**From McCabe to Jordan – Permutations of Themes and**

**Narrative Discourses in *The Butcher Boy***

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Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* (1992) has one of the most arresting opening lines in contemporary Irish literature: “When I was a young lad twenty, thirty or forty years ago I lived in a small town where they were all after me on account of what I done to Mrs Nugent.”(1). This opening reveals two things: firstly, unable or unwilling to identify the amount of time that has elapsed since the events he is going to recount, a narrator, Francie Brady, is obviously highly unreliable; and secondly, it rather straightforwardly announces that the narrator himself must have done something dreadful to a certain Mrs Nugent, and that his narrative will most probably revolve around the terrible deed.

Apart from setting out to explore more closely these issues, this article will also attempt to demonstrate how Neil Jordan’s film adaptation of *The Butcher Boy* (1997) functions, especially in relation to the utterly frenzied narrative of this novel. The first part will therefore focus on the narrative discourse McCabe employs in his novel, and later on the question of identity that is so vital for understanding motives behind Francie Brady’s mad behaviour. The second part of the article will introduce the context in which this particular Jordan’s adaptation and its main protagonist can be observed, and then examine major features in terms of narration and themes presented in the film. In the words of Jennifer Jeffers, Jordan’s film does not quite do justice to the novel since “Francie’s narrative, wild, whirling, and lacking punctuation, tells the story in a way that the film’s portrayal of a boy with a dysfunctional family cannot.” She goes on further to say that the film does not allow Eamonn Owens who plays Francie, to “develop the shockingly mad aspects of Francie’s narrative” (149). Nevertheless, in order to see to what extent Jordan has succeeded or failed to convert McCabe’s novel to the big screen, we need first to look more closely at the novel itself.

**THE FRENZIED NARRATIVE DISCOURSE OF THE NOVEL**

McCabe’s fictional world, set in an Irish small town sometime in the early sixties, is seen through the eyes of a narrator who at first seems like a mischievous teenage boy but is actually a mature man, an inmate of an institution for the criminally insane. Francie Brady strikes us more often than not as an exceedingly annoying narrator, and his narrative discourse, as depicted above by Jeffers, makes it rather difficult for the reader to follow the story and the string of events he tells us hastily about. Moreover, the language Francie uses is a variant of spoken everyday English which lacks punctuation and ordinary syntax, and as such can present a hindrance to the reader throughout the novel.

We soon realize that the main character’s circumstances can be typically associated with traditional Irish experience which is ubiquitous in twentieth century Irish fiction: Francie comes from a highly dysfunctional family. His mother is a subservient passive woman trapped in a failed marriage with a man who is quite unsurprisingly an aggressive alcoholic. The plight of the Bradys is, however, additionally burdened by a mentally unstable mother who is in and out of the “garage,” a mental hospital, and is soon to commit a suicide by drowning in a nearby lake.[[1]](#footnote-1) Francie and his family are in a way stigmatized and ostracized as “white trash” (Smyth 82) by the local community, especially by returnees from England, the Nugent family. The manner in which he narrates the story seems to reflect the fact that he is virtually twice rejected; first by his own family who continually neglect him, and then by society. When Francie gradually develops a bizarre obsession with Mrs Nugent, who in his slanted imagination becomes a substitute mother, and then eventually kills her, this image of the dysfunctional Irish family is taken to extreme. A child, usually a victim of poor family circumstances, soon turns not only into a bully but into a coldblooded murderer. In terms of the narrative discourse, as Rudiger Imhof puts it, “what at first seems the rather innocent logic of a difficult, emotionally crippled child surreptitiously develops into the fiendish, riotous ravings of a maniac” (290). It can be even argued that Francie constantly annoys the reader with his illogical and disconnected discourse and numerous descriptions of the unspeakable misdemeanour we are often not sure if it is true or just a figment of his imagination. Towards the end of the book this annoyance turns into what might be best described as the feeling of utter disbelief.

