



## THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA GROUP THE FILM-MAKERS' COOP

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**MOIRA TIERNEY INTERVIEW**  
HEATH IVERSON, JULY 17TH 2014

**Moira Tierney** is an Irish filmmaker currently based in New York City. Drawing on influences from the American avant-garde films of the 1960s and the socially engaged Irish cinema of the 1980's, Tierney describes her film work as "camera-led, socially engaged and part of my everyday life." Her super-8 and 16mm films combine a poetic sensibility with an anthropological acuity that, in her words, casts "a critical eye on the structures we live with - particularly discriminatory structures - and disarms them with portraits of alternative structures, communal and individual."

**Heath Iverson** interviewed Moira Tierney in coordination with the FMC screening of a program of her films curated by **Tanya Small** at 7:30 on July 17 at 475 Park Ave. South, 6th Floor at 32nd St.

Heath Iverson: I'd like to start by asking about your biography. I wonder if you could let us know a bit about the trajectory of your career as a filmmaker, first in Ireland and then in New York and beyond? How did you get your start making films?

Moira Tierney: I did an arts degree (BA) in languages, in Dublin, during which I was very involved with the college drama society [1] and after college I did an internship at a graphic design company. It turned out that they were involved with the preparation for a huge parade designed to raise awareness about Irish political prisoners in the UK [2]. The filmmaker Pat Murphy wrote the scenario for the parade and a lot of the leading lights of Dublin's arts scene volunteered their time and their skills. Through the parade I got to work with a broad cross section of Dublin's film, theater, and arts community. And through that I got into designing sets for theater productions. I then got more involved with the filmmakers and started doing production design for short films and art department work on larger productions, but I was always more interested, on set, in what the camera was doing. In parallel, I kept notebooks full of observational drawings. Around this time I visited Paris and was blown away by the museums there; I decided to apply to art school and eventually ended up doing a five-year degree course in a state art school in the suburbs of Paris [3]. It was a great experience; there was no obligation to specialize in any one particular medium, so I did a lot of drawing and painting, then progressively more photography and film. In my degree show I showed a number of large and small scale super-8 loop installations, along with a series of sequential drawings and prints.

H.I. You also co-founded and are still involved with the SOLUS Film Collective in Ireland. Did that project begin while you were still living in Ireland and can you tell us a bit more about it?

M.T. - After I finished art school in France, I went back to Ireland for a year and that was where I met SOLUS co-founder Alan Lambert. We started the collective because we weren't really seeing any avant-garde film in Dublin at the time. The initial idea was to show foreign avant-garde film in Ireland and Irish avant-garde film abroad. SOLUS has branched out since then. For instance, we did an Irish-Arabian tour

in 2009 and 2010, making connections with film-makers from North Africa and the Middle East, showing their films in Ireland and showing Irish films across North Africa. Another high point for SOLUS was bringing Jonas Mekas to Dublin to show his films in Ireland for the first time (in collaboration with the Dublin Film Festival) which was really brilliant. We met in a pub afterwards to discuss film distribution and Dublin's Experimental Film Club eventually grew out of these discussions. They're now screening on a regular basis.

H.I. So SOLUS is really about cultivating a greater avant-garde film community in Ireland?

M.T. That was the initial idea. SOLUS is now focusing more on international exchange. For example, I programed a series of Mauritanian films for the Experimental Film Club and there was some debate about whether they were formally experimental enough for the EFC. But SOLUS' stance was that the situation in Mauritania is like it was in Ireland at one point: the work in some places is avant-garde simply by virtue of the fact that it's being made at all. The political situation in Mauritania has meant that most of the country's films and film infrastructure has been destroyed and so filmmakers there are almost starting from scratch.

H.I. It's interesting to see that you first became involved with filmmaking in connection to activist causes in Ireland and that in some ways your work with SOLUS in places like Mauritania seems to partly continue in that tradition. Could you say a bit more about using film for that kind of transnational activism and advocacy?

