

## **REVIEW: DEBATABLE FICTIONS: SCOTTISH CINEMA, TELEVISION AND THE NOVEL**

*Mario Relich*

Duncan Petrie, **Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 223 pp, pb, £15.99, ISBN 0 7486 1789 2.

Mark Cousins, **The Story of Film**, London: Pavilion, 2004, 512 pp, hb, £25.00, ISBN 1862055742.

Duncan Petrie's **Contemporary Scottish Fictions** largely succeeds in examining the novel, film and television drama in Scotland since 1980. He considers these three pervasive forms of art and entertainment as very much inter-related, and linked in significant ways to social and political developments in the context of devolution. Displaying in his approach something of George Davies's 'democratic intellect' at its best, Petrie describes his principal aim as follows: 'This book will explore the Scottish cultural renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s by focussing primarily on the novel, cinema and television drama', adding that '(t)hese are all narrative-based popular forms that provide the means by which the myths and realities, experiences and dreams of Scotland and its inhabitants have been reflected and asserted, imagined and re-imagined through a process of cultural transmission dating back to the bardic tradition of oral story-telling' (p.1).

Petrie's previous book **Screening Scotland** (2000) had a lot to say about **Braveheart**, but here he chooses to say little about it, considering **Rob Roy** instead in more detail as much the finer film. For a start, the script is by Alan Sharp, a Hollywood veteran whose writing career took off with his Glasgow novel **A Green Tree in Gedde**. As a screenwriter, perhaps his finest script was

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that for Robert Aldrich's western with strong Viet Nam War undercurrents, and Burt Lancaster in the lead, **Ulzana's Raid**. In his portrayal of the Highland rebel, Sharp borrows little from Walter Scott but, as Petrie points out, 'owes a great deal to the Western genre in its formal construction and thematic preoccupations' (p.200). Petrie goes on to show how it resembles a 'revenge western' in various ways, yet at the same time illustrating the complexities of the struggle between Hanoverians and Jacobites, thereby not only doing justice to Scottish history, but also countering oversimplifications of it. Indeed, as he shows, the film tended to be misunderstood by critics, who assumed that the foppish but cruel and ruthless swordsman Archibald Cunningham, played by Tim Roth, was an Englishman rather than 'the pro-Hanoverian Scotsman he clearly is'. Petrie must have had fun revealing that '... while Archibald Cunningham is presented as an Englishman, his Scottish name and the final hint that he may actually be Montrose's bastard son ultimately bring him rather more close to the fold' (p.201). Curiously, he has nothing to say about Liam Neeson's performance (styles of acting are less on his radar than other aspects of film) but his argument does confirm the gut-feeling that Neeson as the rebel chieftain is overshadowed by Roth's edgy and energetic villain. He also points out that 'the political insights and ambiguities in Sharp's script are in tension with Michael Caton-Jones's direction, which mounts the film as a tale of romantic individualism' (p.201). His conclusion about **Rob Roy**, in any case, shows that Sharp's script is rather more intelligent than the 'western genre' elements of the film might indicate, in that it is about 'central tensions and conflict' in Scotland after the Act of Union that go beyond 'simplistic and reductive Scotland/England terms' (p.201).

Not surprisingly, Petrie highlights Bill Forsyth as one of the most important Scottish filmmakers. But Forsyth's comedy **Comfort and Joy**, partly based on the Glasgow 'ice-cream wars', is analysed from an unexpected angle in terms of Hollywood genre: '... the slightly sub-**noir** elements of **Comfort and Joy** are a reminder of the potent influence of American culture on the Scottish imagination' (p.55). It is a welcome change from the usual (un)critical association of Forsyth's filmmaking with that of the Ealing comedies.

Where Petrie really breaks new ground, is in his discussion of single television dramas and drama series with a strong Scottish component. One can only agree when he points out about 'the field of Scottish television drama', that '(o)f the three distinct media examined in this book this remains by far the most critically neglected with little more than a handful of broadsheet review articles and the odd essay on individual series such as **Tutti Frutti** or **Taggart**.'

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(p.208) His most interesting pages, in fact, are on these two very different series, both set in Glasgow. **Tutti Frutti** is undoubtedly John Byrne's television masterpiece, and very much the work of a writer with a distinctive vision, while **Taggart** is more genre-driven, and achieved distinction because of the craggy, sharp-tongued Mark McManus in the lead.

