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ADDICTION TO FREEDOM: SCOTTISH IDENTITY IN *BRAVEHEART* (1995) AND *TRAINSPOTTING* (1996)

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Introduction

Renan's Romantic affirmation that a nation is "a soul, a spiritual principle" (1990: 19) still holds today after more than a century of (failed) theorising on nationality. Benedict Anderson's anthropological formulation of the nation as "an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1991: 5) agrees with Renan's placing of the nation in the realm of the symbolic, as a product of the collective Coleridgean imagination. According to Renan, two factors bind the nation together: the common glories of the past and the common will to live the present together. He speaks of the nation as a site for the performance of the great deeds of the future as homage to the memory of the great deeds of the past, but in Renan's conception the present remains a problematic blank. Homi Bhabha replaces Renan's gap with the notion of the conceptual ambivalence of modern society — of the present — which in the production of the nation as narration suffers "a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (1990: 297). The writing of the nation is born of this fruitful impossibility of reconciling the pedagogical and the performative and so the nation is represented not as it is, but as it is imagined (in Anderson's sense) to have been in the past, to be in the present and to become in the future.

Part of the writing of the nation as narration is the filming of the nation. Though in many senses similar to Catalonia, the case of Scotland as a nationality is unique and perplexing. Film reflects the current discourse on this country's split between the pedagogical (the preaching of the idea of Scotland as a nation oppressed by English colonialism, now finally aiming at the creation of a Scottish Parliament) and the performative (the feeling that Scotland is a doomed nation gone out of history). The increasingly appealing idea of independence within a European context both clashes with and complements the paradoxical view of Scotland as a decaying post-colonial country: paradoxical because Scotland and the Scots were an essential ingredient in the making of the British Empire. It is from Scotland that the sense of history now said to be at its end first springs in the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. And it is also from Scotland and its most ardent propagandist, Walter

Scott, that the problem of how to cope with invented traditions and a radical scepticism about the meaning of history in the present first arise. These are aspects reflected by the image of Scotland on film today, and if two films epitomise the cultural confrontation between the pedagogical and the performative, the invented tradition and the impossibility of a coherent present, these are *Braveheart* (1995) and *Trainspotting* (1996).

"In global terms", John Caughie writes, "Scottish film is still a periphery on the edge of a periphery and, in national terms, the core of production funding is still based in the south" (1990: 25). Thus, the definition of what Scottish film is and the problems that beset it passes inevitably through the presentation of Scotland as a peripheric country colonised by the core culture of the English, themselves in the periphery of American culture. The pessimistic positions assumed by Colin MacArthur and his collaborators in *Scotch Reels* (1982) have been somehow softened by the financial and artistic development of film in Scotland after the international success of Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* (1983) (Dick 1990, Bruce 1996). Yet, in addition to the matter of how to fund a successful Scottish film industry there remains the "problem of what the content of the national film culture of a smallish nation should be" (Schlesinger 1990: 227). In this sense, *Braveheart* and *Trainspotting* appear to be opposite and complementary: opposite because *Braveheart* is yet another instance of the big-budget Hollywood product trespassing on the domain of a foreign culture while this struggles to place itself on the map with low-budget indigenous products like *Trainspotting*; complementary because *Braveheart* follows well the Scottish desire to market a tourist-friendly image of Scotland, whereas *Trainspotting* proves that alternative representations of Scotland on the screen may also triumph beyond the Scottish borders.

Seen under this light, the paradox is that Scotland seems to welcome American colonisation through Hollywood while decrying English interference on the management of Scottish film. This might well be because in the particular case of *Braveheart* American business sides with Scottish politics, not without many contradictions. On the one hand, Randall Wallace's screenplay takes the side of Scottish nationalism in defence of Scotland's freedom from English rule. But since the film is American the political message is mixed with the more ambiguous American idea of freedom, which masquerading as personal freedom actually entails the liberal ideology on which multinational capitalism is based — the same that dominates film-making in Scotland. Thatcherism, it must be remembered also appealed to individual freedom and (English) nationalism and so did Ronald Reagan in his reinforcing of America's identity as world's leader. *Braveheart* suggests, ironically, that Scotland was first to fight for the common cause that led to the independence of the USA just seventy years after Scotland lost its own independence. The film

can be seen alternatively as a post-colonial nationalist text or a post-historical, late capitalist product, depending on whether we look at its content or at its making.

