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Ray Donovan: Irishness in American Popular Culture Today

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Ray Donovan is a series created by Ann Biderman and co-produced with Mark Gordon and Bryan Zuriff, which started to be broadcast by Showtime in 2013, winning a Golden Globe award for best supporting actor for Jon Voigt and several nominations in various competitions, including for its leading actor Liev Schreiber, and which has run for six seasons so far. The story pitch is exposed in the very first episode of season 1 of the series and revolves around Ray's Irish- American, South Boston background, as the eponymous title emphasises. Ray Donovan was pulled out of South Boston and relocated in Los Angeles by a substitute father, a Jewish celebrity lawyer played by Elliot Gould, who has trained him to become a "fixer". In other words, his job is to make use of any illegal means, such as blackmailing, extortion, beatings, etc., to make sure that his rich and famous Hollywood clients get away with whatever bad situation they have put themselves in, such as waking up with a dead girl in their beds, or having pictures of them in compromising postures circulating on the Internet. Ray, a man of (very) few words and fewer smiles, who was trained as a boxer from the earliest age by his father, thus converts his considerable inborn amount of rage, anger and hardly contained violence into a worthwhile occupation which enables him to provide the best for his wife, Abbie and his two children Conor and Bridget. Yet, his success remains fragile, and he is still on the make, having still some way to go to rise to an equal footing with his clients and his boss, as his wife reminds him all the time, complaining about their home in Calabasas, which is not the right neighbourhood

to live in, or nagging Ray to use all the pull he can in order to enrol their daughter in the most selective Los Angeles private school.

In other words, Ray aims at living the Hollywood dream thanks to which, as Liev Schreiber puts it in a promotional video on the Showtime website, everyone can re-invent oneself. For we discover right away that Ray is an exile, or even a fugitive, from a troubled past linked to his Catholic, Irish-American Boston background. His move to the West Coast followed a scheme he devised so as to frame his father Mickey, played by Jon Voigt, for a crime he did not actually commit; as a result, Mickey, whose name is an almost self-conscious hint to the stereotype of the Irish Mick, was locked up for twenty years in a Massachusetts prison. When episode one begins, we see Mickey leave the penitentiary and head straight to a local church in Boston where he hunts out the parish priest and shoots him point blank, before flying over to Los Angeles to be reunited with his family. That family is exposed in the following scene (ep.1, 23:20), and proves right away to be completely dysfunctional. The youngest, Brendan, nicknamed Bunchy, was molested by a priest when he was a child and since then has been suffering from what Ray calls “issues”, against which we see him struggling for much of the series. While expecting to receive compensation money for the assault he was a victim of, he attends support groups, in order to help him fight against depression, alcoholism. He is nagged by the fear of being a paedophile himself. The other brother Terry got Parkinson as a result of the blows received in boxing. We gather that Ray, according to a long tradition in film and popular culture of conflating Irish masculinity with brotherly solidarity, has been looking after his brothers for ages – taking them away from Boston, buying the gym for them, supporting his alcoholic brother, helping them both out of any difficult situation they could find themselves in, a pattern which is repeated from season to season. In season 1, Ray also discovers that he has a Black half-brother, which introduces a half-ironic half-serious hint at Irish racism, another stereotype to which the series bows to. But the worst piece of news that Ray hears at the beginning of season 1 is of his father’s return to Los Angeles, since he has bred

a long-lasting hatred for him. As a matter of fact, Ray holds his father responsible for all the woes he, his brothers and his sister had to endure in their youth: their devout Catholic mother's marital unhappiness, followed by her premature death: his sister's drug-addiction and suicide, but most of all the failure to protect them from the sexual abuse they were the victims of as boys at the hands of the local priest. Mickey was then too busy with his own criminal schemes, and either ignored his children's distress or even worse, dismissed it as trivial and of no consequence.

