

*The Evil is Inside the House and There is Nowhere to Run – Analysing the Representation of The Irish Family in The Canal (2014), By Ivan Kavanagh*

*O mal está dentro de casa e não há para onde fugir – Analisando a representação da família irlandesa em The Canal (2014) de Ivan Kavanagh*

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**Abstract:** *The Canal (2014) is an Irish horror film written and directed by Ivan Kavanagh. The story is about David, an archivist who believes a spirit murdered his wife, Alice. David's mental condition is highly questionable, as for the police he is the main suspect of the investigation. In this film, Kavanagh portrays the domestic environment as unstable and violent. The narrative contrasts with Ireland's familist ideology and perception of the family as a harmonious haven. According to Isabel Pinedo (1997), postmodern horror films explore the terrors of everyday life and blur the limits between good and evil. Places and individuals, previously considered safe and caring, can be associated with horrifying events. These contradictions raise the question of how Kavanagh portrayed the family in the postmodern horror paradigm. This study aims at analysing the representation of the Irish family in The Canal taking into account studies about the Irish family and cinema. The research method is content analysis, which is a technique to describe and examine the communicative material, in this case, a movie. Furthermore, the results of this study may contribute to the development of further research related to Ireland's contemporary films and society.*

**Keywords:** *The Canal; Postmodern Horror; Family; Irish Horror Cinema.*

**Resumo:** *The Canal (2014) é um filme de terror irlandês, escrito e dirigido por Ivan Kavanagh, sobre David, um arquivista que acredita que um espírito assassinou sua esposa, Alice. O estado mental de David é altamente questionável, visto que para a polícia ele é o principal suspeito da investigação. Neste filme, Kavanagh retrata o ambiente doméstico como instável e violento. A narrativa contrasta com a ideologia familista da Irlanda e a percepção da família como um refúgio harmonioso. Segundo Isabel Pinedo (1997), os filmes de terror pós-modernos exploram os terrores da vida cotidiana e confundem os*

*limites entre o bem e o mal. Lugares e indivíduos, antes considerados como fonte de cuidado e segurança, podem estar associados a eventos horripilantes. Essas contradições suscitam a questão de como Kavanagh retratou a família no paradigma do terror pós-moderno. Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar a representação da família irlandesa em The Canal a partir de estudos sobre a família irlandesa e o cinema. O método de pesquisa é a análise de conteúdo, uma técnica utilizada para descrever e examinar o material comunicativo, nesse caso, um filme. Além disso, os resultados deste estudo podem contribuir para o desenvolvimento de pesquisas futuras relacionadas aos filmes e à sociedade contemporânea da Irlanda.*

**Palavras-chave:** The Canal; Horror pós-moderno; Família; Cinema de Horror Irlandês.

## Introduction

*The Canal* (2014) is a horror film written and directed by Ivan Kavanagh. It is a story about the film archivist David and the heinous murder of his wife Alice. The narrative induces the audience to question reality and fantasy. David seems to be haunted by the ghost of William Jackson, a man who killed his family in 1902 while living in the same residence where David and his wife now live. Jackson is never punished for his crimes, as he drowns himself with his children in the canal near the house. In the end, it is revealed that David murdered Alice, who was having an affair. Their son, Billy, also dies in the last sequence. These events expose the consequences of dysfunctional families and raise questions about the stability of the domestic environments in Ireland.

Ciara Barrett (2015) describes *The Canal* as a psychological thriller with a poltergeist-horror premise. She also states that the film avoids identifiable Dublin landmarks, and the setting could have been anywhere. However, that does not mean the film does not follow the patterns of Irish national cinema. The characteristics of the feature might reflect the contemporary Irish multi-cultural demography, which has drastically changed during the last decades, as a result of the Celtic Tiger (1994-2008), the iconic Irish economic boom. Thus, if a filmmaker decides not to explore national elements, it “does not mean it cannot be reclaimed, (re) appropriated and/or analysed by cultural theorists as retaining implicit national/cultural signification and import” (Barrett 284). As such, although the narrative is not inspired by Ireland’s historical background and does not use the country’s famous settings, Kavanagh could be taking a peculiar path to portray the Irish society through the postmodern horror, a genre that violates assumptions of a predictable world, and puts violence as a feature of normality (Pinedo, 1997).

Therefore, *The Canal* may explore multicultural elements and still be an Irish film. One can analyse its content in order to understand the current characteristics of Irish society. The fact that, in the film, two fathers viciously murdered their family members exposes a dangerous domestic environment. These events contrast with the central role of the family in Ireland. According to Ciaran Mc Cullagh (1991), in the first decades of independence, there was an interest to preserve the family as an institution, giving it the responsibility to solve tensions in the community. However, during the Celtic Tiger era, the familist ideology started to be questioned after numerous reports of child abuse by family members. Considering the role of the family in Ireland, Sinéad Kennedy (2003) believes it is not surprising that the country's rate of child sexual abuse is higher than in Europe or North America. For decades, tensions were ignored to keep the image of the home as a peaceful environment.

Although this subject can be quite disturbing for a certain portion of society, Irish filmmakers have been interested in exploring dysfunctional families through different genres. For instance, *Snap* (2010), by Carmel Winters, is a drama about Sandra and her son Stephen, who are both sexually abused by Sandra's father. In the comedy *The Young Offenders* (2016), by Peter Foott, Jock is a teenager living with his alcoholic father. Kavanagh also explores family dysfunction in *The Canal* through postmodern horror and, by doing so, he demonstrates that evil may come from places that were previously considered safe, such as one's own house.

So far, this study has introduced how a horror narrative in a domestic environment contrasts with Ireland's familist ideology as a way of setting the basis for the question it aims to explore: How does Ivan Kavanagh portray the Irish family in his postmodern horror film *The Canal*? Thus, the main objective of this article is to analyse *The Canal* in light of studies about the Irish family and cinema, in order to understand the representation of the family in Irish horror cinema. It should be noted that it does not aim to offer a fixed definition of the representation of families in Irish horror cinema. Currently, there is limited research on this topic, and it may be difficult to identify how Irish filmmakers explore fear. Therefore, the results presented in this article can be a starting point for future studies on Ireland's national horror cinema.

