

The *Angel* Controversy: An Archival Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the controversy regarding the decision of the Irish Film Board (IFB) to fund *Angel*, which tore apart the Irish film industry in 1981-82 and almost made the newly-born Board derail. We rely on documents held in the Irish Film Institute Archive to offer a new, more balanced approach to this well-known issue. More specifically, we first show that it was a lack of quorum that made the decision illegal and expose the lies and half-truths that all the parties involved used to discredit each other's position in the media. Next, we examine the Association of Independent Producers Ireland-controlled IFB policies for 1982-1983 and argue that many were geared towards making *The Outcasts* the flagship Irish film at the expense of *Angel*. We finish by reflecting that, although *Angel* was the only success of the IFB, it continued supporting films like *The Outcasts* only until 1987.

Keywords: *Angel*, Film support policies, Irish Film Board, Neil Jordan, *The Outcasts*

1. Introduction

It was John Huston who, in the course of a conversation with Taoiseach Jack Lynch in 1967, first proposed the creation of a national film board in the Republic of Ireland. To the Irish-American filmmaker, a film board was the best chance Ireland had to develop a viable film industry that could also help promote the island as a tourist destination, two ambitious objectives the costly Ardmore Studios, opened in 1958, had largely failed to achieve.

Throughout the 1970s, two trade associations, the Irish Film and Television Guild (IFTG) and the Association of Independent Producers Ireland (AIP), would lobby for the board and policies that favoured native film companies. After some failed attempts at passing a film legislation, in December 1980, the Irish Film Board Bill received parliamentary approval, which

allowed for the creation of a film board to plan, deploy and oversee film-related policies in Ireland, set up and run a national film archive and design, administer and grant state-sponsored film tax incentives, loans and subsidies.

The Irish Film Board Act, in spite of the fact that it was a much-welcomed addition to Irish legislation, did forebode trouble, as it made very clear that foreign and domestic producers would have to compete for public funding, established that every taxpayer's penny invested in film production, plus interest, was to be returned to the State and tied the Irish Film Board (IFB) to this responsibility by setting a maximum debt cap of £4.1 million. Also, it entitled the government to appoint and dismiss, at will, the seven members of the IFB executive board and leave up to four seats vacant.

Acting on that provision, in the summer of 1981, the Irish government appointed John Boorman, filmmaker and chairman of the National Film Studios of Ireland (NFSI), and Robin O'Sullivan, director of the Cork Film Festival, to the IFB, of which Louis Heelan, general manager of the Industrial Credit Company, was made chairman. The remaining four seats were left vacant. In August 1981, the IFB started operations on a meagre budget of £200,000.

The appointments, the vacancies and the budget aggrieved the IFTG and the AIP, which had no representatives on the Board and suddenly realised that the IFB was not to be the independent film haven they had been lobbying for and, as said before, would have to share the scarce IFB resources with transnational, commercial film companies. Resentment against the IFB brewed for months, especially in the AIP, but it would be the backing of *Angel* (Jordan 1982) that created an insurmountable rift between the trade association and the IFB.

For the last three decades, several academic authors, including myself, have been guilty of taking at face value the account of the *Angel* controversy by Dwyer (1982) and Rockett *et al.* (1987), among others. Over the years, the picture emerging out of these accounts, however biased towards the AIP, has become synonymous of sacred truth and very few, again including myself, have ever dared to question it. Furthermore, the handful of authors that have attempted to look beyond – e.g., Connors (2015) – have mainly relied on the AIP documents and contemporary newspaper pieces in the Tiernan MacBride Collection in the Irish Film Institute (IFI) Archive. Collected and eventually donated to the Archive by Tiernan MacBride, one of the leading figures in the infamous AIP campaign against *Angel*, it seems hardly coincidental that out of these materials also emerges a Manichean story of (Irish) good v. (British) evil starring the executive producer of *Angel*, John Boorman, as the lead villain¹.

¹ A major exception to this is Carole Zucker; however, she just devotes three paragraphs to the issue in her comprehensive study of the cinema of Neil Jordan (2008, 20-21).