Scotland's warm welcome to *Braveheart* also involved other political tenets. Secretary of State for Scotland Michael Forsyth had repeatedly defended the need for Scotland to offer advantages to foreign filmmakers. They would help develop Scottish film-making by employing local film workers, would greatly benefit the communities that welcomed them, and their films would contribute to enhancing Scotland's tourist appeal. Ironically Forsyth made his point because most of the $72 million of *Braveheart*'s budget were lost to Ireland, where the film was mostly shot because Ireland could offer the facilities Gibson required (studios, extras, within-reach locations and so on) whereas Scotland could not. Forsyth proposed then the opening of an agency that would amalgamate the services scattered among the Scottish Film Council, the Scottish Film Production Fund, Scottish Screen Location and Scottish Broadcast and Film Training. "*Braveheart* was" David Bruce concludes, "certainly one of the catalysts to the creation in 1996 of the new Scottish Screen Agency", (1996: 171) an agency on which the hopes for the future of the Scottish film industry are pinned now.

As Gibson wrapped his film, the threesome responsible for the successful *Shallow Grave* (1994) — producer Andrew MacDonald, director Danny Boyle and screenwriter John Hodge — were trying to secure the rights to film Irvine Welsh's cult novel *Trainspotting* (1993). Welsh was keen to have his novel filmed by the trio but the rights to film his novel were in the hands of TV producer Nicholas Gay, of *Red Dwarf* fame, who had secured them on the strength of the novel's and the stage adaptation's enormous success. As John Hodge wrote the first drafts of the screenplay, Channel 4 stepped in and bought Gay off for a small percentage of the budget, a modest $3,5 million (or £1.5 million) (Westbrook 1996). *Shallow Grave* (£1 million) had been funded by the Glasgow Film Fund, a Scottish body, but the funding for *Trainspotting* came from the London office of Channel 4 thus epitomising the situation of dependence from the South denounced by John Caughie.

The box office figures show that *Braveheart* grossed $202,6 million world-wide ($75,6 in the USA, $127 million abroad), but they also show that in Britain the differences between the two films were much smaller: Gibson's film made $16,6 million, MacDonald's $12,3 million. *Trainspotting* proved, therefore, the point that a cheap film made in Scotland could compete with big Hollywood productions both at home and abroad, thus paving the way for the English hit *Full Monty* (1996), which was, it must be remembered, financed with US dollars. However, *Trainspotting* also proved

that success may kill the Scottish film industry, for MacDonald, Boyle and Hodge moved next to Hollywood to film the much less successful romantic comedy *A Life Less Ordinary.* Their most immediate predecessor, Scottish director Bill Forsyth, had also abandoned Scotland for Hollywood after proving with his *Gregory's Girl* (1981) and *Local Hero* (1983) that Scottish films could succeed world-wide. The irony is, thus, that while *Trainspotting* refuses to glamorise Scottishness as *Braveheart* does, presenting instead a very drab image of the country, its authors could not resist Hollywood's call. The inevitable conclusion is that Scottish Screen faces a hard task as it is supposed to invest in talent that Hollywood immediately seizes upon. That is the problem that conditions the writing of the nation of Scotland as film narration, rather than what the films should be about.

