



“It’s fucking tiny.” Road Movies, Youth and (Im)mobility in Derry Girls (2018–)

*“It’s fucking tiny.” Road Movies, adolescencia e
inmovilismo en Derry Girls (2018–)*

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ABSTRACT

Derry Girls (2018–present), Channel 4’s major success since *Max and Paddy’s Road to Nowhere* (2004), is a teen sitcom set in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland, which inevitably brings issues such as place and space to the fore by relying on teen drama tropes. This is particularly visible in “The Concert”, *Derry Girls*’ third episode in season two, directed by Michael Lennox and written by Lisa McGee, an episode where the dominant tropes are those of a road movie but genuinely overturned upside down. Such a subversion will be directly connected to notions of space, identity and containment during the Troubles in the 1990s, as well as youth, gender, ethnicity and class divides.

Keywords: *Derry Girls*, Northern Ireland, the Troubles, teen television, road movie, puberty, gender, rites of passage, space

RESUMEN

Derry Girls (2018–presente), el mayor éxito de Channel 4 desde *Max y Paddy’s Road to Nowhere* (2004), es una comedia de situación para adolescentes ambientada en Irlanda del Norte antes del alto el fuego que, como no podría ser de otra manera, aborda cuestiones como el espacio a través de tropos habituales en el audiovisual adolescente. Esto es particularmente apreciable en “El concierto”, el tercer episodio de su segunda temporada, dirigido por Michael Lennox y escrito por Lisa McGee, un episodio donde los tropos dominantes son los del género de la *road movie* pero invertidos. Tal subversión estará directamente relacionada con cuestiones como espacio, identidad y contención durante el Conflicto norirlandés en la década de los noventa, así como con los confines de la adolescencia, el género, la etnia o la clase social.

Palabras clave: *Derry Girls*, Irlanda del Norte, el Conflicto norirlandés, televisión adolescente, road movie, pubertad, género, ritos de iniciación, espacio

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1. INTRODUCTION

Derry Girls (Channel 4, 2018–present), set in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland, follows the lives of five teenagers. Erin (Saoirse-Monica Jackson), the prototype of the self-absorbed teenager, is the heart of the show, as she shares a bond with each character that goes back in time. Her intentions are never executed in line with what she wants. Her teenage angst sets the tone for the show, a characteristic that she also shares with Clare (Nicola Coughlan), the prototype of the smart student who is the voice of reason in the gang. Michelle (Jamie-Lee O’Donnell) is boisterously assertive, a reckless and feisty ladette; Orla (Louisa Harland), sweet, eccentric, and dim-witted *à la* Phoebe Buffay, is not bound by societal norms and values; and James (Dylan Llewellyn), the only teenage male lead in the show, is a vulnerable English geek living in town with his cousin Michelle.

Lisa McGee, the showrunner of Channel 4’s major success since *Max and Paddy’s Road to Nowhere* (2004), is able to build a multi-layered semiotic composition where the comedy disrupts “the stability of the image and its semiotic correlate by making the audience laugh” (Ryan, 2020, p. 80). Another reason behind the show’s success might be its female centrality and plurality. According to McGee, she does not want the women she watches on television to be strong and perfect (quoted in Edinburgh TV Festival, 2018), quite the opposite, she wants the girls “to be complete disasters because [she] think[s] that’s what most teenage girls feel like” (quoted in Royal Television Society, 2019).¹ However, the show’s success is mostly indebted to the fact that the comedy brings issues such as place and space to the fore by relying on teen drama tropes, what, given the current political climate prompted by the Brexit, might not be incidental. Territorial disputes between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland resurfaced in 2018-2019, as the border (first drawn in 1922) returned to the fore in Brexit negotiations.

