

Focail láidire, i nglór íseal

WITHIN THE SPACE of the last year there has been a surge in the construction and shop fitting of strongly advertising, self proclaiming Irish bars in Glasgow. At least seven such new pubs/bars have opened, staking claims to a notion of authentic Irishness. There is no one focus of location for the new premises though they are predominantly concentrated within Glasgow's city centre. This phenomena of the escalation of proclaimed *Real Irish* pubs is not one isolated to Glasgow, it is inextricably linked to a snowballing UK wide product push.

The designs of the new pubs are based on the pursuit of an idealised small *country pub* feel. Various attempts are made to give these larger spaces a sense of intimacy through the use of partitions, screens and the reintroduction of snugs. As much as the theme of Irishness retains a stressed similarity, the specifics of the themes differ and the varied geometries of the buildings dictate their own particular layouts and features. The allusion to Irishness is also played out in a variety of fashions, from the use of 'olde worlde' shop interiors to the inclusion of museum vitrines displaying ambiguous artefacts. In common with most idyllic country pub themes, wooden panelling features heavily and object d'art hide the harsh corners and empty ceiling spaces, all of which in the setting signify little other than an attempt at a throwback to a vague rural past using clichéd terms of nostalgia and romanticism. The reading of the pub's contents are more specifically placed with the use of the Gaelic language in signage. Distressed, supposedly aged, clichéd wooden signs, prints and enamel plaques, either referencing or actual reproductions of graphic styles of previous advertising, seek to re-affirm the heritage of the establishment and the products on sale, all with the appearance of having come off the production line the week before. Still more direct associations are made to an Irishness and a sense of place through the greater proliferation of the media advertising of the products on sale. Despite the otherwise seemingly nonsensical and taboo activity of drinking in a would be Oifig An Phoist or hardware store, the flimsy plywood cornices with shamrock patterns drilled in them and the deliberately chipped,

newly stained woodwork, exposing the fresh pine underneath, only add to the feeling of being on a stage set surrounded by props. The general ephemera, the rush and tack of the decoration and building work adds to this disingenuous sentiment. I would have thought that there should be an obvious loss in the feeling of any implied authenticity alluded to in these places. The actuality is that the new pubs reside in a tradition of such thematising and are a well established part of our daily, *critically conscious* lives. The decor is familiar in the way that it shouts it's a themed pub, and not the first or last in a long line of thematising.

Questions arise about our desire for, or assumptions about, an authentic reality; how and where they are informed. I am not making a claim for an authentic National identity but I am questioning the effects of these selective re-constructions of *Irishness*. The claim to an authenticity and the constant need for new sights and sounds that must still convey a sense of familiarity, a feeling of homeliness and the reassuring associations to that much beloved *corner shop* workplace. What we are presented with is a would be 'microcosm' of Ireland, a public relations packaged image that has turned into a predictable but successful formula for an audience that wishes to be reassured. These theme parks present a populist notion of an Irish cultural Disney Land and in doing so suggest a kind of homogeneity of style and content. They speak reassuringly with one clear voice which on the other hand is also dispiriting.

These pubs do not exist simply in themselves but are steeped in the mass marketing of the companies products that they sell or are owned by. They are after all, both the outlets for, and the embodiment of, media constructs of identities and life styles familiar to the sale of any product, in this case part and parcel of the construction and consumption of an Irish identity that presents the male Irish immigrant as a unified category. There has been a general targeting of a younger market as well as an expansion of the product range. In much of the advertising we find the generic Irishman, redefined for mass consumption and obliging to a form of populism, an acceptable UK media face of Irishness, stereotypically the comedian, game show host, gambling rogue and light entertainer. In one TV advert the desire for escapism both to and from the excitement, hustle and bustle of an American bar is collided and contradicted with the nostalgia of an ideal rural bliss. Knowingly and openly tugging at the family heart strings, its references to the reality of economic migration are stirred only for effect. Similarly, in a now routine feature of avoidance of any possible links with Irish Nationalism, the rolling, pastoral landscape is presented in a way that deliberately effaces any contentious notion of land.

On the Irish landscape Irish artist Willie Doherty explains, "...the landscape is the site of disenfranchisement and privilege, of sorrow and anguish, of hate and guilt, and simultaneously of aspiration and hope. The role which place and landscape play in the psychologi-

cal battle of hearts and minds in the war in Ireland cannot be underestimated. If place is inextricably bound up with ideas of home and identity then it is at the very heart of the struggle between colonised and coloniser." (*Two Names...Two Places...Two Minds*, Camera Austria, No. 37, 1991)

Some of the very basic things that motivate us are advertising imagery, our very world is saturated in it. Advertisers pervade our being to affect our deepest impulses; to shape our sensibility; to transform and organise our vision; ultimately to affect our whole behaviour. In doing so they frame our notions of authenticity. Even if we believe we are not affected we do not exist in a vacuum. Our world is lived with others. What we have in these pubs is the re-construction of the re-construction of an Irishness, a lived reality of thematics operating at a level of fantasy. The copy has become the familiar in the consciousness of many, it has been reinvested with an authenticity through proliferation. It is value constructed numerically. Similar in ways to Coronation Street, perhaps once intended to reflect an essence of a Northern English life, a soap fitting for the time of social-realist documentary and film, finding its existence in the 90's a parody of its own constructions. Its reference points have become itself but for the viewing culture at large it has to be remembered that the TV is also a point of reference. It is not just a painted backdrop but an integral part within a diversity of representations, making claims towards or against the authentic problematic in themselves.

We should not necessarily presuppose that these pubs, and the media circus that surrounds them, are somehow representative of Ireland. What we are presented with is an Ireland constructed of 'other' acknowledged and assimilated words, functioning in a way intended to tickle our sensibilities and provide us with pleasurable sensations. This construct is fixed in a particular de-historicised provincialism, arrested from the world of politics. In these terms, a perpetuated, unified identity of Irishness is used as a convenient, and politically passive, organising principle for the circulation of consumer goods. Unfortunately, the raised profile of a product, along with an uncritical absorption of updated stereotyping terminology, doesn't amount to a raise in the profile of the different issues that affect a community or lead to an understanding of the complexities and diversities of experience within it.

One of the results of British colonialism has been the fragmentation of Irish people through a complex web of differences. While there is no homogenous representation of Irish immigration, Ireland's Diaspora has created a huge global network of people claiming to be of Irish origin. Irishness means different things in different places and develops characteristics particular to specific locales. The wider network of social practices within which identities are constituted must be explored within a discourse not only of emigration but also a complex diversity of assimilation.

Leigh French

image: LEIGH FRENCH