What is fascinating in the novel is that the narrator gives the reader very few or no details at all about the key moments in his life, those connected to his family. His non-existing emotional reactions to the deaths of his parents point to the narrator’s total inability to articulate his experience of coping with reality. When Francie realizes that his mother is dead and that he has just missed her funeral he almost immediately and frenziedly moves on to recount yet another episode. After losing the only person in his life who tried but eventually failed to provide him with care and support,he does not say a single word that would actually verify his grief. On the other hand, he reacts in a way that indirectly reveals to what extent he yearns for a stable family life that he has been virtually deprived of his whole life. A rather short section in the novel shows Francie peeping yet again into the Nugents’ home. What he so avidly observes is one of those idyllic family scenes heavily promoted by the Irish legislation for much of the twentieth century, and is rather telling in this respect. Francie seems to continually project his own misery onto the much desired life of the object of his ever growing obsession and hatred. The Nugent family traditionally consisting of a mother, a father and a child represent both the kind of life that Francie seems to despise and the one he wishes to have:

“Philip was sleeping in his mother’s bed. His head was tilted back on the pillow with his mouth open. She was sleeping soundly her chest rising and falling as if to say there’s no trouble at all in my dreams I have a son beside me and my dear husband will be home tomorrow.” (44)

 Francie’s discourse abounding in “narrative omissions” (152) or “total blockage” (154) as Jennifer Jeffers calls it, gets even more twisted, as it were, later on in the novel where we find him talking and tending his dead father decomposing in the armchair in front of his very eyes. What begins with a description of unnatural silence in the house and his father whose forehead is “cold as ice” (118) and finally culminates in a policeman’s “Sweet Mother of Christ” (143) as he enters their house is probably even more shocking than the actual butchering of Mrs Nugent at the end of the novel. The reader is both taken aback by Francie’s insane behaviour and the fact that he never refers to his father as actually rotting in the midst of their home but is also in a way relieved when this horrific suspense is finally over. Along with literally losing his family members and frantically resisting to deal with the loss, the narrator is gradually but totally losing touch with reality, sadly following in the footsteps of his dead mother (“I was getting as bad as ma. Whiz this way then whiz the other way. I’ll do this no I’ll do that” (184)).

 The final premeditated murder of Mrs Nugent and the meticulously detailed description of the atrocious act is then not as unanticipated as the episode with his decomposing father. If the narrator is heavily at odds with how to articulate the tragic disintegration of what should have been his only foothold in the world - his family, and therefore remains completely silent about it, there is a notion that he sadistically enjoys killing the hapless woman and subsequently depicting the very act:

... I smacked her against the wall a few times there was a smear of blood at the corner of her mouth and her hand was reaching out trying to touch me when I cocked the captive bolt. I lifted her off the floor with one hand and shot the bolt right into her head *thlok* was the sound it made, like a goldfish dripping into a bowl. If you ask anyone how you kill a pig they will tell you cut its throat across but you don’t do it longways. Then she just lay there with her chin sticking up and I opened her then I stuck my hand in her stomach and wrote PIGS all over the walls of the upstairs room. (195)

The irrational hatred towards Mrs Nugent (whom he blames for his mother’s tragic end) on which Francie desperately feeds and which continually runs through the novel as a driving force behind his actions logicallyculminates in her brutal killing.

**CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES AS A DEFENSE MECHANISM**

It is of course possible to use a number of different approaches to analyse Francie’s insanity. The one that seems particularly apt in this context is perhaps the psychoanalytical approach on which Linden Peach draws when reading the murder of Mrs Nugent. He suggests that Francie is unable to rise above the simple good-bad binarism. His own mother is for him the “bad mother” as she permanently withdraws from him through her suicide. On the other hand, he argues that Mrs Nugent actually represents the “good mother” and as such she “comes between Francie and his real mother because she reminds him of the way his own mother failed him, and probably how he thinks of himself having failed her.” Peach concludes that “the ostensibly gruesome details of her murder become highly symbolic because in cutting open the front, Francie seems to signify a desire to re-enter the womb” (185). This perpetual interweaving and blurring of the binary opposites “good” and “bad” thus results in the sadistic destruction of yet another family and the mother figure seen as ideal in his sick mind. If his own “bad” mother” has killed herself and thus deliberately deprived her only child of the life he could and should have had, then this ideal “good” mother has to die as well in order not to provide for and nurture her son any more. Peach’s remark on the symbolism of Francie’s final act and on his oedipal desire might, however, strike us perhaps as a bit exaggerating as it is more likely that in cutting the front open he simply finishes what Mrs Nugent initiated sometime ago when she condescendingly called the Brady family “pigs”. What at first symbolically functioned only as a derogatory term is now grotesquely and horrendously represented by the mutilated human corpse**.**

