



Queer Mobility, Irish Masculinity, and the Reconfigured Road Movie in *I Went Down*

Beginning in the 1990s, there emerged a number of queer Irish films that used postmodern tropes of movement and mobility to interrogate shifting forms of identification and belonging in contemporary Ireland. Films such as *The Disappearance of Finbar* (Clayton 1996), *2by4* (Smallhorne 1997), *I Went Down* (Breathnach 1997), *Borstal Boy* (Sheridan 2000), and *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan 2005) are structured by journey narratives that trace the queer male subject's movement as he negotiates his sexuality in relation to shifting social and spatial structures. These films frame the queer male subject's journey within a coming-out narrative, implying the liberatory potential of mobility with regards to the development and disclosure of sexual identity. At the same time, they signal a distinctly male crisis of identity linked to the mobile subject's physical and psychic disassociation from stable referents of identity associated with placehood. This essay focuses on *I Went Down* to examine how the film's adaptation of the road movie links individual mobility with sexual liberation while provoking a crisis of identity through the queer male subject's displacement from dominant Irish society. Specifically, I propose the concept of queer mobility as a disruptive position of alterity that challenges hegemonic structures and social norms, and reveals identity as fundamentally unstable.

This essay uses "queer" as an analytical tool for considering identity as a process of becoming rather than a static state of being. While queer is often used as an umbrella term for diverse sexual practices and identities that do not fit into institutional and socially sanctioned categories, I extend its usage beyond individual sexuality to examine the sexual politics of space. This approach is informed by a

poststructuralist understanding of space as multiple, fluid, and contested, both producing and produced by social identities and relations. As Henri Lefebvre argues, "the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing that space itself" (129). This notion of a mutual relationship between space and identity allows for an interrogation of how particular place-making practices and spatial politics inform social relations and shape sexual identities. In particular, queer renderings of space have focused on the sexualisation of space and the spatiality of sexual desire. Queer theorists such as Jon Binnie, Gill Valentine, and Jean-Ulrick Désert challenge the normalization of space as heterosexual in order to undermine heteronormative structures of power and privilege which marginalize and exclude non-heterosexual identities, behaviours, and desires. Specifically, Désert develops his concept of "queer space" to theorize how queer bodies can disrupt normalized conceptions of space by revealing it as contested and contradictory. Rather than viewing certain spaces as straight and others as queer, Désert suggests that all space has the potential to double as queer space, and that space remains latent until activated by a queer presence: "where queerness, at a few brief points and for some fleeting moments, dominates the (heterocentric) norm, the dominant social narrative of the landscape" (21). Désert posits queer space as simultaneously public and private in order to blur the boundaries between inside/outside and centre/margin, and to hint at more hybrid spatial positions and complex identity formations.

Larry Knopp further theorizes the disruptive potential of queer bodies to complicate the stable relationship between identity and place. He argues that queer relations to space are “all about the flows of movement and passings” rather than belonging to a fixed and static site (23). He suggests that queer subjects may privilege perpetual mobility and placelessness rather than placehood and sedentarism precisely because “social and sexual encounters with other queers can feel safer in such contexts—on the move, passing through, inhabiting a space for a short amount of time” (23). By revealing space to be inherently unstable and contested, and by producing alternative and non-normative social and spatial relations, queer bodies thus offer the potential to undermine those binary systems and structures of privilege through which hegemonic discourses operate.

By revealing space to be inherently unstable and contested, and by producing alternative and non-normative social and spatial relations, queer bodies thus offer the potential to undermine those binary systems and structures of privilege through which hegemonic discourses operate.

I Went Down adapts the narrative structure and conventions of the road movie within an Irish context to examine how movement along the road liberates the queer Irish male subject from rigidly defined social identities and gendered roles. The film does not emerge as an explicitly queer text. Yet, by using queer mobility as an analytical framework, this essay seeks to productively re-read the film as queer to examine how mobility acts as a disruptive and catalytic force by subverting and transforming stable forms of identity and space. *I Went Down* follows Irish ex-cons Git (Peter McDonald) and Bunny (Brendan Gleeson) as they travel from Dublin to Cork and then back to Dublin on a mission to kidnap a man named Frank Grogan (Peter Caffrey) under the orders of Dublin mob boss Tom French (Tony Doyle). Both Git and Bunny are initially characterized within a hard-bodied hypermasculine ideal. Yet as the men move forward along their journey, this characterization is undermined by the characters’ increasing lack of agency and control over their mode of transportation and their surroundings.

