

Introduction

WITHIN A LONG HISTORY of racial subjugation and conflict, popular culture has played an important and ongoing role in shaping understandings and attitudes towards race in the United States. While such discussions have been a constant in relation to American film since its earliest days, race on screen has recently attained renewed prominence in the wake of the Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement (2013) and the #OscarsSoWhite campaign (2015) as well as the increased visibility and mainstream success of writer/directors such as Ryan Coogler, Ava du Verney, Barry Jenkins, Denzel Washington, and Spike Lee—among others. While Lee, in particular, has been a prominent figure and powerful advocate for African American cinema for decades, the emergence of a new generation of artists has brought renewed visibility and indeed viability to more diverse storytelling within Hollywood.

Yet, even as moving image constructions African American and other nonwhite groups have assumed increasing mainstream attention and prominence, such discussions risk perpetuating binary frameworks if they habitually and uncritically view whiteness as fixed and unraced; a static and unchanging point of reference through history. Richard Dyer noted this years ago when he expressed reservations about the proliferation of “Images of” studies in the (long) 1980s that “looked at groups defined as oppressed, marginal or subordinate—women, the working class, ethnic and other minorities.”¹ While of unquestionable importance, such works, he argued, risked “reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human.”² Dyer and other scholars in critical white studies [CWS] subsequently sought to make whiteness

strange, aware that what is “natural” is derived from a consensus formed around power relations at a given time and place. For all the essentialisms that the concepts of race and whiteness provoke, constructs and conceptualizations are only as durable as the social and political environments in which they circulate enable them to be.

This is what Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), Italian Marxist philosopher and writer, referred to as cultural hegemony. For Gramsci, pondering how power and privilege are legitimized and sustained by the European bourgeois state, the answer was obvious: not simply through ideas but by making such ideas seem natural, unremarkable, and unchanging. And although he provided no precise definition of cultural hegemony, Gramsci outlined its essential aspects by contrasting it with domination. While rule by domination rests on coercive power, he argued, the threat of force is devalued if it must be constantly applied. By contrast, the bourgeois state provides ideological direction to the populace through a variety of cultural institutions such as the Church, education, and the media. Cultural hegemony is rule by consent, its rules and organization of resources presented and understood as natural.

For CWS, a central question is thus not just how has race been historically constructed and imagined, but equally how does whiteness present as natural and normative; by what modalities does it maintain a consensual hegemony? This ongoing project has been characterized in terms of “waves.”³ The first of these is generally traced to the writings of African American writer and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who, in a series of explosive works blending autobiography and sociological commentary, framed race in America as a “dynamic and not a static” construct that offered whiteness a privileged social position and granted white workers a public and psychological “wage” over the ongoing marginalization of people of color.⁴

While subsequent scholars have variously articulated second and/or third waves, we can nonetheless identify a progression of concerns from essentialism to complexity. “Beginning in the early 1980s and throughout the 1990s,” write Jupp and Badenhorst, “CWS advanced the . . . conceptual-empirical arc for which the terms ‘whiteness’ and ‘white privilege’ became first proliferative, then ubiquitous, and finally popularized social science terms.”⁵ For sociologists such as Joseph Pugliese however, whiteness in such work was all too frequently “represented in terms of a homogeneous and self-identical category [and] discussions of whiteness have tended to be decontextualised and de-historicised.”⁶ Correspondingly, sociologists such as Matthew Hughey have recognized a third wave of CWS, which

is alert to the “‘(dis)similarities of whiteness’; a heterogenous concept and experience, whose meaning can vary spatially, temporally, contextually and intersectionally.”⁷ While this perspective continues to identify themes of power, privilege, and the “mundane normality” of whiteness on the one hand, it allows for difference and differentiation on the other, facilitating the consideration of, for instance, considerations of class, age, and even setting (spatial and temporal), on the other. Within such representations, to paraphrase Hughey, whiteness may be “neither essential nor innate but offered all the same as ‘natural’ and ‘common sense.’”⁸ Or, as Troy Duster has it, race “can be simultaneously Janus-faced and multifac(et) ed and [still] produce a singular dominant social hierarchy.”⁹

These two ideas—the social production of hegemony through consensus and the heterogeneity of whiteness—offer potential for film history, with the capacity to inform not only how constructions of race in Hollywood have been shaped by an evolving politics of representation but also for how we might read and reflexively reread earlier texts. While representations of race/relations and the iconic whiteness of stardom, genre, or gender represent the most explicit aspects of Hollywood’s racial politics, such observations offer prompts for returning to the representations of marginal or white ethnic characters and identities within Hollywood’s back catalogue. While such identities may initially appear beyond the pale of mainstream norms, might their heterogeneity serve to foster consensus around race in less direct, though just as influential ways? And if so, how? These perspectives offer a productive point of departure for considering the prolific constructions of Irish Americans in Hollywood cinema between 1930 and 1960, a period when Irish American males—in particular—figured as an enduring, if varied and shifting, presence in the cinematic imaginary.