 This almost nagging interweaving of the notions of the “pig” and the “butcher boy” which imbues the novel and the final coming together of the two in the massacring and wheeling Mrs Nugent’s corpse just like a discarded piece of meat make part of the wider frame of Francie’s frantic adoption of various identities. While continually trying to escape not only the humdrum existence of an Irish “white trash” family but also that of a small tight-knit community with their insular mentality, Francie turns to constructing identities that obviously help him cope with the unbearable real life. Similarly, in an article with a rather telling title, “Identity, Self-Loathing and the Neocolonial Condition in Patrick McCabe’s The Butcher Boy”, Tim Guthrie remarks that Francie’s crisis of identity and the different identities he adopts throughout the novel are “merely quixotic defences against having his identity determined.” Yet another obsession (apart from that with Mrs Nugent and the ideal model of the Irish family), that with comic book heroes and characters from the Hollywood classic western movies mostly embodied in the ubiquitous John Wayne demonstrates to what extent the boy is influenced by contemporary popular culture.

 The early sixties was kind of a watershed period for Ireland when the society slowly opened up to the “loathed” external influences and when the parochial climate in the country gradually but decisively started to change. In this respect, it is no wonder that Francie so eagerly consumes tokens of global culture available to him and thus transcends the local Irish context.[[2]](#footnote-2) Looking towards British and American popular culture for alternative identities, however, only seems to weaken his extremely fragile sense of identity and he eventually totally fails to construct a sensible sense of self. As Gerry Smyth reasonably argues, “Francie tries to make all the disparate voices battling in his head to conform to some kind of coherent narrative that will explain how things got so bad [and] how the past slipped away” (83). All these disparate voices and identities cannot, however, make up a more coherent and logical narrative. Francie’s life irretrievably falls apart when he finally finds out that due to his father’s alcoholism and violent behaviour his parent’s marriage was doomed already on their honeymoon and that the past is subsequently nothing but “a sentimental invention” (Smyth 83).

 It is significant that all the while he is looking towards contemporary popular culture for some sort of role models, Francie turns his back to traditional Irish culture and, needless to say, totally defies and mocks one of the defining elements of Irish national identity, Catholicism. When he wheels Mrs Nugent’s corpse around, he passes another wheelbarrow carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary. This gruesome juxtaposition, as Peach suggests, reflects the fact that in killing a mother figure, Mrs Nugent, “Francie has effectively murdered the Virgin Mary” (186). When he later sets the fire to his decaying house (an ugly image which symbolically reflects the tragic collapse of the Brady family), Francie’s irreverence reaches its peak in an even more grotesque manner. Feverishly talking to the pictures on the wall, typical of every mid-century Irish home, those of the Sacred Heart, JFK[[3]](#footnote-3) and Pope John XXIII, he demonstrates to what extent he wants to detach himself from Irish tradition in the most general sense:

On you go, I says. Then the Sacred Heart with his two fingers up and the thorny burning outside his chest. Do you remember the prayers we used to say in the old days Francie? He says. Oh now Sacred Heart I says, will I ever forget them? May the curse of Christ light upon you this night you rotten cunting bitch – do you remember that one? (207)

The family, that untouchable and sacred unit heavily fostered by the Catholic Church, and Catholic institutions that should have at least put in more effort to substitute his own family have failed him many times. It is no wonder therefore that Francie both literally and metaphorically kills the symbolic forms of Catholicism so as to destroy links with every notion of drab Irish life that has brought him nothing but misery.

 It can be therefore argued the narrator and the inmate of the institution for the criminally insane, where he is eventually incarcerated for life and from where he narrates his astounding story, totally defies Eamon de Valera’s utopian image of Ireland.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yearning for the life that this vision naively promised but realizing that he would always remain an outsider to it, Francie resorts to insanity and crime which seem to offer him the only escape. When he ends his narrative with “the tears streaming down” his face (215) the reader can almost sympathise with him.

**THE DUAL NATURE OF NEIL JORDAN'S FILMS**

The key to unlocking *The Butcher Boy* lies in Neil Jordan's previous films. *The Butcher Boy* is the tenth feature film directed by Neil Jordan, coming on the heels of two productions financed by Hollywood – *Interview with the Vampire* and *Michael Collins*. Although his films cover a very diverse range of genres, spanning from character dramas (*Angel*, *The Miracle*, *The Crying Game*), horrors with elements of fantasy (*The Company of Wolves*, *Interview with the Vampire*), Hollywood-financed comedies (*High Spirits*, *We're No Angels*), to neo-noir (*Mona Lisa*, best depicted as a hybrid of romantic drama and neo-noir) and political drama (*Michael Collins*), all of these films are highly personal explorations of the intertwining of reality and fantasy, the real and the imaginary, the ordinary and the supernatural. Excluding the two Hollywood-financed comedies, all of his films are unified by similar motifs, pointing to an auteur in the tradition of the classical film theory. Even when depicting seemingly ordinary events, Jordan is always interested in probing the dark recesses of human soul.

