

The Celtic blue note: jazz in Neil Jordan's 'Night in Tunisia', *Angel* and *The Miracle*

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Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, a provocative study of how Irish Catholic immigrants, '[who were] an oppressed race in Ireland, became part of an oppressing race in America', begins with a statement made by Frederick Douglass in 1843:

The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step onto our soil to hate and despise the Negro . . . Sir, the Irish-American will one day find out his mistake¹

¹ Noel Ignatiev *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 1

Neil Jordan, Ireland's most prolific and most internationally prominent filmmaker, complicates Douglass's observation about the ready sympathy of the Irish in a 1993 interview in *Film Ireland*. When questioned about his use of black actors in *Mona Lisa* (1986) and *The Crying Game* (1993) Jordan replies:

I used Forest Whitaker because just about every black British soldier has been to Northern Ireland, where they're subjected to a lot of overt racism. I suppose because Irish people have never liked other minorities²

² 'Celtic dreamer' *Film Ireland* no. 34 (1993) p. 20

This paper aims to map the constellation of identification, objectification, voyeurism, minstrelsy, appropriation and ventriloquism which gives voice and visual form to this sympathy and to this racism. I am interested specifically in contemporary Irish film and its practitioners' obvious fascination with African-American

culture. The history of Irish film culture suggests that the 1980s and 1990s are probably the most important decades for the study of Irish images of Ireland, not least because of economic incentives for indigenous production and opportunities for finance from British and US sources.³ Within the context of an emerging internationalized Irish film culture, filmmakers such as Alan Parker (*The Commitments* [1991], based on Roddy Doyle's novel) and Gillies MacKinnon (*The Playboys* [1992], written by Shane Connaughton and Kerry Crabbe) have made allusions to African-American culture in overt and subtle ways in their films about Ireland. In this essay, I examine the Africanist identity figured in repeated references to African-American jazz music in Neil Jordan's 1976 short story 'Night in Tunisia', in his first feature film, *Angel* (1982), and in *The Miracle* (1990).

It should not be surprising that a commercial and/or critical Irish cinema would engage with images and issues from US film and culture, since Hollywood is responsible for most twentieth-century cinematic images of Ireland. What I will argue more specifically, however, is that Jordan addresses experiences and effects of cultural alienation by invoking the (generally absent) figure of the African-American jazz musician. Jazz music, played by Irish musicians, is thematically and structurally central to *Angel* and *The Miracle*, which allows Jordan to allegorize what are often perceived as similar, if not shared, histories of cultural theft, enslavement and subjugation. Jordan calls up experiences associated with colonial oppression, including an anxiety surrounding the question of origins, a rejection of linear history, the neocolonial influence of US mass culture, and the peculiar configuration of genders and sexualities under colonialism.

Jordan's use of jazz music thus appeals to a shared experience of alienation, to the common experience of being rendered a foreigner in one's native land. As Irish historian and cultural theorist Luke Gibbons writes,

[t]here was no need to go abroad to experience the 'multiple identities' of the diaspora valorized in post-colonial theory the uncanny experience of being a stranger to oneself was already a feature of life back home.⁴

Jordan's fiction and films also point to the history of Irish and Irish-American contact with African-American culture. For example, Krin Gabbard, writing on jazz in American film, speculates upon the disproportionate representation of Irish immigrants as minstrel performers:

[it was] perhaps the one ethnic group in the US whose members could identify with the powerlessness and poverty of blacks during the first decades of the nineteenth century.⁵

Clearly, there are problems associated with making neat analogies

3 See Kevin Rockett 'Culture, industry and Irish cinema' in J. Hill, M. McLoone and P. Hainsworth (eds) *Border Crossing* (Antrim: Institute of Irish Studies/British Film Institute, 1994). An Irish film studio in L. Gibbons and J. Hill (eds) *Cinema and Ireland* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

4 Luke Gibbons 'Unapproved roads: Ireland and post-colonial identity' in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) p. 176.

5 Krin Gabbard *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996) p. 43.

6 Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1992)

between Irish and African–American experience, but I am less interested in establishing the relevance of the comparison than in examining the textual and political significance of Jordan’s repeated and explicit appropriations of jazz. Jordan’s invocation of jazz partly conforms to the model forwarded by Toni Morrison that of the Africanist identity as structuring absence.⁶ But I will also argue that, thematically, Jordan’s jazz is a means of expressing male sexuality and violence and, as such, may reinscribe notions of the spontaneity, expressiveness and hypersexuality of the black male performer even as it constructs a potentially unsettling hybridized postcolonial masculinity. In the course of paying homage to jazz figures such as Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong through his young male Irish protagonists, Jordan’s films evoke stereotyped associations, recirculating primitivist assumptions of jazz’s spontaneous voicing of the soul and the utopian fantasy of the jazz soloist’s ability to assert individualism within a group structure. The Irish jazz musician’s performative deployment of masculinity is oral and phallic, expressive and exhibitionistic, and based on problematic images of black performers. However, the sexuality associated with jazz suggests a simultaneously pre- and post-Oedipal masculinity that is distinguishable from the available colonial modes of paternalistic authority or the insufficient, emasculated Irish ‘paddy’.

