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Fictional Scotland: A “Realm of the Imagination” in Film Drama and Literature

This article examines the issues of media representation and cultural distinctiveness within Scotland, one of many national entities currently denied political and cultural expression at the sub–nation state level. Current output of Scotland’s television and film industries is compared with traditional and modern Scottish literature to see which themes and subjects have been preserved, how representative these themes are of Scotland, and whether they remain distinct from dominant English and American trends. The author argues that Scottish media output remains culturally and nationally distinctive in terms of recurring patterns in the selection of various themes and discourses. However, in the absence of a modern Scottish polity that could give political and cultural expression to the country, these themes, discourses, and patterns of use remain inherently regressive and mythic, placing Scottish cultural identity squarely in Scotland’s past rather than its present or its expectations of the future.

Introduction

In 1996, filmgoers in America and across the world were enthralled by two romantic epics about Scotland that featured real historical characters in (supposedly) factual circumstances: Braveheart and Rob Roy. The violent yet uplifting lives of William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, and Rob Roy MacGregor make wonderful tales, and the milieu in which their actions are played out—the Highlands of Scotland—provides a superb cinematic backdrop. There’s plenty of color as well, both in the dress and the language, to keep audiences engaged. Yet, in spite of the strong factual basis for these narratives (Wallace, for example, truly is regarded as a national hero in Scotland), the lingering impression of these films—kilts, misty glens, haunting Celtic music, oppressive English soldiers—remains somehow disjointed, ephemeral, seemingly mythical. It is almost as if the place where these events took place never...
really existed at all and resides only vaguely in our collective imagination, like some Atlantis or Valhalla. Perhaps, to most filmgoers and TV viewers, Brigadoon doesn’t seem so far-fetched after all.

Still, this image of Highland and tartan history is one in which most members of the Scottish nation still place a great deal of stock, at least when applied to literature and film. Even more confounding to foreign sensibilities, there are other, equally salient ways of viewing Scotland and the Scots that are prevalent in fiction about that small country. Such alternate discourses evoke images as contrary as Glasgow hard men and prim Edinburgh lawyers; Clyde shipbuilders and rural, very proper Presbyterian villagers; plucky Gaels and ruddy-cheeked, whisky-swilling Highlanders in ridiculous plaid dress. Yet, although all of these images seem to be recognizably “Scottish,” they have little to do with the reality of everyday Scotland, even though they retain a role in preserving many Scots’ sense of national identity.

The purpose of this article is to examine this conundrum more closely and attempt to offer some explanations for the rather dissonant articulation of Scottish identity and its representation still seen in literature and film. Scotland’s current cultural and political status offers some fascinating insights to issues of media representation of small nations in general and nations bereft of direct political representation in particular. The experience of Scotland, a small country whose international literary and media profiles dwarf its physical size, might well be pertinent to other countries trying to define their cultural boundaries in relation to larger and more powerful neighbors.

This work takes its title from a phrase used by John Brown in his article “Love and Death in the Scottish Cinema.” In the article, which addresses many of the underlying common traits and themes in Scottish filmmaking, Brown refers to Scotland as an entity that exists—for the purposes of filmmakers, writers, politicians, and ordinary people alike—only in the “realm of the imagination” (Brown 1988, 2). Quite why he would say such a thing is fundamental to this study of Scottish fictional themes and how they have developed in literary and dramatic forms to present-day television and film.

Brown is also useful in this context in that he sees the traditional barriers between film and television as “economically, aesthetically and critically obsolete,” and prefers to view the products of these two media as if they were one (Brown 1988, 2). Thus, following this convention, BBC Scotland productions such as Tutti Frutti can be judged directly alongside feature films like Local Hero. It is a convention that is followed in this article, since it simplifies any broader comparisons to be made between filmed and literary fiction. Although one or two obvious distinctions remain—for example, in the realm of TV comedy and soap operas—there is enough common ground among all forms of filmed Scottish drama for them to be treated in a like manner.
Nations and Nationalism

