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The Ormonde

I grew up in rural Ireland, flanked by farmland. The closest town, Midleton, was, as its name suggests, an unremarkable, in-between place. There was a single, small cinema called the Ormonde, a long, low building somewhat resembling a cattle shed. When I first visited it as a child in the late 1980s, instead of tippy-up seats, there were crumb-coated cushions. Instead of trailers, there was a projection of pink blobs aimlessly drifting, bonding, separating; it felt like swimming inside a gigantic lava lamp. The Ormonde was owned and run by an elderly, and perpetually grumpy, couple called the Greens. There were no other employees; if only one Green happened to be on duty, you'd have to wait while they shuffled between the ticket office and the sweet shop to serve up your popcorn.

Despite the pastoral structure, there was something marvellous about being brought to the Ormonde as a child. These were the auspicious surroundings in which I sat through such cinematic classics as *Home Alone*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*. But one night a week, the Greens would screen an arthouse film. I was too young, at the time, to take advantage of this. It wasn't until I was a student in Dublin city that I joined the Film Institute and started to visit, devotedly, every Saturday afternoon. I never checked the listings beforehand; I preferred to take a chance, to experiment with my predetermined tastes. During those years, when I didn't have the money to travel, films introduced me to every kind of eclectic stranger and flew me around the world, as well as both backward and forward in time. And when I started to write, films helped to show me how.

In an essay from 1993 about the relationship between television and American fiction, David Foster Wallace wrote: "...television looks to be an absolute godsend for a human subspecies that loves to watch people but hates to be watched itself..." The subspecies to which he referred was writers, and the same can be said of cinema. Writers are watchers; films show us things which don't exist in our daily lives, but, as Wallace acknowledged, what we are watching "...is *already* composed of fictional characters in highly ritualised narratives..." In the dark auditoriums of the Film Institute on Saturday afternoons, I began to grasp that what I was learning about was not reality, but art.

"Cinema is the most beautiful fraud in the world," Jean Luc Godard famously stated. The perfect film is a self-contained form in a way that television simply isn't; a small universe unto itself in which no detail can be superfluous, or erroneous, or misplaced, in which every song, every scene, every spoken word, must cohere into an autonomous, operational, affective whole. From film, I learned about the laying of narrative clues, (think, for example, of the significance of the marble water fountain in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*); I learned that humour and misfortune are a bittersweet, beautiful mix, (think of Withnail reciting Hamlet in the rain in the final scene of *Withnail & I*); I learned that landscape can be a character, (think of the jungle in *Fitzcarraldo*); and I learned the secret of a resonant ending, (think of *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Graduate*, *Rosemary's Baby*): the monumental power of suggestion.

After several years, I moved back to the countryside, to a place where Midleton is, yet again, my closest town. But the Ormonde isn't there anymore. In the early noughties, a new multiplex was built, one of a franchise, in a new shopping centre, which also houses such franchises as McDonalds and Subway. The Greens were forced to close, and the multiplex schedules no arthouse night; the only films it shows are Hollywood blockbusters, and so, I rarely go to the cinema anymore.

But when I write fiction, I still try to approach it with the sensibility of a filmmaker, to conceive of my fictional world as sound and vision as opposed to static letters of the alphabet arranged on a page, to capture something of the magic which used to flicker between the walls of the Ormonde. “Strangers used to gather at the cinema and sit together in the dark,” Angela Carter wrote, “like Ancient Greeks participating in the mysteries, dreaming the same dream in unison.”