

Black and White and Green All Over? The Emergence of Irish Female Stardom in Contemporary Mainstream Cinemas

by
Ciara Barrett

Abstract

This article proposes to address issues of gender and ethnicity in performances by Irish female film stars since 2000. In *Acting Irish in Hollywood*, Ruth Barton has noted that it has been easier, historically, for Irish male actors than for females to succeed in Hollywood as film “stars”. Indeed, the young Irish woman has largely been avoided both in Hollywood film narratives (as a protagonist) and by industry casting directors (as “star” material). As seen by the relative ubiquity in the press of Irish male actors like Colin Farrell, Cillian Murphy and Michael Fassbender, “Irishness” in contemporary Hollywood remains largely the province of male actor-stars. Nevertheless, since 2000, several Irish film actresses have achieved notable mainstream recognition outside of Ireland through Hollywood-made or otherwise widely-released films: Ruth Negga, Saoirse Ronan, Evanna Lynch and Dominique McElligott.

This paper examines the different ways in which, both in film and press appearances, such actresses have negotiated their Irishness, as well as the performance of Irishness, from the perspective of being female. I will highlight the ways in which more traditionally “Irish-looking” actresses have often suppressed the Irish side of their personas in the construction of their star images (building on Richard Dyer’s theory of the star image/persona), while in the case of the “off-white” (borrowing a phrase from Diane Negra) actress Ruth Negga, her Irishness has rather been highlighted. This paper will show that contemporary Irish female stars in Hollywood are rapidly destabilising traditionally held views of Irishness as “white” and, more specifically, Irish femininity as domestic/maternal, or indeed, conventional at all.

Introduction

In this article, I will be interrogating the seeming incompatibility of “Irishness” as a cultural commodity with stardom on behalf of the female

using two “Irish” identified female film actors, Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga, as contemporary case studies. I will do this firstly by tracing the history – or significant lack-thereof – of Irish female stardom in Hollywood as an indication of these actors’ departure from certain representational trends, and secondly by analysing their individual performances and instances of star representation against this established paradigm. I will suggest ultimately that Irish female stardom, as indicated by Ronan and Negga’s rise to prominence internationally, is just now beginning to find embodiment onscreen and in contemporary discourses.¹

It will be necessary first to define the terms and theories from which I shall be drawing, particularly the working definitions of “Irishness” and “stardom” relative to this qualitative analysis of performance. I will be using the word “Irish” to signify the indigenous or “home-grown” Irish actor, who regardless of ethnic origin identifies as culturally Irish by virtue of having physically grown up in Ireland. Irishness, in this case, is contingent on physical platial association, distinct from the more nebulous heritage of Irishness associated with the hyphenated identities of, for example, Irish-Americans or the Irish diaspora. Furthermore, I will be discussing contemporary Irish female star performance largely in the context of Hollywood (and to some degree non-Hollywood but nevertheless mainstream or “popular”) cinema, in that contemporary film “stardom” within Anglophone societies is contingent on international recognition, market accessibility and appeal/sale-ability in a capitalist system, which is largely the province of the Hollywood-associated actor. Generally speaking, a “star” is a composite sign or matrix comprised of several interconnected signifiers, the “real person,” the persona, the image, and the star-as-commodity, according to Richard Dyer’s seminal theory of stardom.² In practice, a film star may be entrusted to open a medium- to big-budget production based on name and image recognition, a byproduct of visibility in the media. Once these terms of reference are established it will be possible to review and explore why, historically, there have been relatively few Irish female stars.

¹ I would note that I will be limiting my discussion to these actresses’ film work – accepting that Negga in particular has built up an impressive resume of critically acclaimed stage roles – in that such stage work, by nature of its medium, is inherently local, or place-and-time-specific, and is not immediately reconcilable with the discussion of international stardom with which I am concerned here.

² Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: BFI, 1986); *The Matter of Images: essays on representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); *Stars*, 2nd Edition (London, BFI Publishing, 1998).