Because this article examines the relationship between Scottish national identity and representations of that identity, some clarification of the origins and use of these terms, and their use in this context, is called for. When it comes to defining the terms nation and nationalism, researchers in recent years have tended to fall into two general yet distinct camps: what Anthony D. Smith calls the “primordialists” and the “modernists” (Smith 1996, 12). The former tend to see nations as essential, basic units of social cohesion, a universal attribute of humanity; the latter, represented by sociologists such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Liah Greenfield, have pronounced the nation an essentially modern creation, with few roots in premodern times. Primordialists argue that every so-called nation has constructed for itself a sense of national identity, built up partly on its observations and stereotypes of both its own people and other nations. Although subject to alteration and development, it is these stereotypes that form the web of collective myths and memories that are the stuff of national identity, built up over centuries and as old as human society itself. Modernists might agree with much of that, but place the concept and process of nationhood in the specific context of modern Western society (particularly in Europe); human beings might have sustained distinctive ethnic and cultural patterns in earlier eras, but that was not nationalism as we understand it today. In this latter context, Anderson’s description of a nation as an “imagined political community” has been widely quoted. It is imagined, he posits, “because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community.” It is a community, he goes on, because it is “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991, 6). This is a useful definition, although its modernist presumptions make it problematic. Another way to deal with the concept of nationalism is to chart a course between the primordialists and the modernists. This “perennialist” position, held by Smith and others, still emphasizes “the antiquity of collective cultural ties and sentiments” but “falls well short of any presumption that such ties are universal” (Smith 1996, 12). Finally, perhaps the simplest working appraisal of this slippery concept comes from historian Eric Hobsbawm, who, for the purposes of his work, “assumes no a priori definition of what constitutes a nation. As an initial working assumption any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a ‘nation,’ will be treated as such” (Hobsbawm 1990, 6).
Those Pernicious Discourses: Tartanry, Kailyardism, and Clydesideism

When talking about Scottish fictional themes, the problem of accurately addressing the issue of representation—the way Scots and Scotland are portrayed and the discourses used for their portrayal—appears difficult. This article does not discuss the rights, wrongs, and regressive tendencies of tartanry, kailyardism, and Clydesideism, but these discourses have to be recognized and acknowledged, since they are prevalent in many works produced by Scottish film-makers—just as they were, and still are, in Scottish literature. They are the basis of such well-known stereotypes as the kilted buffoon; the drunken, hard-bitten Scotsman; and the canny, tight-fisted Scotsman on the make.

So where do these supposedly pernicious discourses in Scottish drama—whether in written or filmed form—come from? Meech and Kilborn’s (1992) encapsulated definitions, which serve as a useful introduction, make it quite clear that, even today, in the world of current Scottish filmed output,

The central and abiding myths are those of the kailyard (a nostalgic and overly sentimental parochialism) and of tartanry (heavily romanticized depictions of heroic deeds of yesteryear against spectacular Highland backdrops). The other stereotype that has come to the fore in the last two decades has been that of the “dark and dangerous city” (frequently Glasgow) where urban squalor, religious strife and social breakdown provide fast-moving thrillers or social realism pieces (e.g., The Big Man, 1990). (p. 254)

The Glasgow-centered “dark and dangerous city” stereotype mentioned above corresponds to the discourse of “Clydesideism” referred to here (although the recent literary efforts of Irvine Welsh, James Kelman, and others to transplant this discourse’s elements to Edinburgh show that it retains resonance beyond the Clydeside area). The Big Man, based on a book of the same name by William McIlvanney (1986), is just one recent cinematic manifestation of this discourse, which has run through Scottish drama for much of this century. Clydesideism, originally coined to refer to “the nostalgic idealization of the working class in heavy industries now on the verge of extinction and the associated all-male culture in which class bitterness was combined with football” (Calder 1994, 230), has taken on darker connotations in recent years, following the actual collapse of most of these heavy industries and the resulting unemployment and social dislocation. It is now regularly bolstered by such television stalwarts as the Clydeside-based police drama Taggart and the comedy Rab C. Nesbitt. In some respects, Clydesideism has become so pervasive that it often seems that audiences would find it difficult to relate to drama situated in West-Central Scotland in any other way.
Of all the prominent Scottish discourses reviewed in this article, tartanry is the oldest, the most pervasive, and probably the most easily identifiable to non-Scots—1996’s *Rob Roy* and *Braveheart* are of course only the latest manifestations of this still-powerful discourse. All three discourses are fairly modern manifestations of “Scotland,” however, having grown out of the Victorian age or its early-twentieth-century aftermath. Tartanry can find its literary roots quite clearly in the early-nineteenth-century novels of Sir Walter Scott. Works such as *Waverley* and *The Heart of Midlothian* heralded a new era of fascination with all things Highland among Americans and English alike, following a century of fairly strenuous efforts by the British government to emasculate that very same culture in an effort to remove the military threat posed to the state by the Jacobite Highlands. Indeed, tartanry, a Victorian fad whose adherents included Queen Victoria herself, could be construed as a nineteenth-century affliction to Scottish culture whose effects have never completely worn off.