Moreover, in formal terms, Jordan does ‘signify’ upon the jazz tradition by using the music to direct visual style and narrative form, thus translating jazz into film style. Jordan’s editing adapts to the rhythm, pace and colour of jazz, ultimately undermining narrative coherence and chronological time. These interventions into narrative form – the structural centrality of jazz – underscore thematic anxieties regarding ‘impure’ cultural or biological origins and non-linear history. Film theories dealing with narrative disruption have tended to focus on the visual spectacle of female sexuality. In ‘Night in Tunisia’, *Angel* and *The Miracle*, however, visual and, primarily, auditory ‘specularity’ defer or short-circuit narrative trajectories, reorganizing the film according to repetition and revision around narrative and visual ellipses, which is consistent with the films’ thematic concerns with cultural and personal loss.

Angel of death: ‘Strange Fruit’ and ‘Danny Boy’

Henry Louis Gates argues that jazz music provides one salient example of signifying, which he defines as the double-voiced quality of a text that speaks to other texts. In particular, he writes,

black jazz musicians . . . perform each other’s standards on a joint album, not to critique these but to engage in refiguration as an act of homage . . . this form of the double-voiced implies unity and resemblance rather than critique and difference.⁷

7 Henry Louis Gates Jr *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988) p. xxvii

Jordan locates himself within the jazz tradition in order to pay respect to African–American jazz musicians and to foreground resemblances between Irish and African–American experiences of political and psychological repression. In an interview published in the *Irish Times*, in which he discusses his choice of the Billie Holiday/Lewis Allan song ‘Strange Fruit’ as the musical centrepiece for *Angel*, Jordan suggests

You could almost transpose the whole lyrics over to Ireland . . . there you’re speaking about a situation where human beings killed people they didn’t know for reasons which had nothing to do with any kind of human emotion whatever. It was just to do with racial differences; and it’s a similar kind of situation that I was talking about in the film.⁸

8 Cited in Richard Kearney
Avenging angel: an analysis of
Neil Jordan’s first Irish feature
film *Studies in Irish Quarterly*
Review no. 71 (1982) p. 302

The Africanist presence in this instance is utilized as the absent but masterful original composer and performer; the Irish musicians and filmmaker signify upon that tradition, improvising upon the song’s associations. In Jordan’s work, the disembodied African–American ‘speaks’ through his or her music, which would appear to complicate Toni Morrison’s paradigm wherein the Africanist presence must be silenced and erased. In the American literary tradition, Morrison argues:

to notice [race] is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.⁹

9 Morrison *Playing in the Dark*
pp. 9–10

Invisibility and disembodiment in *Angel*, ‘Night in Tunisia’ and *The Miracle* is enforced – there are no African–American characters – but silence, ostensibly, is not, for the jazz music is central to the protagonists’ identities.

The apparent inclusion of African–American voice through music is, if not undermined entirely, at least tempered by the fact that the music – as it is rendered by Jordan’s young male saxophone-playing protagonists – is the means by which adolescent, repressed masculine sexuality and its relation to violence is explored. In the process, primitivist associations ‘idealizing a black other as spontaneous, transgressive, and ecstatically free of bourgeois restraint’ are played out.¹⁰ Thus the African–American ‘voice’ turns out to be audible but non-verbal, expressive yet indeterminate; marshalled in the service of sexuality. The displacement and appropriation permit Jordan’s characters, as well as readers and viewers, to enjoy the auditory pleasures of minstrel performance, to ‘consume fantasies of black male sexuality mediated through white performers’.¹¹

10 Gabbard *Jammin’ at the Margins* p. 2

11 *Ibid.* p. 45

Jordan’s choice of jazz music is not without historical resonances of fantasy and rebellion for his local as well as for international audiences. Consider, for example, the war waged on dance halls and jazz music, two of Jordan’s omnipresent tropes, by Father Peter

12 Quoted in Gibbons,
Transformations in Irish Culture,
p. 101.

Conefrey of Leitrim during the 1920s and 1930s, which culminated in a demonstration against jazz music in 1934. Father Conefrey associated socialist rebellion and sexual permissiveness with jazz, writing:

Jazz is an African word meaning the activity in public of something of which St Paul said 'Let it not be so much as named among you'. The dance and music with its abominable rhythm was borrowed from Central Africa by a gang of wealthy Bolsheviks in the USA to strike at Church civilization throughout the world.¹²

It is thus against a backdrop of Catholic Church opposition to jazz, and a history of African-American social protest and resistance encoded within jazz styles and lyrics, that Jordan configures his male coming-of-age narratives.

