St. Patrick's Day in Ballybeg (2023) is a project exploring the decentralized nature of identity in a hyper-connected world. That the human condition is to try and better one's situation is a truism that barely merits repetition. Throughout time immemorial emigrants have left home behind to search for better opportunities on distant shores. Humankind's history of relocation has seen traditions and cultural icons spread far and wide, finding fresh expression in migrant communities across the globe. One can experience this dissemination of cultures throughout the world's metropolitan centres; whether by enjoying a bagel in Manhattan, dancing in Nottinghill's carnival, or sipping a pint in a Sydney Irish bar.

In a world connected by the internet, the spread of culture globally is no longer inherently attached to the migratory experience. The world wide web allows for the exercise of soft-power and cultural influence in ways far more potent and effective than ever before. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, we now live in a global village; one wherein a good recipe for Bun cha is accessible, via a few clicks, to an internet-user in Turin.

The ease with which we now engage with knowledge, and the speed of change inherent to the technologies through which we navigate the world, shed light on the ways culture is collaboratively constructed. A catchy tune, uploaded from a computer in Seoul, may quickly be re-expressed in new terms as a Garage remix by a producer in Hull. This is, of course, nothing new. Culture once exported has always been reconfigured and recontextualized in global terms, though the internet speeds up this process and states it more clearly.

Interestingly, this recontextualization and reconfiguration often precedes a reintegration of the cultural ephemera concerned back into its original context. Such a process creates a new, contested, understanding of the national identity

in question as its traditions and icons spread throughout the globe. Ireland, as a country whose diaspora wildly outnumbers its meagre population, is a potent example of this; with some of its most famous traditions originating in the United States. Taking all of this into account, one may very well question as to where the point of origination for 'Irish' culture truly lies.
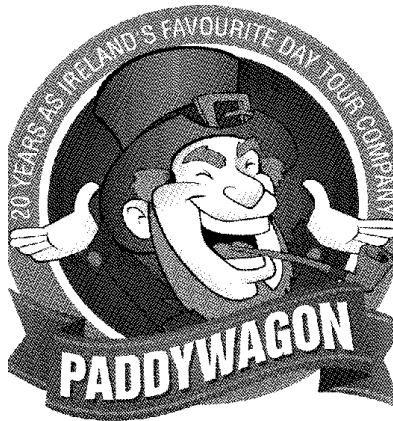
A garish example…

The original cultural icon is…
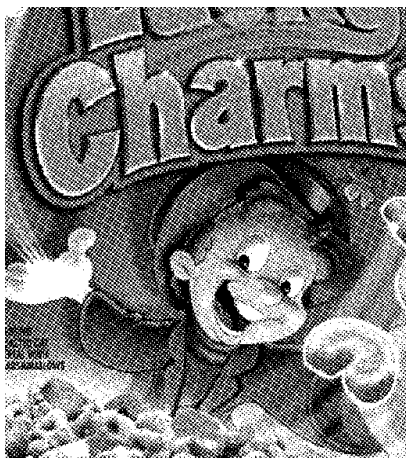
recontextualised in a global setting...

before being reintegrated and deployed in its original national context.

St. Patrick's Day in Ballybeg playfully explores the collaborative nature by which culture is constructed and disseminated. The project takes inspiration from the New York City St. Patrick's Day parade; perhaps the world's most ostentatious projection of Irish identity. The project's methodology adopts banners from the parade, simplifying and reconfiguring them to broadcast snippets from interviews with Irish people today.

The interviews were freewheeling in nature and gave much scope for participants to explore their thoughts. Many reflected on the state of the nation and its post-Celtic Tiger identity as a tax-haven for multinational corporations. Others pondered on their lived experiences of Irish migration and the tradition of the St.Patrick's Day parade itself. These personal reflections contrast the platitudes of pride that often accompany such pageantry. In doing so, the work questions how Irish national identity is defined in a global context. As a nation firmly outnumbered by its cousins abroad, it may be that those living in Ireland have precious little say in the matter.

In March of every year, banners bearing Celtic insignia and uncial scripts are borne with pride through the streets of cities from Cork to Cleveland. The project appropriates the form of these banners, playing with their material mode of cultural discourse. Such artefacts are interesting as they have morphed from folk tradition to quasi-branding tools which declare a certain form of Irishness on a global scale. As objects they both enact the spread of (this certain vision of) Irish culture, whilst providing a metaphorical reading for the historical rise in prominence and success of Irish migrant communities.

Banners are, of course, often rich in symbolism. However, when designed to a simplified text format (as is common in St. Patrick's Day parades), they are limited as an communicative device due to their spatial qualities and declarative nature. The project embraces these formal restraints to reflect upon the diverse opinions of the interviews which form its base. These constitute a wildly varied and fragmented range of viewpoints; here presented in a fragmented form of reading - that of a non-linear flipbook.

A note on the Irish tradition of banners:

The St.Patrick's Day Parade is an interesting cultural phenomenon, as it is distinctly American in tone. Ireland, in vastly oversimplified terms, does not celebrate so much a rich visual culture as it does one of literature, music, and poetry. Indeed to many Irish people, the act of waving a banner and parading down the street doesn't seem congruent with the tall-poppy syndrome that permeates such a small island. This is, of course, not entirely true. There exists a long and politically-charged tradition of banner-making and parading in the North of the island. A tradition which, while recognised here, the project largely avoids*. As a project initiated by a Southerner, and largely informed by those residing in

the South; it is beyond its remit to speak on a history too vast and complex to fit inside a flipbook.

*This is with the exception of the symbol The Starry Plough which appears in reference to the Socialist politics of many of those who took part in the 1916 Easter Rising.

Cover photo: A Group of Irish Dancers Perform During a St.Patrick's Day Parade in Chicago. (Tim Boyle / Getty Images)

Other photos:

A leprechaun counts his gold (Wikicommons).
Lucky Charms Cereal (General Mills).
Paddy Wagon Tours Logo (Paddy Wagon Tours).

Bibliography, Visual Sources, and Further Reading

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