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# Re-imagined Communities? Ireland, Europe and the Web as Shifting Sites of Television Discourse<sup>1</sup>

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Maeve Connolly

## Introduction

The rise of satellite and cable across Europe during the late 1980s contributed to the restructuring of communications spaces that had previously been dominated by national broadcasters. These changes were viewed with concern by many media commentators. Summarising the debate in 1989, David Morley and Kevin Robins noted that 'it is broadly felt that these new technologies have disturbing and damaging implications for established national (and indeed continental) identities. There is a common fear of both their potential to disaggregate fixed national audiences and communities and to create new ones across national boundaries' (Morley and Robins, 1989: 11).

It seems likely that digital broadcasting will further fragment national audiences, not least because it provides for an even greater emphasis on the type of 'niche' programming associated with satellite and cable (Richardson and Meinhof, 1999: 87). Public service broadcasters are faced with the challenge of retaining audiences for generalist programming, while transnational competitors can operate largely outside the limits of national regulation and orient their programming towards the most lucrative markets.

In the Irish context, the troubled development of digital services has occasioned a renewed legislative and critical focus on the role of public service broadcasting in articulating national and cultural identity. But it is also possible to trace the 'textualisation' of new relations between broadcasters and national audiences (Richardson and Meinhof, 1999: 10). This paper adopts a textual approach to the analysis of Radio Telefís Éireann (RTÉ) during this transitional period. The focus of the analysis is RTÉ's discursive framework, which encompasses graphic ephemera such as station idents, logos, lead-ins and trailers, as well as other aspects of scheduling, continuity and branding. This paper also considers the wider context for these shifts in orientation, by exploring television's 're-imagination' of Europe and the Web.

## Television's Discursive Framework

My analysis of RTÉ's discursive framework is informed by Margaret Morse's account of 'virtuality' and distraction in contemporary culture. Morse suggests that television, the mall and the freeway should be considered as 'interrelated and mutually reinforcing systems [which are] organized in a way that allows for "liquidity" or the exchange of values between different ontological levels' (Morse, 1998: 100).

Although her analysis takes little account of the specificity of national formations outside the US, Morse does acknowledge the particular 'national' character of

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broadcasting. She notes that television functions as a 'nationwide distribution system for symbols in anticipation and reinforcement of a national culture presented not only as desirable but as already realised somewhere else' (1998:119). Television is central, therefore, to the construction of a national imaginary.

But Morse's account also foregrounds the interplay between television and other systems of value exchange that extend beyond the borders of the nation. Evidence of this type of exchange is provided by an analysis of European broadcasting. Richardson and Meinhof have analysed a range of television discourses 'which eschew a national address in favour of a European one or something more localised' (1999: 10). In particular, they note the establishment of EuroNews, a multilingual television news service funded by the European Union, which aims to provide a forum for pan-European political and social issues. Despite the aspirations of EU policy-makers, EuroNews has largely failed to provide a common European space of entertainment and information, partly, as Philip Schlesinger suggests, because the existing European communicative space is structured by the globalised film and television industry (Schlesinger, 1994: 34-35). In competition with EuroNews, however, commercial transnational broadcasters such as CNBC have begun to target sections of the European television audience. CNBC offers specialised business and financial news, aimed at Europe's highly mobile financial elite. In the process, it produces a 'European' communicative space that is largely based on the exchange of capital.

Morse notes that, in addition to investing images with exchange value, television actually models exchange, by including the viewer 'virtually' in its discourse and by constantly shifting between different fields of reference. It links the here-and-now with other places and other times, inviting 'distraction'. Morse defines distraction in linguistic terms, as a partial loss of contact with the here-and-now, related to the simultaneous or alternate expression of two planes of language; the plane of engaged discourse and the plane of disengaged story (1998: 100).

A recent ad campaign for RTÉ graphically represents this shift between two planes of language, as it involves interplay between mundane and magical worlds. RTÉ's 'So Much to Offer' advertisement follows a day in the life of the nation, beginning with sunrise and ending with sunset. Throughout the sequence, faces of familiar television personalities are integrated with representations of rural and urban Ireland, suggesting an organic link between RTÉ and the landscape.

