

# The Performance of Critical History in Contemporary Irish Theatre and Film

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines theatre and film in Ireland between 1988 and 2005, focusing on the plays of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr, as well as a select group of films from this period. Employing a method of analysis that couples close-readings with attention to socio-cultural context, aesthetic form, and issues of representation, the dissertation demonstrates how theatre and film work to complicate conventional Irish historical narratives and thereby encourages a reassessment of contemporary constructs of Irish identity.

The introduction provides a contextual framework for significant contemporaneous social, cultural and economic changes in Ireland, and includes a case study of ‘The Spire,’ a monument unveiled on Dublin’s central boulevard in 2003, which I argue is the architectural metonym for the transitional nature of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The case study explores the aesthetics of the monument, as well as the politicised public debate that ensued, and thereby provides a snapshot of issues relevant to the readings pursued in dissertation’s remaining chapters.

The discussion of Sebastian Barry's 'family plays' reveals the playwright's effort to refuse traditional binary conceptions of identity and to proffer, instead, a dramatic landscape that similarly refuses to allow conflict to dominate. Barry's use of a non-conflictual dramatic form supports his narrative interest in compassion and peaceful resolution, and provides a model for living with otherness that could prove useful in an increasingly diverse and globalised Ireland. Marina Carr's plays share Barry's desire to represent aspects of Irish character anew, but they also dramatise how cultural transitions are difficult and never linear, and how the conventional pull of memory and the past has a residual presence in the 'new' Ireland. Taken together, these chapters reveal Barry's hopefulness as an antidote to Carr's tragic endings. The final chapter provides close readings of several 'Celtic Tiger' films, arguing that the representation of landscape is the key lens through which Irish film communicates shifting images of Irish identity. A cycle of films from the first years of the new millennium ekes out a space for new modes of representation through a critical dialogue with major tropes in Irish film history.