cohesion as a nation. This

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<sup>4</sup> Data about television broadcasting can be found on the internet: Mavise <<http://mavise.obs.coe.int/>>

fragmentation is to be observed in the representation of places in the films analysed, as well as in their aesthetic and the delineation of characters.

In this modern period, and especially in the ‘society of the spectacle’ (in Guy Debord’s words), the link between media communication (and thus cinema)<sup>5</sup> and national identity cannot be ignored. As Gellner underlines, the cultural production of a country has an essential role to play in the creation of a coherent national image (56). Martin McLoone among others argues that “national identity is the social imagining which results from the conditions under which modernity interacts with a [particular nation]” (*Border* 156). As nations are artefacts conveyed and produced by the very apparatuses of media communication, the Belgian and Irish lack of national coherence is connected with their inability to establish and promote “a generic narrative image” (Higson 133). State funding began late in Belgium and in Ireland compared to the core countries of Europe: in the 1960s for the former, where it was divided between the North and the South (Mosley 22), and in the 1970s for the latter, where it had quite a difficult start (McLoone, *Border*, 156). This carelessness for the creation of a national cinema may be regarded as one more cause of the lack of a coherent image of the countries. “Si la ‘culture belge’ est reniée de part et d’autre, c’est principalement faute d’avoir pu promouvoir son idée même,”<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Sojcher asserts, situating what he calls “autarcie culturelle” in the absence of exchanges between the North and the South of the country, but also in the general failure of the

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<sup>5</sup> Almost from the beginning of cinema, the ideological power of films has been recognised and used, especially around war times; as in, for example, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*, in Frank Capra’s series *Why We Fight* or again John Huston’s *Let There Be Light*. As Andrew Higson asserts, “at least since the mid 1910s... governments began to recognise... [cinema as] an institution with a nationalising function” (138).

<sup>6</sup> “If Belgian culture is denied from both sides, it mainly results from the inability to promote its very idea” Trans. mine

films to cross regional and national boundaries (*Kermesse* 3: 212-13). This statement strongly recalls Martin McLoone's description of the "self-sufficiency" of Irish cultural nationalism that created "a complacent and conservative society...drifted out of mainstream European culture for nearly four decades" (*Irish* 25). For a medium as international as cinema, such assertions seem paradoxical but appear as ones of the main reasons for the lack of a coherent national image in Belgium and Ireland.

Moreover, Ruth Barton's statement that Ireland is perceived "not so much [as] a real place as a projection of the imagination" ("Introduction" 1) is perhaps symptomatic of a country that has been subjected to outsiders' representations but above all to displacement. At the beginning of cinema, Pathé took up Belgium as a particularly easy market to conquer for its proximity and shared language, compared to the other countries in which Pathé installed its hegemony (Mosley 31). Although he is French, Alfred Machin is the first director to make Belgian films, followed by Jacques Feyder who rapidly naturalized French and went shooting abroad. The Belgian Jean-Jacques Andrien, Marion Hänsel and Agnès Varda are constantly on the border between Belgium and foreign countries on an artistic and/or physical level. This tends to be reflected in the mental or physical exile of their protagonists, which expresses the filmmakers' feeling of alienation. The main reason for this displacement is the need for coproduction, as emphasized by Frédéric Sojcher, who also stresses the number of Belgian actors and filmmakers who had to go abroad to be internationally recognized, among whom Benoît Poelvoorde, Olivier Gourmet, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Natacha Régnier, Jérémie Rénier, Marie Gillain, Cécile de France, and so on. Paris serves as a cultural centre for Belgian French-speaking artists, as London and the US do for numerous Irish immigrants, as can be seen in *In the Name of the Father* or in *Breakfast on Pluto*, among others. What is even more

noticeable about Ireland is the number of foreign filmmakers representing the country in their films. John Ford's *The Quiet Man* as well as Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* or Flaherty's *Man of Aran* all deliver a very stereotypical image of "old backward" Ireland. As Martin McLoone stresses, David Lean's *Ryan Daughter* and Mike Newell's *Into the West* have also their part of stereotypes concerning Irish identity and the romantic aspect of the landscape (20). The cinematic image of Ireland has mostly been drawn by "outsiders" (Hill 3), which reduces the possibilities for certain genres and representations of individuals or settings that would thus not appear to suit conventions, as Barry Monahan explains about *The Courier* and its generic failure ("Keeping" 186). He situates the origins of this phenomenon in "the failure to develop a sense of cinematic self and watch oneself on screen" (186), which leads to a feeling of double-consciousness, also relevant to the Belgian in-between position.

Du Bois first used the term "double-consciousness" regarding African-American's psychological state in a society that despised them. In his 1903's book *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois emphasizes that Africans in the American world can only see themselves "through the revelation of the other world," which confers a sensation of double-consciousness defined as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (4). Since then, this term has been extensively used in literary criticism and can be applied to explain the marginalization that Belgian and Irish people undergo in their artistic productions. "The importance of indigenous film for a healthy culture" (Monahan, "Keeping" 186) has indeed been underlined, for cultural productions are at the core of a people's cohesion. Eagleton also defines culture as "a set of potentials bred by

history and subversively at work within it” (qtd. in Kirby, 1). In addition to the interminable conflicts between Unionists and Republicans, Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, and the everlasting debate on separatism in Belgium;<sup>7</sup> culture also contributes to the Belgian and Irish people’s feeling of in-betweenness, of being “halfway between, not defined” in Homi Bhabha’s words (141). It is thus not surprising to observe the recurrence of marginality and feeling of in-betweenness in Irish and Belgian films. The in-between or the “hybrid,” originally describing the offspring of plants and animals of different species, have now entered various theoretical discourses, among which Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism/heteroglossia that uses “hybridity” to “describe the condition of language’s fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same and different” (Young 20). As will be explored in the second chapter of this thesis, communication problems between people speaking the same language are some of the symptoms of this in-betweenness.

When dealing with contemporary cinema and identity matters, poststructuralists’ ideas are to be regarded as influential. Derrida disclosed the attempt of the modern discourse at repressing the free flow of discourse and its tendency to impose illegitimate social hierarchies, by ignoring the instability of meaning in the pansemiotic universe (Gare 59). Derrida’s call for “deconstruction” results in a new focus on marginalised entities since “by subverting the fixation of meaning, it enables those who have been suppressed and marginalized ... to be heard” (Gare 59). He helped to deconstruct “the binary oppositions governing

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<sup>7</sup> As seen before, neither Irish nor Belgian conflicts and their consequences on cultural identity can be reduced to simple dichotomies but are expressed as such for the sake of clarity.

Western philosophy and culture (subject/object, reality/appearance, speech/writing, and so on)” (Best 21), a process that is to be observed in the Belgian and Irish films analysed in this thesis. When expressing the hybridity of their nations, artists tend to depart from realism especially by introducing magical elements within their representations of the world. “Magic realism, theoreticians suggest, expresses the artistic sensibilities of writers from the margins; as such, it bespeaks a form of resistance against conventional literary models” (Maufort *Union* 192).

Yet, before defining magical realism, it is essential to explore the controversial notions of reality and cinematic realism. Cinema, as Bazin highlights, has often been considered as “une représentation totale et intégrale de la réalité, (...) la restitution d’une illusion parfaite du monde extérieur” (22).<sup>8</sup> But, as he further emphasizes, the idea that cinema allows a recreation of the world through an image that would not be influenced by the interpretative freedom of the artist is only a myth (23). Realism differs from reality as it obeys to a set of filmic conventions while representing reality. A realistic work thus follows rules adapted to human cognition to persuade the audience that the fictional world is a perfect reproduction of reality. Christian Metz differentiates the generic from the verisimilar film, as the former accepts conventions as such, and the latter claims that conventions depend on the essence of the reality presented. Yet, in his view, “il n’y a pas de vraisemblable, il n’y a que des conventions vraisemblabilisées”<sup>9</sup> (*Essais* 240-41). In other words, realist works attempt to present a single and coherent worldview, whereas a non-essentialist aesthetic is more appropriate to portray a multicultural and hybrid reality.

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<sup>8</sup> “A total and integral representation of reality... the reproduction of a perfect illusion of the outside world” Trans. mine

<sup>9</sup> “There is no verisimilitude; there are only conventions made verisimilar” Trans. mine

Postmodern critics champion an observation of reality as fragmented and “valorise differences, pluralities, and heterogeneities that were often suppressed by the grand theories of the past” (Best 259). They rely on the attack of “rationalist and Enlightenment theories” (Best 16) advocated by poststructuralists, among whom Lacan, who underlined the decentring of the human subject that should not be regarded as “a unified locus of thoughts and emotions... [but as] split, without a centre, and characterised by lack” (Appel 100). In the same vein, Lyotard, on the basis of “Nietzsche's critique of truth [and] emphasis on interpretation,” condemns “claims of universality and unity, preferring instead to acknowledge difference and fragmentation” (Schrift qtd. in Peters, 45). When analysing the Belgian and Irish representations of their own liminality, it is therefore necessary to take into consideration that identity is fragmented, incomplete and fluid, that is in constant change.

Precisely because “the liminal [as an artistic mode] facilitates a non-hierarchical articulation of multiplicity, difference and diversity” (Bracken 101), it is particularly adapted to Belgian and Irish artists in the expression of their in-betweenness. Within his study of tribal societies and rites of passage, the anthropologist Victor Turner introduced the term “liminal” to refer to the space “betwixt and between” where the social transition, the passage between identities takes place (Weber 527). Turner’s notion of the threshold (the English term for “limen”) goes hand in hand with his positing of the social reality as “fluid, open, expressed...as process” (Weber 527). However, Donald Weber, in his essay on the limen and the border, underlines Turner’s focus on social levelling and cultural bonding that prevails over “what we now recognize as an encounter between identity politics and the border” (530). In agreement with poststructuralist theories, society is

not to be considered as immutable and fixed but rather as evolving in a specific political and cultural context. Multiple boundaries, not only geographical but also linguistic, political, and religious, compose the Belgian and Irish landscape and influence people's formation of identity. Following the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's theories, Weber asserts that "the border, porous and open, emerges as a zone capable of nourishing a rich grid of crisscrossed...multiple identities, a celebration of ambiguity as the *condition* of the postmodern self, and is now the space of real (i.e. political...) potential" (532).<sup>10</sup> Within the framework of this thesis, the concept of liminality shall therefore be used including Weber's revision of Turner's theories, as "a storehouse of possibilities" (Turner qtd in Broadhurst, 12), but also "a space which differentiates and divides," as Claire Bracken emphasizes, where "differences mingle and mix," rather than erase (98). Magical realism is thus one aesthetical choice among others for the Belgian and Irish directors who express their dual identities as members of hybrid nations. Frédéric Sojcher, in his research on Belgian cinema, describes magical realism as one possibility to express an "unreal reality"<sup>11</sup> dear to Belgian filmmakers, as an attempt to exorcise the schizophrenia of their fracturing country (338-339). Higson points out three particular areas of study with regard to national films: their content, the world-view that they express and their style (formal aspects) (138-39). Belgian and Irish preoccupation for the hybridity of their nations, their feeling of being forgotten peoples and the unconventional formal aspects that films adopt, form the core of this thesis and will be studied in the following chapters.

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<sup>10</sup> Italics in the original text.

<sup>11</sup> "Réalité irréaliste" in the original text.

## Magical Realism as an Expression of Liminality

Artists, along with the whole population, are altered by the economic, social and political circumstances that affect their countries, as well as by the cultural productions that surround them. The in-between political, cultural and historical situation of their nation abides in their cinematic aesthetic, for it reveals the self and its anxieties, whether individual or collective. This first chapter will focus on the aesthetic features of the four films selected for this thesis.

By diverging from conventional modes of address, by blurring traditional boundaries that tell genres apart, or by positioning on the threshold of fiction and realism; Belgian and Irish filmmakers convey the liminal character that individuate their national culture. For that matter, magical realism manifests as a recurrent narrative mode, as according to Zamora and Faris, it “encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures...[and] facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (5-6). It is thus perfectly adapted to convey the in-betweenness of the Irish and Belgian cultural identity, since magical realist texts “admit a plurality of worlds...[and] situate themselves on a liminal territory between and among those worlds,” whose boundaries whether “ontological, geographical, or generic” are “erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned” (Zamora 5-6). Although both magical realism and the fantastic question the nature of reality and its representations, Amaryll Chanady insists on some major differences between the two. In Chanady’s opinion, magical realism integrates the supernatural into a realistic setting “within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world” (23). The irrational is not in conflict with the rational anymore but becomes an everyday occurrence, for the characters do not

question the cogency of extraordinary events. While relying on the narrator's account, the spectators must therefore "suspend any notions of what is possible or impossible," (120) asserts Chanady. The conventional vision of reality merges with the "magical" to create a different vision of the world as unfixed, unknown and unknowable. The definition of magical realism appears broad enough (as is to be noticed throughout this chapter) to be used generically, as it embraces the Belgian and Irish aesthetics that undermine traditional realism.<sup>12</sup>

Jaco Van Dormael's *Toto le héros* (1991) and Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997) appear as two magical realist films that mingle imaginary with reality. This coexistence results in a hybrid reality where boundaries between the real and the unreal are blurred. Surprisingly, the structure of these two films is very similar: Thomas and Francie narrate their life story from their adult perspective and both seek a path to normality in their best friend's life. Throughout his existence, Thomas has been convinced that Alfred robbed his life, and was determined to kill him. Through Alfred, Thomas lived his love for his own sister and then his adult life, until he decides to die passing for Alfred. In their analysis of *The Butcher Boy*, Kevin and Emer Rockett make a statement recalling *Toto le héros*: "...[Francie's] doomed relationship with Joe, through whom he has access to love and normality. Of course, his imagination or insanity become his final escape when these more mundane avenues of release are insufficient to his needs" (184). Both films also emphasize the large presence of American culture in people's mind, and its subsequent influence on their behaviour. Van Dormael and Jordan respectively refer to the *film noir* and the Western, which affect the protagonists' imagination and distort the narrative.