The film’s subversion of the men’s masculinities reaches a climax point approximately halfway through the film in a scene where Bunny reveals to Git that he had a not



Figure 1: Git and Bunny drinking side by side in the roadside motel pub

entirely unwelcomed sexual encounter with a man while he was in prison. The scene begins with Git and Bunny stopping at a roadside motel for the night. They head to the motel pub for a pint, and the first shot of the two men inside the pub is of them framed side by side, smoking cigarettes and drinking their Guinness in unison (Figure 1). Bunny begins to tell Git his theory on women, differentiating between good looking and ugly women and theorizing how their looks influence their attitudes about life. Throughout Bunny’s speech, the men are framed together. Bunny’s theory prompts Git to ask him about his marriage. Bunny tells him that he has been married for twelve years, but also admits that his wife has changed the locks on the house they share and will not allow him inside. As Bunny tells Git that he was imprisoned for over six years for attempted armed robbery, the characters are framed individually, with cross-cuts between close-up shots of Bunny and Git. Bunny reveals that in jail, “there was a man I shared a cell with for two or three months. And what went down—it wasn’t full—I’m not a queer you know. Me wife doesn’t know.” He then tells Git that French knows about Bunny’s sexual indiscretion and is blackmailing Bunny by threatening to tell his wife about it unless Bunny keeps working for French.

In this confession, Bunny does not frame his sexual encounter as an attack or rape, leaving it unclear whether it was consensual. Instead, he appears more anxious about it becoming public knowledge. By leaving it ambiguous as to whether it was a welcome or unwelcome experience, and whether Bunny was a willing participant, the film undermines Bunny’s hypermasculine gangster persona and makes it difficult to view him as unambiguously heterosexual. At the same time, when Bunny reveals that his motivation for pursuing Grogan is to prevent his sexual dissidence from being publicly exposed, the film suggests that the men’s journey is Bunny’s attempt to re-inscribe himself back into the patriarchal status quo. Thus, even as Bunny’s journey is the catalyst for his queer confession, this same mobility is fuelled by a desire to re-assimilate into dominant patriar-

chal structures by conforming to the ideals of the Irish male hard-bodied gangster community.

This tension between deviance and conformity becomes further evident when two women walk into the pub immediately following Bunny's confession and the film works to re-stabilize the men (and the pub space) as heterosexual and homosocial. As Git turns to look at the women, the background music becomes louder and the film returns



Figure 2: Bunny listens outside Git's motel room door

to framing the two men together. The pub shifts from operating as a site for Bunny's queer confession to a space that facilitates the men's sexual pursuit of the two women as Bunny gets up from his seat to approach them. This doubling of the pub space as simultaneously queer and homosocial recalls Désert's concept of "queer space." The tension in this scene between Bunny's sexuality and his negotiation of the public and private divide within the pub (shifting from a secretive confession to a public pursuit of the women) undermines stable forms of identity and space.

Yet even as the film works to re-stabilize homosocial norms through the presence of the two women, it continues to develop queer undertones with regard to Bunny's character. Later that night, as Git and Bunny pee side by side at the urinals in the pub washroom, Bunny looks down at Git's penis with interest and comments on its size. After Git takes one of the women from the pub to his motel room and they begin to have sex, they are interrupted by the sound of Bunny listening voyeuristically outside the room door, with Git even momentarily breaking away from the woman to go and try to catch Bunny in the act (Figure 2). Although the film shifts away from any explicit engagement with Bunny's queer sexuality, this scene still suggests particular anxieties surrounding Bunny's masculinity; as Michael Patrick Gillespie points out, Bunny "suffers quite self-consciously from sexual ambivalence in an environment intolerant of that kind of ambiguity" (92).

The complicated relationship between the liberatory potential of queer mobility and the ongoing pressures of hegemonic patriarchal impulses is further evidenced in the film's adaptation of the road movie genre. While Irish

film scholars such as Luke Gibbons and D'óg O'Connell have characterized *I Went Down* as a road movie, they have not fully addressed how the film uses the iconography and conventions of the road movie to produce a queer form of masculinity. As a masculinist film genre with particular historical and cultural ties to 1960s American counterculture, the road movie has since evolved and been adapted within different national and cultural contexts. At the same time, Laura Rascaroli claims that at the genre's core is the use of "journey as cultural critique, as exploration both of society and of one's self," that is preserved amidst shifts in cinematic style, narrative structure, thematic concerns, and representational strategies (72). Even as *I Went Down* retains this generic core, its specifically Irish context sets it apart from the traditional American road movie. Replacing the boundless American highways and expansive landscapes with the by-ways of the Irish midlands, and emphasizing its protagonists' discomfort with technology and mechanized transport rather than the harmonious relationship between machine and man that is central to the traditional road movie, *I Went Down* not only evokes a strong sense of local particularity but uses these points of difference to suggest a crisis of masculinity.