In *Angel*, 'Strange Fruit' and 'Danny Boy' are the songs – African-American and Irish, respectively – around which a narrative of violent death and equally violent revenge is played out. A young saxophonist named Danny (Stephen Rea) is befriended by a mute girl (Annie) prior to a performance at a rural dance hall near Derry called the Dreamland Ballroom. She waits outside for him after the performance, putting her hands over his eyes, revealing herself to him and making love with him in a concrete construction pipe near the entrance to the ballroom. Danny and Annie witness the apparently sectarian killing of his manager, then Danny watches as the masked assassins shoot and kill Annie and the dance hall



Danny (Stephen Rea) and
Deidre (Honor Heffeman) in the
Dreamland Ballroom. *Angel*
(1982). Picture courtesy:
BFI Stills.

explodes in flames. The rest of the film is concerned with Danny's quest for revenge; he tracks down her killers one by one, becoming more like them, and also more anonymous, as he kills them. In the end, it becomes apparent to Danny that the police have allowed him to carry out this murderous spree of revenge because through it he leads them to the perpetrators, one of whom is a police officer himself.

Richard Kearney's excellent analysis of the film focuses on Danny's gradual substitution of violence for art, signified in a scene where he takes his saxophone from its case and puts a machine gun in its place.¹³ Kearney argues that the film's strength lies in the way it addresses the psychological motivations for violence in a timeless, almost mythical manner:

One of the strengths of *Angel* is its precise ability to focus on this 'basic mechanical level' of reflex attraction and recoil, symptomatic of the workings of the subconscious. In this way Jordan investigates that fundamental nexus between aesthetic creativity and violence which has become one of the most frequent stamping grounds of contemporary art.¹⁴

Furthermore, Kearney emphasizes the manner in which the psychic undercurrents of the film shape its narrative form, specifically noting that 'while the deep-structure unfolds "synchronically" by repeating key visual and sound motifs, the surface structure progresses "diachronically" according to the standard conventions of a sequential plot'.¹⁵ Kearney identifies several critical motifs which operate at a 'vertical (counter-narrative)' level, including dancing, music, the laying-on of hands and framing images, noting the recurrence of Verdi's Requiem, 'Danny Boy' and 'Strange Fruit'. Kearney, however, does not address in detail the effects of the diegetic performances and the non-diegetic jazz music on the film's narrative, except to note the political implications of the lyrics of 'Strange Fruit'. Extending Kearney's analysis, I would argue that the music in *Angel* – dominated by a jazz aesthetic based on repetition and revision – underscores the themes of sexuality, loss and violence, and undergirds the film's formal and narrative circularity.

The film's opening credits are accompanied by a diegetic saxophone riff played by Danny outside the Dreamland Ballroom. Annie touches the instrument and he tells her 'it's a saxophone'. The object, endowed with phallic status, is associated with Danny, 'the Stan Getz of South Armagh', as we see him fondle, fiddle with and clean the instrument repeatedly.¹⁶ By the time Danny finds the gun hidden in his first victim's apartment, his assembling of the automatic weapon looks familiar because it visually and aurally parallels his frequent manipulation of the saxophone. Given the phallic associations of jazz instruments documented by Krin Gabbard

13 See Kearney 'Avenging angel'

14 Richard Kearney 'Nationalism and Irish cinema' in *Transitions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988), p. 177

15 *Ibid.* p. 179

16 The reference to Getz, a white jazz musician, makes Jordan's associations with African-American jazz non-exclusive. However, Getz can be distinguished from bop guru Charlie Parker, the focus of *Night in Tunisia*, by the fact that he was an extremely popular rather than esoteric performer. Thus Jordan may be highlighting the popular, watered-down version of bop that Danny's pop/jazz band plays.

and suggested in these scenes, it is not surprising that after the bombing of the ballroom a guilty and angry Danny has actually lost his alto saxophone and is afraid that he has lost the ability to play. When he tells his Aunt May he has lost his saxophone, her reply – ‘We’ve all lost something’ – emphasizes the metaphorical significance of the instrument.

One scene in particular underscores Jordan’s use of jazz music as it insinuates itself into the idiom of his film language. After leaving the hospital, Danny stays at Aunt May’s house, discovering his uncle’s soprano saxophone, which has been stored under a bed. As he plays a mournful cascade of notes and looks out of the window, he visually revisits the scene of the killings in an increasingly rapid and repetitive editing sequence. Shots alternate between images of plenitude (the girl covering his eyes as she walks up behind him outside the dance hall) and violence (the murder of his manager; the burning dance hall). The riff begins with the following shot sequence: Annie’s hands, Annie being shot, and a tiny bell tinkling. As the music speeds up, growing more insistent and shrill, the saxophone repeats a phrase in sync with the images. The sequence peaks with the shot of Annie’s hands repeated three times, and closes with the shot of the bell, suggesting that Danny’s musical play of absence and presence organizes and revises his memory and loss.

Danny’s encounter with Annie and her death become intertwined in memory, whereas previously his musicianship had been associated with sexual conquest alone. During the performance at the Dreamland Ballroom, Danny is the object of various female characters’ visual interest, including that of Annie, a recent bride, and the band’s singer, Deirdre. Prior to the first gig, Danny propositions Deirdre, engages in flirty banter with the bride and finally makes love with Annie. After leaving the hospital and rejoining the band, Danny begins a love affair with Deirdre which is threatened by his increasing alienation. He tells her his problem is ‘like a nothing you can feel, and it gets worse’.