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<sup>12</sup> The term "magical" is also to be used generically for every kind of extraordinary occurrence that shatters realist conventions.

Thomas dreams of killing Alfred in the way a gangster would, or dreams of Alfred as a member of the Mafia; while Francie compares himself to John Wayne's characters. The actual *mise-en-scène* is distorted by the protagonists' alienated vision of reality, which stands for the very enunciation (i.e. the perspective from which the story is told). Thomas and Francie are indeed the only narrators of the fiction; as a result, all the seemingly unreal events emerge from their imagination. Although the enunciation is clear, a supernatural aspect emerges from the narrators; Francie as an adult addresses his image as a child who then answers him, and Thomas continues to express his thoughts after his death, in the same way as Sinéad in *Disco Pigs* (Kristen Sheridan, 2001).

Both *The Butcher Boy* and *Toto le héros* convey a sense of alienation: hybridity being reflected in the protagonists and their double life, in their travels between urban and rural landscapes, and in the confusing *mise-en-scène* that invades the narration. As will be explored, this feeling of alienation is to be connected with the Belgian and Irish national cultural hybridity, which filmmakers tend to express through these very features that are at the core of *The Butcher Boy* and *Toto le héros*. As an extensive literature dealing with both films is available,<sup>13</sup> more contemporaneous and liminal films are to be taken into account to explore the different narrative techniques that shatter conventional realism in Belgian and Irish aesthetics. *Ma vie en rose* (1997) by Alain Berliner, for example, can be said to be "more liminal" as Ludovic's magical and subjective world merges with the objective reality of the film when his mother enters "his" world through an advertising poster.

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<sup>13</sup> For *The Butcher Boy*, see among others McLoone, 2000; Rockett, 2003; Sweeney, 2004; Zucker, 2008. For *Toto le héros*, see among others Sojcher, 1999, vol. 3; Nysenholc, 1996; Mosley, 2001; Thys, 1999; Aubenas 1997.

Besides that, Ludovic is not the only narrator of the film, so that his perspective does not subdue the magical. This thesis will thus focus on liminal films that convey the in-betweenness of their auteur's nation of origin. As will be analysed, hybridity is often reflected in the film's structure and aesthetic, in the characters' doubleness and marginality, as well as through a fractured aspect of the landscape. Due to the restricted length of this thesis, a selection of four films had to be made; *Disco Pigs*, *Calvaire*, *Adam and Paul* and *Eldrorado* will thus be privileged, without excluding examples taken from other films in order to support the argument.

In *Disco Pigs*, Kirsten Sheridan uses various techniques to integrate “magical” elements into realism, although inner focalization is favoured. The voice over expressing Sinéad's thoughts already begins while she is still in her mother's womb. At first, the voice appears to the spectator as being the baby's, but it actually belongs to Runt/Sinéad after Pig/Darren's death. The language register is indeed confusing as it simultaneously corresponds to a teenager's and a baby's: “With the thumpedy thump of the heart...I tell the noisy world outside to fuck off with all your play acting.” The realism of the film is then disrupted by the enunciation that shifts between Pig and Runt. Multiple flashbacks interrupt their present life and clarify their current and ambiguous relationship. In those scenes, unexpected events take place, for example when the protagonists both come out of their house at the same time dressed in their school uniform with swimming rings around the waist. The strangeness is later emphasized once in the car, where Pig ruins the rings with a giant knife. This kind of unusual occurrences constantly undermines our expectations of ordinary representations of reality. They manifest under what Jeanne Delbaere calls “psychic realism,” since they participate to the creation of the self and are “a physical manifestation of what takes place inside the psyche” (255). Pig indeed

projects his alienated psyche on reality; his insanity dictates his more and more violent behaviour, which stems from the imagined and distorted world that he and Runt created. Unlike Sinéad, who begins to adapt to real society, Pig becomes unable to distinguish good from evil, which results in his killing Markey who is dancing with Sinéad. The boundary between reality and illusion is as blurred as the boundary between good and evil, as can also be seen in *The Butcher Boy* and *Toto le héros*. This violence contaminating the films may be interpreted as a projection of the nations disparities, which trigger confrontations, whether tangible as in Ireland or philosophical as in Belgium. The national dualism emerging from the everlasting conflicts between Protestant and Catholics in Ireland, the Flemish and Walloon Communities in Belgium, and Unionists and Separatists in both countries, manifests in the films' aesthetic, structure and mode of address.

After the flashbacks which originate from Pig or Runt's mind, thus appearing clearly in internal focalization, Pig's monologues similarly confuse the spectator, as they are "the site[s] of [his] distortions of the real, [which] reflect this lack of linearity, this postmodern vision of the world as fragmented" (Maufort 192). Besides Lacan's theory on the self as being characterised by a lack, Marc Maufort, in his article on "Judith Thompson's Magic Realism," relates monologic stories to the characters' assertion of "their identity as a form of fiction, as a reconstruction of reality" (192). Through monologues and stories, Pig recreates another reality in which tangible and intangible mingle. After his last monologue, Pig tells his bus partner a peculiar story that supposedly happened when he and Runt were young. Runt's father had locked her in a car trunk and when the car went away, Pig waited for her return standing on the pavement for a week, day and night. Then, in the middle of a meal with the bus partner, Pig sticks his fork into a man's hand when he

was rudely helping himself to a cigarette. This event is even more disturbing than the story as the focalization is external. In external focalization, indeed, the “grand imagier” is expected to only represent the characters’ objective experiences, whereas the characters’ subjectivity is generally expressed through internal focalization, in which “story world and screen are meant to collapse into each other, forming a perfect identity in the name of a character” (Branigan 102). The term “grand imagier” or “great image-maker” borrowed from Albert Laffay is defined by Christian Metz as (before and above all) the film itself as an object of language; for the “grand imagier” is a “foyer linguistique visuel,” a telling figure that is positioned outside the film. (29). In *Disco Pigs*, however, the spectator never seems to have access to objective reality: Pig rules the enunciation of Runt’s adventures in the car trunk and, in ‘the forked-hand story,’ an ellipse cuts from his finishing his meal to his walking in the street. Whether through montage or the blending of internal and external focalization, the boundary between magic and reality results blurred. The protagonists’ alienation is expressed through the magical realism of the film, which reflects the very liminality of the filmmaker as member of an in-between nation. This narrative mode is likewise to be observed in the Belgian film *Des plumes dans la tête* (Thomas De Thier, 2003), in which Blanche has a whole relationship with her dead son. When the dead Arthur touches his father asleep on the couch, this one reacts as if Arthur were “real,” which makes the boundary between magic and reality unclear. In a similar way as in *Disco Pigs*, the confusion between imagination and physical existence emerges from the oscillation between inner perspective and what seems to be external focalization.

While widely treated in cinema, psychological disorders, as in *Disco Pigs* and *Des plumes dans la tête*, possess a special meaning in nations that have been

confronted to traumatic situations. The 1980s marked a period of intense disquiet in both Ireland and Belgium; the numerous confrontations between Unionists and Republicans as well as Catholic conservatives referendum ‘victories’ shattered the Irish nation, while the Belgian turmoil mainly ensued from killing waves occurred in the ‘80s in Wallonia. In the ‘90s, this disquiet continued in both countries, when sexual abuse and paedophilia cases broke out. As Martin McLoone and Catherine O’Donnell emphasize, the “escalating conflicts” and hunger strikes in Northern Ireland impinged on the South political stage and brought back questions of a united island of Ireland (*Irish* 98; *Fianna Fáil* 60-63). In addition to this, the Ireland of the time remained strongly conservative and Catholic as the two constitutions against divorce and abortion demonstrated in the early 80s (McLoone 98). Those were immediately followed by a bloody series of highly mediatised murders of women and undesired children, like the still unresolved “Kerry babies” case, as Kerrigan writes in 2006. Since the 1990s, more than sixty years of continuous and brutal sexual and mental abuses in reform schools and institutions were progressively disclosed, until finally in 2000 a commission was formed (“Sexual”). After ten years, in May of this year, the report outrageously did not identify any perpetrator, nobody was convicted as the state and especially the department of Education protected the Christian Brothers (“Sexual”).<sup>14</sup> In Belgium, the new autonomy of the Flemish and Walloon regions voted in 1980 changed the Belgian political landscape, further communautarized by the 1988 reform that declared Brussels as the third region of the country, fixed the territorial boundaries and assigned more decisional power to Flanders and Wallonia (Mean 200-207). This resulted, as André Mean argues, in

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<sup>14</sup> Report available on the internet: “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse.” 20 May 2009 <<http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/pdfs/>>

differences in mentalities between the North and the South of the country (208). The still unresolved waves of killing committed by “Les tueurs du Brabant” between 1982 and 1985 traumatized the whole Belgium, as the crimes began in supermarkets on the French border and ended in Alost in Flanders (Carozzo). Identikit posters could still be seen throughout Belgium in the ‘90s but tended to disappear when a new scandal broke up and again pointed at the ineffectual Belgian justice. In 1996, horrific sexual abuses and murders were revealed in Belgium, where posters of “Julie et Mélissa” can still be seen around Liège; the highly mediatised ‘Dutroux affair’ both abroad and in Belgium, tormented the whole nation, as people came together in an enormous White March. Two years after the scandal, Marc Dutroux even managed to escape during a few hours, which again reinforced people’s feeling of anxiety.

Those traumatic events lastingly affected the Belgian and Irish nations and their distrust in their judicial system, which has an inexorable impact on the artists’ representations of the world. In many films like *The Butcher Boy* or *On the Edge* (John Carney, 2001), only a few isolated characters reflect this alienating feeling of disquiet. Similarly, in *Disco Pigs*, Runt is going to a reform institution, whose directors’ relative leniency is to be perceived as a sign of the filmmaker’s hope at the opening of the commission in 2000. In *Calvaire*, however, all the characters are alienated as all of them have lost touch with reality. From the very beginning, the protagonist is confronted with an old woman seducing him but calling herself a “whore” when he rejects her. Then again, the woman in charge of the rest home insistently begs Marc to come back the next year as she craves for him. This reversal of generally accepted sexual identities, to be dealt with in the second chapter, disrupts conventional realism and bewilders the spectator. His mysterious and

powerful attraction seems to be at the core of his troubles, even though, contrarily to traditional horror films, the monstrous cause of Marc's misfortune remains ambiguous until the end and its origin is never identified. He simultaneously seems to embody the victim and to give rise to his own distress. The spectator's bewilderment also originates from the impossibility of knowing the "truth," accordingly with poststructuralists.<sup>15</sup> *Calvaire* mingles a "plurality of world" (in Zamora's words) without distinguishing good from evil in any moment, which again is a characteristic that evades the horror genre.

As noted by Dervila Layden and Barry Monahan in his article on *Isolation*, genres have recently been considered in their relation with the society or the nation that both generate and modify them. This theoretical light allows for genre considering with regard to Irish and Belgian filmmakers' perception of reality. Heterogeneity appears in the filmic aesthetic of *Calvaire*, which goes back and forth between a realist and an extraordinary representation of the world. Marc's van breaks down in the middle of a rainy forest, in an archetype of the horror genre. While realism nonetheless governs what is to follow, nonsensical elements progressively penetrate the fiction. After warning Marc off the villagers, Bartel searches Marc's van while he is having a walk. Through external focalization, spectators are apprised of the danger to come, which is also heralded when Marc discovers some of the villagers' zoophilic behaviour. Much later, when Bartel goes to the local pub, the "grand imagier" (i.e. the camera) lingers to make the spectator understand that the weird atmosphere integrates the whole area, and not only Bartel's. Contrarily to

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<sup>15</sup> Poststructuralists, like Lyotard, dismissed modern philosophy and its "dream of attaining a foundation for knowledge" (Best 21), since it only exists through language, which makes absolute truth unreachable.

fantastic narratives in which the supernatural appears problematical, in magical realist works “the same phenomena are presented in a matter-of-fact manner” (Chanady 24). The protagonist never questions the truthfulness of the weird events, which again enters in opposition with the norms of the horror genre. The film should rather be considered in terms of the uncanny, since “the world appears strange and mysterious without the occurrence of a supernatural event” (Chanady 9). The border between the familiar [*heimlich*] and unfamiliar is shattered, and conventional entities are turned upside down. Boris’ dog is actually a calf, and a pig plays the usual role of a dog. Belgian and Irish cultural representations abound with the figure of the pig, which in traditional literature “were often given otherworld associations” (Ó hÓgáin 423). Although pigs were a “valued source of meat” for both Irish and Belgian families and a sign of “independence and self-sufficiency” (Rockett 196) against the British and the German respectively, they now seem to be associated with death and the abject.<sup>16</sup> The relation that Kristeva establishes between the abject and the margins of the body can be observed in *The Butcher Boy* when Francie the pig, writes the word “PIG” in blood colour on the wall, defecates on Mrs. Nugent’s floor while imagining oinking pigs on television, and eventually kills her after being definitely rejected by Joe. Thierry Zéno’s *Vase de nocces* (Belgium, 1974) figures as an extreme example of this link between pigs, the abject and death, which is also fostered in *Disco Pigs* in which Runt urinates on the school director’s floor, spits on her sheet and kills Pig, as well as in *Calvaire* in which pigs, death and degenerate sexuality are

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<sup>16</sup> In Kristeva’s opinion, “si l’ordure signifie l’autre côté de la limite, où je ne suis pas et qui me permet d’être, le cadavre, le plus écoeurant des déchets, est une limite qui a tout envahi” (11).

closely connected. The importance given to the abject reflects a subversive aesthetic that is symptomatic of marginalized nations.