Given the current political climate prompted by the UK withdrawal from the EU,

¹ An analysis of the wealth of BBC3, ITV2, and E4 sitcoms of the genre in recent years shows that only *The Inbetweeners* (2008-10), created by Damon Beesley and Iain Morris, may resemble McGee’s show. An E4 comedy, Channel 4’s previous defining teen sitcom, *The Inbetweeners*, delves into similar teen preoccupations, but focuses more on lad culture, geek masculinity, and adolescent sexuality.

cultural geography can prove valuable in addressing systematic issues of land disenfranchisement. This is particularly visible in “The Concert”, an episode where the dominant tropes are those of a road movie but genuinely overturned upside down. Such a subversion is directly connected to the notions of space, trauma and containment, as in McGee’s words, during the Troubles in the 1990s Northern Irish people were forced to develop a “very dark sense of humour [...] to find ways to cope with stuff” in an “small country” where the “Troubles affected everyone” (quoted in Edinburgh TV Festival, 2018). According to Long, “[b]y speaking of collective trauma and repressed memories, [*Derry Girls*] provides a vehicle for catharsis and potential for meaning making from previously unbearable memories and experiences” (2021, p. 14),² problematising not only territorial disputes,³ but also intergenerational conflicts, a convention established in many teen sitcoms. As teenagers, the girls and James experience a clear cultural decentring, a displacement. As a result, teen, spatial and political tropes are normally brought together to the fore.

Such tropes are essential in a TV series that problematises the Troubles in the pre-ceasefire 1990s; Derry is set in the border space of the partitioned North, a territory “not so much enclosed by its borders as defined by them” (Hughes, 1991, p. 3). But as teenagers, they are not only situated on the physical periphery but also positioned as borderline characters in a material world which does not provide for them. Picking up on these aspects, we will see whether Erin, Clare, Michelle, Orla and James, are able to successfully interact with the physical and symbolic spaces on the road or, in contrast, their gendered practices meet any spatial opposition.

Methodologically, this study aims at articulating the hegemonic definitions of Northern Irish girlhood contained in *Derry Girls* and the spatial renegotiations which take place in the show’s material world. Space is pivotal in the

² See also Membrive (2021).

³ See, for example, “My name is Erin Quinn. [...] [A]nd I come from a place called ‘Derry’, or ‘Londonderry’, depending on your persuasion” (episode one). Erin’s first-person narration does not enter the conflict, but clearly tells us that space is highly political in Northern Ireland and, by extension, in the TV series.

construction and evolution of all characters, male and female, but it is significantly mutable in the case of these teenagers. Aspects such as rites of passage as embodied practices, or territorial passages (van Genneep, 1960), are fundamental to understand the (dis)placement experienced by these characters.

Additionally, recognizing the importance of the material and the symbolic worlds as moving maps of passions is recognizing that cultural practices are embodied and, thus, the focus should be on bodily displacement (Thrift, 2009, 84–5). In this sense, if all nations are manufactured environments which constantly inform us about the question of being-together (Sloterdijk, 1998; Thrift, 2005), our territories of the self and our embodied practices should be interpreted as spaces of co-existence since “human existence [...] is anchored in an insurmountable spatiality” (Sloterdijk, 2005, p. 229). In such an insurmountable spatiality is where human-made environment (and its individual and organisational agents) live alongside and interact with the other organic lifeforms that occupy it, as well as the ecosystem that underlies it.

The road movie is an apt venue to explore such interactions in our human-made environment and the ideology that permeates at a local, communal and national levels. In fact, Laderman finds in this genre a “dialectical tension between [...] a rebellious critique of conservative authority and a reassertion of a traditional expansionist ideology” (1996, p. 41–2), what will be of particular interest when analysing the protagonists’ marginality as teenagers, as the classic protagonists of the genre tend to be “characters who exist on the fringes of society” (Sargeant and Watson, 2000, p. 8). We will see whether the road movie in “The Concert” privileges the young white heterosexual, cisgender man (James vs girls), or challenges the heteronormative appropriation of the road, as Tincknell (2000) posited in quintessential American road movies such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or *My Own Private Idaho* (1991).

All these aspects will be explored by taking into account Laderman’s defining features of the road movie iconography (2002) and their subversion in “The Concert” (2019), *Derry Girls*’ third episode in season two, directed by Michael Lennox and written by Lisa McGee.