The six films he made after *The Butcher Boy* show the same unified approach. *The Good Thief*, a loose remake of Melville's *Bob le Flambeur*, continues the existential themes explored in the crime world of *Mona Lisa*; *The End of the Affair* continues the character-based approach of his early films, as well as *Breakfast on Pluto*, an adaptation of Patrick McCabe's novel. *The Brave One*, his most pessimistic film to date, is a psychological thriller exploring the descent of a young woman from the verge of matrimonial happiness to the underbelly of dark vigilante retribution. *In Dreams* and *Ondine*, his latest feature film, combine the elements of the real and the imaginary, the constant theme of Jordan's oeuvre.

It might be argued that majority of Jordan's films feature characters haunted by loss, and Francie Brady, the main protagonist of *The Butcher Boy*, is no exception. Leading an essentially ordinary life, Jordan's characters are often struck by some tragic event which uncovers their dark side. Danny (Stephen Rea, the closest Jordan's associate), the saxophone player from *Angel*, witnesses the murder of a mute girl, and enters the spiral of unrelenting violence. Erica Bain, the main protagonist of *The Brave One* (Jodie Foster in a role strongly reminiscent of her films *Taxi Driver* and *The Accused*) lives a happy life, successfully combining the business and private spheres, but after witnessing the murder of her fiancée, sets out on a mission to avenge him. Claire Cooper from *In Dreams* sees both her daughter and husband killed by a psychotic murderer, and Louis de Pointe du Lac, the main protagonist of *Interview with the Vampire* (Brad Pitt), is deeply haunted by his past and tormented by guilt over his new vampire nature. The theme of sorrow and loss is often accompanied with the theme of exile, one of the most powerful notions explaining Jordan's characters. Danny, Erica, Claire, Louis, Patrick 'Kitten' Braden from *Breakfast on Pluto*, George (*Mona Lisa*), even Michael Collins can all be compared to Francie in the sense of displacement and strong rejection by their hostile environments. They are all lone individuals embarking on the journey to the unknown, searching for their identity and their place in the world. Recalling Michelangelo Antonioni's difference between modern and classical tragedy,[[5]](#footnote-5) wherein modern tragedy, with its sense of a loss of human feeling, is juxtaposed to the classical tragedy where a great man falls because of his flawed character, helps us understand the modernity of Jordan's films, which, although combining elements from the rich cultural heritage, nevertheless reflect the pessimistic contemporary Zeitgeist. All Jordan's films are imbued with the deep analysis of human character, showing the fragile boundaries between the rational and irrational in human psyche.

Along with Maria Pramaggiore's analysis of Jordan's career, Carole Zucker has provided the richest and most detailed overview of Jordan's career so far. While Pramaggiore has explained the dark world of Jordan's films through the lens of postmodern use of irony and an unique Irish sense of humour, Zucker has analyzed the gloomy atmosphere of his films applying a wide range of heuristic devices, from their embeddedness in the world of Irish myth and folklore, relationship with fairy-tales and Jordan's own body of writing, to the deep connections with the Romantic and Gothic legacy, and the modern influence of le nouveau's roman interest in the contingent.

In Zucker's opinion, some of the defining themes of Jordan's oeuvre are the following:

a fascination with storytelling, and how the stories are told by various modes of performance; the quest for identity and wholeness; meditations on innocence; permutations of the family unit; violence and its attendant psychic and physical damage; impossible love and erotic tension; the dark and irrational aspects of the human soul; and characters who are, in some way, haunted by loss. (1)

Deeply influenced by the dual concepts of Romanticism and the Gothic, Jordan's films offer a postmodern reading of these notions, playing with their original meaning and transforming them into a new trans-generic hybrid.

