

The Hirschfeld Biograph

(Extracted from his thesis “*Homosexuals are revolting: a history of gay and lesbian activism in the Republic of Ireland, 1973-1993*”

by Patrick James McDonagh, 17 December 2018)

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The Hirschfeld Biograph, a 55-seater cinema housed in the Hirschfeld Centre, was one of the most successful and enduring initiatives of the NGF. The Biograph screened a range of different movie genres every second Monday, many of which would not have been accessible to gay and lesbian individuals without the Hirschfeld Biograph. In the course of its 6-and-a-half-year history the Hirschfeld Biograph screened 137 films, of which included, the Irish premiere of *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, *We Were One Man*, *Victor Victoria* and *The Best Way to Walk*. The Biograph was very much a transnational endeavour, which brought Irish homosexuals into contact with international gay films.

The Hirschfeld Biograph proved extremely popular particularly because it provided an opportunity for younger and older members to socialise outside the disco setting. Its success and endurance, however, owes much to the efforts of Johnny McEvoy who managed the Hirschfeld Biograph from 1979 to its closure in 1986. McEvoy described the Biograph as something which ‘all gay persons, regardless of age, could attend without having the feeling of being left out of things or being in a cruisy atmosphere they felt uncomfortable with.

Although, initially established to provide an alternative social activity for gay and lesbian individuals in Dublin, the Hirschfeld Biograph was highly instrumental in bringing gay themed films into wider circulation and knowledge in Ireland throughout the 1980s. The success in acquiring such a high number of films was helped by McEvoy’s connections outside the gay community. In 1980, at a meeting in Tralee of delegates representing 33 film societies in Ireland, who were attending the annual viewing session of the Federation of Irish Film Societies, McEvoy gave a speech about the Hirschfeld Biograph. Following this, McEvoy, despite his connection with Ireland’s only gay cinema, was invited to take over responsibility for the presentation of films at the Federation’s annual viewing session. McEvoy described this as a great turning point for the Biograph.

There are a few reasons for this being the case. Firstly, by agreeing to take on this responsibility, McEvoy ensured that the Hirschfeld Biograph became an honorary member of the Federation of Irish Film Societies, a considerable achievement for a gay cinema. This not only granted official recognition to the Hirschfeld Biograph, but also legitimised it as a respected outlet for films in

Ireland. In turn, this allowed the Biograph to avail itself of films coming in from abroad, helping to reduce the costs of acquiring international films. More crucially, however, by selecting gay themed films for the Biograph, McEvoy was responsible for these films being shown by other members of the Irish Film Societies throughout the country.

McEvoy's connections were not limited to Irish organisations or individuals. During the 1980 Gay Pride Week, McEvoy succeeded in bringing Vito Russo over from London to speak about his book, *Celluloid Closet*. A few years later in October 1984, thanks to the support of the British Film Institute, Terence Davies came to speak at the Hirschfeld Biograph on his acclaimed trilogy of films, *Children, Madonna and Child, Death and Transfiguration*. Davies' trilogy explored the emotional and spiritual problems of growing up both Catholic and gay in Liverpool. Of all the films which appeared at the Hirschfeld Centre, Davies' generated the most positive reviews and attention outside the gay community. Writing in the *Irish Times*, Ray Comiskey gave considerable attention to Davies' trilogy, noting that 'Hirschfeld Biograph club members will have an opportunity to see a marvellous piece of film [...].' Donald Houram, in *In Dublin*, was even more praiseworthy of the film, arguing that:

Most films, quite frankly, are shit. A few are merely mediocre. But occasionally there comes along something to justify all those hours spent sitting unhappily in the dark wishing that the cultural division of some illegal organisation would bazooka the projection booth. Terence Davies' trilogy of films constitutes quite the most extraordinary and affecting cinematic experience of recent years.

In fact, *In Dublin* was so impressed with the production, that they selected it as their recommended event for readers that week. Despite these positive reviews, Terence Davies' scheduled appearance on RTE's *Day by Day*, to talk about his trilogy, was cancelled at the last minute. According to the *Irish Times*, one producer read Davies' book, '*Hallelujah Now*' and backed off the notion of putting Mr. Davies before the Plain People of Ireland. Even an impressive pedigree of critical acclaim for Mr. Davies' films in the *Observer*, *Times*, *Guardian* and a number of Irish papers failed to save the day.' Although not every film shown at the Hirschfeld Biograph generated as much praise, it was nevertheless important that the Biograph was actually acknowledged in mainstream publications. The nonchalant references to the Biograph gives the impression that these journalists simply viewed the Biograph as a cinema, not a gay cinema to be feared or avoided, but rather one which screened high quality films.

Writing on the closure of the Hirschfeld Biograph in 1986, McEvoy stated that he hoped the Biograph would be remembered as being 'part of a positive evolving gay scene, cherished and let go, but not forgotten. It is time to advance and it is the turn of the next generation.' McEvoy was overly modest in this statement. I would argue that it was not only a part of an evolving gay space,

but also part of an evolving awareness of gay themed films within Irish society. While the intention may have been to simply provide gay and lesbian individuals with an opportunity to view such films, the quality of the Biograph and the films on show appealed to more than just gay and lesbian individuals, as the above reviews highlighted. The positive impact of the Hirschfeld Biograph on the lives of many gay and lesbian individuals was also expressed in comments made by Ciaran Coleman and John Kilcullen in interviews in 2013. Coleman fondly remembered going to see:

The Times of Harvey Milk, which, to me, was like amazing, to see this film about this openly gay politician who unfortunately was shot, but the documentary was just of a high quality. [...] But, for me, the Hirschfeld Biograph was one of the wonderful things about the Hirschfeld Centre, you know, to see movies and documentaries about, you know, at the time, we had no internet, you know, so it was, like, seeing things about places far away, about the gay community, and really, I suppose, you know, San Francisco and the whole Harvey Milk thing really informed the gay community, on, you know, about rights and what we should do et cetera.

Coleman's reflection gives another insight into the benefit of the Biograph. The majority of these films were not Irish. They gave Irish gay and lesbian individuals an insight into areas outside Ireland, which had progressed more in terms of gay rights, offering considerable hope and encouragement to the likes of Coleman. In many respects, these films were a window into a brighter future, when perhaps Ireland could elect an openly gay politician like San Francisco had. Similarly, John Kilcullen has credited the Hirschfeld Biograph with helping him make new gay friends, noting, 'I used to go to the Hirschfeld Biograph, which was a cinema, and again I found another guy from work who was gay, met him there, so through him I met other people and gradually my circle of friends increased.'

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