Over the last 100 years of cinema, Irishness as a particular and specific ethnicity has held considerable value on a global scale. This is evidenced by the ubiquity of Irish-themed movies and Irish-identified characters in popular Hollywood films from James Cagney as the classic Irish-American gangster in *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931) to the “Oirish” man-candy of *P.S. I Love You* (Richard LaGravenese, 2007) and *Leap Year* (Anand Tucker, 2010). As has been noted in recent discourses on Irish cinema and film stardom, it has been easier, historically, for Irish male actors than for females to succeed in Hollywood or internationally as so-called film “stars”.³ Major Irish or Irish-associated female stars are few and far between over the course of Hollywood film history, limited to Mary Pickford (1892-1972), Colleen Moore (1899-1988), Maureen O’Sullivan (1911-1998), and Maureen O’Hara (b.1920). By contrast, a partial list of Irish-identified male stars includes George Brent, Richard Harris, Peter O’Toole, Gabriel Byrne, Pierce Brosnan, Liam Neeson, Colin Farrell, Cillian Murphy, Jonathan Rhys Myers, Michael Fassbender, and Jamie Dornan. Male Irish stars like Farrell and Neeson open or are expected to open (would-be) blockbusters such as *Total Recall* (Len Wiseman, 2012) and *Non-Stop* (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2014). Meanwhile, Michael Fassbender works consistently as a second lead in blockbuster films (*X-Men: First Class* [Matthew Vaughan, 2011], *12 Years a Slave* [Steve McQueen, 2013]) and takes top billing in high-profile independent and European-arthouse movies that get considerable press in the American market (*A Dangerous Method* [David Cronenberg, 2011], *Shame* [Steve McQueen, 2011]). Significantly, regardless of whether the characters they play in such high-profile films are Irish or not, in promotional materials and appearances, their Irishness tends to be objectified towards their portrayal as positively masculine. An equivalent representational paradigm, however, does not exist for female Irish actors.

As a means towards addressing this perceptible imbalance, Ruth Barton has suggested that the Irish female star has been disadvantaged by a shift in the representational paradigm common to Hollywood cinema by which the ideal of de-ethnicised, and thus “unproblematic” whiteness in women has given way to the idealisation of “mixed-race” female beauty.⁴ In his Foreword to Barton’s book, Luke Gibbons proposes the theory that Irish actors’ performance style – which historically has tended to eschew the close-up in negation of

³ Ruth Barton, *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 224-225.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

the allure of the body – has almost disqualified Irish actresses from attaining Hollywood stardom which, in the case of women at least, is predicated to some degree on the acceptance of a scopophilic gaze.⁵ A theoretical consensus has therefore been reached that Irishness is not fetishised as a cultural signifier in women to the same extent that Irishness in men has been employed by actors themselves, or deployed tactically through public relations, as an asset to their stardom. Indeed, the young Irish woman has largely been avoided both in Hollywood film narratives as a protagonist and by industry casting directors as “star” material. This is, of course, with the exception of the aforementioned Pickford, Moore, O’Sullivan and O’Hara. But as Gaylyn Studlar and Christopher Shannon have shown, Pickford consciously invoked her Irish heritage through colleen-esque character choices and surrounding publicity materials to complement her image as unchallengingly innocent and asexual.⁶ Furthermore, Diane Negra has argued that Colleen Moore’s Irishness became acceptable and even attractive for the silent star in signifying a safely a-physical – again, asexual – youthfulness in mitigation of her association with liberalised flapper culture.⁷ Thereafter, such associations of Irish femininity were borne out (albeit with problematic flashes of subversion and inconsistencies of ethnic characterisation) in the star careers of Maureen O’Sullivan and Maureen O’Hara.⁸ Overall, Irish female stardom may be seen as ultimately self-negating in its aversion to the self-conscious performance of sexuality, which at least partially accounts for the historical paucity of Irish-identified female star performers. This is seen and perpetuated by the casting typically of non-Irish female stars in high-profile “Irish” roles: for instance,

5 Luke Gibbons, “Forward” in Barton, *ibid.*, xviii. I am taking the theory of “to-be-looked-at-ness” inherent to the female star/image from Laura Mulvey’s theorization of the gendered politics of viewing, founded in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” reprinted *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). It should be noted that feminist film criticism has since the 1970s expanded on – and at times diverged from – this Mulveyan apparatus theory to accommodate for a discussion of female agency, authorship and phenomenological impact, such as in the work of Tania Modleski and Gaylyn Studlar. Nevertheless, it remains a given to contemporary film and star studies that the image of woman has been constructed through the classical Hollywood style (with exception and notwithstanding certain evident strategies of subversion) as “pure image”, as put by Lucy Fischer in “The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of ‘Dames,’” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1976).

