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Film-within-a-Play: Transmedia Intertextuality in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*

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Abstract:

This essay offers a critical examination of the transmedia intertextuality embedded in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, with a particular focus on the play's dynamic negotiation between film and theatre. Through its incorporation of Robert J. Flaherty's documentary *Man of Aran* via a "film-within-a-play" narrative structure, the essay contends that McDonagh subverts Flaherty's romanticized depiction of the Aran Islands, instead presenting a dystopian and anti-Romantic vision of the island community. Moreover, the protagonist Billy's pursuit of a Hollywood audition functions as a counter-gaze that lays bare the disillusionment underlying the American Dream, particularly as it pertains to Irish diasporic aspirations. Drawing on theories of intermediality, the essay argues that the play's transmedia intertextual strategies not only destabilize conventional boundaries between media but also generate an intermedial performance space that reimagines the theatrical experience. Ultimately, the essay posits that McDonagh's work exemplifies the transformative possibilities of intermediality in contemporary drama.

Keywords: Martin McDonagh; film-within-a-play; intertextuality; intermedial performance space

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Introduction

The influence of film on Martin McDonagh's life and creative practice is both profound and unmistakable. Numerous critics have explored the deep interrelationship between cinema and McDonagh's theatrical oeuvre. Werner Huber, for instance, characterizes McDonagh as the

"Quentin Tarantino of the Jade Island" (Huber, 2006: 20), highlighting the playwright's stylistic and thematic affinity with cinematic violence and dark humor. Similarly, Padraic Lonergan observes that McDonagh consistently draws inspiration from iconic film directors such as Martin Scorsese, Terrence Malick, Sam Peckinpah, among others (Lonergan 135). McDonagh's fascination with genres like horror, the Western, and the slasher is well documented. In an interview, he openly acknowledges that "films are the driving force that inspired my dramatic creation" (Feeney 87). McDonagh's dramatic works clearly reflect this cinematic foundation, often drawing intertextual inspiration from American horror films. His debut play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), gestures toward Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), particularly in the iconic image of the dead mother in her rocking chair. *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) engages in a similar intertextual dialogue with David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995), with notable parallels in narrative structure and tone. *The Lonesome West* (1997) pays homage to Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), while *The Cripple of Inishmaan* parodies Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). McDonagh's plays are thus replete with references to both classic and contemporary cinema. These cinematic allusions are not mere ornamentation; rather, they serve a critical dramaturgical function. The invocation of familiar filmic tropes destabilizes traditional theatrical expectations, compelling audiences to recognize that they are engaging with a hybridized form where dramatic and cinematic conventions intersect. As a result, spectators often experience a sense of "déjà vu" (Eldred 111), involuntarily linking McDonagh's theatrical scenes with their cinematic counterparts. In this way, McDonagh's theatre becomes a site of transmedia interplay, blurring the boundaries between stage and screen.

Transmedia intertextuality constitutes a defining feature of Martin McDonagh's black comedy *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996). Premiering at the Royal National Theatre in the United Kingdom and subsequently staged at the Joseph Papp Public Theater in the United States the following year, the play is set on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland in 1934 and tells the poignant story of Cripple Billy's disillusioned pursuit of a Hollywood dream. Billy, a disabled orphan, learns that American filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty has arrived on the islands to shoot a documentary. Determined to escape his marginal existence, Billy volunteers for a screen test in the hopes of launching a film career in Hollywood. However, his aspirations are quickly dashed when the director rejects him due to his perceived lack of acting talent. Left with no alternative, Billy is forced to return to Ireland. Though he briefly finds companionship with Helen, he soon succumbs to tuberculosis. Since its debut, the play has been the subject of

critical inquiry from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Karen O'Brien, for instance, offers an ecocritical reading, arguing that the play dramatizes "the dynamics of human-nature interconnectivity" (O'Brien 179). She contends that McDonagh's depiction of the Irish western landscape both invokes and disrupts traditional constructions of Irish national identity. Similarly, Maha Alatawi provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the play's treatment of physical disability, focusing on its medical implications. She highlights "how a thought-provoking play can create an impact on the audience and cause the audience to question their own attitudes to people with disabilities and illness" (Alatawi 10). Werner Huber, meanwhile, explores the presence of film in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, asserting that "McDonagh metaphorically and rather cynically use[s] *Man of Aran* as a general emblem of the crisis of representation and as a broadside targeted at various images of Ireland" (Huber, 2000: 14). While these scholarly investigations provide valuable insights into the play's thematic complexity, the role of transmedia intertextuality in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* remains underexplored. This essay offers a critical analysis of the transmedia intertextual strategies embedded in McDonagh's play, particularly the dynamic interplay it constructs between film and theatre. By embedding Robert J. Flaherty's documentary *Man of Aran* through a "film-within-a-play" narrative device, the essay contends that McDonagh subverts Flaherty's romanticized depiction of the Aran Islands, offering instead a dystopian and anti-Romantic vision of the island community. Furthermore, Billy's quest for a Hollywood audition functions as a counter-gaze that reveals the illusory nature of the American Dream, especially for Irish immigrants. Grounded in intermediality studies, the essay argues that the play's transmedia intertextuality not only disrupts conventional media boundaries but also generates an intermedial performance space that redefines the theatrical experience. In doing so, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* demonstrates the transformative potential of intermediality in contemporary drama.

