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## **“Talk to Me in Your Language”**

### **Broadcasting and the Context of Wales on Film**

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In 1992 a Welsh-language production was Oscar-nominated for Best Foreign Language Film. This recognition of *Hedd Wyn* marked a flowering of Welsh cinema, chiefly associated with the Welsh Fourth television Channel, *Sianel Pedwar Cymru* (S4C), established ten years earlier after lengthy and high-profile social protest.

S4C made Welsh-language film a prestigious linguistic and cultural entity: providing within Wales “appointments to view” (in the words of 2004 S4C Review), and beyond Wales opportunities to showcase Welsh talent and issues. S4C, as a commissioning station, also proved important economically by supporting independent production. This, in turn, corrected the lacuna of chaotically evolved and fragmented commercial television services which have never recognised Wales as separate.

S4C films have primarily – with some exceptions – tended to celebrate literary heritage or history associated with the Welsh language. They have helped answer Welsh demands for indigenous media both to challenge perceived external misrepresentations and to assert identity.

Backtrack now to long before S4C, to when outside perspectives dominated. Try to indicate briefly how Wales and Welshness were represented. Then look at recent developments that

threaten S4C's future.

*A Welsh Singer* (1915) peddled poor but honest farmers, singing shepherdesses, gypsy magic and mountain pastures. No reference to coalmining or steel-making – major supports of the Welsh economy. Omission hardly noteworthy, except 1923 John Reith, head of then British Broadcasting Company insisted on high-power transmitter so Cardiff radio station could penetrate industrial valleys: to “combat the doctrines of Communism and Bolshevism so sedulously preached there”.

*A Welsh Singer* re-circulated other social prejudices: in the source novel the heroine, a suntanned farm-girl who becomes an operatic diva, acquires a milky complexion during her education in London, befitting marriage to the hero. Dark skin signified outdoor labour. It also recalled begrimed coalminers and colonially subjugated peoples. Colin McArthur has discussed “the Celt” as “monstrous Other” – “by-product of the European bourgeoisie’s construction of its own identity”.

CLIP: *The Old Dark House* (1932) 266

McArthur:

Bourgeois: Celt

urban: rural

civilised: uncivilised

barbered: hirsute

ambitious: shiftless

cultured: natural

“masculine”: “feminine”

Comic residue endures in Hugh Griffith’s harp player in *A Run for Your Money* (1949).

Racialised ‘others’ infantilised –throughout politically dominant societies – and

sentimentalised:

“head”: “heart”

“capacity for politics or economics”: “feeling”

(McArthur 1994)

John Ford propagated this image of Irish people in *The Quiet Man* (1953); justified using a mostly Irish cast for the Welsh-set mining movie *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) by commenting, “They’re all Micks, aren’t they?”

*How Green Was My Valley* is narrated from America as an old man’s childhood reminiscences – Wales distanced in both space and time. Likewise *The Corn is Green* (1945), based on Emlyn Williams’s semi-autobiographical play, is pushed back into the nineteenth century and assumes an enlightened, cosmopolitan perspective: dramatises a Welsh-speaking miner’s ‘escape’ to Oxford University, through initiation by an English school teacher into English and European literatures.

Similarly *A Run for Your Money* and *Valley of Song* (1953) are explicitly set at the end of the railway. *A Run for Your Money* is a comedy about two miners, ‘innocents abroad’, in London. Particularly interesting is how it embraces Wales into its discourse of Britishness.

Significantly, in the year mining was nationalised, their trip is a prize for contribution to “national output”. It nevertheless emphasises difference.

CLIP: *A Run for Your Money* (1949) A82

The Welsh voice-over narrates “how Welsh Wales came [not ‘went’] to town”: hegemony.

Panning shot and mickey-mouse music underscore imputed absurdity of long Welsh names; leafy shadows and birdsong indicate rural setting of industrial landscape. One prize-winner is an *eisteddfod* singer; reunited with harp accompanist after losing his money, enters talent

contest. 'Natural' musicality – inevitably defeats English opposition. After initial rustic buffoonery: emotional performance charms the metropolis. Switch from Welsh to English, their audience join in – as would the film's original viewers, familiar with Welsh entertainment from BBC national radio. Onscreen and off, all commune harmoniously.

A similar device constrains radical potential in *The Proud Valley* (1940). Stars Paul Robeson, whose political fundraising concerts made him something of an adopted son in South Wales. Wales again the end of the line as an unemployed seaman (Robeson) jumps a freight train. He meets an English busker who specialises in singing out of tune until paid to leave. In the Valleys Robeson's bass voice harmonises with a miners' choir and they invite him to join. His nobility and musicality thus align with 'Welshness' in opposition to the disreputable Englishman. Robeson lodges with the choirmaster's family, gets work in the mine – racist objections dismissed: "Aren't we all black down that pit?" Eventually helps choir win National Eisteddfod after choirmaster dies in pitfall. Mine closed: uneconomic following this disaster. Robeson joins hunger march to persuade the London owners of its viability. Then Hitler invades Poland; pit reopens to support war effort. Ealing values – individualism and community – triumph rather than supposed conformity of trade unionism. Both the management's engineer and Robeson sacrifice their lives so the choirmaster's son can marry and production can resume. First wagons emerge from pithead decked out with Union Jacks; Welsh national anthem changes to English.