Braveheart and Nationalism

Walter Scott articulated a very potent mode of building national identity through the fictionalisation of history which led to imitation in many European countries. But he is also guilty of collaborating in the invention of Tartanry, which together with the sentimental Kailyard tradition epitomised by the late 19th century Scottish novels of J.M. Barrie and others, has imposed a heavy burden on the construction of Scottish identity. "Tartanry and Kailyard", Colin MacArthur has written "is not only the framework within which Scots largely construct themselves but is also the grid within which other cultures construct the Scots" (McArthur 1982: 40). Among them, Hollywood has used these invented traditions to represent Scotland from the very beginnings of film (Murray 1982), which has placed Scottish filmmakers (and Scottish artists in general) in a tight corner. *Braveheart* is, in fact, nothing but an update of Hollywood Tartanry and its winning five Oscars — among them those for Best Picture and Best Director — shows how little Hollywood, and perhaps the filmmakers themselves, understood of the film's militant nationalist message and how much they still depended on stereotyped images of Scotland.

The icons of this invented yet traditional Scottishness form such a solid system of meaning that any of the signifiers — from kilts, biscuit tins and thistles to Scottish terriers, among other images — may transmit "in a process of *condensation* and *displacement*, the complex ideological message of Tartanry/Kailyard" (McArthur 1981/1982: 23). In front of this cohesion, Scottish artists are constricted by their inability to find a meaningful alternative that allows them to narrate Scotland as a different nation. Yet, this negative perception seems to be changing today. Craig Cairns, who joined Colin MacArthur in deriding Tartanry and Kailyard in 1982 is now denouncing the deconstruction of these traditions as snobbery and dissatisfaction on the side of the intellectuals attacking popular culture. "The assumption," he writes, "that if we deconstruct all myths, destroy all

fake versions of our culture we will liberate ourselves into a purified reality is an illusion in the minds of those who think that the world can be reinvented by simply switching discourse" (1996: 111). This may help to understand why *Braveheart*, which ultimately derives from Tartanry, was a successful film in Scotland instead of being received as yet another colonial appropriation of Scotland: it was seen, indeed, as part of Scottish popular culture. "It is probably still the case", John Osmond suspects "that the majority of Scots are eager consumers of the artefacts and images whose influence outside Scotland many would claim to deplore" (1988: 74). It is unclear whether these Scots are the same or two separate groups but it seems obvious that some Scots oppose the romantic, picturesque version of Scotland sold to deluded tourists while others live off it, or, simply, like it. An alternative version of Scotland, no matter how satisfactory in an intellectual and emotional sense might be for some Scots, may attract more enlightened lovers of Scotland but may also jeopardise the tourist dreamland. The beautiful views of Ben Nevis in *Braveheart* are seen with pleasure and cash in mind by the Scottish government agencies, but, while cheered by young Scots, the bleak landscapes of *Trainspotting* must have certainly sent a chill down the spine of the Scottish Tourist Board.

Tourism is closely linked to the birth of *Braveheart*. Screen writer Randall Wallace (no relation to the eponymous hero) was inspired to write his screenplay by a statue of Wallace seen during a holiday in Edinburgh. The nationalist legends other media had failed to transmit were thus effectively transmitted by the efforts of the tourist industry. Wallace the American writer stumbled upon Wallace the Scottish hero at a historical moment most suitable for the resurrection of the Wallace cult, with Scotland hoping for the election of a Labour government that would bring the promised referendum on Devolution, as it did in 1997. Randall Wallace's main source was William Hamilton's 1722 version of the 15th century pro-French, anti-English epic *The Acts and Deeds of Sir William Wallace* written in Scots verse by Blind Harry. This fictional Wallace has superseded the real Wallace of whom very little is known, which has been taken advantage of by those who have made him into a legend, including Mel Gibson.

Proving the post-modern tenet that history is but yet another narrative, of which Scott was already well aware, Wallace has become a protean figure exploited in each period for different political purposes. Akin to the English Robin Hood, Wallace was transformed into a symbol of freedom for all during the Reformation with the publication of John Major's 1521 *History of Great Britain*. His cult grew between 1500 and 1600 but was definitively launched in the 18th century when the exiled Stuarts appropriated Wallace's figure for their myth of national identity and the

popular literature it generated: According to Pittock, Wallace became "a designer-hero appealing to the radical in Jacobite image-projection" (1991: 57). The paradox is that Wallace also became in the 19th century both a symbol of Empire — a hero who by making Scotland great also made Britain great — and a symbol of Scottish national identity, as testified by the 100,000 people who gathered on June 24 1861 at the opening ceremony of the 300-foot amazingly phallic Wallace Monument in Stirling. Later, in the 20th Wallace would become, as Tony Milligan argues, the Bolshevik, the radical plebeian (1995/96) standing for the freedom of working-class Scots.