Zucker's analysis of Romanticism and Yeatsian concept of duality is of special importance for explaining the defining elements of Jordan's films. Reflecting Luke Gibbons' remarks on the oscillating nature of Irishness, embodying a specifically Celtic version of the Jekyll and Hyde duality, wherein characters shift between “two extremes of behaviour and mood“ and are “liable to rush from mirth to despair, tenderness to violence, and loyalty to treachery“ (Gibbons 219), Zucker has positioned the notion of Irishness between two very diverse poles. Romantic poets have advocated the primacy of the spiritual, transcendental world as opposed to the material world, especially embracing the period of childhood as an ideal reflecting the innocent world of the child. The lines between dreams and reality, the ordinary and the fantastic, are increasingly blurred, and echo the dark condition of the collapsing material world. Mourning, melancholy and the utmost sense of despair are primary concepts in Romanticism, and Jordan's indebtedness to this legacy is best seen in his shared concern for intermingling the ordinary and the mystical with Yeats. Yeats was very much influenced by the bloody events surrounding the French Revolution and Ireland's troubled history.[[6]](#footnote-6) In his opinion, only terror can shake the foundations of the old systems and “beauty is the outcome of terror“ (cf. Zucker 15).

Almost all Jordan's films explore the Romantic clash between the waking and dreaming world, but they can only be partially explained by Romantic concepts, because they cross its boundaries and venture into the realm of the Gothic. While Romanticism shows the external world through the prism of its deeply troubled protagonist, the Gothic elements are internalized, shaking the foundations and questioning the very notion of identity. In the fragmented world of the Gothic, one is not certain of the boundaries between the real and the imagined, and the loss of the self is the logical consequence. In this view, Danny, Erica Bain, Claire, and Francie are typically Gothic protagonists, losing their identity in the course of their struggles to overcome the hostile climate of their environment. In the end, they all reflect Antonioni's words depicting the loss of human feeling in modern tragedy.

Danny, the main protagonist of *Angel*, is the prototype for future Jordan's characters. There is the following dialogue in the scene where Danny is with the band's singer Dee:

Dee: 'cause you have to tell me first. What is it?

Danny: It's nothing.

Dee: You're lying.

Danny: It's like a nothing you could feel. And it gets worse.

These words are strongly reminiscent of the European tradition of existential philosophy, starting with Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and continued by Sartre. The state of nothingness and the utter loss of feeling transcend the boundaries of Romanticism and usher in the unknown Gothic landscape, where the loss of identity is the crucial element. The slow, existentialist style of *Angel* resembles Antonioni's films,[[7]](#footnote-7) grounding it firmly in the European modernist tradition.

**THEMES AND NARRATIVE DISCOURSES IN JORDAN'S *THE BUTCHER BOY***

The novel *The Butcher Boy* is a very nuanced text, featuring an unusual mixture of the first person narration and the stream of consciousness technique. The narration is a combination of realism and events which are told through a strongly unreliable prism. The events are strongly disassociated – we find out about the events only through Francie's narration, which departs from the situation very often. Two interesting examples from the novel are the depiction of the death of Francie's dad, which is mentioned in a jovial and sporadic manner, and the reader has to infer the development of the action only from the subsequent narrative development. The other event is the notorious poo scene, when Francie breaks into the Nugents' house and defecates there. What is in reality a primitive and loathsome act has been described in a humorous fashion, where Francie enacts a spectacular exhange of different theatrical personae. The events in Bundoran, the idyllic place where Francie's parents had spent their honeymoon, are told in a realist fashion, shattering the illusions created by the young Francie and opening the way for the catastrophic events of the last portion of the novel.

Although these narrative discourses are rather uncinematic, Jordan has found a way how to lend them a proper filmic treatment. When asked in an interview about his wish to direct *The Butcher Boy*, Jordan has stated:

I wasn't sure. I read the book and thought there'd be a great movie in it. But I was very busy. So I hired Pat McCabe to write a draft, and he kind of avoided the book. So I began to write the script myself. And that's when I heard the voice of the kid, you know? And then I was hooked, so I decided to direct it. What was good was that Francie always imagined himself as a B-movie or comic-strip hero, so [the book itself] is cinematic. (Karger 52)

This is an interesting example of the different approaches of two artists coming from the different media. McCabe, who was able to produce an engaging literary text, couldn't find a way to make it cinematic and instead wrote different versions of the book, departing from the original idea. Jordan, on the other hand, has managed to extract the prevailing visual elements in the novel and also retain its narrative complexity.

While the book may appear as “an uncontrolled flood of words and disjointed fragments expressing the mental processes of a schizophrenic“ (Wallace 158), it is in fact a carefully balanced text depicting the gradual descent of a 12-year-old boy into the spiral of madness. In order to represent the state of schizophrenia, Wallace argues, McCabe has employed a number of textual strategies, establishing the dual mode in which madness and imaginary events are privileged over reason and the depiction of the real.[[8]](#footnote-8) The seemingly disjointed and fragmentary narrative can be understood as a complex Chinese box narrative, containing different stories within stories, unfolding various palimpsestic elements.