Irish America and American Cinema

Images of the Irish have been a central feature of American film since its emergence. With the earliest production companies and screening facilities set amidst the heaving immigrant populations of New York and Chicago, this large immigrant group were everywhere and available to the new medium as stereotypes, subjects, and audiences. Arriving in millions since the midnineteenth century (and before), the Irish both exemplified the great immigrant influx that coincided with the emergence of the movies and through a variety of factors—successive waves, language, race and

acculturation—transcended it. This history offered filmmakers a locus from which to explore an emergent America, and representations of the Irish were shaped by this tension between the historical experience and symbolic potential of a multilayered group defined by in-between and becoming. Three films from the early period are especially notable in illustrating such tensions and establishing themes that will shape future representations: *Caught by Wireless* (American Biograph, 1908), *The Lad from Old Ireland* (Kalem, 1910) and *Regeneration* (Fox, 1915).

Although there had been numerous one-reel comedy films produced during the “cinema-of-attractions” period of early American cinema (dominated by stereotypes of stupid “Brigit” domestic servants and drunken policemen and laborers), *Caught by Wireless* (1908) is arguably the first drama to prominently feature Irish characters and settings.¹⁰ Directed by Wallace McCutcheon for American Biograph (AB&M) and released for St. Patrick’s Day that year, its short (10-minute) transatlantic narrative begins inside a rural Irish cottage, where we see a well-dressed man (who we deduce to be a rent collector) attempts to seduce a young peasant woman, but his advances are disturbed by her returning husband, and a fight breaks out. The villain is then shown reporting the husband to the (British) police, but, fearful of being arrested, he has gone into hiding. Briefly emerging to bid a tearful farewell to his wife and children, “Paddy” heads to America, where he finds work and sends money to his family. Meanwhile back in Ireland, his wife has reported the actions of the rent collector to the compassionate landlord, who promptly summons and fires him. The rent collector is then seen burgling his former employer’s safe before also attempting to escape the country. Aboard the transatlantic liner, Paddy’s wife recognizes the (disguised) villain and reports him to the ship’s wireless operator, who alerts the New York authorities via the (recently commenced) Marconigram service.¹¹ As they disembark, he is arrested, and Paddy, seen waiting in uniform alongside the other police officers (one of whom is played by future AM&B director D. W. Griffith), is joyfully reunited with his wife and child.

Rudimentary in technique and dramaturgy even by the standards of 1908, *Caught by Wireless* is notable for giving its familiar melodramatic narrative an innovative dimension through the novelty of wireless communication. In promoting the film, the *Biograph Bulletin* boosted its “stirring situations of a thrillingly sensational character and the Marconi device, which is accurately reproduced, is most interesting and novel.”¹² While the film’s transatlantic settings serve primarily to illustrate the wonders of the Marconi, they also function to contrast the distance between the

inequities and corruption of the Old World with the opportunities and protections of the New. Primarily an expression of the nascent American cinema's participation in the experience of modernity, the film also recreates experiences, spaces, and dramatic tensions familiar to its immigrant audiences. Within this broader context, the Irish identities of the film's central couple may be secondary to the "stirring situations" of crime and detection but are important not only for adding veracity to the story's transatlantic thrills but also for their symbolic value as typical and ideal immigrant "characters," and in the figure of Paddy, offering a seminal instance how ethnic masculinity can be quickly transformed from a socially marginal and powerless figure in one setting into a position of respectability and male authority in another.

Caught by Wireless introduces elements and associations around the Irish that would become familiar and widely circulated during the period leading up to the initiation of Hollywood studio practices. This was due in no small part to the success of the Kalem Company, founded in 1907 as a breakaway film company by former AM&B talents. In the years prior to WWI, Kalem produced almost 30 (one-, two-, and three-reel) films on Irish themes, shot during annual summer visits to Ireland. The first—and most influential—of these was *The Lad from Old Ireland* (1910) (discussed in chapter 5), which took the transatlantic narrative, romantic separation, and eviction subplot of *Caught by Wireless* but reversed its journey. Starring and directed by Sidney Olcott, the film offered vivid location photography in place of AM&B's flimsy sets and—crucially—foregrounded its protagonist's return to Ireland in preference to the economic and social opportunities of the United States. The story focused on an eponymous "Lad"—Terry (Olcott)—who (again) leaves his poor rural homeland in search of a better life and finds opportunities in New York. Notwithstanding his success in American politics and elevation to the social elite, emotional ties to his sweetheart (Gene Gauntier) and her dilemma summon him home, and he arrives just in time to save her family from eviction, reasserting their romantic ties. The film climactically concludes with a reading of wedding banns (notice of future marriage) and the unfurling of an Irish flag, joining romantic and nationalistic aspirations. The widespread success of *The Lad from Old Ireland* amongst—but also beyond—the Irish American immigrant community would encourage Kalem to return annually to Ireland until 1914, finding popularity and box-office success with a range of adaptations of plays, poems, and historical narratives that firmly established Ireland as a simultaneously real and romantic space in the American film imaginary.