American-Australian Mel Gibson and his crew turn this icon of Scottishness into the forefather of American democratic freedom, and also into an action hero. Scotland and the USA are implicitly linked by the view that both are post-colonial nations liberated from the same enemy, the English, and Wallace appears to be a proto George Washington leaning towards the barbaric. The most problematic aspect of this new reading of Wallace, the text, as a historical figure is the recontextualisation of his idea of freedom. The freedom that Wallace/Gibson constantly invokes on the screen is a mixture of a democratic ideal sustained on the idea of Scotland as an identifiable nation and of personal freedom. The film defends a potent discourse on masculinity by which Wallace is not the conventional heroic patriot with a political agenda, but an accidental hero forced to fight for his nation, who understands politics as a personal affair and who is ultimately defending his personal right to live in peace (in freedom) the life he chooses, none but that of a free-holding farmer.

This is, of course, historically inaccurate as the idea of freedom the historical Wallace fought for was freedom from English domination within a feudal structure (Milligan 1992). Wallace did not lead liberated serfs but small landowners who feared English subjection; he was betrayed by those noblemen who saw more advantages in paying homage to the English crown than in defending Scottish national identity. But if this film has managed to capture the passions of many spectators at home and abroad — though of few reviewers — this is because Randall Wallace and Mel Gibson's presentation of political issues is naive and simple but effective and quite meaningful for Scotland today: the nation, *Braveheart* argues, cannot progress without the union of all classes against the common enemy, subordination to English rule, a view the very SNP would subscribe. This view is led to its last consequence with the detailed torture and execution of Wallace as a traitor to the English crown to which he never swore allegiance. Wallace's graphically depicted torture and death was seen as a letdown by some American reviewers expecting a happy end as usual, but his martyrdom is, in fact, one of the few accurate portrayals of the Foucaldian explanation of power in *Discipline and Punish* (1987) ever

seen on the screen. It is also a most effective though basic way of instilling nationalist passions in the viewer, though the paradox is that possibly few Americans would sympathise with Scotland's present-day claim to independence and much less its government.

Braveheart is, it must be remembered, an adaptation of Blind Harry's epic and the long-lived Wallace cult. It should be seen, therefore, as a free recreation of historical events rather than as an accurate reconstruction of them. This is a fantasy, but it is a fantasy that articulates well discourses that matter for the definition of contemporary politics in Scotland and that can also be understood by anybody in tune with America's idea of itself as a free country, no matter how contradictory this may be. Asked about the importance of historical accuracy in *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson dismissed it, noting that historical accuracy would have meant showing 3,000 naked male bodies at Stirling battle, as it seems the Scots fought naked. This is something he could not do because of MPAA restrictions so he settled instead for a version of the fight in which what Scots don't wear under their kilts is clarified for the benefit of their English enemies and the voyeuristic spectator... Of course, nobody wore tartan in the 13th century and much less kilts or belted plaids. This is a point that can be easily inferred from Hugh Trevor-Roper's essay "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Here Hobsbawm, Ranger and Trevor-Ropes himself unmask the relationship between history and imagination in the name of respectable historiography, and read nation not as Anderson's imagined community but as a rather tacky fantasy. Trevor-Ropes's survey of the invention of Tartanry concludes with the idea that between 1707, the year when the treaty of Union was signed and 1822, the year when Walter Scott convinced visiting monarch George IV to wear a kilt, Scotland was involved in a hallucinatory identification of the nation with the until then derided Celtic Highlands. What he calls hallucination — implying perhaps by contrast that the English do not have such daydreams about their nation — may be indeed a wild flight of fancy, but Trevor-Ropes's attitude rather unprofessional attitude as a historian is to mock the dream rather than to try to understand why so many nations, not only Scotland, felt the need to fake their past. He fails to sympathise with the nation because he sees fancy where there is imagination and so he establishes a scale of authenticity that has nothing to do with how a nation sees itself. The pity is that by denying the authenticity of Scotland's claim to being a nation, as if genuineness mattered in our world, Trevor-Ropes derides Scottish nationalism itself. As Benedict Anderson says, in a rather more sympathetic vein, "communities are to be distinguished, not by their