The kailyard ethic, although traced by some to Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* (e.g., see Craig 1982, 44-45), finds its strongest roots in a small group of Scottish authors of the later nineteenth century—including J. M. Barrie, now best known for his *Peter Pan*—whose foremost common cause was a powerful commitment to the fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Indeed, many of the genre’s prime authors, although not Barrie himself, were ministers in that church. Kailyardism celebrated a cloying, sanitized, and sentimentalized version of Scottish working-class life, guaranteed to win popularity with audiences eager to avoid or ignore the harsh realities of that life in the late nineteenth century. Kailyard fiction typically “portrayed ‘life as seen from the Free Kirk manse’; from this viewpoint Scottish characters were always quaint, the way Scots spoke was comical, the situations Scots found themselves in were coy” (Bold 1983, 42). The kailyard ethic still exists in some mass media forms today, most famously within the pages of the *Sunday Post*, Scotland’s largest selling Sunday newspaper.

In relation to tartanry, Clydesideism, and kailyardism, a number of seemingly recurrent Scottish themes, such as hopelessness, romanticism, and strong community values, often take their cue from one or more of these discourses while at the same time running through and across them. John Caughie, a Scottish film historian, recognizes the perniciousness of such themes feeding into the underlying discourses of fictional Scotland, which in turn fix Scottish culture in a mythical past where, according to Cairns Craig (1982, 27), the country’s true cultural assets are denied any contemporary form of expression. Of course, this point begs the question of just what Scotland’s true “cultural assets” actually are—something this article attempts to investigate.

It is important, and only fair, to note here that these aforementioned discourses have emanated mainly from native Scots, not foreigners, and the
popularity of dramas based on these discourses has been apparent in Scotland, as elsewhere. However, such genres and their discourses have traditionally been aimed primarily at foreign, not Scottish, consumption; indeed, they have often been most enthusiastically received in other countries remote from the realities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scotland. What is true of literature remains true of filmed output. Romantic-historic epics such as Braveheart, Rob Roy, and Highlander, financed outside Scotland, enjoy great success in overseas markets, while Taggart is watched avidly by audiences from the United States to New Zealand.

Another factor, which transcends the discourses mentioned above, needs explication because of its enormous impact on Scottish culture: the country’s relationship with England. This is important, since a discussion of distinctiveness has to clarify from whom or what Scots and Scottishness are distinct. In this case, it seems that the benchmark in this test must be England. The dominating partner in the union to which at present Scotland is bound, England’s cultural hegemony remains as strong as ever, against which a separate Scottish identity must struggle for recognition. In this regard, Scots trying to preserve their cultural distinctiveness share much in common with their counterparts in Ireland and Wales. The importance of England as a rallying point for Scottish identity, however defined, cannot be underestimated. According to Meech and Kilborn (1992, 246), “Scottish collective identity defines itself, to a significant degree, by differences in attitudes, values and behavior between the Scots and the English.” Put more viscerally, “to be Scottish is, to some degree, to dislike or resent the English” (Dickson 1989, 61).

In the introduction to his book Modern Scottish Literature, Bold (1983, 1) points out that “although Scotland is not officially an independent state, Scottishness is a recognized state of mind: sometimes an independent state of mind, occasionally a theocratic state of mind, frequently a confused state of mind.” Despite this, and despite all the ambiguities created by the aforementioned discourses and their stereotypes, Bold has no doubt about the importance of fictional drama, in both constructing and preserving Scotland’s present-day sense of self. This opinion is echoed by Caughie (1982, 56), who, in approaching the topic from within the context of television, stated: “It is the fictional and dramatic representation of Scotland and Scottishness which seems to offer the points of identification for a Scottish identity.”

Recent Scottish Output in Cinema and Television

In terms of sheer volume of filmed cultural output, the struggle to represent Scotland and the Scots adequately on film is still very much an uneven one. Scotland, without a proper film industry to speak of, produces fewer than two feature films a year at present (Meech and Kilborn 1992, 245). Meanwhile, in
television, the production output of just one English commercial station, Yorkshire Television, eclipses that of all Scottish public and private sector producers—including BBC Scotland, Scottish Television, Grampian Television, and sixty independent production companies—for all four U.K. terrestrial channels (Macdonald 1990, 195). Little has changed in this area since the early 1990s. Yet, it is to this regrettably limited level of Scottish output that we must look for an examination of nationally distinctive themes in filmed drama.

