

The Leonard Lopate Show

WNYC New York

Interview with Gabriel Byrne

May 20, 2011

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/2011/may/20/gabriel-byrne-irelands-cultural-ambassador/>

From the website:

Renowned Irish actor [Gabriel Byrne](#), Ireland's cultural ambassador, discusses organizing the exhibition "[Revisiting the Quiet Man: Ireland on Film](#)" at MoMA, which explores representations of Irish identity in cinema. Byrne chose films with key themes—an emigré's sense of "home," politics, the role of women, religion, and Irish identity, including "The Quiet Man," "The Dead," "The Informer," "The Wind That Shakes the Barley," "In the Name of the Father," and "Hunger." Byrne will also discuss the Imagine Ireland program in New York City, and his cultural ambassadorship.

LL: Gabriel Byrne was last on the show to discuss his starring role as the psychotherapist Paul Weston in "In Treatment," the HBO series for which he won, not only an Emmy, but also a Golden Globe award [*Note from Stella: alas, he did not win an Emmy for this role*]. This time he's here in a very different capacity, as Ireland's Cultural Ambassador, its first ever. And, if that weren't enough, he's also the curator of a two-week film series at the Museum of Modern Art that explores Ireland on film. It's called "Revisiting the Quiet Man." It starts today and I'm delighted it's brought Gabriel Byrne back to our show. Hi!

GB: It's great to be back, Leonard, thank you.

LL: So how did you go about choosing which films would be good to explore how Irish identity is dealt with in the cinema? There have to be hundreds, maybe even thousands.

GB: Yes, there was a huge selection of films to view and I suppose you have to start off with a central question and, for me, that question was: Who are we? And how are we being presented on the screen? In other words: Irish identity in modern film.

LL: From Ireland and from the United States?

GB: Just from Ireland. Unfortunately, you see, the thing about it is, we didn't have an indigenous film industry and every film industry has to compete, I think, with the American distribution system, so small Irish films were made now and again but we did not have a way of telling our own story through film. Which is something that American audiences take for granted, that most movies are about American themes and American characters and so forth. So what happened was, you occasionally had great directors who would come in and set films in Ireland, one of which was John Ford, who made "The Quiet Man" there, John Ford who was himself the son of an Irish immigrant and who spoke Gaelic. And then later on in the 1970's, you had David Lean who came in to do "Ryan's Daughter."

LL: A British director.

GB: A British director who had a view of the world that was, I would say, he thought of the world in colonial terms. And so his view of Ireland, in that film, was particularly questionable.

LL: Well, he did "Lawrence of Arabia," "The Bridge on the River Kwai," and these are all about people being in other people's countries.

GB: Yes. And “Passage to India.” Well, I think that people also had problems with “Passage to India,” where you had Alec Guinness put on brown make-up and play an Indian role.

LL: And he could have had Ben Kingsley do it.

GB: Well, Ben Kingsley is, I think, Indian and was a great Gandhi in Richard Attenborough’s film. But we had nobody to tell our own story. If you don’t get the chance to tell your own story, you are relegated to the position that’s given to you by the person who has the power. In this case, it was Hollywood.

LL: Well, it’s interesting that you weren’t telling your own story because the Irish had told their own stories in theater—there’s a great theatrical tradition—and of course in literature—

GB: Sure.

LL: Some of the greatest writers of the 20th century. So you would have thought that, one way or another, people would have been able to do that and yet...so was the theater really just taking the place of cinema for the Irish people?

GB: Well I think that it’s interesting when you look back over the Irish tradition. We’ve never produced, for example, a great painter, a great sculptor. We have produced great novelists and great poets and great playwrights. It’s arguable that, in the 20th century, and this was less than 100 years since Ireland had begun to speak English as its first language, our country had produced Yeats, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, Sean O’Casey—men who re-defined world literature, not just English and Anglo-Irish literature. But before that you had a tremendously rich Gaelic civilization that stretched back thousands of years and that began to be written down in the 5th century by the monks.

