

Dancing for Freedom in Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall* (2014)

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Abstract: Ken Loach is best known for making films that address issues around poverty, social injustice, and the struggles of the powerless. Jimmy's Hall is one such film, narrating the story of James Gralton. This paper discusses the ways in which Loach uses dancing as a metaphor for freedom from social, political, and religious oppression in the Ireland of the 1920s and 1930s.

Ken Loach's *Jimmy's Hall* generated a new wave of interest in the life of Irish communist activist James Gralton, who ran a small community centre in Effrinagh, Co. Leitrim, and was deported from Ireland as “undesirable alien” in 1933. Fearghal McGarry, for instance, dedicated one of his most recent public lectures to the social, cultural, and political context in which “Jimmy's hall” came into being in the 1920s–1930s. As Burns Visiting Scholar in Irish Studies, he gave a public lecture at Boston College in March 2021, entitled “Communism, Sex, and All That Jazz: The Struggle against Modernity in Interwar Ireland,” in which he situated Gralton's story within the context of the anti-communist movement and the anti-jazz campaign in Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s. McGarry argues that the fear of communism through agitation propaganda and of capitalist liberalism through the influence of foreign books, films, and jazz records shaped the story of James Gralton. These fears among the upper echelons of Irish society were worsened by what McGarry refers to as “reversed migration,” the return of Irish emigrants from the United States of America, especially to Leitrim, a county that had

the “highest intensity of post-famine emigration” (00:16:46 and 00:16:52).¹ These returning Americanised Irishmen were seen as “agents of cultural change” who introduced ideas of American radicalism into Irish nationalist discourse, posing a social and cultural challenge to those who intended to maintain the socio-political *status quo* in Ireland and resist the foreign, modernising influences in the newly-established Irish Free State (00:16:56–58).

Ruth Barton’s article from 2016, entitled “Jimmy’s Hall, Irish Cinema, and the Telling of History,” is a further example of the new-found interest in Gralton and the work of Ken Loach in general amongst Irish critics. She relates the narrative of *Jimmy’s Hall* to real-life events, as detailed by two of Gralton’s biographers, Pat Feeley and Des Guckian. Feeley would have interviewed local Irish people to connect the threads of Gralton’s life in Ireland and in America, offering, as Barton argues, a fairly reliable account of the man’s life (99).² Barton makes it clear that Loach’s film version of Gralton’s activities diverges significantly from real-life events. This, however, is not unusual in the director’s approach towards a historical material: he has always been keen on fictionalising historical events and characters in order to “follow the rules of dramatic conflict” necessary for creating an engaging fictional storyline (Loach qtd. in Hill 219). Barton takes a detailed account of the real life of James Gralton, his conflict with parish priests Father Cosgrave and Father O’Dowd, with members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and with the Black and Tans, the new unit of British soldiers deployed in Ireland to defeat the IRA during the War of Independence of 1919–1921. She also discusses the founding of the Pearse-Connolly Hall in Co. Leitrim and the communist activities in “Gralton’s Hall,” as it was known at the time (94). Barton’s account is exhaustive when it comes to Gralton’s involvement with members of the local community, but it does not mention the chronological discrepancies in the storyline devised by Ken Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty. The main historical events of the period are given in a somewhat random chronological order, presumably to suit those “rules of dramatic conflict.” These events include the 31st International Eucharistic Congress (Dublin, 22–26 June 1932); the founding of the Army Comrades Association (Dublin,

1 David Fitzpatrick coined the term “reversed migration” to denote the emigrational trend during the interwar period, especially during the Great Depression following the crisis of 1928–1929. Fitzpatrick uses the expression frequently in *The Americanisation of Ireland* (2020).

2 Barton remarks that these interviews were used for a television documentary on James Gralton’s life, aired in the late-1970s: Pat Feeley, “The Gralton Affair” (Dublin: RTÉ Radio One, 1977)(99).

July–August 1932); and most importantly, the burning down of Gralton’s Hall by the IRA (winter 1932). Gralton’s real-life deportation, which was a rather significant event back in the days, is downplayed by Ken Loach in *Jimmy’s Hall*. By simplifying the complexity of the event, he can highlight more easily the three main themes of the film: the rebellion of youth against the authoritative power of church and state; the struggle of the poor and powerless against the existing political regime; and dancing as a metaphor for Irish men and women’s desire for freedom.