2. BORDERS AND ROAD MOVIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Although Irish studies arrived late to value “the ecocritical importance of thinking about the role of place in cultural representation” (FitzGerald, 2020, p. 60), in the last two decades a growing number of cultural geographers have taken interest in the Irish filmic space from a myriad of perspectives; namely, the politics of filmic renderings of landscapes, space, and time, and what these aspects tell us about power, ideology, hegemonic discourses and cultural practices. While, according to Burke, “[Mike Newell’s magical realist film about Irish Travellers] *Into the West* [1992] [is] the first in a series of Irish films that could ostensibly be described as coming-of-age road movies” (2013, p. 171),⁴ Irish cinema has traditionally delved into notions of space, containment and mobility in a wide range of hybrid genres.

This is the case of the *Traveller* (1981), Joe Comerford’s first feature, that places the audience into the shoes of Irish travellers Michael (Davy Spillane) and Angela (Judy Donovan) and their forced marriage in 1980s Ireland; Aisling Walsh’s *Joyriders* (1988), or the story of Mary Flynn (Patricia Kerrigan), who escapes from her family in search of a better life; Joe Comerford’s *Reefer and the Model* (1988), a road movie about Reefer (Ian McElhinney), a former IRA hard man who operates a ferry in the coast of Galway, and Teresa (Carol Scanlan), who flees away from a life of prostitution in England; Paddy Breathnach’s *I Went Down* (1997), a gangster feature that takes the form of a road movie; Vinny Murphy’s *Accelerator* (2000), an action movie à la *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000) where the protagonists agree to take part in a Dublin to Belfast road race; Alan Gilson’s *Timbuktu* (2004), a dark road movie set in the North African Sahara with two Irish girls in search of a kidnapped brother; Terry Loane’s *Mickybo and Me* (2004), a comedy-drama film about two young Westerns’ fans in Belfast during the Troubles – one Catholic, one Protestant – whose ultimate goal is to emigrate to Australia; Paddy Breathnach’s *Man About Dog* (2005), an Irish comedy film whose West Belfast

⁴ In *Into the West* two young boys dream of becoming cowboys, escaping Dublin on a magic white horse, and reaching Ireland’s west coast.

protagonists are obsessed with dog racing and escape from their problems going “down south” to the Republic of Ireland; Neil Jordan’s *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), or the story of Patrick Kitten (Cillian Murphy), a transgender child who initiates a continuous, multidirectional and messy journey in search for her lost mother from small town near the border of Northern Ireland to London in the 1970s; Paul Fraser’s *My Brothers* (2010), a coming-of-age movie epic quest of three brothers to replace their dying father’s watch; Yann Demange’s *’71* (2014), a historical thriller which presents “an accidental crossing of largely invisible borders by a young British soldier dropped into a [...] conflict in Belfast” (Vaupel, 2017, p. 61) during 1971, one of the bloodiest years of the Troubles; or in the more experimental *Roadside Picnic* (2010), *Birds on a Wire* (2011) and *You Have Been Killed* (2011), Michael Higgins’s road movie trilogy.

But what all these features have in common? According to Barton, the fact that Irish filmmakers have tended to “grasp the language of dominant cinema, [and] tailor it to reflect a local idiom through the appropriation of genres such as the gangster film, the road movie and the historical epic” (2004, p. 7–8). In this sense, the hybridity of the road movie genre in Irish cinema is the result of Ireland’s “relatively small size”, what handicaps the recreation of “the mythic journeys of America’s endless highways” (Burke, 2013, p. 171–2).

