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Review: Knuckle Ian Palmers documentary on Traveller bare-knuckle fighting

Shane O'Curry

13 June 2012

I approached this film with a lot of trepidation, putting off watching it for weeks. Much of this was down to my being uncomfortable with boxing and fist-fighting of any kind – I just don't enjoy watching people knocking the shit out of each other – but I was also uncomfortable about colluding with a project in which a settled film-maker would bring a settled audience to leer into Travellers' lives. Such fears are not unfounded by any means. The media is full of such 'Big Fat Racist' selective framings of Travellers' lives, served up weekly for the titillation of scoffing settled audiences. Will Ian Palmer's 12 year labour of love prove to be different? Will he champion his subjects by turning his camera angle to break with our society's pervasive and racist framing of Travellers as a problematic, and ultimately inferior culture? Or will he take the easy and well-worn path in the way that Channel 4's "Gypsy Blood" did and

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grotesquely reframe Travellers (and Romanies, whom it doesn't bother to differentiate from Travellers) as uncultured monsters?

Conversations I had with people about the documentary in those weeks surprised me. Many who I thought would be critical were not so critical. Others were critical, but not for the reasons I thought they would be. My squeamishness was also assuaged; no, the film isn't all that blood thirsty, I was told, it's perfectly watchable. The really captivating drama is in the personalities and in the themes that pervade: pride, honour, tradition, fairness; but the fights were ok to watch. Not too bad a film, as far as documentaries about Travellers go, an interesting snapshot of people's lives, a sort of record I was told by another person, but it was ultimately exploitative of what is in a very real sense a marginalised community, even if this exploitation was with the collusion of some of the Travellers featured in it. Interestingly, this last person also gave me a bit of advice: "watch out for the accommodation, you can really see a deterioration in people's living conditions as the film goes on". What else does the camera capture besides bare-knuckle fighting?

"Knuckle" is, I can say without hesitation, an absolutely captivating film, taking the viewer into spaces largely hidden from the outside world. Here, we are much more intimate with Traveller men than in any other film (that I have seen, anyway). As if they've forgotten the camera (that is often addressed directly by some protagonists), we see Travellers among Travellers, in all their charisma and tenderness as human beings. In between the fights, we can feel the strength of loyalty and love among brothers, fathers, sons, and cousins; feelings which, along with an acute sense of honour and dignity, in this context, propel the cycle of fist-fighting contests that is the film's subject.

Outside of the fight sequences a perceptive audience could catch a glimpse of the generosity, genuine kindness, respect and hospitality which Travellers, men and women, almost in-

variably offer each other and outsiders as well. But they might also miss it under the torrent of Youtube challenges and clichéd (if at times positively poetic) big talk which confirm all of our narrow assumptions about what it means to be a Traveller. Other glimpses of what life is really like for Travellers are there too, but appear to have been treated as even less relevant to the subject matter. Women and women's voices feature at best as an afterthought, as though a male narrative about a male-dominated activity is the only one that counts.

The other thing that is striking is, as I had been told it would be, the evidence of the deterioration in conditions on Traveller sites. The footage of the same west Dublin halting site where the film's main protagonist, James Quinn McDonagh, lives, shot over the 12-year period in which the film was made, traces a marked decline in conditions. This is sadly the only evidence in the film of the larger processes that shape the drama which the film so brilliantly captures.

Conditions for Travellers have been worsening steadily, not just since the bubble burst in 2007, but as far back as the 2002 Anti Trespass Act (the decision by local authorities to move away from accommodating Travellers at halting sites) and, further back, into the Irish and British States' long sordid histories of neglected rights and of the coerced settlement of Travellers. This, as in so many films about Travellers, is the great untold story in "Knuckle" and more's the pity for it not being told. Without this back-story, there is no context for understanding the frustration and indignity which drive the plot so fervently. Were such a context to be made explicit in the film, "fair fights" could be understood as an integral part of Travellers' struggle to defend their culture and set of codes, ways which are honourable in as many ways as settled ways are honourable. Instead, the viewer uses what s/he has available in order to make sense of the plot: the received ideas that are fed to us daily about Travellers. The conclusion it is tempting to reach is that there is a problem with Traveller culture and in their in-

ability to adjust. Lamentably, Ian Palmer's camera has merely re-framed Charles Haughey's "Itinerant Problem" albeit in a moving and captivating way.