This ad has also been incorporated into RTÉ's discursive framework in the form of a series of station idents for RTÉ One (see Figure 1). These employ 'real world' locations and feature ordinary men, women and children within various urban and rural settings, including a terraced street and the city quays. Each character holds a frame and, as the camera moves in towards the frame, the world pictured within it comes to life.

At first there appears to be a marked difference between these sequences and the images of the St. Brigid's Cross, or patterned standing stones, which were produced by RTÉ during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> But a closer analysis suggests otherwise. The world represented *within* the frame is the same digitally enhanced mystical landscape, familiar from earlier idents. The movement of the camera, as it tracks in towards this world, suggests a passage from the mundane 'reality' of the everyday into mythic time and space. In the process, the sequence hints at the possibility that this ancient and mystical place can be found within each of us.

In attempting to integrate traditional and contemporary reference points, RTÉ's 'picture frame' idents graphically represent two different notions of televisual time and space. In this respect these sequences actually foreground their particular function as 'shifters' within the discursive framework of broadcasting, which is to serve as kind of host or narrator, linking the 'here-and-now' with another place and another time.

The citing of previous idents or logos is a familiar strategy within commercial US television. Margaret Morse has noted that, during the 1980s, NBC explicitly historicised

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<sup>2</sup> The St. Brigid's Cross appeared most recently in a 1998 ident for RTÉ One, in the form of a luminous pattern on the surface of a misty lake. Accompanied by melancholy pipe music, this shape of the cross transforms into the letters 'RTÉ', which hover above the water for several seconds. The lake then seems to tip forward on the z-axis towards the viewer, rippling with reflected light as the title 'RTÉ' morphs into the letters 'ONE', which is rendered in glowing green transparent letters in the final frame.

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itself through an edited review of earlier versions of its famous peacock logo (1998: 80). At around the same time MTV introduced the concept of an identity based upon the notion of rapid change itself by commissioning and displaying endless new versions of its logo. This apparent reflexivity amounts to little more than a stylistic display, in which continuity is emphasised through change.

The proliferation of RTÉ idents during the 1990s<sup>3</sup> suggested a new emphasis on branding (McBride, 1998: 7) necessitated by domestic competition. The re-invention of traditional symbols can also be seen as part of a wider trend within national and regional broadcasting (Meech, 1996: 80). But despite their apparent sophistication, RTÉ's new corporate logos continue to mobilise contradictory aspects of an earlier national identity.

<sup>3</sup> RTÉ logos can be found at <http://www.irish-tv.com>. I am indebted to Stephanie McBride for this reference.

**FIGURE 1- STILL FROM RTÉ'S 'SO MUCH TO OFFER' AD CAMPAIGN**



### Corporate Logos and National Brands

RTÉ's 'millennium' ident (Figure 2) features a young woman in a flowing garment, suspended in the sky above a silvery expanse of water, holding a silver ball. The rapid editing, digital morphing and other special effects are very much in keeping with a progressive, postmodern, corporate identity. But ethereal images of femininity are rooted in established pictorial and literary traditions and have long been a feature of colonial and republican discourse (Cullen, 1997: 152-3).

Richard Kearney has suggested that images of the feminine may serve as archaic signifiers of forfeited and forbidden origins, existing outside history, in 'sacred' time (Kearney, 1997: 113). The 'millennium' ident, which seems to articulate a desire to return to mythic time and space, points to a continued contradiction between RTÉ's corporate and national identities.

**FIGURE 2 - RTÉ MILLENNIUM IDENTITY**



British broadcasting has its roots in a project of nation building, which began in the 1920s and relied on the extension of the 'best' in national culture to all social classes. In contrast, as Luke Gibbons has noted, the formative years of *Irish* broadcasting were characterised by the legitimisation of the new state rather than the nation (Gibbons 1996: 70-81). This project required the incorporation, and the reformulation, of emblems of Irish cultural nationalism. Despite its remit as national cultural institution RTÉ has remained dependent on private as well as state investment (Bell and Meehan, 1989) and effectively operates as a semi-state corporation, complete with urban headquarters. The privileging of rural mysticism over 'urban reality' in its recent advertising is a further articulation of this historical contradiction.