Content analysis was adopted as a methodology, which is widely used by human sciences to investigate images, films, texts, and a variety of media productions. In order to analyse the content of *The Canal*, it is necessary to discuss theories associated with horror cinema and the history of the Irish family. The process must explore elements of the film, and present dialogues and images representing the Irish family identity. The data will be analysed based on the theories discussed in the first two sessions of this article.

## **The Irish Family – Cursed Heirs and Children Without Future**

A family is a group commonly converted into an institution, and its concepts may change due to a variety of social and political phenomena. In Ireland, the family holds an important role in the nation's ideology. Mc Cullagh calls attention to Article 41 of the Irish Constitution, which "recognizes the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society". The author also stresses that, according to the same article, the family possesses "inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law". These statements become controversial if one tries to question the actual rights of a family. What can a family in Ireland decide, mainly concerning the lives of its members? It might be a confusing question to answer, considering each family has its own rules.

Although families are different, there are grounding aspects of the Irish family linked to the 19th Century and the Great Famine (1845-1849).<sup>2</sup> In this context, Mc Cullagh states that the massive starvation in the country was related to the response of farmers to an increasing population. In rural Ireland, the heritage pattern was strongly centred on male family members, as mothers and daughters had almost no say in decisions. The arrangement was quite beneficial for men, as the father led the process and, in the end, every son would inherit a portion of the land:

When a male family member got married, the father sub-divided his holding and gave a certain portion to the married son. As families were large and holdings generally small, this led to the fragmentation of holdings. . . . Such holdings could only sustain the growth of a basic crop like the potato and, as the potato could not be efficiently stored, the rural population was vulnerable to crop failure. . . . The result was widespread hunger and death (Mc Cullagh 205).

Even if some could have considered the process fair, as every son would inherit a portion of the father's holding, it did not fit Ireland's cultural and geographical setting. At the time, Irish people were facing the vicious British colonisation and were eager for freedom. They simply could not endure another massive population decline. Therefore, farmers understood the flaws of this family tradition and developed a new form of heritage management. In this respect, the sub-division system was abandoned and "replaced by an inheritance system around the stem family" (Mc Cullagh 205).

The new tradition meant that a single son would inherit the family farm, and his siblings would need to seek alternative forms of income. The stem family system was a successful solution since it avoided the fragmentation of the properties. However, "while it solves this problem it appears to open new lines of tension in society through those whom it

marginalizes” (Mc Cullagh 206). It should be stressed that those chosen as heirs were not in a comfortable situation. According to Michelle Norris (2016), sons designated as heirs worked unpaid on the family farm, and they were unable to marry until the farm had a large enough income to support an additional family. Furthermore, the family patriarch needed to believe he would not be disrespected or abandoned by the new generation. The father was the one to decide his children’s fate, and concentrating the family power led to unwanted consequences. This family system was centred on a small portion of the adult males, while the rest of the people had no fixed role in society. As a matter of fact, the cruellest layer of the stem family model was the fact that non-inheriting sons and daughters were not only unwanted, but there was a serious attempt to push them into oblivion.

Most of the time, marginalized family members were forced to make troubling decisions on their own. The effects of the high costs of their life choices are reflected in the statistics of mental health. At the beginning of the twentieth century, “the populations of workhouses and of prisons had fallen. By contrast, those of the mental asylums was (sic) increasing rapidly” (Mc Cullagh 208). Asylums were seen as suitable spaces to dispose of the “unnecessary” portion of the family, thus becoming a useful tool for the preservation of the stem family system. Considering how recent the Great Famine was, Irish farmers could not risk a second massive disaster, and sacrificing their own children was a cruel necessity. Consequently, in these circumstances, the commitment to mental hospitals might have seemed an attractive and effective solution.

Tensions within the family were ignored in order to support economic interests. The events mentioned in the previous paragraphs justify the relevance of the family cell in Ireland, but they also expose “a very different situation from the one implied by an official ideology which gives a central role to the ideal of the united and happy family” (Mc Cullagh 209). The familiar institution was overprotected, mostly shielded by Catholicism, and not many dared to challenge this tradition. Standing against a father’s wish could have been the deadliest sin. However, these events took place before the establishment of the Republic of Ireland in 1922. After the independence, there were considerable socio-political changes, and many moved from rural areas to Dublin. The community, however, remained involved with the moral values of rural familism, which raises the question: how was this ideology taken and set in a more urban-centred society?

Mc Cullagh states that the family as a social symbol is linked to a set of values called “rural fundamentalism”. Even after independence, this ideology remained dominant, and people expressed a desire to preserve a highly idealized past in the countryside:

In post-Independence Ireland this ideology, which had its roots in rural Ireland, was carried to the political centre by the rural élites who “colonised” the capital city of Dublin and who steadily took over many of the key positions in the civil service and in state bodies. . . . Through this an ideology which emerged to deny family-centered (sic) conflicts and inequalities became part of the official ideology of the new nation (Mc Cullagh 209).

The author calls attention to the fact that a certain portion of the rural society led transformations that took place in the country, and they simply could not abandon previous traditions. The Irish social setting was different from that of the late 19th century, but the community was still impregnated with the idea of familiar obedience. Furthermore, the Church managed to build a strong bond with the State. In this context, many governmental policies were grounded in the idea of protecting the family institution. As an example, Mc Cullagh points out the introduction of censorship in the 1930s. The proponents voiced that it would be a way to secure “national virtues”, but analysing it closely, the author underlines that the project was mainly a strategy to promote an idealised version of family life.

