



'They can't wipe us out, they can't lick us. We'll go on forever pa, because we're the people' - Misrepresenting death in Jim Sheridan's In America (2003)

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Publication Date	2008

“They can’t wipe us out, they can’t lick us. We’ll go on forever pa,
‘cause we’re the people”: Misrepresenting Death in Jim Sheridan’s
In America (2003)

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Abstract. This paper will examine the recurring theme of death in Jim Sheridan’s work, with particular focus on his 2003 film *In America*. This theme also links Sheridan’s work to one of his favourite directors, John Ford, whose work *In America* alludes to. While exploring the theme of death in Sheridan’s films, and how it connects with the work of Ford, this paper will consider responses to *In America*, the first film to be (partly) shot in New York after the attack on the twin towers, in light of the tragedy of 9/11. It raises questions about the problematic positioning of this film by Sheridan and others not just with respect to the events of that day but also in relation to the 1981 hunger strikes in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it questions the regressive politics involved in the depiction of the central black character in *In America*, Mateo, particularly as it relates to this theme of death.

Keywords. Jim Sheridan, *In America*, John Ford, Death, regressive stereotypes, 9/11, dehistoricisation.

Resumen. El artículo examina el tema recurrente de la muerte en la obra de Jim Sheridan, hacienda hincapié en su película *En América* (2003). Dicho tema enlaza la obra de Sheridan con la de uno de sus directores favoritos, John Ford, a la que se hace allusion en *En América*. A la vez que se explora el tema de la muerte en los films de Sheridan y las conexiones con la obra de Ford, se analizará la recepción de *En América*, la primera película rodada (parcialmente) en Nueva York tras el ataque a las torres gemelas, a la luz de la tragedia del 9/11. Se plantean cuestiones respecto a los acontecimientos del día, así como en relación a la descripción de Mateo, el personaje central negro de *En América*, en particular en lo concerniente a su muerte.

Palabras clave. Jim Sheridan, *In America*, John Ford, muerte, estereotipos regresivos, 9/11, dehistoricización.

The quote included in the title of this paper is taken from John Ford’s 1940 film *The Grapes of Wrath*. The scene in which these lines appear, towards the end of Ford’s film, is included in Jim Sheridan’s 2003 film about a family of Irish emigrants to New York, *In America*. Sheridan has said that he decided to feature this clip because it came from a film that focused on another group of migrants, the

Joad family, who travel from Oklahoma to California in search of work and a better life during the great depression of the 1930s (Sheridan 2004).

However, it is significant that Sheridan should have chosen these particular lines, taken from a speech by Ma Joad, to include in his film. While admittedly suggesting the general theme of overcoming trauma which is at the

centre of *In America*, the lines also represent one of the most significant changes made by John Ford to John Steinbeck's original Pulitzer prize-winning novel of the same name. These lines may provide an optimistic and hopeful conclusion to Ford's film, but in Steinbeck's work a considerably more muted version of this speech occurs a little over half way through the book. Furthermore, the hope that the speech suggests is undermined by subsequent events. Indeed, the final scene of Steinbeck's work shares little of the optimism of Ford's adaptation. The novel ends with the surviving members of the Joad family taking shelter in a barn from the rising waters, brought on by floods that have submerged the boxcar they live in and a dramatic final scene in which Rosasharn Joad offers her milk-filled breast to a starving man.

Rather than the optimism that we find in Ford's adaptation, and the focus on the overcoming of hardship and oppression, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* dismisses such optimism in a searing critique of American social policy in the 1930s. The significant change of positioning of this speech denotes a more general emasculation by Ford of the politics within Steinbeck's work, altering the pessimistic outlook of the novel and softening significantly its critique of capitalism and the American administration. This paper asserts that the inclusion of this scene from *The Grapes of Wrath* in Sheridan's *In America* reflects not just the Irish director's own admiration for John Ford's work, but also a comparable depoliticising project, apparent in Sheridan's remarks regarding *In America*, in the manner in which he attempts to connect his film to contemporary, and historical traumatic events profoundly implicated in politics. Furthermore, it is this paper's contention that what politics there actually are in *In America* draw on regressive stereotypes regarding the representation of minorities in imperialist ideology, stereotypes apparent in Sheridan's engagement with, and depiction of, death.