And the essential drama, I suppose, of the way we expressed ourselves dramatically, was in terms of story-telling. Story-telling was free. You didn't have to train for it. It was able to allude to the past, the present, and the future. It has always surprised me that, for a country that thinks so much in terms of story and image, we never produced a really great film-maker up until, perhaps, the 'eighties, with the arrival of Jim Sheridan and Neil Jordan. But John Ford was a Hollywood director and David Lean was also a Hollywood director and so the images that went out of our country into the world—the reason we are starting with “The Quiet Man” is, as you know, a controversial film because a lot of people think that it propagates the notion of Irish stereotypes and that it's somewhat derogatory. But actually, it is a much deeper and much wiser film than that. Ford was a much greater film-maker than just a maker of stereotypes.

LL: Well, it's an American who falls in love with Ireland and yes, there are stereotypes there, but there are stereotypes in almost every culture. Still, when you think of some of the other Ford films about Ireland—“The Informer,” in which we have troubled Irish people, people who tell on their brothers. There are a lot of alcoholics, in his Irish people in America. Pretty much every Union soldier played by Victor McLaglen was an Irish alcoholic. So this would suggest that he had certain difficulties dealing with his own sense of Irish-American identity.

GB: Well, that's a very interesting question because I think that the identity of the exile is a conflicted one, is a fragmented one. All of Ford's films, I think, and a great deal of the literature about exile is about yearning, about longing for what's been left behind, what's gone. He was a romantic and, in “The Quiet Man,” a very passionate romantic. He was also perhaps somewhat naïve in the way he saw politics. His perspective as a film-maker was certainly overlaid with this notion of

yearning and longing and being split between two homes. And that's not something that's unique to Irish people. I think that anybody who's ever left the place that they belong to, that they come from, and goes somewhere else will always suffer that sense of fractured identity.

LL: You hold both Irish and U.S. citizenship now. You are raising your children here. How do you think of yourself? As Irish first? Or as Irish-American?

GB: Well, I don't hold American citizenship. I am what's known as a "resident alien." It's a peculiar description. I always think that I should have like a pair of television aerials sticking out of my head in that photograph. It is a peculiar description. But I've lived here since 1988. Irish always, spiritually, in every way I'm Irish. I see myself as an Irishman who lives in New York. And yes, I understand also that conflict between not belonging to the place that you come to, even though it feeds you on so many levels, and the inability, the impossibility of return, of being able to go back. And if you speak to people—America is made up of immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants—and if you speak to them about what "home" means to them, it's interesting. It's always an interesting answer.

LL: In the case of the Irish, they had a difficult time establishing a cultural identity here. They were discriminated against in the 19th century and many were denied entry into this country. And then when Ford was making "The Informer," which won four Academy Awards, there was still strong anti-Irish sentiment in the United States. You are the new Cultural Ambassador. Do you think there's still a need to fight against those old stereotypes today?

GB: I think there's a need to fight against stereotypes of all kinds. We were just talking before we went on air about the absurd and barbaric

laws against homosexuality that existed in England in the 1950's and right up until the 'sixties. It's a natural propensity, I think, to put a label on somebody and say "Oh, all French people are like that" and "all Americans are like this" and "all Irish people are like that." And film, because a story takes place over an hour and a half, it tends to chop off the complex bits and reinforce the bits that everybody can identify with. But I think stereotyping other people, as opposed to looking beneath the stereotype and trying to find the common humanity that we all have is the real reason why I chose this film to open the film festival—because I want people to look at how we, in mainstream American film, treat our ethnic brothers and sisters in film.

LL: On June 1, you'll be showing a number of films by Sidney Olcott, "The Lad from Old Ireland" and "Come Back to Eireann," from 1910 and 1914, silents, I assume. He went to Ireland to film them, the first American director to do that?

