

# **KEEPING IT REAL**

**IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION**

**Edited by Ruth Barton and Harvey O'Brien**



**WALLFLOWER PRESS**

LONDON and NEW YORK

First published in Great Britain in 2004 by  
Wallflower Press  
4th Floor, 26 Shacklewell Lane, London E8 2EZ  
[www.wallflowerpress.co.uk](http://www.wallflowerpress.co.uk)

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A catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-903364-94-9 (pbk)

ISBN 1-903364-95-7 (hbk)

Book design by Elsa Mathern

Printed in Turin, Italy by Grafiche Dessi s.r.l.

## Preparing to Fail: Gender, Consumption, Play and National Identity in Irish Broadcast Media Coverage of the 'Roy Keane Affair' and the 2002 World Cup

Marcus Free

It's cost a lot of money to come out here and look ... it's preparation. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail.

– Roy Keane, *Irish Times* interview, 23 May 2002

In May and June 2002, national football captain Roy Keane's expulsion from the team prior to the World Cup Finals in Korea and Japan dominated Irish broadcast media. On arrival in the pre-tournament Saipan training base, Keane complained that the training pitch had injury-threatening holes and that the training kit had not yet arrived. At a squad meeting (23 May), manager Mick McCarthy challenged Keane to reiterate his *Irish Times* interview account of the problems, published that day, whereupon Keane attacked McCarthy's management ability and McCarthy dismissed him from the squad, subsequently refusing to accept his return without apology.

Developing the arguments that sport is a key focal point for the construction of nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991), and that broadcast media narrativise and discursively construct the meanings of sporting events (Whannel 1992; Blain *et al.* 1993), this chapter examines how, in ensuing radio and television broadcasts, including phone-ins, interviews and round-table discussions, fantasies of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1995) were generated and projected onto Keane as a corporeal embodiment of Ireland's economic regeneration in the 1990s. The managerial incompetence of his dismissal, by contrast, was rhetorically cast as emblematic of an enduring and embarrassingly pre-modern 'old Ireland':

Using psychoanalytic perspectives on sport and media consumption (Richards 1994; Silverstone 1994), I argue that these constructions and projections were forms of play homologous with the oscillation between anxiety and security in on-field ball play itself; Keane became a symbolic object, through dialectical play with which a fantasy of collective identity was continually constructed and reconstructed. A key feature here was how Keane's objectification became a vehicle for the participants' – commentators and callers alike – performance of gender identity and difference (Butler 1990). Keane was an unstable signifier of 'native' Irish success. His apparent exemplification of 'hegemonic masculinity' through separation and individuation, his pragmatic attitude to representational commitment, and his professional development *abroad*, problematised his fantasised embodiment of and reproduction of collective identity and economic

achievement. Nonetheless, the exhaustive debate, which far exceeded the typical constituency of football supporters, shifted the tournament focus from actual competitive outcomes to collective consumption – discussion, argument, speculation – as the focal point for imagined national community. Ironically it realised Keane's warning that 'fail[ure] to prepare' adequately for the tournament (through poor training and preparation) was 'prepar[ation] to fail' in the tournament itself. As expectations lowered, failure was 'prepared for': celebrations of participation by supporters eclipsed the significance of actual competitive outcomes, and the modest achievement of reaching the second round was considered a success.

### *'Old' and 'New' Ireland: the mythology of the 'Celtic Tiger'*

Keane's behaviour and McCarthy's response to this ensured that the footballer became an ambivalent national representative. Blanket media coverage focused firstly on the possibility of apology, then on Ireland's diminished tournament hopes following confirmation that he would neither apologise nor return. Hard facts from Saipan, and then Japan, were lacking, time zone differences meaning that key events occurred in early or mid-morning, Irish time. In their absence, numerous presenter-led morning and afternoon radio programmes, fuelled by listener phone-ins and e-mails, presented themselves as gauges of the national mood.