Although their contribution has been quite small, the television companies mentioned above still have provided the major source for film financing and production in Scotland. To this list should be added Channel 4, a London-based television channel designed to cater to minority interests, and the Scottish Film Production Fund, a government-sponsored body. Channel 4 in particular has become increasingly prolific in its support of British filmmaking in the late 1980s and 1990s, partially funding such critical and commercial successes as My Beautiful Launderette and, from Scotland, Heavenly Pursuits. In return for pumping money into film projects, the minority-interest channel secures part of the profits from the film (if there are any) plus television screening rights in the United Kingdom. In one of its latest, and perhaps greatest, coups to date, Channel 4 is reaping the rewards for having fully financed Trainspotting in 1994, with 1.7 million pounds sterling in development funds (O’Hagan 1996, 8).

Despite the still low levels of domestic media production overall, Scottish film and television fiction production has become more prolific and visible over the past fifteen years or so, allowing—for perhaps the first time—home-grown products to match or exceed external representations of Scotland (Caughie 1982, 34). For this reason, the themes displayed in dramas like Tutti Frutti, Local Hero, The Bogie Man, Take the High Road, and Taggart—and even comedies such as Rab C. Nesbitt—become central to a consideration of the central issue of Scotland’s national and cultural distinctiveness.

Recurrent and Dominant Themes

Setting aside the sticky problem of representation for the moment, a closer examination needs to be made of the various themes that recur throughout Scotland’s current filmed fictional output, how closely these relate to literary themes, and, most important, what conclusions can be drawn from this investigation about the distinctiveness of Scotland’s national character and culture.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of all the aforementioned visual texts is the multiplicity of themes within each of them and across all of them, ranging from the power of superstition to the despair of unemployment, from rural beauty to urban wasteland, and from traditional family values to twentieth-century Americana. If we start to break down our examination of Scotland’s
recent filmed output into individual programs, we can see many of these points coming through loud and clear. Urban blight, hopelessness, and despair are constant themes in title character Rab C. Nesbitt’s view of life in working-class Govan; such themes also appear throughout *Tutti Frutti* and *Taggart*. Likewise, the power of the landscape and the mysticism of the supernatural remain a constant background force in *Local Hero* and *Sunset Song*—always insinuated but rarely openly alluded to—just as the power of religious bigotry fulfills a similar function in *Rab C. Nesbitt*, *Tutti Frutti*, and *Taggart*. Strong, sometimes overbearing, American cultural influences are to be found in *Tutti Frutti*, *Your Cheatin’ Heart*, and *The Bogie Man*, and are never far from the surface in much of Scottish filmed drama.

Although many themes found in television and film also have antecedents in the theater, the majority of such themes has stronger roots in Scotland’s literary output; indeed, much of Scotland’s filmed output can trace a direct thematic line to Scottish novels and short stories. Thus, for example, the despair and hopelessness so often seen in *Rab C. Nesbitt* is vividly apparent in Kelman’s (1989) “Not Not While the Giro” and Naomi Mitchison’s (1989) “A Matter of Behaviour,” whereas *Local Hero*’s allusions to the supernatural can be seen in a whole host of short stories, from James Hogg’s (1983) “The Brownie of the Black Haggs” to George MacDonald’s (1989) “The Golden Key.” The greatest cultural source for Scottish filmmaking remains Scotland’s literary roots, both distant and recent. Many of the discourses and thematic elements in Scottish literature—from sources as diverse as Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s (1950) *Sunset Song* and McIvanney’s *The Big Man*—have been mined, mixed, and regurgitated by current scriptwriters and producers to provide the basis for much of Scotland’s film production. If we look more closely at a selection of recent film output, this becomes clear.

*Rab C. Nesbitt*, an example from the comedy genre, is full of recurrent themes previously widely covered in literature. The harshness of Rab’s life—in this case in Govan, a notorious working-class district of Glasgow—is a theme seen in numerous Scottish short stories, both in urban settings (“Not Not While the Giro”) and rural milieus (Gibbon’s [1983] “Smeddum”). The latter example’s treatment of a strong woman (Meg Menzies) surrounded by inept or uncaring males is a theme repeated in the shape of Rab’s long-suffering wife Mary. The occasional anti-English slant in the series, most often expounded by Jamesie Cotter—interestingly the character with the greatest inferiority complex—is echoed in John Herdman’s (1989) short story “Clapperton,” whose central character of the same name is also a pathetic antihero lashing out at the English out of displaced frustration. What is relatively new, however, is for these themes to be framed within the genre of comedy (and usually dark comedy at that).
Much of Rab C. Nesbitt's other thematic and spiritual baggage—the sense of urban community (and urban blight), masculinity, the working class “wee man” as philosopher, despair and misery, the harshness of life and language, the place of religion, the demon drink—can be seen clearly laid out in short stories by Kelman, Tom Leonard (“Honest,” 1989), and Edward Gaitens (1989), whose vivid description of an impromptu Govan house party, complete with plenty of whisky and dancing, in “A Wee Nip” could have been scripted directly into an episode of the BBC Scotland comedy series. The power and influence of these themes over Scottish film should not be underestimated: Bill Douglas’s feature My Ain Folk, to take another example, investigates despair, loneliness, and the harshness of life with all the power of, say, Kelman’s works.