M.T. Well, an example there might be the fact that I was invited to attend the Semaine National du Film in Mauritania as a representative of the SOLUS Collective; while I was there I signed a co-operation agreement, on behalf of the collective, with the host organisation (La Maison des Cineastes, Nouakchott) and five other organisations from Senegal, Morocco, Spain and France. The festival also screened my film Habibi, which shows a march across the Brooklyn Bridge in support of Lebanon [during the 2006 Israeli air and artillery attacks]; you see people from all across the population spectrum - Muslims, Jews, black, white, latino, young, old ... a real mixture of people, in New York, which is not necessarily known for a pro-Palestine or pro-Lebanon point of view. And in Mauritania they appreciated the film's content and they were also interested in the way it was filmed [4]

H.I. That's really interesting because formally Habibi, like many of your films, seems to have one foot in the more experimental, poetic, or diaristic cinematic mode reminiscent of filmmakers like Mekas, but another foot firmly in a more documentary, almost anthropological tradition. Can you say more about your formal approach to film and whether there is any continuum with your work in other mediums?

M.T. I think there is definitely a continuum, though I'm not sure it is always conscious. For years I was always drawing what I saw around me; in pubs, in cafes, in subways, on the street. I've always drawn from life. And I like capturing details - what peoples' hands are doing, or their faces. While I was at art school, I tried to do these large scale drawings that never quite worked, but the last one I did consisted of a series of smaller drawings and found images on one large scroll of paper and I realized that I think better sequentially. I think when I'm filming, I'm doing the same thing, looking at details and visualizing them as a portrait, as a whole composed of various different parts.

H.I. So in a film like Hot Brass, which you'll be screening this week at the Film-makers' Cooperative, did you approach that film and its montage with a kind of pre-arranged sequential outline? Or are you visualizing these details in a more improvisational way, much like the jazz musicians who are the film's subjects? Visually, the film has a very rhythmic and musical sensibility.

M.T. Yes, that was a concert I was invited to by the bass player in the film and I was able to shoot from right up beside the stage. I was just jamming with the camera; I had no idea what was going to happen. If I'm listening to music or I'm lucky enough to tap into the rhythm of a particular place or a particular situation - whether it's overtly musical or not - then I'm usually able to do a good job composing as I go along.

H.I. So you are editing mostly in-camera?

M.T. Yes, and it's mostly improvised.

H.I. You work with both Super-8 and 16mm film. Does your improvisational style apply differently to these different formats?

M.T. It's hard to say. I've been using Super-8 more recently because the camera is lighter and much easier to travel with. But for a new project I've been working on in New Orleans I've been using 16mm; I always forget how gorgeous its image quality is. But I think I'm trying to do the same thing with both formats.

H.I. We've talked a bit about your formal approach to film and how that relates to your observations of the political. Can you expand a bit on that topic? For instance, in *Are We There Yet?* you shot landscapes along the Irish border and the film seems to suggest that this invisible boundary is more of a political fiction than anything with a kind of concrete, real existence. [5]

M.T. Well, with regard to the north [of Ireland], one of my first memories is of the censorship that I noticed while listening to the radio before going to school in the morning - I remember hearing the Irish and British versions of events, along the border for example, and there was a rather dramatic difference. I later got to know more about the situation there after I left college and I think that the importance of getting information out, that has not been governmentally edited, has stayed with me.

In 2010 I was one of four artists commissioned to make work on and about the border and in researching that I realised that people's opinion of the border varied quite a bit in relation to their proximity to it. I became interested in the parallax effect, which I applied literally to *Are We There Yet?*; the film was originally looped and projected onto a hanging plexiglass screen, so that the image was visible from both sides; there were three alternating soundtracks, each of which altered the way that the images were perceived.