Coinciding with the 35th anniversary of the theatrical release of *Angel*, we started to wonder whether something else could actually be added to the history of the controversy or, regardless of how unabashedly one-sided it all seemed, it was a closed case. This took us to the IFI Archive in Summer 2017, where we unsurprisingly confirmed first-hand that the papers in the MacBride Collection did indeed tell the story the way it had been told up to that moment. That notwithstanding, we decided to go through the blue-bound volumes of minutes of the first Irish Film Board (IFB), donated to the Archive by former IFB Chief Executive (CE) Michael Algar in 2011.

This paper exists mainly because we do believe that the information in the minutes allows us to offer a slightly different perspective on the controversy than the one we have become used to hearing. By putting side-by-side the documents in the MacBride and the Algar Collections, there emerges a more thorough, less biased picture of the events—a picture where John Boorman and the three-member IFB receive a fairer treatment and, more importantly, which includes details of the crucial role *The Outcasts* (Wynne-Simmons 1982) seems to have played in how the affair unfolded. The methodology used in this paper is, therefore, archival and historical. The events are approached in chronological order, starting with the first IFB meeting in August 1981 and ending in December 1983, shortly after the Irish general release of *The Outcasts*.

This picture of ours, however, has no aspiration whatsoever to become sacred truth. We are well aware that there are many documents we have not had access to that can, and hopefully will, change the story again in the future. As a matter of fact, as we went through the minutes, documents were often mentioned that are not currently in the IFI Archive and maybe never will be. Some may have been lost with the passing of time; others may be in the personal archive of Neil Jordan and will be inaccessible to researchers for quite some time yet; some others may be waiting to be dug out among the John Boorman papers in the Indiana University Library in Bloomington.

2. *The three-member Board (August-December 1981)*

2.1 *The seeds of conflict*

The maiden meeting of the IFB was held on 24 August 1981² with the three appointed members in attendance. Among other things, the minutes for the meeting reflect the eagerness of Boorman, O'Sullivan and Heelan for

² Most sources are cited by date only. The reason for this is two-fold. Pagination starts anew with each meeting record in the volumes of minutes and is missing in many other documents (news clippings, press releases, correspondence...). Also, the vast majority of records and documents are between one and three pages long.

the remaining four vacancies to be filled soon, as the absence of just one of them would prevent a quorum from being reached.

Being, at the time, the only Irish film project scheduled for shooting in 1981, *Angel* was already discussed at the meeting. The attendees noted that the film had secured financing and was due to start filming on a budget of £546,000 in October. Taking into consideration that one-third of the money was “on a temporary basis”, they “agreed to consider any proposal for the re-financing of the part of the budget which the producers might submit” (Irish Film Board 1982, 24/08/81).

At the following meeting, the offer was still standing, as *Angel* was “the first fully developed [project] to come to the Board, had a high “Irish content” and was ready for shooting in a matter of weeks” (3/09/81). The official records also report that it was then that Boorman – whose production company, the Motion Picture Company of Ireland (MPCI), was co-producing *Angel* with British television Channel 4 (C4) – declared his interest in the film. According to the minutes, he “was helping Mr Jordan (without fee) to raise finance and obtain distribution for the film” (*ibidem*).

Regardless of the Board’s early, undisguised sympathy for *Angel*, funding applications were called for and no decisions were taken until the call closed. When they met in October to discuss which projects would be awarded funding, C4 had already requested Boorman to executive produce *Angel*. The proceedings record that, as a consequence, he abstained from participating in the “consideration of or discussion on the case” (10/81), which concluded with the approval of a non-recourse, interest-free loan of £100,000 to the MPCI under these terms:

- Neither the director nor the executive producer could be others than Jordan and Boorman, respectively, and only minor changes could be made in the script and casting.

- The budget could not go over £516,767, including contingency (£46,979) and a completion guarantee (£26,309), which the MPCI was responsible for getting from a guarantor. C4 would “provide a non-recourse, interest-free advance of up to IR £416,767”, of which £184,880 would be allotted “on delivery of the film to Channel 4” to pay “for the UK rights in the film” and £184,908 “to be repaid *pari passu* with the repayment of the IFB loan”. The investment was secured by a lien, shared between C4 and the IFB, on “the film, the copyright in the film and final shooting script, and the rights in the story and music of the film [...] and the benefit of the distribution agreements in respect of all non-UK territory” (*ibidem*).