Douglas’s work aside, the line between black comedy and biting social commentary in Scotland has become blurred in recent years, whether the genre is a half-hour sitcom such as Rab C. Nesbitt or a two-hour feature film such as Shallow Grave or Trainspotting. Even within the very stylish film adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s (1996) novel Trainspotting, for example, the themes of hopelessness and despair are very prevalent, as is a strong anti-English bent (albeit from an intensely self-deprecatory national perspective), portrayed most virulently in the person of Renton:

Fuckin failures in a country [Scotland] ay failures. It’s nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We couldn’t even pick a decent, healthy, vibrant culture to be colonised by. No. We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don’t hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots. (p. 78)

Surprisingly perhaps, given its resonance within much of the Scottish population, anti-Englishness does not often appear explicitly in Scottish filmed drama, at least not in any present-day manifestation. Perhaps this is simply a commercial consideration among Scottish filmmakers and producers desirous of displaying their products to a British rather than just a Scottish audience. Still, it occasionally comes close to the surface, as this hilarious excerpt from Rab C. Nesbitt, in which Rab confronts an English soldier on maneuvers in the Highlands, indicates:

MILITARY MAN. Oh, sorry Jock. Manoeuvres.
NESBITT. I’ll give yi manoeuvres, boy. I’ll manoeuvre my toe right up yir archibald and do collateral damage to yir colon! (Closing turf lid on the military man.) . . . Gawn, get doon that strategic cesspit where yi belong! It’s high time the silent majority opened wur yaps, bared wur teeth and put wur bliddy foot down!

[Rab] slams his foot down hard on the lid, trapping the military man’s fingers.
... That’s for Dounreay!
*Another stomp, another yell.*
... That’s for Hunterston!
*Another stomp, another yell.*
... And that’s for...
... And that’s for 9-3 at Wembley in 1961!

(*To audience.*) Ah well, that’s Scottish history avenged. I think I’ll just take a walk across the water back to Nesbitt Castle noo. (Pattison 1992, 67)

Anti-Englishness apart, many of these same themes surface in another urban-based TV drama, *Taggart*—although in this case they are also challenged by powerful thematic elements of the U.S./British “cop show” genre. Although it occasionally moves away from the downtrodden imagery of urban blight, the series never strays too far from the spirit of *No Mean City* (celebrated in the series’ theme song) or its more recent antecedent, the tough Glasgow policeman Laidlaw in McIlvanney’s novel of the same name. John Byrne’s *Tutti Frutti* also draws on some of the same themes—particularly male dominance, despair and hopelessness, the effects of (Roman Catholic) religion on the characters, and the role of the strong woman subverted by dominant masculinity (in the form of Suzi Kettles and Vincent Diver’s wife). However, Byrne adds one significant new theme: the effect of American culture on Scotland, particularly the west of Scotland. This is a theme that Byrne carries through much of his dramatic work, from the country-and-western singers of *Your Cheatin’ Heart* to the American-style fifties rock group the Majestics in his earlier *Tutti Frutti*, which grafts a veneer of Americana to a group of ordinary, working-class, Irish-Catholic Glasgow lads.