Ray Donovan can then be considered as a new avatar of popular films or series staging one or several Irish-American characters, a sub-genre which has been well documented by Diane Negra¹, Ruth Barton² or Stephanie Rains³, and which according to them has tended to waver between a representation of the "bad Paddy", and of the "good Paddy". The former is characterised by violence, criminality and deviancy, in the tradition inaugurated by the 1930s James Cagney type of gangster films, subsequently rekindled in the 1980s and 1990s by the Northern Ireland Troubles, whereas the latter is honest, hard-working and devoted to his family and creed. Recently however, as Diane Negra has observed, a new wave of films and TV series has tended to revert to the initial stereotype of the Irish gangster, among which she mentions 2006 Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*⁴, 2006 series *Brotherhood*⁵, 2007 *The Black Donnellys*⁶, and even more recently 2015 Scott Cooper's film *Black Mass*⁷, starring Johnny Depp and Benedict Cumberbatch. *Black Mass*, like *The Departed*, is based upon the story of Whitey Bulger, the brother of a state senator and

1. Diane Negra, *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2006.

2. Ruth Barton (ed.), *Screening Irish-America: Representing Irish-America in Film and Television*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2009; *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press 2006.

3. Stephanie Rains, *The Irish American in Popular Culture, 1945-2000*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2007.

4. *The Departed*, dir. Martin Scorsese, Warner Bros, 2006.

5. *Brotherhood*, produced by Blake Masters, Showtime Television, 2006-2008.

6. *The Black Donnellys*, produced by Scott Corwon and Paul Haggis, NBC Television, 2007.

7. *Black Mass*, dir. Scott Cooper, Warner Bros, 2015.

the most infamous violent criminal in the history of South Boston, who became an FBI informant to take down a Mafia family. The prevalence of such movies based on male, white, Irish, either cop or gangster and mostly Boston-born protagonists, has led to the creation of a new sub-category of films labelled “the Boston crime drama”, which according to blogger Mark Ryall⁸ “utilises Irishness as a morally corrupt representation of white ethnicity”. As Diane Negra puts it, *The Departed* employs the ethnic Otherness of the Irish-American “as a kind of light camouflage [to] manifest an anger that would be less sanctioned if directly articulated as an expression of straightforward Americanness”⁹.

In parallel, the depiction of Irish America on screen and TV has been inseparable from the representation of Catholicism, but this representation too has changed over the times: according to Anthony Burke Smith, the iconic representation of the priest as American hero in 1944 *Going my Way*, starring Bing Crosby as Father Chuck O’Malley “overturned the long-standing stereotypes of Catholic authority”.¹⁰ But the 1981 Ulu Grosbard’s movie *True Confessions* starring Robert de Niro as a corrupt Irish priest, on the contrary “repudiated the older Irish Catholic America”, according to Timothy Meagher, who further argues that “depicted for thirty or forty years as pictures of innocence, guardians of morality, and/or exemplars of patriotism in movies like *Going My Way*, Irish American Catholics were now showing up largely as cynical cops, corrupt politicians, nationalists zealots, or hypocritical priests.”¹¹

It seems to me that *Ray Donovan*, by combining a narrative of sexual abuse at the hands of the Catholic clergy with elements of the classic Boston crime drama, together with a portrayal of Irish masculinity in crisis, complicates the representation of

8. <http://whybother.ie/the-departed-and-the-boston-crime-drama/> (last accessed 9/05/2019).

9. Diane Negra, “Irishness, Anger and Masculinity in Recent Film and Television”, in Ruth Barton (ed.), *Screening Irish America, op. cit.*, p. 294.

10. Anthony Burke Smyth, “America’s favorite Priest, *Going My Way*, 1944” in Colleen McDannell (ed.), *Catholics in the Movies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 108.

11. Timothy J. Meagher, “Cops, Priests and the Decline of Irish America”, *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Irish-Americans either as a consoling ethnic category embodying whiteness and innocence, or as a figure of Otherness impossible to control and assimilate in mainstream Americanness.

Indeed, as can already be gathered from the summary above, *Ray Donovan* navigates between two sets of contradictory stereotypes regarding Irish-Americans, one extolling the virtues of the traditional Irish family, with the hard-working, devoted, protective father caring for his own and struggling to provide them with the best the American dream can provide ; the other, depicting the Irish as violent, drunkards and criminals, with the aggravating fact of their being also corrupt and infected by a sexually deviant Catholic clergy.