1. The dynamic interplay between theater and film: a form of intermediality

Since the emergence of cinema as the so-called "seventh art," scholars have actively investigated the relationship between theatre and film. French film theorist Christian Metz observes that, unlike lyric poetry or the novel, theatre and film are fundamentally forms of "dramatic art" (Metz 191). As such, there exists a close and enduring relationship between the two mediums, marked by continuous interaction and mutual influence. It is noteworthy that many prominent contemporary film directors possess backgrounds in theatrical production or

performance, and vice versa. This raises a central question in the context of postmodern artistic practice: how do theatre and film engage and intersect with one another? Intermediality offers a productive theoretical framework for examining this dynamic interplay, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these two dramatic forms converge, overlap, and redefine one another in contemporary cultural expression.

Intermediality is a key term in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. The prefix "inter-" denotes "between" and refers specifically to the boundaries that separate distinct media forms. The conceptual origins of intermediality can be traced back to classical antiquity. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle asserted that "poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation. They differ, however, from one another in three respects—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct" (Aristotle 1). Building on this foundation, the Roman critic Horace introduced the notion of *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting, so is poetry") in *The Art of Poetry*, highlighting the affinities between poetry and painting. By positioning these as sister arts, Horace underscored the aesthetic parallels between verbal and visual representation. During the Baroque period in the 17th century, the technique of *trompe l'oeil* sought to achieve a three-dimensional, life-like quality in painting by incorporating sculptural techniques, thereby further dissolving the boundaries between painting and sculpture. However, the term "intermediality" itself was not coined until the 1960s, when British Fluxus artist Dick Higgins introduced it in the context of performance art. In his influential essay "Intermedia," Higgins observed that "much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media" (Higgins 11). Intermediality, as he conceptualized it, describes the crossovers and interactions that occur among various art forms and media. The earliest systematic investigations into intermediality were predominantly undertaken by German and French scholars in the early 1960s. This period witnessed a surge of interdisciplinary experimentation across artistic and academic domains. Among the most prominent voices in this discourse is German critic Werner Wolf, who advocated for what he termed the "intermedial turn." In his seminal work *The Musicalization of Fiction: A Study in the Theory and History of Intermediality* (1999), Wolf questioned whether this theoretical shift should be fully embraced. By the 1990s, the concept of intermediality had begun to attract significant attention within English-speaking academic contexts. Scholars in this period focused primarily on the intersections between literature and painting, film adaptations of literary texts, and the evolving relationship between theatre and film.

With regard to the definition of intermediality, Werner Wolf asserts that "Intermediality, in this broad sense, applies to any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media … and thus comprises both 'intra-' and 'extra-compositional' relations between different media" (Wolf 252). In this formulation, intermediality encompasses the interplay and mutual influence among media, whether within a single work or across different compositional contexts. However, Christopher B. Balme has critiqued Wolf's definition as overly broad and lacking in precision. In his influential work *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (2008), Balme delineates three distinct forms of intermediality: (1) the transposition of content from one medium to another; (2) a specific type of intertextuality; and (3) the attempt to reproduce in one medium the aesthetic conventions and/or perceptual modes of another (Balme 206).

According to Balme, the first form of intermediality involves the transposition of content from one medium to another, as exemplified by film adaptations of literary classics such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and William Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The second form of intermediality corresponds to intertextuality across different media. In the 1970s, Julia Kristeva introduced the term "intertextuality," building upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic criticism. When a text incorporates elements from other media, it fosters a cross-boundary interaction, as seen in the integration of visual illustrations within the poetry of William Blake. Balme underscores that the first two forms of intermediality belong to a broader conceptual category, whereas the third form—intermediality in the narrower sense—pertains specifically to the transference of formal techniques or aesthetic conventions from one medium into another (Balme 206).

In the context of postmodern culture, the interrelations between different media have become significant features of contemporary art. Various forms of artistic expression, such as film scripts, paintings, comics, picture books, operas, films, hypertext novels, and multimedia computer texts, are frequently embedded within novels. Within this diverse and multicultural mediascape, theatre is inevitably influenced by other media forms. A play is not merely a written text; it is an intermedial performance that integrates words, sounds, music, and visual elements. Chile Kattenbelt, a prominent scholar in the field of intermediality, observes: "Theatre is a physical hypermedium. It is because it is a hypermedium that theatre provides, as no other art, a stage for intermediality" (Kattenbelt 23). Theatre performance, with its infinite inclusivity, can incorporate music, visual art, film, and dance, making it a uniquely versatile art form. No other medium possesses this level of integrative potential, positioning theatre as a

primary site for the exploration of intermediality.

