

# FROM MASS MEDIA TO NEW MEDIA IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA: BILLY ROCHE'S *ON SUCH AS WE* AND PAUL MEADE'S *SKIN DEEP*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

This article explores the impact of new media and the mass media on the production, composition and reception of contemporary Irish drama. It considers the emergence of several tensions in that genre, notably that between mobility and stasis and the local and the global. This development is considered in relation to a discussion of two plays: Billy Roche's *On Such As We*, which was produced at the Peacock Theatre in 2001, and Paul Meade's *Skin Deep*, premiered by his company Gúna Nua at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 2003.

**Keywords:** Irish drama, globalization, Billy Roche, Paul Meade, new media.

In contemporary culture, nothing lasts forever. Vinyl was replaced by compact discs, which are in turn being replaced by digital downloads; videotapes disappeared with the advent of the soon-to-be obsolete DVD; and perhaps, for reasons of environmental protection as well as fashion, the book may eventually be replaced by an electronic

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equivalent. "To avoid frustration", notes Zygmunt Bauman, "one would do better to refrain from developing habits and attachments or entering into lasting commitments. The objects of desire are better enjoyed on the spot and then disposed of; markets see to it that they are made in such a way that both the gratification and the obsolescence occur in an instant" (*Individualized Society* 156). The increased commodification of culture, that is, results in a situation where the gap between consumption and desire has been reduced to almost nothing.

I want in this article to explore how this situation has become evident in contemporary Irish drama. We are witnessing the emergence of a series of fascinating tensions in that genre: between mobility and love of place, between nostalgia for the past and enthusiasm for the future, between the impermanent and the eternal, and of course between the local and the global. I explore how this development is presenting itself by considering two plays: Billy Roche's *On Such As We*, which was produced at the Peacock Theatre in 2001, and Paul Meade's *Skin Deep*, premiered by his company Gúna Nua at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin in 2003. My argument is that the impact of both mass media and new media have radically altered the way in which Irish audiences receive new plays like those by Roche and Meade. I also want to consider the extent to which Irish dramatists are aware of and responsive to these changes.

## Mobility in Contemporary Culture

The two plays under discussion in this article emerged at a time when many critics and scholars were attempting to come to terms with the transformation of culture that had been occasioned by the combined impact of the mass media, digital culture, and globalization on our ability to receive and process information. In 2000, for example, the author James Gleik drew attention to the "acceleration of just about everything" in global culture, noting that many aspects of human life, from commerce to employment to culture, had accelerated considerably (116). That acceleration has resulted in a state in which people now

"multitask", he suggests: that is, they have become used to performing a number of simple tasks simultaneously rather than, as would have been the case in the past, devoting their attention to one specific complicated activity. Eleven years earlier, David Harvey had related multitasking to the impact of capitalism, which, he states, has been "characterized by continuous efforts to shorten turnover times, thereby speeding up social processes while reducing the time-horizons of meaningful decision-making" (229).

Both writers' insights seem accurate if mildly generalized: the public generally have shown an enthusiasm in their private lives for devices that are designed to save them time or that allow them to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. Microwave ovens, remote controls, and speed-dialling telephones are common examples of this phenomenon. Gleik in 2000 described how a manufacturer of portable Compact Disc (CD) players was offering users the option to play back their CDs with the gaps between songs removed, saving the user perhaps forty seconds when listening to a sixty-minute CD. What is significant about this example, of course, is that it illustrates how the time we use to engage with culture has become more compressed. But it is also notable that Gleik's example has itself become outdated in a very short period of time, since MP3 players such as the Apple I-pod have largely supplanted portable CD players since the turn of the century.

For the present purposes, the most important form of acceleration occurred when capital's focus moved from production to culture. The production of culture "has become integrated into commodity production generally," notes Harvey (61), responding to Fredric Jameson. He continues:

The mobilization of fashion in mass (as opposed to elite) markets provided a means to accelerate the pace of consumption not only in clothing, ornament and decoration but also across a wide swathe of life-styles and recreational activities (leisure and sporting habits, pop music styles, video

and children's games, and the like). A second trend was a shift away from the consumption of goods and into the consumption of services – not only personal, business, educational, and health services, but also into entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions. (285)