## Shifting Temporalities

The discursive framework of broadcasting also includes graphic sequences, such as film lead-ins, promos and trailers. These are usually digitally manipulated and often visually spectacular. In recent years, RTÉ seems to have commissioned a great number of these sequences, although as ads and trailers are not identified in the schedules it is difficult to find more than anecdotal evidence of this increase. The commercial breaks that followed the recent *Beckett on Film* broadcasts, however, were littered with new graphic sequences. A single break (following the screening of *Endgame* on RTÉ One on March 25, 2001) featured a trailer for the *Beckett on Film* season, an ad for RTÉ's news service, a trailer for the *Ireland On Screen* film season and a 'picture frame' station ident for RTÉ One.

The advertisement for RTÉ's news service (which proclaims 'You don't stop, why should we?') employs a temporal loop to promote RTÉ's current round-the-clock news service across radio, television and the web, suggesting that RTÉ is an integral part of both work and leisure. It is perhaps significant that this ad, which could be read as a form of advance marketing for RTÉ's proposed digital news channel,<sup>4</sup> follows a day in the life of a highly mobile young man.

This suggests a displacement of an earlier temporal order, developed in the formative years of public service broadcasting and based upon the routines and rhythms of family life (Scannell, 1996). Changes in temporal order, albeit less overt, can also be discerned from an analysis of RTÉ's seasonal or thematic schedules.

*Ireland On Screen* is the title of a regular, and relatively successful (Barton, 2001: 30) season of contemporary Irish produced films on RTÉ. One of the more prominent film slots in the schedules, the 1999 season<sup>5</sup> was promoted in the *RTÉ Guide* (Dwyer, 1999:16) and identified within the flow of programming by a graphic lead-in. This lead-in sequence incorporates a 'letter-box' format and visual references to a digitised film leader strip as well as the sounds of a film projector.

### FIGURE 3 - STILL FROM GRAPHIC LEAD-IN TO RTÉ'S 'IRELAND ON SCREEN' FILM SEASON



©1998; COURTESY RTÉ

<sup>4</sup> The original proposal for Digital Terrestrial Television, which referred to a 24-hour 'rolling news' station, dates from 1997.

<sup>5</sup> The 1999 season appeared prominently in the schedules and was programmed across two channels (RTÉ One and Network Two) in a relatively concentrated period of time; approximately thirteen films over two consecutive months. It was identified in television listings as 'a season of films coming your way this autumn on RTÉ' (Dwyer, 1999: 16). The lead-in to the first screening was prefaced by an introduction by an onscreen presenter; 'Now on One, we kick-start our season of *Ireland On Screen* with the world television premiere of one of the most successful Irish movies ever – *I Went Down...*'

The lead-in calls attention to the specifically cinematic character of these representations and structures the passage into the imaginary space of cinema, presented as distinct from that associated with television. The cultural capital of cinema is also mobilised in the *Beckett on Film* series, in the interests of producing a high profile television event. The televisual construction of cinema as a discrete space belies the fact that these media are increasingly interdependent, in both cultural and economic terms (Elsaesser, 1998).

In contrast with other film slots on RTÉ One and Network Two (such as *The Midweek Movie* or *Cine Disney*) *Ireland On Screen* is not defined by a particular place in the schedule or by association with a specific director. Instead, the title announces an emphasis on recognisably Irish subject matter. The foregrounding of Irish themes and stories may serve to promote RTÉ as a national broadcaster but it also hints at the 'theming' of Ireland, in the interests of cultural tourism and investment (Barton, 1997:46).

The use of seasonal schedules within broadcasting, in order to structure or match the activities of the audience, is nothing new. During its formative years, BBC radio deliberately incorporated events from social, agrarian and natural seasonal cycles, as part of its project of nation-building (Scannell, 1996: 54). Now, however, broadcasting seasons (such as the *Ireland On Screen* films or the *Beckett on Film* series) resemble branded collections.