In spite of the unsettling symbolic aspects of *Calvaire*, the verisimilitude of the strange events is never questioned, as they are portrayed in external focalization. As Marc's perspective is rarely transmitted, he does not possess any narrative authority over the fictional world. Similarly to Alice in the wood of *Wonderland*, Marc is the alien element in the fictitious society; he is the one who appears insane, for he is the only one to speak the language of reason (Defaux 669).<sup>17</sup> In the depraved society portrayed, the only one denouncing its abusive aspects is automatically discredited, in a way that reminds the decades of complaints against the abuses in Irish industrial schools, which the state generally dismissed or ignored (see "Sexual"). For that matter, internal focalization is associated with an irrational *mise-en-scène*, the representation of reality being thoroughly shattered. Marc's mental state generates movements of camera that defeat realism, like for example through a series of increasingly quicker and crazier 360° pans of Boris, Bartel and Marc during their nightmarish Christmas dinner. Then, when the villagers supposedly come to rescue Marc, the camera shakes in a war-like fashion as if the whole house was being bombed rather than a few people shooting. No redemption is possible for the protagonist, who seems stuck in this irrational world and part of it at the same time, similarly to an abused child who, although vindicated, will never forget. The beginning of the film already establishes the uncanny, as cold colours

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<sup>17</sup> In the original text, Defaux analyses Erasmus and Molière's texts and underlines that "...celui qui entend dire la vérité, démasquer les visages, parler le langage de la raison, y passe aux yeux d'autrui pour un fou furieux –*demens ac furiosus*" (669).

and a fixed camera that alternates with handheld shots emphasize Marc's ridicule disguise, his poor setting and choreography. The colours in *Calvaire* evolve



*Marc's daily life before his mishaps*

alongside with the degree of reality that the director wants to transmit. The more Bartel settles Marc down in his house; the more the contrast between the colours becomes expressionist and surreal. In her book on magical realism, Maggie Ann



*Expressionist and surreal mise-en-scène in Calvaire*

Bowers underlines that “the realism of [a] film [may be] diminished by the director’s choice of lighting” (110). The repeated uses of filters as well as the absence of extradiegetic music – which usually enters the norms of realism –, create a bizarre atmosphere. In addition, one of the few diegetic music pieces is played on a dissonant piano in minor key and incites the villagers to awkwardly sway, in a surreal scene that alludes to André Delvaux’s famous film *Un soir, un train*.

The nightmarish nature of *Calvaire* is nonetheless presented as a tangible and material reality, in a similar way that the utopian world of Pig and Runt exceeds their imagination. From the very beginning, the montage of *Disco Pigs* participates in the creation of this magical reality. The shot/reverse shot of the babies gives the illusion that they are looking at each other, which is echoed not long after when, as teenagers,

they gaze and smile to one another through the wall of their mirrored adjoining rooms. This false use of shot/reverse shot is also used in *Calvaire*, when Marc looks at a dry landscape that is covered with snow once framed by his rear window. “As with many magical realist novels,” Maggie Ann Bowers asserts, “the narrative technique of the film and the content are intertwined” (111). In *Disco Pigs*, as in the surreal scenes of *Calvaire* mentioned previously, the mise-en-scène – including colours, sounds or music, movements of camera or within the image, as well as the editing – express the characters’ inner state. Pig and Runt’s happy memory of their journey to the beach is illustrated in a bright colourful image and the music says: “in this world where we live, there should be more happiness,” while Runt’s parents are arguing. Later, a shaking handheld camera and repetitive cuts to similar sizes of frames, that contradict continuity editing,<sup>18</sup> characterize Pig’s psychotic second monologue. Sounds of the sea join the last shot of this scene to an image of Runt in apnoea in the bath, encapsulating in this way their supernatural connection. This one again manifests when Pig approaches Runt’s reform institution, as both of them feel each other’s presence, as in *Des plumes dans la tête* when Blanche’s son dies. This natal link can be interpreted in terms of a national connection between a divided people. Both Irish and Belgian were cradled on a same land but appear in a constant stretch between mother and father, between detachment and attraction regarding deep-rooted foreign influences. For that matter, different kinds of aesthetics mingle in the films discussed so far but never totally fuse.

Whereas *Calvaire* and *Disco Pigs* were on the threshold between horror and realism, *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado* oscillate between a comic and a tragic mode,

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<sup>18</sup> See Amiel, 2001.

which is another source of magical realism.. Although the tragic tone is predominant in both films, a succession of unexpected events and characters generates a “magical” mood in the dark reality presented. The progressive immersion of “the directionless protagonists [of *Adam and Paul*] into situations of epic and uncontrollable proportion” (167), Barry Monahan argues, provokes a comic “snowball effect,” in Henri Bergson’s words. Bergson asserts that the comic undoubtedly requires “une anesthésie momentanée du cœur” (6) from the spectators, who also have to regard the characters’ apparent freedom as controlled by fate, people being “d’humbles marionnettes Dont le fil est au main de la Nécessité” (Prudhomme qtd. in Bergson, 79).<sup>19</sup> As they laugh, spectators are aware of the “grand imagier” that Bergson is referring to by “Fate.” Adam and Paul’s successive happenings may bewilder the audience and appear as “magical,” for no logical explanation can be provided within the fictitious world. Precisely when Adam and Paul’s situation seems utterly hopeless and when Paul is begging to be lucky, a brand new television is left in front of them, which again disputes the boundary between fiction and reality. This possible way of making money is nevertheless soon annihilated when the reseller kicks and breaks the screen. The magical aspect of that event is also enhanced by the fact that the possible customer for the television lives next door to their drug dealer, where Adam and Paul went knocking at the beginning of the film. The protagonists also seem to acknowledge this circularity as they assert “back where we started,” where they started the day but also the film. This statement reemphasizes their position on the border between the fictional and the real world.

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<sup>19</sup> “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart”(4b) – “... humble marionettes The wires of which are pulled by Fate” (26a). Translations available online: <<http://www.templeofearth.com/books/laughter.pdf>>

Adam and Paul have been rejected by a handful of acquaintances, until they meet Clank who at first glance sets them in a worse situation, which as a matter of fact provides them with a car. As explained before, this series of (un)fortunate events succeed in a *deus ex machina* sort of way, as in the case of the two packs of heroin that fall at their feet. As Christian Metz explains, the verisimilitude of the film originates from its ability to make the audience believe that however unreal the events may appear (*Essais* 15), they are determined by the very subject of the film:

L'oeuvre vraisemblable...essaie de persuader le public que les conventions qui lui font restreindre les possibles...ne sont pas des conventions du tout, et que leur effet, constatable dans le contenu de l'oeuvre, est en réalité l'effet de la nature des choses et tient aux caractères intrinsèques du sujet représenté.<sup>20</sup> 241

Following this statement, the verisimilitude of Dublin's city and life is conveyed through the use of natural lighting and exterior spaces. Nevertheless, the reality is distorted by the many protagonists' mishaps. This is characteristic of magical realism, as Franz Roh asserts, "the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it" (qtd. in Leal, 123). Not only does this altered reality manifest at the thematic level, but also at the stylistic one.

The filmic aesthetic is positioned on the threshold of realism by the shattering of realistic conventions. Extreme long shots, usually used as establishing shots, here often frame the protagonists, who thus appear obscured by their environment. The

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<sup>20</sup> "The verisimilar work...attempts to persuade the audience that the conventions that make it restrict its possibilities...are not conventions at all, and that their effects, which can be seen in the work content, result in fact from the nature of things and originate from the intrinsic character of the subject represented." Trans. mine

frame also appears to act upon their behaviour; for instance, when the camera does not move but Paul stops in the middle of the frame attracted by something behind us, Adam then joins him in the frame again when he notices Paul's absence. This use of the frame is unsettling for the spectator, since it blurs the boundary between fiction



and reality. Large shots and depth of field are also used to favour the “spectator’s focalization,” which gives rise to laughter and bewilderment at the characters’ naivety,<sup>21</sup> as when Adam and Paul are supposed to watch out for the police while Clank is robbing a petrol station shop. Closer shots serve likewise to unsettle the spectator and raise laughter; for example, when Paul is knocked down by a motorcycle and then hit by a ball in the park. The surprise arises from the external focalization, which places the characters and the audience on the same level of knowledge. Extreme close-ups are also used to generate the extraordinary, although in a completely different manner. In the scene during which the drug dealer rejects the protagonists, the camera functions as an independent eye, which neither

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<sup>21</sup> François Jost applies the term “spectator’s focalization” to any given moment “when the audience has the advantage of knowing what’s going on” (Châteauvert 113), compared to the protagonists.

correspond to any of the characters' view nor focalizes on them as it did in the previous examples. It can thus be named "non-focalized" camera, since it introduces the "grand imagier's" perspective. Progressively shorter shots generate an abstract tone and enhance the "magical," as Adam and Paul are actually turned down by an eye and a voice that will never be humanized.



*More and more abstract shots of the door of Adam and Paul's dealer*

Internal focalization also introduces mystery into the fictional world. First, when Janine appears on the threshold of her room, where Adam and Paul cuddle her baby, a dreamy scene of the three of them hugging is presented. The perspective of this scene remains unclear, as it begins after a shot of Janine's back and Adam and Paul looking at her, and it closes with the two bewildered protagonists. This fantasy allegedly originates from (one of) the two men's imaginary. The subjectivity of the scene is emphasized by the slow motion but also by the sudden "suspension of sound" (in Michel Chion's terms), which disrupts our perception of reality by producing "an impression of emptiness and mystery" (112).<sup>22</sup> The second internal focalization occurs when the protagonists are tripping under heroin. After being introduced by peaceful extradiegetic music, this scene expresses the characters' state of mind through out-of-focus images, brighter colours, detail shots of their body and inserts of objects in point of view shots. In a similar way as in the first occurrence of internal focalization, these subjective shots are never identified with one specific character, as Barry Monahan asserts in his article (167). This undermining of usual

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<sup>22</sup> "...une impression de vide et de mystère" in the original text. Trans. mine

cinematic conventions and editing techniques such as the eyeline matching (Monahan 167) disrupts our expectations of realism. By introducing magical elements in realism, Belgian and Irish filmmakers seem to find an adequate mode of expression for the liminal cultural identity of their nations. Moreover, and as will be seen in *Eldorado*, their use of cinematic techniques tends to dehumanize their characters by emphasizing their natural environment, such as to convey their alienation as members of a divided nation.

A piece of art was regarded as realistic when it represented the external world with “truth and honesty,” as Joy Marcus asserts (190). In postmodernity, however, the meaning of realism has shifted to “fidelity to the nature of the medium or to the artist’s subjectivity itself, as the notion of an objective external order began to fall into disrepute” (Joy Marcus 190). The aesthetic of *Adam and Paul* even shatters this concept of realism, as it unsettles the medium conventions to create a magical reality, in which “the improbable and the mundane” commingle, in Salman Rushdie’s words (qtd in Bowers, 3). In *Eldorado*, similar devices of mise-en-scène are used to generate the same kind of magical realism. The protagonists are also often framed by long shots that diminish their importance in the fictional world compared to their environment, which seems even more deserted. As in Abrahamson’s film, the large



*In Eldorado, Elie wakes up in a rural and deserted area*

shots increase the duration of the characters’ action, since they must dawdle from an end to the other end of a larger frame than usual. For example, this stands clearly when Elie crosses from the car to the petrol station shop in a setting that reminds

Abrahamson's *Garage*. Those large shots and their subsequent emphasis on duration are devices that generate magical realism, as they "destroy our conventional view



*Elie crosses from the car to the shop in Eldorado*

of reality" (Chanady 27). This is an occurrence of "time-image" following Deleuze's definition, as this type of image connects the audience's perceptions to the protagonists' thoughts rather than to their movements as in the traditional "action-image" (7-8). In both films, the audience's perception of time indeed correlates with the characters' dawdling mind.