Musicians and murderers are depersonalized in the film, and Danny’s growing anonymity conflates violence and sexuality. When Deirdre tells Danny they’ll be playing his tune, ‘Danny Boy’, he replies, ‘That’s not my tune, that’s everyone’s’. During their flirtation at the Dreamland Ballroom, the bride asks Danny if she has seen him play before, to which he replies ‘we all look the same’. Later, Danny becomes sexually involved with her in order to locate her estranged husband, whom Danny believes was with the men who killed Annie. She waits outside the dance hall in a repeat of Danny’s encounter with Annie. As they compare Danny to the husband, they collapse sexuality (the reason he gives for his questions) and violence (the actual reason he asks them):

Woman: I think you're jealous!
Danny: I want to know everything he ever did with you. Am I like him?
They kiss
Woman. You're like him now.

When Danny finds her husband the next day, he pulls a gun on him. The interchange between the two men suggests their growing similarity.

Danny: How'd you do it?
Man: It's not that hard when you put your mind to it. You may know yourself.
Danny: How did you shoot her?
Man: It's easy, just pull the trigger.

Danny does pull the trigger, making the man his third victim. Later, Deirdre will tell Danny that he is dead, and that he looks just like the police: 'them, like you, only in uniform'

Danny's loss of identity, the collapse of musician and murderer, is marked by an increase in the use of jazz riffs which signal the return of repressed memories, and by a decline in Danny's musical performances. Jazz riffs signal the repetition of previous events when the police approach Danny and take him to the morgue, when the bride tells of her husband's absence on their wedding night (the night Annie is killed), and just before Danny witnesses the new manager making protection payments (which is what brought the paramilitaries down on the previous manager).

It is fitting, then, that a jazz riff sets the stage for the final confrontation between Danny and Bonner, the police officer involved in the paramilitary violence. The film returns full circle visually and aurally: 'Here we are again', Bonner remarks as he drags Danny into the ruins of the Dreamland Ballroom. He makes the analogy between music and violence complete: 'It's a lot easier to play than the saxophone', he says of his gun, 'You only have the one tune'. The gun creates loss and the saxophone relives and revises the absence which becomes a presence: Danny's 'nothing that gets worse'. Bonner is killed by his superior, Bloom, as Danny is returned to the position of witness to violence rather than perpetrator. Verdi's Requiem, the musical accompaniment to the initial scene of violent killing, is heard over the sounds of Bloom's helicopter in the film's closing moments.

Jordan's use of jazz foregrounds the relationship between sexuality and violence. Not only are the specific songs Danny performs connected to his struggle against violence and anonymity, but the non-diegetic score, resonant with Danny's replaying and revising the loss of Annie and his innocence, is critical to the film's anti-narrative elements and to Jordan's visual style.

'Night in Tunisia': jazz combo as utopian family

'Night in Tunisia', a clear precursor to *The Miracle*, deals with an unnamed adolescent boy negotiating his emerging sexuality and nurturing his artistic talent in the context of various 'improper' family structures during two months at a seaside town. The boy's father, a professional musician, plays,

what he said would be his last stunt, since there was no more place for brassmen like him in the world of three-chord showbands. . . . Every night his father took the tenor sax and left for Mosney to play with sixteen others for older couples who remembered what the big bands of the forties sounded like. And he was left alone with his sister who talked less and less as her breasts grew bigger. With the alto saxophone which his father said he could learn when he forgot his fascination for three-chord ditties. With the guitar which he played a lot, as if in spite against the alto saxophone.¹⁷

17 Neil Jordan *A Neil Jordan Reader: Night in Tunisia and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), p. 34

The following themes – almost all of them circulating around the musical instruments in the story – are translated from the story into the film: the absent mother; the father's profession as a swing-band hack and his desire for his son to play the saxophone; the generational rift between big-band swing and bop, signified by the alto saxophone, symbol of bop; the saxophone versus the guilty pleasure of the guitar; the incestuous displacements of eroticism between the instruments and his sister, which also extend to an older unnamed girl with whom he and his sister have spent a night under a blanket on the golf course during a previous summer stay.

Several passages from 'Night in Tunisia' highlight the sexual associations Jordan attaches to the Dizzy Gillespie composition which lends the story its title. When the boy first hears Charlie Parker's famous version of the song:

He heard the radio crackle over the sound of falling water and heard a rapid-fire succession of notes that seemed to spring from the falling water, that amazed him, so much faster than his father ever played, but slow behind it all, melancholy, like a river. He came out of the toilet and stood listening with his father. Who is that, he asked his father. Then he heard the continuity announcer say the name Charlie Parker and saw his father staring at some point between the wooden table and the wooden holiday home floor.¹⁸

18 *Ibid.* pp. 42–3

Lest the connections between the oral physicality of playing the saxophone and sexuality be missed, the boy has already encountered a youth, a tall thin boy who 'put his mouth to the mouth of the French letter and blew. It expanded, huge and bulbous, with a tiny bubble at the tip.'¹⁹