6 Gaylyn Studlar, “Oh, ‘Doll Divine’: Mary Pickford, Masquerade and the Pedophilic Gaze” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002); Shannon, “The Bowery Cinderella” in *Screening Irish-America*, ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009).

7 Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (London: Routledge, 2001).

8 Barton, 2006, Op Cit; Martin McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008).

Kate Hudson (American) in *About Adam* (Gerard Sternbridge, 2000), Kelly MacDonald and Shirley Henderson (Scottish) in *Intermission* (John Crowley, 2003), and more recently Judi Dench (English) in *Philomena* (Stephen Frears, 2013). Compounding the problem, Irish film criticism has fallen short in recent years of investigating this imbalance from a critical perspective, remaining focused instead on explorations of ethnic stereotyping (the Irish-American gangster, the comedic and/or violent drunkard, and less frequently the Irish mammy) alongside a trend in Irish film theory towards the deconstruction of representations of Irish masculinity in crisis.⁹

Again, of course, in terms of raw material/data – that is, Irish female protagonists within film narratives and/or Irish female stars in the mainstream today – there is little with which Irish film critics might work. Ed Guiney, Head of Production at Element Pictures, has suggested that the scarcity of lead roles for women in indigenously made Irish films has contributed to the low rate of retention for Irish female talent in the film industry, as compared to theatre. This is exacerbated by the proximity of Ireland to Britain, which encourages young female acting talent to emigrate prior to establishing strong national profiles and consequent international reputations as “Irish stars”.¹⁰ In the meantime, Irish male actors like Colin Farrell, Cillian Murphy and Michael Fassbender remain ubiquitous onscreen and in the press. Thus, “Irishness” in contemporary Hollywood and/or the mainstream remains largely the province of male actor-stars, while explorations of female stardom and femininity are under-represented.

Nevertheless, since 2000, two indigenously Irish film actors, Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga, have achieved notable mainstream recognition outside of Ireland through Hollywood-made or otherwise widely-released films. And it is for this reason that I wish to explore how these actresses’ rise to stardom or potential stardom (in the case of Negga) reflects changing cultural attitudes towards Irish femininity both within and without the nation itself. In the context of a nascently multi-cultural, or as Edna Longley would have it, “inter-cultural” Ireland¹¹, which is also crucially post-Celtic Tiger, the stability of the meaning of Irishness is now breaking down or perhaps already has

9 C.f. *Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger’s Tales*, eds. Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

10 Interview with Ed Guiney, National Media Conference panel. Trinity College Dublin, 16 November 2013.

11 Edna Longley and Declan Kiberd, *Multi-Culturalism: The View from the Two Irelands* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 10.

been broken down. This has left room for the evolution of a new concept of Irish stardom and a new understanding of Irishness as differently gendered and alternately “coloured” away from the traditionalist, masculinist concept of Irishness.

Below, I will examine the different ways in which, both in film and press appearances, these two actresses have negotiated their Irishness, as well as the performance of that Irishness, from the perspective of being female, simultaneous with their ascendancy as stars (though in somewhat different ways). I will highlight the various ways in which the more traditionally “Irish-looking” Saoirse Ronan may be seen to have suppressed the Irish side of her image in the construction of her star image-persona, whilst in the case of the “off-white” actress Ruth Negga (to borrow a phrase from cultural theorist Diane Negra)¹², her Irishness has rather been highlighted in surrounding star discourses as a means of solidifying her cultural identity (a prerequisite of stardom). In such a way, I will demonstrate how contemporary Irish female stars have the potential to destabilise traditionally held views of Irishness as “white” and, more specifically, Irish femininity as domestic and maternal, or indeed, conventional at all.

Irishness as cultural currency, or as a potential star attribute, has been established in cultural discourse and media as effectively incompatible with “femininity.” That is, Irishness, in the traditionalist sense, does not belong to the female body; in another sense, it is not physically “of the female.” Indeed, the composite image of Irishness upheld and developed by audiences historically has been both gendered and sexed overtly *away* from “the feminine” and the female, except where the feminine, as a gender, is contained by associations with bodily/sexual negation. It is this specifically gendered aspect of theoretical Irishness that I want to explore before going on to discuss its application in analysis of the star performances of Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga.

