

## INTERVIEW

### Interview with Aislinn Clarke, 2019

Northern-Irish filmmaker Aislinn Clarke is an award-winning director and a lecturer in scriptwriting at the Seamus Heaney Centre in Queen's University Belfast. Her debut feature, *The Devil's Doorway* (IFC Midnight, 2018) injected a shot of adrenalin into the subgenres of demon-possession and found-footage horror. Clarke's film is set in a Magdalene Laundry in 1960, when the Catholic Church was at the height of its influence and power in the Irish state. The footage is shot ostensibly by Fr John (Ciaran Flynn) to document an investigation by Fr Thomas (Lalor Roddy) into a reported miracle within the convent. Shot in era-appropriate 16mm, the film utilises the aesthetics of authenticity that the found-footage mode commands to tell a story of corruption and cover-up in the Catholic institutions of recent Irish history.

I first met with Aislinn Clarke at the Galway Film Fleadh screening of *The Devil's Doorway* in July 2018. My own PhD project focuses on demon-possession horror films produced in the 2010s, and I was particularly fascinated with her treatment of the subgenre. This interview took place over Skype in March of 2019. Demon possession has been a recurring trope in horror cinema since the silent era, arguably beginning with the Swedish documentary-film *Häxan* (dir. by Benjamin Christensen, 1922). A notable cluster of possession films appeared in the 1970s, with Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971), William Friedkin's Oscar-winning *The Exorcist* (1973), and the blaxploitation film *Abby* (dir. by William Girdler, 1974). The subgenre has experienced something of a resurgence in the last two decades, with over one-hundred films in the subgenre produced since 2000. I began by asking whether there is any particular reason why Clarke thinks it has returned to popularity, to which she replied,

I feel like demonic possession has been popular for a long time. Even on horror's low ebb where it's not getting the kind of positive publicity it is now, people were always making films about demonic possession. It's something that people are just fascinated by. There was always an audience for that and there are a lot of people who are very committed to that subgenre.

Clarke noted the subgenre's problematic preoccupation with the female body and female sexuality, stating

Personally, for me, it's not one of my favourite subgenres, actually at all. I think it's because very often it has very consistent tropes that I find offensive at worst and boring and unimaginative at best. You see so many films that have demonic possession in them and it's a young girl on the cusp of discovering sexuality. They say things that are very judgemental of female sexuality; they contrast it against innocence and virginity. It's the virgin/whore dichotomy and for some reason there are a lot of people who are into seeing those two come up against each other. You've got this young virginal girl and then she becomes possessed by a demon and very often she becomes hyper-sexualised. For me, I don't like what they have to say about female sexuality, particularly about young women. They can be misogynistic, right? I'm not the first person to have said this.

Given that *The Devil's Doorway* was Clarke's first feature-length film, it was interesting to hear that she chose to work in a subgenre that was not necessarily her favourite. Her comments on the choices and decision making that go into changing the meaning and tropes within a genre film were equally revealing:

The producer came to me, Northern Ireland Screen told him to come to me. He had an idea but he didn't have a script. He just said, 'I want to make a horror film set in a Magdalene Laundry'. And I thought, 'well that sounds interesting'. But then he told me what he wanted to do. He wanted it to be a modern-day found-footage film, where you could basically get a bunch of young people and stick them in a haunted Magdalene Laundry and then, you know, spooks and stuff. Central to that was a girl who was possessed and who was still in there, a girl who had been trapped for a long time. I told him straight-up, I said, 'I think this could be really problematic. What are you saying about the women who were actually kept in these institutions? There are women now who are forty years old who were in Magdalene Laundries.' I don't think at the forefront of his mind he was thinking about social issues at all; he was just thinking about what would be a cool film. But my position is: you can't extract yourself. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. If you make a film like that, even if you think you're saying nothing, you are saying something. What you're saying is 'I don't care'.

Clarke suggested that they go another way:

There's so many demonic-possession films and you need to do something new with that. That's why I suggested we put it in 1960, really put it in the heart of the human drama where the best horror is and be very careful not to make the women who were in there, the women who were the victims, the source of the evil. Clearly a very problematic thing to do. And he could have said 'no. Go away' because he was talking to other directors, but he liked that I was setting it in 1960 and he liked all the other things I was saying.