GB: Yes, it's hard to believe, when you look at that footage and those beautiful prints that they had restored at the Irish Film Institute, it's just so beautiful to watch the stories that they were telling and the vitality they were telling them with, because they felt the need to...this was six years before the Irish Revolution in 1916 and eight or ten years before the Russian Revolution and four years before the first World War. There was a sense that being Irish was—you had scientists, for example, who in the 19th century, learned scientists who gave lectures about the inferiority of certain races, the Irish. They would draw these heads of the aborigine, the black man, and the Irish man's head, and they would show from cranial reconstruction how the heads of these people indicated that they were actually inferior species, which was actually one of the driving forces of colonialism and the desire get out there and tell your own story and your own history. I spoke to a Native American friend of

mine and I asked how he thought his people had been depicted in American film. He said, I suppose with a certain amount of resignation, you know: “It’s not enough that our civilization was wiped out, but then we had to watch ourselves on film, on horseback as savages throwing spears.” So the desire to tell the truth about who you are and where you are in your history has, I suppose, always marked Irish film, although we were denied access to the means to do that.

LL: Well, that was a terrible situation because many Irish people came here because of the potato famine and then they wound up being discriminated against here as well.

GB: Well, I think the Irish Potato Famine, which happened in 1845, was our Holocaust. Eight million people, the population went from eight million people to four million people and that event, that catastrophic event, didn’t change just Irish politics, but it changed American politics forever.

LL: My guest is Gabriel Byrne, Ireland’s Cultural Ambassador and the curator of “Revisiting *The Quiet Man*: Ireland on Film” which is running at MoMA from today through June 3, as part of “Imagine Ireland,” Culture Ireland’s year of Irish arts in America 2011...and Mr. Byrne will be introducing “The Quiet American” tonight—

GB: “The Quiet Man.”

LL: “The Quiet Man” tonight at 7:00 pm. You will also have some guests as well?

GB: Yes. I’ll have a professor of social studies who will put the film in context of its role in American film and its influence on people like Spielberg and Scorsese and so forth and look at it objectively as the product of a Hollywood of 1950, a Hollywood that--when you think

back, it's kind of interesting, that the Golden Age of Hollywood was between 1934 and 1959 and during that time, there was a representative of the Vatican, of the Catholic Church, a man called Joe Breen, who vetted every single script that went through there. Between the Hays Office and Joe Breen, American films were highly censored, which resulted in a sometimes a great deal of imaginative and creative solutions.

Short Break

LL: We're back with Gabriel Byrne, Ireland's Cultural Ambassador. First ever? How did that come about?

GB: There were certain people, although it's a non-governmental appointment, non-political, there were certain people who felt that culture and the arts were an intricate part of the revival of our self-esteem as a country. Because, as you know, economically we have been—essentially what happened there, very briefly, was ten or twelve Bernie Madoffs took over the country.

LL: Very recently. Ireland was going through this boom time—

GB: Oh, God, yes.

LL: And maybe too many people thought it would go on forever.

GB: And people did think it was going to go on forever. You can't blame people if the banks are saying "Yeah, it's no problem, we'll give you the money to buy an apartment in Uzbekistan." People would pick stuff off the Internet and say "yeah, I'll have one of those." I remember a friend of mine in Dublin saying to me that, one Saturday, this is a man of God actually, one of his friends called up and said "Listen, we're going to Berlin for lunch. Do you want to come?" and he said "Ah, okay, I'll go to Berlin for lunch." So they go on the private plane to Berlin and

they have lunch and a guy says “Oh, there’s a block of flats for sale just down the road from the restaurant,” a block of pre-war flats and they bought the block of flats and were back in Dublin that evening for dinner. It’s been a horrendously difficult time economically.

LL: Well, that probably was a better investment than some! Berlin is still booming.

GB: Berlin is booming. But it was the idea that there was no end to the amount of money you could borrow and there was a sense of, I suppose, greed on the part of certain people. But it devastated the country in terms of its self-esteem. The banking system collapsed and then of course you had in tandem with that the collapse of the Catholic Church as well. So the moral and the financial structures both collapsed almost at the same time. And so we’re a country now in the process of regaining our self-esteem, trying to build our lives back together again and at the forefront of that there is, I think, a recognition that the world of the spirit and the world of the imagination and the world of arts are tremendously important. They feed the soul as opposed to the more temporal things that the Celtic Tiger encouraged.