Mediatization, intermediality, and the issues of authenticity and commodification are central to contemporary studies of Irish theatrical production (Achilles 78). Several modern Irish plays are notably characterized by their intermedial nature. For instance, Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983) incorporates music, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) features dance, and Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) as well as Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (1999) integrate filmic elements. These plays can be classified as intermedial or metadramatic, as they make music, dance, or film the central thematic focus of the performance.

2. Transmedia intertextuality: narrative device of "film-within-a-play"

Drawing inspiration from the dramatic device of the "play-within-a-play," the authors introduce the concept of the "film-within-a-play" to describe the incorporation of a film into a theatrical performance. The "play-within-a-play" is a specific dramaturgical phenomenon that presents a secondary narrative within the primary drama. Traditionally, the "play-within-a-play" is understood as a literary device that "addresses issues of representation and introduces a meta-theatrical discourse" (Giovanzana 16). In the 17th century, this device was regarded as a paradigm of *theatrum mundi*. Notable examples include Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), both of which prominently feature this narrative device. While the "play-within-a-play" fell into relative neglect for some time, it was reintroduced by 20th-century playwrights. In a sense, the "play-within-a-play" deals with the introduction of one or more worlds (the secondary stories) within a larger world (the frame story), allowing for the creation of "bridges" between them. In the postmodern era, the "play-within-a-play" is described as "a malleable device permitting one to step outside of the theatre medium, to juxtapose materials that are not necessarily linked together, to shift in time, and to change perception or discourse towards the world" (Fischer and Greiner xii). Similarly, the "film-within-a-film" is a prevalent device in cinematic art, exemplified in films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and *Inception* (2010). However, unlike the "play-within-a-play," the "film-within-a-film" transcends the boundaries of different media. The embedding of a second work of art (the film) within the primary artwork (the play or film) functions similarly to ekphrasis, allowing the second work to rise above the frame narrative and create a fissure in reality. This "in-between" space, this duality, generates new insights and perspectives, enriching the overall work.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Martin McDonagh cleverly integrates American director Robert J. Flaherty's documentary *Man of Aran* into the dramatic structure of the play, creating a dynamic interaction between film and theatre. According to Brian McHale, a true mise-en-abyme is "a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world" (McHale 124). In McDonagh's play, the frame story revolves around Billy, a disabled young man who manages to secure an audition for a Hollywood film after hearing that Robert J. Flaherty is coming to the Aran Islands to shoot a documentary. However, Billy ultimately fails to pass the screen test due to his inadequate acting abilities. Tragically, he contracts tuberculosis and returns to the Aran Islands, disillusioned and defeated. The embedded work of art within the play is Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, a documentary that portrays the lives of the local community on the Aran Islands. McDonagh's play and Flaherty's film are both set against the backdrop of the 1930s Aran Islands, located off the western coast of Ireland, and together they present a vivid depiction of the islanders' harsh and isolated way of life.

However, the frame story of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* not only questions the authenticity of Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* but also subverts his romanticized portrayal of the Aran Islands. Flaherty, often regarded as the "father of American documentary film" following the success of his first feature, *Nanook of the North* (1922), continued to build his reputation with subsequent works such as *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934), and *Louisiana Story* (1948). *Man of Aran* offers a highly romanticized depiction of the islanders' epic struggle against a harsh and indifferent natural world. In this 76-minute documentary, Flaherty chronicles the Aran islanders' strenuous efforts to survive in pre-modern conditions. The film meticulously divides the islanders' daily routines into four segments: the return voyage from fishing, cultivating barren land, hunting sharks, and enduring a storm. The documentary concludes with a powerful storm in which the fishermen tragically drown at sea. In its essence, *Man of Aran* emphasizes the profound dignity of the islanders in their relentless struggle within a brutal and unforgiving environment. The Aran Islands, a cluster of three islands off the west coast of Ireland, consist of Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisheer, with Inishmaan being the most remote and least influenced by external cultures. This isolation has allowed it to preserve its Irish language, traditions, and customs more effectively than the other islands. As such, the Aran Islands, with their rural, pre-modern landscape and peasant inhabitants, have been consistently fetishized in Irish nationalist discourse as "a benchmark of authentic Irishness" (Arrowsmith 547). Flaherty's film foregrounds the primitivism of the Aran Islands to construct an idyllic

utopia where the islanders lead a self-sufficient existence. The harsh, rocky terrain complicates agricultural production, and the islanders are shown digging soil from the cracks in the rocks to plant potatoes on seaweed, a testament to their resourcefulness in the face of adversity. One scene depicts the father of a nuclear family meticulously excavating soil from crevices in the rocks before laboriously cultivating the land. Living on the edge of the world, the islanders also hunt sharks to obtain liver oil for lamps, working together to battle the fierce sharks with harpoons and spears. Thus, communal cohesion and heroism are central themes in Flaherty's film. At its conclusion, all the fishermen, except for the male protagonist, tragically drown in the sea during the storm. *Man of Aran* perpetuates the Gaelic myth of the noble Irish, who embrace their hardships with stoic resilience. Given these themes, it is unsurprising that Christopher Murray described Flaherty's documentary as "a myth of heroic endurance" (Murray 85).