Neither McGarry nor Barton discusses the actual storyline of *Jimmy’s Hall*. The purpose of this article is to offer an analysis of this plotline, revealing the many different ways in which dancing is represented by Loach as a metaphor for freedom. First, the article discusses the main plot, that of the return of the hero, Jimmy Gralton, to Ireland, and the re-opening of the Pearse-Connolly Hall. This event opens the question of the meaning and value of communal dancing for the small group of friends who attend Jimmy’s hall in the 1930s. Second, the article analyses the conflict that arises between Gralton and Father Sheridan with regard to jazz music and dance, and the social and religious implications of “forbidden dancing” in the life of the village community. Thirdly, the article examines the details of the conflict between Gralton and his arch-enemy Dennis O’Keefe, whose daughter, Marie, is one of the leaders of the “dancing revolution.” First and foremost, the analysis of these three thematic threads is carried out in order to shed a new light on the multi-layered nature of the dancing metaphor in Loach’s film. Beside this, it is done with a view to refuting claims that *Jimmy’s Hall* is one of Loach’s failed attempts at making another heritage film, particularly when the film is compared to *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* that had won the prestigious Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006. *Jimmy’s Hall* is a worthy addition to the long list of heritage films about Ireland, including Neil Jordan’s *Michael Collins* (1996) and Terry George’s *Some Mother’s Son* (1996), and a perfect fit into Ken Loach’s extensive list of films that deal with the situation of the poor and the powerless, including *Carla’s Song* (1996), *My Name is Joe* (1998), and *Bread and Roses* (2000).

“[T]O DANCE ... AS FREE HUMAN BEINGS”:

JIMMY GRALTON AND THE PEARSE-CONNOLLY HALL

Set in 1932, *Jimmy’s Hall* tells the story of James (Jimmy) Gralton’s return to Ireland after a long period of self-imposed exile in the United States of America following

the Irish Civil War of 1922–1923. As mentioned, the film is a historical sequel to Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), which narrated the events of the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War that ensued after the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty on 6 December 1921. While it was hoped that the Anglo-Irish Treaty would bring bloodshed to a halt in Ireland, it only fuelled more violence as many could not accept that peace would come at the price of the partition of Ireland. According to the Treaty, the country was partitioned into the Irish Free State, which received dominion status within the British Empire, and Northern Ireland, which remained legislatively part of the United Kingdom. At the beginning of the film, Ken Loach takes us back to these times of war and revolution. He narrates the events that had led to Jimmy's exile in 1922, ones that will have consequences in 1932: Jimmy and his friends from the Pearse-Connolly Hall reinstate an evicted tenant, Rory McManus, on a landed estate in Co. Leitrim. Rory had fallen behind the payment of rent to the local landlord. During the reinstatement, Jimmy Gralton finds himself in violent confrontation with a powerful local man, Dennis O'Keeffe, and a strict parish priest, Father Sheridan. Following the confrontation, Jimmy is accused of agrarian agitation and is forced to leave Ireland. Jimmy would spend nearly ten years in exile in the United States, until his return in February–March 1932.

In Loach's film, Jimmy Gralton is imagined as a revolutionary character, someone who is always on the side of the homeless, the poor, and the dispossessed. Andrea Velich observes that it is a common trait in Loach's work as director to focus on "social pressures [arising] from unemployment, low wages, poverty, [and] homelessness" (126), and *Jimmy's Hall* seems to be following in these footsteps with its representation of the life of James Gralton and his comrades in Effrinagh. The Jimmy of Loach's imagination feels very strongly about his mission in the community, exclaiming in the speech that follows the reinstatement of the Milmoie family to Lord Kingston's estate in Co. Roscommon in 1932, that he has had personal experience of poverty in America: "I saw the bubble burst, the crash of '29 and misery in a land of plenty. Let's not forget how it's spread around the world from a system steeped in illusion, exploitation and avarice" (01:16:00–30). Gralton's criticism of capitalism is highlighted in these sentences, a critique that will impact on the way he will be treated by those in powerful social positions in Leitrim.³ Jimmy's words