This alteration in the pacing of mass mediated entertainment was not imposed by an elite on an unsuspecting and helpless public, states Harvey. Rather, it was a reaction by those controlling the mass media to the exercise of viewers' decision-making – principally by means of the remote control, according to Gleik. Robert Levine cites studies that show that the television no longer has viewers, but "grazers": people who change channel up to twenty-two times in one minute, who "approach the airwaves as a vast smorgasbord, all of which must be sampled, no matter how meager the helpings" (Levine qtd. in Gleik 183). As a result of such "grazing", audiences form superficial views of the programming, which reduces their satisfaction levels and their attention span. Networks have responded by ensuring that the audiences will not be given any reason to hit the remote control button. Gleik mentions how a "new forward-looking unit within the NBC" has been taking "an electronic scalpel to the barely perceptible instants when a show fades to black and then re-materializes as a commercial. Over the course of a night, this can save the network as much as fifteen precious seconds, maybe even twenty". However, writes Gleik, saving time is not the main point of this exercise. "The point," he argues, "is that the viewer, at every instant, is in a hurry" (175).

Similarly, the growth of fast-cutting and double or triple cutting in cinema and television has meant that the speed with which people process images has increased. The Irish theatre producer Michael Colgan offers a useful example of the consequences of this transformation:

I recently went to see *L.A. Confidential* with my sixteen-year-old daughter and my mother. It starts with cross-cutting,

cameras flashing, simultaneous sounds, half-sentences, overlapping dialogue, American slang, characters talking in unison, everything topping everything. I was giving it my best just to hold on to it, not helped by my mother who was giving it her complete best but was hopelessly lost and my daughter said "What's wrong?" I said, "Nana doesn't understand it" and Sophie said "Doesn't understand what?" She had time to talk to us and she understood every single thing that was going on. The speed, the density was perfect for her. Her world is an entirely different world from ours. It's not a failure of the imagination to say it would be easier for my mother to sit through three and a half hours of *King Lear* than it would be for my daughter. My daughter would be bored by that. (qtd. in Chambers et. al. 83)<sup>2</sup>

So, as Gleik and Harvey note, many people now perform their tasks in work differently, but the point here is that they also are beginning to watch theatre and other forms of culture differently too. Colgan's example illustrates that different generations have become used to receiving culture differently. His mother's reception of culture involves concentrating on one specific point for a protracted period. His daughter performs a number of cognitive tasks simultaneously: she is multitasking, in other words. Colgan's perceptual processes combine both extremes. He admires his mother's concentration and his daughter's versatility, but relates entirely to neither.

Colgan's anecdote – together with the works of Bauman, Harvey, and Gleik – can be used to illustrate the way in which audiences' responses to theatre are changing, both in Ireland and internationally.<sup>3</sup> It is almost certainly the case that the organization of time within theatre is being altered. The traditional three or five act structure of plays has generally been replaced by loosely structured series of short scenes (often between twelve and fifteen per play) that tend not to last longer than fifteen minutes each. The risk of an audience losing concentration is minimized with action taking place quickly enough to be perceived,

but too quickly to be analysed, and by the frequently gratuitous use of shocking images such as explicit on-stage sex or intensely cruel violence.<sup>4</sup> Audiences have generally responded positively to the ways in which some new dramas attempt to provoke spontaneous emotional reactions from them rather than considered intellectual responses – since this is what they have become used to in almost every other visual medium, from cinema to television news reports.

If we now receive culture at a faster speed, it is also significant that the world has itself become a faster place. As Arjun Appadurai notes, “few persons in the world today do not have a friend, relative or co-worker who is not on the road to somewhere else or already coming back home, bearing stories and possibilities” (7). Irish dramatists are clearly no exception in this regard, as is evident from the success of such playwrights as Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson in New York, of Enda Walsh in Germany, and of Frank McGuinness in London. In fact, it could be argued that the historical mobility of Irish dramatists—as evidenced in the work of Boucicault, Shaw, and Wilde, among others—has now become the dominant feature of theatre throughout the globalizing world.