The narrator, Francie, has several literary and film antecedents. The literary style, the combination of the first-person narration and the stream of consciousness technique, is reminiscent of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, while the picaresque adventures of a little boy (Francie's trips to Dublin and Bundoran), resemble Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Among the films featuring similar themes, especially notable are Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, describing the coming-of-age of a 12-year-old Antoine Doinel in Paris, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, a portrayal of an equally psychopathic and violent protagonist, and Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, focusing on the fantastic world of two teenage girls, whose progressive detachment from the real world results in a gruesome and premeditated murder. *Heavenly Creatures* is perhaps the most similar to *The Butcher Boy* because of its depiction of the vanishing lines between the dreaming and the waking world and the strong impact the severance of someone's imaginary life can have on his/her behaviour. While Francie's fantasies were portrayed in an innocent way in the majority of the film, only when his illusions were shattered after the discovery of the ugly truth about his parents in Bundoran did his violent side finally erupt.

Two modern American independent films also feature similar themes. The elliptically narrated *Gummo* combines fantastic and realistic elements, creating an impressionistic collage of subversive themes. The voice-over narration, the story of troubled adolescents, the use of references from popular culture and fragmented narrative progression are some elements shared by both films.[[9]](#footnote-9) *River's Edge*, made a decade earlier, is an equally powerful portrayal of modern alienation and the loss of human feeling. A harrowing study of the coming-of-age in an insignificant small town, similar to Francie's hometown, the film also focuses on an individual whose sense of reality is deeply shattered and results in an unnecessary murder.

In analysing the film, McLoone (32-33) has singled out three techniques which enabled Jordan to render the first-person narration of the novel. The first is retaining the richness of Francie's idiomatic speech, used to an engrossing effect in the novel, the second is the voice-over narration of the older Francie, who is an unreliable narrator in the film, and the last is a visual depiction of Francie's fantasies, which has stimulated Jordan's involvement in the film, as had been described earlier in the text. Zucker's thorough analysis is even more detailed. When describing the defecation scene, Zucker has found a whole range of multiple narrative voices (96-7), where the dual narration of the young and old Francie intermingles and presents an amusing communicational interaction between two aspects of the same dramatic persona. What makes this scene even more potent in narratological terms is the introduction of two more dramatic personae, Phillip and Mrs. Nugent, both enacted by Francie, which makes the line between reality and fantasy extremely vague. In the course of the novel and the film, Francie enacts few more characters (Algernon Carruthers, The Butcher Boy, heroes from the realm of popular culture), lending a high level of complexity to his screen persona. In his adaptation Jordan, who has always been interested in the process of storytelling, constantly juxtaposes three distinct narrative points of view: “subjectivity (the diegetic young Francie), a second subjective point of view (old Francie) and an omniscient point of view (the camera)“ (Zucker 98). In this way Jordan constructs multiple narrative levels, which surpass even the narrative technique of the original novel, which only consists of the subjective narration and internal monologues of Francie.

*The Butcher Boy* adaptation opens[[10]](#footnote-10) in a seemingly fable-like fashion, with older Francie's voice-over narration: “When I was a young lad, 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, I lived in a town where they were all after me on account of what I had done on Mrs. Nugent. If she hadn't poked her nose in between me and Joe everything would have been all right“. There are two important themes evoked in this sequence: the potentially unreliable narrator, whose interpretations we will constantly have to question, and the immersion in the past, a specific feeling of nostalgia for past events. Francie's feelings towards Mrs. Nugent, whose family had returned from England, have a deeply metaphoric subtext of British domination of Ireland. The characters who had any contact with England are adulated in the smalltown society,[[11]](#footnote-11) presenting a visible level of stratification, where the English, or the ones who were in close contact with them, are elevated in society.

Francie, who lives in the dream world populated by heroes from science fiction and western films, is accompanied there by his best friend Joe, who represents his only profound emotional attachment. When this attachment has been broken by Mrs. Nugent's actions, Francie's only possible reaction is to retreat even more into his fantasy world and the idealized notion of the past. His disappointment in Bundoran, when the owner of the boarding house accidentally mentions the word pig regarding his father's behaviour, finally releases all the anger he has endured during his lifetime and initiates his final brutal killing of Mrs. Nugent.