However, this handicap has not refrained academics from considering how we move through filmic landscapes, since a “critical geographic understanding of filmic spaces [...] indeed sheds light on social and cultural processes beyond the film’s frame, insights that enrich our understanding of place, space, [...] and identity (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 439). This is the case of Rockett, Gibbons and Hill (1987), Hill, McLoone, and Hainsworth (1994), McLoone (2000), Pettitt (2000), Barton (2004), Ging (2012), and Hill (2019), and their respective works on Irish cinema; McIlroy (1998), Edge (2009) and Brown (2010), who have focused entirely on the Northern Irish cinema; Kirwan (2011), Clarke (2012), and Burke (2013), who have been particularly concerned with borderlines and Irishness in cinematic representations; and Schwerter (2007), Vaupel (2017), and Deffenbacher (2019) special emphasis on the Troubles. Other significant case studies, not focused on (Northern) Irish cinema, range from gender and identity, in McDowell and Shirlow (2011), Mac an Ghail (1994, 1996a, 1996b), and Walsh

(2010); to Curtin and Linehan (2002), Lysaght (2002), and Ashe (2012), geographers who have mapped political transitions of gender in the Northern Irish urban space during and after the Troubles.

3. SUBVERTING THE ROAD MOVIE IN "THE CONCERT": A CASE STUDY

In "The Concert", the gang has tickets to see Take That in Belfast, a once-in-a-life-time opportunity, but when Ma Mary (Tara Lynne O'Neill) forbids them from attending, they decide to sneak away. Instantly, Take That, and their concert becomes their final frontier,⁵ the point at which their identity can be renewed and regenerated, as a means to access their teen generational space and the globalised dominant culture that their local world does not provide for them. The opening sequence is key to understand this. When the whole family is watching the "Pray" music video in the living room (Take That, 1993), Granda Joe (Ian McElhinney) bursts out:

Granda Joe: I don't know what the world is coming to. Bloody perverts [...].

Ma Mary: You're overreacting Da [...]

Granda Joe: Why do they keep touching themselves?

Erin: 'cause they're artists Granda.

Granda Joe: Dirty English bastards are what they are. No offence, son (addressing James)."

Joe's masculine subjectivity is challenged by some English young men (the members of the boyband), who sensuously hold and touch their bodies in front of the camera. Their bodies are "not only presented as desirable, but, by their actions, [...] also [produce] performances of desiring" (McDonald, 1997, p. 279),

⁵ Sargeant and Watson note that "[t]he road trip is as much an internal voyage as an external geographical movement, the inner voyage providing a 'new frontier'" (2000, p. 10), while Brereton highlights that "[t]he road and its destination become a metaphor for life itself" (2003, p. 112). For a theory on Manifest destiny, the final frontier and its influence on the American identity, please see Turner (1920, p. 1–38).

a new global mode of pop maleness that transgresses Joe’s manliness, embedded in local forms of hegemonic masculinity, and endangers Joe’s ethno-Irish identity – “Dirty English bastards is what they are”.⁶ In this space that Granda Joe symbolically dominates, Derry in the 1990s, *Take That* has no place, something that Erin perfectly explains to Ma Mary: “The fact that this one’s happening [this concert] is a miracle. Nobody good ever comes here cause we keep killing each other”. By ignoring their parents and sneaking away, the road trip to Belfast instantly becomes a rite of passage and a road movie.

In this episode the dominant tropes of the road movie are those of a trip-oriented narration: freedom, the thrill of mobility, exotic encounters, confined vehicles, rural/wild elements, long distances, psychotic hitchhikers, confrontations with the authority, obstacles and an incipient deadline. These aspects, however, are articulated in ways that genuinely overturn the tropes upside down. According to Schwerter, “[p]ostmodern Troubles narratives [such as *Derry Girls*] are characterised by their hybridity [...], carnivalisation (the use of parody, satire and irony) and polysemy” (2007, p. 15), not to ridicule the victims of the conflict but to challenge the structural dimensions which fuelled the conflict.