19 *Ibid.* p. 38

The saxophone and the condom suggest both orality and homoeroticism; however, the boy's preference for the saxophone and implicit rejection of overt homosexuality is revealed in a scene where the thin boy puts on a condom and masturbates. In contrast to the sensual images of fluidity in Parker's playing, the boy notes the dead-end quality of autoeroticism and, implicitly, homoeroticism. 'He saw how the liquid was caught by the antiseptic web, how the sand clung to it when the thin boy threw it, like it does to spittle'.²⁰

20 *Ibid* p 43

Furthermore, the Parker solo freezes space and time by occupying both simultaneously and, unlike the thin boy's 'antiseptic web', the music is orgasmically transcendent:

The notes soared and fell, dispelling the world around him, tracing a series of arcs that seemed to point out a place, or if not a place, a state of mind. . . . He decided it was a place you were always in, yet always trying to reach, you walked towards all the time and yet never got there, as it was always beside you.²¹

21 *Ibid* p 46

The boy repeatedly encounters the older girl, to whom a less ambient, more phallic eroticism seems to cling, along with her yellow cardigan. The girl is represented in distinctly Nabokovian terms, suggesting her sexual knowledge and her own incestuous family structure. She plays tennis with an older man, without much interest on her part. When the game is completed, he hurries her to a nearby car.

She was standing on the one spot, dead-centre of the court, hardly looking at all at her opponent. She was hitting every ball cleanly and lazily and the sound that came from her racquet each time was that taut twang that he knew only came from a good shot. . . . And every now and then when the man she was playing against managed to send a shot towards the sidelines, she didn't bother to follow it at all. She let the white ball bounce impotent towards the wire mesh.

He watched the small fat man he didn't recognize lose three balls for every ball won. He relished the spectacle of a fat man in whites being beaten by a bored teenage girl in sagging high heels.²²

22 *Ibid* p 39

The girl, unlike Lolita, is also apparently suicidal: the boy 'learnt that underneath her frayed blouse her wrists were marked'.²³

23 *Ibid* p 33

After dissatisfying encounters with the thin boy and others like him as they play on the beach, singling out women to call 'whores', the main character returns home to the piano, 'trying to imitate that sound like a river he has just heard'.²⁴ He plays a recording of Charlie Parker's 'Night in Tunisia' and finally picks up the alto saxophone, allowing his father to help him find the notes.

24 *Ibid* p 46

He learned the first four keys that day and when his father took his own instrument and went out to his work in Butlins he worked out several more for himself. When his father came back at two in the morning, he was still playing . . . He forgot the raft and the games of pontoon and the thin boy's jargon. He stayed inside for days and laboriously transferred every combination of notes he had known on the piano onto the metal keys. He lost his tan and the gold sheen of the instrument became quickly tarnished with sweat, the sweat that came off fingers in the hot metal room. He fashioned his mouth round the reed till the sounds he made became like a power of speech, a speech that his mouth was the vehicle for but that sprang from the knot of his stomach, the crook of his legs.²⁵

25 *Ibid* p 47

The boy masters his own new language of the body, his own jargon, with his father's help. He learns that the girl with marked wrists had been rescued by the lifeguard several times from 'a part of the beach too near the shore to drown in by accident', and he approaches her. He plans to tell her about 'that place' he has found in the music. In the final passage of the story, sex and saxophone, woman and water merge in a triangulated image of mutual oral engulfment and sexual aggression:

She raised her head and opened her mouth, her answer already there. She inhabited that place, was already there, her open mouth like it was for the lifeguard when he pressed his hand to her stomach, pushed the salt water out, then put his lips to her lips and blew.²⁶

26 *Ibid* p 49

27 Gabbard *Jammin at the Margins* p 97

28 Elsewhere I have argued that Jordan's use of triangulation in *The Crying Game* offers possibilities not only for the inclusion of bisexual characters such as Jody but also for bisexual spectatorship practices in which desire and identification are not wholly distinct processes. See 'Straddling the screen: bisexual spectatorship and contemporary narrative film' in *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

29 Consider, for example, Parker's Famous Alto Break from a 1946 Dial recording of *Night in Tunisia*. According to Mark Gardner, Parker felt he would be unable to reproduce the soaring spontaneity in subsequent efforts' and thus released the fragment as *Famous Alto Break*. Whether this is the solo identified by Jordan in the story is unclear – a number of versions of Parker playing *Night in Tunisia* exist. See Barry Kernfeld (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Recorded Jazz* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1995) p 221.

In these passages, wordlessly, water and sound, orality and sensuality are expressed in the fluid Parker style the boy imitates. The orality of his sexuality and his rejection of the other boys' games signify his adoption of the 'appealingly unconventional paradigms of masculinity' that jazz presents.²⁷ He becomes assertive, yet does not challenge his father in order to achieve mastery. His masculinity cannot be associated with the controlling mastery of a colonial paternal figure or the emasculated colonized subject represented by his father. And, interestingly, this polymorphous sexuality seems to require a triangulation, a third term – the lifeguard's lips breathing life into the cardigan-clad girl's mouth.²⁸

