Peripheral Vision

Peripheral Vision, Donnacha Ó Briain / 2012 / Ireland / 100 minutes.

Review by Stephen McCloskey

In 2002, Donnacha Ó’Briain (with Kim Bartley) directed the award-winning documentary The Revolution will not be Televised, a remarkable film made during an oppositional coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. The film captured the outpouring of popular support for Chávez from the country’s poor that secured his restoration to office. Ó’Briain’s latest documentary, Peripheral Vision, focuses on events closer to home but remains firmly fixed on the relationship between people and power and the role played by civil society in resisting unjust policies foisted on them from above. It takes as its starting point the decision taken by the Dublin government in 2008 to recapitalise Irish banks which had recklessly over-extended their lending arms contributing to a construction boom fed largely by unsafe property loans and a credit bubble that was pricked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank in the United States. The government’s decision to bailout one bank in particular, Anglo Irish, which was symptomatic of the corruption and malaise in the Irish banking sector and had no intrinsic value to Irish society, caused public outrage. The decision to recapitalise the banks led the government to seek a staggering €85 billion loan from a troika comprising the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (McCloskey, 2011).

What followed the bank bailout was a wave of cuts to public services and welfare as part of a belt tightening austerity programme dictated in the terms of the troika loan. Peripheral Vision charts the resistance to the programme of austerity by inner city Dublin communities feeling the full force of government cuts and two communities in North Cork, Ballyhea and Charleville, that mount a weekly protest against the bank debt repayments. Shot in a raw cinema verité style over twelve months in 2011-12, the documentary is a study in activism as we witness a small group of protesters in Ballyhea (later joined by Charleville) move from weekly marches to sit-down protests to a ‘run to the Dáil’ to finally confronting the ECB in Frankfurt. We see a growth in confidence among the protestors - despite occasional doubts as
to the efficacy of their efforts - spurred by their greater awareness of the issues and increasing level of collaboration with like-minded groups in other parts of the country. They draw strength from participation in a major protest in Dublin against the Household Charge, which culminates with a march to the Fine Gael Ard Fheis (annual conference).

We also see a flowering of activism in the community resistance movement Spectacle of Hope and Defiance which has been mobilising inner city Dublin communities on the frontline of government cuts to resist austerity. They launched a book of grievances in 2011 based on the Cahiers or lists of grievances drawn up by the three estates (the clergy, nobility and middle-class) in revolutionary France. Although the lists were ordered by King Louis XVI they were not intended as a challenge to the ancien régime but ultimately helped to articulate and fuel the need for change at the time. The lists compiled by the Spectacle of Hope and Defiance similarly provided an opportunity for communities to articulate their fears, grievances and aspirations for the future. We see community workshops in which children discuss the burden of poverty on their families and concerns about cuts to local projects. They are in effect development education workshops led by community activists that involve economic demystification and shared learning in participative formats. While Ireland has become a by-word for political passivity and resignation in the wake of the financial crisis, Peripheral Vision suggests otherwise as communities prepare for a major public demonstration in Dublin city centre on 3 December 2011 in which they reclaim the streets and publicly air their grievances.

The film continually shifts between the protest movements in Ballyhea and Dublin and interjects these narratives with RTÉ news footage of government manoeuvres to navigate the crisis while keeping the public in check. At one point we see Taoiseach Enda Kenny saying in the Dáil (Irish parliament) that ‘We are not going to have the name defaulter written across our foreheads’ as part of a speech that defended the latest contribution of €1.5 billion to Anglo bondholders; a cost born by the Irish citizen. The debts of the now dead Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society total €30 billion and represent a staggering 40 percent of Irish national income. A campaign called Anglo: Not our Debt, which calls for a cancellation of Anglo debt and is
supported by many of the groups chronicled by *Peripheral Vision*, estimates that payments could continue to the 2030s ([http://www.notourdebt.ie/](http://www.notourdebt.ie/)).

Until the end of 2013, Ireland’s debt took the form of promissory notes which are stated intentions to pay back the debt over a specific period. However these notes were converted into sovereign bonds which are tradable on the international markets and more difficult to write down. They are also payable over a longer timescale and accrue more interest which makes them arguably even more damaging to the Irish economy. Ireland’s debt crisis is therefore not going away and the activism documented by *Peripheral Vision* needs to be stepped up if the lives of future generations in Ireland are not to be blighted by debt.

A key question posed by *Peripheral Vision* is why we do not have the kind of popular mobilisations against the bank debt repayments in Ireland similar to those seen in Greece and other neighbouring European states? This question is never satisfactorily answered although it is often debated in the film by activists, one of whom suggests that in Ireland we have often relied on intermediaries when dealing with institutional power rather than doing so directly. What is indisputable, however, is Ireland’s experience of a sharp increase in emigration levels in times of severe economic difficulty and that has been the case since 2008. This has resulted in even greater tragedy for Irish families which have become divided through the need, particularly among young people, to find work overseas.

*Peripheral Vision* is a film about community learning and a learning tool in its own right. It asks searching questions about Irish society and the political class, and also our degree of political latitude within the European Union. It rebuffs the notion that Irish communities are willing to swallow the bitter pill of austerity without challenging the legitimacy of the odious banking debt which has been socialised and foisted on the Irish people. It should be shown in community settings and used as a mainspring toward education and activism on debt. The film makes clear that the media has largely failed us in regard to this issue which makes more public education on Ireland’s debt crisis a matter of urgency.
References
Anglo: Not our Debt, for more information on the Anglo campaign visit: http://www.notourdebt.ie/ (accessed 2 April 2014).


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