*The Devil's Doorway* would have been a very different beast altogether without Clarke at the helm:

The funding was already kind of there. The film was happening, but it would have been a very different script, it would have been a very different story. It would have been a different director. And it would have annoyed me dreadfully to have seen it come out and be a horror film set in a Magdalene Laundry, coming from Ireland and say that these women were inherently evil and therefore deserved all their punishment. Luckily that's not what happened.

The producer still wanted to have a possessed girl, 'so I had to figure out a way to have possession without falling for those tropes, without buying into the established language of those films'. Clarke wanted the possessed girl, Kathleen (Lauren Coe) to be more complex:

Whether or not she's possessed is slightly ambiguous. She herself is a decent person, a good person, even a religious person. She's not sexualised and I had to fight pretty hard not to have her sexualised. Really, there were a lot of conversations about what people wanted to see. There were talks about nudity and all that kind of thing. It was important to me if I was having a girl and she was possessed that she wasn't there for those reasons.

Within *The Devil's Doorway*, I suggested, the possessed girl is not so much the object of fear as she is its subject. The possession is presented as something that is very much happening *to* her:

Exactly, and even when we first meet her and she attacks the nun, we don't feel that it's her fault. She is a victim in this situation as well, rather than becoming an evil target. Because I watch a lot of horror films, good ones and bad ones and all kinds of ones. In some of these films, the girls, because they are behaving in an evil and demonic way, it is acceptable to use violence against them.

Clarke didn't want to depict this possessed girl as an acceptable target for violence, so when writing the character, she 'didn't want her to lose her humanity'. The ritual of exorcism in horror is presented as a scenario with great potential for violence, particularly against the possessed person. 'Does religious horror', I asked her, 'need to be set in the past for audiences to believe that rational people would behave and react that way?' She replied,

For me, I set it in 1960 because this was, forgive my clumsy turn of phrase, the high-point of these institutions, when they existed in plain sight. There were literally adverts in the newspapers targeted at housewives, saying 'Christmas is coming up. You're probably really busy. Send all your sheets to us.' And that would be for such-and-such a convent. People knew that they existed. My mother had a friend who was taken to one. My dad was a breadman in Dundalk and he delivered bread to a Magdalene Laundry for years and years and walked through the actual laundry and saw the girls. I thought that that was the most interesting time to deal with that subject.

Catholicism has historically been central to how Ireland constructed its national identity and told stories about itself at home and abroad. Previously, Irish cinema completely shied away from genre and horror filmmaking, displaying instead a propensity for realist drama. ‘Why do you think’, I asked, ‘it is only now we are producing internationally recognised horror cinema?’

I’ve been thinking about this quite a bit lately. I was in Spain for the European Fantastic Film Festival in Murcia and we were having a panel discussion about this. Irish people have always been interested in the darker side of things; in our stories and our music and in the general way that we see the world. Irish fairies and fairy tales are very dark, I’m sure you’re aware yourself. They’re not like Tinkerbell with wings. The *si* are evil, evil creatures. In childhood and in school you’d hear these stories about some boy who did something bad to a fairy tree and then there was thorns in his bed for the rest of his life and he was driven insane. We’ve always been interested in those kinds of things and I don’t know why we haven’t produced so many horror films. The films that come out of Ireland, not all of them but most tend to be drama and there is sort of a maudlin air to them as well.

The Northern-Irish film and television industry is enjoying its own specific moment right now:

I know for the North, we didn’t really have an industry. We had a civil war for 30 years. Things were obviously very bad up here in general. There was a lot of poverty and we just didn’t have the infrastructure. There were people making films but they were making documentaries and they made some really excellent documentaries made in that time. But it’s only in the last ten years that we’ve had any kind of industry and that’s because of *Game of Thrones* [HBO, 2011-19]. People malign it, but it completely revitalised the film industry in Northern Ireland. Because you would have people who would study film like I did and they would become cinematographers and they would move to London. They’d go elsewhere because there was no work here. Suddenly there was work here and there needed to be studios and post-production houses to facilitate the massive machine that was *Game of Thrones*. Suddenly had on the ground world-class post-production facilities and world-class crew, living here, that we could use to make our short films. That’s why we have seen Northern Ireland, which is a small place with a small population, making its mark on the world stage.