Charlie Parker's playing speed, and his improvisations from the top of the anchoring chord rather than the middle, are only two of the reasons he is recognized as the most important jazz soloist since Louis Armstrong. Parker, along with Dizzy Gillespie, is credited with the innovations of 1940s and 1950s bop, a combo-centred style which depended upon instrumental virtuosity and improvisation, both displayed in landmark and fetishized solos.²⁹ The combo functioned, in utopian terms, as a community in which individuality and artistry

were prized – the polar opposite of the band the boy’s father plays with for a living

In allegorizing the father–son relationship through jazz, Jordan points to a fantasy of unconflicted Oedipality, and a community in which individuality is nurtured. The unmentioned missing mother is refigured as musical instrument; the father assists his son in his quest for physical and aesthetic transcendence rather than competing with him, and prepares the boy for consummation with Jordan’s version of the sweater girl. Curiously, the sister drops out of the story, displaced by the ephemeral music and the embodied and sexualized older girl.

The allegory of spiritually meaningful community and transcendent sexuality made possible by African–American jazz artistry is not simply an interesting feature of Jordan’s analogy between African–American and Irish culture. As Luke Gibbons points out,

It is not simply . . . that allegory comes after the event, a mask that can be removed at will; it is part of consciousness itself under certain conditions of colonial rule.³⁰

Perhaps, then, displacing generational, political and sexual conflicts onto jazz in the story and the film is part of the consciousness of these works. One reviewer noted in *Irish Stage and Screen* that the ‘only bond between the father and his son [in ‘Night in Tunisia’] is their common love for Charlie Parker music and playing the saxophone’³¹ Perhaps, then, their common desire for an expressive, oral, performative alternative to conventional masculinity, their problematic negotiation of individuality and community, and their location of those desires and their realization in jazz, are all part of the formal structure of that bond and of the story.

The Miracle: jazz as Oedipal spectacle

If the artistry of Charlie Parker, bop soloist *par excellence*, is the centre of the short story, the Hoagy Carmichael classic ‘Stardust’, made famous by swing soloist *par excellence* Louis Armstrong, is the set piece which mediates relations among the characters in *The Miracle*. Krin Gabbard remarks that ‘members of Armstrong’s band are said to have referred to their accompanying figures on Armstrong’s 1931 recording of “Stardust”. as “the fucking rhythm”’,³² and in this film version of the Freudian family romance, this rhythm, and the repetition and revision that characterize jazz form, revolve around the maternal body, which is no longer displaced and reshaped as a musical instrument as it was in the short story. In this tale of the return of the repressed maternal body, and the son’s assertion of his sexuality and musicianship, the boy can achieve transcendence only through through the most literally

³⁰ Luke Gibbons ‘Identity without a centre’ in *Transformations in Irish Culture* pp. 142–3

³¹ Sylvia Thomson ‘Miracle man’ *Irish Stage and Screen* vol. 3 (1990/91) p. 7

³² Gabbard *Jammin’ at the Margins* p. 143

transgressive sexual act: maternal incest. The form that the film's narrative assumes is an explicitly Oedipal scenario structured by jazz music.

In *The Miracle*, Jimmy's absent mother, whom he believes to be dead because this is the story told to him by his father Sam, returns to the seaside town of Bray. Her reappearance disrupts the intact and continuous life story Sam has crafted and complicates Jimmy's adolescent sexuality. Furthermore, her return rewrites Jimmy's biological and cultural origins because the surprising source of Jimmy's parentage is a problematic interpenetration of American and Irish popular cultures. Renee Baker, the absent/present mother, is an American stage actress and singer, whereas the overly present, overly embodied father is an Irish musician who drinks too much.

Jimmy performs with his father in a dance hall for middle-aged couples, but resists being absorbed into the combo's repertoire, aware and resentful that it does not much matter what he plays because nobody is listening. He walks the boardwalk by day with his chum, a sisterly girl named Rose, whose histrionic claim that she and Jimmy are 'too friendly to be lovers, too close to be friends' belies her obvious feelings for him. Her phrase is an apt representation of the romance narratives she and Jimmy concoct on the boardwalk, as they use the other beachcombers as fodder for indulging in flights of verbal acrobatics. In this manner, the film is framed by an attention to the way narratives are constructed.

Renee appears on the boardwalk one day, arriving by train from Dublin. Rose initiates the young couple's interest, wondering if she got off at the wrong stop, but it is finally Jimmy who is entranced by Renee. The triangulation of this relationship is visually suggested in the scene of Renee's arrival, when Jimmy and Rose follow her to the stairs leading to the beach and Renee is framed between them. Jimmy pesters Renee when she visits the beach, rides the same train into Dublin and follows her to the Olympia Theatre where she is performing a stage version of 'Destry Rides Again', the 1939 US musical-Western featuring Jimmy Stewart and Marlene Dietrich.³³

Jimmy steals a poster bearing her image and puts it up in his room. In repeated visits by train, Jimmy watches Renee playing the phallic Frenchy to her counterpart's non-violent Destry; she shoots, sings, smokes and ultimately dies taking a bullet intended for Destry. The nightly repetitions of her death and her blood-stained costume evoke her real and symbolic deaths in the film just as Jimmy's endless loops on the train signal his problematic relationship to origin and destination.

