# *Intertextualities between Frank Berry's films,* I Used to Live Here *(2014) and* Michael Inside *(2017)*

## *Intertextualidades entre os filmes de Frank Berry* I Used to Live Here *(2014) e* Michael Inside *(2017)*

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**Abstract:** *With the support of John Nicholl's (2001) approach on how to "read" a film, this article discusses the intertextual relations between two films* I Used to Live Here *(2014) and* Michael Inside *(2017), by the filmmaker and producer Frank Berry. These two fictional dramas are set in the suburban north region of Dublin and portray issues such as bullying, loneliness, social exclusion, and suicide. In the 2017 film, the director borrows some filmic elements from the previous movie such as visual and sound codes, the setting, specific scenes, and actors. Using images as signs, as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, the director makes imagetic appropriations to enhance the construction of space and identity, which brings a strong sense of sequel in "Michael Inside", thereby stimulating examinations concerning its originality. Additionally, this research briefly observes the social function of these two community-oriented films and the director's motivation for the usage of intertextualities. In conclusion, it discusses how Ireland's recent history of rapid globalization has transformed Irish cinema tradition, especially in prison-themed films such as Michael Inside, in which the lines between the local and the global become blurred.*

**Keywords:** *Irish Film Studies; Appropriation; Post-Celtic Tiger, Social Exclusion.*

**Resumo:** *Sob a orientação de John Nicholl (2001) sobre como se 'ler' um filme, este artigo discute as relações intertextuais entre dois longa-metragens,* I Used to Live Here *(2014) e* Michael Inside *(2017), do cineasta e produtor Frank Berry. Ambos são dramas fictícios que se passam nos subúrbios do norte de Dublin e retratam questões como bullying, solidão, exclusão social e suicídio. No filme de 2017, o diretor faz uso de alguns elementos fílmicos do filme anterior, como códigos visuais e sonoros: cenário, cenas específicas, música e ator. Através do uso*

*de imagens como signos, conforme definido por Ferdinand de Saussure, o diretor faz apropriações imagéticas para aprofundar a construção de espaço e identidade, o que traz um forte senso de sequência a Michael Inside em relação ao filme anterior, estimulando, assim, debates em relação a sua originalidade. Além disso, esta pesquisa analisa brevemente a função social desses dois filmes voltados para a comunidade e o que motivou o cineasta a fazer uso dessas intertextualidades. Concluindo, este artigo discute como a história recente de rápida globalização da Irlanda transformou a tradição cinematográfica irlandesa, especialmente em filmes sobre prisão, como Michael Inside, em que as linhas entre o 'local' e o 'global' se entrelaçam.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Estudos de cinema irlandês; apropriação; pós-Tigre Celta; exclusão social.*

This article investigates intertextualities, or appropriations, from the film *I used to live here* (2014) to *Michael Inside* (2017), both written and directed by the Irish filmmaker and producer Frank Berry. It aims at exploring how these two realistic fictional dramas relate and how images are used as signs to convey meaning and a sense of sequel. These features share the same setting, similar themes, and most especially the actor, Dafhyd Flynn, who plays a secondary character (Dylan) in the previous film, but is the protagonist (Michael) in *Michael Inside*. Both films take place in Tallaght, a suburban north region of Dublin city and portray issues related to drug consumption, trafficking and bullying. They show social dynamics between young people who have no prospects for life and the disaffected way in which they interact.

Despite sharing the same setting and themes, Dylan and Michael have the same personality traits which brings a strong sense of continuity. *Michael Inside* appropriates much from *I used to live here*, not only in terms of plot but also in the usage of similar cinematic elements. However, the stories are different and although one can be seen as a sequel of the other – they are not. The process of appropriation is never mentioned in any sort of paratext in the beginning of the movie. Consequently, the first questions to be asked to involve the matter of originality: why would Berry borrow so much from his previous work instead of creating something new? Is *Michael Inside* an original film?

It is widely known that the practice of making a film from a text that already exists is as old as cinema itself. In *Palimpsests* (1982 apud Stam, 2000), Gerard Genette argues there is no

text that does not evoke another, so in this sense, all pieces of art are somehow hipertextual. In his transtextual studies, the author classifies all types of relation, secret or manifested, between two texts – the hipotext ("source" or text A) and the hypertext (text B). A palimpsestic analysis of a film allows the audience to play the "game" of searching in the text its pre-texts. Most importantly, Genette raised the awareness that any hypertext can be read in relation to the "source" or in relation to itself. We must, then, ask ourselves how much the audience loses if they do not know, or do not consider, hipotexts in a film analysis.