¹² Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

Bodiless Women: The Absence of Irish Female Stars in Classical and Contemporary Mainstream Cinemas Historically

“Irishness” as an ethnic and cultural marker can only be understood and made appreciable as a star attribute and thus commodifiable and consumable for a mass (American) market when it is gendered male. That is to say, Irishness has only been “readable” as a positive sign, a signifier of desirability, when the star-body to be looked at, and to which Irishness is being ascribed, is male. Barton and Negra have shown us that when Hollywood – and for the most part Irish – cinema has dealt with Irishness, more often than not it has also been trading on images of masculinity. Irishness, connoting a history of oppression and racial Otherness which has been overcome in the attainment of literal and metaphorical whiteness and assimilation into the middle class¹³ – has thus become a self-effacing symbol of the American cultural status quo (which is capitalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal in ideology). In this context, Irishness is a “pure” ethnicity removed of the traces of racial ambivalence, and in its lack of racial ambivalence/impurity/dilution, the male Irish body has been made to seem sexually unambiguous or un-contaminated. Irish heritage, in America at least, can therefore be traced patrilineally, not matrilineally, and is thus perfectly embodied by and through the heterosexual, white, male. Therefore, the heterosexual, white, male body looks at itself as Irish because that ethnic Otherness is immediately re-assimilable within capitalist-heteronormative-patriarchal ideology. The specifically gendered-as-male star embodies this, and is thus acceptably desirable and commodifiable as an image or a product. In this way, as Negra writes illustratively in relation to the representation of the Irish and Irish-Americans in (American) popular culture, Irishness is thus “correlated with depictions of male centrality and ancillary femininity.”¹⁴

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that representations of Irishness in mainstream and particularly Hollywood cinema have been de-populated up until recent years of actual Irish female bodies. They are palpably absent. As has already been noted by Guiney and Barton, this is first the fault of the

¹³ This is the central argument of a recent collection of essays on Irish ethnic assimilation within America, *Screening Irish America*, ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), which builds on a theory developed by Noel Ignatiev in *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁴ Diane Negra, “Irishness, Anger and Masculinity in Recent Film and Television” in *Screening Irish-America*, ed. Ruth Barton (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 280.

indigenous Irish film industry for its reluctance to cast homegrown actors as central, female protagonists in its major productions (a significant example, again as noted by Barton, being *About Adam* from 2000).¹⁵ There have been, however, several exceptions to this rule of “absent actresses” in the last five to ten years: notably Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga, to whom I return as examples of Irish female stars – or actors who have the potential to *become* nominally Irish stars – if Irishness as cultural currency in Hollywood can be successfully redefined to accommodate for “the female.” This entails a thorough evolution, or revolution even, of representational paradigms of Irish femininity and female sexuality first within Ireland itself and secondly outside it.

The composite image of Irish femininity both within and without Ireland is a bodiless one and thus, following Richard Dyer, devoid of sexuality. As Dyer writes, “To represent people is to represent bodies,” implicit in which – particularly through the apparatus of cinema – is the representation of sexuality.¹⁶ However, despite the obviously real fact of Irish woman/personhood, Irish media and cinema more particularly has resisted being “peopled” with women. Over the history of Irish visual and literary culture, which has been associated predominantly with *Catholic* Irish visual and literary culture (the dominant inflection of Irishness at least in the eyes of the outside world), the Irish woman has been denied a basic, earthly embodiment, tending to be figured as a de-sexualised religious or political symbol (the Virgin Mary or Kathleen Ni Houlihan). On film, female sexuality and/or the female body tends to be contained within or restricted to domestic maternity and traditionally maternal roles (for instance the ever-pregnant Brenda Fricker of *My Left Foot* [Jim Sheridan, 1989]). Alternatively, if the sexually active female is not contained within the domestic, she is posited as in some way dangerous, disruptive to, or otherwise transgressive, within traditional Irish-Catholic society (taking, for example, the “problem” of unwed mothers, Goretta in *Hush-a-bye Baby* [Margo Harkin, 1992] and Sharon in *The Snapper* [Stephen Frears, 1993]). If not *unimaginable*, as such, the desirable (that is, sexual or sexualisable), young Irish woman has been almost (pleasurably) *unimage-able*. For this reason, I would suggest, the Irish female film star – within or without Ireland – and with certain marked exceptions (such as

¹⁵ Barton, 2006, 224-225.