The key figure, both as presenter on 'The Last Word' (Today FM), and as guest on other programmes, was Eamon Dunphy, ghostwriter of Keane's subsequent autobiography. Famous as a former Ireland player and for his scathing attacks on Jack Charlton's management of Ireland in the early 1990s, Dunphy was himself an object of ambivalence among Irish soccer supporters (Rowan 1995). A well-known populist proponent of the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrat coalition government's corporate sector-friendly, neo-liberal economic policies, Dunphy conjoined his football and political interests to set an agenda for other radio and television programmes. He speedily elaborated a rhetorical polarity between an idealised 'new' Irish professionalism embodied by Keane, deemed both source and symptom of the government-enabled 1990s economic boom, and an 'old Ireland' of incompetent bureaucracy and anti-individualism associated with a lazy, bogus cultural nationalism. Thus he equated Keane with 'the financial services area ... where excellence is achieved and required', echoing Irish economists' congratulations for Irish business culture's 'new self-confidence' and entrepreneurial productivity (Fitzgerald 2000: 55). At the same time he was dismissive of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and the 'Irish media mob' as consumers of an excellence that the FAI's managerial structures could not emulate (interview, 'Gerry Ryan Show', 2FM, 24 May 2002). This polarity entailed projecting onto Keane the characteristics of 'hegemonic masculinity'; that is, those characteristics requisite for the successful performance of masculinity as a culturally

and socially constructed gender identity. The projection in turn enabled Dunphy and his interlocutors to themselves perform overlapping and mutually reinforcing masculinities. Dunphy moved between three spheres: 'business world' guests from the new Ireland; 'laddish' masculinity as a guest with fellow radio presenter Gerry Ryan; and the 'intellectual' sphere of cultural commentators who were guests on his programme.

The business world guests were mobilised to pass judgment on McCarthy's (mis)management of Keane. Two aspects dominated: commentaries on the FAI and McCarthy's competence and their public relations management. The first equated sporting performance's supposedly pure measurability with business performance, so elevating and idealising business culture, although superior management knowledge was often established through the unscientific rhetoric of personalised anecdote and relativity. Hence, '[in] management and organisations, the ones most closely aligned with football teams would be professional firms ... where people are highly paid and high performers ... big merchant banks, consultants, law firms; and 'I've heard more serious language [than Keane's reported outburst] ... that would peel paint off doors at under-14 matches' (Chief Executive, Irish Management Institute, 'The Last Word', 28 May). Indicting McCarthy's childish sensitivity here simultaneously elevates the interlocutor and by implication the business community. (He's also the 'good', tolerant father – who attends kids' games!) On an imaginary scale of masculine resistance to injury it exemplifies management culture's routine deployment of sporting and militaristic metaphors to distinguish managers from non-managers (Collinson and Hearn 1994).

In another variation, the dispute's translation into a quasi-sporting game turned sporting into business management, legitimating the latter with a masculine corporeal form. Thus, a PR consultant's enthusiastic 'scoring' of the participants' public relations 'game' adopted a mock football commentary: 'McCarthy hesitating on the ball, he leaves the door open, gets caught in possession ... is wounded, perhaps fatally,' etc. ('Last Word', 28 May – note the slippage into military metaphor here). The effect is two-way legitimation: football is important because it is like business, and vice versa.

McCarthy and Keane thus became objectified imaginary figures in a dialectic by which speakers performed their own hard-nosed masculinity. Projecting characteristics onto sport and business, they positioned themselves in a hierarchy of masculine toughness. Banter was a significant feature, a typically masculine form of mock mutual deprecation in which disavowed fondness is ironically articulated through reciprocation and/or mockery of a third party (Easthope 1992). The PR scoring, for example, describes Dunphy's attack on 'a national icon in John Giles' [former Ireland player and football pundit who supported McCarthy] as 'almost another own-goal', equating Dunphy-versus-Giles with Keane-versus-McCarthy. Dunphy's reply, 'he's gonna get another one in a minute!' ironically separates him from the old Ireland represented by Giles, forging an alliance with his interlocutor, since such a PR 'own goal' is a goal for the honesty and truth of new Ireland.