Clarke has made a short horror film called *Childer* (2016), which was also filmed in Northern Ireland. It tells the story of a neurotic mother who kills her children when they get to the age where they start playing outside and getting messy. ‘What is most important’, I asked, ‘when writing these kinds of character studies?’

Even in childhood I was very interested in Greek mythology, fairy tales, and read Stephen King when I was far too young. I suppose I was very introspective. I was kind of a weird child and I remember not being satisfied with the archetypes that were being presented. You know, you’d hear of so-and-so down the road who went

and did this terrible thing and I wanted to understand. Every human being has some human motivation for what they do even if what they do is unimaginable to us, it's still human. I think we have this tendency to distance from what we might call evil behaviour from humanity by saying it's inhuman. It is, by definition, human if a human being has done it. There was a lot of conversation when *The Ted Bundy Tapes* [Netflix, 2019] came out with people saying you know, 'don't watch that'. I don't think that helps us as human beings, to pretend that there aren't other human beings who do this kind of thing. I think we need to stop with this good guy/bad guy archetypal mentality that we have. We want to see a villain in a cloak cackling in the sunset after murdering a village of children. Those types of people don't exist. Everyone has a motivation for what they do. Everyone is the protagonist of their own story. They have a rationale for what they do, even if that rationale is abhorrent.

Clarke takes inspiration for her writing and her characterisation from true-crime documentary:

The BBC had a documentary on the Yorkshire Ripper, in that case, basically something like thirteen women were killed unnecessarily. This is how the BBC lays it out and it's very compelling. Essentially the police constructed a narrative that centred themselves as the heroes versus this kind of villain in black clothes. It ended up that they were disregarding evidence that didn't fit into that. They were looking for a different man with a different accent and who lived in a different part of England, which meant that Peter Sutcliff got away again, and again, and again. That's why I think it's not just about stories. I do think it makes better stories to present people who are complicated and human in uncomfortable ways but also because our narratives, and the stories we tell ourselves, do inform our culture and inform our real world. That's why I like to use characters, male and female that I can understand as people, not just as tools for my narrative.

Speaking of character representation, stories of demons possessing women are often accused of being really about the men who exorcise them. *The Devil's Doorway* does indeed have male exorcists and demonic female figures, but the men are not so much representative of patriarchal authority as they are witnesses in a world of women:

I think you can see that in the Mother Superior (Helena Bereen). Clearly, she is very evil, but she needed to have a justification for all the stuff that she does. That's why she has this speech where she says, 'you leave all the dirty work to the women'. I mean she's right about that and you want the audience to be a bit conflicted. You want them to say 'well, I kind of get where she's coming from, to be fair'. But with *The Devil's Doorway* I think that it's not just about making complex female characters. We talk about the best representations of characters to challenge kind of gender norms and stuff like that. It's not just about making complicated female characters, though that's a massive part of it. We also need to look at male characters. Because we have so many male characters that if they were in the situation that Fr Thomas is in, they would just come in and they would kick ass left, right, and centre and they would leave with the baby and everything would be cool. First of all, that didn't happen. These places existed and those women's lives were ruined and there was no hero who came in to save the day. Second of all, you know what, that's okay because he still behaves with moral courage the whole way and I think that we don't

just need to change representations of women for women's sake. We need to change representations of men for men and women's sake. We don't fix toxic masculinity just by having complicated female characters; we need to show young men that you don't have to feel like a complete shit if you're not this über-masculine hero.

Describing her interactions with fans at screenings and in social media, Clarke reports the impact that this vulnerable male characterisation seems to have had on her audience:

At almost every screening I have some young man come up to me and say 'I really liked Fr Thomas, he reminded me of my dad' and then he'll tell me a story about his dad. I have some people on Twitter who really love *The Devil's Doorway*, and they are all men, they are all young men who have vulnerability and who saw that reflected back in *The Devil's Doorway* and who really appreciate that. I think that it's important to do that.

Clarke has also been criticised for choosing two male leads for the film:

I have had two occasions with feminists, one in the US and one in England who just completely misread the film. But they read it from their perspective, and I think the audience are entitled to read films the way that they read them. Once I put it on the screen, it's up to you what you take from it. But they don't see what I'm saying, they don't think it's important to have those kinds of representations of men. I think we need to fix our representations of men and I think that's part of feminism.