3 What is left unmentioned in the film is the fact that, partly out of sheer desperation and partly because of their communist convictions, the real-life James Gralton and his comrades carried out

from Roscommon correspond well to the black-and-white images that are shown at the very beginning of *Jimmy's Hall*. Contemporary jazz music is being played in the background, while images of post-1929 America are flashed across the screen, drawing attention to the dire situation of the poor in the “land of plenty.” In these images, shops are closed, people are unemployed, men live homeless on the streets, and food is subject to rationing. Capitalism, of course, is not in full force in Ireland at the time, but the situation of the poor is not dissimilar to that of the socially deprived in America. Soon after his return from self-imposed exile, Jimmy first meets a bunch of local youth, and one of them confesses to him the following: “There is nothing ‘round here for us. There is no work. There is nowhere for us to go. We can’t go to America the same as yourself. The rules of emigration have changed. We are stuck here” (00:16:03–10). Jimmy meets these young Irish people when they are dancing on a dusty Irish road. One of them confesses about lack of work, the other asks him about the re-opening of the Pearse-Connolly Hall.⁴ Jimmy has not given thought to opening it because the hall is in a derelict state, with the roof coming off and the walls crumbling. He is aware also that the query has come from none other than the daughter of his arch-enemy Dennis O’Keefe. Back in the 1930s, Fearghal McGarry and Diarmaid Ferriter explain, the Catholic Church would have had authority over educational, health and social welfare matters in rural townlands (McGarry 00:40:47–57; Ferriter 320). Opening commercial dance halls would have been instantly perceived by local clerics as provocative in nature. Intending to steer clear off any form of confrontation, Loach’s Jimmy Gralton first turns down the offer to create an alternative space for the entertainment of village youth.

However, when Jimmy returns to the hall to inspect its current state, all his memories come flashing to him, and he is reminded of the educational work that was done within the walls during the hall’s short existence in the 1920s. Alongside the traditional Irish dance classes, young men and women were tutored in the Irish language and were taught traditional Irish singing. Also, drawing classes were offered for girls and boxing training for young boys, to keep them out of mischief and nurture their competitive spirit. After some deliberation, he and his friends listen to the plea of the dancing youth who beg them to create an alternative space

land seizures and cattle drives, igniting social unrest in Co. Limerick. See more on this in Ryan (22).

4 Gralton’s hall in Effrinagh was named after Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, two of the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and executed leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916.

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for gathering:⁵ “We want to dance, Jimmy. Somewhere, where we won’t be getting a guard or a priest poking at us with a stick. Somewhere warm” (00:16:14–19). Amid anti-jazz agitations, the newly reopened hall becomes a place of cultivating Irish traditions in the form of *sean nós* and set dancing, as well as a place of revolutionary thought and movement.⁶ Jimmy brings with himself from America a knowledge of Afro-American jazz music and dance. With its unique steps and distinctive dance moves, jazz immediately appeals to the “rebel” locals, who feel intrigued and liberated when dancing the new dance form. At first, the new music comes from the gramophone but soon the local Irish band learns the tunes, and joyful scenes of traditional Irish dancing and modern American jazz dancing combine in the first part of the film. These create a general air of fun and happiness about Jimmy’s hall, even though, in real life, the local clergy would have looked upon the hall as a “place of sin,” a “most dangerous source of corruption in the country” (qtd. in Ryan 22). This is the first instance of dancing representing real freedom in Ken Loach’s film. Within the four walls of the hall, the “rebel” locals can dance and sing “as free human beings,” as Jimmy puts it in his speech in Roscommon (01:17:31–35). They can dance without feeling the social restrictions or the political pressure of contemporary Ireland, described by McGarry as suffused in cultural nationalism and clerical conservatism. Couples can switch and new couples can form during an Irish jig or an American jazz number. Visually, Ken Loach connects the Irish youth dancing in Jimmy’s hall to the poor in America whose lives are shown at the beginning of the film in the aforementioned black-and-white images. Loach seems to suggest that the situation in Ireland and that in America is not that dissimilar: while those living under the poverty line were struggling every day of their lives, they were still determined to make the most of the little they have and enjoy their lives as much as circumstances would allow in American city slums and in rural townlands around Ireland.