With the onset of WWI and the industry's move to California and feature-length production, such narratives and practices became outmoded, and a corresponding move away from immigrant-centered narratives forced American film—and its interest in Irish themes—in new directions.¹³ Made only a few years after the Kalem films, a distinctly changed emphasis can be discerned in a third seminal text—Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration* (1915)—an ambitious adaptation of Owen Kildare's memoir *My Mamie Rose* (1903) and the first feature film to feature an Irish American protagonist. The narrative centers on Owen Conway (Rockliffe Fellowes), an orphaned child who has become a dockside tough and petty criminal, whose potential is nonetheless recognized by Christian reformer Marie Deering (Anna Q. Nilsson) and who takes him under her wing. While Conway's Irish heritage seems incidental to the film's D. W. Griffith-inspired action and clash of Victorian virtue and urban reality, its signaling functions not only to bring historical veracity to the themes and setting but to gender the budding but ultimately unconsummated romance of the film's heterosexual couple. Conway's Irish origin is significant in that while it communicates social/cultural difference, it does not constitute an insurmountable barrier or potential scandal in the same way that an interracial relationship certainly would and leaves open the potential for romantic coupling and a desire to become "white."

Although these three texts represent a small sample of Irish-themed films produced by the nascent American film industry, they are invoked here as a prehistory for the films in this study. In them we identify representational precedents, tropes, and themes that would be developed across several decades of Hollywood. Foremost is a new kind of Irish masculinity that differed substantially from negative Victorian-era stereotypes of drunks and fighters (courageous, romantic, capable of change), the interplay of historical individuals and the American experience (*Regeneration*), the symbolic potential of the Irish as "threshold" whites and heteronormative romance as a figuration of crossing this threshold, and the theme of transatlantic return as a "going home," among others. Even when they may seem incidental or merely convenient—and perhaps especially then—markers of Irishness function in these and later films to suggest broader meanings than the experience of a specific group, invariably expressing tensions between once and future identities on social, cultural, and spatial levels. From the outset then, the Irish within American cinema not only reflect an emerging industry seeking stories that would appeal to its swelling immigrant audience but also a nation in transition, seeking to navigate between the varied backgrounds of millions

of new Americans (some 15 million between 1900–1920 alone) and the religious, ideological, and racial foundations on which it had been built.

Framing Ethnicity: From Public Enemy to Quiet Man

This book traces the development of constructions of Irish American identities in classical Hollywood between 1930 and 1960, the period spanning the introduction of sound and the demise of the studio system. Despite the initial hammer-blow of the Great Depression, the studios' status as America's "dream factory" was cemented during the 1930s, when audiences for film represented some 65% of the nation's population, a cultural role that would span WWII and its aftermath (hitting a peak in 1946) before waning for a variety of reasons in the late 1950s.¹⁴ Book-ended by the defeat of (Irish American candidate) Al Smith in the 1928 presidential campaign on one side and JFK's victory in 1960 on the other, these representations would seem to broadly reflect the transformation of the status and popular perceptions of Irish America during this era; from *Public Enemy* to *Quiet Man*. On further investigation, however, such representations clearly also speak to wider themes and issues beyond the acceptance of a significant, though hardly homogenous group and though some films had their basis in the lives of actual individuals (the biopics discussed in chapter 3 and elsewhere), in this book, I shall argue that these are not "images of" the Irish experience in any narrowly historical sense.

For a start, a quantitative analysis of films made during these three decades reveals characters and stories that are overwhelmingly male in focus, with women—when present—confined to secondary, supporting roles of mothers or girlfriends. While not unusual in itself, this contrasts with the Irish-themed narratives of the preceding (late silent) era when Hollywood tended to foreground female characters, largely inspired by the popular interclass/intercultural stage plays *Peg O' My Heart* (stage: 1912; film: 1919, 1922, 1933) and *Abie's Irish Rose* (stage 1922; film: 1928, 1946).¹⁵ Such "Cinderella" narratives tended to feminize Americanization in terms of romantic incorporation and mobility, with marriage offering a path away from immigrant ties and identities. With the arrival of the Production Code, the Irish presence in American cinema became almost entirely male and the relationship of such characters to their backgrounds became more complex.¹⁶ Afforded a greater degree of independence and agency than their 1920s female predecessors, such figures seem

to complicate Parker Tyler's description of "Hollywood as a Universal Church," which "offered ideal models for national imitation: glamorous, personable and Anglo Saxon."¹⁷ If, as Gwendolyn Foster memorably puts it, "Hollywood is the garment centre of white fabrication . . . ,"¹⁸ then these masculinities reconfigured the patterns of this process by explicitly retaining ties—emotional, social, cultural and personal—to their origins even as they pursued acceptance and success within white America.