This dialectical process additionally entailed the projection of hegemonically masculine characteristics onto Keane. Dunphy moved between the above and a more deliberately vulgar laddish masculinity in such exchanges as the following with Gerry Ryan ('Gerry Ryan Show', 2FM, 24 May):

- Dunphy: This great man, not just a footballer, he's a *man*, Keane, he's a lovely family, lovely wife, looks after his parents ... perfect human being ... but he's living in a world full of spivs, PR merchants, chancers...
- Ryan: I don't think it's manly, the kind of things I hear coming from these players (who sided with McCarthy)...
- Dunphy: McCarthy was one of the boss' men, he was close to Jack [Charlton] ... so was Packie Bonner, Gerry Peyton, they were the sort of ... establishment men.
- Ryan: [overlaps] The 'Top Dogs'.
- Dunphy: Well, the wagons, you know. And Keane is one of the lads, at the back of the bus.

This exchange shows several significant rhetorical shifts. Firstly, Keane becomes 'a man', implicitly suggesting a hegemonic masculinity, indirectly defined by what follows as independence, self-reliance, self-making and reproduction, power, as opposed to the legitimate dependence of family, including parents, and illegitimate dependence of consumers ('spivs') who contaminate football's pure world. Secondly, spatial metaphors ('back of the bus') indirectly differentiate Keane's manliness from non-manly Charlton associates – in turn feminised as 'wagons', Dublin masculine slang for difficult, conceited, untrustworthy women.

The indirect reliance on metaphor and negative distancing from a feminised 'other' is striking. Ryan began the exchange with 'do you know what I smell, Eamon? I smell amateur riflemen lining up to shoot the finest buck male in the herd.' This metaphor was typical of his show's adolescent sexualising, 'smell' suggesting the nervous sweat of (sexually) insecure males seeking compensation by destroying the epitome of sexual prowess. Sexual metaphors continued in Ryan's phone-in discussions. Given Keane's non-apology and final statement that he would not return, Ryan asked, 'would Mick McCarthy have apologised for behaving like a debutante spurned by her date for the night?', later remarking that 'the whole thing looks like a ballet-dancing weekend' ('Gerry Ryan Show', 29 May 2002). McCarthy is progressively feminised by association with ballet's 'effeminacy', but the recourse to mixed metaphor signifies the relativity and instability of the gender game at play.

Such exchanges exemplify Deborah Cameron's argument that in performative gendered speech, stereotypically 'cooperative ... talk among female friends ... building

on one another's contributions so that ideas are felt to be group property' (1997: 55) may equally characterise men's talk. Hence a combination here of cooperation through reinforcement ('man/'manly) and stereotypically masculine competition in the search to outdo each other's metaphors!

Dunphy shifted register yet again as his regular guest Fintan O'Toole intellectualised the narrativisation of uneasy transformation from a culture of low expectation and bogus national collectivism to professionalism in search of excellence. O'Toole added another 'Celtic Tiger' myth to Dunphy's, that the state equals the nation, the nation equals culture, and national subjects are symptomatic, in their actions, of national culture. Peadar Kirby has argued that O'Toole's 'Manichean polarities' of 'old' and 'new' are 'derived from crude forms of modernisation theory and entirely dismissive of any historical complexities that may cloud [his] clarity of judgment' (2002: 23). In this instance, culture is reduced to an abstractly symbolic and innocuous plane.

Thus, in Levi-Straussian vein, O'Toole's mythologising resolves a cultural binary opposition:

[the team] learned from Keane ... that even the greatest individuals can function within a collective enterprise ... something we needed to hear in Irish society at the moment where we have ... individualism placed against collective institutions ... because the institutions are crap. ('The Last Word', 17 June 2002)

O'Toole makes a three-way mutual reinforcement and conflation of distinct social and cultural spheres. Football becomes high culture, (in an *Irish Times* article, he compares Keane to Sophocles' Philoctetes! (27 May 2002)), high becomes popular culture and the social an idealised cultural, symbolic sphere where action takes place on a level playing field with an outstanding individual as ultimate team player, a hall of mirrors in which O'Toole symbolically resolves a mythical opposition he has helped construct.