CLIP: *Proud Valley* (1940)

As Robeson's voice takes over and the camera tilts up to the mountains and clouds, class, ethnicity and nationalism are subsumed into a universalised humanistic discourse of workers against fascism.

*Tiger Bay* (1959), distinctive for docklands setting: contemporary, multicultural, urban Wales

– yet literally ‘orientalises’, in Said’s term, Cardiff’s inhabitants. The exotic, yet non-specific, foreignness of many characters recalls the sensationalism, disguised as concern, of 1950s ‘social problem’ British films; the Polish anti-hero’s dark and sultry former girlfriend, for example, has African artefacts decorating her flat. That *Tiger Bay* comprises an English schoolgirl’s fantasies situates the few Welsh characters as ‘other’ in their own capital.

S4C arrived, helping to counter externally imposed film depictions, after more than a half-century of antagonism over broadcasting. From the start, Welsh was allotted airtime, albeit irregularly. Nevertheless Welsh-speaking leaders feared radio’s homogenising influence guaranteed the language’s destruction. Such fears catalysed cultural and political nationalism. In 1925 the Nationalist Party of Wales (*Plaid Cymru*) was formed. In 1935 Sir Ifan ab Owen Edwards made *Y Chwarelwr*, a Welsh-language sound film. This represented familiar scenes and appropriated for Welsh the relatively new medium of talkies, another perceived threat. On another front, Miners’ Institutes operated an alternative distribution circuit, using Hollywood movies to subsidise screenings of political material. Communist documentary maker Ralph Bond shot sections of *Today We Live* (1937), an exposé of social inequalities, in Welsh mining districts. Such activism, nationalist or internationalist, contrasts with what Brian Winston calls the Reithian “engine of British nationalism.” This was well characterised in a 1933 BBC memorandum: “If a programme is to be done on Merthyr, it would be better to do it on old Merthyr, because a programme on present-day Merthyr would be difficult to do without referring to its poverty.”

S4C’s second feature made for theatrical distribution, *Solomon a Gaenor* (1999) (title), was also Oscar nominated. Although set against historical events in 1911, it confronts contemporary issues, uses specific cultural imagery to weave a commercially appealing tale, and usefully problematises conventional binaries. The film is tri-lingual: the doomed relationship between Welsh-speaking Gaenor and Yiddish-speaking refugee Solomon is

conducted in English. *Solomon a Gaenor* is fundamentally a mature work. Neither idealises Welshness nor demonises Englishness, but recognises differences and similarities within Welsh-language culture and between it and others. *Solomon a Gaenor* augurs an open, diverse Welshness – multicultural, exploratory, free of parochialism.

Language and broadcasting problems continue and evolve as globalised media flows permeate national and other boundaries. 60% of Welsh homes have satellite television and 75% are broadband accessible, well ahead of UK figures. The compromise whereby S4C broadcasts English programmes from Channel Four will cease to be necessary as Channel Four establishes a niche in Wales among hundreds of digital services. Already S4C acknowledges that Welsh speakers are turning to American imports on Channel Four digital; the numbers viewing in Welsh are declining inversely to the growth in Welsh speakers. With its small audience, S4C has one of the highest per capita costs of any broadcaster. Yet its funding remains unchanged since the devolution referendum of 1997, whereas other public service broadcasters enjoy additional subsidy or have restructured to offer more channels and interactive platforms. Last year S4C voluntarily requested a review alongside the BBC to secure its future presence and status. In response, Ofcom has mooted scrapping S4C and replacing it as a publisher for various media, including mobile phones and digital television.

Critics previously objected that ghettoising Welsh material on S4C prevented most people in Wales from encountering it, whereas bilingualism entails the language should be represented everywhere. Now satellite take-up renders S4C even less centrally visible as a unifying symbol. Nevertheless on Sky Television since 1998 it serves a sizeable Welsh-speaking population *outside* Wales, and non-Welsh speakers thanks to subtitling.

Education has made nearly half of Wales's children bilingual, many in urban areas, but language is less closely tied to nationalism. Welshness is one among their identities, and for

Welsh to thrive they need to continue using it, and hearing it, in contemporary contexts. Now, as ever, Wales and Welshness(es) need broadcasting as a forum and showcase.

However, S4C is seriously at risk. Its involvement in a digital multiplex was a commercial disaster. S4C, having commissioned every Welsh-language feature since its inception, has failed to afford an earlier commitment to one or two theatrical releases a year. Only last week, the channel announced it would aim for “quality not quantity” to address the fact that over the last eight years its share of the potential peak-time audience has dropped from 20 to 10 per cent. Maybe spending more on fewer productions will revive Welsh-language films as “appointments to view.”