If we perceive films as social texts that combine visual, verbal, and sound codes and conventions to create meaning, many aspects can be adapted or appropriated from one movie to another. According to Julie Sanders (2008, p.18), when one has the knowledge of the "source", there are a series of phenomena that might be explored as: allusions, analogies, bricolage, quotations, continuations, hybridizations, imitations, parodies, pastiches, replicas, revisions, versions – each of these have different functions. Therefore, while adaptations signal relationships to the source, appropriations do not always clearly address or recognize the hypotext. Sanders emphasizes that appropriation differs from adaptation mainly because it is less evident, and especially because parts of the hypotexts are embedded in a new product that might be in the same genre.

However, before trying to look for appropriation phenomena from one film to another, we must look carefully at how movies are made and the way they tell stories. Since motion pictures have arisen as a storytelling art, filmmakers have developed a system of signs and images called visual language, in Nicholl's words: "a way of creating meaning through visual images" (2003, p.15). The author argues that camera codes (as types of shots, angles, frame spaces), temporal codes (suggestions of passage of time as dissolves, fades, cuts, titles), lighting codes (three-point light, front lit, side lit, back lit), sound codes (diegetic and non-diegetic music, voices, sound effects), and other codes, are used in certain ways in different film genres.

These elements mentioned above are keys to tell stories because they feature types of conventions that carry meaning and trigger feelings in the audience. To play the "game" of finding pre-texts in a text, in this instance a movie inside a movie, one has to learn how to read a visual language the same way one has learned how to read a play or a novel. However, to explore intertextualities between the two films, first it is necessary to bring to light important aspects of the hypotext, or the source, which *Michael Inside appropriates.*

*I used to live here* was inspired in "Breaking the ripple effects of suicide" (2011) by Dr. Tony Bates,[1] an article which speculates about suicide clusters that happened among teenagers in Tallaght. It explains how a suicide may lead to other suicides among youngsters, especially the ones who suffer from social problems as exclusion and bullying. Although the story pictures some days of the life of the protagonist Amy (Jordanne Jones), showing her motivations to commit suicide, the theme of contagion also appears in the subplot of her friends Joe (Richard Price) and Dylan (Dafhyd Flynn). The topic is presented in the beginning of the film when Joe throws himself off an overpass after his brother's death. Joe's passing has a great impact on Amy, who starts flirting with the idea of doing the same. Dylan did not know Joe, but his suicide affects him too.

Dylan is different from the other boys, not physically, but some characters call him weird for being too quiet. He is a victim of physical, psychological, and material bullying at school and his situation worsens throughout the film. In the beginning of the movie, Dylan is suspended from school for fighting, he is afraid of going back to classes because he is being bullied by two gangs. However, he refuses to seek help from his parents or from the school authorities. Seeing no way out from his condition, in the end of the movie Dylan goes to the same overpass where Joe killed himself and then there is an extreme close up of his face. This is the last scene, so the audience does not know if the boy actually jumps from the overpass as Joe did.

On the other hand, the main theme in *Michael Inside* is the representation of an introverted and naive eighteen-year-old who gets arrested twice, first for hiding drugs for a friend at his house, then for a vicious assault. The film pictures how incarcerated adults interact, and how they use an intimidation system to demonstrate power and to get what they want. By presenting violence and the systematic persecution among prisoners, it also shows how Michael's experience in jail changes his identity, and how it socially affects him after he leaves prison.

Dylan and Michael are targets of bullying and are socially excluded. Despite having a quiet appearance, the characters are enduring deep suffering and isolation so there are many scenes that focus on their expressions. Close-ups and extreme close-ups are often used because the characters do not talk much, especially about their emotional state. According to Nicholl (2001), the observing of facial expressions "is inviting us to get into the mind of the character and to identify with what he or she is thinking or feeling" (Nicholl, 2001, p.16). Dylan's and

Michael's suffering are expressed by the actor's internalized-performances and not by what they say. For instance, in *I used to live here*, Dylan is on the overpass, there is an extreme close-up of his face that lasts 80 seconds. While one can see he is grieving, the volume of the instrumental music gradually increases and becomes intense, then there is a dry cut. This is the last scene of the film.