Keane variously becomes material, human embodiment of an 'economic boom' of 'contested pedigree' (Kirby 2002). Claiming professionalism developed abroad as symptomatic of a supposedly like-minded domestic generation mystifies Keane's professionalism, the source of national wealth and the nature of the labour which produces it. Keane's success might as easily be read as working-class pragmatism motivated by desire for optimal achievement. At the same time, his bodily labour power reflects and vindicates generations of working-class Irish migrants who defined themselves by their capacity to sell and reproduce their labour (Greenslade 1997).

As for the boom, while proclamations of success routinely cite radical reduction in unemployment, growing GDP and consumerism as indicators, as Denis O'Hearn (2000: 74) argues, Ireland has 'bought economic tigerhood' by importing foreign capital, a proportion of which is effectively fictitious due to low taxation and foreign multinationals'

capital 'repatriation' (Fitzgerald 2000: 54), so that GNP lags well behind GDP. The bulk of new jobs are in poorly-paid service sectors (O'Hearn 1998) and wages constitute a shrinking proportion of GDP (O'Connell 2000: 84). Consumerism has been fuelled by low EU-set interest rates and income tax reductions despite persistently poor transport, health and social services infrastructural investment and development (O'Connell 2001), while relative poverty has increased despite the boom (Cullen 2002). It is no coincidence that, given Irish economists' narrow definition of cultural change in Ireland as 'a successful business culture only' (Kirby *et al.* 2002: 13), the search for a broader cultural manifestation of the 'new self-confidence' should focus on sport.

The fantasised Keane legitimates free market and imagined Ireland alike by willing Ireland to win. But there was an inevitable contradiction, that the quintessentially self-made man should be appropriated by nationalism, however new. His own initial withdrawal indicated a tension between his status as Manchester United employee and national subject. Proclaimed as an emblem of native productivity, he was objectified by various consumption fantasies in which native productivity was ironically paramount, fantasies which emblematised Ireland's arrival as a consumer society.

Such conflation and confusion, through variously gendered play, contributed to the 'Celtic Tiger' myth of shared national economic success and ownership, rising consumption as a symptom of modernity, and the appropriation of foreign-based professionals as native successes, thus legitimating a history of economic migration which footballers like Keane, albeit contradictorily, represent.

#### *Public service broadcasting and the 'national family'*

In object relations psychoanalytic writing on childhood play, the infant's cathexis of an object (personal toy, blanket etc.) with magical significance through play is a means of negotiating the boundary between 'me' and 'not-me'. It is a first 'transitional object' (Winnicott 1971) in the path to individuation. This concept has been applied both to play in sport and media consumption. Barry Richards (1994: 27-50) sees oscillation between possession and dispossession in sport as a symbolic re-enactment of residual anxieties in individuation: the ball as 'transitional object' mediates anxiety and security. Roger Silverstone sees the play of childhood and adult media interpretation as a 'dialectical articulation of anxiety and security ... shifting between illusion and disillusion' in the search for 'ontological security' (1994: 16-17). If nations are 'imagined communities', arguably broadcast international sporting contests 'corpo-realise' the community, but in a rather unstable way. Loss is a serious risk, and collective anxiety concerning Keane's withdrawal here highlighted the community's contingency: just whom exactly did Keane represent?

A structural homology developed in Irish media between the possession/dispossession dialectic of on-field play, and Keane's objectification as an unstable symbol of national

identity. There was an extraordinary interplay between radio phone-ins and television broadcasts, particularly following Keane's RTÉ television interview with Tommie Gorman (27 May 2002), in which he failed to 'apologise'. This dialectic shifted focus from football to the play of consumption. A different problematic replaced the 'new'/'old' Ireland polarity, though exhibiting a similar level of anxiety over Keane's representative status. In ensuing radio discussions focusing on Keane's emotional state in the interview, a metaphorical frame of national family emerged, though given the move from strictly sporting terms of reference, this frame developed with some ambivalence from the various interlocutors.