- Once the film was completed, the MPCI was to repay the moneys above first. Then, they would “reimburse” the IFB for the “solicitors’ fees and outlay in connection with the IFB Loan [...] up to a maximum of IR £1,500”. Finally, “not less than 50% of the net profits” were to be shared proportionally between C4 and the IFB (*ibidem*).

However rough the terms of the loan were, *Angel* would infamously become the only film to receive IFB support in 1981. Except for the £2,500 granted to the Festival of Film of Television in the Celtic Countries, no other applications went through and submissions by Vincent Corcoran, Bob Quinn, Tom Hayes, Tiernan MacBride, Jim Sheridan, John T. Davies, Ian Merrick and Tommy McArdle, among others, were steadfastly rejected, asked for further development or deferred “for consideration by the full Board when appointed” (*ibidem*). Among those who failed to get support were also Robert Wynne-Simmons and Kieran Hickey, who were encouraged to scale down *The Outcasts* and *Afterwards*, respectively, arrange for private funding and re-apply in 1982.

Utterly frustrated at the Board’s decision, the executive committee of the AIP asked members to boycott it by refusing to submit further applications and withdrawing those already submitted until a full Board was appointed. An *Irish Times* cutting, aptly titled “Producers want boycott of Irish Film Board” and held in the MacBride Collection, introduces what would become the core of the AIP position throughout the conflict with the Board: the three-member IFB was incomplete, (illegally) operating without a CE, and “assessing applications and making decisions” they were blatantly incompetent for. The AIP illustrated the Board’s incompetence by pointing out their refusal to consider documentary film applications for funding until a “larger board” was appointed, their turndown of “a film script which won the last Arts Council film script award” (i.e. *The Outcasts*) and especially their decision to award “a major part of its finance to a film by an inexperienced filmmaker already in production in Ardmore Studios” (i.e. *Angel*) (Kiely 1981).

An undated AIP memorandum in the same collection considers the issue from a legal perspective. According to the memo, Boorman might have disclosed to the Board that he was executive producing *Angel*, but neither had he done it before discussions started, as obliged by Section 17 of the Irish Film Board Act, nor had he informed the Board that he was also a director and shareholder of the MPCI, that is, that he had a personal interest in the matter. Considering that “the Rules of constitutional or natural justice apply to the activities of the Board” and they demand “administrators and others to be disinterested and impartial in the exercise of their powers and discretion”, especially “where the interest involved is the interest of the public body which the individual administrator represents and it is unarguable that where the individual himself is the person who holds the interest and, a fortiori, where that interest is pecuniary” (Association of Independent Producers Ireland undated), Boorman should have abstained from both attending the meetings and casting a vote. If he had done either, the Board’s decision could be deemed invalid and the funds returned on request. Furthermore, if no quorum could be reached without him, funding decisions should have been postponed until at least one of the vacancies was filled.

Deeply worried about the AIP's reaction, Robin O'Sullivan wrote to MacBride on 23 October. He begins by expressing his distress at "some of the things being said on behalf of the AIP" and warning that, should the AIP persist on their accusations, "the £200,000 allocated by the government will not be spent and will, therefore, be lost to the Irish film industry". He concedes that the IFB may not have been as transparent as it should have, even though "the position adopted by [the AIP vice-chairman] Bob Quinn in particular is intemperate and, in relation to John Boorman, manifestly unfair". O'Sullivan remarks that it was Boorman who brokered the deal with C4 for four-fifths of *Angel's* budget and the British television that demanded him to executive produce the film, which he was doing *bona fide* and after giving "a personal guarantee to Channel Four in respect of their investment". He also reminds MacBride that the AIP had agreed not to object to Board members submitting projects to the IFB and, yet, they were taking it out on Boorman, who had "been utterly scrupulous in relation to 'Angel' and the application before the Board". O'Sullivan finishes the letter by vindicating the Board's decision on the need to "get things moving" and "prepare the ground for the full functioning of the Irish Film Board" lest the government should get the impression that there was "no urgency in finding funds for film making in Ireland" and claimed back the IFB allotment for 1981. He adds that an AIP boycott "would throw into turmoil a situation where it appeared that at long last there would be a coming together and concrete hope for Irish film-making and its future" (O'Sullivan 1981).