There are three recurring symbols in the film. The first is the pig, the derogative word first used by Mrs. Nugent to describe the low social standing of the Bradys. Francie later works as The Butcher Boy and slaughters pigs while working for Mr. Leddy. The symbol of the pig reappears near the end of the film, when the lake where Francie and Joe are relaxing in one of Francie's flights of fancy, explodes as a result of nuclear annihilation. The fantasy sequence[[12]](#footnote-12) features the bodies of dead pigs and prepares the stage for Francie's murderous rage. The other symbol is the already mentioned John Wayne, the most common pop-cultural reference in the novel[[13]](#footnote-13), featuring prominently throughout the book. Jordan has substituted this symbol with allusions to Cuban missile crisis, which are constantly present in the film and are more evocative of the period when the story's action takes place. The third recurring symbol is Our Lady (Sinéad O'Connor), who is ironically the only character in the film who believes Francie and supports him in his actions. While there is a girl in the town who supposedly has visions of Madonna, Jordan chooses to present us visions of Our Lady as experienced by Francie, offering an interesting counterpoint to the hypocritical nature of Irish working class, where only Francie, the complete outsider in the community, has an access to higher spiritual spheres.

It is beyond doubt that Jordan has managed to successfully recreate the narrative complexity of McCabe's novel. In Levy's words, *The Butcher Boy*, “a brilliantly bold, haunting evocation of an intensely troubled and violent childhood“ is a remarkably faithful adaptation and Jordan's “most startingly original and accomplished film to date.“ James Berardinelli, describing the film as a mixture of dark comedy and social satire, thinks that it is “somewhat less successful as a character study“. The worst review of the film is by Lisa Alspector, whose opinion is that *The Butcher Boy* “fails miserably as satire, character study, and anything else it might have aspired to“. The performance by the newcomer Eamonn Owens has been universally praised and finally won him an award at the Berlin festival. Jordan has also received the Silver Bear for direction at the same festival. Although the film has managed to successfully integrate many elements from McCabe's novel, it is the opinion of the authors of the paper that the mood evoked in the adaptation is slightly out of tune. While McCabe's novel is a disturbing portrayal of a deranged psyche, Jordan's film is primarily a dark comedy, which strongly diminishes the impact of the novel. When Kubrick made his adaptation of *Barry Lyndon*, he was equally faced with the dilemma of how to present the imperfect observer used by Thackeray and concluded: “It might have worked as a comedy by the juxtaposition of Barry's version of the truth with the reality on the screen, but I don't think that *Barry Lyndon* should have been done as a comedy“ (Ciment 170). The same goes for Jordan's worthy, if somewhat flawed, adaptation of *The Butcher Boy*.

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**ABSTRACT**

**From McCabe to Jordan – Permutations of Themes and Narrative Discourses in**

***The Butcher Boy***

 This paper sets out to examine narrative discourses and a variety of themes employed in Patrick McCabe's 1992 novel *The Butcher Boy* and Neil Jordan's 1997 big-screen adaptation of the novel. The first section of the paper analyses main features of the utterly “frenzied” narrative McCabe uses and how this narrative technique is linked to the thematic concerns of *The Butcher Boy.* It focuses on the gradual decline into madness of the main protagonist / unreliable narrator accompanied by the construction of various identities under the influence of a ubiquitous popular culture. The second part of the paper is concerned with the general nature of Jordan’s films and their protagonists and then attempts to demonstrate to what extent the Irish director succeeded in adapting McCabe’s astounding narrative discourse to the film. The aim of this analysis is to draw comparisons between the novel and the film and point out that the latter does not quite live up to McCabe’s original work.

**Key words:** *The Butcher Boy*, narration, madness, identity, popular culture, film

**SAŽETAK**

**Od McCabea do Jordana – Permutacije tema i narativnih diskurza u romanu**

***The Butcher Boy***

 Ovaj članak analizira upotrebu narativnih diskurza i tema u romanu *The Butcher Boy* (1992) irskog autora Patricka McCabe, te u istoimenoj filmskoj adaptaciji redatelja Neila Jordana (1997). Prvi dio članka fokusira se na glavne značajke „grozničave“ naracije koju McCabe koristi i kako je ovakva naracija povezana s tematskim opredjeljenjima samog romana. U središtu je interesa prikaz postupno rastućeg ludila glavnog lika / nepouzdanog pripovjedača praćenog stvaranjem različitih identiteta pod utjecajem sveprisutne popularne kulture. Drugi se dio bavi prirodom Jordanovih filmova i njegovih junaka i nastoji pokazati u kolikoj je mjeri irski redatelj uspio u svojoj nakani da prenese na filmsko platno McCabeovu začudnu naraciju. Cilj je članka povući paralele između romana i filma i prikazati kako film ipak nije jednako kvalitetan kao originalni književni predložak.