5 Back in those days, many of the social gatherings would have taken place in Ireland in church halls, under the watchful eyes of the local clergy.

6 *Sean nós* (old style) and set dancing are forms of traditional Irish folk dance: the former is a solo dance, the latter is a group dance.

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“[B]EST DAMNED DANCES IN THE WHOLE COUNTRY”:

JIMMY GRALTON AND FATHER SHERIDAN

Father Sheridan and Jimmy Gralton could never see eye to eye on the matter of the Pearse-Connolly Hall. Father Sheridan never liked the hall because of its association with post-1918 communist ideology. He is aware that the desperate times of the 1930s call for desperate measures, and he fears the spread of communism in his parish. He reads the *Irish Workers' Voice*, which reports of the re-opening of the hall on 5 May 1932, illustrated with the image of Jimmy Gralton. Historically, the *Irish Worker's Voice* would have been only a year old at the time, having been first published by the Revolutionary Workers' Group in April 1931. The left-wing newspaper would later become the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Ireland that would be established in June 1933. Pat Walsh notes that real-life James Gralton was member of a Revolutionary Workers' Group, and he used the Pearse-Connolly Hall for disseminating his radical political views (29). Stephen Ryan and Ruth Barton add to the debate about Gralton's radical political activities in Ireland that Gralton was member of the local Direct Action Committee and his hall was used as court of arbitration where he, as judge, settled land disputes, sometimes resulting in land seizures and cattle drives off larger estates (Ryan 23; Barton 98). Ken Loach shows little of these organised radical left-wing activities: most references that link Gralton to communist ideology are uttered by Father Sheridan in forms of accusations against the good work of Jimmy. When Jimmy visits Father Sheridan to ask him to become a trustee on the board of the hall, the priest refuses the offer until the title deeds of the hall were transferred to the Holy Mother Church. Jimmy argues that the hall “brings out the best” in his small community of volunteers and they respect “freedom of religion and conscience,” as opposed to propagating far-left Soviet politics (00:58:40–41 and 00:57:21–23). Father Sheridan, however, is resolute in having the hall serve the broader needs of Catholic Ireland under the rules of the Holy Mother Church. At one point during the conversation, Father Sheridan mentions the issue of Stalin's secret prisons in the Soviet Union and the famine in parts of the eastern Soviet Union at the time, but Jimmy is unwilling to take on the challenge, saying “that is a long debate to be had” (00:57:31–33). As self-professed Marxist, Ken Loach is unwilling to have his main character entangled in a lengthy debate about Stalin's dictatorship in the Soviet Union. Instead, as gesture of goodwill towards a member of the clergy, Loach has Jimmy invite Father

Sheridan onto the board of trustees of the Pearse-Connolly Hall. Given the strongly anti-communist stance of the Catholic Church in Ireland at the time, a parish priest accepting the offer of a communist activist would have been a rather unlikely scenario. Lili Zách notes that during the interwar period “Irish nationalists adopted an uncompromisingly anti-Communist stance rooted in the strong Catholic traditions of the state” (14). By avoiding mention of Jimmy’s radical political activities and having him extend a welcome towards the local clergy, Loach manages to paint the image of Jimmy as a local Irish hero, who only wants the best for his people. Adding a further twist to the narrative, the idea of welcoming the priest to the community had originally come from Oonagh, Jimmy’s love interest, making it somewhat difficult to determine whether Jimmy himself had agreed with the proposal or had just acted on it because of his attraction to Oonagh.