In *Eldorado*, as in *Adam and Paul*, the "magical" also emerges from "false" editing techniques. At the end of their journey to Elie's parents, a series of low angle tracking shots successively unfolds from right to left and from left to right. This kind of montage does not respect the usual rule of the "180° system that ensures consistent screen direction" (Bordwell 312), thus the car from which the images are apparently taken seems to change direction continually. Besides, the house roofs and the sky are seemingly framed from what may be Elie's perspective but are never clearly aligned to it, which disorients the spectators. Their bewilderment also increases while the montage of those shots is organised rhythmically in accordance



*Disruptive shots and montage in Eldorado*

with the characters' dialogue. This usage of rhythmical montage in order to undermine realism and create a magical realist atmosphere can also be observed in *Des plumes dans la tête*, when Arthur has just disappeared and completely heterogeneous images are juxtaposed for unsettling effect. Amaryll Chanady indeed underlines that magical realism "belongs neither entirely to the domain of fantasy...nor to that of reality, which is our conventional everyday world" (27). *Eldorado* and *Adam and Paul* integrate that definition by going beyond the limits of realism, since their auteurs "[do] not try to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) or to wound it (as the Surrealists did) but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things" (Leal 123). This in-between mode of representation that Belgian and Irish filmmakers tend to privilege serves as an expression of the dualism of their very national cultures.

Genre blending, as seen before in *Disco Pigs* and *Calvaire*, also figures as an alternative to the traditional narrative modes generally adopted by core countries' cinema. Similarly to *Adam and Paul*, *Eldorado* also includes some of the characteristics of the road movie, but absurdly undermine them. Both films are structured along the lines of "character motivation and cause-effect relations through the journey itself" (Hammond 14). The characters "are acted upon events along the road" (Hammond 14), that confronts them to people even more eccentric or marginal who thus underline "la moderation, la mesure, le manque d'engagement des protagonistes" (Hurault-Paupe 120).<sup>23</sup> This is mainly true for *Eldorado*, in which Yvan and Elie are confronted to a man who sells old cars and boasts that all of them were involved in death accidents. Later, a naked and hairless man calling himself

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<sup>23</sup> "the protagonists' moderation, self-discipline and lack of commitment."  
Trans. mine.

“Alain Delon” helps them to tow and clean their car. In an unusual scene, he is sitting naked on a chair marked with the actor’s name and he is explaining the road to Yvan, while the farmer who towed the car insistently stares at Elie who overtly



*Magical realist scene in Eldorado*

looks aside. In the next scene, the farmer, who never said a word, interminably hugs Elie until Yvan comes to deliver him. At the end of their journey, the protagonists are faced with a dying dog that another eccentric advises them to leave there: “un chien c’est comme un être humain, faut le laisser là et se casser, c’est tout.”<sup>24</sup> Yvan and Elie nevertheless decide to euthanize the dog and bury it, which again proves their moderation compared to the other characters of the fiction. This contrast generates an absurd tone, which also proceeds from the external focalization that allows the strange events to integrate properly the fictional reality. In the same way as in *Adam and Paul*, the protagonists’ imagination is presented only once through internal focalization. A flashback, which is again not aligned to any character but allegedly arising from Yvan’s memory, expresses the main characters’ state of mind. Quite conventionally, a Spanish lament that is completely different from the other music of the film introduces the sequence, which is nevertheless closed by a non-focalized and unconventional shot that rotates with the door of the car when Elie opens it. This type of technique sheds light on the cinematic apparatus (seemingly fixed on the door) and thus blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. As for

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<sup>24</sup> “A dog is like a human being. Just leave it here and split”

Adam and Paul's metafilmic statement, the purpose of this implicit self-reflexivity is not to distance the spectator but maybe to underline the very nature of cinema: itself liminal, going between illusion and iconic representation of reality. As Barthes highlights: "le cinema fictionnel...peut être fou par artifice, présenter les signes culturels de la folie, il ne l'est jamais par nature (par statut iconique);...il est simplement une illusion" (181).<sup>25</sup> By blurring the abstract boundary between fiction and reality, Belgian and Irish artists convey their very in-betweenness, as they are both influenced by the dualism of their national culture and torn apart between their countries of origin while France or England appear as places "to realise economic and social ambition" (Rockett 181). As explained in the introduction, emigration is a common phenomenon among Belgian and Irish filmmakers, who do not find sufficient economic and cultural support to fulfil their ambitions.

The road movie, in this light, plainly epitomizes this duality as "the unexpected and unexplained acts that happen on the road are motivated by the fact that the protagonists are outside of their ordinary sphere of existence" (Hammond 14). In both *Eldorado* and *Adam and Paul*, the extraordinary, however, already entered the fiction before the protagonists undertook their journey. Yvan indeed waits the whole night for the thief (Elie) to come out from under his bed. This scene generates a grotesque mood, already produced by a homeless man declaring himself as the Christ before the opening credits. From the very beginning of *Adam and Paul* likewise, an absurd backdrop is provided to encompass the protagonists' adventures. Adam and Paul embark on their trip to the city as an ultimate solution to the first part

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<sup>25</sup> "Fictional cinema...can be insane by artefact, present the cultural signs of insanity, it never is by nature (by its iconic status);...it simply is an illusion." Trans. mine

of their troubles. In only five minutes, they wonder where they are, in the middle of nowhere, Paul delivers Adam from the mattress on which he was sleeping and ruins his jacket and pants, and Martin, their drug dealer, roughly rejects them in the unusual scene described before. Although the protagonists evolve in an environment that they know, in which the film differs from the road movie aesthetic, the fiction is formally structured by their loitering through the city, the events and the minor characters that they encounter. Adam and Paul's quest for survival places the film into the second category of road movies established by Anne Hurault-Paupe (116) who emphasizes the stasis that characterises this cinematic style. Whereas *Eldorado* was only based on the quest narrative related to the *bildungsroman* (as it sometimes happens according to Hurault-Paupe), *Adam and Paul* seems to integrate ironically the three categories distinguished by the critic. The narrative is indeed marked alike by the chase ("la cavale"), the drift ("la derive"), and the illusory quest (115-117). As a result of a misunderstanding, Adam and Paul's path converges with Clank's, whom they do not know but who abducts them to commit a robbery. They later escape with Clank's car that they break a few miles later, in a grotesque conclusion of the opportunity that they were looking for. The absurdity of the realities presented by Lenny Abrahamson and Bouli Lanners may be illustrating the incongruity of the judicial and social systems<sup>26</sup> in Belgium and Ireland, the road metaphorically representing a potential escape.

However, even when Adam and Paul begin to be lucky, they are unable to seize the occasion and seem doomed to remain underdogs whatever happens. They are subdued by the community/nation in which they live. Adam and Paul belong to

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<sup>26</sup> The third chapter of this thesis will deal with the economic systems of Belgium and Ireland and their social consequences in more details.

the city, since “individual and collective identities, far from standing in dichotomous dualistic opposition, are two sides of the same coin” (Szakolczai qtd. in Flynn, 36). The bond linking the protagonists to the community seems immutable, as the one linking people to their nation of origin. Contrarily to what Turner thought, “liminality issuing in ‘homogeneous’ *communitas* followed by a regenerative return to structure is essentially utopian” (Weber, 530), for communities and nations tend to silence marginal voices and consider subaltern identities as ‘other’ (Gledhill 11). Adam and Paul’s lack of commitment equal the people that they meet during their journey “back in town,” as they drink excessively, rob or beg for money, thus placing marginality at the centre of reality. This feature is at the core of contemporary Irish cinema as Debbie Ging affirms,

What is most striking about this new cycle of male-themed and male-oriented films is its preoccupation with underclass, criminal and socially marginalized masculinities and the popularity of these underclass antiheroes at the height of the Celtic Tiger, a time of unprecedented economic prosperity in Ireland. 164

This same tendency can be observed in contemporary Belgian cinema, not only in Bouli Lanners’ films (including *Eldorado* and *Ultranova*), but also in the films of the Dardenne brothers. They reflect the industrial decline suffered by Wallonia in the 50s and 60s and its unending consequences on the present, as many people are considered socially marginalized. Even Yvan who is characterized by Elie as having a car, money and a job, that is as being integrated into society, seems to drift through life, as he accompanies his “thief” Elie on a three-days trip to his parents’ house. Moreover, as Philip Mosley asserts, “the political complexity of contemporary Belgium carries within it an ever present risk of alienating the

citizenship from the multifarious apparatuses of the state” (24). In both *Eldorado* and *Adam and Paul*, the lack of inner characterization of the protagonists compared to the importance given to their environment seems to convey this concern for people’s alienation in contemporary Belgian and Irish society.

The liminal aesthetic of the four films studied reflects the very characters’ marginality and their in-between cultural identity. The confusion of internal and external focalizations privileges the introduction of extraordinary events as well as the characters’ unexpected behaviour. This undermines realism – which is also shattered by the *mise-en-scène* –, and thus provides an alternative mode of representation for a liminal people. Belgian and Irish filmmakers are to be considered in their specificity, as members of in-between nations that have been marginalized by the core countries around them, as will be explored in the next chapter. As artists, they are also marginalized by the society in which they live, as they do not receive sufficient support to realise their art without having to resort to coproduction and hence they often have to turn to the very nations that once despised them. As extreme examples of liminality, *Puckoon* (Ryan, 2002) and *Thomas est amoureux* (Renders, 2000) both display Irish and Belgian schizophrenic identities, not only by portraying magical realities, but also by thoroughly undermining the border between fiction and reality, as the characters constantly address the camera, and as a result, the “grand imagier” or the master of the fictional reality. As will be seen in the next chapter, Belgian and Irish filmmakers also reflect on the fragmentation and subsequent liminality of their nations through the schizophrenic attitude of the protagonists, their relation to childhood and their recurrent problems of communication, which also impinge on the films’ formal aspects.

## The double: an archetype of liminal identity

This chapter shall focus on the construction of the characters, in which Belgian and Irish filmmakers tend to allegorically convey the marginalization that their nation has suffered from its neighbours as well as their own national liminality. Since the nation is constantly on the threshold of divergent cultures, communication is rendered more complex and appears sometimes impossible. Communication problems often arise between characters in contemporary Belgian and Irish cinema, though they are also manifest in earlier films such as *Le banquet des fraudeurs* (Henri Storck, 1951) and *The Quiet Man* (John Ford, 1952), in which different cultures appear in conflict with one another. Cultural clashes that arise from the coexistence of multifarious worldviews are to be observed in various nations and especially in colonized ones; but here Belgium and Ireland are to be treated in correlation, as being two European countries that display a multitude of homologous aspects. This emphasis on communication problems and the motif of the “double” also stems from the divergences of the two countries’ cinemas from their European counterparts. If “strong state support can be a key factor in developing successful film industries” (Everett 29), in Belgium and Ireland, the recent proliferation of independent producers and directors and their necessary recourse to European funding or co-production demonstrate the countries’ lack of any film industry. In addition to their similar enduring difficulties regarding feature-film support from the state, which privileges video, shorts and documentaries; the distribution of Belgian and Irish films proves strenuous beyond festivals, television and art-house cinemas (Pettitt 39-45; Mosley 139-209). It is not surprising thus if Wendy Everett, in her survey on European film, only mentions Ireland and Belgian cinema without even dealing with them synthetically as she does for other small industries, such as Portugal, Denmark

and Iceland. She nearly amalgamates Irish cinema with British's and correlates Belgian cinema to Luxemburg's, for Belgian and Irish audiovisual markets are dominated by France and the UK, respectively the first and second largest market in the EU (Everett 19).<sup>27</sup> As explained in the introduction, it is widely acknowledged that "narrative fiction films produced by nation-state film industries play an important part in the construction of a national imaginary" (Mosley 168). In the case of Belgium and Ireland, Gellner's emphasis on nationalism as constructed through media is highly relevant. In Flanders, in the early '90s the television channels VTM and VRT undertook to broadcast exclusively Flemish programs (or adapted from Dutch ones) to thwart the massive interest for Netherlandish channels and construct a Flemish identity (Dresse). The increasing tendency to broadcast Irish-speaking programs on the whole island of Ireland, whereas BBC remains very popular on the two sides of the borders, also participates to the in-betweenness of Irish identity. Belgian and Irish's failure to build a strong national audiovisual industry thus impinges on their divided national image.