Conversely, McDonagh subverts Flaherty's romanticized depiction of the Aran Islands, offering an anti-Romantic, dystopian vision of the island community through three key aspects: dysfunctional families, the islanders' eccentricities, and the lack of harmonious interaction between humans and nature. Firstly, family dysfunction is widespread in the Aran community, where islanders are, without exception, widowers, widows, orphans, elderly spinsters, and old bachelors. The absence of intact nuclear families has become a pervasive feature, fostering morbid, alienated, and estranged interpersonal relationships among family members. In stark contrast to the portrayal of the young boy in Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, who is cherished by a devoted father and loving mother, and enjoys a blissful childhood, Billy is abandoned by his parents due to his deformity. Out of sheer selfishness and cruelty, Billy's parents attempt to drown their infant son by tying a bag filled with stones around his body. Fortunately, Billy is rescued by Johnny and adopted by the elderly spinsters Kate and Eileen. As Billy nears adulthood, he learns the truth from Kate: "It was poor Billy they tied in that sack of stones, and Billy would still be at the bottom of the sea to this day, if it hadn't been for Johnnypateen swimming out to save him" (McDonagh 75). Driven by a desire for fraudulently obtained insurance money, Billy's parents commit infanticide, with money serving as the driving force behind their violence. Dysfunctional families are typically influenced by a range of factors, including domestic violence, alcohol abuse, poverty, high stress, and divorce, all of which inflict both physical and psychological harm on the children involved. In addition to the violent actions of parents toward their young child, the play also depicts elder abuse perpetrated by an adult child. In the play, Johnny not only abuses his 90-year-old alcoholic mother, but also

physically assaults her. In this context, the Aran islanders appear brutal, largely due to the community's lack of any cohesive value system, whether based on the Church, family, or social ties. Even the Holy Bible is "tossed back into the sea" by Bobby (McDonagh 33). As noted by Victor Merriman, McDonagh's portrayal of the Aran Islands is "a benighted dystopia" (Merriman 312), characterized by persistent violence, materialism, and moral decay.

Secondly, the Aran islanders in McDonagh's play are depicted as pathologically morbid, each possessing their own eccentricities. For example, Kate obsessively converses with stones day and night; Irene copes with high stress by compulsively eating large quantities of candy; Helen vents her private anger by throwing eggs; Johnny spreads gossip in order to gain petty profits; the 90-year-old Mammy is addicted to alcohol; Bartley longs for American candies and telescopes; Jack and Patty kiss each other incessantly; and Billy spends his days staring blankly at cows. These individuals are marked by their respective traumas and psychological quirks. Kate speaks to stones due to her nervous condition; Mammy tries to drink herself to death, unable to overcome the grief of losing her husband; Helen's fiery temper stems from sexual harassment by Father Barratt. Billy, the play's protagonist, is an orphan and an insignificant figure within the community. Born with a crippled leg and a weak arm, Billy becomes the target of ridicule and is nicknamed "Cripple Billy." He requests to be called simply "Billy," expressing his desire to shed the label of "Cripple." Due to his disability, Billy is belittled by the islanders: "Just to end the laughing at me, and the snipping at me, and the life of nothing but shuffling to the doctor's and shuffling back from the doctor's and pawing over the same oul books and finding any other way to piss another day away. Another way of sniggering, or the patting me on the head like a broken-brained boy fool. The village orphan. The village cripple, and nothing more" (McDonagh 92). Lennard Davis argues that disability is perceived through the lens of what is considered normal, and normalcy itself is a social construct rather than an inherent natural state. He asserts, "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (Davis 24). Disability, defined as an aberration, inevitably carries negative connotations. This imposition of "normalcy" is referred to as "the hegemony of normalcy" (Davis 24). Mocked by the villagers, Billy experiences a profound sense of abandonment and worthlessness. However, Billy's physical deformity mirrors the inner dysfunction of the community. As Billy reflects, "Well, there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows" (McDonagh 64). Unlike the solidarity portrayed in Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, the islanders in McDonagh's play are characterized by estrangement and alienation. McDonagh

subverts Flaherty's romanticized portrayal of the Aran Islands by presenting a morally degenerate community marked by repulsive behavior, verbal abuse, and personal attacks. In doing so, McDonagh implicitly challenges the long-standing, idealized perceptions of Western Irish identity, revealing the dysfunction and moral decay underlying the idyllic image of the Aran Islands