Drawing on Marx's notion of ideology "as a pure illusion, a pure dream,"¹⁹ Elizabeth Bronfen wrote:

Ideology indeed found the perfect materialization in the Hollywood dream machine, since from the start, Hollywood cinema developed fantasy scenarios that produce and propagate . . . the relationship that the American subject maintains with the cultural codes and prohibitions that define it.²⁰

Central to such fantasies, as Foster and others have argued, was Hollywood's creation of a "white space . . . where class and race are homogenous, sterilized, and largely erased in motion pictures . . . where representation insists that the human race, especially in America, is white."²¹ A key mechanism within this project was the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code (1934) which, while ostensibly an industry/interfaith consortium to rid cinema of morally undesirable content might also be understood as functioning to "maintain the borders of whiteness."²² That the emergence of the Irish American protagonist/antagonists that begin this study coincide with the introduction of the Code is thus no coincidence, and films such as *Boys Town* or *Angels with Dirty Faces* (both 1938) construct "white space" fantasies on symbolic as well as thematic levels. However, while these and similar texts of benevolent patriarchy maintain hegemonic whiteness within such an imaginary, prominent and persistent markers of Irishness appear to nuance and complicate Foster's argument around homogenization and the erasure of difference. They retain, instead, distinctive cultural and symbolic resonances, notably associations of fiery independence and family loyalty that can be variously drawn on to both resist *and* reinforce the structures of white manhood, often within the recurring trope of fraternal conflict. How are we to understand such often paradoxical constructions and roles? Centrally, I argue, they develop from a flexibility afforded to ethnicity but denied to race in classical Hollywood producing in-between and transcultural identities.

In his seminal collection of writings *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903 [1999]), African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois argued that arising from the traumatic experience of slavery and objectification, blacks had internalized seeing themselves through the eyes of others: “Gifted with a second-sight in this American world, the Negro is [born into] a world which yields to him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.” This “double-consciousness,” is a “peculiar sensation . . . a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” To be black then, is to be “a divided self,” producing a spiritual striving to “attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self . . . to make it possible to be both a Negro *and* an American, without being cursed and spat upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”²³ Du Bois uses the metaphor of ‘the Veil’ to express the physical and psychological color line that separates black and white America, perpetuating systemic racism, ‘closed doors’ and an irreconcilable sense of “two-ness.”²⁴

Ethnicity, in contrast, has offered a more permeable concept and category of belonging according to literary scholar Werner Sollors, particularly in the aftermath of European fascism and the horrors perpetrated in the name of race. In Sollors’s discussion of the emergence and development of this concept in the United States, we find echoes of the two-ness described by Du Bois, but with diametrically different emphasis and implications:

In “ethnicity,” the double sense of general peoplehood (shared by all Americans) and of otherness (different from the mainstream culture) lives on. . . . Yet, in America ethnicity can be conceived as a deviation and as a norm, as characteristic of minorities and as typical of the country.²⁵

Sollors explores “this double sense” via the immigrant experience as described in American fiction and autobiography, which he categorizes in general terms as “a drama structured between consent and descent” identities.²⁶ Seeking to understand ethnicity as a dynamic category, Sollors’s *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986) explores a complex nexus of tensions between ethnic, racial, class, and familial heritage—“descent” identities—on the one hand, and a conflicting impulse to *choose* and shape one’s destiny regardless of that heritage—“consent” identity—on the other. For Sollors, the immigrant writings

might be read “not only as expressions of mediation between cultures but also as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness.” Or as Barbara Hiura puts it: “The personal and psychic pull between tradition and identity . . . where oppositional choices are used to transcend the barriers of ethnicity into an American wholeness and unity.”²⁷

Michael Rogin criticizes Sollors for “subsuming race under ethnicity,” arguing that “the process of national incorporation, whose symbol was the melting pot, operated differently for ethnic than for racial groups . . . [E]thnic minorities were propelled into the melting pot by the progress that kept racial minorities out.”²⁸ Yet as David Bernstein and others have argued, the historical reality around the meaning and understanding of race is complex. “Irish, Jews, Italians and others were considered white by law and by custom” he argues, while nonetheless being victim to discrimination and racialized prejudice. “By contrast, persons of African, Asian, Mexican and Native American descent faced various degrees of exclusion from public schools and labor unions, bans on marriage and direct restrictions on immigration and citizenship.”²⁹ The term “white-ethnic” thus reflects such complexities while also capturing how heterogenous whiteness is structured to simultaneously incorporate and exclude; to promote from within while maintaining race boundaries. Retaining descent markers and relations while participating within the norms of national incorporation, ethnicity often functions within popular culture to obscure or disavow such boundaries.

As suggested in the opening sections of this chapter, the Irish in American cinema are constructed as typical and indeed exemplary examples of ethnic, heterogenous whiteness from the outset, their pugnacious in-between status crucial to framing whiteness as something both nominated and normative. The cultural/ideological usefulness of this position intensifies from the early 1930s onwards, thanks, as noted, to the implementation of the Production Code, along with factors including demographic transformation and the ideological underpinnings of the New Deal, which further move the Irish away from earlier negative or stereotyped representations. This status takes on renewed and patriotic purpose with US entry into WWII where, in films such as *The Fighting 69th* (1940), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), or *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944), Irish American masculinities function to express an ethnic—different but still white-coded—patriotism, their descent-inherited “fighting” instincts transformed and repurposed for the national war effort. (In the case of the latter film for instance, *Five Heroes* became *The Sullivans*, which met a lukewarm reception before being rereleased with “Fighting” added to

the title. Only then did it become a hit.)³⁰ Irishness assumes a viable and valuable flexibility for Hollywood during these years in particular, the embodiment of a “friendly neutrality” articulated by the American-born president of Ireland, Éamon de Valera, and ideal figures of heterogenous whiteness connecting past and future American values and masculinities.