I'd like to get audiences to ask questions. I'm less interested in creating an exposé or putting out a definitive point of view. I'd rather show a different aspect of something that tends to be represented in a particular way. This is true in the case of my film *American Dreams 4*, for example [6]. It was shot in the Bronx which, like a lot of neighbourhoods in New York, is subject to serious misrepresentation. When you go there in real life you see people doing all the usual, everyday stuff, doing the shopping, sweeping the street, looking after the kids ... just getting on with it

H.I. The *American Dream* series seems to represent a part of a consistent theme in some of your recent work which focuses on the visual appeal of the streets of New York as well as some of America's social or political problems as they are expressed in such public spaces. In *American Dreams 4*, for instance, you look at the memorial mural for Amadou Diallo, the African immigrant who was wrongfully shot to death by New York police. Another of your films that uses images of the city's public space to offer a similar critique is *Times Square*. Formally, the film is obviously fascinated by the textures, rhythms, and qualities of light available in Times Square. In some ways, it reminds me of the urban lights in the films of Marie Menken. And while these lights are indeed spectacular, in the literal sense of the word, I've always found Times Square to also be very abrasive and alienating, in part because today it can often seem to represent some of the most crass and troublesome aspects of American culture. Your film seems to pick out some of these aspects - for instance you focus on a Marine Corps recruitment sign or half-dressed objectified women in clothing adverts. Are American militarism or consumer culture coming in for a critique here?

M.T. That film was a combination of me being fresh off the boat and thinking Times Square was amazing but also being stunned to find a recruiting center in the middle of this super consumerist spot. That's one of the more unpleasant aspects of the U.S., how things like military recruitment seem to seep into all aspects of life. Even at, say, Coney Island, one of the few places where New Yorkers can go to relax and escape the daily grind. The *American Dream* series is, in a way, a continuation of that approach.

H.I. Similar to the extent that the title, "American Dreams" is ironic and that you are expressing a kind of disillusionment or surprise with the way America is as opposed to the way it likes to represent itself?

M.T. Yeah. The whole concept of the American dream is such a scam. Before you come here, your idea of the States is colored by what comes out of the States, the culture, the television. I remember when I was at college in Dublin, there was an African-American woman who came to visit and she said that she had trouble getting out of the States. I don't remember all the details but I remember thinking that there must be a lot going on there that we just don't know about. So that was one of the reasons I wanted to come here. There's a huge amount of information filtered out for foreign consumption and that's something I'm trying to suggest by showing these alternative points of view.

H.I. A lot of your work - and I'm thinking of films that deal with street demonstrations or activism - films like *Habibi* and *American Dreams 4* - seem to walk a line between observation and involvement. Where would you place your films on a spectrum between straight actuality footage and more expressive cinematic poetics that suggest a kind of sympathy or connection between you and your subjects?

M.T. I film stuff that I admire. So if it's something I admire and would like other people to see, then by default, I'm sympathetic before I even pick up the camera. Then I think I just try to capture it as well as I can. When it come to editing I'm trying to find the rhythm that's within the images and help that flow as well as I can.

H.I. Are you working on any new projects?

M.T. I've recently been working on a project in New Orleans, and I'll be showing some of that work at the Co-op. In 2012 and 2013 I did some filming with the Mardi Gras Indians and I later came back to film a mural painted by a local barber, which analyzes Katrina and makes historical connections with slavery, as well as suggesting what the next steps forward might be. I also shot underneath a controversial highway where the locals have, in a way, reclaimed their territory by covering the highway pillars with scenes from local history (relating to slavery and the Civil Rights movement) and culture (the Mardi Gras Indians and iconic local musicians).