Rather like globalization itself, mobility is evident in ways that are difficult to measure. Freedom from restraint of one’s mobility is indispensable to the success of organizations and individuals in the globalized world; inhibition of mobility has increasingly been seen as an indicator of disadvantage. Zygmunt Bauman, who writes about these issues in great detail, suggests that, in our times: “Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values—and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times” (*Globalization* 2). As Bauman points out, one of the most interesting analyses of the current importance of freedom of movement is Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character* (1999). Sennett illustrates the importance of mobility in our society by means of a perceptive comparison of Bill Gates – the most successful

businessperson of the globalization era – with John D. Rockefeller. “Gates seems to be free of the obsession to hold on to things”, Sennett notes: “His products are furious in coming forth and as rapid in disappearing, whereas Rockefeller wanted to own oil rigs, buildings or machinery for the long term. Lack of long-term attachment seems to mark Gates’s attitude towards work” (61). Rockefeller’s power was signified by possessions occupying physical space, but Gates’s power is signified by his freedom from temporal attachment – by the fact that his success is built on the short lifespan of everything he produces. Gates therefore becomes a significant example of a value that has come to dominate all of our lives – the temporary nature of our relationships with everything that we produce or consume. Sennett interestingly dubs Gates and those who share his values as examples of “Davos Man”, named after the Swiss resort at which, each year the World Economic Forum meets.<sup>5</sup>

### **“Anything But Stand Still”: Billy Roche’s *On Such as We***

My purpose in reviewing these debates is to provide a context for a discussion of the concerns that underlie Roche’s *On Such As We*. That play, I suggest, shows that Irish dramatists are aware of, and determined to analyze, the growing dominance of mobility in our societies.

Like most of Roche’s works, the play is set in Wexford in the southeast of Ireland, and concerns the widening gulf between traditional and modernizing Ireland. This contrast is dramatised in the form of a conflict between Oweney, the owner of a barbershop, and a businessman called P.J., whom we never see onstage. Their antagonism is caused mainly by the decision of P.J.’s wife Maeve to begin an affair with Oweney, and the plot concerns her confusion about whether she ought to remain with her husband or join Oweney instead for a more fulfilling yet less secure life.

In some senses, P.J. can be understood as an example of Sennett’s Davos man. He has taken control of many of the shops in Wexford,

replacing their individualized shop fronts and products with material described by Oweney as “Neon, plastic, hollow crap” (94). Like a Wexford Bill Gates, P.J.’s interest is in the impermanent and the temporary. As Maeve explains:

He never stays put. When he’s here, he wants to be there. When he’s there he wants to be somewhere else. And he wants to knock everything down – the house where he was born in case somebody sees it, the old hotel for spite, the whole neighbourhood if necessary. Anything but stand still (33).

This description contrasts with Oweney, who is “old-fashioned and proud of it”. Whereas P.J.’s actions are a denial of his past, Oweney is committed to a linear sense of history, as represented by his barbershop: “My da had this place before me and his da before him and I’ll be straight about it – I’m hopin’ my young lad’ll take over after me” (32). This rootedness to one location is emphasized throughout the play, as for example when the audience is told that Oweney does not have a car (27).

As is appropriate for a play set in a barbershop, the dominant image in the text is of the mirror—with P.J. and Oweney functioning dramatically as reflections of each other. P.J. generates obedience from people by hiring thugs to commit acts of violence on his behalf, but Oweney inspires loyalty by means of kindness and generosity. Oweney’s sensitivity is evident when he tells Maeve that he will walk with her through a wood, but P.J. tears down an orchard at the back of his house in order to build a pool-room. Whereas P.J. does not want to have children, Oweney is on the other hand an apparently affectionate father to his own three children, as well as being a self-professed “mother” (6) to Laurence, one of the young men to whom he leases accommodation. When one of P.J.’s hired thugs is sent to prison for an assault which P.J. had ordered him to commit, he receives no support; in contrast, Oweney shows great concern for Laurence when he is summoned to court for the theft of Christmas trees.

There might appear to be a rather simplistic morality at work here, with the overwhelmingly negative characteristics of P.J. contrasting favourably with the essential decency of Oweney. It could be easy for an audience to think that since P.J. is overwhelmingly bad, so too is the modernity that he represents—and that, similarly, the traditional values shown by Oweney are good simply because he himself seems a decent man. The fact that at the end of the play Oweney has taken P.J. “down a peg or two” (94), and that Oweney is still in business while P.J. has left town, might lead us to believe that Roche’s hero has been successful and that, by extension, we are to understand that traditionalism has triumphed over gaudy modernity. However, many aspects of the play combine to show that Roche is attempting instead to avoid creating such an impression.