LL: Well, in this city I think that most people think of Ireland in terms of the culture because we even have our own Irish theater company. Right now we have Oscar Wilde on Broadway in a wonderful production. Mark McDonagh, anytime any play by him opens up you can almost predict it’s gonna be a big hit.

GB: Yes.

LL: And so our sense of Ireland these days has been rather cultural. You put together this thing called “Imagine Ireland” which includes over 400 events going on across all the art forms.

GB: Yes. My sense about the arts is that it is a language that, as human beings, it's common to all of us. Art doesn't have boundaries. I think, as I said before, without being too pretentious about it, art feeds the spirit. And I think this campaign, Imagine Ireland, is to bring knowledge and awareness, not just of the people you've talked about who are fantastic, like Druid and Martin McDonagh and Oscar Wilde and so forth, but there's a whole new generation of young Irish artists, who are drawing on their own Irish background and ethnicity, but at the same becoming universal artists.

LL: Did you feel a connection to Eugene O'Neill when you appeared in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" and "A Touch of the Poet," a person who was obviously very aware of his Irish roots and, at the same time, was very American, one of our greatest playwrights?

GB: Yes. O'Neill's father, interestingly enough, was from a small village near where my father came from and I had kind of grown up on the myth of O'Neill's father being the first great Broadway actor, a challenge to Edwin Booth.

LL: We see the other side of that story in "Long Day's Journey Into Night."

GB: In "Long Day's Journey Into Night." I mean O'Neill is fascinating because what he did was he took his family and basically he put his family on the stage and he was ruthless and merciless in exposing their weakness. Yes, I did identify with Eugene O'Neill but what I identified with him, I think, was, he was a playwright who never lied about anything and his great ambition, he said as a writer, was, he said, it was a quote that I've always remembered, he said "We are all haunted by the masks that we wear ourselves and the masks that others wear." And his ambition as a writer was to remove those masks and to see who are we

really. And I suppose, going back to this exhibition of film, it's about looking at who we are and who we have been perceived to be through Irish film, because we gain so much knowledge about each other, and oftentimes false knowledge about each other by the films that we see.

LL: You had to pick and choose and I was curious about some of the selections. You have Jim Sheridan's "In the Name of the Father," which is based on the autobiography of Gerry Conlon and I gather that Jim Sheridan will be introducing it on the 28th, but you don't have "My Left Foot," which is very much about Irish home and identity.

GB: Once again, it's impossible, it's like if someone said "Okay, put twenty books together that you love"...I think that the themes of "My Left Foot," which are about poverty, motherhood, the struggle of the artist, I think they're covered in other films. I think films like "The Wind That Shakes The Barley"—a lot of Americans come up to me and they say "What is the North of Ireland? What was going on there?" Like people say about the Middle East: what is going on there? Tell me really what's going on. Those two films, I think, "In the Name of the Father" and "The Wind That Shakes The Barley," when you come out of those films, you understand why that awful tragedy in the North of Ireland happened, and I think it marks a huge turning point for Irish film because it was the first time that an Irish director made a film about Ireland and about Irish history.

LL: The films that are being made in Ireland now but mostly subsidized by— like you see in third world countries where money is put together from England and France and Germany and the United States.

GB: Well, I think, unfortunately, Ireland is no different from any other country when it comes to the huge kind of juggernaut of Hollywood films. A friend of mine who went to meet one of the studio people was

told by his agent: “Don’t mention character and don’t mention drama in the meeting.” And he told me that with—he just couldn’t believe that he’d been told to say that.

LL: But so it would be all plot?