In America marked the beginning of a movement from the Irish settings and Irish politics that featured in Sheridan's previous work into an American context that would recur in his 2005 biopic of the American rap artist Curtis '50 Cent' Jackson, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. This film caused considerable controversy in the US on its release. Indeed, one report from the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*

reported that "Police [in that city] and across the country are stepping up patrols at movie theaters showing rapper Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson's film *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* following the fatal shooting of a man inside the Loews Cineplex at The Waterfront" (King Greenwood 2005). While *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* may have appeared to audiences at first a departure of sorts from Sheridan's earlier work it did share a recurring theme found across his oeuvre, one media reports suggested was reflected in responses to the film: the theme of death. Apart from the association of death with the title, content and reception of *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, in Sheridan's previous films the deaths of characters such as Séimí, "The American" and Tadhg in *The Field*, or father figures such as Paddy Brown in *My Left Foot*, Guessepi Conlon in *In the Name of the Father* and Danny's trainer Ike Weir in *The Boxer* play an important role in the narrative of each of these films.

The recurrence of this theme in Sheridan's work could be attributed at least partly to the director's own biography. Sheridan has remarked that the death of his ten year old brother Frank, who died in 1966 of a brain tumour, has overshadowed everything he has done (Mulholland 2003). Frank is transformed into the recently deceased son, Frankie, a central (though missing) character in Sheridan's most autobiographical work to date, *In America*. It is Frankie's death that is a significant factor in the decision of the Sullivan family at the centre of this film to move from Ireland, via Canada, to New York. The Sullivan child Frankie has also died of a brain tumour and a fundamental theme in the film is the struggle of each member of the family to come to terms with this loss. The film is overshadowed by death, both that of Frankie and later the Sullivan family's mysterious black neighbour Mateo ([Djimon Hounsou](#)), but also by the inclusion of several scenes occurring during the Day of the Dead, Halloween, including the scene in which the Sullivan children, Ariel (Emma Bolger) and Christy (Sarah Bolger), first encounter Mateo. However, Sheridan has expanded the significance of death in the film by describing the crossing of the family into the US at the start and the early revelation of the death of their child as symbolising the Irish coming to America after the famine: "[The Opening of *In America*] is based on the myth of the Irish

coming to America after death on a mythological level which everybody knows the Irish did after the famine [...]” (Sheridan 2004).

Sheridan’s allusion to the famine in relation to *In America* provides an intriguing link to the work of Irish-American director John Ford, whose parents arrived in the US from Galway in 1872, a little over 20 years after the end of the Great Famine. Indeed, Ford has spoken of his family suffering “bitterly during the potato famine” (Sharp Bolster 1957: 9) and has explained his own attraction to Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* as due to the narrative’s similarity to events during the Irish famine itself: “The story was similar to the famine in Ireland [...] when they threw the people off the land and left them wandering on the roads to starve. That may have something to do with it - part of my Irish tradition - but I liked the idea of this family going out and trying to find their way in the world” (Bogdanovich 1978: 76).

Sheridan has described Ford as a possible predecessor of sorts in terms of Irish film (Barton 2002: 139) and is a great admirer of Ford’s iconic “Irish” film *The Quiet Man*, describing it as surpassing “every other Irish work of art in important aspects in that it’s a true, genuine love story and in the beginning of the love story, the guy has killed somebody in a fair fight and he comes back to protect the woman from the incest culture” (Barton 2002: 151).