Firstly, Oweney is not as admirable a person as we might assume, and Roche leaves many aspects of his character interestingly unresolved. Oweney is estranged from his wife, who forced him to leave their home. Furthermore, Oweney tells us that his “oldest girl Sharon is still not talkin’ to me. She turns away or crosses the street whenever she sees me comin’ now” (32). When asked by Maeve to explain this, Oweney can only say that his wife asked him to leave because of his “ramblin’ and gamblin’ and stayin’ out late at night” (32)—an evasive explanation that no member of the audience can be satisfied with (though Maeve does not pry further, interestingly). The cause of this separation is not explained. Instead, Roche hints at possible causes. Oweney certainly gambles, as we find out late in the play’s second act, when Oweney tells us that he is “after winnin’ a nice handy little two hundred smackers for meself anyway [...]. Twenty pound win double on Sergeant Major and Planxty Jones” (72)—in other words, he bets against long odds. So this is one possible cause of his estrangement from his wife (as well as his lack of a car). It is therefore apparent that the audience is intended to regard Oweney as being in certain respects flawed.

Furthermore, the play concludes unsatisfactorily for many of the main characters. Maeve tells Oweney as consolation for her unwillingness to pursue a relationship with him that “the two of us will

live forever" in memory (90), because Oweney showed her a reflection of herself that was "beautiful". This vision is instantly subverted, however: Maeve then tells Oweney that she has decided to stay with her husband because she must make a success of her marriage: "at the end of the day Oweney it's a *reflection* on me if I don't" (91, emphasis added). Similarly, the other couple in the play—Sally and Leonard—end the action very happily and romantically. Yet a great deal of what we see of Sally is contradicted by what the other characters say about her. There is a hint that she has had some form of relationship, albeit probably a brief one, with Eddie, one of the play's least likeable characters. The play's last action is of Leonard crossing himself before getting into bed—an image that contrasts interestingly with a statement that Ritchie makes about how Sally "caused quite a stir up there [at the convent where she lives] from time to time [...]. Sister Veronica had to put her on the pill and everything I believe" (19). Ritchie himself seems a very likeable old man, yet we are told that he treated his wife badly, and that she at one stage ran away to Swansea in order to be free from him. From these and many other examples, it seems that Roche is trying to direct our attention to an undercurrent in his description of an apparently idyllic setting. This is a play in which most of the characters appear to be very likeable—but much of what is reported about them shows that they are not just performing to the audience, but to each other as well.

Another significant example of this tension between appearance and reality is the play's presentation of popular culture. Although Oweney and some of the other characters are trying to resist the forces of modernization, he—and everyone else in the play—is highly literate in popular culture, albeit in its older manifestations. While Oweney is able to recount to Maeve the story of the "Swan Lady" from Wexford (29) and Sally thinks that Matt's portrait of Laurence makes him look like "Labhraic Loinseach" (61), the majority of references in the play are to popular culture. The play is filled with a variety of popular songs, all of which are American or English, most of them originating

in the 1950s and 1960s. We also have references to American television programmes such as *Mister Ed* (about a talking horse) or to international events such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, or such global personalities as Che Guevara.

Furthermore, the play is clearly based on the Western genre of cinema, which, as Luke Gibbons has shown, has played an important role in the production of Irish culture. In a public interview at the Peacock Theatre in 2001 (which I attended), the play's director Wilson Milam said that although Roche had never confirmed that he had intended to structure the play like a Western, Milam's own view was that the play certainly resembled one—*Shane* (1953) in particular, he thought. The play certainly uses many aspects of that genre: there is the presentation of Wexford as a small, self-contained unit being threatened by external forces, and there is also the showdown on the main street at the conclusion of the play. Furthermore, *On Such As We* is filled with references to the Western genre, as for example when Laurence recounts a scene at the courthouse on Christmas Eve:

It was like the Wild West up there at one stage. Hank was up for breakin' your man's nose, there was another lad up for hittin' a fella in the forehead with a hatchet and Malachy Morris was charged with knockin' off a horse and cart. (68)

All of Roche's plays are nostalgic—"old fashioned and proud of it" like Oweney—but in *On Such As We*, that nostalgia is consistently destabilized. The sentimental portrayal of Oweney, Roche's use of old-fashioned music, and his imitation of the Western plot structure are all intended to celebrate the recent past. On the surface, Roche's play appears to be a critique of the attack by modernity on tradition. Yet it is also a celebration of certain forms of mass mediated popular culture.