Jimmy’s gesture of comradeship is offered after one Sunday mass, during which Father Sheridan calls out the names of the young people who attend the dancing sessions in Jimmy’s hall. Loach intercuts images of the poor Irish enjoying themselves while dancing in the hall with those of Father Sheridan ruthlessly lecturing them from the pulpit. Giving his weekly sermon, he is seen wearing the full priestly regalia of green and gold chasuble, a normal vesture for a priest during Ordinary Time. Green here carries a double meaning: first, it is the colour of hope in the Roman Catholic liturgy, associating hope and renewal with the Roman Catholic Church; second, it is the colour most associated with Ireland, also known as “the Emerald Island.” Hence, in the image of Father Sheridan standing in full regalia on the pulpit, a visual connection is established between this idea of hope and renewal and the Roman Catholic Church. This connection is further underlined during the scene in which Jimmy visits Father Sheridan. There is a painting hanging on a wall in the priest’s parochial home: Sir John Lavery’s *The Blessing of the Colours* (1922).⁷ The painting depicts a young Irish volunteer in green uniform kneeling before the Archbishop of Dublin, who is seen raising his right hand to bless the Irish tricolour of green-white-orange, which became the Irish national flag in 1922. Tony Canavan writes that the painting “encapsulates the Catholic ethos of the newly independent Irish state” in that it depicts the symbolic moment in which Irish

7 Sir John Lavery himself was involved in the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. William Butler Yeats mentions this painting in his poem, “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” (1937). Lavery’s painting bears the following, longer title on the back of its canvas: *The Blessing of the Colours of the Irish Free State*.

nationalism/the nationalist cause/the new Irish state is being blessed by the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church (55). Father Sheridan points to the painting that hangs on textured green wallpaper and remarks to Jimmy: “Democratic Irish State; true to its traditions; in harmony with its people and under the guidance of the one true universal Apostolic Church. That is the natural way” (00:56:56–00:57:07). When the priest delivers these lines, Jimmy Gralton is standing in front of him, in a posture that resonates strongly with the one of Father Sheridan at the Sunday sermon, mentioned previously. During the sermon, he makes it clear that his parishioners have a choice to make: they either accept the teaching of Jesus Christ and abide by the rules of the Catholic Church; or they follow Jimmy Gralton and assent to his communist ideology disseminated from the Pearse-Connolly Hall.

By way of diversifying clerical opinion on the matter of dance halls and the “evils of dancing,” Ken Loach and Paul Laverty introduce the character of Father Seamus. He is a young curate, who holds opposing views to Father Sheridan. He understands the young people of Efrinagh and seems unbothered by either the “Los Angelisation” of their minds through music and dance, or by Jimmy Gralton’s communist ideas. He disagrees with Father Sheridan when collecting the names of those who attend Jimmy’s dancing sessions, grumpily remarking: “I think we’re doing more harm than good” (00:40:26–27). For him, Jimmy Gralton is only a “lightweight maverick” (00:37:38), a harmless human being, and Jimmy’s hall is no threat to the wider community. As he says, it is “just a tiny little hall, in a country bog” (00:38.03–05). His stance on matters of social justice and the rights of ordinary people do not seem to be that different from Ken Loach’s own critical stance on these matters. Father Seamus understands that the small number of communists in Ireland are unlikely to change the *status quo* between the landless, homeless poor, and the wealthy, landed gentry of Ireland. He even exclaims in an emotionally charged monologue, defending Jimmy: “I suspect if Christ was here today, there’d be several members of this parish who would have Him crucified again! That’s what I suspect!” (01:26:00–05). This comes after the burning down of the Pearse-Connolly Hall one evening. Immediately after this happens, Father Sheridan, Dennis O’Keefe, and the chief of the local Gardaí meet to discuss the future of the local community in Efrinagh. Father Seamus seems to be critical of the others in the room, who want Gralton gone from Ireland. Sheridan, O’Keefe and the Guard seem to be concerned about the possibility of Jimmy becoming an Irish martyr in the eyes of the followers. They fear that this would result in further political turmoil and possible agrarian

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violence in the area. First and foremost, however, they are relieved that the dance hall, with its “foreign filth,” is gone and that there would be no more unlawful gathering of people in Effrinagh. Father Sheridan would look forward to things returning to “normal,” as he sees it, the community rejoicing in the blessings of the 31th International Eucharistic Congress, held in Dublin in June 1932.⁸

“[W]E WON’T STOP DANCING”:

JIMMY GRALTON AND DENNIS O’KEEFE

Father Sheridan is one of those priests for whom jazz represents “the gamut of anxieties of modernism,” fearing “transnational culture influences” from the United States (McGarry 00:20:45–48 and 00:20:52–54). Throughout the film, Father Sheridan wants Gralton gone from his parish, and so does Dennis O’Keefe, father of Marie O’Keefe. Marie is the driving force behind the “dancing revolution,” much against the will of her authoritative and violent father. She asks Jimmy to open the hall; she attends every dance at the hall; and when Jimmy is being escorted out of town by the police, she shouts out to him reassuringly: “We won’t stop dancing, Jimmy” (01:41:43–45). Her words here take on an additional meaning: “dancing” becomes the synonym for “fighting.” What she is hinting at here is that the community will not stop fighting against social injustices, prohibitive social rules, and authoritative social patterns. She has the last words of the film, and by allowing her to utter these last words, Ken Loach turns her into “the voice of whole community.” She speaks for herself, but she speaks for the entire village community, who, in her view, are forced to live their lives according to the rules of the Catholic Church and the new Irish state. Diarmaid Ferriter remarks that, during the revolutionary period of the 1920s, the Roman Catholic Church “reasserted its moral authority in many areas” of Irish life (311), and the power of the church remained strong during the 1930s, with the Constitution of Ireland (1937) written on Catholic social and moral principles. Dennis O’Keefe is one such man who abides by the laws of the church and the state. He had supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, had fought on the side of Michael Collins during the Irish Civil War in defence of the Treaty, and had served in the Free State Army of the new Irish state after its

8 Over a million Irish Catholics attended the opening mass of Eucharistic Congress, held in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. These included Prime Minister Éamon de Valera and members of the newly-elected Fianna Fáil government that came into power in February–March 1932.

establishment in 1922. As member of the Cumann na nGaedheal party,⁹ he had supported the first Irish government in power between 1923 and 1932, prior to the election of Éamon de Valera and Fianna Fáil in February 1932. He had become member of the Army Comrades Association, or the “Blueshirts,” to protect the Cumann na nGaedheal party, afraid of being attacked by old IRA prisoners released from jail by the new Fianna Fáil government. As Joseph Lee explains, clashes between the IRA and the ACA had been increasing since February 1932 (178). O’Keefe had married into land and wealth and is now a member of the Irish Catholic *bourgeoisie*. He might not agree with the political values of the new Fianna Fáil government but is still a violent defender of a system of patriarchal society, based on religious values. He despises everything that he would see as undermining these values, especially his authority as a father.

As mentioned, there was a strong concern among conservatives about the rapidly growing foreign influence on Irish culture, one that comes to the fore in Loach’s movie. For traditionalists, anxieties around the emerging influence of American culture on traditional Irish society were intermingled with concerns about the changing behaviour of Irish people in the public space. One of the arguments of those conservatives who took part in the anti-jazz campaign of the late-1920s and early-1930s was that the growth in what they conceived as indecent public behaviour was a consequence of the influence of American culture, disseminated in books, films, and commercial dance halls. American jazz dance, as Eileen Hogan explains, was seen as “promoting physical movements and pleasures” (63). These new “pleasures” were “antithetical to the morally ordered bodies espoused for Irish men and women in the postcolonial reconstruction of national Irish purity” (64). As well as this, Hogan reminds readers that “because of its African-American origins ‘jazz’ was inextricably bound up in the question of ‘race’” (65). Constructions of jazz music and dance were often sexualised and racialised, fuelling the anti-jazz campaign of the 1930s to the point that an anti-jazz march was held in Leitrim on New Year’s Eve in 1934 (McGarry 00:17:53–00:18:23).¹⁰ Only

9 Cumann na nGaedheal was the governing political party of the Irish Free State between 1923 and 1932. Fianna Fáil was the governing party in Ireland from 1932 until 1948.

10 Barbara O’Connor’s article, “Sexing the Nation,” provides further details on the radicalisation and sexualisation of the “dance revolution” in Ireland during the 1930s. The Carrigan Committee, originally set up by the Cumann na nGaedheal government in 1930, and its report that was published in 1931, significantly contributed to the further sexualisation of the social and political discourse with regards to the dance halls of Irish townlands (McGarry 00:29:00–00:34:10; Ferriter 321–325).