The pub shifts from operating as a site for Bunny's queer confession to a space that facilitates the men's sexual pursuit of the two women ... This doubling of the pub space as simultaneously queer and homosocial recalls Désert's concept of "queer space."

Git and Bunny's initial movements along the road are motivated by French's orders. Whereas the traditional American road movie tends to frame the protagonist's journey as a form of escape or rebellion, as scholars such as Timothy Corrigan and David Laderman have suggested, *I Went Down* frames Git and Bunny's journey as an act of compliance, with their movements dictated by French's instructions. The conforming nature of their journey is further evidenced by its circularity. The men travel from Dublin to Cork and then back toward Dublin. They are not moving through space into the unknown but instead remain on a circular course that will return them to their origin, implying character regression rather than development. The film emphasizes the circularity of their journey in a scene shortly after they have kidnapped Grogan in Cork and begin heading back toward Dublin. Their car is stopped by a Gardaí who is helping to tow a broken car off



Figure 3: A circular journey—Git and Bunny head back to Dublin



Figure 4: On the road in *Easy Rider*

the road. After a short exchange with the officer, they pass through the police barricade unchallenged and a long shot shows the car driving away from the barricade and toward the camera. In the shot, the road forms a U-shape so that as the car moves toward the camera it follows the curve of the road and begins to head back in the same direction the characters came from. Not only does this shot reference the small size of Ireland, since Git and Bunny have been able to cross from one side of the country to the other in two days, but it stands in stark contrast to the more conventional landscape shots used in American road movies, such as *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), where the highway stretches out to disappear into the distant horizon (Figures 3 and 4). Such an explicit reformulation of the American road movie is not found in other queer Irish journey films, such as *The Disappearance of Finbar* and *Breakfast on Pluto*. This more direct reference to the road movie in *I Went Down* therefore signifies the film's self-reflexive play with film genre, acknowledging the influence of American culture on Irish cinema even as it attempts to shape a specifically Irish cultural product.

I Went Down further distinguishes itself from the traditional American road movie by refusing to evoke the same joys of mobility and exploring space. Rather than travelling along a highway that borders expansive landscapes, Git and Bunny travel along byways that border the bogland. There are very few long shots in the film that emphasize the characters moving across the landscape. Instead, their

movements along the road follow a start-and-stop pattern whereby a shot showing them driving away down the road is often followed by a shot of them stopping for some reason. For example, when Bunny steals a second car after having to ditch the first one, there is a shot of Git waiting by the side of the road in a small town and then Bunny pulling up to the curb. Git gets into the car and Bunny drives off down the road. The film then cuts to a bird's eye shot of an idyllic Irish landscape with lush green fields and a picturesque farmhouse in the distance, before tilting downward to reveal Bunny leaning over the front hood of the stationary car, which has broken down. Throughout the film, the characters' movements through space are halted by bouts of immobility and frustration. This tension between mobility and immobility is indicative of broader oppositions surrounding tradition and (post)modernity, and the local and global ambivalence that characterized Ireland in the 1990s. Even as Ireland's economic boom and entry into the global market signified its modernization and liberalism, ongoing social contradictions and inequalities surrounding immigration laws and abortion rights suggest the persistence of conservative ideologies. The film thus complicates the dominant Irish cultural narrative of national progress through the characters' inability to move smoothly forward.

Git and Bunny's stunted mobility is largely the result of their inharmonious relationship with their mode of transport, which acts as an impediment to their journey. Whereas Corrigan argues that the vehicle in the American road movie becomes "the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction" (146), this symbiotic relationship between self and technology is undermined in *I Went Down*. Git and Bunny initially set off to Cork in a stolen car, but their inability to open the car's petrol cap at the gas station alerts the attendant's suspicions. Bunny ditches the car as a precaution, forcing the men to walk through country fields to the next town. Bunny steals a second car, which becomes increasingly unreliable as the heater malfunctions, the radio refuses to work and the car finally breaks down

The men's antagonistic relationship to their vehicle and their environment undermines claims to conventionally masculine traits of agency and control, and their physical displacement from dominant Irish society suggests that hegemonic concepts of masculinity are becoming unhinged.