On the one hand, the Donovans are typical Irish hooligans, who present a dangerous mixture of criminality, brutality, addictions and degeneracy. Abbie, Ray Donovan's wife, comes from a family of Boston pub-owners, whom in one episode she asks Ray to rescue as we gather they have drunk themselves into bankruptcy. Bunchy and Terry suffer from incurable diseases, one from a kind of mental retardation, the other from Parkinson disease. The gym setting that we see right from episode one helps also connects the Donovans to a long tradition of boxing films centred around Irish-American characters, from 1935 Lloyd Bacon's *The Irish in Us* starring James Cagney as a boxing promoter to Clint Eastwood's 2004 *Million Dollar Baby*. Boxing films themselves have an ambivalent significance regarding ethnic stereotyping as they stage racial minorities such as Afro-Americans, Italians or Irish as possessing a kind of natural, innate, almost animal-like physical strength and violence (a representation which Martin Scorsese stretched to a limit in his 1981 *Raging Bull*), which the sport allows them to release and channel ; on the other hand, boxing is viewed as a means to climb the social ladder, to reach success and assimilation. In this regard, Ray is a kind of upgraded fist fighter, a boxer in a black (Armani?) suit, who uses his physical strength, viewed as a kind of ethnic marker, to climb his way into the world of the rich and famous, symbolised by Hollywood.

Boxing is also a way of course of affirming masculinity and the attraction of the series relies much on the actor Liev Schreiber's

imposing physical presence, as opposed to his waif-like, red-headed wife Abby played by Paula Malcomson, who in accordance with a Scarlet O'Hara type of prejudices about Irish women, is endowed with a fiery temper, stands up to defend her own material interests, can sometimes be devious and disloyal towards her husband, is fiercely protective of her children, and can say "F..you" in the face of anybody without showing any fear. However Abby is only a housewife and plays a minor role in the story – she even altogether disappears in season 5 – in accordance with the marginalisation of female characters in recent Irish-American film and TV drama, as noticed by Stephanie Rains when she underlines "the clear absence of Irish (or, for the most part, Irish-American) women from narrative representations of any kind" in this kind of films.¹²

Another typically masculine issue in the series *Ray Donovan* is the father and son conflict, around which much of the plot revolves and which constitutes yet another ethnic marker that harks back to an age-old tradition in Irish literature and folklore. This would include the involuntary murder of his own son by the great mythological hero Cuchulainn, the mythologised murder of his father by J.M. Synge's Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), the search for a substitute father in the person of the Jewish Leopold Bloom by a confused Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the heinous relationships between fathers and sons in John McGahern's stories: as a matter of fact, Irish fathers through literature and culture have often been represented either as tyrannical and brutal, or irresponsible, inadequate and altogether obnoxious. In 1926 *Juno and the Paycock*, Sean O'Casey already featured the working-class Irish father as a boastful, self-aggrandising, escapist idle drunk who spent his time "sthрутtin' about from mornin' till night like a paycock!"¹³ That deprecatory image of the Irish father has crossed the oceans, as reflected by the character of Mickey Donovan, who has a knack for causing trouble to his sons and embroiling them in either illegal or life-threatening situations, while

12. S. Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

13. Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*.

contriving to warrant maximum enjoyment for himself – we often see him dancing, sniffing cocaine, or having sex – generally in a completely lawless and violent manner, such as peddling drugs, selling prostitutes, or robbing a bank. What’s more, he always gets away with whatever crime he commits and keeps reappearing in his sons’ lives unscathed, when they thought they had finally managed to get rid of him. Ray, in particular, repeatedly endeavours to have him either arrested or killed, in an effort to achieve the parricide presented as a desirable goal in Synge’s play mentioned above.

We may wonder to what extent the pervasive, enduring negativity attached to the figure of the Irish or Irish-American father, especially in popular culture, should be related to the obsession with a shameful, violent and troubled past which cannot be erased or forgotten, and which keeps resurfacing in the present, so prevailing in Irish culture and history. Through times, the sins of Irish fathers and forefathers have kept reappearing and jeopardising the children’s present and future lives, as was especially the case for the Northern Ireland Troubles, in which events dating back to the 16th and 17th century were relentlessly rehashed in order to fuel sectarian hatred, with the effect of compromising the existence of the future generations. In this regard, Stephanie Rains shows that the Troubles engendered new perceptions of Irish masculinity through American film and TV series, in which the IRA gunman was regarded as a kind of dangerous sociopath.¹⁴

However, in *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, which was published in 2006, Diane Negra argued that, contrary to those rather deprecatory representations, Irishness in the early years of the 21st century became a form of discursive currency, with the United States playing “a key-role in producing and consuming the authenticity of Irishness”.¹⁵ At the time, Negra pointed out how Irishness, “once a socially stigmatized ethnic category”, was turned into “an ethnic code for reinstating social values perceived to be lost in millennial

14. Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 172-173.