Throughout the two movies, the actor's expressions vary from preoccupation and sadness to despair. The realism in the representation of Dylan's and Michael's isolation is also constructed in a similar way in both movies. Dylan and Michael are often shot through unique mid-shots, in which the characters are by themselves with a side lit to project shadows that suggest a bleak side of their inner state.

Another recurring type of shot in both films is the framing of characters by the back of their heads, when they walk alone roving the streets of Tallaght without a clear direction. These scenes illustrate the teenagers' lack of perspective on life and loneliness. According to Ged Murray (2015), in *I used to live here,* their unfriendliness is also "punctuated by a lot of shots of the backs of people's heads wandering aimlessly around Dublin's suburbs" (XX). The disaffected way these young people interact is remarkable in both movies: they get together on the streets, but there is little communication between them. Most of their dialogues are short and marked by silence about sharing marijuana and alcohol, or based on intimidation.

The great amount of back of the head angle shots and extreme close ups are techniques that, when applied on the same actor, in the same setting, brings that sense of watching the same film. Besides that, the score of both films are very alike – an instrumental tense and melancholic music that is sparse but very significant for being associated with moments of emotional charge. Created by musician and composer Daragh O'Toole especially for the two films, the score evokes the psychological state of the characters as it adds a dark tone to the movies. But in both, despite the predominance of silence, diegetic sounds (which try to convince the audience of the reality of the scene) are quite audible.

The soundtracks emphasize daily noises, especially the sound of the traffic on the road below the overpass where a youngster committed suicide in the first movie. There, the traffic noise is intense because it is an important location. Not by chance, the image of the overpass appears in *Michael Inside* a few days before Michael is arrested for the first time. Michael walks through it and stops to see the cars passing by on the road with his fingers intertwined in the guardrails. This scene echoes a recurring one in *I used to live here*, when Amy is shot from a

back angle staring at the traffic below in the beginning and in the end of the film. The camera changes focus from Amy's hand in the protection gate to the cars on the road (see screenshots 1 and 2); the same technique is applied in *Michael Inside* (see screenshots 3 and 4):



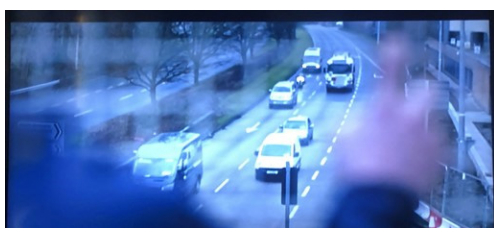Image 1: Back of Amy's head.



Image 2: Amy's hand.



Image 3: Michael's view from the overpass.



Image 4: Michael's hand.

This sequence of images of Michael on the overpass, through the changing of background and foreground focuses, becomes an important symbol in *Michael Inside*.

Nicholl (2001) states that if we interpret images and their implications as signs, as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, we will notice that a sign has a given meaning which is influenced by the culture that created it. Signs carry meanings within social and cultural contexts, thus images as signs can be read in a denotative or in a connotative level. In a denotative level, not much can be said about a given image or photography of a film, as one will describe what is there to see. However, the connotative level brings "a personal response which depends on our personal background and so is open to other possible interpretations or criticism" (Nicholl 12). It can be stated that visual signs are symbols that allow different subjective readings of a film.

The overpass is an image that carries meaning in a connotative level, but the meaning of being there can only be perceived for those who have seen *I Used to Live Here*. When Michael stops there and looks at the view, he knows there is a high chance he will be arrested and his life will change dramatically. Of course, it is impossible to know if the character is considering jumping, but the possibility to end suffering that way is a path that some teenagers have taken. According to Dr. Bates [2] (2015), when a young person commits suicide in a community, it sets an example of an exit for their suffering, and that is how contagion spreads. He explains how everyone in a community is interconnected and interdependent, even if they feel alone or "living in a parallel world". The audience who knows *I Used to Live Here* also knows that the idea of taking his own life on that spot is a possibility for Michael. Nevertheless, after being shot standing there by other camera angles, the protagonist walks through it and faces his trial.

It was observed that the usage of the overpass as a symbol enhances meaning and stimulates the audience's imagination. In realistic films, what the director chooses to picture, and how it is shown, reflects socio-cultural and political backgrounds. As in a photograph that captures a certain angle of an image, realistic cinema, as defined by Sigfried Kracauer (1960 apud Andrew, 2002), shows different angles of how relations of space and identity are articulated. In *I used to live here* and *Michael Inside*, the filmmaker sought maximum authenticity to illustrate the circumstances in which young people are inserted to represent them psychologically. Berry brings a realistic register of how some socially excluded and marginalized identities are related to that place.