Interestingly, however, if Roche's use of these forms is in fact a celebration of late modernity, the directorial style employed by Milam was in many ways a celebration of mobility, being like P.J., "afraid to

stand still". Although written in two acts, the play combines a number of run-together scenes that take place over the course of two weeks. In its 2001 Peacock production, the action occurred, often simultaneously, in three performance spaces—so that when a character left one room, his or her instantaneous appearance into another room signalled a chronological shift of hours, days—even weeks. In the course of a play lasting less than two hours, the audience was therefore asked to keep up with such sudden chronological shifts forward in time on almost thirty occasions—making the pace of the play remarkably fast, and ensuring that audiences' attention would never be allowed to waver. The audience, that is, was being asked to multitask cognitively—we were, to repeat Gleik's words, "at every instant [...] in a hurry". So the production was designed to accommodate the different modes of perception that I described in the first section of this article – a feature that places into interesting context Roche's themes.

The apparent triumph of traditionalism in the play is thus complicated in many ways. Roche undermines it by hinting at darker sides of his characters' lives, and with his use of popular culture. The manner in which the play was produced—with its overlapping scenes and its use of celebrity to market the play (it starred Brendan Gleeson, whose image was prominently used in advertising for the production)—also contrasts interestingly with Roche's apparent celebration of traditional values. And most importantly, there is the plot: Roche shows that, despite his admirable qualities, Oweney's lack of mobility means that he cannot be successful in the globalizing world, as is made evident at the play's conclusion, when Maeve returns to P.J. This shows that *On Such as We* must be regarded as a lament for a dying culture, rather than as a celebration of an embattled one.

As such, Roche illustrates the importance of mobility in many ways. P.J.'s success is represented through his power to move freely and without impediment; for all of his good qualities, Oweney's lack of mobility is represented as disadvantageous to him. So, as an act of social critique, the play's views on mobility are clear. Yet the play itself

is an example of the significance of the need for cultural forms to be transferable across national boundaries: with its use of the Western genre and the fact that its linguistic register is from a globalized popular culture, the play's Wexford setting will not prevent anyone from understanding it. Roche's characterization and the play's music indicate regret for the passing of certain values; but the production's pace and innovative use of chronology show that those values have not just passed, but are gone forever. Thematically and structurally, Roche's play implies that the ability to move freely and quickly is a sign of success in the globalized world.

### **New Media and Irish Drama: *Skin Deep***

That theme is also evident in Paul Meade's fascinating 2003 *Skin Deep*, a play that aims to chart the impact of digital culture on Ireland. Shortly before Billy Roche's play premiered in 2001, Ireland had become the world's largest software exporter, a development that illustrates the ongoing importance to Ireland's society and economy of computers and computerization (Forbes). The production by Gúna Nua of *Skin Deep* was one of the first attempts to evaluate this situation.

Use of information technology has indisputably changed the manner in which theatre is received, in Ireland and elsewhere. It is widely believed that the development of new media is altering the production and reception of traditional art-forms or that, as Lev Manovich puts it, the "gradual computerization of [some parts of our] culture will eventually transform all of it" (*Languages* 6). The pervasiveness and power of digitization is thought to be having a profound affect on all aspects of life, with Lyotard's notion that ours is a "computerized society" (3) the subject of increasingly frequent citation, if less frequent evaluation. Although the transformation of society referred to by Lyotard and others is interconnected with the development of information technology, the reverse statement is also true: as I have discussed above, computerization is driven by a much

broader reconfiguration of creativity, space, consumption and, most importantly, of cognition.

There are obvious differences between plays and digital technology. A theatrical performance generally involves the performance of a script by an actor or actors, in a space that has been designated as being in some way separate from the social spaces around it; it is also carried out under the presupposition that an audience will be present to see it. Theatre and new media therefore share one crucial element: both are determined not by content but by mode of transmission. A novel, a poem – even a playscript – may be organized for electronic distribution without the loss of their formal or generic qualities but, although elements of theatrical performance (such as projections or computerized special effects) may be digitized, the entire theatrical experience cannot be digitized without becoming something *else*. It would for example be impossible to distinguish between a theatrical performance filmed for computerized distribution, and a digital film. Similarly, to digitize the presence of an audience, or to broadcast a performance live over the internet, would be to make the theatrical formally indistinguishable from a live television broadcast before a studio audience. This could of course be a simple matter of categorization: for example, digital cinema is still described as “film” despite the fact that its composition and relationship with live action have altered considerably (see Manovich, “Digital Cinema” 16-17). Nevertheless, the theatrical is dependent not just on the existence of a live audience, gathered in a discrete location in order to witness live actors performing, but also on the unfolding of the action in real time. It is possible that such an understanding of the theatrical may be transformed in the future, but at present it is the case that, so long as the theatrical *is* theatrical, it cannot fully be digitized.