The interview itself was a discursive agonistic play between Keane's rhetorical device of a hypothetical alter ego questioning his motives before confirmation – an imaginary, self-justificatory dyad in a classically masculine, individualised corporeal economy – and Gorman's multiply clauded, repetitive, invitational questions, re-framing the dispute in terms of the 'national' audience:

Keane: if there was any doubt in my mind that 'Roy, you were a little bit out of order' ...

Gorman: aren't wrongs all relative things, and *what about* the sense of wrong to those poor people who saved their money, who follow Ireland, who love you, who want to teach their kids, 'yes, you're right, he is a hero, he's a fantastic fellow', *what about* the sense of confusion they feel, that ye guys can't sort this out as adults? (my emphasis)

RTÉ's television news bulletin prior to the interview led with Keane's declaration that 'I want to play for Ireland', yet this was actually the final outcome of verbal sparring and an indirect response to Gorman's hypothetical scenario: [McCarthy and the FAI] 'come to you and say 'for the good of the country ... we'd like you to be playing for Ireland'.

The constructive nature of this discursive exchange, unacknowledged in preceding and succeeding news bulletins, was complemented by the camera's remaining in mid-close-up or close-up on Keane through the lengthy questions, as though seeking out a non-verbal, emotional flicker of response. The quintessential 'action' man (famously, in the press photograph in which, bare chested, he shakes hands with McCarthy while turning away) was reduced to head and shoulders, fixed as silent, still, attentive – singularly untypical of televised football. Indeed it is the classic 'reaction' shot of the 'woman's genre' of melodrama (Modleski 1984). Television's typical 'look', the 'glance', temporarily becomes the 'cinematic' look, the 'gaze' (Ellis 1992), an image that newspapers the next day photographically reproduced as single, or multiple television screens in actual viewing locations.

This visual excess – hallmark of feminine suffering in melodrama, the image temporarily rupturing the filmic narrative – underpinned a different commentary from Gorman on the

9pm news, as he interrupted interview segments with explicit interpretations stressing Keane's shift from expressing 'pain, his hurt and his blind anger' to his wish to 'play for Ireland'. The report concluded with Keane walking alone to his car, implicitly establishing a contrast with his strident but reporter-plagued dog-walking when he returned from Saipan. The shift in focus from narrowly-defined sporting issues (training facilities, playing ability, fitness, match outcomes, and so on) to his emotional state and the possibility of a change of heart (if not mind) enabled a stereotypically feminine melodramatic narrative form to develop with a possibly negotiated, even partial pragmatic solution (Nochimson 1992) in prospect.

On the following day, RTÉ radio was dominated by discussion of Keane's, McCarthy's and other players' emotional states and the possibility that the 'hurt' might be repaired, even if ego-damaging apologies were not forthcoming. However, these discussions exhibited a tension between indulgence in, and ambivalent distancing from this feminised narrativisation. As a story of clashing masculine egos, it was elevated to the public sphere, but as a narrative with an emotional focus, it was simultaneously devalued as soap opera. So, when current affairs presenter Cathal MacCoille suggested (on RTÉ radio's *Morning Ireland*, 28 May) that, given a threatened India-Pakistan nuclear war and new revelations of child abuse in Ireland, 'Princess Diana'-scale mass hysteria had gripped the country, co-presenter Aine Lawlor, who had introduced the discussion with 'this is a soap opera', shrieked with laughter before guest psychologist Maureen Gaffney restored the emerging orthodoxy, that 'we're ... primarily emotional beings, seeing the row as a 'rift in the [national] family' and expanding Gorman's interpretation that Keane 'was actually expressing great vulnerability'. Ambivalence was contained by the privileged position of television sport (Rose and Friedman 1997: 4) as a 'mas(s)culture cult of distraction', legitimating male (and female, as evident here) viewers' absorption by multiple identifications with, in hard news terms, comparatively trivial matters.

Interestingly, transgressing the implicit code of hegemonic masculinity drew complaint from many recorded female calls through the day – 'if this was a bunch of women, they'd all be talking about hormones or PMT by now. They're a disgrace', etc. ('Today with Pat Kenny', RTÉ Radio One). Such comments both varied performance of gender difference and signalled another emerging theme in the live radio flow, the repeatedly expressed possibility that media encouragement of prurient fascination had rendered a mutual face-saving apology impossible, while inducing guilt about voyeurism and eavesdropping.