15. D. Negra, *The Irish in Us, op. cit.*, p. 12.

American culture".¹⁶ In a chapter called "Irishness, Innocence and American Identity Politics before and after September 11", Diane Negra also contended that the combination of Celtic tigerism and the role played by Irish-American policemen and firefighters on the occasion of 9/11 all contributed to further construct an image of the Irish as what she called a "consoling ethnic category", endowed with virtues of authenticity, working-class resilience and courage, drawing from "a cultural reservoir of associations between Irishness and innocence."¹⁷ However, in a later article called "Irishness, anger and masculinity in recent Film and Television", Negra noted a "hardening" of Irishness in a new wave of representations, as if "Irishness had entered a "dark phase".¹⁸

It seems to me that *Ray Donovan* displays the signs of a further hardening and darkness attached to Irishness, and that one of the most direct causes of this new twist in the long tradition of representing the Irish in American popular film or television must be found in the revelations of numerous sex scandals among the Catholic clergy which took place over the last decade. These scandals were of foremost importance in Ireland, but also occurred in the United States, often involving clerics of Irish descent, and were widely publicised by the media. Television and the media indeed played a central role not only in the disclosure of the scandals but also in forcing governments and the judicial system to take legal action against the clergy both in Ireland and in the United States. Many TV shows or films in Ireland or Britain first aimed at documenting the sex crimes themselves and focused attention on the offenders, as well as on the active role played by the church as an institution in concealing the facts and protecting the criminals. In Ireland, several programmes aired on TV, such as RTE's 1999 *States of Fear*, TV3's 1999 *Stolen Lives*, RTE's 2002 *Cardinal Secrets* and BBC's 2002 *Suing the Pope*, all contributed in alerting public opinion and forcing the state authorities to take some legal action. In the USA, the revelations

16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 363.

18. D. Negra, "Irishness, anger and masculinity in recent film and television" in Ruth Barton (ed.), *Screening Irish-America, op. cit.*, p. 281-295.

regarding sex abuse in the Catholic clergy were also widely reported by the media, initially by the press and particularly by the 2002 series of articles published by the *Boston Globe*, as is so precisely illustrated by Tom McCarthy's 2015 Oscar-winning film *Spotlight*. However, *Spotlight* was preceded by other international films denouncing the bad treatments and physical abuse prevailing in some Irish Catholic institutions, especially aimed at women and children, such as Peter Mullan's 2002 *The Magdalene Sisters* and Stephen Frears' 2013 *Philomena*, which shows that the scandals inspired authors of fiction as well as reporters or documentary film-makers.

The dramatic undertones of the reported cases of child abuse, involving as they did such universal concerns as faith, trust, authority, the protection of childhood, sexual drives, etc., inevitably found significant echoes in film and popular culture. Television in particular, with its squads of showrunners, writers and producers, always on the lookout for new topics, based on emerging patterns of social, sexual and moral behaviour or new developments in the socio-political context, turned the revelations into material for films and drama. The fact that the scandals involving the Catholic church in Ireland were so widespread and of such an appalling nature— what with the discovery of a mass-tomb containing the remains of hundreds of children in a Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, the disclosure of the ill-treatments suffered by single mothers in the Magdalen Laundries, all institutions run by the Church, besides the innumerable cases of child-abuse committed by priests—necessarily had an impact on the representation of Irishness in the popular imagination. This was compounded in the USA by the prevailing number of clerics of Irish descent among the American Catholic Church, who were also grievously involved in the scandals—as was further exposed recently in Philadelphia. These facts have engendered renewed representations of Irish-Americans, both as agents and as victims of the scandals, in film and television drama.

