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The Importance of Sporting Imagery in Representing National Identity

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Introduction

This research is the culmination of my under-graduate research in visual studies and post-colonial theory. My paper examines the relationship between sporting imagery and formations of national identity by exploring historical visual representations of Ireland and how those images have informed notions of Irishness. This paper does not offer a straightforward chronological account of visual representations of Ireland nor is not an attempt to record fully the use of sports imagery. Instead, it is intended as an overview of the broad sweep of notions of national identity and their redefinition through history. Before I frame my discussion in the context of sporting imagery, let me explain some of the key terms which form my research.

National identity

National identity is the depiction of a nation-state or longstanding ethnic population as a collective, through its traditions, culture, language and politics. We perform national identity daily when we speak our native language and speak in accents. We also rehearse our identity when we are rooted somewhere else (Eg; on holidays). National identity is a shared sense of nationhood grounded in images and stories associated with a nation. It exists to the extent that these images and stories are acknowledged and reaffirmed by others as legitimate representations of the nation in question. It is the product of negotiation and is constantly being refined and redefined to satisfy the needs of the generation performing it. One important point to bear in mind when considering national identity is that what constitutes the 'nation' and 'state' may be recognised and represented in different ways by different segments of the population. Identity at the national level may be derived from a whole range of different sources- cultural, historical, social, economic and also sporting- with the emphasis on one another differing from country to country. Visual technologies refers to any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the internet. Visual imagery is never innocent, it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges.

Let me take you through a brief history of visual representations of Ireland...

Punch was a British weekly magazine of humour and satire established in 1841. Punch's anti-Irishness is famous. *Punch* Magazine illustrations contained a series of negative stereotypes which was a visual mechanism used by colonizing powers to justify their presence. For example, *Figure 1* this illustration of *The Irish Frankenstein* depicts the Irish as savage, inhuman monsters. Soon, this casual racism became unacceptable so positive stereotypes emerged and the idea of creating a positive concept of Irishness became very important.

Figure 1: The Irish Frankenstein by John Tenniel. Published in Punch Magazine 20th May 1882.

The growing revolution in Ireland during the late 1800s into the early 1900s sparked a reaction to the Irish stereotype in the form of landscape. The Irish landscape- the landscape of the West of Ireland in particular- became synonymous with what it is to be Irish. The Celtic Revival drew on the traditions of literature and art and created an iconography of Irishness which stimulated a positive representation of Irish national identity through the appreciation of works of poets and writers such as WB Yeats and James Joyce. This revival transgressed into the visual as the landscape of the West came to represent who we are both visually and spiritually.

There are many similarities between images of the Irish landscape and sports images. Both types of images ignore economic, religious and political reality as they focus on positive images of Ireland rather than the changing urban landscape of the city. Both types of images are a-historical and can stand the test of time whereas images of urban landscapes change rapidly with constant transformations in architecture, infrastructure and other contributing factors.

John Hinde Postcards

Moving into the mid 20th century, the photography of John Hinde and the subsequent postcard collection promoted Irish tourism before the development of digital imaging. This idealised view of Ireland was at the time in stark contrast with the grim realities of a stagnant economy and repressed society in 1950's Ireland, thus often causing Hinde's postcards to be "identified as emblematic of an 'imaginary' view of Ireland propagated by foreign photographers. However his postcards became immensely popular with tourists and locals alike and are fondly recalled to this day.

Collecting Turf from the Bog, Connemara, Co. Galway, Ireland.

Colour Photo by John Hinde, F.R.P.S.

Figure 2: 'Collecting Turf from the Bog, Connemara'. John Hinde Postcard Collection (1962)

Figure 2 is typical of the style Hinde became famous for. It's a presumably posed, kitsch and colourful representation of the Irish landscape featuring a buachaill and cailín rua as well as a trusty donkey, carrying turf from the bog.

Figure 3: John Hinde Postcard Reinvention by The Stone Twins (2013). Le Cool (Issue 195).