Jimmy's parents collude in keeping the secret from him, but Renee and Jimmy's obsessive interest in one another leads Jimmy first to jealousy, then to the discovery of his prehistory, once again in a manner mediated by an image. His access to the primal scene is

33 This reversal echoes that of *The Playboys* in which the film version of *Gone With the Wind* is reenacted on stage.

distinctly photographic; in typical Jordan fashion he finds a photograph of Renee and Sam in Renee's purse.³⁴

If the psychodynamics of the men's relationship subtends the triangulated structures of the short story, the film's ventriloquism of sexuality and loss through jazz music results in a refusal of narrative progression other than by riffing, improvisation and repetition. This circularity is certainly consonant with the film's self-conscious focus on the way stories and histories are constructed. Gabbard warns, in relation to American cinema, that

As both psychoanalytic and structuralist film theorists have pointed out, musical numbers bring the film's story to an abrupt halt. Since narrative is indisputably what most audiences crave, then a film about jazz or a film with jazz cannot dwell on the music for too long.³⁵

Jordan defies this convention in *The Miracle*, dwelling obsessively on jazz in full-length performances and in scenes during which the non-diegetic jazz score is privileged. Here, as in the short story, jazz music is no liberatory or creative outlet unless it recognizes the solo artistry of the performer, and/or the sexual expressiveness of the music. Jimmy disdainfully rejects a job playing with his father's dance-hall ensemble for one accompanying a circus contortionist, clearly enjoying the challenge of matching his playing to her body's movements in rehearsal. Continuing the sexualization of Jimmy's musicianship, Jimmy can be seen through the contortionist's legs – framed in this way by the camera – during the public performance. As Rose's jealousy ignites, she leaves Jimmy to his own devices – travelling in seemingly endless loops of train windows accompanied by non-diegetic jazz music between the seaside town and Dublin. At a post-performance party Jimmy accompanies Renee as she sings 'Stardust', a song about invoking memories. Significantly, the camera circles Jimmy and Renee as he plays piano for his mother, just as it does in the scene where he plays for the contortionist.

The scenes in which Jimmy spontaneously plays the saxophone for the acrobat and the piano for his mother have all the hallmarks of a Mulveyan spectacular image – they do not 'further the narrative', but instead foreground the recirculation of music and rhythm as part of Jimmy's psychosexual investigation. After playing with the circus and for Renee, Jimmy dreams of spinning the rope for his mother as she crazily circles the tent above him while his father, and photographs of his father, burn nearby. These repetitive actions, underscored by jazz, shape the film as lack and its revision. Jimmy is engaged in an extremely complex *fort-da* game. He has experienced the lack of a mother his entire life, yet when he discovers near the film's conclusion that Renee is his mother, he learns a new register of loss – the loss of a mother who is not dead.

34 Jordan's novel *The Past* deals with a man trying to reconstruct his ancestry from a series of photographs taken in 1914. Arguably, the photograph of Jody and Dil that Jody shows to Fergus while in captivity in *The Crying Game* establishes Fergus's positions of desire and/or identification in relation to Jody and Dil.

35 Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins* p. 6.

He must, in a sense, improvise the Oedipal conflict through that configuration.

Henry Louis Gates writes that ‘Improvisation, of course, so fundamental to the very idea of jazz, is “nothing more” than repetition and revision’.³⁶ And Luke Gibbons, writing on the Irish film *Maeve* (Pat Murphy, 1981), associates narrative redirection through repetition as a device which foregrounds the past as a destabilizing force:

In *Maeve*, landscape becomes one of the primary means of arresting the flow of events, becoming in effect a form of congealed memory. The apparent continuity between past and present is brought out in the film by a series of flashbacks inserted into the narrative without the usual demarcating devices of blurred focus or dissolves – as if to say, in *Maeve*’s own words, that ‘the more you focus on the past, the more reality it gains’³⁷

Gibbons further writes that,

the impossibility of gaining direct access to the past is not because it is sealed off, as in a time capsule, but because it is part of an unresolved historical process which engulfs the present³⁸

This view of repetition as a means of acknowledging the past as a process taking place in the present is extremely helpful for my reading of *The Miracle*. Jimmy deals with the return of the repressed lost maternal object in the present through his music, reliving, reinvoking, and rehearsing her absence and its relation to his desire. The saxophone and jazz music are his ventriloquists, as they are for the boy in ‘Night in Tunisia’. The privileging of the performance, and the insistence upon Jimmy’s desire to perform for his object of desire, his mother, again suggests a refashioned masculinity at once oral, phallic and fetishized

As if the film’s sense of time as repetition and revision extends to its mise-en-scene, several commentators have remarked that the look of the film is nostalgic, evoking a sense of the 1950s

Renee is a glimpse of the exotic, a luminously sensual woman of a kind seldom seen since the Fifties, and as such Jimmy invests all his dreams and desires in her.³⁹

Like the boy discovering the solos of Charlie Parker for the first time, Jimmy’s journey becomes detached from real time, and the various performance times in the film – Renee’s, Sam’s, Jimmy’s, the circus – assume a heightened prominence as a result. And Jimmy’s last performance is an extremely shocking grand finale Jimmy and Renee have sex on the boardwalk after the secret has been revealed.