**Ključne riječi:** *The Butcher Boy*, naracija, ludilo, identitet, popularna kultura, film

1. It is significant that McCabe chooses the family name Brady, the same one Edna O'Brien uses in the *Country Girls Trilogy* (for Caithleen Brady, one of her two heroines). This name connects the two highly dysfunctional families in that both mothers, submissive and passive women, die by drowning in a lake early on in the novel. The fathers are, needless to say, typical Irish fathers of twentieth century Irish fiction: good-for-nothing violent drunkards who exert detrimental influence on their children's lives. Both Francie and Caithleen (who paradoxically also commits suicide by drowning as a mature woman) are thus tragically affected by the early loss of a mother figure and an aggressive father. Cf. O'Brien, Edna. *The Country Girls and Epilogue* (1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It was quite obvious around this time that the insular concept of Irish life which advocated rigid adherence and subjection to the precepts of the family and church could not hold any more. Along with the growing popularity of the cinema, newspapers, magazines, radio and particularly television as the newly emerging media began to offer insights into more current lifestyles and ideas. In this respect (and in this respect only), Francie is a typical teenager living in Ireland in the sixties. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Inglis remarks on the symbolism of J. F. Kennedy’s picture in many Irish homes in the second half of the twentieth century. Kennedy was a descendant of the Irish diaspora and the first Roman Catholic to be elected President of the United States. “The Irish adored J. F. Kennedy,” Inglis says. “He was like a saint. When Kennedy died many people put up his picture on the mantelpiece, often alongside pictures of Jesus and that other great reformer, Pope John XXIII” (87). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Herron and Ellen McWilliams in their respective articles refer to de Valera's famous 1943 radio speech in which the then Ireland’s president envisages the classical image of Catholic Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. McWilliams argues that Mccabe’s psychotic characters “present a recipe designed to explode rather than preserve” such nostalgic images fostered by de Valera and the ideology of the conservative Irish state (395). In a similar vein, Tom Herron claims that *The Butcher Boy* openly exposes and ridicules his utopian vision. De Valera’s imagined Ireland is certainly not, as he suggests, the Ireland that Francie and his family as the “dysfunctional, the poor, the drunken, the emotionally scarred, the lost”, inhabit (176).  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Zucker 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The deeply unsettling history of Ireland has been depicted in Jordan's *Michael Collins*. Michael Collins was involved in the Easter Sunday Uprising of 1916 and one of the leading members of the Irish Republican Army. After the Anglo-Irish War (1919-21), Collins was summoned to London as the representative of Ireland and signed the treaty partitioning the country into the Irish and English governed entities. This outcome was deeply resented by Irish nationalists, led by the president of Sinn Féin, Eamon De Valera, who inititated the civil war in 1922, ending with the assassination of Michael Collins. The partition has been the cause of constant clashes between the Irish and the British. Apart from *Michael Collins*, the subtext of Anglo-Irish troubled relations is also present in *Angel*, Jordan's first film. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Angel* pays homage to Antonioni by showing the poster of his famous film *L'Avventura*. Similar existentialist threads can be found in films by Aki Kaurismäki (*Shadows in Paradise*, *The Match Factory Girl*, *Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatiana*, to name just a few), which all present the deep loss of feeling and alienation in modern Finland. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wallace's analysis is grounded in theoretical notions of Michel Foucault, especially his *Madness and Civilization; A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, which are strongly reminiscent of the dual Yeatsian and Romanticist paradigm, paving the way for the impact of the Gothic. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The main protagonist's name, Bunny Boy, echoes Francie's nickname The Butcher Boy, and the final sections of the films feature Roy Orbison's and Frank Sinatra's songs, respectively. Both films were made in the same year. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Before these words we see the opening titles of the film, juxtaposing various images from comic strips, showing Francie's deep detachment from reality and also setting the pattern for many references from popular culture in the film. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The same feelings are also directed towards Alo, Francie's uncle who has worked in London for many years. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This sequence is one of the rare instances where the action has been presented from an external point of view, as opposed to Francie's internalized narration. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is interesting to note that all Francie’s heroes are either American (John Wayne, heroes of SF films, and comic book heroes) or British (Francie's favourite football team is Manchester United – cf. McCabe 53), opening the way for an analysis of both the novel and the film in neocolonial terms. For an interesting discussion, cf. Gauthier. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)