Among them, *Ray Donovan* suggests that the sex scandals in the Catholic Church have added a new dimension to the idea that the Irish suffer from the burden of the past mentioned

above; what's more, the toxic legacy inherited from the fathers or the father-figures is in the context embodied by a religion which was always looked upon with suspicion, if not downright horror, by the Protestants, first in Europe and later in the United States. The revelations of the sex crimes in the Catholic clergy and the secrecy around the deviant priests maintained by the hierarchy at the highest level were bound to rekindle old prejudices against Catholics in a mainly Protestant country, which flourished until late in the 20th century and the election of the first Catholic Irish American President John F. Kennedy, whose grandfather had been a "ward boss" for the Democratic Party, that is to say someone in charge of "fixing" things somehow in the manner of Ray Donovan, if less violently. The long history of anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States was recently recalled by many American newspapers on the occasion of Pope Francis's visit to the States in September 2017, about which they frequently quoted historian John Tracy Ellis's view that anti-Catholicism was "the deepest bias in the history of the American people".¹⁹ Examples of this bias abound in popular culture and film, such as illustrated in Martin Scorsese's 2003 film *Gangs of New York*, which stages the feud between the clan of the Natives against the Irish immigrants in the Five Points area. From earliest times, Irish Catholicism was considered a threat to the integrity of American identity, because it was associated with backwardness, superstition and corruption; what's more, the common Protestant abuse of the Pope as "the whore of Babylon" points to the sexual connotations attached to anti-Catholic prejudices. This was already the case in English and Irish gothic and sensationalist novels of the eighteenth century, a form of literature which was in its time an expression of popular culture. Critics of the genre agree that Catholicism plays an active role in most gothic novels, often situated in monasteries or convents and staging lecherous, depraved monks and nuns, often indulging in same-sex relationships. That recently revived representation of Catholic priests as lecherous, deviant, corrupting and corrupt finds a

19. John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1969, p. 151.

good example in episode 10, season 1 of *Ray Donovan* in which Bunchy has stalked his former assailant, a priest who now lives under a different name in another parish. Bunchy has brought him back to the gym after wounding him with a bullet; he and Terry have called Ray for help as usual, but the three brothers are at a loss as to what to do with the priest; they at least want to force him to own up his guilt and to ask Bunchy to forgive him. But the whimpering priest keeps denying he did anything wrong and when he finally confesses the abuse tries to belittle his responsibility by claiming that he suffered from a kind of psychological disease for which he has since been treated. The climax of the scene happens when Ray finally decides to drive him to the hospital and the priest refuses, afraid that Ray may kill him instead, as we understand that Ray was probably his victim too. This disclosure of Ray's most secret, intimate wound infuriates Ray who eventually shoots him dead. The pathos of this long tragic scene in which the brothers discuss the dilemma of killing the priest or forgiving him highlights the ambiguity at the heart of Ray's characterisation: on the one hand he acts out the righteous protector of his family, and like his brothers tries to cling to old-fashioned virtues of loyalty, honesty, respect, compassion and forgiveness. On the other hand, his soul has been irremediably damaged by the combined destructive forces of a criminal, irresponsible Irish father, and a corrupt, devious Catholic priest, and as a result his load of anger and violence has become uncontrollable. What's more, the Catholic church is in the scene and others presented as being manipulative, entwining its parishioners in a vicious circle of shame, guilt, anger, self-destruction and thirst for revenge. While Terry for instance has kept his faith and fears the damnation of his soul, and is even ready to offer himself in sacrifice to save the rest of his family, Ray in a later episode falls prey to the manipulative attempts on the part of a priest to get him to own up his crimes under the guise of the secrecy of confession.