36 Gates *The Signifying Monkey*, p 64

37 Luke Gibbons *Lies that tell the truth* in *Transformations in Irish Culture*, pp 119–20

38 Luke Gibbons, *Race against time* racial discourse and Irish history in *Transformations in Irish Culture*, p 157

39 Eamonn O’Donnell *The Miracle* *Film Base News* (July–Aug 1991) p 22. And see Denis Staunton ‘Neil Jordan’s new film a hit in Berlin’ *Irish Times* 22 February 1991 p 10 (Scenes in the circus and on the theatre stage lend the film an old fashioned look placing it in Neil Jordan’s words “outside time”)

Maternal/paternal allegory

In 'Night in Tunisia' and *The Miracle* narrative is short-circuited by obsessive, repetitive iterations of performance and theatricality, specifically in the idiom of African-American jazz music. In the film, as in improvisation, jazz music admits of a troubled relationship to the past and produces a juxtaposition and proliferation of complementary and contradictory images without origin or destination. It is interesting that a number of reviewers called *The Miracle* Jordan's 'home movie', as if its small budget and Irish shooting location secured his return to his proper origin, because this is a film in which origins are mythologized and problematic, fetishized and violated in an almost schizophrenic manner.

The formal narrative circularity, wherein the jazz performances, non-diegetic jazz and Jimmy's circular, never-ending train rides structure the film in negative terms, suggests an anxiety of origins expressed through a musical language of loss. The structure foregrounds the problem of obtaining access to any origin (biological, ethnic, cultural) in a postcolonial and postmodern context that increasingly recognizes the complexity of cultural hybridity. The absent mother, Renee, performs in a staged musical Western in the role made famous by Marlene Dietrich, significantly, Jimmy initially guesses that the mysterious, foreign woman is French while Rose believes she is English.

The relationship between Sam and Jimmy is crucial and yet fraught; their shared love of jazz is both a means of connection and the site of their recognition of loss, in a different 'register of memory.'⁴⁰ In both works, stage, film, musical and circus performers invoke and critique neocolonial power relations, themselves often cloaked in parental metaphors, as they unfold in the culture of entertainment. The films do not directly address the issue of British imperialism or US neocolonialism – rather, familial and communal structures are always already embedded within those politics. Thus any individual or cultural origin – figured as paternal or maternal or as theatrical source material – is always elsewhere and always impure, refusing the postcolonial subject any linear cultural or ethnic genealogy. Thus Jordan's use of jazz music at once renders the peculiar connection his works assert between Irish and African-American cultures, and evokes their shared histories of loss and dislocation even as he points to the neocolonial influence of American music and popular culture as it operates in contemporary Ireland.

Why Jordan is so interested in reworking colonial and neocolonial relations in Oedipal scenarios is an interesting question. I would argue that Jordan's reworking of Freudian/Oedipal tropes in *The Miracle* is grounded in certain historical events of 1980s Ireland – events that make reference to a number of converging and imploding

⁴⁰ Gibbons 'Ireland and post-colonial identity' p. 172

41 I am indebted to Luke Gibbons for this insight and for the information he presented during a lecture at Northern Illinois University's Media and Culture in Ireland seminar at Dublin City University July 1996

42 *Celtic dreamer* p 20

43 *Miracle worker* *Irish Independent* 4 March 1991

'traditions', such as the mythologized Irish family, the repression of female sexuality and the problematic category of Irish masculinity.⁴¹ Jordan himself states that he

had an idea of using incest as an expression of rupture within a family, a prism where different aspects of what that implies are explored. mother-love, jealousy, sexual attraction⁴²

and he suggests that the film

deals with a specifically Irish kind of failure to understand women on the part of men. It grapples with the inarticulacy that the male character needs in order to keep going.⁴³

The oral and phallic sexuality of the boy in 'Night in Tunisia' is turned towards his mother with a vengeance in *The Miracle* – suggesting the desire to both possess and destroy the maternal body. I would suggest that Jordan could no longer dispense with the mother's body in the film as he did in the story, because tensions surrounding marriage, abortion and female sexuality reached crisis proportions during the 1980s. The maternal body became a contested entity in the 1983 abortion referendum, which made abortion illegal and unconstitutional, and during the 1984 events at Granard, where a fifteen-year-old pregnant girl who had told no one of her pregnancy died near a statue of the Virgin Mary. Her sister committed suicide a few months later. In that same year, the Kerry babies incident occurred, in which a woman was accused of murdering a newborn baby found washed up on a beach in a blue fertilizer bag. A woman, Joanne Hayes, from whom a confession was extracted without a lawyer present, was later shown by DNA testing not to be the dead infant's mother. And in 1986, the divorce referendum concluded a series of events which had placed women's bodies, sexuality and lives at the centre of national debates about Ireland's modernization. For these reasons, I suspect, Jordan could no longer displace incestuous desire onto the saxophone, the maternal body had become a player or, perhaps, a pawn, in the allegorical struggle for national and sexual identity.