In America also shares with *The Quiet Man* a similar dynamic that triggers the migration of both the Sullivan family and Sean Thornton in Ford’s film: an attempt to come to terms with the trauma of death. In *The Quiet Man* it is the death of Thornton’s opponent, Tony Gadelo, in the ring during a prize fight that brings Thornton back to Ireland in search of peace and his ancestral home. Indeed, death in *The Quiet Man*, as Luke Gibbons has noted, hangs over the narrative as a whole and is referred back to at several points, most clearly in the quite realistic and dark flashback sequence included shortly after the wedding of Thornton and Mary Kate, in which Thornton remembers his killing of Gadelo (Gibbons 2002: 66-70).

However, much as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ford’s adaptation of Maurice Walsh’s short story “The Quiet Man”, included in Walsh’s 1935 collection *Green Rushes*, also involved a considerable depoliticisation and, indeed, dehistoricisation of the narrative. While Ford’s

film is set in the 1930s, as Sean Ryder has noted:

In Walsh’s *Green Rushes*, the story of [...] Paddy Bawn [the character on which Sean Thornton is based] is merely one part of a web of stories concerning a common set of characters and events in north Kerry during the Irish war of Independence (1919-1921). Thus the reader meets Paddy Bawn in other tales, where his character takes on additional attributes [...] Most often, for instance, he appears as the taciturn but stalwart member of an IRA guerrilla band (Ryder 1998: 122).

Indeed, this is a role alluded to at several points in Walsh’s short story but entirely absent from Sean Thornton’s character in Ford’s adaptation.

The depiction of death in the cinema has provoked considerable debate and not a little controversy, apparent in reactions to both Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), arguably one of the most controversial films in Hollywood history, and Sheridan’s *Get Rich or Die Tryin’*. For Jim Sheridan the depiction of death would appear to provide a means to work through the trauma of death itself. Sheridan has argued that viewing *In America*:

can be cathartic for viewers who have been through a tragedy themselves [...] They’re only going to go through those emotions if there’s part of their own life that touches those feelings they want massaged or alleviated. So people change according to reality because now they’re engaged in a different way. They’ve understood something. They’ve been through something (Cohen 2003).

Critics have remarked on this possible therapeutic role of cinema. Lucy Walker, for example, has argued, drawing on the work of David Thompson, that “films that are ‘about’ death” can occasionally “function as preparation and consolation for our own experience of death [...] [they] can have a therapeutic effect on the spectator, even—indeed especially—those that confront our worst fears” (Walker 2005: 486).

The Russian-American literary scholar Mikhail Iampolsky has also noted how “art allows the viewer to experience death vicariously, through the process of identification, and to remain alive” (Iampolsky 1995: 271). Iampolsky is influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud who found that “In the realm of fiction we discover the plurality of lives for which we crave. We die in the person

of a given hero, yet we survive him, and are ready to die again with the next hero just as safely” (Freud 1963: 124). Furthermore, Freud argued that “our habit is to lay stress on the fortuitous causations of the death-accident, disease, infection, advanced age; in this way we betray our endeavour to modify the significance of death from a necessity to an accident” (Ibid).

This depiction of death would appear to concur with its occurrence in both *The Quiet Man* and *In America*. While Tony Gadelo is accidentally killed in a Prize fight with Sean Thornton in Ford’s film, the death of Frankie Sullivan in *In America* results from his accidental falling down a set of stairs and the subsequent development of a brain tumour. Furthermore, Mateo’s death in Sheridan’s film is due to the onset of some unspecified disease. Sheridan, however, has extended this therapeutic role of death in his film from the personal to the political.

In Sheridan’s commentary and in some critical reaction to the film, *In America* was portrayed as providing a means through which Americans, and in particular the citizens of New York, could come to terms with their own recent trauma, the tragedy that has become known as 9/11. The film was released in the US in November 2003 and reviews in the American press quickly found connections between *In America* and 9/11. Indeed, American film critic David Poland described the film as “the perfect answer to 9/11” (Poland 2003) while Armond White in the *New York Press* noted that:

It usually takes two years for the effect of real-life events to be felt in mainstream movies. Still, onscreen responses to 9/11 didn’t make 2003 a good year for Hollywood, just a confused one. The best movie to address the way we live today, *In America*, depicted how humans respond to tragedy yet search for freedom (White 2003).