4. The Thrill of Mobility

In this episode, the trajectory commonly associated with the road movie is subverted. On the one hand, mobility flows concentrically (to the locus of power), to Belfast, not eccentrically. The gang enthusiastically move from Derry to Belfast, not only the concert’s location but also a city that, after the onset of the Troubles, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, is increasingly mapped as a war zone one should run away from (Schwerter 2007, p. 2; Vaupel, 2017, p. 76). The trope of body as home, which establishes expectations for one to feel “at home” in one’s embodied practices, is essential to understand why these teenagers travel to Belfast. They are travelling to a place where, in spite of the Troubles, they can have access to their generational space. On the other hand, their trajectory is to the East, not the West, also subverting the traditional frontier drawn along the

⁶ For the impact of boybands and transnational masculinities in local cultures, please see Jung (2011, p. 99–100). For a discussion on Irish boybands as a global phenomenon and their permeation in Irish popular culture, please see Fagan (2003, p. 130).

urban-rural divide. As McLoone highlights, noting what cultural nationalist traditions suggest, the “further away from Dublin, the closer one got to the real Ireland” (2000, p. 201). With such a double subversion of the trope, notions of cultural authenticity and intergenerational conflicts collide.

Additionally, the typical long distances normally associated with the American road movie are reduced to a journey of 62 miles. The parody is possibly enacted from the fact that, as Clarke has argued, “Ireland is too small a country to host a road movie” (2012, n. p.), a fact that has influenced a great deal of Irish road movies in the last twenty years. However, the implications are not only relegated to the physical limitations of Irish landscape but also to the conditions of the route network. In this 62-mile-journey, the gang travels through, what seems to be, national secondary roads. This contrasts with the new American 1950s highways of the traditional road movie, which will “reconstitute the nation’s identity as a unity” while promoting “an image of America as a healthy body whose lifeblood flows through a network of road arteries” (Laderman, 2002, Chap. 1). It is therefore not a coincidence that, by subverting the trope, what *Derry Girls* problematises is the health of their troubled national identity. In fact, after the Northern Ireland Government announced plans for an extensive motorways programme in 1964, the M22 motorway which links Belfast and Derry was nearly cancelled due to the Troubles and it was almost left as it currently stood in 1975 (DfI Roads). As O’Toole has noted, “[t]he future that Ireland was imagining was an American motopia of the 1950s in which petrol was dirt cheap, guilt-free, and infinitely available” (2010, p. 188), but due to poor investment and the political conflict, this motopia continues to be a dream.

5. Rural and Wild Elements

For the gang, neither Derry nor rural Ireland grants them access to their generational space. This is perceived in the subversion of the rural element, as the TV series constructs a sense of rural claustrophobia where the wild element in their journey is reduced to a domesticated polar bear which escaped from the Belfast’s Zoo and running over a sheep. In the road movie, “[t]he vast, open landscape bordered by seductive horizons” (Laderman, 2002, Chap. 1), and open roads “eternally vanishing into the horizon, [...] [usually] offer audiences a glimpse at an ecstatic freedom” (Sargeant and Watson, 2000, p. 13), and signals

the frontier ahead, the incipient destination at one’s feet, usually enacted using traveling, aerial, and parallel “side-by-side” traveling shots opened to the vast and rich landscapes ahead. This is not the case in *Derry Girls*, where shots, camera angles, lighting and colour are especially arranged to infuse a sense of rural claustrophobia.

If “[i]mages of conflict between independence and dependence [...], maturity and immaturity” shape the teen audiovisual panorama (Driscoll, 2011, p. 14), in most road narratives, personal growth normally parallels literal changes in landscape, mirroring the emotional journey of the protagonists in the scenery. This does not happen in *Derry Girls* either. The emerald green of Ireland is absent from the photography of the episode. Instead, a dark brown and a depressive lighting contribute to subvert nature and landscape imagery as “only forms of simulacra” (Harvey, 1990), as an “exotic commodity” long evaporated, or “a signifier of nostalgia” (Kääpä, 2014, p. 118). If a wild and vivid rural Ireland, rooted in the romantic pastoralism of the nineteenth century “appears throughout the road movie canon as both motivation and goal” (Laderman, 2002, Chap. 1; see also Brereton, 2013), in “The Concert” the cinematographic space is neither a site of rejuvenation nor self-discovery. What is more, *Derry Girls* refuses to engage in an idealisation of nature. It offers little landscape views for which the road film is known, limiting the use of nature on screen to merely establishing shots or medium shots, where the natural element is placed behind them or at the corner of their eyes, separating the teenagers from the landscape and engaging with it only when it is relevant to them.⁷ This claustrophobic human-environment interaction is reinforced when Michelle remarks:

“Erin: We need a better plan, Michelle!

