

Guest Editor's Note

The Flannkfurt School: Brian O'Nolan & the Culture Industry

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Brian O'Nolan, whether he was writing as Flann O'Brien, Brother Barnabas, or Myles na gCopaleen, had a complicated view of popular culture. In *At Swim-Two-Birds* and its embryonic precursor 'Scenes in a Novel,' we see characters objecting to the lurid, sensationalist plots concocted by their author. One of the most memorable sequences in *At Swim-Two-Birds* not only satirises Zane Grey cowboys-and-Indians adventures, but also makes fun of the appeal of Westerns to Irish readers. In *Cruiskeen Lawn*, Myles routinely speaks down to The Plain People of Ireland and the Dublin intelligentsia alike, mocking both the conspicuous consumption of culture (made easier with Myles's famed book-handling service) and the effects of trashy literature on those less cultured than himself. At the same time, though, he expressed great admiration for the films of Walt Disney, Warner Brothers, and Fritz Lang, and his parodies of different popular genres show that he was a conscientious satirist, never making fun of anything without doing some homework on it.

In the 31 August 1959 *Cruiskeen Lawn* column titled 'A Word on Spookery,' Myles speaks of his enjoyment of an American comic book – specifically, an issue of Archie Comics' *The Fly*, wherein the titular hero ('a winged wonder-man into which a young fellow can change himself by rubbing a magic ring') has to do battle with a villain from Irish folklore, albeit one equipped with modern weaponry:

The fly is the hero but in this case he is up against a leprachaun [*sic*] named Tim O'Casey who, in a city far from the shores of ol' Erin, accuses one of two hard-faced men of stealing Finn MacCool's hoard of gold, of which Tim O'Casey was guardian. He invokes the aid of a platoon of enormous metal robot-men, one of whom seizes the alleged thief in his great hand, and it is The Fly's business to rescue him. He succeeds partly by impersonating Finn MacCool himself.¹

Myles's professed enjoyment of this comic may be ironic, given that he closes with the mock-academic observation that he 'cannot recall any sound literary reference to the leprachaun' and thus concludes that the shoemaking fairy 'may be a British invention.' Whatever O'Nolan's real opinion of popular culture, it is clear that popular culture has a sneaky regard for him: De Selby is referenced as an obscure genius in a great many science fiction texts (appropriately footnoted); The Parish from *The Third Policeman* appears in the appendix of Volume II of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill (as a place visited by the protagonists, along with Laputa and King Solomon's Mines); a copy of *The Third Policeman* appeared on an episode of the hit ABC television series *Lost*, being read by a character inhabiting an underground laboratory full of mysterious machines.²

Some recent scholarly work on O'Nolan has looked at his familiarity with popular literature, and more recently, critical attention has been paid to the contents of his personal library, giving us a possible insight into his own reading habits.³ The current critical emphasis on reading O'Nolan against the coordinates of 'new modernism' studies provides a context within which to situate the author within the sphere of mass culture, as an active participant and critic rather than simply as a consumer. Sascha Morrell, for instance, compares *At Swim-Two-Birds* with Frank Moorhouses's *The Electrical Experience* for their shared attention to drink manufacture as a means 'to explore whether human life itself might be considered a mass product like Guinness or Coca-Cola.'⁴ And in the previous issue of *The Parish Review*, Andrew V. McFeaters considers O'Nolan's sustained engagement with the ideology of Fordism across his novels, columns, and short fiction.⁵ Carol Taaffe invokes the spectre of mass production by noting that *At Swim-Two-Birds* 'often reads not only as a novel produced by committee, but as an experiment in assembly line fiction – albeit with all the pieces inserted in the wrong order'⁶; a pithy observation, given the committee-driven, assembly-line nature of the modern culture industry. Given these trends, the time seems ripe to throw Flann and the Frankfurt School together, and then mangle them for diversion and also for scientific truth.

The Frankfurt School derived its name from its original base of operations, the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt. Founded in 1923 by Carl Grünberg, the Institute counted thinkers such as Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, and Herbert Marcuse among its members, but overall, the Frankfurt School is most often associated with Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in particular. After the November Revolution gave way to the ineffectual and economically shaky Weimar Republic in 1919, these theorists and their contemporaries had come to realise that Marxist philosophy would have to be adapted to the new twentieth-century context of

Fordism and increasing mechanisation. The most pronounced aspects of this adaptation were a pessimistic outlook and a new distrust of the masses, both of which were further emphasised as the School fled to Geneva, and then to New York, following the ascension of the Nazi Party in 1933. These new tendencies gave birth to a peculiar variety of Marxist critique that set its face against popular culture, scientific positivism, and the possibility of a better future.