Sheridan himself was not slow to make a connection between the theme of the film (coming to terms with death) and the recent trauma of 9/11 in interviews during the film’s release. “We were the first film [made in New York] after 9/11” he remarked in one interview, “so everybody was really warm to us. But it was actually very hard not to [think about] 9/11 because the film is about grief and I knew it would have that kind of impact being in the city” (Jawetz 2004). In a further interview he described

setting out “to make a film and September 11th happened and everything was thrown into a different perspective” (Horowitz 2004). The director’s commentary to the DVD release of *In America* also includes several comments regarding 9/11, including that accompanying the opening scene of a flag waving in the wind, which Sheridan indicates was shot in New York soon after the tragedy.

In a public interview in the Irish Film Centre in March 2003 Sheridan also described *In America* as being about “‘getting away from the death culture’ that is so prevalent in Ireland” (Barton 2002: 189). He developed these remarks in comments made in the director’s commentary to the film’s DVD release where he describes *In America* as

about the fact that the Irish can overcome death or leave it behind or a husband and wife can leave it behind and I thought of the hunger strikers and we being the only Western Society that could have that – ten men dying one after another – and I thought we’ve got to leave this suicide culture behind. But we’re probably the only suicide culture where the guys did damage only to themselves but we are close to the Arabs in our sense of victimisation (Sheridan 2004).

In these comments following *In America*’s release Sheridan makes a significant connection not just with a highly politicised moment in recent Irish history but also with the contemporary conflict in the Middle East and the attack on the twin towers. However, his comments bear a disturbing similarity to the type of regressive stereotyping associated with colonial discourse whereby violence associated with the colonised is commonly attributed in colonial representations to the inherent instability, innate weaknesses, or irrational violence of the colonised themselves. This stereotyping is facilitated, as John Hill and Martin McLoone have outlined in their respective studies of representations of violence in films concerning Northern Ireland, by a process that both depoliticises and dehistoricises the violence itself (Hill 1987: 147-193, McLoone 2000: 60-84). However, such “representations of the Irish characteristically associated with sources outside of Ireland have now, apparently, become so ‘natural’ and ‘normal’” as Hill observes, “that they are providing a framework for certain sections of Irish film-making as well” (Hill 1987: 178). While Hill’s comments were made over twenty years ago, they still

remain relevant for many films made subsequently, including work by Sheridan. By suggesting that his portrayal of a family attempting to come to terms with the death of their child may allow Irish people to leave the “suicide culture” behind, Sheridan similarly elides the historical and political context within which events such as the 1981 Hunger Strikes occurred. Furthermore, such remarks invite a closer look at the politics within *In America* itself, politics that are particularly apparent in the representation of illness and death in the film.

While the film is haunted by the recently deceased child of the Sullivan family, the death we witness in the film is that of the family’s mysterious black neighbour Mateo. However, as Beth Newell has noted, this representation is both problematic and regressive. For Newell, by his association of Mateo with both the primitive in earlier scenes (where Mateo is depicted as almost “an uncontrollable, beast-like savage”) and with the mystical, spiritual (or “servile saint”) as the film develops, Sheridan “invokes retrograde representational strategies common to imperialist ideology” (Newell 2005: 144). Indeed this process is apparent in the scene in which the Sullivan children first encounter Mateo. It is a central scene that marks the transformation of Mateo from this apparent “savage” into a spiritual saint, a process complemented both by the manner in which the scene is shot, the accompanying soundtrack, and centrally in the performance of Djimon Hounsou who undergoes a dramatic, and unexpected, transformation of character.