As seen in the introduction, both the Belgian and the Irish have the idea of their nation as an invention and as a product of others' imagination. The concept of double-consciousness such as explained before is reflected through the recurrent motif of the "double," which often appears in form of alter egos. This expresses the Belgian and Irish feeling of being the same and other at the same time, as their nations have been culturally, politically, linguistically and socially divided by

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<sup>27</sup> "Hollywood's global dominance" is indeed not to be taken into account as it affects all Europe (Hill 1-7). "Audiovisual market" here includes French and English television soaps, which have a real impact on French-speaking Belgian and Irish audiences respectively. The huge success of series like *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders* in Ireland and of *Plus belle la vie* or *Sous le soleil* among Belgian audiences, are examples of this domination.

history. Their double-consciousness also originates from the once scornful look casted by France and England upon the Belgian and the Irish respectively. At the end of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire describes Belgium as “un pays barbare” (qtd. in Crépet, 162),<sup>28</sup> a grotesque exaggeration of every France’s defects, which he relates in notes that were to be published under the title *Pauvre Belgique!, La Grottesque Belgique* or, with even more contempt, *Une Capitale pour rire, La Capitale des singes* or *Une Capitale de singes* (Crépet 164).<sup>29</sup> Although Baudelaire’s disdain for Belgium could be associated with the unbearable progression of his illness, this was a long-lasting feeling among French people towards Belgium. Luc Dardenne dubs this feeling of inferiority: “En Belgique, il y a un vieux complexe par rapport à la France. Nous avons une fameuse expression qui dit: ‘Mille ans dessous France’ – *mille ans de souffrance*” (53).<sup>30</sup> This unjustified disdain recalls the English despising look upon the Irish, whom they regarded as a backward and “abjected” people whom they compared to filthy pigs (Sweeney 78-79). The pejorative epithet “Potato eaters” given to the Irish echoes Baudelaire’s remarks on Belgian poor culinary habits (deprived of fruits and vegetables) (Asselineau). A profusion of other stereotypes can be observed, especially between the Netherlands and Flanders, and from America towards Ireland. As Yvan Vanden Berghe explains, until the ‘90s, Flanders has looked up to Holland, through the media, as a guide country on an intellectual but also political level.<sup>31</sup> However, the vehement struggle led by Flanders to establish the

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<sup>28</sup> “a barbarian country”

<sup>29</sup> *Poor Belgium!, The Grottesque Belgium, A Capital for Laughing, The Monkeys’ Capital, A Capital of Monkeys*. Trans. mine

<sup>30</sup> “In Belgium, there is an ancient complex regarding/compared to France. We have a well-known expression that says: ‘A thousand year below France’ – *A thousand year of suffering*” Trans. mine

<sup>31</sup> In the original text: “Deze Vlaamse Nederlandgangers...hoopten openlijk dat Vlaanderen en België een beetje meer op Nederland zouden gaan lijken.” And

Dutch language as a cultural criterion fails to interest the Netherlands, which proves condescending towards Flanders and denies it diplomatic recognition (Vanden). Although American stereotypes are nowadays aligned to the “singing and drinking Irish,” they rely on a more ancient discrimination of the Catholic and underprivileged immigrant (Clapper; Jensen). This ancient contempt and its remains in popular thinking therefore affected the current self-image of Belgian and Irish people, which instigates artists to adopt unconventional and sometimes absurd modes of expression, in a re-appropriation of their identity, even though alienated. As seen in the introduction, this liminal feeling also arises from the countries’ lack of unified and asserted history, which seems to be reflected through a preoccupation with infancy and the margins.

In *Disco Pigs*, an emphasis on mirrors evinces the necessity of recognizing oneself as a complete human being. As Lacan theorizes, the formation of the ego occurs at the mirror stage,<sup>32</sup> and becomes a human subject at “the entry into language” (Appel 101). Pig and Runt’s personality oscillates between these two stages, as they constantly need to reassure themselves on their own existence, as in a symptom of the double-consciousness of their nation. Pig and Runt find a double in one another: by leading a parallel life they protect themselves against “the power of death” (Freud 235) as they remain in the primary narcissism, that is the mirror stage. The many presence of mirrors, Pig’s egotism, and the characters’ fantasy of being king and queen and annihilating the whole world apart from their two rooms, figure as their failure to grow up, which already appears in Runt’s statement at the

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“Nederland was inderdaad gedurende drie decennia (1960- 1990) op vele gebieden het gidsland voor een grote groep Vlaamse intellectuelen.”

<sup>32</sup> When the infant recognizes itself in the mirror (Metz, “Imaginary” 733)

beginning “and I arrive into this world of mine.” Inasmuch as they do not express themselves through coherent language, Pig and Runt persist in being on the threshold between the magical and imaginative world of children, and society. Pig makes Runt a present of “the big blue there,” i.e. the sea, also referred to as “all that water”. The inability to project oneself to abstract situations beyond tangible life also reflects their childishness, as this capacity figures among the various stages of development (Robaey). This is also manifest in their dialogue on Runt’s dream to “walk into the sea and never come back” and to become someone different for half an hour, to which Pig answers “Jesus Runt that’d be impossible, 'a half hour', fuck!” Towards the end of the film though, the necessary umbilical detachment progressively occurs, which is symbolized in Pig’s breaking the mirror in the bathroom of the ‘Palace’. After he realizes that he has lost his own self in the process, Darren is meant to die. “When [the primary narcissism] has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect,” Freud asserts, “from having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death” (235). This lethal protection that Pig and Runt had created for themselves against the outside world and their refusal to grow up may allegorically refer to the relatively recent Irish nation and its tendency towards “self-sufficiency” as McLoone dubs it (*Irish* 25). “The complacent and conservative society,” in McLoone’s words, is therefore reflected in the reclusive life of Pig and Runt in a ‘bubble-state’ that is itself internally divided.

The archetype of the double has often been used to express the characters’ alienation from their social or cultural background in films, such as in Bergman’s *Persona* or Kieslowski’s *The Double Life of Véronique* among others, in which the double is presented as an indicator of death. However, the ‘double’ takes on a new meaning when it serves to express the hybridity of a nation divided between

conflicting cultures, which is idiosyncratic to Belgium and Ireland. In the four films analysed in this thesis, the separation of the dual protagonists seems to be necessary for the other to be able to go on living. In *Toto le héros*, Thomas saves Alfred's life by committing suicide, in a symptomatic gesture of his uncertain identity and his impossibility to gather the self until he dies, as Jacqueline Aubenas underlines: "mais s'il est né Autre, il mourra enfin dans un 'Je' rassemblé, à sa place" (63).<sup>33</sup> In the same way, in *Disco Pigs*, Darren asks Sinéad to kill him. Marc, in *Calvaire*, seems to renounce to his personality and embrace Gloria's (although it remains ambiguous). And in both *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado*, the protagonists end up divided by death or a fatal future. *The Tiger's Tail* (Ireland, 2006) likewise appears to echo *Trouble* (Belgium, 2005); although the resolution of the conflict is different, it becomes unavoidable that one of the twins dies or that the twins physically split up. This inevitable disunion seems to indicate the impossible reconciliation of hybrid nations that are and will ever be divided between conflicting viewpoints. The four films here under scrutiny, nevertheless, do not draw conclusions upon their nations' future but rather raise a whole set of questions about it.

Towards the end of the film, in the "Palace," Pig underlines how great he and Runt look in the mirror. However, the disruptive montage that intercuts the protagonists' reflection with their physical image suggests the contrary. This disregard of filmic conventions confuses the spectator and introduces a kind of magical aspect, since their reflection corresponds to the inverted image of another replica. In the mirror, Pig and Runt are the reflections of the very mirror image created by the cinematographic apparatus, which reproduces the object as "its shade,

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<sup>33</sup> "While he was born Other, he finally dies as a gathered 'I,' in his place."  
Trans. mine

its double” as Christian Metz asserts (“Imaginary” 733). Inverted shots like those presented below alternate and compose the whole sequence. Pig and Runt thus appear as shadows of themselves, furthermore isolated from their environment by the use of a long lens. Considering the psychoanalytical tone of films, Adolphe



“False” shot/ reverse-shots of Pig and Runt in the club “Palace”

Nysenholc emphasizes that contrary to American cinema, European directors tend to convey interiority through the protagonist’s own self rather than through a third entity that would analyse it: “le cinéma européen a souvent la tentation de l’introspection: l’analyse de soi-même par soi-même” (87).<sup>34</sup> Thus, contrary to what can be seen in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) according to Nysenholc (91), European characters are generally<sup>35</sup> not portrayed from the outside, but internal and external blend into one or even two (double) protagonists. Bergman’s *Persona* constitutes an extreme example of that transfer between the self and the “other,” as the main characters mingle. In the same way as the protagonists of *Disco Pigs*, and *Calvaire*, Alma and Elisabeth appear as the very source of their existential feeling of guilt. Since human beings were born to die –which constitutes a punishment per se–, it seems that an unknown crime has been committed for which no redemption is

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<sup>34</sup> “European cinema often tend to interiorize: through the analysis of oneself by one’s own self” Trans. mine

<sup>35</sup> Here, “generally” is used since some examples in European cinema prove to adopt Hollywoodian processes such as described by Nysenholc. For example in *About Adam*, the protagonist’s introspection is entrusted to all the other characters; although this introspection is subverted as the spectator never really knows who Adam is.

possible, such as portrayed in European films; in opposition to the American happy ending where the protagonist's anxiety is decoded (Nysenholc 90-91).

While in *Calvaire*, one single protagonist embodies the self and the “other,” thereby restoring the ego's “fragmentation and insufficiency to illusory unity” (Benvenuto and Kennedy qtd. in Appel, 101); in *Disco Pigs* the self and the other manifest separately through respectively Runt and Pig. Pig conveys the id that is “unacceptable to the subject and to the social order” according to Freud's theories (Appel 104). When facing their inner self and until the end, the protagonists of both *Calvaire* and *Disco Pigs* do not experience relief, as the conflicts between the two constitutive parts of their subject remain unsolved. The last image of *Disco Pigs* is ambiguous, as it cuts on Sinéad in motion saying “where to, hey pal, where to?” leaving as a result the spectator in the vague as whether she runs towards the sea in an attempt to join Darren in the otherworld, or goes back to a lonely and “normal” life that is accepted by society. The dissolve of that image – just before the ending credits – to a light blue, which is the sky colour, hints nonetheless at her death by walking into the sea, following in this way her desire. However, this is not to be observed as a negative act, but as an act of regeneration and rebirth, the sea being an “ancient, universal symbol of the mother” (Bonaparte qtd. in Den Tandt, 72). Runt was indeed constantly dreaming about the ocean giving her an opportunity to be someone different. Sinéad is to be reborn alone “in that silence again,” as she utters in the very end, echoing her monologue as a baby at the beginning. The buzzing society that condemns her to a state of in-betweenness would thus be silenced, which would enable Sinéad to fully live her “otherness” within contemporary society. In an allegorical reading, this gesture symbolizes Ireland fully entering into Europe with all its particularities and overlooking all the myths that have been built around the

nation. In the postmodern era, “the ‘marginal’ and...the ‘ex-centric’...take on new significance,” Linda Hutcheon asserts, “the concept of alienated otherness...gives way...to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralized sameness, but of decentralized community” (12). Belgian and Irish filmmakers particularly focus on marginality, which is at the core of their aesthetics as an expression of the liminality of their very nation. In that process, they prove very distinct from their European counterparts.

Marc’s liminality is also expressed through the proliferation of mirrors in *Calvaire*. Although the spectator empathizes with Marc as the victim, they might have some doubts upon his identity. First, when Bartel finds his driving license on which Marc appears with a horrific black beard, and then, when all the villagers recognize him as Gloria, which brings the spectator to wonder if it really does not exist any link between the two people. This questioning is increased by the fact that the spectator still hoped for the villagers to rescue Marc, even if their expectations had been shattered by the surreal scene in the pub, which also tore down the concept of abnormality as used by Bartel. And finally, when Robert falls into a frozen swamp in the last scene of the film, Marc admits that he had loved him,<sup>36</sup> as if he really were Gloria. This is to be related to the poststructuralists’ ideas that the truth is unreachable, that the human subject is decentred, and thus that traditional dichotomies, such as gender oppositions, must be dismantled. Marc would thus embody both the ego and the id in a hybrid character, as the ultimate human being encapsulating the masculine and the feminine. Traditional identities as well as the horror genre are subverted, as Marc does not seem to embody the usual innocent

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<sup>36</sup> Marc says “Je t’ai aimé”

victim. This ambiguity remains until the end and Marc's fate is unclear, as it is emphasized by a long lateral tracking shot going from right to left, giving thus the impression of a return to the past, or to the village, before the ending credits interrupt the movement. However, contrary to *Disco Pigs*, the horrific cry at the end of the credits figures as an ill omen for the protagonist, unable to flourish in such a dichotomous and pugnacious society.

As *Breakfast on Pluto* and *Ma vie en rose*, *Calvaire* explores sexuality matters and reverse stereotypes through the archetype of the double. The subtitle of *S.* (Guido Henderickx, 1998), "Nobody is Innocent," could also apply to this film, as it conveys likewise "a reaction against a supposedly sexually degenerated Belgian society of the mid/late 1990s" (Mathijs 86). As *S.*, *Calvaire* alludes to the Dutroux case, as Fabrice du Welz himself acknowledges; he used the Walloon landscape "en référence aux sombres histoires de grands malades qu'il y a eus en Belgique."<sup>37</sup> Marc as a man but dressed as a woman and further disguised as the Little Red Riding Hood, embodies the poststructuralist idea of unfixed identities. He is kept under the control of his "husband," Bartel, and raped by the villagers, as a woman (or Gloria) would be, which reflects a reversal of stereotypes, already existing at the beginning with the two women's craving for him. Marc embodies a clash of worldviews, which is "the often essential element of horror...present consistently across a number of Irish films" (Och 193). Dana Och indicates that "the lack of a highly identifiable and vilified monster," as can equally be seen in *Disco Pigs* and *Calvaire*, "is a symptom of historical circumstances...[among which] the continuing nature of the Troubles results in the inability to simply personify and exorcise the social anxieties in the

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<sup>37</sup> "to refer to the dark stories of the critically insane people happening in Belgium" Trans. mine

bodily form of a monster” (193). Here speaking about Irish cinema, Och points at the Troubles of Northern Ireland as a traumatic event of the past that undermines national cohesion, for being still unresolved in the present, like separatism in Belgium. This makes it “difficult to identify a single source that could be demonized in the films as the monster” (193). In *Calvaire* and *The Company of Wolves* (Neil Jordan, 1984) alike, sexuality serves to express traumatic aspects of a society, whose divergences reflect in “the multiplicity of world views [that] is presented as the norm” (Och 194). This diversity is also conveyed in the films’ magic realist aesthetic, as Neil Jordan affirms: “I like to take stories that have a realistic beginning, that start from the point of realism and go to some other place that is surrealistic” (qtd. in Och, 194). Very similarly to Fabrice du Welz, Jordan uses magical realism to display a “sense of borderland and ‘inbetweenness’” (Rockett 38), which is symptomatic of the fragmented Belgian and Irish identity.