As Berry said in an interview[3] (2015) that his inspiration comes from relevant themes that need transformation, and the idea was to put on-screen real-life experiences. To achieve that, in *I used to live here,* he spent two years in the community center of Killinarden having conversations with teenagers and adults and also with Dr. Bates. The film was part of a community project and it was starred by an amateur cast from Killinarden community theatre group. The script was written by Berry along these teenagers and some of Dr. Bates' patients. According to Berry, the movie is not based on any real story, but an extra on the DVD says that suicide clusters really happened in Tallaght and there was a need to talk about that and break the taboo. When the director was in contact with the teenagers in this community, he noticed that many of them had no life prospects, they were surrounded by criminality and very disengaged with prosperity. Many of these teenagers end up in prison, just as Michael, because they are naive and can easily get involved in doing small favors to large chains of criminals.

In *Michael Inside*, to take an authentic look at Michael's experience, the director researched with former prisoners from *Path Ways*, a Programme in Ireland for continuing the education of people who get out of jails. All the cast playing the prisoners were former prisoners from this Programme. Berry spent time with them to write the script and with this partnership, he was able to draw real situations that occur inside the prison as bullying or holding something for someone in a higher status so this person will not get caught in a search. According to the director, to work with former convicts to write the script, and as a cast, brought a great sense of reality to the film.

In *I used to live here* and *Michael Inside,* Berry's interest in portraying socially excluded and vulnerable individuals connects to style – filming in low-fi digital format (Tracy 318). Both narratives are constructed through sequences of segmented actions linked through dry cuts. The movies' aesthetic tends towards minimalism and the films share features such as long and uncomfortable moments of silence, especially when young people are gathered.

The sharing of identical cinematic techniques mentioned as camera angles, shot types, music, side lit, and other elements, brings the sense that we are watching a sequel of the same movie. Moreover, Dylan and Michael live in the same neighborhood, share similar problems and have the same face; consequently, they seem to be the same person. The matter of originality and appropriation was brought to the director in interviews and he was asked: why to expand the story of a boy like Dylan instead of creating an original one?

Berry argues that he chose the actor Dafhyd Flynn to star as Michael because it would be easier for the audience to connect with Michael once they have known Dylan. They are very introverted and have many things in common so Michael could easily be Dylan a bit older. Hence, in spite of not being a proper sequel, it could have been. Berry also revealed that the idea to make *Michael Inside* came in the middle of shooting *I used to live here* and it borrows a lot from it. He wanted to represent what happens to boys like Dylan when they get older, picturing the collateral effects of criminality upon the young people, on the vulnerable, to use his words, on "the pressionable".

On a deeper level, it can be stated that *Michael Inside* is not about drug trafficking itself, nor about prison, but how his experiences in jail affects his life and personality, leading him to his second arrestment. In the interview mentioned, Berry also commented on the pun in the title: Michael inside the prison, and how he feels inside. Michael has to learn how to use intimidation to survive; how to use violence to avoid being beaten up and abused. On the

other hand, it can be affirmed that *I used to live here* is not a film about suicide itself, but rather about isolation among young people and the suffering on the living. In *I used to live here*, Berry focuses on those teenagers' subjectivities, representing the feeling of isolation they share, which is real not just in Ireland but in other cultures as well.

Despite all similarities in plot and on representation, both films have other less obvious coincidences in theme that can be explored such as the absence of religious and family ties. Both protagonists do not have their mothers, and church or God is never mentioned throughout the stories. The absence of the mother figure and the Catholic church, traditionally portrayed as the foundation of Irish society, shows the director's intention to present the lack of structure of a post-modern country. It is interesting to notice that there is not a single sign of religiosity in the scenery, not even a cross on a wall.

Frank Berry is well-known for portraying local issues and the idea of listening to his community to make movies is a mark of Berry's work. He became famous in Ireland in 2011, when he wrote and directed the documentary *Ballymun Lullaby*, which was acclaimed by critics for his capacity of bringing a different perspective of the district. Instead of picturing Ballymun's drug trafficking problems – violence and poverty – the director decided to portray the willingness of the people who fight to bring a sense of community to the place. In this documentary, he showed the efforts of a local music teacher to set up a Music Programme and create the choir of the children of Ballymun.

