CONNOR MORRIS

INVENTING ATLANTEAN

IN 1978 DUBLIN-BORN FILMMAKER BOB QUINN produced the first feature-length narrative made entirely in Irish. Set in Connemara, a western district of Ireland bordering the Atlantic, *Poitín* follows Michil (Cyril Cusack), Labhrás (Donal McCann), and that slippery character Sleamhnán (Niall Tóibín) as they drink, fight, and struggle at the margins of society. Michil recruits Labhrás and Sleamhnán to trade his illicit high-proof alcohol that, over the duration of the story, the pair will lose to the police, steal back, and sell on their own with Michil cut out of the deal. Patiently photographed and sparsely edited, *Poitín* depicts a harsh and violent rural Irish existence through an idiosyncratic version of cinematic realism, with Quinn rejecting the Romantic tropes of an idyllic Irish countryside. The naivety and insularity of the film's characters earn them no spiritual or material comfort amid their rugged coastal surroundings; the landscape does not redeem them. As Irish art responding to Irish stereotypes, *Poitín* has equal interest in the truth of what it portrays and the fiction of what it refuses.

The tension between *Poitín*'s quasi-realist formal pattern and critical-interrogative mode serves as an important prelude to Quinn's work on the decades-long *Atlantean* project—a sprawling televisual intervention aimed squarely at a modern Irish consciousness overdetermined by its mythological Celtic origin story. Airing in 1984 as a three-part television program on Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), Ireland's public broadcaster, *Atlantean* expands on a number of Poitín's thematic interests but marks a shift in Quinn's aesthetic strategy. Though primarily a cinematic experience (he added a sequel in 1998 and an accompanying text of his personal research, *Atlantean: Ireland's North African and Maritime Heritage* [1986], which was revised in 2005), *Atlantean* can be interpreted within the framework of 20th-century Irish literary modernism, of which James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) is an illustrative example.

In his book *Inventing Ireland* (1995), the great Irish critic Declan Kiberd

describes the Joyce of this period as striving to blend myth and realism, positioning "each term as a critique of the other, so that neither would achieve its goals." Kiberd's scholarship focuses on the role that artists played in the reconstruction of Ireland's national identity from its late 19th-century revival through the formation of the Republic and into the second half of the 20th century. Shaped by the postcolonial writing of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Julia Kristeva, and Edward Said, Kiberd observes a heritage of Irish authors dramatizing and subverting Ireland's determination to understand itself as England's antithesis. One of his central observations is that modernists like Joyce used formal experimentation to transcend either/or binaries (English/Irish, urban/rural, centre/periphery, etc.), which constrained Ireland's ability to imagine itself beyond a narrow nationalism imitative of its English Other.

Quinn, Kiberd, and Joyce are connected by their shared suspicion of the Celtic myth they see as the root of these antinomies: a Romantic and heroic fiction of continental invaders that substantiates an essentialized division between (barbarous) provincial Ireland and (civilized) metropolitan England. For Kiberd, the history of colonial struggle between England and Ireland manifests in the need to "perform" Irishness against its polar English opposite. Writing of the *Atlantean* project in 2005, Quinn declares that "it can no longer be respectably maintained that the island or its people are, or ever were, culturally or ethnically 'Celtic,' a narrow historic—and touristic—strait-jacket, essentially imposed by outsiders."

Stylistically, *Atlantean* is a hodgepodge of documentary, narrative, and experimental techniques: a hybrid and consequently marginal form known as the "essay film" that plays the conventions of each genre against one another in service of a broader argument. Filmmakers working in the essayistic mode share principles associated with modernist movements in literature, such as the disruption of linear narrative patterns, the affirmation of quotidian characters, skepticism regarding realist representation, and an emphasis on the subjective and material circumstances of artistic creation. These textual conditions help us understand Quinn as a filmmaker working within and extending upon a tradition of Irish modernism and its attendant formal and thematic concerns.

Over its nearly four-hour runtime, *Atlantean* follows its erstwhile filmmaker on an international journey to uncover aspects of Ireland's contemporary identity unexplainable through recourse to inland colonizers. Quinn

himself is thus the focal point of the action, which revolves around his conversations with historians, linguists, archaeologists, and geographers. He details his premise during the program's first episode: the Irish belong to a culture of maritime communities who sailed and traded across the coasts of what would become France, Ireland, Britain, Spain, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, and whose connections can be traced through Moorish Spain all the way back to ancient Phoenicia.

He believes these cultural affinities—observable in the day-to-day activities of ordinary people—have been obscured by an English and Irish urban elite and their politically expedient myth of an uncontaminated Celtic identity. He is particularly sensitive to the way that canonical Eurocentric histories have diminished the influence of Islamic peoples on the development of continental culture. While Kiberd and the literary modernists focused on urban/rural and English/Irish binaries, Quinn takes the extra step of situating Ireland in the fictional partition between global east and west.