The magical realism of *Calvaire* originates from Marc’s liminality, trapped between the real and the surreal, as in a dreamlike state. Marc’s raptors behave as animals and embody pigs, representing thus the abject and all the fear attached to children’s imaginary. In Freud’s opinion, these are related to darkness, silence and solitude, for being all “elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free” (252). Besides manifesting darkness, silence and solitude that provoke an uncanny effect related to infantile fears, the nightmarish aesthetic of *Calvaire* sometimes unfolds as illogically as a dream. The film recalls Jordan’s *Company of Wolves* in many aspects. In both films, the spectator seems to witness a dream throughout, although in *Calvaire* it is never portrayed as such, contrarily to Rosaleen’s explicit dream in Jordan’s film. In *Calvaire*, the *mise-en-abîme* is suggested through the first image of the film where

Marc appears reflected in two mirrors, which points to the possibility of creating another world. As in *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll, this world reveals nonsensical and leads to confusions of identity. The tracking shot of the end, running in the opposite direction as conventionally, alludes to a restoration of the past or to the conclusion of a dream. Rosaleen and Marc's common juxtaposition with the Little Red Riding Hood "acts as the 'magic mirrors' into [their] inner selves" for being, according to Bruno Bettelheim, "the [very] function of fairytales" (Rockett 43). The magical realism of *Calvaire* and its expressionist lighting, similar to *The Company of Wolves*, can thus be said to express Marc's subjectivity. In addition, the unconscious of both Marc and Rosaleen's reflects a "transitional space between childhood innocence, curiosity, and the adult world of desire and eroticism" (Rockett 41), which is projected in the dual world they are confronted with. For that matter, the reference to the Little Red Riding Hood also encapsulates an opposition between the rural and the 'civilized' world. In the two films, modernity stands at odds with wilderness symbolizing in-between nations, as will be explored in more details in the next chapter. Neil Jordan stereotypically opposes a sophisticated English accent and lifestyle with the Irish pronunciation and rustic customs. Fabrice du Welz, in the same way, contrasts modernity with traditions, through Marc's modern equipment<sup>38</sup> and the countryside wild atmosphere. As Marc was going to France, this contrast that appears in both films seems to symbolize the negative and retrograde image that France/Holland and England have of Belgium and Ireland respectively.

In *Calvaire*, the regression of the characters from a coherent symbolic language to a corporeal language composed of signs (the semiotic) can be interpreted

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<sup>38</sup> Which one impresses Bartel more than once, as when he remains in complete wonder at Marc's loudspeakers and mobile phone.

as a return to the bodily drives that “make their own way into language” and that already did so, according to Kristeva, “before the infant [began] to use [symbolic] language” (Oliver 560). This childish atmosphere, although completely different, and the return from the symbolic to the semiotic, are also present in *Disco Pigs* through the world that Pig and Runt create for themselves. In *Calvaire* and *Disco Pigs*, the characters’ failure to grow up and evolve in society seems to represent the entrapment of the Belgian and Irish nations in their marginalized and traumatic past. According to Dana Och, traumatic feelings often emerge from “social and cultural shifts, such as wars” (192) and “the separation from the past” (Hill qtd. in Och, 194), symptomatic of both Belgium and Ireland. The nations’ in-betweenness is also conveyed in the different levels of communication on which the characters evolve. In *Calvaire*, the confusion about Marc’s identity originates from Bartel and the villagers’ situating on a distinct level of language that is semiotic and animal, which undermines the communication with Marc who does not belong to their world. In the same way, the conflict between Pig and Runt emerges from their failure at understanding each other’s yearnings. This obsession of Belgian and Irish filmmakers for problems of communication appears as an expression of their nations’ bilingualism and the conflicts that it triggers. In *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado* alike, the protagonists are not on the same levels of language either, for they situate at different stages of development, Elie and Paul being more childish than Yvan and Adam.

The seemingly obsession with childhood and infantile anxieties in contemporary Belgian and Irish cinema may be interpreted as a projection of the youth of the very countries and their lack of asserted history, or even as a reflection on their uncertain future. The “un-nuclear family,” Brian Neve asserts when

analysing *High Boot Benny* (Joe Comerford, 1994), functions “as a metaphor for the unhappy and unproductive situation in the island of Ireland” (94). Pig and Runt also come from dysfunctional families, similarly to Dylan and Kylie in *Kisses* (Ireland, 2008), Thomas in *Toto le héros* and the brothers Michel and Louis in *Congorama* (Belgium, 2006). These can be regarded as allegories of the nation as a dysfunctional family, as an orphan child, similarly to the ex-communist Poland in the 1991’s *Double Life of Véronique*. This theme of the orphan child or single-parent families seems indeed particularly adapted to the artistic productions of fractured nations; as can be observed in a number of Irish and Belgian films, such as *The Butcher Boy*, *Ben X*, *Breakfast on Pluto*, *On the Edge*, and *Le huitième jour*, among others.

Similar allegories appear in *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado*, both couple of protagonists being alter egos, double of one another but divided by their ineffective communication. In this way, the films allude to the dualism of cultures in Belgium and Ireland and the clash between them. The two pairs of protagonists are lost individuals in quest for identity and for a communal bond with their citizen companions. As described in the previous chapter, Adam and Paul search a social recognition that they will not find, maybe for being too out of norms. Although the people that they meet appear as hopeless as them, the protagonists are further alienated by communication problems that also determine their adventures. First, their dialogue with Georgie denotes their awkwardness: Paul asks “-Where do you live now Georgie? - Why do you want to know? - I don’t.” Then, to their bewilderment, they learn about the month’s mind of Matthew and about the few drinks the group is having at the Bunker pub where their path will cross again, in spite of their disagreement. They are further confronted to Clank – whom they did not know – as a result of a misunderstanding with another homeless. In *Eldorado*,

Yvan and Elie are linked into their hopelessness at the beginning, which then evolves into a kind brotherhood. Elie indeed embodies Yvan's dead brother, as both of them were heroin addict and as what we see in the flashback suggests. Like Adam and Paul, the protagonists of *Eldorado*, in spite of their differences, unite in their lack of understanding with the other characters of the film. Yvan and Elie form a kind of nucleus that includes Elie's family in spite of the discordances that divides it, since his parents are not portrayed as strange characters like the others. Elie's parents and the atmosphere surrounding them seems to allude to the country of Belgium, that is afflicted by a deep cultural malaise that lies underneath a bewailed unitary surface. These familial scenes indeed arouse empathy as they are treated with an unexpected nostalgia expressed through close-ups and a Spanish lament. They strongly contrast with the distant mise-en-scène of their journey and the strangeness of all their encounters on the road, which generates confusion and blurs the limits of "normality," thus placing the protagonists on the edge of the society portrayed. Faris asserts that "a Jungian rather than a Freudian perspective is common in magical realist texts; that is, the magic may be attributed to a mysterious sense of collective relatedness rather than to individual memories or dreams or visions" (183). In both films, the extraordinary seems to express a collective angst that may be caused by a lack of national cohesion and belonging to a community. The main characters of *Eldorado* and *Adam and Paul* symbolize the Belgian and the Irish nations as two broken families dawdling around and excluded from their environment, from Europe.

In both films, those communication problems not only occur with the people beyond the duo but also between the two of them, which indicates their exclusion

from the community as well as the wobbly nature of their fraternal bonds.<sup>39</sup> As said before, this situation might be interpreted as an allegory of the Irish and the Belgian that are alienated from Europe and also divided within their own boundaries. The protagonists' difficulty to communicate emerges from a cultural clash partly due to Paul and Elie's childish behaviour, and symbolizing Belgium and Ireland continual political and cultural disagreements, besides their young history. Like a child, Paul constantly asks rhetorical questions to Adam, apologizes without really knowing why, cannot hold from vomiting, and does not have any conscience of his physical environment; the motorcycle and the ball scenes as well as the two failed attempts at robbing purses standing as evidences of this. Similarly, Elie displays immaturity when constantly questioning Yvan without making any decision, but also when lying about his real name – inventing thus a character for himself. He also pretends to be hurt after falling in the stairs at the beginning and dissents to walk in the dark or the cold water. Elie is also unable to think about the future; so when asked “Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire maintenant?” he answers “Ben, je vais voir si mes chaussettes sont sèches puis je vais les mettre,”<sup>40</sup> a statement that could as well belong to Pig, or to Adam and Paul. In the same way as children, those characters fail to communicate properly, for not being able to extend their perspective neither beyond their selves nor beyond the here and now. This lack of future and past may as well be expressed by a feeling of melancholy in which the countries are united, as Jacqueline Aubenas underlines about a Belgium that only exists in pain, “le pays ne s'[étant] retrouvé

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<sup>39</sup> A certain dysfunction is already present in the fact that “we never learn from the diegetic evidence which of them is Adam and which one Paul” (Monahan 167).

<sup>40</sup> “What are you going to do now?”... “See if my socks are dry and put them on”

rassemblé que dans des situations d'affliction, c'est-à-dire de mélancolie” (48).<sup>41</sup>

After the Second World War in Belgium and the civil war in Ireland, the people split up even more and came together sporadically in circumstances of extreme pain, like the ones provoked by the child abuses, both in Belgium and Ireland. As Aubenas asserts, “melancholy has become one of the revealing themes of a Belgian identity defined by discomfort, questioning and incertitude,” as not being supported by a long nor asserted history (47-48).<sup>42</sup> Melancholy seems to invade both *Eldorado* and *Adam and Paul* in which the longing for a lost sense of belonging to a community may as well express the uncertain character of Irish identity.

Thus, while the first part of this thesis was centred on magical realism, this chapter has sought to understand liminality in Belgian and Irish films mainly through the study of the characters’ construction. The marginalization, the difficulties to communicate and the recurrent childishness that characterize the protagonists express the filmmakers’ incertitude as members of hybrid and young nations on the threshold of Europe. Those features are conveyed through an allegorical use of the double and through the formal aspects that emphasize the in-betweenness of the characters. Another extreme example of liminality is to be noted in *Ben X* by Nic Balthazar (2007), in which the protagonist’s psychotic and thus marginal behaviour is reflected in the aesthetic of the film, as it is on the threshold of documentary, video game and social realism. By focalizing on marginal characters and by depicting them in a magical realist atmosphere, Belgian and Irish filmmakers express the liminality of their nation. In addition, this liminality also appears in their delineation of the

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<sup>41</sup> “the country only gathering in situations of affliction, that is of melancholy” Trans. mine

<sup>42</sup> Trans. mine. In the original text: “...le ‘qui suis-je?’ n’étant pas épaulé par une histoire longue ou revendiquée” (48)

spaces in the four films studied in this paper. The next chapter will deal with the representation of places, which embody the fragmentation that distinguishes the Belgian and Irish nations from their European analogues.

## A fractured landscape for a fractured people

In order to express the in-betweenness of their nation on a cultural, socio-economic and political level, Belgian and Irish filmmakers treat places as layers of meaning. The lack of a coherent national feeling in both Belgium and Ireland seems indeed to be conveyed through the representation of the countries' landscape. Gellner only recognizes a contingent "fetichizing" link between culture and land, as Jarvie asserts in his essay on national cinema (76). However, although wars are mainly provoked by nationalist feelings (thus not directly linked to the land), territories are often at stake as a multitude of wars has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate. Therefore, the connection between landscape and national culture cannot be thoroughly denied since, as Catherine Palmer asserts, the landscape is not "a passive marker of a nation's identity, it can evoke feelings, generate emotions and provide causes" (McLoone, *Irish* 207). As McLoone argues,

[Landscape] enters into everyday consciousness as a cultural signifier, an aspect of what might be called 'banal nationalism'...the commonplace...which people live with (and through which they live their sense of collective identity). 207

In their expression of the world, filmmakers are influenced by their national environment, which is reflected in the aesthetic of their films, in their construction of characters, as well as in their depiction of places. In the films analysed, places are not to be considered as mere backdrops but as "layers of meaning" in Luke Gibbons' words (qtd in McLoone, *Irish* 20), since they "cannot be separated from the social and historical forces which existed before the individual and provided the terms of his attachment and the forms in which he can find expression" (Hooker qtd. in Peach 13).