Figure 5: On the “straight” path—Git and Bunny drive off down the highway toward Dublin Airport

completely on the side of the road. After Git and Bunny abandon the second car and are forced to continue their journey on foot, the Irish landscape offers a further source of defeat. The rain begins to pour down and Git falls, gets stuck in the bog, and needs to be rescued by Bunny.

While the landscape impedes the men’s forward movement, Ruth Barton suggests that the film’s setting in the Irish midlands operates as a liminal space that offers the potential to redefine Irish masculinity outside traditional paradigms. Because the “Irish midlands represents one of Ireland’s least colonized regions, subject neither to the Romantic gaze of tourism nor the physical hallmarks of colonial architecture” (Barton 198), Git and Bunny are freed “from the kind of inorganic cultural identities imposed on other areas of Ireland and thus more able to explore the alternatives” (199). The men’s antagonistic relationship to their vehicle and their environment undermines claims to conventionally masculine traits of agency and control, and their physical displacement from dominant Irish society suggests that hegemonic concepts of masculinity are becoming unhinged. The liberatory potential of such disassociation then emerges explicitly in the scene in the roadside motel pub with Bunny’s queer confession, despite its immediate disavowal.

As Git and Bunny move along their journey, tensions emerge as their place-bound sense of self is de-stabilized and they become increasingly disassociated from rigidly defined gender identities and social roles. By examining how *I Went Down* both adheres to and departs from road movie conventions, I reveal how Git and Bunny’s movements through space at once de-stabilize and essentialize their identities in relation to hegemonic discourses. While the film begins to use queer mobility to subvert and transform dominant social norms produced by national paradigms, it fails to engage directly with Bunny’s non-normative sexuality and ultimately frames his sexual ambiguity more broadly as a form of confused masculinity. The film’s closing shot, which shows Git and Bunny driving down the highway to-

ward Dublin airport, further emphasizes a continued hold on the linear “straight” path (Figure 5).

By ending the film with Git and Bunny leaving Ireland, *I Went Down* links queer mobility to the imagining of a future elsewhere that offers greater freedoms and opportunities than Ireland. Yet the film’s final shot also emphasizes the ultimately linear nature of Git and Bunny’s journey and implies a continued hold on heteronormative (“straight”) structures. In doing so, the film undermines the disruptive potential of queerness to de-naturalize social norms and challenge heterosexual privilege. In this closing shot, *I Went Down* once again engages with the tension between the liberatory potential of queer mobility and the forces of hegemonic patriarchal logic. The men’s liberation (and smooth movement forward) is achieved through their act of conforming to the linear road. Therefore, even as *I Went Down* makes evident the reconstruction of Irish identity within global parameters, it promotes a sense of personal identity which remains delimited by a heteronormative framework; as Bunny emphatically asserts, “I’m not a queer you know.”

Works Cited

- Barton, Ruth. “Kitsch as Authenticity: Irish Cinema and the Challenge to Romanticism.” *Irish Studies Review* 9.2 (2001): 193-202. Print.
- Binnie, Jon. “The Erotic Possibilities of the City.” *Bodies, Cities, Spaces: Pleasure Zones*. Ed. David Bell, et al. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2001. 103-130. Print.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992. Print.
- Désert, Jean-Ulrick. “Queer Space.” *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*. Ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter. Washington: Bay, 1997. 17-26. Print.
- Gibbons, Luke. “Projecting the Nation: Cinema and Culture.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*. Ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 206-224. Print.
- Gillespie, Michael Patrick. *The Myth of an Irish Cinema: Approaching Irish-Themed Films*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2008. Print.
- Knopp, Larry. “From Lesbian and Gay to Queer Geographies: Pasts, Prospects and Possibilities.” *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*. Ed. Kath Browne, Jason Lim, and Gavin Brown. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. 21-28. Print.
- Laderman, David. *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. Print.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Maiden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 1991. Print.
- O’Connell, Dióg. *New Irish Storytellers: Narrative Strategies in Film*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2010. Print.
- Rascaroli, Laura. “New Voyages to Italy: Postmodern Travellers and the Italian Road Film.” *Screen* 44.1 (2003): 71-91. Print.
- Valentine, Gill. *Social Geographies: Space and Society*. Essex: Pearson Education, 2001. Print.