The world described by the Frankfurt School is grim. Scientific positivism has devolved into 'instrumental reason,' divorced from its original purpose (the pursuit of truth) by market forces, and now limited to the identification of the most cost-effective means to achieve financial goals, regardless of ethical considerations. The global economy, meanwhile, is increasingly dominated by smaller and smaller numbers of corporate actors; these firms trumpet the virtues of entrepreneurship and competition, while in fact seeking to monopolise their respective markets. Against this backdrop, totalitarian governments have emerged across the world, coming to power with simplistic 'magic bullet' explanations for the vicissitudes of human history, and seeking control over every aspect of civic and private life. Using 'reason' as a tool to consolidate power, corporate concerns will by necessity fuse with the apparatus of these governments, replacing what is left of democracy with oligarchy.

Aiding and abetting all of this is the 'Culture Industry': mass-produced art churned out to serve the interests of totalitarian capitalism. Art-as-commodity is meant to be passively consumed, so that its status-quo-affirming tropes can be internalised as normal. The characters in culture-industry narratives are never introspective or contemplative, nor do they ever try to change their circumstances. Propaganda and advertising are sold as 'realism'; stereotypes and clichés are recycled over and over again until they become part of the cultural wallpaper – internalised, taken for granted, and barely even noticed. This mass-produced entertainment idolises the cheap and thus makes the average heroic.

On one level, of course, this all smacks of pretentious self-marginalisation; like the present-day hipster, the Frankfurt School appear to be a self-proclaimed *avant-garde* who secretly delight in being surrounded by 'cultural dupes' (or 'sheeple' in today's parlance) to whom they can feel superior. It certainly does not help that such attitudes have become louder, more ubiquitous, and more obnoxious with the rise of blogging and social media. In an unsigned post titled 'Why Are SO Many Millennials SO Uncool?' a contributor to the 'POWERevolution' blog helpfully defines 'cool' as 'those who don't conform, who don't always fit in nor do they try to, and who follow their own path,' while the 'uncool' are 'those who dress, act, and have the same tastes as the masses and are vulnerable to corporate influences.'⁷ It would be a mistake to

take serious issue with this stuff, but it does highlight a problematic aspect of the Frankfurt School's legacy: namely that at one extreme, their pronouncements on popular culture and the consumption thereof can come across as adolescent pomposity.

The other problematic aspect to the Frankfurt School's view of popular culture is that their pessimistic attitude denies the possibility of human agency. Central to their theorisation of the culture industry is the conceit that media consumers are passive, uncritical, and easily manipulated (whereas the cultural critic, on the other hand, is observant enough to anticipate and deflect such manipulation). In this respect, the Frankfurt School's pronouncements on the degrading influence of popular culture can be seen as giving intellectual succour to the kind of authoritarians who advocate moral guardianship through wholesale censorship. From comic books causing juvenile delinquency and homosexuality in 1950s America, to the 'video nasties' of Thatcher-era Britain, the moral panic over supposed 'subliminal messages' in heavy metal albums and, more recently, the hypothesised link between video games and school shootings, there is scarcely a single pop-culture artefact that has not been blamed for society's moral decline (in whatever form that decline is manifested). Adorno, a musicologist as well as a sociologist, had a particular abhorrence of jazz, which he described in 1953 as 'the mechanical reproduction of a regressive moment, a castration symbolism.'⁸ Despite the obvious ideological differences, there is an odd parallel between Adorno's opinion and those of the Gaelic League: declaring war on jazz in 1934, the League and their supporters linked the music to paganism, treason, and 'young ladies smoking in public.'⁹

The fact remains, however, that the Frankfurt School's observations cannot be dismissed out of hand. Since the end of communism, the Russian Federation's policy of privatisation has given rise to an oligarch class and a legislature that prioritises big business over civil liberties. In the aftermath of the 2008 Recession, multiple countries across the West bailed out their biggest banks and passed the cost of doing so onto the citizenry. Since coming to power in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government in Turkey has shed its pretence of 'conservative democracy' and has started openly persecuting its critics. Refugees fleeing persecution in the Middle East have to endure persecution in the West, and in the U.S.A. a presidential candidate has accrued massive support by being openly bigoted and substituting supposed business acumen for political nous. Meanwhile, the global media market continues to be dominated by American conglomerates, particularly 'the Big Six' – Comcast, The Walt Disney Company, 21st Century Fox, Time Warner, CBS Corporation and Viacom¹⁰ – and the U.S. media and entertainment industry is predicted to be worth \$723 billion by 2018,

up from \$598 billion in 2014.¹¹ The Internet, once a countercultural realm of unregulated data exchange, is now dominated by a handful of companies with near-monopolies on their respective sectors, such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook in the West, and JD.com, Tencent, and Alibaba in China. This is all the more poignant for Adorno's assertion that 'all humans deep down, whether they admit this or not, know that [utopia] would be possible or [the world] could be different [...] the social apparatus has hardened itself against people.'¹² Popular culture, Adorno argues, is blocking the way to a utopian society that is in fact materially possible. And while Myles himself could never be charged with Utopianism, these were issues he dealt with daily in his columns and fiction.