The stem family tradition and the population of the psychiatric hospital slowly shrunk in the country in the first decades of independence, but that did not mean the familist ideology disappeared. It became part of Irish nationalism, influencing the actions of public institutions. As an example, Mc Cullagh mentions a document written in 1982 by the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI). The text was an answer to the rising crime in the country. It recalls a conflict-free past, when communities enjoyed harmony, “which, if it could only be recaptured, would solve major social problems” (Mc Cullagh 201). Clearly, the peaceful past was strongly related to the family structure, which would offer solutions for the tensions in the country. The erosion of the domestic environment was considered the main cause of the crisis, while other aspects, like the growth of the urban areas, were not blamed.

The international winds of change were one of the forces behind the weakening of familism. During the Celtic Tiger period, Dublin became a more cosmopolitan place. Hunger for modernization and development led to an intimate involvement with capitalism. The economy influenced major social changes in Ireland throughout this period. In this context, the familiar institution would not remain untouched. Although the family does not have an obvious economic role, Sinéad Kennedy (2003) states that while a conventional couple might be bonded with the idea of romantic love, one should not overshadow the family’s economic function. It is a source of care for the future workforce in a profit-oriented system. It means that the arrival of the Celtic Tiger did not erase familism but gave the familiar institution a



different role. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that this socioeconomic setting allowed the exposure of shocking contradictions of the domestic environment in Ireland, as Kennedy further states:

The family can operate a contradictory role: as well as being a place of comfort, it can also be the source of horrendous violence . . . If one considers the central role that the family has played in Irish society, it is no surprise that Ireland has one of the highest rates of child sexual abuse, higher than in either Europe as a whole or North America (Kennedy 106).

Kennedy indicates that the position of the family in Irish society basically authorises different forms of violence. Besides involuntary incarceration, those that remained in the household were also potential victims. These tensions have been obscured for decades to preserve the image of the family as a harmonic moral haven. Kennedy states that Ireland has unusual statistical figures for child sexual abuse and relates the high number of cases with the familist ideology. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre commissioned *The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland Report*, in which it can be read that forty-two percent of women and twenty-eight percent of men had been sexually abused in their lifetime. “The majority of abuse occurs within the family or by an individual close to the family, such as a teacher or a priest” (Kennedy 106). These numbers become even more alarming when compared to surveys in Europe showing “that seventeen percent of European women have experienced sexual abuse as children. In Ireland, that figure is thirty percent” (Kennedy 106). The author also calls attention to the fact that the reports found that almost half of those interviewed said they had never told anyone about the abuse.

The fact that so many abuses were hidden contributes to the understanding of the Irish family as an overprotected flawed institution. The Celtic Tiger period did not make familism vanish from the national identity but encouraged people to report its tensions. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the first years of the twentieth century, Irish authors were inclined to write fictional narratives featuring rural family conflicts. In W.B. Yeats’s short story “Red Hanrahan” (1907), for instance, Mary Lavelle’s mother dies and if she does not have a man inside her house within a month, the land would be given to someone else. She calls Hanrahan, but he fails to meet her on time. Thus, she is put out of her house, marries a labouring man, and goes to England to look for work.

Filmmaking in Ireland became more common during the Celtic Tiger, especially due to the investments of the Irish Film Board.<sup>3</sup> It can be seen as a contemporary form of storytelling, reflecting social patterns and human behaviour. Thus, writers have also started

using the screen to tell stories about family conflicts. These new storytellers have explored different genres to portray this specific theme. It is particularly interesting how some tend to associate the family environment with horror, which contrasts with the traditional position of the family in Irish society. In present times, can the Irish family structure be a source of fear?

### **Irish Contemporary Horror – The Evil Lies Within**

Irish national cinema underwent a major transformation during the 1990s – a phenomenon mainly associated with the reopening of the *Irish Film Board* and the Celtic Tiger economy. According to Díóg O’Connell (2010), between 1994 and 2008, the *Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann – IFB/BSÉ*<sup>4</sup> supported the production of over one hundred and forty projects. These films “can be arranged generically with a handful of genres appearing more frequently: thriller; gangster; horror; romantic comedy, for example” (O’Connell 45).

Although horror is mentioned as a frequent genre among the productions funded by the IFB, Kim Newman (2006) argues that horror is far from being considered a tradition in Irish Cinema. Nonetheless, the author claims that, historically, one can notice the potential of the Irish to explore fear in films. For instance, “J. Sheridan LeFanu’s (sic) vampire tale ‘Carmilla’ and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and ‘The Canterville Ghost’ have inspired multiple film and television adaptations” (Newman 3). Likewise, Irish writers and directors such as Neil Jordan, who was responsible for *The Company of Wolves* (1984) and *Interview with the Vampire* (1992), have done significant works of horror in foreign lands.

The bond between Ireland and horror is noticeable, “yet, there’s a distinct shortage of Irish horror films, and little which might be counted as an Irish horror – or even fantastical – tradition in the cinema” (Newman 3). The small number of Irish horror features in the Celtic Tiger period does not mean that these stories are irrelevant or should be taken for granted by scholars and researchers. On the contrary, they are a relevant source of research, as they provide meaningful information to understand Irishness. According to Séan Crosson (2012), between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, Irish filmmakers used the horror genre as a medium to represent aspects of Irish society, culture, and history. Still, the author draws attention to the fact that Irish filmmakers have generally been less inclined to horror, even though it is one of the most overused and international cinematic forms.

During the Celtic Tiger period, Irish horror films were often placed in rural Ireland. Crosson points out Paddy Breatnach’s *Shrooms* (2007) and Aisling Walsh’s *The Daisy Chain* (2008) as good examples of stories set in the Irish countryside. Kennedy (2012) believes that there are not enough horror films to edify a tradition, but he recognizes the astonishing



number of rural tragedies in contrast with urban-set monster outbreaks. One can surely recognize the rural setting as a strong characteristic of the Irish horror cinema of the Celtic Tiger period. Still, we aim at analysing a film released during the so-called Celtic Phoenix era (2014-).<sup>5</sup> The ideologies and goals of the filmmakers are probably not the same, especially considering that Ireland went through significant economic and demographic changes in recent decades. Therefore, in order to understand the characteristics of a recent Irish horror movie, one must analyse the general features of contemporary horror cinema.