Moving into the late 20th century and present day, we have seen the advent of digital and graphic imaging, the internet and the increasing mobility of images in the 21st century as they appear and reappear in many places *(Figure 3)*. These advances in visual mechanisms are what we rely on as representational devices. We look to these devices for snippets of the truth and constantly rely on images for clarification and validation. Eg; Did you really? I don't believe you! Show me a photo

Sport in 20th Century Ireland

For most people, historical knowledge is constituted by the oral and the visual. The oral tradition transmits a sense of tradition and belonging creating an identity which is reinforced by visual representations which help lodge potent images in the mind. Traditionally, national identification has been inspired by the stories told by notable artists, writers and historians. As national stories are increasingly told through popular culture and the media, many people turn to sports, sport events, sport venues and sports people as representations of the nation and national values.

During the first half of the 20th century, sport was both a potent symbol of resistance to English rule and a key element in the definition of identity in the early years of the Irish state. As Barry Houlihan has observed, 'over the last 100years or so, key phases in Ireland's history have been interwoven with sports politics and sport remains a powerful metaphor of contemporary Irish politics and an effective state resource'.

Figure 4: Michael Collins addressing players before throwing in the ball at Croke Park (1922)

Traditional Irish sports were important in defining Irish national identity during the anti-colonial struggle- none more so than the sports of the Gaelic Athletic Association. Many viewed the GAA as an expression of Irish Independence and its success in orchestrating Irish cultural resistance is impressive. In the early years of the GAA, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) saw the association as an ideal recruiting ground from which fit young men could be called upon to fight for Ireland's freedom if and when the opportunity arose. The GAA took on the symbolism of nation, resistance and liberation and Gaelic sports still remain a key symbol in Irish national identity today.

Sports in Contemporary Ireland

Ireland considers itself a great sporting nation and a country devoted to sport, and these images have been important for the development of national identity. International sporting success- especially at Olympic-type festivals and World Cup tournaments- does help to bolster a country's prestige both at home and abroad. It is during these international competitions that all states are faced with the pressure to establish and project a sense of national unity on the world stage. Beyond the matter of winning and losing, a vital aspect of sport is that of representing place. The boundaries between countries are sacred lines as each country carries its own stories, a place apart, with its own traditions and its own history. You may be born just miles away from your neighbour but if a country boundary runs through those miles, your neighbour is somehow different. You might learn to love that neighbour, but you would never want to change places with them. And no contest is as intense as that played out between border rivals. People who agree on everything else argue over sport. From this sporting rivalry flows all manner of other differences. Most often these differences are

imagined rather than real- but they are important nonetheless. It is the territorial nature of the rivalries which gives so much exhilaration in sport- it gives rivalries a depth and texture.

Figure 5: Clare Hurling Fan. Sportsfile (2013)

How we use and mediate images of sporting success performs a social function as well as an aesthetic one. It says something about who we are as a nation and how we want to be seen. Whether we are guilty of being 90minute patriots whose nationalist outpourings are expressed only at major sporting events or life-long dedicated fanatics, sport, as a collectively sustained symbolic structure, is a powerful metaphor which reveals the most deep seated values of a culture.

Ireland has enthusiastically embraced its sports stars such as Katie Taylor, Rory McIlroy and Conor McGregor as symbolic of the country's new identity. Consequently, sport- particularly elite sport- is used to provide the focus for the definition of national identity, which once successfully established, is often projected back to foster the impression of cultural continuity.

Conclusion

Sport has been a supportive venue for attempts by colonial cultures such as Ireland, Australia and Canada to establish a different lifestyle and identity to that of the mother culture. Sport provides a number of emotionally charged occasions for citizens to be made aware of and express their common identity within the nation. The participation in major sports events as spectators has the element of ritual and emotional appeal capable of sustaining the 'imagined community' of the nation. Every individual will have their own understanding of how sports imagery represents a nation and no paper can possibly compete with the varying experiences of a lived history. If nothing else, I hope that this paper has stirred the embers of old controversies- or maybe even start a few new ones. If I have succeeded in that ambition, it will reflect the diversity, the passion and the sheer fascination of the visual history of Ireland and its relationship with sports imagery.