A variant mode of consumption began to emerge, then, an ambivalent humorous oscillation between indulgence in and self-distancing from this feminised consumption of masculine competition. This was encapsulated, on the eve of Ireland's opening match (May 31), in well-known feminist and 'Late Late Show' (RTÉ Television) guest Nell McCafferty's ironically expressed wish to *be* in Japan, free of 'the spectacle ... of players being brought out to be executed and then weeping and pleading exhaustion and crying

for their mummies'; in other words, to avoid the mediated reconstitution of men as relationally connected (Chodorow 1978), 'human, passionate, volatile, vulnerable'.

The motor behind this ambivalence was, once again, Keane's ambiguity as a model of individuated masculinity: if he 'want[s] to play', why not apologise? To extend the 'Diana' analogy, if as Richard Johnson argues, Princess Diana became a vehicle for 'transferred feelings', a vicarious working through of hitherto 'unmourned' losses (1999: 31), transference was enabled by her media construction as a quintessentially connective figure. Roy Keane, however, was the quintessential hard man with an already established reputation for on- and off-field displays of temper and violence no more readily co-opted to a national broadcaster's construction of national family than an imaginary embodiment of Ireland's new professionalism. The play of ambivalence towards him progressively shifted the focus from a narrative of national becoming through competitive play to national being through collective speculation, argumentation and consumption.

#### *A 'moral victory' by any other name...*

From the tournament's commencement, Dunphy himself ironically contributed, with this resignation and ambivalence, to 'preparation to fail', in that acceptance of competitive failure was prepared for. As a 'panel of experts' member, Dunphy attacked RTE's upbeat build-up as 'happy-clappy public relations guff' (*Network 2* - 'World Cup Preview', May 30), so establishing an agonistic tension between the new Ireland allegorical narrative of national becoming and old Ireland celebration of national being. This tension endured in the broadcast of Ireland's opening match against Cameroon (1 June), with three notable textual features.

The broadcast effectively prepared for failure in two ways, the first a continued strain of ambivalent humour, the subtext a self-reflexive celebration of being Irish as playful acceptance, a knowing wink at the embodied stereotypes: presenter Bill O'Herlihy joked, at the 7am outset, that it was 'an ungodly hour to put your reputation on the line' with a breakfast of 'bacon and pints'. As such, this was an ambivalent indulgence, shifting the textual emphasis from the play of production to consumption. The second re-framed the opening 'hermeneutic enigma' ('will Ireland win?') in terms of McCarthy's survival - O'Herlihy again: 'can McCarthy silence his critics today?' Failure, if it happens, is McCarthy's, rather than ours.

The third feature was Dunphy's continued attack on RTE and his fellow panellists, particularly their reading a 1-1 draw as a quasi-victory, despite a remark (John Giles) that 'the days of "moral victories" are over' - Dunphy: 'The players ... carry[ing] this monkey on our back' were 'set to be "betrayed" by flag-waving leprechaun[s]' (the carnivalesque supporters). The 'our' extended a fascinating slippage: 'if we ... go through to the second phase and come home feeling that this has been successful, then we will be betraying

[players] like Damien Duff...' Players who achieve despite managerial incompetence represent new Ireland. Because they are already cast as old Ireland, however, (by remaining with McCarthy), they had to fall for old Ireland (colonially stereotypical 'leprechaun' supporters and 'monkey') to be exposed! Dunphy's convoluted logic was confronted with record complaints from viewers. Ironically, and inadvertently, he became 'bad cop' in a 'bad cop'/'good cop' dialectic that progressively validated moderate success in reaching the second round, precisely the 'it will do' old Ireland reading he decried.