As Petrie puts it, **Taggart** at first was 'suspiciously similar' to William McIlvanney's crime novel **Laidlaw**, itself extensively discussed by him, together with Ian Rankin's 'Rebus' novels, but Glenn Chandler's scripts, starting with the three-part pilot **Killer** in 1983, soon made the series so distinctively televisual that it became an international hit. It is still going strong, even without MacManus who died tragically in 1994. **Killer** effectively dramatised the class and psychological tensions in Taggart's character, which explode in a ferocious, hate-filled attack on a trapped serial killer, otherwise a businessman whose wife Taggart fancies. Petrie is most acute in his analysis: 'This loss of control reveals the degree of repression inherent in Taggart's psyche, a consequence of his own deep insecurities relating to both sexuality and class and the final image of the sodden and shivering detective stranded in the River Kelvin conveys his desperation and bewilderment in a powerful and tantalising manner' (p.145). John Byrne's **Tutti Frutti** dealt with more 'ordinary' denizens of Glasgow, even if they were members of a rock-band, but in their way equally repressed and insecure. For Petrie, 'the thematic heart of **Tutti Frutti** is Byrne's engagement with the gendering of Scottish culture' (p.57), and he declares that it buries the myth of the 'hard man' once and for all. So, although Petrie does not explicitly make this contrast, instead of the shivering, stranded 'hard man' epitomised by Taggart, Byrne's drama ends with one of the male characters coming to the rescue of a woman friend abused by her husband, characterised by his 'anglicised tones and sadism', and offering to be a true father to her child. His decision, according to Petrie, 'suggests a fundamentally new image of Scottish masculinity, based on reciprocation, mutual support and sustenance, and the ability to confront the demons of insecurity and loss' (p.59).

While Petrie's book is most valuable on Scottish film and television drama, his analysis of novels and novelists defers too much to current academic orthodoxies and distortions in Scotland about the contemporary Scottish novel. He does, however, deal most interestingly with the 'canonical' writers of contemporary Scottish fiction, such as Alasdair Gray, Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy, and Irvine Welsh. For instance, here is a sharp comment on characterisation in **Trainspotting**: 'Welsh uses Begbie as a graphic

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manifestation of the Scottish male's myopic capacity for self-destruction, and self-hatred' (p.93). But, in the case of **A Disaffection**, he seems to miss James Kelman's grounding of his novel in the existentialist philosophies of Heidegger and Sartre, so that there is much more to it than the novelist annihilating 'any residual faith in the egalitarian Scottish myth of social mobility' (p.45). Also, to call two of the thinkers, namely Hegel and Hölderlin, whom the alienated teacher Patrick Doyle fantasises about, 'liberal intellectuals' is completely inadequate and misleading, since one was a supremely important philosopher and the other, despite his mental breakdown hinting at Doyle's, one of the greatest German poets. He also omits any discussion of Alan Massie, surely a major novelist by any standards. Perhaps Massie's best novel, **A Question of Loyalties**, in its epic exploration of the Vichy mentality in wartime France, might seem to Petrie, and other orthodox academics, to be remote from current Scottish concerns, but is it really? One might as well consider Walter Scott's novel of the Crusades, **The Talisman**, as just pure escapism. The betrayals, compromises and dilemmas of political and moral choices which lie at the heart of Massie's novel can never be devoid of present-day consequence.

Lavishly illustrated, Mark Cousins's **The Story of Film** is aimed more at the general public than Petrie's, but this does not prevent it from being a serious work of film history and criticism, and not just 'coffee-table'. Only one Scottish filmmaker, Bill Forsyth, however, is given any detailed treatment. This seems rather niggardly, although at least Forsyth is paid a compliment, which chimes in with Petrie's view of him as well, for capturing 'aspects of life ignored by the ideologies of the time' (p.411). He is also perceptive on how **Gregory's Girl** relates to the early films of Milos Forman. Even so, his view of what makes Forsyth's work distinctively Scottish is rather hackneyed: 'Not since the films of Powell and Pressburger ... and **Whisky Galore** (UK, 1948) had the eccentricities and mysticism of Scotland been so beautifully married' (p.411). As the Americans like to say, 'oh please!' After this kind of comment, any flaws in Petrie's more scrupulously argued book can be readily forgiven.

*February 2006*