While—as Sollors’s study shows—a productive tension between decent-consent identities is identifiable in literature and autobiography through language and interior revelation, narrative cinema includes, and more often depends on, expressive means—performance, dialogue, and *mise-en-scene*—to communicate character, drama, and conflict. Although the first of these are sometimes referred to in discussions of the Irish in Hollywood—an actor’s Irish looks, charm, or “brogue” for instance—considerations of *mise-en-scene* and issues of space and setting are less often considered. Yet, as I shall argue throughout this book, place and space are of central importance within these texts on textual/thematic and contextual/ideological levels. Thematically, spaces and settings (neighborhoods, bars, domestic environments, etc.) frequently function to express characters’ social “place” (class, ethnic, gender, etc.) within film narratives as well, conversely, as their “out-of-placeness” in environments associated with ruling elites (clubs, luxury settings, institutions, etc.). Correspondingly, social tensions are often expressed spatially but also resolved in terms of a character’s (eventual) acceptance or mobility into spaces previously out of bounds. Such passages express and fulfill the American dream in both physical and socio-symbolic ways and are invariably coded in terms of incorporation into “legitimate” or national whiteness. In the postwar period, these themes acquire increasingly racial resonances, albeit coded in terms of immigrant nostalgia. We see, for instance, the urban neighborhoods of the 1920s and early 1930s superseded by the darkening city of film noir and with it an appeal to earlier values. Then, a half century after the Kalem Company’s early films, Hollywood “returns” to Ireland, imagined as a white space of romance and retreat. Viewed collectively and contextually, such settings offer something more than shifting narrative backdrops and, as we shall argue, express sociospatial dimensions to Hollywood’s (re)production of hegemonic whiteness.

Home and the Spatial (Re)Production of Whiteness

Inspired by the work of post ’68 writers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault, the “spatial turn” within the humanities

made space “visible” in ways analogous to critical whiteness; a conceptual matrix that sought to illuminate social hierarchies and structures of power through attention to elements previously rendered as “natural” or “common sense.” Lefebvre’s landmark *The Production of Space* (1974) in particular introduced the idea that space is a dynamic entity rather than something pre-existing:

Space in both its material and imagined elements is interwoven with the everyday and ongoing formation of identities . . . [S]pace is not a given but, to quote one urban historian, “a site of action and always loaded with meaning.”³¹

Lefebvre argued that space is “produced” through a triad interplay of elements: “spatial practice” (everyday life); “representations of space” (maps, models etc.—a concrete guideline for how “thought” can become “action”); and “representational space” (which overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects through ideas and imagination, etc.). Crucially, the production of space is controlled by a hegemonic class as a means of reproducing its dominance: “a tool of thought and of action . . . [because] in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”³² De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) developed one particular aspect of this above all; how we make place from space, make it our own through tactics; “the art of creatively combining ways of doing with the rules of the space you find yourself in to make a comfortable space for yourself” (de Certeau (1984, 30). This might be nothing more than embodied routes and routines but may extend to involve activities that seek to play out unobserved by state and/or other institutions of power. For de Certeau, the modern subject is always in conflict with “strategies” of the state in both explicit and implicit ways. Foucault developed his analysis of space in several directions but, rejecting a linear view of the past as a causality of events, he shares with Lefebvre and de Certeau a turn towards space as the overlooked dimension of human history whether, for instance, through the disciplining of “docile bodies” across a range of contexts or within “heterotopian” spaces—“half fictional, half real”—environments set apart from everyday social relations that allow alternative practices and social relations to prosper. For all three, and those that came in their wake, spaces—real and imagined—are the mechanisms and expressions of power and knowledge. In the case studies that follow, they offer conceptual

frameworks that make visible a politics of narrative space ranging from domestic, urban, and institutional settings to the nation itself.

Articulating the descent-consent dynamic for the visual medium of moving images, an attention to space offers added dimensions to the constructions of white-ethnic masculinities explored in this study, *located* as they so often are, at the threshold of marginal and mainstream social relations. As the most popular visual art form of the twentieth century, film can be understood as an important contributor to “representational space” in Lefebvre’s schema. As a narrative medium, Hollywood cinema “produces space” diegetically—through characters who shape and are shaped by their story spaces—as well as socially—expressing the socio-spatial relations of the society it portrays and circulates within. While the “invisible style” of Hollywood functions to “subordinate every cinematic element to the interests of aspect of a film’s narrative” (Ray, 32), ideas within “the spatial turn” remind us that space and its representations are never neutral. As Edward Soja put it: “Space is always political and ideological.”³³ Developing Lefebvre, Soja posits that space must thus always be understood as “simultaneously real and imagined” for there is always a link between “physical, geographical spaces and mental, cultural constructions of space.” Cinema makes such connections in ways that few—if any—other narrative media can do. In the five case studies that make up this book, therefore, I seek not only to trace the evolution of Irish American masculinities in terms of themes and types, but also make visible how these white-ethnic figures function within classical Hollywood *mise-en-scene* to represent but also actively (re)produce the United States as a “white space.”