Michelle: This is a great plan.

Erin: We cannot walk to Belfast!

Michelle: How far can it be? Have you ever seen Northern Ireland on a map? It’s fucking tiny.”

⁷ In the episode, there are only two long/aerial tracking shots following the gang’s bus as they move across the landscape but, in our view, their main function is two highlight the muted palette of the landscape and the cloudy day.

The teens, eager to expand the contours of their self far beyond the final frontier ahead, have a strong urban-centric view of their material world and an antirural bias that contrasts the values of their globalised generational space with the cultural capital of rural traditionalism, enacting a renegotiation of the limits of the Irish identity and its authenticity. This vision coincides with Murray's and Heumann's critique, who view that "drawing on images of an open road built on our drive to move west toward progress is counter to any truly progressive ecological vision for the future" (Murray and Heumann, 2010, p. 155).

6. Vehicles

We might also look at the car itself, a crucial element of the road movie iconography. According to Corrigan, "cars and motorcycles represent a mechanised extension of the body, through which that body could move farther and faster than ever before and quite literally evade the trajectory of classical narrative" (Corrigan, 1994, p. 144–5). It is no surprise then that the teens do not own or are able to drive a car. Instead, they hitchhike and travel by bus, constrained by the contingencies of public transport. Several factors are usually considered when designing a bus network and routes. Administrations and operators design bus routes taking into account aspects such as line frequency, peak periods, stops, inter-stop distances or even physical characteristics of the landscape that might impact the routes – due to manoeuvre space or weight limitations. All these aspects point to an artificiality in the trajectory of any public means of transport, something that is mirrored in the trajectory of the teens' mobility to Belfast.

Their mobility is artificially constructed and institutionally constrained, something that points to James's and the girls' social status as teens (their lack of independence, access to a driving license, etc...), and to their ritualistic inability to pass the threshold of maturity that economic independence confers. In globalised cultures, Schouten argues that teenagers normally mark their culturally prescribed rites of passage through "acts of disposition and acquisition" (Schouten, 1991, p. 49; Turner, 1969). Without any social and economic capital on sight, these working-class teenagers are unable to expand

the territories of their embodied self.⁸ This is reinforced by the fact that, although the teenagers embark on a route taking no intentional detours (a linear path), several obstacles on their journey map a continuous, multidirectional and messy trajectory, where the teens are only able to move forward when they confront the authority of Sister Michael (Siobhan McSweeney), the police, and their parents.⁹

7. Confrontation with the Authority

“The ambivalent relationship between rebellion and conformity so important to teen film is clearly established as a youthful characteristic of the genre” and, thus, of *Derry Girls* (Driscoll, 2011, p. 22). In terms of challenging official authority, disobeying adults in this episode is directly linked to disobeying the unofficial authority of mainstream, conservative values. As De Certeau (1988) argues, the construction and evolution of any given culture is facilitated by its consumers rather than the creators and agents of culture. Such focus on consumption contributes to escape from dominant culture “by considering the ways that the people can resist the imposed system of order” (De Certeau, 1988, p. 15). Therefore, listening to Take That, buying the CDs, consuming their videos and, of course, attending the concert, are in essence acts of resistance.

Since parents fail to enforce their authority in *Derry Girls*, social regulation emerges from elsewhere: the classic institutions of the teen genre; the state apparatuses (that regulate the driving age or the legal age to drink alcohol), the church (Sister Michael), and the NI police (bomb squad). When the teens board the bus that is going to Belfast, they sit on the back seat together, where Michelle is carrying a full suitcase of vodka. Sister Michael, principal at Our Lady Immaculate College, is unfortunately on board as well. After questioning the gang for the “unattended” suitcase full of alcohol and lying about it, Sister

⁸ For other examples on how social status and economic status constrain their mobility (towards independence and adulthood) please see episode two (the trip to Paris) or episode seven (the Protestant’s gift gag). Although episodes in season one do not have a proper title and by season two, episode name convention was changed by adding titles, all episodes from both seasons will be addressed following the same convention (episode one, two, ... ten).