Quinn's preferred example of this overlooked cultural connectedness is the unaccompanied folk Irish singing style called *sean-nós*. Finding no analogue for its rhythmic variation and intense vocal ornamentation in the Irish or wider European tradition (Quinn, rightly I think, notes that the closest relation might be modern jazz), he discovers traces of the style in Morocco, Libya, Egypt, and Tatarstan. Notably, he is unable to establish a convincing origin for *sean-nós*; his inquiries commonly face dead-ends or historical anachronisms. This pattern of frustration, which repeats itself in matters of music, garment, architecture, and sculpture, is characteristic of *Atlantean*'s modernist tendencies. Quinn is exasperated by the professional historian's need for strict chronology, causation, and progress. *Atlantean*, in contrast, is arranged suggestively, revelling in its own inconclusiveness.

Unpacking Quinn's prodding of tropes associated with commercial documentary cinema provides a further route into his modernism. He is at the centre of *Atlantean*, but his thoughts and actions are relayed by an English narrator who frequently emphasizes the self-doubt the filmmaker feels as an amateur scholar. Unlike conventional documentary, *Atlantean* accentuates its subjective conditions, albeit in a mediated form. Kiberd highlights the typically Irish association of autobiography with nation-building—the creative tension of a self and nation under constant negotiation. Quinn's uncertainty about his own project may be telling in this regard: what would it mean to be *certain* about your identity and the identity of your society?

Formally, the juxtaposition of an Irishman ventriloquized by an Englishman lends to the ironical and buoyant tone of *Atlantean*. Functionally, it subverts the filmmaker's status as a privileged subject and omniscient author (Quinn was likely satirizing Kenneth Clark's enormously popular *Civilisation* series [1969] whose most famous progeny is David Attenborough). Quinn is also, I think, reflexively acknowledging the role of popular ethnography in modern Irish society and its recurring need to understand itself through an English lens.

Quinn attenuates his arguments about Ireland's historical origins through his film's formal structure, but to what end? According to Kiberd, Irish modernists have always struggled to locate what is properly Irish through conventional modes of representation. Take, for example, the hyper-artifice of everyday life in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Kiberd proposes that the novel's telescopic detail is the source of its radicality, writing that Joyce "wished to reassert the dignity of the quotidian round, to reclaim the everyday as a primary aspect of experience." Like Joyce, Quinn's ironic attempt to reconstruct everyday Irish existence can similarly be read as a reaction to the inherent limitations of artistic and scholarly genre, which Kiberd goes on to call a "deliberate denial of older hierarchies of value" that undercuts any claims to universal or mythological truths. In his introduction to *Ulysses*, Kiberd also writes that the digressions in the novel are interventions that "break the tyrannical hold of the all-powerful author over the credulous reader. The novel has always been an artefact and, in that sense, a sham, but now it is *self-evidently* so." The meandering of *Atlantean* achieves a similar ambition.

A formally adventurous filmmaker, Quinn is conscious of how certain tendencies of genre can function to conceal, rather than reveal, the medium's artificiality. He is equally aware that through these tendencies genre becomes a vehicle for ideology, propaganda, and dogma. *Atlantean* continuously calls attention to the conditions of its own creation, opening itself to criticism, contradiction, and failure. As a modernist text, these qualities enhance the viewer's ability to resist overstated historical or anthropological conclusions within *Atlantean* and beyond.

Quinn and Joyce both worked through periods of intense regional conflict (*Ulysses* was published the same year the Irish Free State was established), but as far as I have been able to tell, *Atlantean* does not contain any direct references to the situation in Northern Ireland. Looking back on that

time, Quinn writes:

> The 1980s were a period of intense revision of conventional ideas about Irish identity. Renewed emigration, decimating a generation of the newly educated, suggested that the Republic was also a "failed entity." The barbarism of the war in Northern Ireland, and the fear of it spilling over into the South, produced a concerted political, journalistic and scholarly campaign to play down traditional ideas of identity such as Catholicism, the Irish language, a Gaelic culture, anything that could be depicted as underpinning or giving comfort to the Provisional IRA campaign. At the time it was as dangerous to be a free thinker as it was to be a fundamentalist; as intimidating, indeed, as it is now, post-9/11.

Reading *Atlantean* and *Ulysses* against the backdrop of local violence may help us understand why Quinn, following Joyce, pursues an anti-heroic, anti-Romantic version of Irish antiquity. Both are engaged in the historical project of demythologizing Irish identity and restoring the plurality at the source of its beauty. But *Atlantean* is not the intervention of a cosmopolitan. Quinn clearly believes that the Irish are a singular people at risk of losing their distinctiveness, yet he cannot abide a historical explanation that borders on the metaphysical.

Kiberd writes that with *Ulysses*, Joyce "offered a text without final authority [. . .] to seek a tradition, and, in that very act of seeking, to invent it. Such a tradition exists more in its absence than in its presence: it is its very lack which constitutes an artist's truest freedom." *Atlantean* never identifies the origin of *sean-nós* or of Irish culture. Not to worry, our narrator reminds us. Quinn affords no special status to the style: he has simply grown accustomed to it. *Atlantean* is a text "without final authority," but Quinn gets the last laugh.