The strong American influence in Scottish film output is one of Scotland’s most interesting thematic developments, since it has no traditional basis or clear antecedents in Scottish literature (although the subject has been broached in the theater through the plays of Byrne and others) and traces its origins to the profound impact in Scotland of American cinema. There has been surprisingly little research on this subject given the huge popularity of American culture—and in particular American films—in Scotland for most of this century. Filmgoing was, in the 1930s and 1940s, a way of life for many in Scotland, particularly in Glasgow (Scullion 1990, 43). The predominance and popularity of Hollywood over the domestic (i.e., English) competition is indicated by a letter from a contemporary Scottish film distributor, quoted by Scullion (1990, 44), revealing that 90 percent of all British films made during this period “flopped” in Scotland. This long-held bias against the British product has had a substantial effect on Scottish popular culture in the later years of the twentieth century. Its influence is still prevalent in present-day films such as *Soft Top Hard Shoulder*, a Scottish film that takes the form of an American road film.
The peculiarly Scottish love affair with the Golden Age of Hollywood is also celebrated in *The Bogie Man*. Some of the Scottish themes already discussed, such as depression, unemployment, and despair, are dealt with in this production. (For example, Maurice Roëves’s down-and-out character at the soup kitchen is a stereotype that nicely combines these aforementioned traits.) However, as is the case in *Taggart* and elsewhere, these themes merely form the narrative canvas for the central subject of the film; in this case, the evocation of 1940s film noir genre in 1990s Glasgow and the fusing of aspects of Scottish and (recreated) American culture. The implications of developments such as this for Scottish culture are as important as they are misunderstood, and shall be discussed in more detail later.

The presence of the supernatural is something that has become less dominant in modern Scottish film, although its presence is still perceptible. The unstated yet omnipresent power of the ancient standing stones in *Sunset Song* and the role of the mermaid-like Marina in *Local Hero* are due testimonial to the fact that the supernatural still has a place in film drama. The Brownie, or fairy, in Hoggs’s “The Brownie of the Black Haggis,” the mysterious woman in Hoggs’s “Seeking the Houdy” (1989), and the references to the supernatural in MacDonald’s “The Golden Key” are all manifestations of what Murray (1983) calls “an obsession in Scottish literature.” Notably, these manifestations of the mysterious and the supernatural often take the form of women. This theme is often extended in Scottish fiction to show females as mysterious creatures unfathomable to simple men, such as in the film *Gregory’s Girl* or in Herdman’s “Clapperton.”

In the narratives of both *Local Hero* and *Sunset Song*, however, the spiritual element seems to be tied to a wider sense of magic about the land and its people. Nature’s beauty, the feeling of timelessness, and the awe surrounding Scotland’s natural phenomena (such as the aurora borealis in *Local Hero*) are recurrent themes in Scottish film—echoed also in *Taggart*, *Rab C. Nesbitt*, and *Trainspotting*. Of course, because it is Scotland we’re talking about, such beauty is often deeply tinged with regret and melancholy. In the film version of *Trainspotting*, for example, Renton waits until he has been dragged into the Highlands by his mates before snapping at them about how “crap” it is to be Scottish. Once again, these themes can also be found in numerous short stories, from George Mackay Brown’s (1989) “Celia” to Eona Macnicol’s (1989) “The Small Herdsman.”

Even among the beauty and tranquility of *Local Hero*, there lurks a darker force that comes to the fore near the end of the film, when the villagers march on the intransigent old beachcomber Ben’s hut to force him to sell his beach to make way for an oil terminal. The potential of violence and evil is quickly averted, but for a moment its stark presence is quite unsettling in this otherwise
warmhearted film. This theme of underlying darkness or evil is found in much Scottish writing, such as “The Small Herdsman,” in which the gentle idyll of the countryside is shattered by the discovery of the previous torture dealt out to the character of poor Wee Wattie and his dog.

Articulation of Scottish Themes, Contexts, and Patterns of Use

Having examined some of the main recurrent themes in Scottish film and literature, we finally have to ask just how nationally distinctive these themes are, and what conclusions can be drawn about this very complex, confused small country and its culture. This article has reflected on the importance of fiction in constructing and maintaining Scotland’s national identity and the ability of Scots to find a meaningful sense of identification with their nation. The problem, still, is to divine exactly how Scottish fiction helps us to arrive at such an identification. There is no simple way to address this problem. Perhaps one answer is that Scotland has lost all claims to a cohesive, viable, and distinctive identity. (Such charges are still periodically made against sub–nation state groups around the world.) Or perhaps a Scottish identity, or identities, remains, but it is too diffuse at present to be plainly articulated by Scots or anyone else. Both these positions are arguable but ultimately unfair. Scottish identity and representation—like those of culturally hegemonized minorities the world over—do have a solid foundation. It is simply a matter of identifying that foundation and recognizing it for what it has become at the close of the twentieth century.