As a result, we may argue that *Ray Donovan* stages the crisis, and even the breakdown, of Irish-American masculinity induced by the revelations of child sexual abuse at the hand of the Catholic church: both Ray's brothers Bunchy and Terry

experience great difficulties in dating women and keeping a girlfriend, with hints at Bunchy's sexual impotence, as confirmed by the following seasons; Ray himself is shown to be in crisis from the start, unable to overcome the demons of the past which keep reappearing under the shape of his incorrigible biological father and of his spiritual father, the Catholic priest. Each season of the series is based on the premise that the balance Ray thinks he has established in his life is jeopardised by his father's misconduct; in season 1, the murder of the priest thus sets the police on his track. Despite all his efforts to protect his family and to live the true American success story, albeit thanks to his physical violence, the Donovans get into trouble all the time. In season 1 for instance, Ray's daughter—named after the suicide sister—dates an Afro-American teenager who gets murdered under her eyes, his wife threatens to leave him after Ray has slept with other women, his son gets involved in fist-fights at school. The past, symbolised by a harmful, radically failing Irish father, undermines Ray's transformative journey from archaic, poverty-ridden, ethnic-centred South Boston to cosmopolitan, postmodern, rich Los Angeles, and the metamorphosis from street thug or prize-fighter to suit-clad, business-like respectable member of the upper class threatens to be overturned and exposed as a sham, like Cinderella's coach which becomes a pumpkin again. As a result, it may be argued that the character of Ray "plays out the conflicting ethnic traits of purity and innocence versus corruption and brutality [...] a splitting of the ethnic inheritance of Irishness" in the words of Ruth Barton in her introduction to the edited book *Screening Irish-America*.²⁰ Although admittedly Ray is far from pure (he cheats on his wife, drinks far too much, kills and maims with the utmost brutality), he nevertheless stands as the hero of the series, and much of the success of the show relies on the empathy the audience cannot help feeling for him. The revelations of the sex scandals in the church have re-awakened in the popular imagination a number of stereotypes concerning the legacies of Irish ethnicity, presented as a shameful burden which needs to

20. Ruth Barton, *Screening Irish America*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

be cleansed and eliminated, which had been overturned by the role played by Irish policemen and firefighters on 9/11, which according to Diane Negra had contributed to changing the image of the Irish into a “consoling ethnic category”, an Irish ancestry being then viewed as a matter of pride and nostalgia. What’s more, the series gives another twist to traditional views of Irish Catholicism, by showing Ray trying to obtain redemption for the crimes committed by his father and by his priest, instead of staging the figure of a heroic priest. If Ray looks at the pictures of his childhood with a degree of nostalgia in episode one, it is only to try harder to exorcize his past, to get rid of the Catholic church and of his toxic father, in other words to kill the Irish Mick in himself and in his own family- which up to season 5 at least, never happens.

However, one should also insist on the way the series plays with the audience’s ambivalent sympathies. The non-Irish actor Jon Voight, once the cowboy turned male prostitute in the anti-American-Dream film *Midnight Cowboy*²¹, is one of the big assets of the series, opposing his cunning, charm and resilience to the brutish, taciturn resentment powerfully expressed by Liev Schreiber—who was born in San Francisco from a Jewish mother and a Protestant father— so that the audience hesitates between a full condemnation of the criminal Irish father, and a full embrace of the son’s struggle to get rid of him. The duality of the bad-but charming South Boston father and the good-but violent Los Angeles son is perhaps what best epitomises the ambivalence of the representations of Irish-Americans on the screen today, and may explain why there can be no happy ending to the series, in which, as in *Midnight Cowboy*, the American dream remains a bunk for this Irish-American family.

Irishness therefore acts as a powerful pivot in the series, accounting for much of the characters’ attitudes and fate; however, the authenticity of the ethnic markers exploited by the authors of *Ray Donovan* is highly questionable. The theme of Irishness, as argued before, was inspired to the non-Irish authors and producers of the series by the wave of revelations involving

21. *Midnight Cowboy*, dir. John Schlesinger, United Artists, 1969.

the Catholic Church, which is inseparable—at least, as of today—from Irish identity. The sex scandals, like other events in recent American history, such as the terrorist attacks, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria, the increasing role of social networks in public and political life offer to the authors of popular forms of culture —especially as far as TV series are concerned, because they are so prompt to detect, digest and reflect the latest social evolutions— a fantastic source of dramatic situations, involving conflicted personalities, cases of post-traumatic disorder, family disputes, notwithstanding the interrogations on the characters' wounded sexual identities. Irishness and all the clichés traditionally attached to it—violence, corruption, Catholicism, backwardness— therefore work in *Ray Donovan* like a set of signs meant to be immediately identified by the audience rather than as an actual investigation of what it means to be of Irish descent in America today.