By the second-round match against Spain (16 June), the result (defeat on penalties after extra time) was effectively rendered inconsequential through a pre-match build-up culminating in a musical sequence stitching together several 'World Cup' scenes. An *Embrace* song, the lyrics 'I've been lucky, I was lost, now I'm found', over images of individual players, led to the title refrain, 'My weakness is none of your business' as a shot of the panel celebrating Ireland's goal against Germany in the studio included Dunphy in the middle, visibly punching the air - symbolically if mutely reclaiming him. Concluding with a montage of celebrating, waving supporters in stadiums, pubs and streets, in the final shot, two young women shrugged, laughed, cried and embraced. The sequence signified a moral victory, in the agonistic on-screen battle of ambivalent modes of consumption, community progressively imagined as imagery. Loosely extending a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective (Lacan 1977), narcissistic self-identification with a collectivity through imaginary recognition of wholeness in the waving 'other' as mirror combined with indirect construction of collective identity through voyeurism. Claiming a moral victory despite actual defeat has historically been an Irish sporting analogue of heroic failure in Irish history and culture. Despite contrary protestations, RTE's broadcast, including its panel of experts, contributed to its reproduction.

#### *Conclusions*

Ultimately, these modes of consumption were not dissimilar in constituting complementary searches for metaphorical embodiments of late twentieth-century Ireland. Each fed off the other in a dialectical play, the ultimate outcome the reaffirmation of collective national identity at a historical moment when the supposed economic boom was coming to an end and was increasingly exposed as an unstable function of Ireland's dependence on mobile international capital. Ambivalence, the play of indulgence and distance, is fuelled by and helps negotiate anxiety. Few national icons could be more ambiguous and anxiety-inducing than Roy Keane, whose autobiography revealed an extraordinary capacity for ambiguity and ambivalence with respect to football itself. At one point he asks, 'are footballers sometimes childish? Of course ... otherwise they'd just start believing they were only playing a game!' (2002: 184), in which case professionalism would slip. Players have to be childish to be serious. 'Play', paradoxically 'unreal' and 'real', entails, as

Bateson argues (1972: 153), an implicit 'metacommunicative' rule that 'these actions in which we now engage do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote: the animal's 'playful nip denotes the bite ... not what would be denoted by the bite'. If Keane's play is ambiguous and attitude ambivalent, so are the forms of playful consumption discussed here. They are variously gendered, nuanced, mutually extensive performances of national identity both real and unreal in articulating anxieties concerning the imagined community.

There are two final points in this regard. Firstly, the World Cup itself carries ambiguous status in football. National teams are only indirectly related to the 'serious' business of regional teams in national leagues and, of growing significance, European club competitions. The heightened contingency of outcome in contests between concocted teams of mutually unfamiliar players means that success can prove imagined national identity 'real' and that failure is bearable, both to regular football supporters and the more casual fans who appear every four years. The second point is unfashionably basic, in the context of contemporary cultural studies: the fervour surrounding the national football team may be a symbolic compensation for the redundancy of cultural nationalist rhetoric in post-'peace process' 26-county Ireland. Further it may substitute for the historically inclusive social vision of cultural nationalism, however flawed, that the intellectually impoverished and socially divisive adoption of neo-liberal economics has replaced.

#### Note

- 1 While this chapter focuses on the World Cup campaign only, the 'Keane story' endured into 2003. Keane's autobiography, published in August 2002, and serialised in *The Times* and *News of the World* newspapers, re-ignited the feud with his account of an enmity dating from their overlapping careers as Ireland players in the early 1990s. McCarthy entered the 2004 European Championship 'qualifiers' in September 2002 adamant that Keane would never play for him again. Having lost the opening two matches, he resigned as media pressure and negative criticism mounted. Supporters unprecedentedly booed him and chanted 'Keane' following the second defeat, at home to Switzerland. In November 2002, an Football Association of Ireland-commissioned report on World Cup preparations, by Genesis, a UK business consultancy, confirmed and supported Keane's original criticisms. Widely expected to return to the fold following appointment of McCarthy's successor, Brian Kerr, Keane reiterated his retirement from international football in February 2003 on medical grounds. However, he reversed this decision, returning for the friendly match against Romania in May 2004.

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