Thirdly, McDonagh's play highlights a complete absence of meaningful interaction between the inhabitants of the Aran Islands and the natural world. The islanders lead lives marked by idleness, neither engaging in productive labor nor venturing out to sea for fishing, which traditionally sustains them. They are thoroughly disconnected from both the land and the sea, lacking any intimate relationship with the natural environment. For Kate, the Aran Islands' picturesque landscape, which attracts many tourists, is nothing more than a source of boredom: "On Inishmore? What sights? A fence and a hen?" (McDonagh 40). Similarly, Billy is eager to escape this uninspiring place, stating: "Would I miss the scenery, I thought? The stone wall, and the lanes, and the green, and the sea? No, I wouldn't miss them" (McDonagh 73). In stark contrast to the self-sufficient lifestyle depicted in Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, McDonagh's islanders are no longer reliant on hard labor to harness nature's resources or craft their daily necessities. Instead, the essentials of their daily lives are imported from outside the island, including items like Fripple-Frapples, Yalla-mallows, Mintios, and Chock-top Drops from the United States. This signals a profound shift in the Aran islanders' way of life, deeply influenced by the industrial capitalist production model of the 1930s. As a result, the once-abundant ecological resources of the sea no longer hold practical significance. Instead, the sea is depicted as a grim, insurmountable force that both confines the islanders' physical freedom and claims the lives of its inhabitants. For example, Billy's parents are drowned in a storm while attempting to reach America, and Johnny's father is consumed by a vicious shark. In this context, the sea becomes a symbol of loss and departure, offering no promise of return. Throughout the play, death, rather than immortality, looms over the Aran Islands, reinforcing the sense of bleakness that defines the islanders' existence.

When we examine McDonagh's play within the historical context of the Great Depression in the 1930s, we uncover its profound social and realist significance. McDonagh addresses the dire social conditions in Ireland during this turbulent period. Following the Irish War of Independence, the Irish Free State was established in 1922. However, Ireland was unable to achieve full political sovereignty, remaining a semi-autonomous state under British influence. In the play, the Aran community's isolation on the remote islands, surrounded by the vast,

impenetrable ocean, subtly mirrors Ireland's own semi-autonomous status. By the 1930s, Ireland had integrated into the global economic system, which was increasingly dominated by financiers, bankers, credit institutions, and commercial speculators. During this period, Ireland found itself embroiled in a prolonged economic conflict with Britain. The Irish government's refusal to pay an annual land annuity of approximately £5,000,000 to Britain led to British retaliation in the form of higher import tariffs on Irish dairy cows, which severely harmed Ireland's economy. This economic war, which lasted over six years, had devastating consequences for Irish farmers. The conflict was not resolved until 1938, when Ireland agreed to pay Britain a one-time settlement of £10,000,000 in exchange for Britain relinquishing control over the commercial ports. In McDonagh's play, this confrontation between Britain and Ireland is symbolically represented through the fictional play "England versus Ireland," presented by the characters Helen and Bartley.

> Helen: Do you want to play "England versus Ireland"?
> Bartley: I don't know how to play "England versus Ireland".
> Helen: Stand here and close your eyes. You'll be Ireland.
> Bartley: And what do you do?
> Helen: I'll be England.
> [Helen picks up three eggs from the counter and breaks the first against Bartley's forehead. Bartley opens his eyes as the yolk runs down him, and stares at her sadly. Helen breaks the second egg on his forehead.]
> Bartley: That wasn't a nice thing at all to [...]
> Helen: Haven't finished.
> *Helen breaks the third egg on Bartley.*
> Bartley: That wasn't a nice thing at all to do, Helen.
> Helen: I was giving you a lesson about Irish history, Bartley. (McDonagh 50-51)

For centuries, Ireland endured oppression under English colonization. The English occupation of Ireland, spanning from the sixteenth century to 1922, resulted in a prolonged period of rupture, crisis, and conflict concerning the territory's status as a nation. Although Ireland gained independence from British colonial rule, the nation's political instability and economic stagnation set the stage for the harsh realities depicted in McDonagh's play—poverty, material deprivation, and spiritual paralysis among the islanders. In contrast to the romanticized

portrayal of the Aran Islands by the American filmmaker Robert Flaherty, McDonagh offers a critical "anti-gaze" to expose the disillusionment of the American Dream for Irish immigrants. In the play, the younger generation of Aran Islanders is eager to leave the island and emigrate to America, seeing it as the ultimate destination. The economic prospects that America promises serve as the main motivator for financially independent Aran Islanders to depart, leaving behind the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. Nevertheless, those left behind continue to hold onto the illusion of the American Dream. They seize every opportunity to escape, especially the younger generation, who are in the throes of adolescence. For example, Bartley is infatuated with imported American goods such as Yalla-mallows, telescopes, and Hollywood movies, while Helen attempts to seduce a film producer in hopes of landing a role in a film. Similarly, Billy harbors aspirations of going to Hollywood to fulfill his dream of becoming an actor. What truly attracts the younger generation of the Aran islanders to America is the promise of wealth and opportunity. When Johnny learns that a Hollywood film crew has arrived on the islands to shoot a film, he considers it the most significant news to share, and his words are laden with the allure of money.