Certainly, the foundation will not be found within the flawed discourses of tartanry, kailyardism, and Clydesideism. However, an examination of other Scottish themes presents its own set of problems. Looking at such a plurality of themes as we have seen, one can see how their sheer variety and diversity can cause major problems when we try to talk about their “Scottishness.” Unemployment, despair, loneliness, the supernatural, masculinity, and strong American influences are among the themes examined in this article. Apart from the fact that they are all so diverse, these and other themes certainly are not uniquely Scottish; indeed, they can be found in theatrical and literary works all across the world. Although not unique to Scotland, it could be argued that they are more relevant to Scotland, in that they are emphasized more frequently in Scotland than in England or elsewhere, or used in certain combinations distinctive in a Scottish context. Rab C. Nesbitt’s emphasis on unemployment and social deprivation, for example, could be said to be a deft exposition of Scottish themes—either individually or in combination—simply because they appear so often in other Scottish dramas. However, it seems to me that this argument, on its own, is fraught with danger and can be seen all too easily as a
subjective value judgment by overzealous Scots desperate to find something unique about their country’s culture. All these themes can be, and are, repeated outside Scotland, and there is nothing to say that Scots can claim any sort of cultural sovereignty over them. There has to be more to Scottish fiction and its cultural articulation if it is to be seen as truly distinct from that of other countries.

On the other hand, the contexts and patterns of use in which these themes appear, and which are articulated and reinforced in Scottish drama, could be said to be more nationally distinctive than simply the themes themselves. (By contexts and patterns of use, I simply mean the ways in which these themes are combined and articulated to make up the final fictional product.) The fact that these patterns of use are so multifaceted and subject to foreign influence does not necessarily reduce their Scottishness; it just makes the job of defining what is Scottish all the more difficult. As Craig (1990) bluntly contends,

> Because Scotland has been force-fed the dominant powers’ cultural values, because it has been imperialised and has committed linguacide, it can have no one tradition, no one “centre” from which to assert its identity. . . . And yet, it is in the local dialogue of these alien things that its unique contemporary creativity is generated. (p. 27)

This comment speaks eloquently to the ability of some sort of Scottish culture to reformulate itself even within the powerful hegemonic influences of England and the United States. To understand how and why this is so, it is important to appreciate the role of these contexts and patterns of use. The prevalence of nostalgia, sentiment, escapism, fantasy, and so on are all significant in this regard, since they combine to give shape to these patterns of use and allow “Scottish” themes and narratives to be understood and appreciated in the most meaningful way.

Conclusion

The questions remain. In terms of representations of Scotland, just what can we discern as culturally distinctive in the contexts and patterns of use in the themes and discourses we have uncovered in literary and filmed fiction, and what does this say about the position of Scotland in the United Kingdom and the world? Referring to the majority of recent Scottish film output, Brown draws attention to “the remarkable extent to which these [Scottish] movies act as fables and parables. Very few of them offer themselves by contrast simply as naturalistic slices of life” (Brown 1988, 5). For example, *Tutti Frutti’s* emphasis on American themes is placed within a nostalgic context, with the band unable to deal with the melancholy present and looking back with a sense of
wonder to a better time in the past. Also, according to Brown, this serial works on an allegorical level, with the decline of the Majestics representing the decline of Scotland and the disillusionment of its people. A similar thing happens in *Trainspotting*. The decline into heroin addiction of Tommy—the footballer who, alone among his friends, seemed to have a chance at a reasonably bright future—has wider implications for the state of Scotland and its future.\(^2\) Numerous other features, such as *Your Cheatin' Heart*, *The Bogie Man*, and even *Rab C. Nesbitt* and *Local Hero*, could be seen in a similar light, each drifting into sentiment and each with its own allegorical allusions to the state of the Scots and Scotland. It is unfortunate, although probably inevitable, that in following this path, these narratives often turn into escapist fantasies. Scottish drama appears incapable of facing squarely up to the future and all it has in store.

The problem of how to present Scotland and the Scots in a progressive manner therefore remains. Julie Watt (1987, 55) argues that “while the rest of the world gets on with the twentieth century, in our films Scotland continues to stand where she did, for we dodge issues that might lead to change.” This reactionism and preoccupation with the past does seem to give a better indication of the Scottish identity.

We can conclude, then, that concentrating attention on the way with which these contexts and patterns of use in Scottish film and literature are treated—rather than simply examining the themes and discourses on their own—indicates something that is, after all, nationally distinctive about Scottish culture. Such an approach is both constructive and appropriate, and it might also be usefully replicated in relation to sub–nation state groups in other parts of the world. Unfortunately for Scotland, however, it still doesn’t allow a clean escape from what Meech and Kilborn (1992, 246) call “the question of how Scotland can be adequately represented on screen without falling foul of those distorting Scottish myths [and their associated discourses and stereotypes] which have persevered both inside and particularly outside the country for so long.”