GB: Action. I think one of the things that’s happened, say with the arrival of reality television, which was inevitable in a way, people have become more and more addicted to the notion of spectacle and sensation. The idea of the complex emotional build-up to a point being made, I think, that kind of film has to fight for its survival. Huge franchise films or low-budget comedy films—the days of the in-between \$15-20 million dollar film may be over. What I think is tremendously important for American audiences is that, American audiences hear what people outside America are saying about their own culture. We don’t know that terribly much about Iceland or Africa or India or whatever, but if you go to any of those countries, you’ll see an American film. So the idea of sub-titled films, which at one stage used to count for 13% of the human population, is now down to 0.1% and that’s bad for American audiences because it means that America becomes more culturally isolated.

LL: Now what happens when films from Hollywood about Ireland are shown in Ireland, going back to “The Quiet Man?” Do people resent it or do they think it was all right? Did they find it as charming as Americans found it?

GB: That’s a very interesting question. There’s an awful lot of Irish people who wanted “The Quiet Man” to be true and there was an awful lot of Irish people who thought it was retrograde and brought everything back to the nineteenth century. But we were so unused to being depicted on film that I remember being in the cinema in Dublin and a

documentary came on about the city and it showed one of the bridges of Dublin in its opening title and it got a round of applause. Because we were so unused to seeing—

LL: Even being paid attention to...

GB: We were just being paid attention to, yeah. But in American films you had the rise of the Irish American character, people like James Cagney and, you know, the Pat O'Brien's, the Bing Crosbys, there was a huge—

LL: Barry Fitzgerald. Maureen O'Hara.

GB: Maureen O'Hara, yes.

LL: A lot.

GB: Quite a lot.

LL: And mostly treated with a lot of affection.

GB: A lot of affection. But, for some people, devoid of the complexity of what it meant to be Irish and what we'd be looking at in these films is, you know, how were we perceived, how did Hollywood perceive Irish people, and it's a series that I hope will open up to other nationalities and other countries, like how is Mexico perceived in film? How is, you know, India and Africa and so forth. Because, as I said before, we need to listen to each other's stories, and we need need to be heard.

LL: We seem to be sending out mixed messages. On the one hand, we have a film that's being featured, John Huston's "The Dead," with a screenplay by Tony Huston, that's going to be shown on May 21 and 25, and then we have another movie, like "Finian's Rainbow," or "Darby O'Gill and the Little People," about leprechauns.

GB: Yes.

LL: Now one is this very profound story and the other is “Ireland is this place where cute people and little elves live.”

GB: Interesting point. “The Dead” was John Huston’s last film and his most personal film and it’s one of the most beautiful adaptations of a short story ever. Beautiful adaptation. I think a film like “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” is an example of how something that was essentially extremely serious— There was a time when people did not have the benefit of scientific explanation to explain the world around them. So it was explained in terms of the super-natural. And the super-natural was represented by fairies, by trolls, by bad spirits and so forth. And so what happened was, in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in theater, that way of explaining the world, that very valid way of explaining the world and things that could not be comprehended—for example, I’ll give you an example: a child who died of a wasting disease—the community did not know how to comprehend that. So what they did was, they invented. The fairies would have been responsible for taking away the real child and replacing him with a sickly child. Okay. It may be primitive to look back on, but the basis of leprechauns, trolls—they’re in every community and in every society, but what Disney did, in 1957, with “Darby O’Gill and the Little People” was, they “Disney-fied” that notion and made it funny and made it interesting, but once again they added to that notion of the Irish as being a combination of—I think it’s a very funny film and I think it’s extremely well done and very scary.

LL: The reason I ask is because there are also trolls and horrible things in “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” and other cultures but whenever we think about those cute things we always think about Ireland.

GB: Yes.

LL: Maybe that's an affectionate part of the depiction of Ireland, so not everybody is an alcoholic, you know, there are also nice things: shamrocks...

GB: Well, we are a nation of great musicians and singers and we sang our history, really. And that idea of the shamrock is an old pagan idea that explains the three phases, the three personalities of the moon. So, when you go back and you examine what's behind these kind of affectionate images, you find that they have a real basis and a real root in folk tradition.

LL: Now how does this apply to you? You strike me as a fairly happy sort—

GB: (laughs)

LL: But what do you make of the fact that so many people describe you as brooding?