falsity/genuiness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (1991: 6). What *Braveheart* does for Scotland is to show sympathy for the way Scots have imagined themselves through the Wallace cult and, thus, the film succeeds despite its political naiveté, its crude sexual politics and its merging of the Wallace cult with the Mel Gibson cult.

Trainspotting and Post-colonialism

Trainspotting shows that the Scots welcome the deconstruction of their myths, provided they come from home itself. This a film Hollywood could not make about Scotland, and much less the English; *Braveheart* is a film Scotland itself could not make without appearing to be excessively naive. Although *Trainspotting* is a film about young people and drugs and can be thus understood by many other communities, it is also a film about Scotland as a neverland — a drug haze — out of history. It must be remembered that J.M. Barrie, the Scottish writer who invented Kailyard, also transposed this Scotland that will not face itself to his eternal children of *Peter Pan*, harassed by the Stuart Captain Hook (as Pittock suggests) as they search for the ideal mother figure.

The terrible squalor of the Scotland *Trainspotting* narrates, with its disgusting toilets, dead babies and battered tourists, is portrayed with a great deal of black humour. The grim comedy spells out a clear message, though: young Scots seek refuge in drugs because they cannot stand the reality they live in, but also because they cannot and will not do anything about it. Renton's scathing speech to Tommy on the meaninglessness of being Scottish — pronounced in the middle of nowhere or the great outdoors in Tommy's version — serves as the film's declaration of political intentions (or lack of them). The hub of Renton's speech is that the clearest sign of the Scots' being the lowest of the low, as he says, is their having succumbed to English colonisation. "We could not even find a decent nation to be colonised by", Renton rants, as he deplores not English imperialism but Scottish passivity. The irony is that this desperate chant to Scotland's apathy, becomes in itself a source of pride: the Scots are proud of their ability to voice through *Trainspotting*, among other very negative texts like those by Kelman or Warner, the decay of their nation. "Scottish culture", Craig Cairns writes, "has cowered in the consciousness of its own inadequacy, recognising the achievements of individual Scots simply as proof of the failure of the culture as whole... And the consequence of accepting ourselves as parochial has been a profound self-hatred" (1996: 12). *Trainspotting* goes one step beyond towards a recovery of Scottish culture by mocking the parochialism and the self-hatred, but it is still far from offering a positive model of how to deal with Scottish reality. *Trainspotting* seems the answer to the question of how to overcome the Tartanry and Kailyard myths strangling the development of Scottish

fictions, but it also falls together with many other Scottish fictions into a glamorisation of hopelessness. This is useless to bridge the gap with those in the nation trying to take an active political position, the Scots still absent from the screens. Arguably, *Braveheart* also glamorises self-hatred and defeat, but Wallace's martyrdom bespeaks hopefulness rather than hopelessness.

Renton's view of Scotland as a colonised nation is being contested in the 1990s. In *Understanding Scotland* (1992), David McCrone exposes colonialism as yet another myth, though his dissenting voice is in the minority. The "colonial metaphor", as he calls it, was used in the late 1960s and early 1970s by the SNP and some Scottish intellectuals to justify the situation of Scotland's ailing economy. It is still very much used today. In 1975 the American sociologist Michael Hechter published *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* claiming that Scotland was part of the Celtic world colonised by the English (comprising also Wales and Ireland). Hechter's theory came at a very convenient time and made some interesting points, but he himself realised that the evidence for presenting Scotland as a Celtic nation was weak and that so were his arguments maintaining that Scotland was a peripheral nation rather than part of the core of the British Empire.