As has been observed so far, Belgian and Irish filmmakers focus on liminality, situated at the core of their reflection on the nation as a population socially and economically involved. The social and economic situation of a country and the society that it generates can be inferred from the films, which tend to convey the collective unconscious. In Belgium, the industrialization process of the late nineteenth century has been particularly traumatic. The films that treated the social consequences of industrialization and of the later globalization have also contributed to national imaginaries, and thus impinged on the vision of the world of contemporary artists. These concerns are expressed in films like *Daens* (Coninx, 1993), which denounces the atrocities and the impoverishment linked with the industrialization, or like *Misère au borinage* (Storck, 1933), which deals with the extremely poor living conditions in Wallonia due to the depression years that considerably affected the coal regions. The resulting unemployment and deep poverty exacerbated in the 1950s and 60s when Walloon “industrial base declined sharply,” considerably affected “the self-image of Wallonia” (Mosley 20). This period marked the beginning of the economic reversal between the prosperous Wallonia and the poor Flanders, which is still noticeable in present-day Belgium as the unemployment rate indicates: in 2008, there was 10% of unemployment in Wallonia against 4% in Flanders (“Un premier” 2). The Dardennes’ *Rosetta* (1996) and *L’enfant* depict this socioeconomic situation that led to the marginalization of a high number of people, especially among the working and the underclass. The modern Western economic model based on an active population leads the people forgotten by this system to a growing inertia, which impacts on their mental state. With a little less than 10 500 000 inhabitants in Belgium, almost 6 000 000 people are considered inactive (“Un premier” 1). The socially marginalized also tend to

drink their affliction away and in this way deepen their own unadapted situation, as depicted in films such as *Rosetta*, *La raison du plus faible* (Belvaux, 2006) or *Des plumes dans la tête*. As will be explored, the borderline situation also infers from the films through their depiction of a fractured landscape in-between industrialization and rurality, as in *Des plumes dans la tête* (2003), which was significantly made during the months of the closing of another Walloon industry (the sugar refinery of Genappe).

In Ireland, a much later process led to the same distrust of capitalism that is reflected in contemporary films. The Irish colonial past and the 1920s civil war that tore the country apart kept Ireland from developing economically at the same time as other European countries. The “Troubles” that divided Northern Ireland until recently are indeed recognized as a major cause for the country’s “peripheral economy” that is “lagging behind in their economic development,” a situation that it shares with Hainaut, a Walloon region of Belgium (Begg 1-2). *Poitin* (Quinn, 1978) depicts the bleak and poverty-stricken reality in which ‘70s rural Ireland was still steeped. Until the recent economic growth of the ‘90s, Ireland was regarded as the poorest country of Europe. After its independence and until the 1950s, it developed “a chauvinistic economic nationalism...based on the development of the agricultural sector, import substitution and protectionism” (McCarthy qtd. in Kirby, 6). In spite of the economic stagnation of the ‘70s and ‘80s and of a strong Catholic conservatism, the economic growth and modernising process that began in the ‘60s eventually exploded in the ‘90s (Kirby 7). A whole set of foreign industries like Apple, Heineken and Dell, settled in Ireland and increased employment. It is precisely where the main criticism made about the economic boom lies, in Ireland’s “reliance on multinational capital” (Kirby 5). What was once perceived as “a

permanent transformation of the Irish economy” (Kirby 4) has indeed been annihilated by the actual recession, as the sudden growth of the unemployment rate indicates: a little more than 4% of unemployment was registered for the last three years before 2008 but gradually increased up to 12% in July 2009 (“Seasonally”). Even before the disastrous impact of the economic crisis, the negative effects of modern Western economy on Ireland were already denounced in the social failure and inequalities correlated with the Celtic Tiger (Kirby 5). The two-tier system that emerged is to be noted in the antithetical views of contemporary Ireland displayed in films. Whereas in their delineation of the city, films like *About Adam* (2001) or *Goldfish Memory* (2003) present a modern and vigorous society; *Kisses* (2008) emphasizes the extreme consumerism that has contaminated the generation of the Celtic Tiger, while more rural areas and older generations remain in a poor state of economic and social development. In *Kisses*, the director Lance Daly blatantly sheds light on this disparity by portraying the country in black and white, which progressively colours as the children are reaching Dublin and returns to shades of grey once they are confronted back to their grim social background. As is to be observed in a number of Irish films, like *Eden* (Recks, 2008) for instance, those forgotten people drink excessively, unable to face and to cope with the rapid modern economy and the active population that it requires. Although referring to a thoroughly different Ireland, the diagnosis of a paralysed hemiplegic society that Joyce made of Ireland in *Dubliners* still endures.

In a similar way, Belgian and Irish filmmakers have shown a particular interest in depicting the social and economic dualism of their countries. They reflect and insist on the negative impacts of the phenomena of modernization and globalization, and tend to convey the dualism that they arise through a fractured

landscape. The military expression “no man’s land,” referring to a disputed ground between borders, now also designates “an area of bare, unclaimed, or waste land” and “a dangerous or not well understood state, field of ideas, conditions...usually between two other states, ideas, conditions” (“No man’s land”). In this chapter, the metaphorical concept of the no man’s land can be used to interpret the representations of places, as reflecting the in-between identity of the Belgian and Irish nation. Their territory being fractured by North-South boundaries and fragmented between different cultural, social and economic aspects, the image of the uninhabited space is appropriate to describe the gaps that separate the nation.

*Disco Pigs* mostly display places of the imagination, thus uninhabited spaces that reflect Pig and Runt’s alienation. Pig characterizes Cork as a “sad old town” but “it’s our town” he adds. It is not coincidental that the tower of the protestant St. Anne’s church with that of the catholic St. Mary’s cathedral in the backdrop – an image steeped in the duality of Ireland – are not framed by an establishment shot as conventions would require. The shallow shots of this scene leave the Cork that Pig is describing in the blurred background, attesting in this way to the imagined aspect of



*Only images of the city of Cork in Disco Pigs*

the town. The places in Kristen Sheridan’s film convey the feelings of alienation of the protagonists, who embody the very nation. The setting and its imaginary quality denote a no man’s land symptomatic of the Irish socio-historical and political context, but that incorporates Protestantism and Catholicism alike without any

aversion. The symbolic white in the Irish flag seems to colour the peaceful world that the protagonists inhabit, when they do not relate to the society outside their protective bubble. This reading would then indicate to a pessimistic interpretation of a contemporary Irish society that annihilates youthful hope. Nonetheless, the film's ending suggests a renewal, as explained in the second chapter, through the necessary death of Darren that seems to pave the way for a new future for Ireland, allegorically embodied by Sinéad.

The no man's land in which Pig and Runt live is revealed on various occasions in the film. When Pig goes to the train station to join Runt in Donegal, the awkward gaze that he addresses to the baby and then his failure to understand the ticket attendant indicate that he is unadapted to the society in which he lives. In the reform institution, Runt also appears as an outsider in her refusal/inability to speak to her roommate. Nature figures as a remedy to their alienation by steering them to a path of rebirth. The sea, as a symbol of the womb of the mother, "waters in flux...between life and death" (Cirlot 281), encapsulates at the same time their freedom from society and a possibility of regeneration as expressed frequently by Runt, a statement that Pig fails to understand. Especially when separated, the protagonists are surrounded by sounds and images of the sea, which also emphasizes the divergence in their evolution. Whereas in the narrative process, Pig appropriates the visual and Runt the aural as underlined by Barry Monahan ("Keeping," 191), their mental states are inversely associated. Darren's increasing psychosis is expressed through sounds, music and the roaring of the sea, while Sinéad's increasing experience of the social world is portrayed through a complete aural, visual and tangible atmosphere. Pig's first monologue is followed by Runt's looking at their pictures; and his second schizophrenic monologue is accompanied by deep

sounds of waves, which ensure the transition to the image of Runt, eyes wide open in the bath. Her inner turmoil has been illustrated earlier by a complete sensuous experience when she leaves the jabbering classroom, out of breath in the corridors, surrounded by the sounds and the image of the sea. This shot is again succeeded by the power that Darren gives to sounds as he rises the television volume. His embracing of sounds while leaving the world of images culminates in the bathroom scene in the club where he breaks his reflection in the mirror, which symbolizes, as Monahan asserts through Lacan's theory, Darren's "failure to undergo anamorphosis" (194), and thus to cope with external society. In her complete cognition of the world, Sinéad progresses towards an assimilation to society. The bluebell and the "big blue up there" referring to the sky allude to friendship, and drive her to an integration into the social world. Those symbolic elements also echo the sea enclosing Pig and Runt's tale. Nature thus figures as a place where the future is to be found for Irish dual society.

Moreover, Sinéad's social opening occurs in a rural environment, which does not have the usual backward and romantic connotations dear to foreign cinematic representations of Ireland. Darren's journey from the South to the North also figures as a rewriting of the traditional and ideologically marked travels to the West, similarly to Joyce's revision of nationalist geography as analysed by Howes (68). As willing to return to Cork to celebrate their birthday, Darren again demonstrates his failure to progress, depicted through their teenage habits of messing around in their usual off-licence and clubs. In opposition to traditional representations, the journey from the country to the city here appears as a movement back in the past. Cork abounds with indoor places: their two rooms, cars, clubs, the school, the off-licence, whereas the institution in Donegal is less and less perceived

by Sinéad as a confining place, as windows and vegetation proliferate. Her roommate's burning of a paper angel seems to obliterate religion from the future landscape. In that, the South and the proliferation of indoor places appear as the sign of the protagonists' marginalization, whereas the North and its association with nature in the film indicates the need for openness and border crossing to build a harmonious future in Ireland.

Darren's journey refers to the in-betweenness of Irish contemporary nation, for the road is the no man's land between the urban and the rural or, in other words, the path towards the future. Martin McLoone postulates for a deconstruction of the usual dichotomy between the rural and the urban in terms of past traditions and future modernity, as "the populations of urban and rural areas are coming increasingly to resemble each other" (O'Toole qtd. in McLoone, *Irish* 202). However, as McLoone notes and as can be observed in *Disco Pigs*, "the conflicting images of country and city, in all their contradictory complexity, still operate" (203). This is not surprising since Irish society is defined by its hybridity; however, as the Belfast Agreement indicates in a way, there is a desire to reconcile Irish duality, which is thus to be reflected in the depiction of the landscape, as McLoone argues. Lenny Abrahamson's *Garage* (2007) conveys this tendency, for aspects of the city such as globalization, modern constructions and considerations have entered the countryside. First, Mr. Gallagher rules Josie's petrol station from a distance and remorselessly takes advantage of him, and then Josie is surprised to learn that one cannot show a pornographic movie nor give beer to a fifteen-year old. The protagonist proves unadapted to the modern and capitalist society, which leads him up to committing suicide by entering into a swamp that swallows him, in a metaphor for the gulf between government and people. In the same way, the white horse

coming towards the camera in the last shot seems to be a call for freedom, but also for a state that would adapt to its people with all its paradoxes, and not the reverse. *Rosetta* (1996) made the same call for a reduction of the gap between capitalism and rurality, which successfully led to the creation of the “plan Rosetta,” an economic scheme that helps the young to find work. *Rosetta* as well as *L’enfant* (Dardenne, 2005) also take place in a kind of no man’s land, in the suburbs, precisely between the urban and the rural.

The landscape in *Calvaire* also encompasses the contradictory trends of Belgian general modernity and the still very rural Wallonia. Rural and urban characteristics blend in the film, as the depiction of the first town is too shallow to be thoroughly differentiated from the village in the wood. The absence of information enhances the mysterious; as the audience is neither provided with images of the two villages, nor does the road even hint at the general geography of the film. The protagonist only asserts to be heading towards the South, but there is no means to know if he refers to the South of Belgium or the South of France, although the latter is likelier as the journey is to last two days. The more the protagonist goes to the South the stranger the place becomes; the wood being compared to the already strange atmosphere of the rest-home. This allusion to the South is not innocent as it automatically implies a North, it highlights the geographical division of Belgium and its linguistic borders that separate culture as well as people, as shown here, for Marc rather goes to sing in France than in Flanders. As explained previously, the wild and backward behaviour of the villagers in the wood alludes to the traumatic events that happened in Wallonia in the last decades and that shattered the whole population of Belgium. The strange and primitive occurrences emerging from the wood in *Calvaire* mirror the rough masculine society that lives in the forest of *The Company of*

*Wolves*. In a similar way, indoor spaces are not portrayed like safe places but appear, on the contrary, as extensions of the ferocious world. In *Calvaire* as in *Isolation*, “rural iconography has never been more easily de-romanticised as holocaust-like images of major culling were framed against the countryside landscape” (Monahan 266).