In his last film, *Aisha* (2022), Berry exposes the experiences of a young Nigerian woman who seeks protection in Ireland. The movie presents the refugee crisis, and the endless suffering and liminality of those seeking asylum in the country. Aisha has been trapped for years in Ireland's immigration system, where she is moved from place to place and has to attend hearings in which she must repeat her terrible story to unsympathetic workers. She develops a close friendship with a former prisoner whom she meets at one of the inhumane accommodation centres of Direct Provision.

As we can see, the director's authored-movies entangle multiple realities of marginalized identities, revealing a commitment to give a cinematic voice to lower-income communities. His work portrays local issues of a globalized Dublin, picturing excluded individuals in Irish society and their experience of loneliness, social exclusion, and alienation. Lance Pettitt (2010) argues that films that give voice to local issues, through worldwide paradigms, have been increasing lately in Ireland. As Frank Berry, many contemporary Irish filmmakers, as Leonard

Abrahamsom and Gerard Barrett, have been illustrating how the country has changed in the last two decades.

It is well-known that in Irish cinema if we consider that the artistic representation of individuals who experience exclusion and marginalization has been a topic in Irish literature since the colonial period. Themes associated with social exclusion, suicide, and prison are not groundbreaking, but they carry a temporal perspective and have become current subjects as realistic films explore more universal topics. The sociological concepts of exclusion and marginality are broad and they oscillate not only in place, culture, society, and nationality, but also in time (Argaiz, 2016). Irish contemporary realistic cinema shows a different perspective of the excluded as filmmakers represent topics related to globalization, crisis of identity, and how the changes brought by progress has led to more marginalization and social exclusion.

In *Michael Inside*, Berry offered an updated perspective on the prison subject as it is associated to drug trafficking. Irish prison drama movies were a common topic in the Republic and in Northern Ireland filmography in the 20th century. Traditionally, Ireland's national cinema represented much of the country's political history as the wars of independence, the IRA and the Troubles. Nonetheless, after the Peace Processes signed in the Good Friday Agreement the 1998 (Sheridan, 2013), and the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger in the mid-2000s, the nature of Irish filmic production started to change. By 2010, more than seventy percent of arrests in Ireland were related to drug abuse and traffic (Dyas and Keogh, 2018).

According to Ruth Barton (2002), with the country's transformations, realistic contemporary movies began to spotlight less on political collective matters and more on universal anxieties and subjectivities, reaching markets overseas. Frank Berry's community-oriented films have achieved global market and have attained worldwide acclaim and awards because it connects to universal matters. As *Michael Inside*, the prison movies *Cardboard Gangsters* (Mark O'Connor, 2017) and *Broken Law* (Paddy Slattery, 2020) deal with the Irish jail's new contexts of the twenty first century, and they also found international audiences.

It can be observed that Berry aspires to make movies in response to what is happening to Dublin's citizens now. Thus, he transposes reality by creating a new reality and the observation of this new reality stimulates the public to think, generating a more critical view of reality. Realistic cinema has the power to create deep reflections and "the fact that films are only representation does not prevent them from having real effects in the world" (Shohat;

Stam 178). Berry cuts out facts from his country that need to be understood in order to "free" them, using his ability in the seventh art as a potent instrument for creating awareness and introspection.

To sum up, Berry uses some cinematic elements of *I used to live here* in *Michael Inside* as a strategy to broaden meaning, making conscious use of allusions to enrich the story. This conscious self-referentiality, or appropriation, is a common feature of cinema, in which the filmmakers use their own work and existing discourses as a repository from which to draw. As a storytelling art, films borrow heavily from widespread literary traditions, customs, and social relations to build meaning, thus contributing to the formation of a country's cultural imaginary.

## Notes

[1] Dr. Tony Bates is founder of Headstrong, The National Centre for Youth Mental Health in Ireland. His article argues on the evidence of the spread of suicides and suicidal behavior among young people after the suicide of a friend, family member or person of the same community. According to Dr. Bates, this phenomenon is called contagion and might occur mostly between teenagers and young adults with social issues. It is available on: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/breaking-the-ripple-effects-of-suicide-1.590289>

[2] The DVD of *I used to live here* brings an extra of a conversation Dr. Tony Bates in which he clarifies some points of his article.

[3] This interview was found on *Dublin Called*, a YouTube channel which aims to interview different people, those who have done something unusual, who have a gift, or who just get by through life's adversities. Interviewer: Orla O'Driscoll.

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