Interpreting Hollywood’s Irish America

The first extended studies on representations of Ireland and the Irish in cinema appeared at the end of the 1980s during a wave of scholarly interest in national cinema as a theoretical concept and practice, coinciding with the centenary of the medium. While a majority of monographs from across the world looked back over a hundred years of indigenous moving images, *Cinema and Ireland* (Routledge, 1987) coauthored by Kevin Rockett, John Hill, and Luke Gibbons and Anthony Slide’s *The Cinema and Ireland* (McFarland, 1988) considered “Irish film” to indicate a broad and transnational category that included not only works produced in Ireland

but also, given the paucity of local production, films that gave expression to the Irish diasporic experience. Rockett's monumental *Irish Filmography* (1996) developed this approach with sections relating to films produced not only in Ireland but also Australia, Russia, Spain, Italy, Holland, Great Britain, and the United States while noting:

The USA accounts for half of all entries. Or put more dramatically: more fiction films were produced about the Irish by American filmmakers before 1925, when the first indigenous Irish fiction film was made, than in the whole subsequent 100-year history of fiction filmmaking in Ireland.³⁴

Published the same year, the American Film Institute catalogue, *Within Our Gates: Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911–1960* (1996), listed some forty entries under “Irish-American.”³⁵ Such studies not only complicated any linear notion of Irish film history as culturally discrete but in drawing attention to the substantial presence of the Irish American themes in Hollywood narratives, laid the groundwork for investigations on the range and meaning of such representations.

Despite this, detailed and extended histories of this heritage have, until recently, been relatively sparse. For a long time, the only book-length study was Joseph M. Curran's *Hibernian Green on the Silver Screen: The Irish and American Movies* (1989). Developing substantially upon the few essays that preceded it, Curran's discussion identifies three phases of Hollywood representations: the silent era, gangster films of the 1930s, and Irishness in John Ford's films.³⁶ Outside of these it is sketchy on detail and while—for instance—it notes the Irish ancestry of actors such as Grace Kelly and Gene Kelly, it does not see such background as especially relevant. The book's emphasis and argument reflect an overarching belief in “ethnic fade” where immigrants shed their cultural difference through successive generations, a process, argues Curran aided by popular culture:

By reflecting and sometimes influencing their audience's changing perception of the Irish, motion pictures facilitated their assimilation into American society, helping to raise their status and aspirations.³⁷

Hibernian Green thus reinforces a “straight-line” theory of assimilation that dominated sociologies of ethnicity and shaped studies of ethnic representation during the twentieth century. Within such a framework, it takes such

representations largely at face value and does not attempt to differentiate between historical and broader levels of meaning, focusing on a limited corpus of films that seemingly reflect a narrative of Americanization.

Curran argues that the Irish emerged as “Hollywood’s favourite ethnic grouping” on account of two principal factors: they represented a large potential share of early cinema’s audience (21.4% of New York’s 1910 population were Irish-born) and on account of their subsequent influence within the industry:

The Irish not only provided motion pictures with a history of talented performers but they also contributed to the success of American film as directors and technicians. The industry reciprocated by making more movies about the Irish than any other ethnic minority.³⁸

Such arguments have proven enduring and remain widely cited—often reductively so—in discussions of the Irish in American film, and clichéd representations of Ireland continue to be blamed on the sentimentality of Irish American audiences. While such factors no doubt contributed to the popularity of Irish themes, I would suggest that they do not adequately address the range or function of such images within Hollywood’s wider system of race-making. In this respect Curran’s concern around what he describes as the ongoing presence of “starkly negative stereotypes that purport to be realistic” and description of the Irish as safe targets as “enemies of the American establishment” seem both overly literal and extrapolated from too small a sample. While Curran’s book marked a pioneering intervention, its limited range of texts and “images of” paradigm would subsequently be complicated by the number of films revealed by the *Irish Filmography* and *Within Our Gates* catalogues and scholarship—particularly within critical white studies—that offered a more nuanced understanding of Irish America and American race history.³⁹

Although Lee Lourdeaux’s *Italian and Irish Filmmakers in America* (1990) did not enlarge upon the former, it offered a more nuanced approach to cinematic representations of the Irish. Finding commonality between two immigrant groups based on their Catholic backgrounds, Lourdeaux considered the work of four American film directors—John Ford, Frank Capra, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese—arguing that their ethnic/religious heritage was *the* determining factor of their respective cinematic visions. Despite evident differences in themes and timeframes—two directors from classical and new Hollywood eras

apiece—Lourdeaux identified the distinctiveness of what he termed “a Catholic imagination” in their films, a concept grounded in community and a sense of the sacred. While he acknowledges that there are cultural differences between Irish and Italians, he argues that this shared heritage produced a “moral attitude” that distinguishes them from Protestant Anglo Americans. Citing theologian Richard McBrien, Lourdeaux writes:

The most readily apparent of Catholicism’s three principles [communion, mediation, and sacramentality] is communion. WASP Americans have long envied the way the Irish and Italian immigrants enjoy community life in their parishes and neighborhood.⁴⁰

Lourdeaux’s study liberates its subjects in seeking to go beyond questions of types/stereotypes in order to grasp something deeper about both the “core values” of these filmmakers and their construction of (fellow) ethnic Americas. In doing so, he seeks to probe deeper than what he describes as the limitations of an “images of” approach:

My focus on core values is nothing like the “images of” adopted by Les and Barbara Keyser in *Hollywood and the Catholic Church: The Image of Roman Catholicism in American Movies*. The Keyser’s chronicle Hollywood’s many images of Irish and Italian priests and nuns [but their] approach gleans a film’s surface, passing over background, yet essential issues of the narrative schema that organize cultural values.⁴¹

Instead, the book “uses a director’s identity to elucidate a complex array of cross-cultural tensions; ethnic versus WASP, Catholic versus Protestant, even Irish versus Italian.”⁴² Identifying a “nexus-of-values” approach not only illuminates the distinctive contribution of these directors to American cinema but also shifts our understanding of how they shape their ethnic characters. Even if the book’s one chapter dealing with John Ford offers a very limited purview on Irish American representations, Lourdeaux’s identification of the dynamic and mutually enhancing relationship between ethnic and white identities in Ford’s films advances upon one-dimensional readings of such characters in terms of stereotypes or Americanization. By turning to its filmmakers’ cultural backgrounds, the book identifies and illuminates an array of intercultural tensions—between Catholic and Protestant, individual and community, tradition and modernity, and so

on—that illuminate the 20th century American experience and the role of popular culture in it.

Lourdeaux's paradigm is of value not only in thinking about other examples of the "Catholic imagination" in Hollywood—for instance the Irish American priests discussed in chapter 2 or the themes of a director such as Leo McCarey (*Going My Way* [1944] *The Bells of St. Mary's* [1945])—but also in proposing a structure for approaching Irish American masculinities in Hollywood cinema more generally; their identification with communal ties and relations which are often contrasted with the conservative or corporate individualism of (WASP) American manhood. And although Lourdeaux's single chapter on John Ford offers a limited discussion of the Irish American dimensions to his argument, he asserts a dynamic and mutually determined relationship between ethnic representations and white identities that challenges a simplistic Americanization narrative:

At first filmmakers like John Ford and Frank Capra adjusted their ethnic backgrounds to accommodate Hollywood stereotypes. But once they discovered that the success ethic was a strong common bond between Anglo American and their immigrant cultures, they began to configure new socio-religious values lacking in mainstream society.⁴³

The identification of cultural reciprocity is important to the presence of Irish/Irish Americans in Ford's films generally. Even at their most cliched and stereotyped such characters frequently bring mutually reinforcing humor and humanity to the communities and institutions they encounter. Marty Maher in *The Long Gray Line* (1955) (ch. 3) is a typical example; a character based on a real individual who—having been established in stereotyped terms—counterbalances the "gray" discipline of West Point military academy and reconfigures (white) military masculinity in the process. As we shall see, such dynamics extend beyond Ford and, from the mid-1930s particularly, can be seen to shape many of the Irish American males discussed in this book who similarly disrupt or alloy the norms of white American manhood. While explicit in the maverick priests inhabited by, for instance, Spencer Tracy or Pat O'Brien (both products of Midwestern Irish Catholic backgrounds), such dynamics can also be found in the police-themed post-WWII narratives discussed in chapter 4 through intergenerational professional male relationships and even in the return-to-Ireland narratives of chapter 5, where Irish

American protagonists challenge the dominant contemporary modes of masculinity produced by consumer capitalism while espousing a return to roots and romance.

A final, more comprehensive study is Christopher Shannon's *Bowery to Broadway: The American Irish in Classic Hollywood Cinema* (Scranton University Press, 2010). More attentive to the range and development of filmic representations than Lourdeux, Shannon considerably advances and deepens Curran's earlier study. Concentrating mainly on films from the 1930s and 1940s, Shannon begins by reflecting on how the virulent anti-Irish, anti-Catholicism of the 1920s could be transformed into a more positive set of images, a transformation, he notes that is unmatched by other ethnic groups: "How do we account for this seemingly dramatic reversal? Why did Americans who loathed the Irish as politicians [subsequently] love them as gangsters, boxers, working girls and song and dance men?"⁴⁴ The answer, he suggests, is that such narratives reinforced local values and heroes, thereby avoiding direct conflict with dominant American values: "Redeemed from the slurs of nativists, the Irish nonetheless never became representative Americans." During a period when "the New Deal, World War II and Hollywood cinema combined to bring an unprecedented degree of political and cultural unity to American life, America as a nation is only a minor presence in most of these films."⁴⁵