> Johnny [pause]: From Hollywood, California, in America they're coming, led be a Yank be the name of Robert Flaherty, one of the most famous and richest Yanks there is. Coming there to Inishmore they're coming and why are they coming? I'll tell you why they are coming. To go making a moving picture film will cost o'er a million dollars, will be shown throughout the world, will show life how it's lived on the islands, will make film stars of whosoever should be chose to take part in it and will take them back to Hollywood then and be giving them a life free of work, or anyways only acting work which couldn't be called work at all, it's only talking. Colman King I know already they've chosen for a role, and a hundred dollars a week he's on [...] "The Man of Aran" they're going calling the film. (McDonagh 15)

Becoming rich in the United States is a central aspiration for every Irish immigrant. However, achieving "the American Dream" requires a solid economic foundation. Jean Baudrillard famously remarked, "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (Baudrillard 28). Indeed, without the support of financial resources, emigrating to the United States remains a distant and unattainable dream. Billy, however, attempts to pursue it. He reflects, "there comes a time in every fella's life when he has to take

his heart in his hand and make a try for something, and even though he knows it's a one in a million chance of him getting it, he has to chance it still else why be alive at all" (McDonagh 73). Despite his disability, Billy is undeterred in his relentless pursuit of the American Dream. For him, disability is not an obstacle to realizing his aspirations; rather, it becomes a motivating factor, driving him to prove his worth and utility to society. The notion that Billy can leave the island and travel to America is a bold and radical one. McDonagh deliberately avoids portraying Billy as a stereotypical tragic or pitiable disabled character. Although Billy manages to secure an audition in Hollywood, he is quickly dismissed due to his lack of acting skill. Billy reacts angrily, "A blond lad from Fort Lauderdale they hired instead of me. He wasn't crippled at all, but the Yank said 'Ah, better to get a normal fella who can act crippled than a crippled fella who can't fecking act at all'" (McDonagh 64). Billy also mocks the lines he was asked to perform for the screen test: "An Irishman I am, begora! With a heart and a spirit that on me not crushed be a hundred years of oppression. I'll be getting me shillelagh out next, wait'll you see. A rake of shite. And had me singing the fecking 'Croppy Boy' then" (McDonagh 62). In these moments, Billy offers a sharp critique of the stereotypical portrayal of Ireland and the prejudices surrounding people with disabilities. Through Billy's character, McDonagh exposes the absurdity of conventional attitudes toward disability, thereby constructing a counter-narrative that challenges these stereotypes (Meszaros 2003). Following the disillusionment of his American Dream, Billy returns to the Aran Islands. His return marks a departure from idealized and fantastical notions. He comes to terms with life as a survivor. When the islanders ask him about the greatness of America, Billy dismisses it with a nonchalant remark: "It's just the same as Ireland really. Full of fat women with beards" (McDonagh 63). For Billy, Ireland is no less modern and globalized than America; it is by no means a pre-modern society. He observes that people from diverse backgrounds—French, German, and even those of African descent—are choosing to make Ireland their home, and thus concludes, "it mustn't be such a bad place" (McDonagh 39).

As Chiel Kattenbelt observes, "intermediality is an operative aspect of different media, which is more closely connected to the idea of diversity, discrepancy, and hypermediacy than to the idea of unity, harmony, and transparency. Intermediality assumes an in-between space from which or within which the mutual effects take place" (Kattenbelt 25-26). Theatre serves as a platform where various media converge, providing a space for the interaction of different forms of media. Consequently, theatre facilitates the creation of textual, intertextual, and intermedial spaces that exist between and across media. In McDonagh's play, the device of

"film-within-a-play" is used to present a sharply contrasting narrative. While Flaherty's *Man of Aran* offers a romanticized depiction of the Aran Islands, McDonagh's play unveils a dystopian vision of the Aran community. Furthermore, the transmedia intertextuality between theatre and film generates a unique intermedial performance space, enriching the overall narrative by blending the conventions and effects of both media.

3. The dramaturgy of intermediality and intermedial experience

The integration of film, television, and digital media into contemporary drama has become a defining feature of theatrical performances. Theatre provides a unique platform for other media to be incorporated, facilitating a convergence of space, media, and reality. The dramaturgy of intermediality blends digital technology with theatrical practice, creating an intermediary performance space that transports audiences into a realm of in-between realities—a psychological and sensory space. As Land Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx assert in "Presence and Perception: Analysing Intermediality in Performance," "intermediality allows for particular ways of structuring the stage, employing aesthetic strategies such as montage, collage, doubling, difference, framing, or interactivity" (Nibbelink and Merx 223). They argue that intermediality not only offers innovative technical methodologies for the theatrical stage but also enables a unique intermedial experience for audiences, shaping the encounter between stage and spectators. In their view, the intermedial experience is crucial to understanding intermedial theatrical performances. This experience refers to the way in which the audience's perception of the theatrical event is shaped by the interplay of various media. Typically, the dramaturgy of intermediality disrupts the audience's perceptual expectations, evoking complex emotions such as initial astonishment or bewilderment, followed by a sense of displacement and unsettling, uncanny experiences of alienation.