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

classical Hollywood stars Maureen O'Hara and Maureen O'Sullivan),¹⁷ has been largely a non-entity. This is because the film star – and certainly and perhaps especially the female film star – is necessarily “of the body,” and highly image-able, whereas the Irish woman in traditionalist and popular culture is decidedly not.

Therefore it will be interesting to see how this is negotiated in the performance and mediation of young, female Irish actors such as Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga, who are either – in the case of Ronan – actively being promoted in the media as rising Hollywood stars, or – in the case of Negga – poised to make the transition from Irish (and British) screen star status to potential “rising star” status in Hollywood. As will be seen, their particularly ethnically inflected images as self-declaratively Irish star-performers – Ronan as conventionally white, Negga as unconventionally “off-white” – has impacted their promotion and reception as commodifiable stars or star “packages.”

Contemporary Irish Female Stars: Definitions in Black and White

Ronan, born in America to Irish parents in 1994 and raised in County Carlow, first gained international acclaim for her Oscar-nominated appearance in a supporting role in *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007). Since then, she has appeared in a number of similar “prestige” drama films, including *The Lovely Bones* (Peter Jackson, 2009), *Hanna* (Joe Wright, 2011) and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014), as well as starring in the teen-oriented Hollywood would-be blockbuster *The Host* (Andrew Niccol, 2013), evidencing her assumed assimilability and indeed saleability within the Hollywood star production system. Negga, on the other hand, despite having twelve years on Ronan – born in Ethiopia in 1982 to an Irish mother and Ethiopian father and thereafter raised in Dublin – has been slower to transition into big-budget international productions; unlike Ronan, she has not appeared on the American chat show circuit in promotion of her films and star image, though she has recently in Britain. Negga first rose to prominence as an Irish actor on a number of Irish television series, transitioning to Irish cinema in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), and to British television with *Misfits* (2010), and the Shirley Bassey biopic *Shirley* (2011). In 2012 she appeared in a leading role in the low-budget Canadian crime drama *Fury* (David Weaver),

¹⁷ Barton, 2006.

also known as *The Samaritan*, which was released in the UK but did not pick up international distribution. Since then, she has shot scenes for major Hollywood productions *12 Years a Slave* and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013), showing evidence of a building international star profile (however she has been largely cut out of both releases).¹⁸

For now, I want to look at how Ronan and Negga's respective "Irishness" has been employed (or not) in the mediation of their star images. Thus far, Saoirse Ronan, the more established "Hollywood star" of the two, has been engaged in a subtle process of Irish-disavowal, by which her Irishness is consistently and systematically dis-embodied or removed from her body via her own self-performance, and as channelled through promotional discourses. This is seen first in a fixation on her fluid performance of non-Irish accents, both in films and in interviews, and secondly in the fetishisation of her Irish name, which has functioned to contain her Irishness in a verbal form.

In appearances on talk shows during and since the promotion of her star vehicle *Hanna* (Joe Wright) in 2011, Ronan may be seen to be engaged in an ongoing process of simultaneous fetishisation and disavowal of her Irish ethnicity. This has manifested itself in a tendency to poke fun at the Irish (though interestingly slightly Anglicised) pronunciation of her first name as a means of acknowledging her ethnicity first, and secondly by compartmentalising the significance of that ethnicity within her name-as-sign. As a means, then, of disavowing the practical limitations of her ethnicity – which as I have shown for a female actor to be founded in a process of bodily negation – she tends to engage in a series of performances of accents, thus re-claiming her ethnicity-as-Irish as signifying a more generalized pan-whiteness – a *lack* of ethnic identification – than a commodifiable attribute. This may be seen in a number of appearances on chat shows in Britain and America during her promotional tour for *Hanna*, most notably her interview with Ellen Degeneres from April 2011, in which she insists upon the pronunciation of her Irish-spelled name as "Sersha," whilst making fun of a number of common mis-pronunciations.¹⁹ As prompted by Degeneres, she performs a series of regional American accents, as if in the same breath denying that same Irish specificity of image that her name would purport to indicate. In such a way, Saoirse Ronan's star image

¹⁸ Overall, Negga has found most success on the stage and, in terms of screen work, on television. Most recently she appeared in three episodes of the American series *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*
¹⁹ "Saoirse Ronan (Ellen)." YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggx0qSjnbME> (retrieved 21 April 2014).

is constructed as nominally Irish, but practicably and personally it remains undefined or malleable: classically “white”.