The deep rurality depicted in *Calvaire* contrasts with Marc’s relatively modern sound equipment and mobile phone, as is to be noticed in Bartel’s confusion when looking at the telephone and in his ironic offense when Marc asks if he has a landline. The still important rurality in Belgium<sup>43</sup> clashes with the widespread modernity of the country, and parallels the situation of Ireland as depicted in Abrahamson’s *Garage*. Marc discovers a remote and savage place but the film is not steeped in the traditional dichotomies between rich/poor and traditional/modern, for he embodies a lower middle-class citizen, indicated by the poor aspect of his show, clothing and van. As Josie’s town, Marc personify a no man’s land, expressive of contemporary Belgian and Irish society. The similar lack of precise localization in both *Garage* and *Calvaire* universalizes their story, as both point to the defect of globalization, considered by Ian Aitkin as the main cause of the fragmentation of cultural cohesion (79). In the “undefined present,” Raymond Williams argues, “images of country and city, no less than conflicting interpretations of the past, are at the heart of [the] tension...about the fate of collective identity and communal responsibility in the global marketplace” (McLoone 211-12). Marc and Josie’s unadapted behaviour to the (whatever odd) environment in which they find

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<sup>43</sup> Which also manifests in this summer numerous demonstrations of farmers throughout Belgium (which still continues as I am writing), about the milk production, and more generally about the European decisions concerning agriculture.

themselves reflects the questioning that Williams is referring to. It is even more relevant to Belgium and Ireland, since filmmakers' depictions of rural and urban spaces carry the cultural disparity between people divided by their historic, linguistic and political past. Compared to other European filmmakers, the Belgian and Irish demonstrate a particular interest for liminal identities and marginal people.

*Eldorado* sheds light on the uninhabited countryside of Belgium, except for some typically Belgian 'friteries'<sup>44</sup> or petrol stations scattered along the road. When Yvan and Elie deviate from the road, they come face to face with a neglected and deserted site of caravans and shelters. This kind of places is quite frequent in Belgium although they now tend to disappear in the globalization process, as a recent case demonstrates, as the Walloon government decided to expropriate 250 people living in cabins and caravans in a private field (see Saussez). The journey on which the protagonists embark discloses the gap existing between the country's economic system and its people, which is emphasized by the reality presented that only involves people on the edge of society. In the same way as in *Adam and Paul*, the social background of the protagonists never strikingly differs from the other characters of the film. The characters therefore all embody a sort of psychological no man's land blending the contradictory impulses of contemporary Belgian and Irish society. Both films operate as road movies, "in the space between the utopic comforts, or dystopic confinements, of family home, employment or responsibility, and the promise of freedom represented by the journey" (Hammond 14). However, the journey is void as it eventually confines the protagonists to their inertia, none of

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<sup>44</sup> "chip shops"

them having neither a proper job nor responsibilities, in opposition with what modern Western society requires.

In *Eldorado* as in *Adam and Paul*, drinking abusively seems to be regarded as fairly normal and accepted by the society presented. In Abrahamson's film, Georgie heartlessly turns down Marian's offer of a beer as his ex-wife "would go mad if [Georgie Jnr] tells her [he] was drinking again," but then he furtively drinks as Marian presses him to do so. While despising Adam and Paul for their addiction and repulsive physical aspect, the characters all drink and smoke relentlessly, and rudely speak to their children. This class of people considered marginal by the capitalist



*Marian, Orla and Wayne hanging around and drinking beer*

society remains unadapted due to a sort of paralysis that precisely originates from the very system and its inequalities. As the filmmaker only depicts this vision of the world, it ironically appears as the norm. As already explored, the same process is at work in *Calvaire*, where Marc parallels Alice in the wood of *Wonderland* or *Through the Looking-Glass*, for they both figure as the bizarre element even though the world that they face does not embrace realist conventions. As Yvan and Elie in *Eldorado* follow a man who offered to fix their car, this one urges them to drink up strong liquor until he is able to foresee future events related to death. Surprisingly, what he says to Yvan foreshadows the end of the film, while he says that he does not see anything about the drug addict Elie. The incongruousness of the statement is



*Yvan and Elie in Eldorado drinking whisky in hopes of yielding the man's ability to foresee*

reinforced when instead of telling him what he finally foresees, the man unexpectedly asks Elie to sing the national anthem of Belgium. Yvan then remarks “Comment ça se fait que tu connais les paroles de la Brabançonne toi? Plus personne connaît ça.”<sup>45</sup> This comment is particularly true, as the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2007 the ex-future prime minister Yves Leterme confused “La Marseillaise,” the French national hymn, with the Belgian one. At the end of the reportage, the journalist rightly concludes, “La Belgique est sans doute le seul pays au monde où les dirigeants ont du mal à dire ce qu’on célèbre le jour de la fête nationale” (“Allons”).<sup>46</sup> The gap between the government and the nation emphasized here also reflects in the dualism between the



*The bleak barn where Yvan and Elie have been drinking*

bleak aspects of rural indoors and the powerfulness of the landscape framed in the next scene. A loud and saturated sound generates the transition to the binary landscape, reinforcing the contrast with the previous silence of the absurd drinking scene. The rural setting of this sequence, notwithstanding, does not differ from the

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<sup>45</sup> “How comes you know the words of the Song of Brabant? Nobody knows them anymore.”

<sup>46</sup> “Belgium is probably the only country of the world where the leaders cannot clearly tell what is celebrated on the National Day” Trans. mine.

Reportage available on <[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)>: “Gaffe Yves Leterme sur l'hymne national belge”



*The image of the Belgian landscape that follows the drinking scene*

other places of the film. The villages and even the city in the end appear as a continuation of the peculiar aspects that putatively characterize the life in the countryside. Liminal identities and people on the threshold of society invade the film, regardless of the kind of setting. Marginalization affects the fictional realities of *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado* in their full expression, both in the city and the countryside.

In a way that can be compared to *Disco Pigs*, indoor spaces are the site of Adam and Paul's marginalization, in a way that resembles Mona's lack of roots in the Belgian Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi (Vagabond)*: for "the representation of enclosed space... functions... as a symbol of life in society, and more often the sign of society's rejection of [their] marginality" (Udris 45). It is therefore not a coincidence if the three stories circularly begin and end in a rural area, where the protagonists are condemned to die as a consequence of their rejection from modern Western society. However, as explained before, the sea in *Disco Pigs* has a similar symbolic aspect in *Adam and Paul*, since Paul continues living in spite of his liminality and Adam's death. The city indeed figures as the origin of his marginalization, as being the socioeconomic starting point of his oblivion, resulting inertia and addiction. In the very same way, the city in *Eldorado* engulfs Elie; while the last image of the film shows Yvan looking at the city from its suburbs, after burying the dog – as a metaphor for Elie. This last image intertextually recalls one of the opening images of

*Adam and Paul* and what the audience may imagine of the after-film after Adam's death.



*Ending image of Eldorado, Yvan watching the city*      *One of the opening images of Adam and Paul*

As the boundary between the rural and the urban is easily crossed and not clearly marked in the four films analysed, Belgian and Irish directors seem to emphasize that social dualism, and thus marginalization, does not only affect the countryside as generally accepted, but is generalized to a whole society. The cinematic representation of a city, as Susan Hayward highlights, is very limited and generally conditioned by “what is included as desirably visible and what is excluded,” as the city is “the embodiment of power relations” (31). In such a theoretical light, it is notable to observe how a majority of mainstream French and Hollywoodian films only depicts the city as buzzing with life, clear from any ‘undesirable elements’ that would darken the national image and would, as a consequence, repel the spectator from positively identifying with the protagonist as an “ego ideal” in Mulvey’s words (840). *Dans Paris* (Honoré, 2006) starring the popular Louis Garrell appears as a typical example of this phenomenon. This adornment of national landscapes culminates in the enormous blockbuster *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tits* (Boon, 2008), which embellishes to the utmost Northern France and all its rural and putative backwards idiosyncrasies, some of which could also apply to Southern Belgium. In the same blatant and ludicrous way, *In Bruges* (2008) by the English McDonagh displays a touristic view of the city of Bruges, which figures as the setting for the mishaps of two Irish gangsters. Although the protagonists of *In*

*Bruges* highly remind the couple of *I Went Down* (Breathnach, 1997) in their function in the story,<sup>47</sup> the grotesque mise-en-scène causes their roles of “bad guy” to be unconvincing. Like the films mentioned above, *Goldfish Memory* and *About Adam* make the cities exist outside of History by producing sterile and idealized images of the city. On the contrary, *Disco Pigs*, *Adam and Paul*, *Calvaire* and *Eldorado* all depict places that convey a political and historical background, therefore in line with Frampton’s “critical regionalism” that John Hill explains as “a cinema rooted in the particularities of a specific culture, which ‘replies’ to the ‘universalising’ discourse of Hollywood’s global cinema in the accent of the local and the regional” (6). If *In Bruges* and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tits* are to be regarded as cinematic failure in spite of their audience success, it is precisely because of their sterile and standardized use of places, compared to the socioeconomically, politically and historically rich delineations made in the four films interpreted in this thesis. This may also be regarded as the main reason why *Isolation* and *Calvaire* succeed in the horror genre, since while settling the story in the Belgian and Irish landscape, they avoid to reproduce the common images fomented by the outsiders’ perceptions of those minor countries.

The importance of rurality in both Belgian and Irish culture is also to be observed in the flight from modernity advocated in the films. In *Eldorado* and *Calvaire*, the near absence of mobile phones plays a special role in the adventure of the protagonists. Elie teases Yvan for not possessing one when they would need it; similarly, Marc remains caught in this horror for not having a phone that functions properly. The filmmakers denounce the seemingly necessity that modern Western

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<sup>47</sup> As well as for casting Brendan Gleeson who was one of the protagonists of *I Went Down* and Colin Farrell whose physical aspect is akin to Peter McDonald.

society made of technology. Adam and Paul's astonishment in front of Janine's television and Pig's misuse of the television volume also postulate another lifestyle that rejects the abusive use of modern equipment. Similarly, the ultimate symbol of modernity, the only car of *Adam and Paul* is quickly obliterated, which seems to allude to the negative aspects of Ireland's thriving economy at a social level. The four films draw attention to the impenetrable no man's land that exists in Belgium and Ireland between modern society under capitalism and the inertia that marginalizes more people than one could think of.

In their representation of places, filmmakers express social, political and cultural aspects of their country of origin, which has influenced their worldview and thus reflects in their artistic productions. By placing their liminal characters in symbolic 'no man's lands', Belgian and Irish filmmakers express their concerns for the sense of alienation and in-betweenness that afflicts their nations. In doing so, they subversively underline the power of marginality and rurality, of which they encourage an acute awareness amongst the Belgian and Irish government and people.

## Conclusion

This thesis has first sought to explore how magical realism could arise from the formal aspects of the films. Through disruptive forms of editing and a confusing use of internal and external focalizations – which in turn impinge on the use of colours, music and camera –, the filmmakers generate a subversive aesthetic that challenges realistic conventions and thus moves away from usual core countries' cinemas. In the four films analysed, formal aspects blur the boundary between reality and illusion, which therefore generates a liminal aesthetic. The irrational, or the so-called 'magical' convey the very alienation of the protagonists, who therefore evolve in a liminal reality. Unexpected events or characters integrate the fictional world of *Adam and Paul* and *Eldorado*; whereas in *Calvaire* and *Disco Pigs*, the uncanny is conveyed through the psychological disorders of the characters and the abject that surrounds them. By addressing the audience on a subversive cinematic mode, Belgian and Irish filmmakers express the individual angst that emerges from collective in-betweenness. They reflect on the marginalization of their country with regard to the core countries around them, but also on the marginalization of people within their nation. Magical realism is thus perfectly adapted to convey the national feeling of hybridity.

A substantial focus on liminal protagonists has also been noted in the Belgian and Irish aesthetics. These marginal characters symbolize the nation in many aspects. The archetype of the double embodies the dualism between Protestants/Catholics, Flemish/Walloons, and Unionists/Separatists, as well as the ongoing confrontations that divide them. Although they come from the same nation, the alter egos fail to communicate properly, as a result of their linguistic, cultural and political disparities.

In addition, the young and unasserted history of Belgium and Ireland are personified in the childish behaviour of the protagonists in the four films analysed in this thesis. They represent a transitional state in-between autonomy and collective integration, questioning in this way both the belonging to a national community and to a European community. The traumatic situations that Belgium and Ireland have suffered also aroused this sense of alienation caused by a lack of a coherent image and symbolized through the recurrent image of the dysfunctional family, as in *Disco Pigs* and *Eldorado*, but also in *Adam and Paul* and *Calvaire*, where the family unit seems thoroughly absent.

As they are part of the marginalized Belgium and Ireland, essentially hybrid countries, the in-between protagonists seem to live in a no man's land. Moreover, their liminality is deepened by the gap that divides the government and the people. The still important rurality of Belgium and Ireland clashes with the modern, globalized and capitalist economy that submerges the society. The couples formed by Pig and Runt, Adam and Paul, Yvan and Elie, and Marc/Gloria travel on the road between nature and city, in a difficult balancing act between Belgian and Irish traditional and melancholic hopes of unity and their strives for recognition on an international scale.

This thesis focussed on Belgian and Irish cinemas in the way in which they differ from their European counterparts in their aesthetical, thematic and spatial expression. Once they rejected their English, French and Dutch 'fathers', the two states were left with two 'mothers', one Flemish and one Walloon for Belgium, one Protestant and the other Catholic in the case of Ireland. This situation affected both present-day nations and, hence, influenced their cultural productions. The countries therefore have to cope with historical, political and linguistic fragmentations at the

same time as they endeavour to draw a coherent national image to project in the European landscape. Belgian and Irish filmmakers shed light on this internal and external gap and explore the bridge that could path the future for their divided nations.

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*Des plumes dans la tête.* Dir. Thomas de Thier. 2003.

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*Dust.* Dir. Marion Hänsel. Videocassette. Man's Films, 1985

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