⁹ Other rites of passage are also normally connected to small “becomings” at a gang level, such as doing drugs or buying a new dress for the school dance (Ryan, 2020, p. 83); all Americanised ritualistic practices and illegal practices which will permeate the local (episodes ten and eleven, respectively).

Michael asks the bus driver to pull out and calls the police, triggering a security alert. The suitcase full of vodka is finally detonated by a bomb squad, and the teens run away before being flagrantly caught by their school principal. These youthful rebellions, according to Burke, are normally heightened by some form of criminality in teen (Northern) Irish drive movies; for instance, in *Mickybo and Me* the protagonists “believe that they have been implicated in the death of a neighbour, while in *Into the West* and *My Brothers* a horse and bread van are stolen” (2013, p. 176).

In this coming-of-age narrative embedded in road movie iconography consuming Take That’s music, confronting parental authority, drinking alcohol, or hitchhiking can be viewed as personal rites of passage that allow the gang to separate from adolescence (an act of disposition) and embarking adulthood (an act of acquisition and consumption). All these acts of resistance conform a rite of passage that contributes to the formation of their new identities with such symbols and practices available for the consumer.

8. Exotic Encounters

Although it is well documented the use of native Americans and Latinos in the road movie iconography to assist protagonists and confer authenticity and “naturalness”, these exotic encounters in the Irish road movie have traditionally served other purposes.¹⁰ According to Laderman though,

“A certain exoticism regarding race pervades many road movies. This exoticism generally appears in the visionary longing of the protagonists, who idealise ‘primitive’ cultures as a kind of ‘dark continent’ destination, an antidote to the materialistic Western industrial culture they are rebelling against.” (2002, Chap. 1)

When the teens come across a small group or Irish Travellers selling vegetables on the road, this exoticism is automatically enacted, but engaging in rather problematic racial depictions. The girls’ stereotyped perception of the Travellers – as dangerous, dishonest, even psychopathic – equates a rejection of rural Ireland and of those ones who inhabit it. However, when James is accidentally left behind with the Travellers and “becomes a gypsy”, this interaction contributes

¹⁰ Please see Burke (2013) and Deffenbacher (2019).

to authenticate James as a "real" man, confirming the "'man's' legitimacy to own and control the landscape", so prevalent in the road movie lore (Brereton, 2003, p. 91). This contrasts, though, with James's inability to pass as a "real man" throughout the whole series.¹¹

9. Freedom vs. Home

Another frontier addressed by the road movie genre is that between adolescence and maturity, a border that can only be crossed by repudiating domestic stability. To be on the road signals "the potential of venturing beyond the familiarity of home [...], to venture into the new and unknown" (Laderman, 2002, Chap. 1), where protagonists normally seek "the freedom of the road as refuge from a harrowing past" (López, 1993, p. 257),¹² to what Cohan and Hark have expanded by linking "the genre's potential for romanticizing alienation" with its ability to challenge "the uniform identity of the nation's culture" (1997, p. 1). All these aspects are clearly exemplified in "The Concert", not only through the different acts of disposition and acquisition we have already discussed but also in some hyperdiegetic elements of the episode such as the music soundtrack.

If the classic road movie of the 1960s and 1970s is "culturally interwoven with the advent of rock" (Laderman, 2002, Chap. 1),¹³ the gang's road trip cannot be explained without the 1990s pop music. The thrill of mobility is marked by two Take That songs, "Pray" and "Sure", reinforcing the episode's structural formulas: (i) that of the goal-oriented protagonists who must overcome obstacles before reaching their destination/goal, (ii) and that of the three-act trajectory of equilibrium, disruption, restored equilibrium. In twenty-five minutes, we also listen to "The Key, the Secret" (Urban Cookie Collective), regarded as one of the biggest dance anthems of the 1990s, "Better the Devil You Know" (Kylie Minogue), "Ode to My Family" (The Cranberries), "Let's Get Ready to Rhumble" (PJ & Duncan), "It's Alright" (East 17), "Where Are You Baby?" (Betty Boo), or

¹¹ James is constantly forced to clarify he is not gay (episodes two, three, six...) or try hard to pass as a lad (episode seven).