GB: I don't know. Maybe it's just the way, maybe it's the way my features fall. I don't know, I don't—

LL: Well, if you're gonna play shrinks, troubled shrinks, maybe they'll start associating you with that.

GB: Well, I think so. I think he was a tortured kind of man and I tend to be drawn to playing tortured kinds of people because I think they're more interesting. There are more layers and levels and complexities. And I don't believe, you know, in the notion of a constant state of happiness. I believe we all struggle with our good days and bad days and gray days and it's the gray days that interest me more as an actor. Of course, I'd love to be one of those people permanently happy but I don't know anybody really who is.

LL: One of the films you chose you did appear in: Jim Sheridan's "Into The West" but your next film will be directed by Neil LaBute? He's going to look for the brooding side, isn't he?

GB: It's actually an Agatha Christie film, so—"The Crooked House" by Agatha Christie and I'm sure, like me, you love all those kind of, well, talk about being stereotyped, that English country house with all those crazy, dysfunctional, upper-crust, mad, aristocratic English people. So, I'm going to play one of those for a change.

LL: Didn't you come to acting rather late?

GB: Yeah, I didn't become an actor until I was 28, 30 years old. I was a teacher before that. I taught Gaelic literature, English literature, and Spanish.

LL: Had you wanted to act?

GB: No, not at all. I used to take my kids, my classes, to the films and to the theater because I thought it was a great way of opening up the discussions with them, and when you met them outside the classroom and you had a film to talk about, you got to see sides of them that you never got to see when you say "What's the present tense of the verb, you know, to be?" And so one of them said one day "We'd love to have a drama class" and I knew nothing about it whatsoever. So I went to the headmistress and she said, "Well, yes, but you'd have to have it outside of class." So we met outside class and on weekends and I have to say that it was one of the most enjoyable times of my life and it taught me that—because to be honest, as a teacher I was a little bit intimidated by my students. I was 22 and I was teaching girls who were 18 and 19 and who had no mercy on me whatsoever. They were absolutely ruthless in their collective behavior towards me. Individually it was easy to sort them out, but—

LL: My imagination's running rampant here.

GB: (laughs) It was, well, then we did a co-production at the boy's school and we put on this play and Jim Sheridan actually came to see the play and he said "You were pretty good up there" because I had to play one of the characters because one of the kids got sick. A bit like that woman who was discovered in the chemist's shop, what's her name?

LL and GB in unison: Lana Turner.

GB: This is a bit of a Lana Turner story.

LL: Except that you were acting, so... We originally had booked you for next week but then didn't President Obama call?

GB: Yeah, I'm going to Dublin on the 23rd to introduce President Obama. They're closing off our main street, O'Connell Street there and, of course, Obama coming to Ireland—I think it would be the same thing as Kennedy coming to Ireland because we love to keep that contact between America and Ireland. We've had Reagan, we've had Clinton, who was the other one? We had Nixon, yeah. Nixon had an egg thrown on his car while he was there. We've had them all there, except for that guy who got in for eight years.

LL: Well, we thank you for coming here, Gabriel Byrne, Ireland's Cultural Ambassador, curator of "Revisiting *The Quiet Man*: Ireland on Film" which is running at the Museum of Modern Art from today until June 3rd. And tonight at 7pm Mr. Byrne will be engaged in a discussion with some other special guests before the screening. This is all part of "Imagine Ireland," Culture Ireland's year of Irish arts in America, 2011... Thank you so much for being with us.

GB: Thank you so much, Leonard, and I just want to finish by saying one thing which I really mean. I think that independent radio and radio

itself is so tremendously important. It was the thing that brought me drama, it was the thing that brought me to the world of imagination. When you watch television, you're a passive kind of participant or non-participant. When you listen to radio, your imagination is involved. Public independent radio is crucial to debate and the expansion of ideas and imagination and I'm gonna sign up for \$180.00 for the cookery book?

LL: Well, yeah, Julia Child. You can't go wrong.

GB: No, you can't go wrong with that.

LL: Thank you so much for those final words as well!

GB: Thank you, Leonard.