Contemporary horror films have been strongly related to a closer evil, instead of monsters from distant lands or another planet. Isabel Pinedo (1997) states that horror violates the assumption that we live in a predictable world. These narratives also elucidate the perception that taken-for-granted normality can become a minefield because in horror irrationality challenges the universal social order. She also makes a distinction between two periods of the horror genre: “in the classical paradigm, the violent disruption is often located in or originates from a remote, exotic location. In contrast, the postmodern paradigm treats violence as constituent element of everyday life” (Pinedo 18).

Postmodern horror presents disturbing events as a feature of the society. Authorities might fail to control violence, and a close friend can be a vicious killer. This aspect leads viewers to the perception that danger can become a fixed element of their lives. Take for example the following films: In *Dead Meat* (2003) and *Shrooms*. The protagonists are tourists looking for exotic experiences in Ireland, which slightly associates these films to the classical paradigm. However, both features can also be placed in the postmodern spectrum. Classical and postmodern paradigms do share characteristics, but they are different in the nature of their moral universe. Pinedo argues that the classical paradigm draws relatively clear limits between contending camps, such as good and evil or normal and abnormal. The monsters are usually destroyed in the end and routine goes back to normal. In contrast, the postmodern paradigm “blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous” (Pinedo 22).

Postmodern cinema frames society in a path of inevitable despair. It shows that it might be impossible to find a suitable solution for what threatens normality. Therefore, restlessness becomes part of the routine, and it can be seen as a new version of the social order. In *Dead Meat*, by Conor McMahon, Helena escapes from zombies, but she ends up locked in a truck by authorities that were supposed to rescue her. In *Shrooms*, Tara, an apparently harmless American student, murdered all her friends. The most unsettling part of the story is the very last sequence, when she kills a paramedic and runs into the woods. Thus, the narrative remains open, and Tara is free to keep committing dreadful acts.

Tania Modleski (1986) mentions that characters in postmodern horror films are relatively unsympathetic. Nobody is usually a charming hero, they are far from being moral role models, and one might even find it hard to grieve their eventual deaths. According to Modleski, these films commonly dispense or drastically minimize the development of the characters and the plot, which influence the audience's reception and judgment. It can be hard to feel sorry for a character that lacks the expected moral values. In *Shrooms*, Bluto is the first one to die, but he is also willing to cheat on his girlfriend. From the start, he shows a very aggressive personality, punches one of his college friends, and violently kills an animal.

Pinedo argues that postmodern horror, just like its classical predecessors, exposes the monster's graphical violence over ordinary people, and their flawed attempts to survive. It might be difficult to imagine a horror film without any variety of violence. The monster's rampage and the other characters' struggle are the backbone of the narrative. Thus, filmmakers do not randomly place violence in horror films, "but it is rather a constituent element of the genre" (Pinedo 17). In this sense, violence is the element used to throw into question the everyday life security, and the integrity of everything surrounding us.

Although there are different forms of violence, the physical one is probably the most frequent in horror films. As such, special effects tend to play an important role in the narrative. Irish filmmakers usually lack access to human or technical resources to compete with Hollywoodian standards and viewers might even find the violent scenes in Irish films unreal or unprofessional. For example, in 2007, Derek Elley wrote a review of *Shrooms*. He was clearly not fond of the movie, stating that the scenes were not scary, and the story was far from original. He also points out that Paddy Breathnach's feature "shows just how difficult it is to do effective, modestly budgeted horror" (Elley n.p.). Elley exposes his opinions about the film and underlines an important aspect to be understood in terms of horror cinema in Ireland: local filmmakers face a severe lack of financial support.

The Irish Film Board's funding is the main ground of contemporary Irish cinema. Many successful films, like the Oscar-winner *Once* (2007), by John Carney, might have never been recorded without IFB's support. Back in 2008, due to a severe economic crisis, the abolishment of the board was recommended, but this proposal would "have catastrophic consequences for the Irish film industry if implemented given its dependence on the board for financing and support" (Crosson 1). Irish filmmakers do not usually rely on private companies and the domestic studios cannot match the Hollywoodian technologies. The budget offered by the IFB might not be enough to make a box office successful horror movie, and that can be one of the main reasons for the short number of productions in this genre during the Celtic Tiger period.

In spite of this, it is worth mentioning that, in the last decades, we have seen an increasing number of Irish horror films, “thanks to digital film and the possibilities it presents for rapid and cheap filmmaking with relatively sophisticated special effects offerings in post-production” (Barret 282). These resources were important to encourage Irish filmmakers to produce horror during the 2000s, but, just like *Shrooms*, they still failed to receive positive criticism. Bill Gibron (2007) wrote a slightly negative review about Stephen Bradley’s *Boy Eats Girl* (2005), stating that the film was overly similar to *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), by Edgar Wright: “Unless you can equal . . . the project you’re pilfering, do something original and inventive instead” (Gibron n. p.). However, during the 2010s, the reception of Irish horror films became more positive. The budgets were still low, but Irish horror filmmakers learned to make the best out of it. Brad Miska (2012) states that *Stitches* (2012), by Conor McMahon, was destined to be a cult classic. Although he did not ignore the flaws in the production, he saw potential in the film: “*Stitches* is an incredibly low budget production – the film looks cheap, and the acting is suspect – but it delivers on so many other levels. Its biggest accomplishment is that it’s never boring, and carries heavy replay value” (Miska n. p.). This review indicates that Irish horror cinema might be creating its own identity by overcoming limits imposed by the lack of financial support. Therefore, filmmakers are possibly developing engaging narratives that can horrify audiences, without the need to rely on high-priced special effects.

