

Aisha (2022): Despair and Desperation in Ireland's Detention Centres

A Movie Review

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"When you're in survival mode, you numb yourself." – Clemantine Wamariya

Frank Berry is an Irish film director and screenwriter who doesn't shy away from exposing the harsh realities of contemporary life in Ireland. In his films, [Berry](#) has tackled difficult topics such as prisons, suicide and poverty. He doesn't indulge in middle-class condescension of working class people either. Those in power know they have power and use it to lord it over the weak and vulnerable. Berry's previous work includes films such as Ballymun Lullaby (2011), I Used to Live Here (2014), and Michael Inside [see my review [here](#)](2017).

His latest film is no exception. *Aisha* (2022) stars Letitia Wright as Aisha, a Nigerian refugee living in an Irish detention centre. Her life is constrained by the fact that her father and brothers were killed by gangsters and she needs to get her elderly mother over to stay with her before she too becomes a victim of the violence.

The staff in the centre are not particularly friendly or sympathetic except for one new security guard, Conor (played by Josh O'Connor). They strike up a difficult friendship as Aisha's family problems weigh heavily on her emotional life. She works in a hairdressers which she enjoys while also learning a trade, yet this is taken from her too when she is transferred to a different detention centre in the countryside, further isolating her. The

problem of state bureaucracy is examined through interview panels of experts who don't realise or care how serious her situation is.

Berry's approach to directing is understated. Throughout the film Aisha tries to keep calm but eventually explodes with anger when the situation becomes too much for her. The audience understands the difficulty of her position in Ireland but Aisha keeps much to herself, out of fear and possibly worry that revealing too much might make her position worse. It shows us that, in many cases, what emigrants are going through is something we cannot really comprehend in a country that has not had similar political and violent upheavals in nearly one hundred years.

Berry's social realist style is typical in that he depicts the most vulnerable people in society, while at the same time rooting the story in a realistic, contemporary situation that may be shocking for those who have no idea what life is like for the less fortunate that they coexist with. Gaining such awareness creates empathy and understanding, maybe not in everyone who sees the film but hopefully even the most cynical will have their biases disturbed. As Sartre wrote, 'to reveal is to change.'

Housing crisis

The context for Aisha is also important to note. The refugee issue in Ireland is hitting serious crisis proportions. The Irish government struggles to find accommodation for refugees in a national situation where house prices are very high, rents are very high, and homelessness is on the increase. According to Daft.ie (main site for buying/renting/selling property in Ireland) in [August](#) 2022: "Ireland's rental market has plumbed new depths as the number of homes available has dropped to an all-time low while the rate of inflation in prices climbed to its highest level in at least 15 years." The rental market has been decreasing for various reasons: high taxes, constant changes in law (as the government tries to figure out how to solve the rent increases problem), [and](#) a "lack of any effective enforcement or regulation if a dispute between Tenant/Landlord arises."

Adding to all of these issues is the [arrival](#) of "more than 62,000 Ukrainian refugees" which the Irish government has been accommodating in hostels, hotels and other private accommodations, even in tents.

Journalists Ferghal Blaney and Eithne Dodd have written (as recently as 6 Jan 2023), [that](#): "Despite government promises that tents would not be used to accommodate refugees anyone, nearly 90 people slept in a tent last night in county Clare. [...] Before Christmas, news that asylum seekers were being housed in tents caused outrage and promises were made that the move was purely temporary and would end on 12 December 2022."

In an [interview](#) with Roderic O'Gorman (a spokesperson for Minister for Equality): "The war in Ukraine combined with the high number of International Protection applicants continues to put real pressure on the government's ability to offer accommodation, and has resulted in the largest humanitarian effort in the State's history."

The upshot of these multivaried pressures on accommodation is the dramatic increase of homelessness in Ireland. The online Irish journal, [thejournal.ie](#), (published on 8 January 2023) an [article](#) stating that: "Homelessness record broken again as 11,542 people in emergency accommodation in November. The CEO of Dublin Simon Community said that

the figures convey “nothing short of a tragedy.” The number of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland has once again hit a record high with latest government figures showing that 11,542 people were living in emergency accommodation in November. It is the fifth consecutive month that the record number has been broken. A total of 5,423 single adults, 1,371 young people and 3,494 children were living in emergency accommodation between 21 and 27 November.”

All this in a country with a relatively small population. The CSO (Central Office for Statistics) [stated](#) that: “Ireland’s population was estimated to be 5.10 million, increasing by 88,800 persons in the year to April 2022. This was the largest 12-month population increase since 2008 when the population increased by 109,200.”

In fact, Ireland is a big country with a small population, and one of the very few countries in the world that has fewer inhabitants now than in the nineteenth century when Ireland is [estimated](#) to have had over 8 million (in 1841).

Compare these figures for [Ireland](#) with those of the [Netherlands](#), for example:

Ireland

- Population: 7,026,636 (2022) [combining Republic of Ireland: 5,123,536 (2022) and Northern Ireland: 1,903,100 (2021)],
- Area: 84,421 km² (32,595 sq mi),
- Pop. density: 77.8/km² (201.5/sq mi).

The Netherlands

- Population: 17,783,400 (2023 estimate),
- Area Total: 41,850 km² (16,160 sq mi),
- Pop. density: 520/km² (1,346.8/sq mi)

The Netherlands has more than twice the population of Ireland on half the total area. Thus, it can be seen that Ireland’s immigrant problems are not due to any lack of space but decades of mismanagement of resources.

Aisha’s story points up the stresses and anxiety that these bureaucratic issues pile onto the many immigrants whose sense of insecurity is already badly shaken.

These days the billionaire media makes political change difficult. Making art that not only looks at the plight of ordinary people, but also in a very expensive medium, cinema, is a victory over a dominant and very conservative cultural hegemony. Berry’s films are shining stars in a galaxy of romanticist superhero, super-funded, short-lived supernovas. What we need are more artists – a new movement even – of artists willing to go against the dominant cultural hegemony and produce a new culture of progressive change, with an understanding of how neo-liberal politics and economics affects ordinary people. How we treat other people reflects how we would like to be treated, and the vagaries of the late capitalist global system mean that the situation can suddenly reverse when we least expect it.

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