There is a sense of emptiness, of a vacuum, surrounding all representations of modern-day Scotland, a vacuum that in many ways reflects reality—captured perfectly in both the book and film versions of *Trainspotting*, for example. It at least seems clear that Scotland’s tenuous political condition plays a role in the preservation of this cultural vacuum. Recent political developments notwithstanding, \(^3\) Scotland’s present ambiguous state of constitutional affairs—with a distinctive national identity from the past but without a real political dimension to anchor and articulate that identity in the present—has made it unable to represent itself or its people in a modern or progressive manner. As long as this political situation remains unchanged, the country will keep returning to that “realm of the imagination” so beloved of Scottish fiction.
Notes

1. This 1990 film, directed by David Leland, features Liam Neeson in the title role of Dan Scoular, an out-of-work miner lured into the dark world of bare-knuckle fighting.

2. One of Scotland’s most successful television exports, Taggart is produced by Scottish Television, a commercial channel. It starred the late Mark McManus as Detective Chief Inspector Jim Taggart, a tough Glasgow homicide cop. (Following McManus’s death, the series continued with the Taggart’s sidekick, Sergeant Mike Jardine, played by James MacPherson, taking the lead role.) In many ways, it is framed as a standard police drama series, except that it is the only example of this genre currently emanating from Scotland.

3. BBC Scotland’s successful comedy revolves around the title character (played by Gregor Fisher) and his family, all of whom live together in Govan, one of Glasgow’s most socially deprived neighborhoods. It is a rare example of a Scottish comedy being successfully networked throughout the United Kingdom.

4. A BBC Scotland Production from 1987, Tutti Frutti was adapted from the stage play of the same name by the playwright John Byrne. It starred Robbie Coltrane and Emma Thomson.

5. Local Hero, a rare international success for Scottish feature filmmaking, was directed by Bill Forsyth. Released in 1983, this story of a young American oil executive’s attempt to buy up land for an oil refinery in coastal Scotland featured Peter Riegert, Burt Lancaster, Denis Lawson, and Peter Capaldi.

6. Produced by Paul Pender for BBC Scotland in 1990, The Bogie Man was a Christmas special that placed Robbie Coltrane in the lead role of a mental institution escapee at loose among Glasgow’s underworld.

7. Scottish Television’s long-running soap opera Take the High Road deals with the residents of a small fictional Highland village called Glendarroch.

8. Adapted from the book of the same name by Gibbon (part of the trilogy A Scots Quair), Sunset Song was a rural drama produced by BBC Scotland in 1972.

9. Your Cheatin’ Heart, produced in 1990, was another serial written by John Byrne for BBC Scotland, following the success of Tutti Frutti.

10. Soft Top Hard Shoulder, a 1992 film directed by Stefan Schwartz, starred Peter Capaldi and Elaine Collins in a comical story centering on a newly acquainted couple driving north from London to Glasgow.

11. Gregory’s Girl (1981), a comedy directed by Bill Forsyth, centers on the title character Gregory (played by John Gordon-Sinclair), a gawky youth finding out all about dating girls within the confines of Cumbernauld, his Scottish “new town” home.

12. It is interesting to note that one of Tommy’s favorite video excerpts, as recounted in the film, harks back to a fleeting “great moment” in Scotland’s recent past: Archie Gemmill’s brilliant goal in Scotland’s 3-2 victory over Holland during the 1978 World Cup in Argentina. The same match saw Scotland ejected from the competition because the win wasn’t big enough to enable the Scottish team to secure a place in the next round of the competition. The match is often remembered by Scottish commentators as yet another footnote to the grand litany of dashed Scottish hopes.

13. Major constitutional change across the United Kingdom has been initiated in the wake of the May 1997 election of the first Labour government in Britain in eighteen years. The new government, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, quickly introduced legislation to enable referendums for devolution in Scotland and Wales (and, the following year, in Northern Ireland). In Scotland, the September 1997 referendum resulted in an overwhelming majority of Scots voting for the creation of a Scottish parliament with tax-varying powers, scheduled to convene for the first time in 2000. At the time of writing of this article, it is too early to speculate on the effects of such
a parliament on the cultural and media situations in Scotland. Rather than engage in vague speculation, this work restricts itself to commenting on the cultural and constitutional status quo in the country prior to full devolution taking effect.

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