There is a mythologisation of character at work in this scene also, a process that is apparent throughout Sheridan’s films which are noted for their mythologizing impulses. Sheridan has himself claimed that “[Story] exists on two levels. It exists on the level of realistic scenes and then there’s another kind of thing that’s running parallel with it which is mythological” (McCurrie 2004). This mythological level in *In America* includes for Sheridan, as indicated by his comments, both Irish and American trauma and is also reflected in the dehistoricising processes at work in the film itself. While the events portrayed occurred in the 1980s, Sheridan makes no attempt to depict this period authentically, despite including several of the major cultural icons of that period, centrally E.T., in the film.

Instead time and place float free, somewhat uneasily, from history and represent a more mythical place. By seeking to tell a universal story the film elides “the specificity of its historical moment” (Tamasulo 1997: 154).

However, this dehistoricisation is also apparent in the portrayal of Mateo himself, in a manner reminiscent of the dehistoricising of the “Other” Edward Said has delineated in colonial discourse (Said 1993: 269). While we are given little information on Mateo’s background, we are also only given ambiguous suggestions, and little clarity, as to the illness he suffers from, or where it may have originated. Choosing to shoot the film largely from the perspective of children – and particularly many of those scenes that depict Mateo including the scene in which he first meets the Sullivan children – allows Sheridan to avoid engaging with the particularities of Mateo’s illness.

However, it is not just Mateo’s illness but his death itself which is problematically framed. Sarah W. Goodwin and Elizabeth Bronfen, in their study *Death and Representation*, have noted the frequent “othering” of death in representations, in remarks pertinent to the portrayal of Mateo’s death in *In America*:

Death is the constructed other. That which aligns with death in any given representation is Other, dangerous, enigmatic, magnetic: culturally, globally, sexually, racially, historically, economically. To study representations of death is to study how not only individuals but also groups have defined themselves against what they are not but wish to control [...] (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993: 20).

As the Sullivan family stand by their premature child’s incubator (whose life hangs in the balance after a blood transfusion) in the hope that it might show, as Christy’s voiceover remarks “some sign of life”, these moments are intercut with the final breaths of Mateo. It seems that Mateo must “symbolically [...] die to ‘save’ [the Sullivan family]” (Barton 2002: 190). However, in “giving his life in this manner”, as Beth Newell notes, “Mateo’s character takes on a disturbing level of martyrdom” (Newell 2005: 150). In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam recognize a comparable practice whereby Black, and minority characters generally, are often limited to subservient, and sometimes sacrificial roles, when compared to white individuals portrayed in Western literature and media. They contend that “in order to equal, the

oppressed are asked to better, whence all the stoic ‘ebony saints’ [...] of Hollywood, from Louise Beavers in *Imitation of Life* (1934), through Sidney Poitier in *The Defiant Ones* (1961), to Whoopi Goldberg in *Clara’s Heart* (1988)” (Shohat and Stam 1994: 203). As Beth Newhall notes

Mateo’s sacrifice is not only noble, it is believable because it partakes of longstanding conventions whereby an idealised Black character willingly gives up his or her life for White characters – a telling comment on the inequality with which the media depicts the lives of minorities, as well as audiences’ willingness to accept those depictions (Newell 2005: 150-151).

In Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud’s study of Hollywood films concerned with the Vietnam War they found that:

What [these] films suggest is both a need for healing and an anticipatory need to prepare for the next round. However, in film after film, the means of recovery is withheld. Audiences are offered neither insight as to why the United States took on this war in the first place nor an understanding of its long term consequences or possible alternatives (Dittmar and Michaud 1997: 2).

In a highly emotionally charged and impressively realised narrative concerning death, Jim Sheridan’s *In America* does provide a cathartic experience through which audiences may find assistance in working through their own personal traumas. However, the portrayal of death in the film also involves both a questionable dehistoricisation and stereotyping of the film’s central Black character Mateo. More problematically still, Sheridan’s description of this film, echoed in critical commentary, as providing a means of dealing with the trauma of 9/11 and of being about getting away from the “suicide culture” in Ireland, while recalling the dehistoricising and regressive stereotyping associated with colonial discourse, ultimately obscures the real social, political and historical context of these events themselves.

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