

In the full glare of the medium

THE CENTRE'S LIGHTS ARE BRIGHT, THE SURFACES

The centre's lights are bright, the surfaces polished, the sun shines in, and all is order. Red. Yellow. Blues. Green. The colours in the exercise, waiting, leisure, and changing areas are loud, primary, and categorical. Otherwise, around the reception area the tone is muted. Gray. Glass. Whites. Wood. The walls, floors, fittings, and finishes are universally smooth throughout and evidently moisture resistant. People are generally in good form.

The film begins in a silence. A supportive male colleague expresses an interest in the recent experiences of Rob. Momentarily, Rob leaves the changing area where they talk. A departing remark prompts Rob to respond involuntarily. Even though he can no longer see or be seen by the locker-room philosopher, his head turns back with half a look, acknowledging the disembodied truisms that now send him on his way. From our point of view, as Rob goes forward, so we move backward. The camera faces squarely away from the direction we are all moving in. As we watch Rob, centred in the frame, it becomes noticeable that the camera lens is having an extreme effect on the surrounding architecture. Before our eyes, the edges of the walls, the corridors, appear to bend, curving in Rob's wake. He will follow these magnetic passageways to differently oriented activity rooms within the leisure centre, stopping here and there to exchange congratulations and condolences with co-workers.

We're in Rob's face most of the time, except during some short spells of intimacy. At these times, the camera hangs around entrances and exits, only remotely interested. Nonetheless, as Rob's amiable social banter fuels his journeying, there is time to survey

the scene, look around the screen, make our own deviations within the shot, and look for a bit of action ourselves.

When Rob falters or stops, a call stage right, or a shepherding manoeuvre from the camera, gets him going again. Only at one point the good humour that Rob's presence seems to generate sours, when a mock rebuke from him immobilises a well-wisher. But the horror just as quickly melts away in a volley of smiling reassurances. Joking. Same old Robbie/Same old Robbie.

For music of no consequence, the abruptly audible Musak - did it start when we passed through that doorway? - now seems to play a little too loudly, indifferent to a flash of upset, which at some distance is a little hard to see. Apparently, the news of Layla's arrival doesn't work its magic on everyone. Phone call. Change of direction. Rob walks through ranks of running and walking machines. In the background, the colleague of Rob's, who earlier failed to recognise that he was a changed man, is using one of the machines. She seems to move in slow motion, as if in her personal space she has her own time. Although in the room, she appears to be running at fewer frames per second slower than are Rob and another employee, a real trooper, who is running the treadmills through their paces, in the foreground of the shot. With several machines under her belt, and more ahead of her, she reckons she's covered a fair distance. She uses the unofficial unit of measurement 'to Tipperary and back' to factor her calculations. And still, the endless piped music. Is it "Unforgettable"?

Like a song of love that clings to me  
How the thought of you does things to me  
Goodbye Piccadilly  
Farewell Leicester Square  
It's a long, long way to Tipperary  
But my heart's right there

Writing to Molly in the song, "It's a long way to Tipperary", Paddy asks her to let him know if the letter he's writing should fail to arrive. The joke is, of course, that Molly will not read this instruction if the letter never arrives. The ridiculous collapse of sense and tense, the narrative impossibility of it all, is patently obvious and obviously ridiculous. The quaint racism in all its lingual stereotyping is similar to the sentimental 'letter from an Irish Mother to her Son' tea-towel-cum-key-ring verse, which is now rare. In addition to the song's use historically, to enhance the marching environment of the foot soldier, it is also a story of being in london and thinking of home. This emigrant narrative is surely the one that most plucked the heartstrings of Count John McCormack's public and those of other early popularisers of the tune It's often a long way home when you've been away. In as much as the emigrant story involves re-invention, seeing the future where you are and not just where you are going to, you first need to recognise when you've arrived. People in this film are taking you there.

The dreams we hear about at the end of the film are about time and transformation, here, not somewhere else. In the future fiction that Amy puts before Rob, she describes, a picture that puts the three of them, Amy, Rob, and Layla, at the centre of everything, as agents of change, where they are the driving force behind how their story goes. Amy conjures their story in words overtone with

great intimacy, her voice now more outside of the film than in it.