¹² See also Ireland (2003, p. 482).

¹³ See also Atkinson (1994).

even “La Macarena” (Los del Río).

Many of these songs strategically connect our teens’ pubertal angst:

“Do you see me, do you see me? / Does anyone care? [...] Unhappiness where’s when I was young / And we didn’t give a damn / Cause we were raised / To see life as fun and take it if we can.” (“Ode to My Family”)

to the exploration of separation and the individuation process, a trajectory from a self based in identifications with meaningful others to a new self more uniquely one’s own:

“I’ve got the key / To another way.” (“The Key, the Secret”),

“We are the seed of the new breed / We will succeed our time has come.” (“It’s Alright”).

For such an exploration, a displacement of the previous generation, and their cultural capital, may be enacted, but not without fearing the nature of adulthood.¹⁴ This is comically perceived when the gang is offered a lift from Rita (Kerri Quinn), a middle-aged woman in a passing van, but soon realise she might be more dangerous than the Travellers – she is not only drink-driving but also forces the girls to listen to La Bohème’s “Che Gelida Manina”.

10. THE TERRITORIALISATION OF GENDERED BOUNDARIES

When the girls realise that they have left James behind with the Travellers and the concert tickets everything changes. Physically and symbolically, their only chance to trespass the final frontier (the concert) is with James. When they go back for him, he surprisingly admits that he wants to live with the Traveller community. James changing relationship with the symbolic and material space which he occupies is captured by his decision to inhabit the world of the ethnic Other. If this is incidental, we do not know, but the fact that the male protagonist is the only one able to successfully interact with the rural space in this episode

¹⁴ According to Burke, many teen (Northern) Irish road movies illustrate this ambivalence; *Into the West, My Brothers*, or *Mickybo and Me*, to name a few (2013, p. 176).

remains obvious.¹⁵ If the tropes of the road movie and the American frontier have historically contributed to the construction of American masculinity, becoming the locus of the American nation-building process (Manifest destiny), this episode not only maps the contours of their teen selves but also the territorialisation of their male and female gendered boundaries. This vision coincides with Aitken’s and Lukinbea’s, who argue that usually, in this genre, the “spatial metaphors of mobility combine to form an incontestable metanarrative which, in the case of the road movie, may simply be another form of hegemonic masculinity” (1997, p. 352).¹⁶

All in all, the girls are always frightened on the road, they are unable to surpass the obstacles on their own, and the dominion over the material and symbolic spaces is only exerted by James. Thus, the de-territorialisation of their female gendered boundaries is not resolved satisfactorily in this episode as *Derry Girls* shows little interest in the landscape and offers little sense of how it coexists with us. Less than demonstrating the risks of travel for young women, the rural-urban divide authenticates the girls’ femininity by establishing them as unsuited to nature and *natural* women.

Rites of passage, road movies, and space have been articulated to challenge notions of adolescence, authenticity, identity, Irishness and (im)mobility in *Derry Girls*. Although the protagonists are able to reach their final frontier and attend the concert, this is only one of the many rites of passage and transgressions they have ahead of them, a constant in a movie genre that “focuses [...] on ceremonies marking the achievement of some limited independence which, at the same time, does not produce adulthood” (Driscoll, 2011, p. 70). However, by subverting all road movie tropes and iconography, and by mapping a multidirectional and

¹⁵ Ironically, James is normally deprived of the male spaces of co-existence where he could accomplish “culturally appropriate and geographical contingent versions of masculinity” (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 89). For instance, in episode one, James is forced to enrol in an all-girls college, in episode twelve, he compares Derry with a prison and just “developed Stockholm syndrome”, etc...

¹⁶ See also Laderman (2002) and Stringer (2002).

messy road trip, "The Concert" also problematises the teenagers' liminality and structural inferiority.

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