The critiques could perhaps be part of the increased public investment in and cultural attention paid to horror narratives and horror representation in recent years, as horror is going through a period of mainstream appreciation. I asked, 'what does this mean for you as a lifelong horror fan and active contributor to the genre?'

It's exciting as a creator. The more good publicity there is for horror films, the more people are talking about it, the more there is a wave of horror filmmaking, which means I get to make more films. It's good that people are engaging with horror that have never really engaged with it before. Because that's what we're talking about here when people say things like 'Oh *Us* [dir. by Jordan Peele, 2019] has saved horror', what they're really saying is 'I didn't really like horror, I thought horror was terrible'. It's a good thing that there are people coming to the genre who weren't previously engaged with it.

While she does express concern that terms like 'elevated horror' malign the genre and erase past contributions of horror filmmaking, she believes it is a net gain:

It used to be quite hard (and still is to some extent) to get any kind of credible, high-brow recognition for a horror film and I think that dam has burst. With *Get Out* [2017] being nominated and Jordan Peele winning the Oscar for best screenplay, then you have created a precedent where these kinds of things can happen. Of course, the

instant response was 'elevated horror' but I mean, it's still horror, we know that. That's a good thing and for new people coming to the genre, well, they are just going to have so much fun.

Speaking of her own ideal creative situation and people she would like to collaborate with, she says,

My ideal is always to write my own stuff, even though there are of course other directors that I admire. I wouldn't particularly have an ambition to write something for them, I'd rather make it myself. There are writers that I would like to work with. The first person that comes to mind would be Adam Nevill who wrote *The Ritual* [2011], who I have met recently to talk about a project which probably isn't the one that's going to go forward for complex reasons but I had a really interesting conversation with him. He's interested of course in writing more scripts and we are potentially interested on working on something together going forward. I think he's a really great writer. He writes beautifully in prose but also his scripts are beautiful because he is a prose writer. I'd like to work with him. My ideal is always going to be directing the stuff that I come up with. Writer-director is my natural home.

Clarke describes her own current writing project:

I have another script that I am writing now that's just at the very early stage. It's a post-apocalyptic story called *Rainy Days*. It's being produced by Fantastic Films in Dublin who did *The Hallow* [dir. by Corin Hardy, 2015] and *Wake Wood* [dir. by David Keating, 2009] and it's funded in development by Screen Ireland. It is a post-apocalyptic story of an epidemic of grave sadness. I'm interested in established, tropey subgenres and I'm interested in taking just a different slant on it. I don't know why I do this to myself. It's not my favourite subgenre but I feel that so many of them have a central thesis: if we were in an extreme survival situation, if humanity at large was in an extreme survival situation, what would survive of us is the sociopath. The person who is going to isolate themselves and their families and get a gun and be like 'I don't care about all of you, I'm okay'. Where actually I don't think that stands up to human history. Neolithic man was in a kind of comparable situation of survival and how we are here now is because they learned to create a community and develop empathy and altruism. I think that's how we would survive. The race would die out pretty quick if it was just survivalists by themselves. I've had enough of the horror in horror films be about masculine aggression. I think it can be a lot more complicated than that.

In my story, we have an epidemic of sadness, and people either just waste away because they are not taking care of themselves, like extreme depression. They don't feed themselves, they don't drink water. Or else they commit suicide to escape this terrible sadness. The ones that are left when my story begins are called 'The Stragglers' and they are not zombies because they are not dead but they are just consumed by a need for comfort. They are just dreadfully sad and they need human contact and comfort but the people who are not infected can't give them that because then they will get infected. The threat comes from their desire for human contact. It's not motivated by evil or aggression, it's motivated by the very human need to be loved and to be close to people.

It's an interesting idea and it sounds as if those who are not infected need to shut down a part of their own humanity or empathy:

Yes, they don't look scary, they look just pitiful. Like if there's a little three-year-old child and it's weeping and it wants you to pick it up, you can't because it has the disease. I don't know if you are familiar with Schopenhauer? He had this thought experiment about hedgehogs who are very cold at night. They want to huddle together so they can keep each other warm but they can't because their spikes prick each other so they have to actually find a happy medium where they can keep each other kind of warm but not hurt each other. I think that's kind of like the human condition. I think we're all a bit like that.

*Máiréad Casey*