“Transcoding” is however one principle of new media in which a new relationship with theatre may be discerned. Manovich suggests that new media are comprised of a “computer layer” and a “cultural layer”. While he acknowledges that the causal flow between culture

and computer works both ways – a PDF document attempts to reproduce the experience of reading a book, for example – Manovich believes that computerization will ultimately transform culture:

The computerization of culture gradually accomplishes similar transcoding in relation to all cultural categories and concepts. That is, cultural categories and concepts are substituted, on the level of meaning and/or language, by new ones that derive from the computer's ontology, epistemology, and pragmatics. New media thus acts as a forerunner of this more general process of cultural reconceptualisation. (*Languages* 47)

This leads to an important question: to what extent has new media transformed the manner in which theatre is produced and received? Theatre has a long history of reflecting and assimilating technological and artistic developments, utilizing sound and lighting technology, engineering and architecture, and video and projections, for visual and aural effect – while also integrating elements of dance, music, film, television, and even radio into the action. For example, *Krapp's Last Tape*, as well as being dependent upon the presence of a reel-to-reel tape recorder, was inspired by Beckett's attempts to listen to the BBC recording of his play *All That Fall* (see Rattigan). Likewise, it is evident from the increasing use of digital projection in scenic and lighting design that new media are transforming the way theatre is presented visually. Probably less evident, but no less important, is the impact of digitization on sound, which has transformed the way that sound effects are created, used, and cued, in and for performance. Accordingly, just as such inventions as lighting, hydraulics, and amplification were integrated into theatrical practice, it is now evident that new media is being used more frequently as a tool for the enhancement of the spectacular and sensational aspects of theatre.

The impact of new media on theatre has been increasingly evident since 2000, and is particularly associated with the words of such directors as Robert Lepage and Katie Mitchell. Cathy Leeney has initiated discussions of how this new genre is developing in Ireland, in her treatment of the work of Desperate Optimists Theatre Company, referring particularly to their productions of *Play-Boy* (1998) and *Time-Bomb* (2000). The form is becoming more common generally, especially in fringe and youth theatre companies, with many significant productions emerging from 2004 onwards, such as TEAM Educational Company's *The Making of Antigone Ryan* and Pan Pan's production of *Chair Women* (see Johnson). The most significant of the first productions in this genre is the 2003 play *Skin Deep*.

Gúna Nua is a young Irish company (established in 1998) with a reputation for innovation. Their name invokes both tradition and novelty: meaning "new dress", the phrase "Gúna Nua" is one of the few Irish-language names used by a theatre company in Ireland. Like Patrick Marber's 1997 play *Closer* (arguably the iconic new media play), their *Skin Deep* explores the changing relationships of two men and two women in the context of the growth of new media and consumerism. The play opens with Karl, a visual artist, asking a medical student called Susan to steal a human foot from a cadaver in the autopsy room of the hospital in which she works. Because Susan is under severe financial pressure, she agrees when Karl offers to pay her. Karl then places the foot in the fridge of his friend Dan (a photographer), and surreptitiously films the reactions of people, including Dan and his partner Ruth, to the sight of the foot when they open the fridge. Karl then mounts the videoed reactions of his friends as an exhibition, and achieves instant notoriety as a "controversial" visual artist. As the action progresses, the relationships of these four characters become intertwined, as the plot broadens to explore issues of infidelity, serious illness, blackmail and, ultimately, suicide.

The play works through a number of the themes typical of this genre. There is in the treatment of the "foot in the fridge" plot, an apparent

concern with the ethics of representation, which is common to most theatrical considerations of new media. There is also a concern that the represented subject can sometimes appear more real than the physical subject, as stated in the following exchange between Karl and Ruth:

RUTH. What do I look like on that [video camera]?

KARL. Like a million dollars.

RUTH. Really?

KARL. No. I just say that to all the girls. You look kind of ... being honest ... kind of digital.

RUTH. Digital?