The reinvention of the season as a brand suggests a convergence of formerly distinct modes of consumption, associated with broadcasting and fashion. Paddy Scannell has theorised the development of (public service) broadcasting as a 'mediating response' to the disjunction of modern life (1988: 29). Fashion, however, is associated with the celebration of modernity, in that it provides a means of 'luxuriating in successive and disjunctive moments of the present' (Wark, 1991: 61).

## Conclusion: The Branding of Diversity

RTÉ is not the only national public service broadcaster to have redefined its use of seasonal schedules. Theme nights, featuring a series of linked texts, have become a common feature in BBC and Channel Four schedules, often enabling these broadcasters to promote their digital services through programming tie-ins. In the process, Channel Four has been able to exploit its history of independent film production to establish a brand identity for *Film on Four*.

Niche television may seem to offer a welcome alternative to the normative emphasis on nation and family that characterised an earlier era of broadcasting. It has been defined as both 'egalitarian and elitist' in that all tastes are taken seriously (Richardson and Meinhof, 1999: 151). But niche television may also involve a normative form of address, because it privileges taste or knowledge rather than the shared (albeit virtual) experience of time and space.

In their analysis of a European cultural channel (ARTE) Richardson and Meinhof argue that thematic scheduling appeals to *epistephilia*, the pleasure of 'knowingness' or of expertise (1999: 150). The soliciting of viewers as experts or as active readers is not particular to television and was identified by Adorno as a characteristic of genre film. Adorno, as Miriam Hansen notes, is highly dismissive of the mode of address in which 'identification of a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition' (Hansen, 1992: 51).

This link between niche television and genre's address towards expert readers seems significant, given the prominence of genre classification in commercial digital television. The SkyDigital Electronic Programme Guide (the primary interface between audience



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<sup>6</sup> The SkyDigital EPG can be viewed at <http://www.sky-skymedia.com/interactive/epg>

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and broadcaster) lists all available channels according to genres such as 'entertainment', 'sport', 'news & documentaries' or 'movies'.<sup>6</sup> Clearly this form of classification poses problems both for generalist channels and for programmers working outside established genres.

Channels are also assigned places in a list of 'all channels'. On their entry to the Irish SkyDigital platform the two RTÉ channels, TV3 and TG4 were able to command the first four places (Smyth, 2002). But it is possible that, if brand awareness of existing generalist national services declines, these broadcasters might have to increase their volume of themed programming in order to succeed commercially within a predominantly generic classification system.

I want to call attention to one final shifting site of television discourse: the World Wide Web. Although it is no longer clear that the Internet will provide a significant platform for the delivery of digital television, the web's cultural associations with notions of choice, diversity and heterogeneity have already been mobilised by SkyDigital. SkyDigital's Electronic Programme Guide (EPG) incorporates visual and structural links to the Internet. It offers a range of 'interactive' features such as 'shopping' and 'email', which echo the design of a web browser. But although digital television viewers may choose from a range of services similar to those accessible via the internet, the Web's non-commercial, non-proprietary aspects are excluded. The interface is, in fact, aimed at consumers/viewers with little or no experience of either PCs or the Web. The director of *Open...* (provider of the SkyDigital interactive services) notes, 'it is designed for my mother who has never seen an error message on her TV set, or had to re-boot whenever she wants to watch the news' (Forrester, 2000: 163).

In conclusion, it seems that graphic interfaces have become increasingly important within television's discursive framework. RTÉ's transition to digital broadcasting has been marked by the production of an excess of graphic ephemera, as well as changes in scheduling and temporal order, articulating a somewhat contradictory national identity. With the development of increasingly sophisticated digital interfaces, however, the identity of the national broadcaster (or indeed any 'channel') may be superseded. In the process, the figurative passage between the different planes of virtual discourse, currently articulated in RTÉ's idents and advertisements, may be displaced by a much more direct navigation between spaces of consumption.

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