Throughout the film, the audience is frequently reminded that they are indeed watching a film. Film fans will find the look and feel of some the images resonate with those of other films, a film about films. Either way, the seven Civic Life films, of which Leisure Centre is one, all deliberately put their production methods to the fore. It's almost a century since actions were taken to formally counter a (phony) realism believed to be destroying the critical faculties of the performer and-more importantly-the audience. Coining the term 'alienation effect', Bertolt Brecht sought to de-nature conventional theatre and critique its ideology. The exposure of staging devices otherwise concealed from the audience was as valuable and important as devising the story and mapping out the plot in bluntly transparent ways. This approach carries over into film. In addition to the critique of theatrical realism, the non-realist film image has exploited the materiality of film and the availability of film techniques create disorientation and surprise. Comedic and illusionistic techniques -sudden appearances, disappearances, superimposition, jump-cuts, fades-have their place in a history of filmmaking concerned with countering audience passivity.

Leisure Centre flaunts a range of alienating effects. This doesn't diminish the pleasure. It is explicitly about heightening the sensitivity of the audience to the sensory and intellectual complexities of representation. The camera gorges on expensive film to afford us the time to look at ordinary things and be hypnotised. The motion of the steady cam operator's hips is conspicuous

when the camera loiters. Softened by the mechanism of an elaborate body-harness, those hips, that mechanism, the long shot, they conspire to lull. So, at intervals, it falls to the soundtrack to create disquiet. In passing through doorways, the visual transition is often exaggerated by an aural one. Under fluorescent lights there is a moment of cold comfort. The scene is suffused by bright light, there is a buzzing, an electrical hum. This is a sound that has garnered its own significance as a filmic device. It is notably explicitly associated with the technology of fluorescent tube lighting, which has a propensity for these lights to fail to attain full illumination, flicker, buzz, and pop. Sound is used as a scenic component. The synchronous sound is deployed to afford the speech between the characters a naturalistic flow, but it is inflected with some a-synchronicity in the dubbing. Other than that, there is no real need or value added by the synchronisation of the sound. Here and there, foley sounds are added to anchor the audio to the visual where incidental activities are highlighted to attract attention and direct the audience to linger on details that are not essential in plotting the film. The last voice you will hear will not be lip-synched.

Twice in the film, the lighting is dimmed. This happens in the film's concluding scenario. Beforehand, Rob has paused in a corridor on his way to the Family Room before meeting with his girlfriend Amy, to change, and collect their new born baby Layla. He briefly closes his eyes a few times and takes a deep breath. As he turns a corner, his eyes are downcast. The film continues for about another ten minutes. Fundamental to the principle of shooting on 35mm has been the ability to show the Civic Life films in commercial

cinemas. In February 2006, five months after filming in Ballymun, the participants in the film see themselves and one another in Leisure Centre for the first time in a cinema complex on Dublin's Parnell Street. The same week, in the same complex, the multiple Oscar nominated Capote, is released.

The biopic about the American author Truman capote has ensured that bookshops have sold out of Capote's books, and prior to its release on DVD, that market has been secured by the film's Oscar nominations. So it is that the spectacular application of 35mm film technology in Leisure Centre means ordinary people get to occupy the same premium screen space as the biggest grossing, most famous, movie stars. It's unknowable if in the future theatrical showings or DVD viewing will accrue the greater numbers. Serendipity has dealt a different hand to each of the Civic Life films. It is nevertheless fair to forecast that Leisure Centre's DVD life will, on the one hand, extend its audience and, on the other, accept the variables vis-a-vis the conditions in which it will be watched.

If you are watching this DVD at home, don't bother closing the curtains if the sun is up. Don't worry about the lights reflecting on the TV screen. When the screen darkens, the domestic experience of watching the film brings its own rewards and opportunities.

In Truman Capote's Music for Chameleons, the writer writes about one afternoon when he has turned his attention to the decorative objects placed about a room in which he sits while conducting an interview. He sees a black mirror. He decides he will describe it as he feels an avant-garde French novelist would, by discarding narrative, character,

and structure, in preference for page-length paragraphs that detail the contours of a single object and the mechanics of an isolated movement. By the end of the story, it's unclear whether he ever looked away from the dark glass once he set eyes on it. And it remains a possibility that the rest of his account of the interview is related as he has experienced and recalled it through the mirror, lying open on a table, just as though it were a deluxe edition, meant to be picked up and browsed through; but there is nothing there to be read or seen - except the mystery of one's own image projected by the black mirror's surface before it recedes into its endless depths, its corridors and darkness.

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