This is in keeping with the essential paradigm of Irish femininity I have reviewed above, by which physicality –a prerequisite of star performance – and traditional white “Irishness” is seen as incompatible within the female body. For Ronan, adhering to this representational paradigm, performing Irishness may be seen to detract from her image as a star to be looked at and desired. Because Ronan is white, however, her Irish ethnicity is easily manifestly erasable, once fetishised and simultaneously disavowed into the verbal/aural packages of her name and voice. Her white body, in a way, becomes a blank canvas on which any number of performed ethnicities may be inscribed and thereby signified by or channelled through her speech. In most of her film roles and in her extratextual appearances, Ronan thusly appears to be engaged in a conspicuous under-performance of her white ethnicity-as-Irish.²⁰

Ruth Negga, on the other hand, may not be seen to have had the same flexibility of image and identity, precisely and ironically because her race and ethnicity are, at least on the visual outset, more ambiguous. Negga’s appearance as “mixed race” is such that her Irishness is not immediately or stereotypically visually marked, and the fact that Negga speaks with an Irish accent but *looks* “black,” i.e. “not Irish,” in the traditionalist sense, is evidently a source of fascination for many interviewers. For this reason, she may be seen constantly re-affirming her Irishness in media appearances, and to actually declare or call herself out *as* Irish, towards the end of achieving a coherence of star image.

In a recent interview on BBC in promotion of her starring role as Shirley Bassey, Negga has declared unequivocally, “I’m Irish,” as an explanation of her ethnic background and the consequent challenges of adopting the Welsh accent of her role.²¹ Indeed, Negga’s ethnic background is consistently interrogated in her public appearances, seemingly as a means of solidifying/identifying her problematic star image as an “off-white” Irish star: simultaneously ascribing to the cultural heritage of Irishness, but physically speaking against the bodily

²⁰ It should be noted that Ronan’s performance in Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is most recently is exceptional, in that she speaks in her “natural” Irish accent – a directorial choice which is not within the scope of this paper, given space constraints, to analyse.

²¹ “Ruth Negga on BBC Breakfast 26.09.11.” YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggx0qSjnbME> (retrieved 21 April 2014).

effacement which has been seen to go hand-in-hand with traditional Irish femininity. The incongruousness of Negga's visual appearance, compounded by the mismatch of her Irish-sounding voice, apparently necessitates interrogation when she performs "as herself" in a public forum.

In print interviews with Negga, the ostensible mismatch between her visual and aural image is frequently made explicit. As noted in the London Metro in September 2011, for instance, her looks are simultaneously described as "striking," being the "result of an Irish mother and Ethiopian father," thus euphemistically referring to the exoticism of her ethnic lineage, at the same time as her accent is noted as a "pronounced [...] soft Irish brogue."²² The distinction between Negga's and Ronan's various (re)presentations of Irishness, then, appears to be between Irishness-by-ascription on Negga's part, versus Irishness-in-containment on Ronan's. For Negga, the seeming incompatibility of her ethnic signifiers – visual versus aural affect – invites consideration of her (problematic) body. Meanwhile for Ronan, fetishisation of her Irish monicker serves as an outlet almost for her ethnic identification as "Irish," which might otherwise disallow focus on her physicality as a star. In this sense, Saoirse Ronan may be seen to perform against her Irish ethnicity, whereas Negga – whose body itself would seem to speak ethnicity otherwise – literally speaks for Irish-identification, but through new visual signifiers.

In one of the few scholarly articles to address this motion towards a performed redefinition of female Irishness in contemporary film and media, Charlotte McIvor has provided a useful analysis of Negga's function in *Breakfast on Pluto* as "forc[ing] the audience towards a contemporary engagement with a transnational Irish history that illuminates the history of a 'global Irish'."²³ While perhaps not done consciously on the part of casting directors in Irish cinema and television shows such as *Love/Hate*, Negga's bodily presence onscreen as a non-white Irish female nevertheless serves as a constant reminder/commentary on her national identity and indeed the unstable definition of Irish femininity. Negga's unavoidable "coloured-ness" thus requires repeated definition and explanation in media and press, while the reiteration of her Irishness over a breadth of interviews seems to amount to a

²² Keith Watson, "Misfits actress Ruth Negga talks Robert Sheehan and the Irish accent." <http://metro.co.uk/2011/09/26/misfits-actress-ruth-negga-talks-robert-sheehan-and-the-irish-accent-163619/> (retrieved 26 September 2011).