KARL. Yeah. Pixels and bytes instead of flesh and blood. The camera makes you more and less than you actually are (scene 7)<sup>6</sup>

The suggestion that digitization makes the self seem both more and less real is specifically related to the commodification of the human body in globalized visual culture. This representation, as the play shows, is gendered: as Nicholas Mirzoeff explains, "this current moment of globalization is especially enacted on, through and by the female body [...]. Globalization in the West is culturally figured as feminine" (17). The increased commodification of the female body is explored when, in a key moment in the play, Dan secretly photographs Susan as she lies naked, sleeping in his bed. He later sells this image to an advertising agency, which mounts it as a part of a nationwide billboard advertisement campaign. The ad's caption—"when your body is asleep your spirit is free"—is not just a bland marketing slogan, but is also intended to be suggestive of the vulnerability that Dan exploited in Susan in order to create this image (the word "free" is being used in the sense of something being taken without payment, as well as in its traditional sense of liberation). Dan and Ruth see the billboard while walking in the street together:

RUTH. Wow. Look at that. Shouldn't be allowed.

DAN. Why not?

RUTH. Naked women. What's it advertising?

DAN. It's one of those teasers. You know, another instalment to follow.

RUTH. Oh yeah: "What happens next."

DAN. Do you like it?

RUTH. I don't know. There's something about it. I can't put my finger on it.

DAN. Well, that's my photograph.

RUTH. Oh, is it? Oh, I'm sorry Dan. It's great. I mean it's fantastic. Wow, it's so huge.

DAN. Yeah. I like it big like that. (Scene 10)

Dan finds himself in the same situation as Karl. Both are objectifying the body of another, taking possession of it: "that's *my* photograph", says Dan, in reference to the supposedly "free spirit" he has captured visually and exploited financially, just as the human foot is regarded as Karl's "creation".

The play is thus an exploration of how the body has been both mediated and commodified. Karl expresses this in a monologue filmed as part of his exhibit:

Think of how much our bodies are worth. If you're a model and you have the right look, then your face could be worth millions. You give your blood in the States, what is it? I don't know? Thirty bucks. Your kidneys? Must be worth at least ten grand. You could be a bum on the street sleeping rough and yet your whole body, all in, could be worth a couple of million. Think of that. One minute you're begging, you haven't got the price of a can of cider, the next thing you know, your liver is processing the finest champagne in the world for some eighty-year old billionaire. Meanwhile, your

lungs are pumping air for some trust-fund playboy in Monte Carlo. Life's great isn't it? Your eyes are helping someone to see a sunset in Tobago, your bone marrow is creating stem cells for some top-secret genetic research in Switzerland, your hair is being made into a wig in Russia and your heart is in San Francisco! Isn't life great? You feel like shit? You should feel like a million dollars! (Scene 18)

Despite an apparent awareness of the damaging effects of the commodification of the body, all of the characters seem determined to profit from the bodies of others. Susan steals and sells a foot, Karl exhibits the reactions of people to it, and Dan profits from secretly photographing Susan.

However, just as there is a tension in Roche's *On Such As We* between the theme of the play and the style of direction, *Skin Deep* also involves an interesting clash between medium and message. What makes the play stand out is its use of information technology as part not only of the performance, but also the narrative. In its original production at the Project Arts Centre in July 2003, the main action took place on a standard square stage, directly faced by the audience. However, two camera-operators stood on either side of the stage, filming portions of the action, which was then broadcast to a screen at the back of the stage. These cameras were also used by the characters within the naturalistic confines of the action: Karl uses the video camera for his exhibit, and all of Dan's photographs are taken with a digital camera. The audience thus watched the action on stage, and simultaneously watched the action on screen. This technique allowed for close-ups of the actors, whose facial expressions and other bodily movements thus became more clearly visible, and it allowed for the two media (theatre and digital projection) to interact and contrast with each other. It also gave the audience two sites of performance simultaneously, asking them (once again) to multitask cognitively.

This is not new media used frivolously. The images presented are integrated into the action in ways that are often surprising and disturbing. For example, it is revealed late in the action that the images

of Susan stealing the foot shown on screen in the first scene are to be understood as recordings by security cameras, the existence of which will lead to Susan's exposure for theft and ultimately to her death. When Karl films his friends' reactions to the foot in the fridge, he does so with a digital camera, so that the images are broadcast directly to the screen for the audience to see. Soon after, the action shifts to an art gallery, where the same images are being played on the same screen, only now as a naturalistic part of the action, presented as a screen in an exhibit in an art gallery. This shows the audience how art is dependent upon medium and context for its meaning, revealing how the institutionalized space of the gallery (or the theatre) can transform a visual image from simple representation to the status of art.