To this, David McCrone answers that in fact Scotland moved from the periphery of the pre-Union times to the core of the Empire thanks to its early "dependency." He denies the view of Scotland as a colony, for among other factors, England treated Scotland as a source of military manpower and not of raw materials as it did with other territories, Scotland's civil society survived unharmed the signing of the Union treaty, unlike Ireland Scotland suffered no invasions and "Scotland's native culture remained strong, especially among its merchant class, the quintessential 'modernising' cadre" (McCrone 1992: 45). It could always be claimed that Scotland did suffer a more insidious form of colonisation following the loss of its Parliament, its subjection to legislation made in England, and the cultural allegiance of the Scottish upper classes to English values, but it seems obvious that Scotland's situation is not that of India nor, for that matter, the USA. Colin MacArthur argues that Scotland's nationalist feelings grow from the 1960s onwards when "partnership in Empire becomes being tied down to a post-imperial geriatric" (1982: 49). This is a view supported by McCrone's conclusion that "the roots of Scotland's decline are to be found in a 'surfeit of imperialism' rather than, as is more commonly supposed, in a position of clientage or dependence" (1992: 68). What Renton attributes to colonisation is, therefore, better attributed to a failed partnership that allowed Scotland to rise briefly in the 18th century but plunged her then down and out of history with England as the decline

of the British Empire began.

In the end, the solution Renton adopts is becoming 'one of us' in the sense of becoming a (implicitly European) middle-class consumer but in no perceptible way a committed Scot. "Scotland, like other societies," David McCrone writes, "may be entering a post-nationalist age. The vehicle on that journey, ironically, seems to be nationalism itself" (1992: 196). In view of Renton's attitude, this statement might be a bit premature, for the young Scots of Trainspotting seem to have abandoned nationalism without ever reaching it. Renton's post-colonial speech is bracketed by his initial and his final speeches on consumerism. The Renton who chooses drugs instead of consumerism's artificial paradise at the beginning of the film, walks confidently towards the camera at the end ready to abandon drugs and enter consumer utopia, to be "one of us." There is much irony in his conversion to respectability in the world of multinational capitalism and no reference at all to Scottishness; in fact, while the book's Renton leaves Scotland for Amsterdam (where author Irvine Welsh lives), the film's Renton is just on the move presumably also far from his so-called mates whom he has betrayed. Nationalism is not a meaningless option, though it does have an extra-diegetic presence in the relation that the filmmakers establish with their nation as Scotland's (accidental) international spokesmen. Again, their going to Hollywood seems to suggest that in the representation of Scotland on film there is still a void that cannot be filled, and that is the reality of those who stay home and try to balance *Braveheart*'s heroics with *Trainspotting*'s anti-heroics.

Conclusions

The sharp contrast between *Braveheart* and *Trainspotting* seem to epitomise Tom Nairn's diagnosis of Scottish nationalism as a form of neurosis. But seen from another cultural point of view, such as the Catalan, Scotland appears to be a privileged nation, capable of interesting Hollywood and of offering self-representations succeeding world-wide. Despite Nairn, the fact is that each film has managed to say relevant things about Scotland today and to create its own cult. One wonders, though, whether there is any single Scot who is an adept of both. The value of each film, which is high in itself, increases when they are set against each other, for their joint discourse on Scotland proves that nationalism is a dynamic cultural phenomenon that will not allow itself to be defined once and for all. Scotland's ability to let itself be marketed as a heroic and an anti-heroic culture on the screen fascinates even more if we take into account the real-life narrative of Devolution. In this the nation narrates itself as a body transcending the past of *Braveheart* and the present of *Trainspotting* not so much towards Renan's future of glorious deeds but towards a post-nationalist period in which one needn't justify to

an overbearing neighbour the independence of one's own home.

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