At this juncture it is my proud duty as guest editor of *The Parish Review* to introduce the contributions to this special issue on 'Flann and the Culture Industry' that deal with O'Nolan's engagements with Mass Culture and its consumption in the complex linguistic and ideological environment of post-independence Ireland. Tobias Harris outlines some fascinating comparisons between Myles na gCopaleen and the German author Karl Klaus (one of the main influences on Adorno and Horkheimer), and particularly between Klaus's criticisms of the poet and essayist Heinrich Heine and Myles's attacks on the playwright J. M. Synge. Susanne Hillman gives us an insightful reading of absurdity in *The Third Policeman*, looking at apparent meaninglessness as a means to disrupt the reading habits cultivated by soothing, easily-digested culture industry texts; 'wrong' laughter becomes 'right' laughter as the primacy of 'entertainment' over art is refuted. Joseph LaBine then examines the short story '*Díoghaltais ar Ghallaibh 'sa Bhliain 2032!*' in the context of language revival in early twentieth-century Ireland, and looks at how the story reflects on the interpenetration of linguistics and ideology in the nation-building project. Finally, Flann scholar and Society stalwart Thomas Jackson Rice scrutinises the short story 'Two in One' through the lens of 'cultural cannibalism,' teasing out the underlying themes of linguistic and cross-cultural ambivalence. Alongside these essays, we have Alana Gillespie's review of a new Flann O'Brien monograph by Flore Coulouma and a report from the 2015 International Flann O'Brien Society conference in Prague by Tamara Radak. Two notes on the ongoing #Flann50 celebrations this year capture the festive mood in the Flann community, with Eimear Ní Dhroighneáin and Daniel Curran reporting from a bilingual anniversary symposium in Maynooth University and Catherine Ahearn from the boisterous Myles Day celebrations in the Palace Bar. Looking to the future, the issue also includes two Calls for Papers: one for a special issue of *The Parish Review* to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of *An Béal Bocht* and one for the 2017 society conference in Salzburg.

Sadly, this issue of *The Parish Review* will conclude with tributes to two dearly departed friends: the translator, actor, and raconteur Harry Rowohlt and Irish Studies stalwart, scholar, and gentleman Werner Huber. These short obituaries will include a selection of images celebrating their lives and work and involvement with the International Flann O'Brien Society.

Notes & references

¹ Myles na Gopaleen, 'A Word on Spookery,' *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 31 August 1959, 6.

² *Lost*, Season 2, Episode 1, 'Man of Science, Man of Faith' (21 September 2005).

³ See issue 3, no. 1 of *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies*, 'Reading Brian O'Nolan's Libraries,' ed. Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley.

⁴ Sascha Morrell, 'Soft Drink, Hard Drink and Literary (Re)production in Flann O'Brien and Frank Moorehouse,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 175.

⁵ Andrew V. McFeaters, 'Reassembling Ford: Time is Money in Brian O'Nolan's Brave New Ireland,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 42–55.

⁶ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 35.

⁷ 'Why Are SO Many Millennials SO Uncool?,' 19 November 2015. <http://powerevolution.tumblr.com/post/133543612986/why-are-so-many-millennials-so-uncool>.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Perennial Fashion: Jazz,' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Webster and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 129–130.

⁹ 'Anti-Jazz Campaign Opened,' *Irish Press*, 2 January 1934, 7.

¹⁰ See Vanna Le, 'The World's Largest Media Companies of 2015,' 22 May 2015, www.forbes.com/sites/vannale/2015/05/22/the-worlds-largest-media-companies-of2015/#41089282b64e.

¹¹ Source: U.S. Department of Commerce/International Trade Administration, *2015 Top Markets Report, Media and Entertainment: A Market Assessment Tool for U.S. Exporters* (July 2015). [http://trade.gov/topmarkets/pdf/Media and Entertainment Top Markets Report.pdf](http://trade.gov/topmarkets/pdf/Media%20and%20Entertainment%20Top%20Markets%20Report.pdf).

¹² Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch, 'Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing,' in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 4.