New media can be used in theatre as a tool and as a theme. *Skin Deep* uses it in both ways, simultaneously. The screen is used as a tool: it frames the action by presenting pre- and post-performance credits, and acts as part of the scenery, representing a billboard in one scene, and the monitor of a security camera in another. Yet these representations also evaluate new media, drawing disturbing parallels between the surveillance of security cameras, and the appropriative artistry of Karl and Dan. Finally, the screen acts as part of the plot: characters' motivations are explained by their having been filmed or otherwise captured on screen. *Skin Deep* therefore presents new media as panopticon as well as prop.

## Concluding Comments

My suggestion here is that, due to the continuing alteration in how audiences now receive culture, it is possible to borrow from the aesthetics of both new media and mass media to understand recent developments in theatre more thoroughly. The audience that is bombarded with compressed information, which it then must sift through and analyze (as in *On Such As We*), is acting in a way analogous to a computer processor. The use of multiple simultaneous scenes in drama (as in both *On Such as We* and *Skin Deep*) can be compared to

the use of multiple interface technology (like that in use in the Microsoft Windows Operating System). To make such comparisons might imply that computers have transformed theatre, as Manovich claims. But although some level of "transcoding" cannot be ruled out, there is another explanation for the fact that plays and computers seem to be working in similar ways.

There are many apparent analogies between theatrical perception and the alteration discussed above in cultural practices and new media. The person who is paid to perform several tasks simultaneously is multi-tasking; a person who watches a play in which several scenes are being performed simultaneously is engaged in a comparable activity; and a computer that produces several different windows simultaneously is performing in a similar way. Also important is the question of utility. What is the purpose of new media in a globalizing society like Ireland? In *Imagined Communities* (1991), Benedict Anderson posits a relationship between artwork and social structure, describing the nineteenth-century novel as a vehicle for nationalism. It might be possible to develop this idea to suggest that, in this postmodern and supposedly post-national era in Ireland, the computer and mass media have similarly become the vehicles of globalization. Just as the novel was a space for a community to imagine itself as a nation, so too is the idea that geography has been eradicated imagined through the use of mass communications, especially the internet. Globalization is an imagined community in which the world is interconnected, where distance has been eliminated, where borders seem no longer to exist, where nations seem to have disappeared, and where identity, race, and class are invisible. Such a community can only ever be imagined through the digitization of the subject, since this imagined community does not exist in the "real world". Like the nation imagined by nineteenth-century novelists, our globalized world could be understood as an occasionally useful fiction, and the computer the vehicle for its transmission.

My conclusion, then, is that our perception of media is changing as a result of the processes associated with globalization. Irish theatre, in plays such as *Skin Deep* and *On Such As We*, has attempted to come to terms with this situation, using dynamic and innovative modes of presentation to consider the impact of mobility and compression on Irish life. New media and cinema have directly influenced the construction of Irish theatre, but all three media are being affected by globalization. This reveals that the transformation of the formal qualities of Irish drama is part of the broader reconfiguration of spaces brought about by globalization. What is most significant, however, is the way in which Irish writers are using old narratives to deal with these new developments.

## Notes

1. This essay is related to the research project on "The Internationalization of Irish Drama 1975-2005" funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and the Social Sciences whose support is gratefully acknowledged.
2. *L.A. Confidential* was a 1997 film directed by Curtis Hanson.
3. This discussion appears in more detail in my book *Theatre and Globalization* (2009), where I explore the impact of these processes on the development of the Irish monologue.
4. The critic Aleks Sierz refers to the emergence of this development in Britain as an example of "In-yer-face Theatre", but in fact these characteristics have become common in many other media – especially television and cinema. They are also common in drama outside of Britain. I discuss this issue in more detail in a chapter on Martin McDonagh in *Theatre and Globalization* (2009).
5. These issues are discussed at length and developed by Bauman, 1998.
6. At the time of writing, Paul Meade's *Skin Deep* was unpublished. References are taken from the production script, and give scene numbers only. I am grateful to Mr Meade for making a copy of the script available to me.

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