²³ Charlotte McIvor, "'I'm Black an' I'm Proud': Ruth Negga, *Breakfast on Pluto*, and Invisible Irelands," *InVisible Culture*, No. 13 (Spring 2009), 22-36.

composite image of her as Irish *but-not-white*. Such reiteration also constantly draws attention back to her body, her physicality, firstly as a non-white woman, and secondly *as a woman*. Thus, for Negga, Irishness, as a component of her star image, is seen to function as a complement to her physicality as an actor – a star asset perhaps. For Ronan, meanwhile, the “truth” of her ethnicity, even as she talks about it to Ellen Degeneres, is repeatedly disavowed or denied in the physical casting-off of the signifiers of Irishness through her vocal performance and mimicry of accents commonly ascribed to other white ethnicities. It remains to be seen, however, how Negga might be further “packaged” by Hollywood, ethnically and racially, as she develops her image as an increasingly and unavoidably *visible* Irish female star.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how stardom on behalf of the Irish female performer was made an impossibility due to certain cultural associations of Irishness-cum-femininity with traditional whiteness, bodilylessness and asexuality, as well as a failure on behalf of the Irish film industry to promote indigenous female talent both nationally and abroad. However, as I have traced the rise to prominence of two talented film actors in the last decade, Saoirse Ronan and Ruth Negga, I have shown the visible absence of Irish femininity from popular cinema and associated media is currently being redressed. Furthermore, in light of Negga’s a-typical effect/affect as Irish but “off-white”, I have suggested that she poses a problem to the signifying value of Irishness in the film texts and media in which she appears – which cannot be contained in the same way that the “problem” of Ronan’s Irish ethnicity in relation to her female stardom can be disavowed or indeed performed-against. Therefore, while Ronan’s trajectory as a female performer in Hollywood is unlikely to see her promoted internationally as an “Irish star”, in keeping with an historical representational paradigm, Negga’s Irishness must be invoked in the explication of her visually and aurally incoherent or problematic star image. In that her image’s incoherence is predicated on the mismatch of her body with the established cultural significations of Irish femininity, Negga thus provides a new site of embodiment for the Irish female star.

References

- Barton, Ruth. *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006.
- Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: BFI, 1986.
- . *The Matter of Images: essays on representation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- . *Stars*, 2nd Edition. London, BFI Publishing, 1998.
- . *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Fischer, Lucy, "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of 'Dames'," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1976).
- Gibbons, Luke. "Foreward," in *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006.
- Guiney, Ed. Interview with Ed Guiney. National Media Conference panel. Trinity College Dublin, 16 November 2013.
- Ignatiev, Noel. *How the Irish Became White*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Interview with Ed Guiney, National Media Conference panel. Trinity College Dublin, 16 November 2013.
- Longley, Edna, and Declan Kiberd. *Multi-Culturalism: The View from the Two Irelands*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2001).
- Masculinity and Irish Popular Culture: Tiger's Tales*, eds. Conn Holohan and Tony Tracy. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- McIvor, Charlotte, "'I'm Black an' I'm Proud': Ruth Negga, Breakfast on Pluto, and Invisible Irelands," *InVisible Culture*, No. 13 (Spring 2009).
- McLoone, Martin, *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008.
- Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Negra, Diane. *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- . "Irishness, Anger and Masculinity in Recent Film and Television," in *Screening Irish-America*, ed. Ruth Barton. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009.
- "Ruth Negga on BBC Breakfast 26.09.11." YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggx0qSjnbME> (retrieved 21 April 2014).
- "Saoirse Ronan (Ellen)." YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ggx0qSjnbME> (retrieved 21 April 2014).
- Screening Irish America*, ed. Ruth Barton. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009.
- Shannon, Christopher, "The Bowery Cinderella" in *Screening Irish-America*,

ed. Ruth Barton. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009.

Studlar, Gaylyn, "Oh, 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade and the Pedophilic Gaze" in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002.

Watson, Keith. "Misfits actress Ruth Negga talks Robert Sheehan and the Irish accent," retrieved from <http://metro.co.uk/2011/09/26/misfits-actress-ruth-negga-talks-robert-sheehan-and-the-irish-accent-163619/>. 26 September 2011.