H.I. The New Orleans project almost sounds like a collaboration with your subjects. That too - creative collaboration between filmmaker and subject - seems like a running theme in your work. Your earlier films like *Liberty Kids* and *Tiger Me Bollix* both grew out of collaborations with the children who are featured in them, correct? [6] [7]

M.T. Yes. And collaboration is a big part of the New Orleans project, in particular. The initial footage that I shot was with the Mardi Gras Indians; I went back to New Orleans the following year and tracked down as many people from the footage as I could; I wanted to show it to them and see if they approved. There's a huge problem of people wanting to film the Indians and take photographs and then sell the photographs and show the films, but rarely do they go back to the Indians themselves to see what they make of it. So I wanted to go back to them and make sure they were happy with what I had shot. As a result, one particular tribe recorded audio to go with the original footage and then asked me back to film them on a separate occasion, which was a real privilege. [8]

H.I. You'll also be bringing a few films by other filmmakers to the Co-op. Could you say a few words about them?

M.T. One of the films is by Stom Sogo. He's part of the reason I'm making films. When I came to Anthology Film Archives in 1995 I saw a poster saying "Open Screening"; I was shooting in Super-8 and was pretty tentative about showing it, I wasn't sure if it was any good, but when I turned up at the screening Stom was organizing and he was extremely welcoming and encouraging; anybody could come, he was really generous with his time, and he projected everything. I got to know him and we became good friends. He was meticulous about what he did; he kept amazing notebooks full of critical writing, about exhibitions he saw or books he read. I learned a lot from him; he had a very analytical approach, a wealth of knowledge and a real cinematic culture which made a huge impact on me at the time. And he

was making films all the time that he was working as a projectionist at Anthology. The Co-op will be screening his Diary #5. His diary films were shot as he was walking around New York, they're composed of extremely brief shots - expressionistic records of his daily life in the city - and you can really sense Stom's genius eye for color and composition.

H.I. And the other film?

M.T. It's a film we've been showing as part of our SOLUS programs; its called Maze and it was made by Hugh Mcgrory from Belfast. It was shot in the now-defunct Maze Prison where the Irish hunger strikers were held. It's a beautiful film.

For more information: <http://www.moiratierney.net>

Notes:

1. Dramsoc, University College Dublin

2. The Parade of Innocence, 1989. A parade to celebrate the release of the Guildford Four and to continue the pressure for the release of the Birmingham Six. Followed by a second parade down the River Liffey, the River Parade, in 1990. The Birmingham Six were eventually released in March 1991. The Birmingham Six, Guildford Four and Maguire Seven were three of the most prominent cases of wrongful conviction of Irish men and women in Britain during the Troubles. Their cases were covered by the media for many years before their eventual release and exoneration.

3. Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris-Cergy (ENSAPC)

4. Habibi, 16mm, 7 minutes, color, 2008. Shot on silent Super 8mm film and blown up to 16mm. The soundtrack consists of two popular songs from Ireland and the Lebanon.  
<http://moiratierney.net/habibi.htm>

5. Are We There Yet? A 16mm loop installation created for the Peace III Project (Leitrim/Fermanagh 2010). 16mm, 10 minutes, colour, 2010. Music by Macdara Smith & the Bahh Band.  
<http://moiratierney.net/leitrim-loop.htm>

6. American Dreams #4: Courtesy, Professionalism, Respect. 16mm, 8 minutes, color, 2009.  
<http://moiratierney.net/dreams4.htm>

6. Liberty Kids. A collective portrait of the children of 4th class, St. Audoen's Primary School, Dublin 16mm, 5.5 minutes, sound, colour, 2006. [http://www.moiratierney.net/liberty\\_kids.htm](http://www.moiratierney.net/liberty_kids.htm)

7. Tiger Me Bollix. Super-8mm/16mm, 3.5 minutes, b/w, 2000. Music by Andrew Lampert  
<http://www.moiratierney.net/tiger.htm>

8. St Josephs 2013. Commissioned by the Young Seminole Tribe of Mardi Gras Indians. Super 8mm/HD, 5 minutes, color, 2014. Music by the Young Seminoles.  
[vimeo.com/moiratierney/st-josephs2013](http://vimeo.com/moiratierney/st-josephs2013)