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a year later, in 1935, the Public Dance Hall Act was passed in the Irish parliament to prohibit the use of commercial dance halls and the broadcasting of jazz music on national radio (Hogan 59).¹¹ The “Los Angelisation” of Irish culture was condemned from the altar around the country, witnessed in Loach’s film in the scene of Father Sheridan’s sermon to his parishioners. Condemnation of non-clerical dance halls and foreign music only created further feelings of resentment among those who felt their freedom of movement limited, or prohibited, by the new legislation and the increasingly hostile public discourse. Marie O’Keefe’s relationship to her father needs to be understood in this context. As father and respectable member of the local community, Dennis O’Keefe would not tolerate what he regarded as the moral degeneration of his daughter in Jimmy’s dance hall, and her coming under the foreign influence of Afro-American jazz music with its sexualised lyrics and syncopated rhythms. O’Keefe could not stand the public scrutiny of his family, hence his brutal punishment of his daughter and his aversion to anything related to Jimmy’s hall. Marie O’Keefe, on the other hand, would not succumb to the prohibitive nature of social rules and regulations, and her father’s increasingly violent conduct. Ken Loach seems to be emphasising in the film that domestic violence can be attributed both to individual personal behaviour and to prohibitive social rules and regulations, as was the case in Ireland in the 1930s.

Although generally steering clear from the sexual contexts of the anti-jazz campaign in Ireland at the time, Ken Loach does address the issue of the connection between dancing and sexuality in one of the scenes of the movie involving Jimmy and his love interest Oonagh. Gralton’s deportation, following the reinstatement of the Milmo family to Lord Kingston’s estate in Roscommon mentioned earlier, finally puts an end to Jimmy’s relationship with Oonagh. She is now married with two children and is settled in the local community. She and Jimmy were once childhood sweethearts, and she stands beside him in all decisions he makes—be it about the hall, his mother, or leaving Ireland. One evening Oonagh and Jimmy dance together in the darkness of the Pearse-Connolly Hall, reigniting their old love and affections for each other. This dance is the slowest of the film’s dances, and is coloured in black and shady blue, with only one spotlight on the dancing couple. She is wearing a figure-hugging, see-through dress that Jimmy had brought for her from America. They both think back to the freedom they once experienced as a young

11 McGarry remarks that the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 “shifted unlicensed dances into parochial halls, benefitting church and state in the form of ticket sales and taxes” (00:27:08–15).

couple, before politics started to play a serious role in their lives. This dance is their “dance of freedom,” a special moment of emotional and sensual reunification. While clerical and political anxieties about dance halls are challenged in Ken Loach’s film, this scene of dancing in the hall suggests that dance halls could be, or in fact were, used by couples to escape temporarily from the church and/or the state, as well as the couples’ respective families. The scene represents Jimmy’s hall as a “safe space,” as Jimmy surreptitiously calls it, or a “utopian space,” as Barton refers to it (104). Nonetheless, it also depicts the Irish dance hall as a place in which the risks of forbidden pleasure and sexual freedom are tested. Oonagh is not present when Jimmy is being deported by the Gardaí,¹² following the deportation order from Dublin. Marie O’Keefe and the “rebel youth,” however, are there to see Jimmy escorted out of Efrinagh among heavy police presence. Cycling next to the car on which Jimmy is sitting, Marie O’Keefe exclaims: “We won’t stop dancing, Jimmy!” (01:41:43–45). Jimmy Gralton and his comrades had sown the seeds of rebellion and the young people whose lives he has touched with his enthusiasm will continue to dance for their freedom, whether it be in defiance of the clerical or the political authorities in Ireland. After all, as Ken Loach himself has confessed about the role of dancing and music in *Jimmy’s Hall*: ultimately, “[i]t is an expression of freedom,” something that is “[a]lways dangerous to those who seek to exercise control” (18). Situating the dancing metaphor at the centre of his film, Loach successfully dissolves politics into art, and overcomes what Jacob Leigh referred to as “creative challenges” when depicting on screen the story of Irish communist James Gralton to audiences shaped by the values of present-day global capitalism (1).

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12 Gardaí is a short form of An Garda Síochána (“Guardian(s) of the Peace”), sometimes called Garda Síochána na hÉireann, established in 1923, which was the official national police force of the Irish Free State. An Garda Síochána remained the police force of the Republic of Ireland, calling itself today Ireland’s National Police and Security Service.

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