In scene eight of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the Aran islanders—Bobby, Mammy, Johnny, Helen, Bartley, Eileen, and Kate—sit in semi-darkness in a church hall, watching Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. As they watch the documentary, they simultaneously offer their commentary. The scene is vividly described: "All are staring up at the film *Man of Aran* being projected. The film is nearing its end, and its soundtrack is either very low or not heard at all" (McDonagh 55). The integration of cameras, screens, and imaging devices onto the stage in theatrical performances facilitates the dynamic interplay of diverse media forms. In McDonagh's play, the film screen functions not only as a backdrop but also as an interactive canvas that engages the audience. This blending of drama and film creates an intertextual dialogue within a "media

landscape" (Seldon 205). Flaherty's film is seamlessly embedded into McDonagh's play through the projection surface, thus fostering a harmonious fusion of different storytelling mediums.

Moreover, McDonagh enables both the characters within the play and the audience to experience an intermedial encounter shaped by the dynamic interplay between theatre and film. Initially, the Aran islanders in the play undergo a perplexing intermedial experience, prompted by the fictional representation of their community in Flaherty's film. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* presents a heroic myth about the islanders, which sharply contrasts with the anti-Romantic, dystopian portrayal of the island community in McDonagh's play. As a result, the islanders in McDonagh's narrative question the authenticity of Flaherty's film, particularly the most striking scene involving shark hunting:

> Kate [pause]: That's a big fish.
> Eileen: 'Tis a shark, Kate.
> Kate: 'Tis a wha?
> Eileen: A shark, a shark!
> Helen: Have you forgot what a shark is, on top of talking to stones?
> Bartley: It's mostly off America you do get sharks, Mrs, and a host of sharks, and so close to shore sometimes they come, sure, you wouldn't even need a telescope to spot them, oh no [...]
> Helen: Oh telescopes, Jesus [...] !
> Bartley: It's rare that off Ireland you get sharks. This is the first shark I've ever seen off Ireland.
> Johnny: Ireland mustn't be such a bad place so if sharks want to come to Ireland. (McDonagh 55-56)

The dialogue in the play highlights the Aran islanders' critical engagement with the fictionalized portrayal of shark hunting in Flaherty's *Man of Aran*. Although the film presents itself as a historically accurate and credible documentary, it is ultimately revealed to be a carefully constructed fiction. *Man of Aran* dramatizes scenes of islanders hunting sharks with harpoons and spears. In reality, however, this traditional practice had already been abandoned by the 1930s. By that time, the islanders relied instead on modern fishing trawlers. Reports suggest that Flaherty even enlisted experts from London to instruct the islanders in the use of harpoons for the purposes of filming. This manufactured authenticity is directly challenged by

the characters in the play. Kate, for instance, fails to identify a shark because she has never encountered one on the Aran coast, while Bartlett remarks that sharks are rarely seen in Ireland, admitting, "the first shark that he's even seen is on a film screen." Helen goes further, casting doubt on the film's entire premise by insisting the sharks are fabricated. Enraged, she hurls an egg at the screen, exclaiming: "Ah, it wasn't even a shark at all, Mrs. It was a tall fella in a grey donkey jacket" (McDonagh 60). In addition to questioning the authenticity of the events depicted, the islanders ridicule the film's heroic representation of masculinity. Coleman King, the film's lead, is portrayed as a strikingly handsome, strong, and agile figure. Yet the islanders in the play dismiss this idealized image; they deride King as being "as ugly as a brick of baked shite" (McDonagh 15), arguing that anyone could appear heroic if given a role on screen. Helen, in particular, rejects the film's emphasis on male heroism and sarcastically proposes an alternative title: "The Man of Aran me arsehole. 'The Lass of Aran' they could've had, and the pretty lass of Aran. Not some oul shite about thick fellas fecking fishing" (McDonagh 51). Through these dialogues, the play underscores the islanders' deep dissatisfaction with how their community has been represented. They view *Man of Aran* not as an authentic record of island life, but as a fictional and romanticized construction that misrepresents their lived reality.

Although both the play and the film are set against the backdrop of 1934, their sharply contrasting narratives create a sense of displaced intermedial experience for the audience. Flaherty's film, in particular, deliberately overlooks the encroachment of modernity on the Aran Islands, choosing instead to portray a romanticized, pre-modern existence. As a result, the film functions as an anachronism—offering viewers a constructed image of a past that no longer existed at the time of filming. Joe McMahon, one of Flaherty's assistants, later recalled that upon arriving on the islands, Flaherty was disappointed to discover that "the place was not as primitive as he had envisioned" (McMahon 292). Prior to his visit, Flaherty had immersed himself in J. M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) and *Riders to the Sea* (1904), and resolved to recreate the Aran Islands as they appeared in Synge's era. This deliberate historical regression draws the audience into an intermedial performance space, prompting reflection and critical questioning: What did the Aran Islands actually look like in 1934? Was the film a faithful representation of reality, or does the play offer a more authentic account? Which medium offers a more truthful depiction? In this context, theatrical performance—especially when incorporating digital media—serves to disrupt the audience's expectations, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. This intermediality heightens awareness of how cultural narratives are constructed and mediated across time and form.