One may still claim that horror cinema is experimental on Irish soil. The rising Irish horror cinema can go through different paths while building its own traditions. One of the filmmakers offering expressive contributions to Irish horror cinema is Ivan Kavanagh. Although he is not fully dedicated to the horror genre as demonstrated by his most recent Revisionist Western *Never Grow Old* (2019), he was responsible for films that are very meaningful to the contemporary Irish horror scenario. His low-budget *Tin Can Man* (2007) was not funded by the IFB, but it was highly appreciated and won the “Boundary Breaking Best Feature” at the Sydney Underground Film Festival 2007. In a review for the website Pophorror.com, Evan Romero says *Tin Can Man* “is an experience the viewer won’t soon forget, nor will they want to”. Later, Kavanagh was able to receive financial support from the Irish Film Board to produce his second horror feature: *The Canal*.

The discussions of this section emphasize that the Irish horror cinema is still building a tradition. Thus, it can be quite meaningful to develop an analysis of this film. By examining its implicit and explicit aspects, one can contribute to understanding the particularities of Irish horror. As it was mentioned, filmmakers in Ireland are unable to reproduce the level of violence present in Hollywoodian horror narratives. However, the lack of resources might lead writers, directors, and producers to take unique paths to explore fear.

## The Canal – The Father Still Decides the Fate of The Family

*The Canal* was written and directed by Ivan Kavanagh, and the production company in charge was the Dublin-based Park Films. The Irish Film Board financially supported the project. The story is about David, a film archivist, who moves with his pregnant wife, Alice, to a new house. The film starts with a sequence in daylight, and they are paying a last visit to the place before closing the deal. The colours are very bright and they both look optimistic and excited about their new home (Figure 1).

Five years later, they are living with their only son, Billy. However, the harmony is gone, and the couple is facing marital issues as David suspects that Alice is cheating on him. After the first sequence, the couple wakes up in a plain-coloured room (Figure 2), which contrasts with the brightness of the first shots. At this point, this choice of shot exposes the unrest in their domestic environment. Alice is clearly uninterested in having sex with David, who does not seem to know much about her thoughts. There is a feeling of solitude in their bedroom, and Kavanagh seems to use colours to expose the changes in their relationship (Figures 1 and 2).

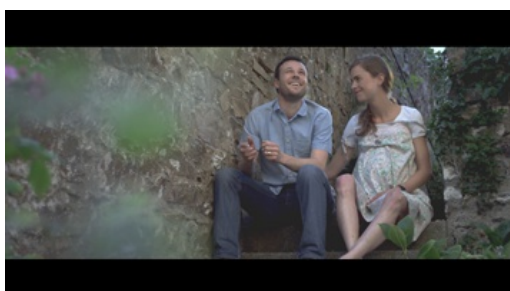


Figure 1 and 2 – In these shots, Kavanagh uses colours to present the changes in David and Alice's relationship.

Source: *The Canal*.

Although David and Alice live an unhappy marriage, they are clearly loving parents. As a father, David is not fully following the patterns of the stem family. Actually, during the Celtic Tiger period, Irish filmmakers were engaged in representing non-traditional families. Liz Gill's *Goldfish Memory* (2003) presents two same-sex couples building a family with a child. In *Once* (2007) by John Carney, "Guy's father is, in many ways, feminised, depicting the hybridity of his role through his positive and caring relationship with his son" (Ryan 9). In *The Canal*, David seems to be responsible for Billy's routine. He puts Billy in bed and takes him to school. On a certain morning, before leaving, David asks Alice to be at home early this time, implying that she tends to work late. When she gets home, Billy is usually already asleep.

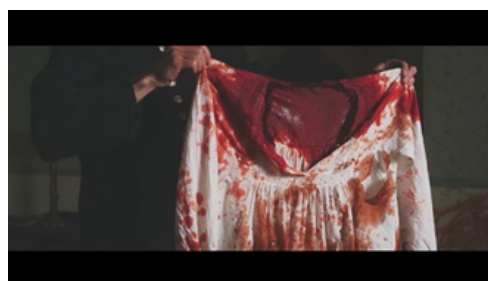
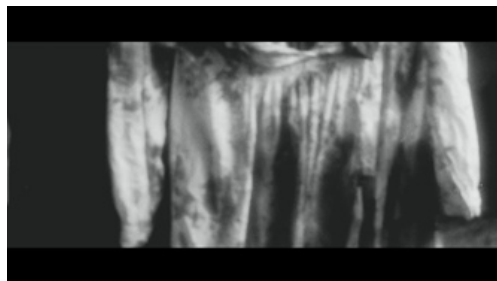
Soon, David discovers his wife's infidelity, which is the reason why she arrives late at home. This is not the only issue that troubles his mind. At work, he watches a reel of footage that shows his house being the scene of a vicious murder. William Jackson, a previous owner, killed his wife and drowned his kids and himself in the canal. The footage is in black and white, but as David watches the scenes some shots rapidly show images in colours, which seems to be Kavanagh's attempt to connect the film with David's reality. According to Andrew Tudor (1989), traditional contrasts between life/death or normal/abnormal are not clearly marked in "paranoid horror"<sup>6</sup> and, therefore, human beings might not be able to draw a defence line against the unknown. A variety of threats can quietly sneak into one's routine, without causing any warning until it is too late.

Isabel Pinedo states that nothing is what it seems in postmodern horror. Characters might find themselves locked in a nightmare and die in their sleep. Reality is severely fragilized both in terms of narrative and at the cinematographic level. The author underlines that horror tends to violate cinematic codes that distinguish the subjective and the objective, leading the viewer to wonder what is going to happen. In order to create the perception of a film blending with reality, Kavanagh makes a very complex sequence: the use of shots in black and white and in colours makes one wonder if David is watching the film or the murder scene in real life. Kavanagh also uses subjective shots in the sequence, which is a strategy to place the audience in the film by seeing the events through David's eyes.

In figures 3 and 4, one can notice shots of the same moment with different colours. David is watching a film recorded during the police investigation, showing police officers arresting William Jackson, collecting evidence, and taking a corpse out of the canal. Then, this sequence cuts to a close-up of David's face. He watches Alice and Billy holding each other and singing together. As he enters his room, he sees William Jackson violently stabbing his wife. Here Kavanagh creates a sequence of rapidly changing shots of Alice and Billy and the vicious murder as if the massacre and violence were happening to David's family. The wall slowly opens exposing Jackson and three masked individuals. Finally, David wakes up, but he does not believe those disturbing events were a dream. He gets up and puts his ear on the wall, trying to check if there is someone behind it. This sequence is a landmark in the film, as it puts reality into question, and also induces the audience to raise questions about David's sanity.

