

Professor Desmond Bell  
Film Studies  
Queens University Belfast  
Email: [d.l.bell@qub.ac.uk](mailto:d.l.bell@qub.ac.uk)  
Tel : 44 (0) 2890 971140

## **Early Cinema and the Diasporic Imagination: the Irish in America 1890-1930**

### **Summary**

Our network addresses the theme of the Irish diaspora and early cinema in the US. It proposes cross-disciplinary collaboration between GB, Irish and US based researchers to explore the role and representation of Irish immigrants within US cinema. It examines the contribution of Irish immigrants to early motion picture production, their formation as an ethnic and gendered audience and their portrayal within American silent cinema. By facilitating transatlantic collaboration between film historians and archivists, social historians and film makers, we seek to elaborate an innovative, visually led and historically informed methodology for examining the linkage of early cinema and the diasporic imagination.

### **Programme Priorities**

The network will facilitate innovative research approaches and facilitate digital dissemination of new knowledge about the role of cinema in the formation of the diasporic imagination to the widest possible audience. The main theoretical and methodological approaches will be drawn from the fields of Irish Studies and Film Studies. The network will also address issues that converge with other research areas that are exploring the experiences of the Irish Diaspora in the US and the formation of Irish migrant identities (e.g. Irish migration studies, American labour history, the history of popular culture, race and ethnicity studies, etc.).

The network will facilitate transatlantic collaboration between historians and theorists of early cinema concerned with the role and representation of ethnic groups in early US motion picture production. In addition to providing a forum for scholarly debate about the relationship between the Irish diaspora and American popular culture, the network will actively collaborate with non-academic cultural bodies in the UK and the US. We have identified three research arenas in the field of early US cinema and the Irish where we hope to facilitate transatlantic collaborative activities: Production, Representation and Reception.

### **Rationale and research context**

The growth of academic interest in the relationship between migrant communities and early cinema in the US has coincided with new debates in the field of Irish Studies. Film history has increasingly questioned the traditional 'melting pot', or assimilationist function, of early cinema. Recent scholarship has identified the role of ethnic and gender factors in the formation of early audiences and tastes and in shaping production agendas and treatments within the industry before the consolidation of the studio system. Similarly Irish Studies has sought to replace essentialist theorisations of 'Irishness' with a polyvalent approach. Both Irish and Film Studies now seek to explore the contradictory dynamic between ethnic assertion and cultural assimilation faced by the immigrant communities within the US. Early cinema was a popular culture made for and by the new immigrants. Its audience structures, formal strategies and cultural sensibilities reflect the the contradictory impulses of assimilation and ethnic assertion, and of mediated remembering. The network aims to bring together film scholars with historians of the Irish diaspora in order to explore the role of Irish immigrants in the emergence, organization, and reception of early cinema in the United States. Accordingly, the network will align its research focus both to contemporary critical debate within Irish studies and to trends and methodologies developed by historians and theorists of early cinema.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The principal aims of the network will be to:

- (i) Create a research forum for collaborative and individual projects that explore the role of Irish migrant communities in the emergence, organization, and reception of early cinema in the United States;
- (ii) Facilitate new research methodologies in the fields of film studies and Irish studies via promoting synergies between these areas;
- (iii) Explore innovative approaches to the curatorship, archival compilation, and exhibition of still and moving images through academically informed interpretive and creative practice;
- (iv) Facilitate dialogue and productive collaboration with other non-UK projects pursuing a similar range of research questions
- (v) Facilitate 'connection, communication and exchange' between the network and individuals and bodies working outside the higher education environment (e.g. Ulster-American Folk Park, Centre for Migration Studies, Irish Film Centre, Institute for Immigration History);
- (vi) Contribute to greater public awareness about the relationship between Irish immigration and the history of cinema, and to assist in the production of a range of new interpretative resources for the study of this topic

### **Outcomes**

- The network will hold two workshops on the topic of 'Early US Cinema and the Irish' :  
Boston College, March 2006  
University College Dublin, March 2007

- Develop a web based 'invisible college' of researchers to facilitate cross Atlantic knowledge transfer on this research theme
- text based publication (edited book) with contributions from network members and invited contributors. This will focus on the historical theme of early American cinema and the Irish migrant.
- a web site reporting the work of the network and hosting work in progress, including workshop papers, conference proceedings and network communications.
- Curation of a major touring exhibition to be mounted initially at the Queens Film Theatre and the Irish Film Archive, Dublin (later venues to be negotiated)

**Duration**

1<sup>st</sup> January 2006 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007

Dates for the proposed exhibition still to be confirmed

**A case study of Professor Bell's project can be found in the AHRC's Annual Report for 2005-6 under the following link:**

[http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/ahrb/website/images/4\\_98435.pdf](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/ahrb/website/images/4_98435.pdf)