The interplay between theatre and film in the play redefines the dynamic relationship among performers, audience, and performance styles, allowing both the characters and viewers to undergo an uncanny intermedial experience. This convergence reaches its climax at the conclusion of Flaherty's film screening, when Cripple Billy's silhouette suddenly appears on the now-blank screen. In Scene Eight, stage directions note: "The film winds out, leaving the screen blank. A light goes on behind it, illuminating the silhouette of Cripple Billy on the screen, which only Kate sees. She stands out and stares at it" (McDonagh 60). The shocking reappearance of Billy unsettles both characters and audience, as he was presumed dead. In this moment, the dramaturgy of intermediality subverts both Kate's and the audience's perceptual expectations. Is the figure a living Billy or merely his ghost? For Kate—who has had no contact with Billy for a considerable period—the vision evokes an uncanny sensation. When she stares at his silhouette on the screen, she likely experiences a form of estrangement. As Sigmund Freud observes, the uncanny "arouses dread and horror [...] certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening" (Freud 339). According to Freud, the uncanny emerges when repressed infantile complexes resurface in consciousness. Unlike positive affect, it produces unease, fear, and disorientation. In the play, Billy's sudden return from the United States touches on Kate's unresolved traumas and anxieties surrounding the loss of her adopted son. Billy's fate has remained a mystery to the Aran community, and it is Kate who ultimately lifts the sheet to reveal him—alive and well. The stage directions read: "Billy looks at the screen, pulls it back across to its original dimensions and stands there staring at it, caressing it slightly, deep in thought" (McDonagh 63). Freud further hypothesizes that "many people experience the [uncanny] feeling in the highest degree in relation to [...] the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (Freud 364). The return of Billy initially appears spectral, but ultimately disrupts expectations when he is revealed to be physically present. To the community's astonishment, Billy has merely returned from America. Both the characters and the audience experience relief as the uncertainty surrounding Billy's fate is finally resolved. In this way, the dramaturgy of intermediality not only deepens the interaction between stage and spectators but also evokes an uncanny, liminal experience that blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, fiction and reality.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that McDonagh does more than merely juxtapose theatre and film; rather, he constructs a deliberate tension between the two mediums. On one hand, the American filmmaker in *Man of Aran*, who observes and documents the life of a pre-modern Irish community on the Aran Islands, adopts a condescending stance that romanticizes

the islanders' remote and traditional way of life. By emphasizing the perceived backwardness and primitivism of the Aran community, the film reinforces a binary opposition between dominant and subordinate cultures—between those who speak and those who are rendered voiceless. The Aran islanders are particularly depicted as gibbering, non-English-speaking "Others," effectively silenced within the film's colonial gaze. As Robin Roberts notes, "Flaherty uses the US film industry to represent the corrupting and dangerous influence of American media on Ireland" (Robert 111). It is precisely in response to this hegemonic portrayal that McDonagh reclaims narrative agency for the islanders through his character Helen. In the play, when *Man of Aran* is screened in the church, Helen, enraged by its fictionalized depiction of shark hunting, reacts with defiant protest—hurling an egg at the screen and exclaiming: "Oh thank Christ the fecker's over. A pile of fecking shite" (McDonagh 60). Through this moment of theatrical resistance, McDonagh challenges the cultural hegemony imposed by global media—particularly the dominance of American cinematic discourse—and asserts a localized, critical voice against externally constructed narratives of Irish identity.

Conclusion

Intermediality has emerged as a defining trend in twentieth-century arts and media, characterized by "the blurring of generic boundaries, crossover and hybrid performances, and intertextuality" (Chapple & Kattenbelt 11). Theatre, as a multifaceted art form, has always been shaped by its interaction with other media. Intermediality not only introduces new models of performance and dramaturgy within theatrical space but also offers innovative perspectives for theatre and performance studies. In particular, it facilitates the critical investigation of the media's role in the "spectacularization" of contemporary society through social, political, cultural, and aesthetic lenses. In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, Martin McDonagh embeds Robert J. Flaherty's documentary *Man of Aran* into the dramatic structure of the play, thereby constructing a dynamic interplay between film and theatre. By employing the narrative device of the "film-within-a-play," McDonagh subverts Flaherty's idealized and romanticized portrayal of the Aran Islands, replacing it with an anti-Romantic, even dystopian vision of the community. Moreover, the protagonist Billy's journey to Hollywood in pursuit of an audition operates as a counter-gaze, exposing the illusory promise of the American Dream, particularly for Irish immigrants. Through its transmedia intertextuality, the play generates a fluid mediascape that invites audiences into a liminal performance space—an in-between zone

where the conventional boundaries between media forms are transcended. McDonagh's integration of film into theatrical performance not only exemplifies the increasing prevalence of intermediality in contemporary theatre but also offers a compelling paradigm for critically engaging with transmedia intertextuality in modern drama.

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