Pinedo compares the appreciation of a horror narrative to a roller coaster ride, arguing that both people are confined and kept off-balance through suspense and surprises. There is an element of control, which is the conviction that the danger is not real. The viewer is aware that there is nothing to be afraid of, and stress becomes a pleasant sensation: "Fear and pleasure commingle" (Pinedo 39). However, in postmodern horror, danger gets close to

familiar places, and horrifying events can take place in our own houses. It can weaken the viewer's feeling of control and redefine the experience, as the narrative gets closer to real life and the audience may wonder if it can ever happen with themselves.



Figures 3 and 4: Images of the film David is watching in black white and in colours.

Source: *The Canal*

The family holds a central role in Irish society, and the negative representation of families in contemporary horror films contrasts with the “privileged status which it is given in the Irish Constitution as in the controversies which so often resolve around the need to ‘preserve the family’” (Mc Cullagh 205). In *The Canal*, the danger appears from within the house in such a destructive way that every family member dies. It means that preserving the family can be an unsuitable option. Alice was having an affair, and it was later revealed she was planning on leaving David. If she had been quicker, she could have saved her life. David tracks his wife to the house of her lover and faces the confirmation that his marriage is falling apart. He walks back home and, as he passes the canal, he feels sick and goes to a filthy public bathroom. He listens to someone else entering. Then, a ghostly William Jackson whispers to him: “the master wants you” (*The Canal*, 2014, 23 min 45 sec). The statement comes as an invitation, leading David to have Jackson's same dreadful destiny.

William killed his family in 1902 when the family institution was supposedly stable and harmonious. With this, Kavanagh might be trying to imply that disturbing events were happening in domestic environments long before the recent decades. William transfers to David a duty, and he has no choice but to accept it. It is worth mentioning that David's last name is Williams. According to Leslie Dunkling (2014), Williams is a surname that means descendant of William. We do not know much about their family background, but the names chosen by Kavanagh could emulate a certain genealogical relationship. They are establishing a tradition in which the acts of violence keep repeating themselves without any chance for change. One can associate their connection to the period of the stem family when the father



had the power to decide his children's destiny. William seemingly obligates David to receive an inheritance of violence, which led his family to demise.

Considering there was a certain paternal relationship between David and William, it is possible to point out this bond as a source of mental unrest. It is almost like a father deciding a child's future, but the latter refuses this inescapable reality. The only way out was to compromise his own conscience and create a new narrative for himself. Furthermore, David was shaken by the suspicion of his wife's infidelity, something that could drastically affect his routine. His current situation was unbearable. Sanity became his curse. David's reality led him to develop a mental disorder, as the risks threatening his house were too much to bear.

While he is still in the bathroom, David listens to Alice's voice crying for help. He seems very weak and crawls. Then, he witnesses someone attacking Alice. He passes out and wakes up in the morning in the same spot. He goes home and decides to report Alice is missing. In *The Canal*, human actions fail to interrupt the monster's rampage of violence, which is an element that connects the narrative to the postmodern horror genre. According to Pinedo (1997), contemporary horror films present violence as a constituent feature of people's routines. Thus, the monster does not appear to disrupt normality, as he looks like a regular resident of the everyday world. His actions are not that different from what one usually sees on the news. Furthermore, human regulations are not effective against the spread of violence; characters are unable to find a definitive solution at the conclusion of the film, and that "produces an unstable, paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse" (Pinedo 65).

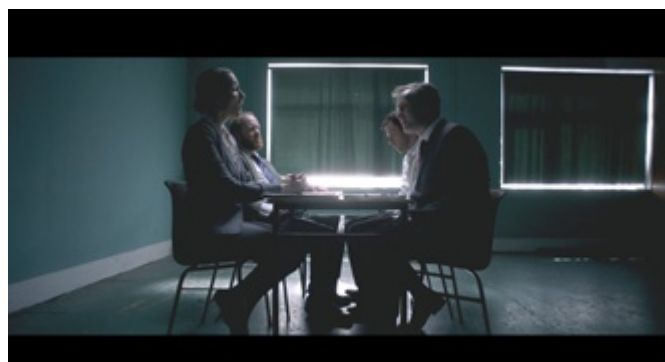
The failure of human responses against the tensions caused by the monster is probably related to the function of the authorities in the country. As previously discussed, Mc Cullagh points out a document produced in 1982 by The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) stating that a unified family would be the solution to the rising crime in the country. This exposes a belief that the familiar institution is responsible to regulate social behaviour. The familist ideology diluted part of the State's responsibility for security. Therefore, in Irish horror film narratives, people requesting protection can be frustrated by the infective action of authorities. Detective Mc Namara is responsible for Alice's case, but he looks clumsy in every single scene, and one cannot say he conveys confidence. He does think David killed his wife, but his attempts to arrest David and protect Billy failed.

Consequently, in *The Canal* Kavanagh seems to aim to expose the powerless police force and justice system. When they find Alice's body in the canal and David becomes the main suspect, Detective Mc Namara and the senior welfare officer believe that Billy should be taken into care by the social service. This sequence takes place in a very dark interrogation room, and a lawyer accompanies David. As the senior welfare officer proposes to take Billy into social care,

David's lawyer argues that the decision is too drastic and suggests a psychiatric evaluation. David tells Mc Namara that he believes a ghost murdered Alice, and that gives the detective enough reasons to question his sanity. However, the lawyer easily convinces the senior welfare officer to wait for the report back from the psychiatrist.