This is a strong observation, attentive to the settings and themes in which such characters were situated, but it might overstate the extent to which such narratives stand outside of America. While Shannon makes a useful distinction between "stories of ethnicity" like *The Jazz Singer* (1927) "that dramatize the conflict between the old world and the new" and "ethnic stories" in which "Irish characters may not always know what to do, but they always know who they are,"⁴⁶ such oppositions may obscure both the important shift in the concept of ethnicity between the 1920s and 1930s/40s and the usefulness of the white ethnic category within a nation seeking to reassert foundational values within a demographically transformed population. Similarly, while he is correct to note that "the Bowery Cinderella story had clearly moved from A to B picture status by the early 1930s," I would argue that this is more than a matter of "narrative exhaustion" but reflective of urgent new social tensions and the changed cultural role of Hollywood.⁴⁷ Displacing the female-centered romance comedies that dominated representations in the 1920s, the New Deal Irish American male is framed in terms of individual choice within a structure of inherited "decent" ties. Such characters thus reinforce what

Joseph Darda has described as “the association between whiteness, Americanness, and freedom” in contrast to “the association of blackness with un-Americanness and unfreedom.”⁴⁸ It is at this level that Irish Americans operate as “Hollywood’s favourite ethnics”—to repurpose a much used term—expressing a whiteness that is heterogenous *and* hegemonic, foregrounding an ideology of consent over coercion.

Irish American Masculinities: Stereotype to Types

These themes are central to this book’s exploration of Irish American masculinities in Hollywood cinema across five chronologically structured case studies: James Cagney’s Irish career at Warner Bros., the Catholic priest of the 1930s, sport-themed biopics, the Irish-American cop, and postwar narratives of Irish Americans who return to, and settle in, Ireland. While such figures may today seem familiar and even clichéd, each offered a new and timely type who, while developed from historical or narrative precedents, can be read as a response to contemporary forces and contexts. In making this claim we recall Richard Dyer’s distinction between stereotype and type: while the first serves “to maintain sharp boundary definitions and define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it,” a type offers “representations of those who ‘belong’ to society.”⁴⁹ Thus, although stereotypical elements would endure, particularly in relation to older/first generation Irish, the Irish American male in Hollywood film would assume a more typical quality, not quite an everyman but someone with an outsider’s eye and appreciation for American opportunity. While nineteenth-century stereotypes positioned such figures “beyond the pale” of social norms, from the 1930s onward, the Irish American male was co-opted into the reproduction of an expanded understanding of whiteness against the backdrop of social and political change. Additionally, thanks to their visibility as cops, priests, and sporting and showbusiness figures, they had an enduring association with performance, putting on and off uniforms/costumes and stepping on and off stages. Such malleable identities facilitated their culturally useful construction as both ethnic *and* white, capable of “performing” whiteness while retaining links and loyalties to their immigrant origins. Conversely, such ties could work to “enrich” whiteness, lending it grit, authenticity, and independence, even as it retained its hegemonic status, allure and dominance. Functioning to de-essentialize the racial element of whiteness

while continuing to uphold patriarchal whiteness meant that “the Irish in Us” (to borrow the 1935 film title) would come to be claimed by those with only the slimmest of ancestral associations.

Our study begins with James Cagney, who, during a decade of prodigious output at Warner Bros. established and explored a new type in popular culture, becoming the most significant Irish American actor/screen persona of the long 1930s. Short and volatile, more resembling a longshore worker than a movie star, his breakthrough came—much like his character in *Lady Killer* [1933]—when Hollywood storytelling moved from image to sound and his Lower East Side physical and verbal mannerisms became sought after for the realist films Warner was quickly producing. Cagney’s pugnacious persona expressed an impatience with existing social structures and hierarchies, and his mercurial characters were driven by an energy that sought to challenge and recalibrate norms of American manhood. During a decade when a number of actors (Spencer Tracy, Pat O’Brien, Frank McHugh) were consistently identified with Irish types, it is often overlooked that in a body of work bookended by *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), twenty-two (roughly 60%) of the characters he played are marked as Irish American. While these characters initially figure as threats to hegemonic WASP whiteness, these became more varied as the decade progressed (a combination of his own resistance and Production Code pressures) resulting in a body of work that was both unprecedented and without comparison in its span—and development—of Irish American masculinity in film history.

Chapter 1 charts the progress of the Cagney persona from ethnic gangster and public enemy to his career highpoint playing the original Yankee dandy George M. Cohan on the eve of WWII. Central to the development of this persona is a recurring motif of performance, suggesting that repositions whiteness as a flexible, performative category shaped by both social norms and individual choice. A decade after *The Public Enemy*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* concludes with the ageing but still sprightly George Cohan join marching soldiers singing his signature show tune “Over There”; a full-throated performance of patriotism, unknown to the youthful cadets he walks with, he helped shape for a previous war. Returning to the public streets he once terrorized, the Cagney persona, and Hollywood’s construction of Irish American manhood comes full circle, walking in step with a “national” white American manhood that is both heterogenous and hegemonic.

Even with his versatility and prodigious output, Cagney was not the only or even most culturally impactful of Irish American male types