

The Forces driving Irish Language Cinema

Introduction

Explore the enigma of *An Cailín Ciúin* (2021) – the Irish-language film that smashed records at the box office and snagged an Oscar nod. Journey with us as we obtain a holistic snapshot of the current Irish Language Feature Film industry. We must understand how the implemented structures have developed production thus far, and uncover whether or not this phenomenon is but a fleeting blip on the cinematic radar.

Method

I reviewed literature on Irish language cinema, viewed the existing Irish Language Feature dramas, analysed industry discussions, and crucially, conducted 8 semi-structured interviews with the Director General of TG4, commissioning editors of the Cine4 scheme, writers, directors and producers.

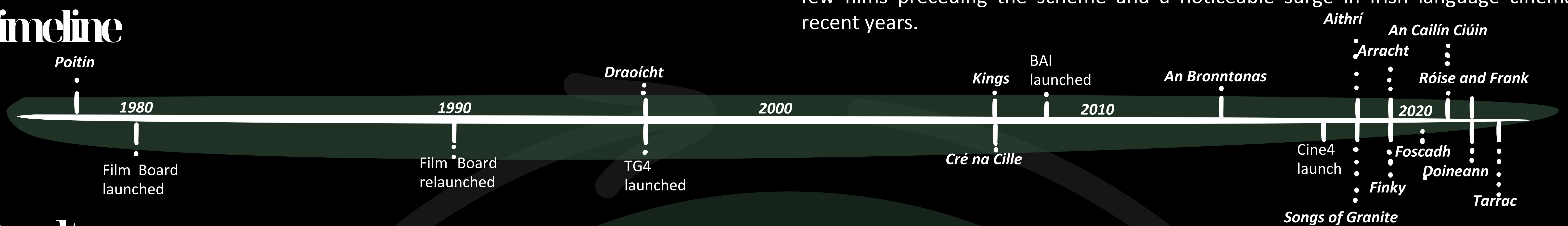
Is it a blip?

Background

In a nation where only 1 in 4 speaks Irish, and a mere 1 in 40 speak it 'very well,' (2) the recent emergence of Irish-language cinema is nothing short of remarkable. *An Cailín Ciúin* (2021) stands as a milestone, becoming the first Irish-language drama to gross over 1 million euro at the UK and Ireland box office and receiving an Oscar nomination for Best International Feature Film. Films like *Arracht* and *Róise and Frank* further underscore this outstanding achievement.

Cine4, an Irish Language Feature drama scheme funded by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Screen Ireland and TG4, launched in 2017. Preceding this scheme, there were but a handful of projects scattered over a period of fifty years. The Cine4 scheme marks a turning point, injecting structure and financial support into this landscape, ushering in a wave of promising films. The timeline below highlights a stark contrast, with relatively few films preceding the scheme and a noticeable surge in Irish language cinema in recent years.

Timeline



Results

I identified the main forces driving the initiative, mapped them out and discovered a cycle:

1. Creative Talent

- 75% of interviewees highlighted the existence of a strong creative talent pool in Ireland, who are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to explore authentic Irish stories in the context of cinema.
- 37.5% (80% of the creatives) stated not believing they could have gotten their feature film funded in the English language.

"There is an avalanche of ideas out there... I would view the current situation as a shockingly preventative way of getting films made, that Screen Ireland have turned into a kind of marketing operation, rather than a primary producing operation. Coproduction seems to be what English language film supports" ~Lelia Doolan

5. Inspirational success

- Talent, funding, existing audiences and high levels of authenticity and quality have combined to great success. Apart from the extraordinary success of *An Cailín Ciúin* (2021), the 4 other films released by Cine4 have been shown in cinemas internationally and have garnered awards and critical acclaim.

"Success breeds success"

4. Existing audience

- 75% of respondents believe that Irish language advocacy plays a crucial role in propelling Irish language drama forward, with both filmmakers and audiences taking pride in its production and consumption.
- Ireland ranks sixth from the bottom in Europe in terms of indigenous production audience share, accounting for only 5% of ticket sales (2), which underscores a stark contrast between the advocacy-driven enthusiasm within the industry and the broader audience engagement with Irish films.
- 62.5% raised the point that there is a 'new' audience out there for subtitled work.

2. Cine4 scheme

- Cine4 is a joint venture founded by TG4's Alan Esslemont, Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, Screen Ireland and TG4 along with the Section 481 tax incentive provide the funding.
- On an annual basis, 5 applications are chosen for development funding, 2 are chosen for 1.2 million euro production funding.

3. Authentic, quality films

- 75% of interviewees believe that Irish language drama is more authentic than English language drama. Reasons being:
 - Absence of coproduction within the Cine4 scheme, highlighted by 62.5%.
 - The native language being a strong medium of cultural expression, highlighted by 37.5%
- 100% of interviewees stated that there is an effort made to hire crew with fluent Irish. However, 100% also stated that level of skill trumps level of proficiency. All 6 of the produced Cine4 films have been made bilingually.

"You're forced to create stories that are inherently Irish and are inherently of us. A lot of Ireland's film content ... [has] aped America and Britain in terms of story and how it was done ... almost trying to make American films in Ireland. Irish language cinema does it [it makes it] impossible to do that." ~Tom Sullivan

Conclusion, the future

Correspondences were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of Cine4 in fostering Irish cinema, through its facilitating a robust talent pool in realising their ambition to tell authentic Irish stories. The absence of coproduction and the cultural significance of the native language are the pillars of recent success. There is a strongly held belief that Irish language cinema is further aided by a 'new' audience for foreign language work fostered by exposure to international content on streaming services. The inspirational success of recent projects signifies an extraordinary time for Irish language cinema and confirms that while we cannot tell the future, there is no reason to believe it is a blip.

Acknowledgments

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References:
 (1); Central Statistics Office 2022
 (2); International Union of Cinemas Annual Report 2022
 Images courtesy of Cine4