It is worth mentioning how Kavanagh explores the lighting in this sequence. In the shot of figure 5, it is possible to notice the room itself is very dark, but there is light coming out of the window. David and Mc Namara are closer to the window, which is partly illuminated, while the lawyer and the senior welfare officer are almost entirely in the shadows. The sequence features close-up shots of both David and Mc Namara, and the viewer can see their faces are entirely illuminated, suggesting that they are the ones closer to the truth about what happened to Alice. The light can be associated with the truth, as neither lawyer nor the senior welfare officer would have allowed Billy to stay with his father knowing how he was mentally ill. Still, the decision was irresponsible, considering Mc Namara had reported David's delusional thought and David was the main suspect of the murder.

The decision to wait for a psychiatric report exposed David, Billy, and everyone around them to an unspeakable risk. These two individuals, associated with law and social assistance, were partly responsible for the culminating disturbing events of the film. Even if it was not explicit, they followed Article 41 of the Irish Constitution and respected the inalienable rights of the family. They understood David had just lost his wife, and it would have been too harsh for him to lose his child. In fact, it would have meant the demise of their entire family institution. The shot of figure 4 and this whole situation implies the failure of authorities in their duty to protect society.



Figures 5: David is facing the authorities in an interrogation room.

Source: *The Canal*

Kavanagh explores the contradictions of the family values during the whole narrative. At Alice's funeral, David has an extremely uncomfortable conversation with his mother-in-law. She is aware of the affair and even asks David if he knows something about Alice's boyfriend.

Apparently, the man is going through a hard-grieving process. Alice's mother also wants to take Billy with her, but the proposal is quickly refused. The dialogue between the two feels like a confrontation. She does not even ask how David is doing, and clearly does not recognize him as the central figure of the family, implying that he is not important for the child at the moment: "Maybe I should take him for a while... He should be around another woman. A mother figure" (*The Canal*, 2004, 37 min 35 sec). Her attempt fails, exposing that, even if it is flawed and unstable, the father is responsible for making decisions about his children's lives. She even argued that Alice would want her to take Billy, but her insistence would not be enough to change the patriarchal decision.

In *The Canal*, the monster seems to target women that could threaten the stability of the household. Infidelity can put an end to a marriage, and lead to the shattering of the family. William kills his wife after discovering her affair. As a ghost, he instructs David to do the same, as if it is a tradition to be passed down. One can understand that the film aims at portraying these men as monsters that willingly obliterate their families when their authority is challenged. Kavanagh's film offers the female viewers a truly fearsome experience, as women and children are at risk throughout the narrative, but no adult man is murdered or even attacked. In 1902, after killing his wife, William also decapitates the nanny of his children with an axe. David does not hurt Billy's nanny. She probably survives because she quits the job as soon as she notices David is mentally unstable.

According to Modleski, horror films enable the male audience to keep a certain distance from the terror. The genre offers viewers a pleasurable encounter with violence, as they are aware that there is nothing to be afraid of. Nevertheless, Modleski argues that contemporary horror projects the experience of submission and defencelessness onto female characters and deprives the female spectator of recreational experience. In the film, women are scapegoated by the failure of their marriage. They are not just blamed, but also viciously punished by their partners. The men seem to exempt themselves from any guilt as if their wives ought to obey and stand by their side forever. David and William drown themselves in the canal, but their death can hardly give the women viewers any consolation. These men decided to murder their wives and kids, but they never face the consequences of their actions. The authorities fail to take them to justice, and their deaths do not look as painful as the terrors their wives had to face.

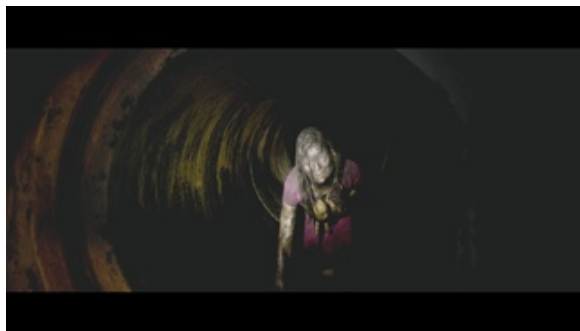
Before dying in the canal, David believes he was able to record a ghost on tape. He is at home with his co-worker Clare and insists on watching the film that is supposed to show a dead woman near the canal. While they are watching the film, a creature comes out of a hole in the wall and drags Clare inside. Mc Namara and the police have been watching the house, and

they hear a woman screaming. When they confront David, he runs and enters a manhole holding Billy. Inside the tunnel, he seems to recall what really happened the night Alice died and moments ago in his house with Clare. A flashback shows that David killed them both, and he looks astonished by the revelations of his own memory. Thus, the film presents two different and conflictive versions of reality:

David's experience of reality, which is dreamlike and non-linear, alternating always between past, present, and the in-between, and the objective story's world's, which operates according to rational and linear principles of causation. (David is a jealous husband, ergo he kills his wife; David feels guilt, ergo he constructs an alternate reality that shifts the blame away from him: ghosts killed his wife) (Barrett 283).

As far, *The Canal* is a film strongly associated with the postmodern horror paradigm. Hence, it is expected to have an open-ended conclusion. Kavanagh not only presents a narrative without a clear conclusion, but he also offers the audience the option of deciding what was real throughout the story. One may believe there was a ghost influencing David's actions, but he can also be a jealous and violent man who refuses to face his own horrifying actions. Furthermore, the obliteration of a family cannot be entirely part of the reality of a community that has been cherishing this institution for so long. Placing the destruction of the family institution between reality and delirium might expose that the Irish society still struggles to recognize the contradictions of the domestic environment. Even years after numerous reports of violence and abuse, the community can find it hard to believe that a father dared kill his whole family.

In *The Canal*, the family is represented as a flawed institution that does not provide the expected security to its members. While he is being chased by the police in the tunnel, David sees a monstrous zombie-figure of Alice giving birth to a child. This is related to the fact that she was pregnant when she died. She chases him (Figure 6), and he has no exit thus falling into the canal with Billy. Her appearance can be associated with the belief that the family, as an institution, is dying. Familism has proven to be ineffective and harmful to the Irish community. It can be seen as a dead and meaningless ideology that struggles to stay alive. It should be stressed that the first target of the assassin fathers, William and David, were the mothers. That is quite representative, considering women are usually the ones who beget the children and must take care of the household. By murdering the mothers, these men erased a fundamental pillar of the Irish family structure.



Figures 6: A monstrous figure of Alice chases David in the tunnel to the canal.  
Source: *The Canal*

Mc Namara manages to save Billy, but David drowns in the canal. At this point, the audience might believe the story is coming to a sort of positive end, in which the child would finally be free from his father's disturbing actions. Nonetheless, Kavanagh builds a narrative that does not allow the viewer to easily separate David's delusions from reality. There is no certainty about the actual source of the violence, as the film "provides purposely unconvincing retreat from David's dream/ghost-world" (Barrett 283). The story emulates a parental connection between William Jackson and David Williams through their names, and this can also be connected to David's son. Billy is a common nickname for William. In this regard, one could predict that the heritage of death would be passed on to the next generation.

Although David is supposedly dead, Billy listens to him through the wall: "It's Daddy, I'm here with your mother. Do you miss us? Do you want to stay here with us? Do you want to stay here with us forever? I love you, Billy" (*The Canal*, 2014, 1h 28min 24sec). Billy gets into the car with his grandmother, but he suddenly opens the door and jumps from the moving vehicle. "The film's last shot is of Billy, back in the house – either having survived the jump or having now become a ghost – closing the door on the audience and engulfing them in literal and metaphorical darkness" (Barrett 283). The conclusion of the film is strongly associated with the postmodern horror paradigm, as there is no clear idea about Billy's fate. It is very unlikely that he survived, but the audience does not witness what happened after he jumps from the car.

The conclusion the filmmaker gives to the film is the triumph of the monster, who seems to be an invisible force that induces fathers to kill unfaithful wives. The children are also sacrificed to obliterate a flawed family as if they just could not live outside their household. Although David died, normality was not restored, and his child became the very last victim. Kavanagh possibly aimed to expose a contradictory ideology with roots in the stem family tradition. Irish society propagated familism and ignored the negative effects for as long as they

could. They establish a way of living that sacrificed a whole generation. It was a tradition that charged the community, and the “price, quite literally, was madness” (Mc Cullagh 208). Thus, William and David, just like the fathers of the stem family system, decided the fate of the other family members. The unfaithful wives were serious threats to their position, as they could leave with the children and form a family with a new partner. These women challenged the traditions by taking control of their own lives, and that was unacceptable. William and David were not able to handle their failure to maintain the tradition, and their roles in the household. Thus, their flawed families had to disappear.

## Conclusion

As previously mentioned, this study can be considered a starting point to develop theories to understand the aspects of contemporary Irish horror cinema. This research is still in its first stages, but one can point out that Irish filmmakers have repeatedly staged horrifying events inside households. Furthermore, a family member tends to play the role of the monsters, which creates a troubling contrast with the traditional representation of the family in the Irish society.

Therefore, *The Canal* is a movie that reports contradictions of the family institution. In Ireland, the family has held a central role in the community for quite a long time. However, it has been noticed that parents have failed to regulate social behaviour, and they can even threaten the security of their children. In this regard, Irish horror filmmakers explore the family as a source of fear, especially considering that the postmodern horror paradigm tends to portray the terror of everyday life. Kavanagh presents a story of a monstrous entity that crosses generations spreading violence. He seems to imply that Irish household terror has roots in the past, but the contemporary family still struggles to avoid its vile influence. In the film, David's whole family died just like the previous residents of his house, implying that it can be hard to avoid the horrifying heritage.

In this sense, the film exposes some of the worst aspects of the family institution. One can notice that the actions of the father, who was supposed to be the head of the household, led the whole family to its demise. Thus, the narrative can be associated with the consequences of the stem family tradition. The father in a family had full control of his children's fate, and his decisions had horrifying effects on non-inheriting sons and daughters. In *The Canal*, the fathers struggle to keep control of their families. As soon as they notice their own failure, they engage in a self-destruction process, as if their wives and children simply do not have the right to leave or form a new family.

Just like his previous micro-budget horror film *Tin Can Man*, Kavanagh explores psychological horror and connects the viewer with a troubled mind. By using sequences with



rapidly changing shots, face close-ups, and a sound design, he provides a frightening experience to the audience. Consequently, through films like *The Canal*, Irish filmmakers prove that they can induce fear without relying on costly special effects. As such, this film can be considered a turning point in the development of a horror cinema tradition in Ireland, departing from the influence of Hollywoodian patterns and producing creative, unique, and horrifying narratives.

## Notes

- 1 The author of this article receives a monthly grant from FAPESB – Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado da Bahia. He was also selected by the ABEI committee to receive the ABEI / ESP Grant to a Junior Researcher 2020.
- 2 The Great Famine was a period of great starvation in Ireland, when potato crops were infected with a fungus, leaving peasant families with little or no food options. During this period, the Irish population fell drastically, as a result of the large number of deaths and immigration.
- 3 The Irish Film Board, now known as Screen Ireland, is a public organization that supports and promotes the development of film, television, and animation in the country. They usually offer financial support to projects by Irish writers, directors and producer. They also fund filmmakers interested in recording movies in Ireland. Source: [www.screenireland.ie](http://www.screenireland.ie). Access: August 01, 2020.
- 4 The Irish Film Board was founded in the early 1980's and, although it existed for less than a decade, it can be seen as the starting point of Ireland's modern national cinema. In 1993, then Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Michael D. Higgins, re-established the Board.
- 5 The Celtic Phoenix is a name given to Ireland's economic recovery. According to Aidan Regan and Samuel Brazys (2017), Irish economy started to grow again with the investment of multinational corporations, such as the global tech giant Apple.
- 6 Aiming to discuss contemporary horror cinema, Andrew Tudor (1989) uses the term paranoid horror, while Isabel Pinedo (1997) introduces "postmodern horror".

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