2.2. *The controversy goes public*

By November 1981, *The Irish Independent*, *The Sunday Tribune* and *The Irish Press* were already pouncing on the IFB-AFI strife³. On 3 November, *The Irish Press* ran "Row over UK staff on Irish film", where the AIP accused the MPCFI of using British crew and equipment in the production of *Angel*, which, in Quinn's opinion, disqualified the film as Irish. In the same article, Boorman, Jordan and the film's producer, Barry Blackmore, admitted that the cameraman (Chris Menges) was indeed British but pointed out that the rest of the crew were Irish and regretted the "chorus of invective" (*The Irish Press*, 1981) aimed at Boorman.

The following day, the General Meeting of the AIP decided by an overwhelming majority to boycott the IFB until a full Board was appointed⁴. A

³ Rockett *et al.* consider that "the issue forcefully entered the public domain at the Third International Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Countries" (1987, 119); however, by late March 1982 it had been around for more than four months.

⁴ Rockett *et al.* soften the AIP's decision by saying it was "a threat to boycott the Board's proceedings" (1987, 119) rather than an actual boycott.

post-meeting press release only concedes that the award to *Angel* “might well have been made by a full seven-man Film Board including Irish film makers”. Besides insisting on most of the points made in October, it remarks that the Board was “acting without any guidelines or instructions from” the government, and the call for applications had, in practice, excluded most Irish filmmakers and invited foreigners to submit projects. Furthermore, given that Boorman was executive producing *Angel* and was a shareholder and director of the MPCI, there was at least “an appearance of impropriety” in the Board’s decision. The document finishes by asking Boorman, Heelan and O’Sullivan to resign so that the government could appoint a Board that would “act as a cohesive force in the industry, rather than a divisive one” (Association of Independent Producers Ireland 1981).

Despite the harshness of both *The Irish Press* piece and the press release, the copy of the latter in the IFI Archive is actually an enclosure in a rather conciliatory letter to trade union leader Liam Saurin. In the letter, dated 6 November, MacBride remarks that the AIP take on *Angel* is the one in the release, not in *The Irish Press*, which he disregards as “distorted and out of context”, surprisingly adding that the “AIP fully accepts that *Angel* and Channel Four are valuable sources of work for Irish technicians and has no desire to adversely affect this situation”. Also, he argues that “it would be of benefit to us, and to the overall picture, if the Union would publicly support us in our position” (MacBride 1981).

We cannot know whether the letter was written before or after RTÉ, after some bickering with Boorman, aired a report about the controversy on *Féach*, a current affairs programme, in the evening of 6 November. Although not in the IFI Archive, the episode is worth mentioning because it featured an interview with Boorman where he denied the accusations of conflict of interest in the Board’s decision to fund *Angel* and the mismanagement of the NFSI. Asked about the boycott, he bluntly told a rather hostile Eamonn O’Muirí that it would actually make things much easier, as over the last few months he had “been inundated with material” he was not reading because it was “mostly rubbish” and implied that some independent filmmakers would be withdrawing their applications just because they considered the Board “incompetent to judge their masterpieces”. He added that the controversy was mostly due to the fact that he and his associates had “committed the unforgivable sin in Ireland of being successful” and scorned the protesters as a “small group of paranoiacs intent on a slur campaign” (RTÉ 1981).

The Sunday Tribune must have run “Ardmore management attacked as crisis deepens” shortly after RTÉ broadcast the episode of *Féach*, although there is no date on the cutting in the IFI Archive. The article is mostly based on an interview with a sour, convalescent Vincent Corcoran, NFSI Board member and one of the filmmakers shunned by the IFB in October. In the piece, Corcoran makes Boorman and Sheamus Smith responsible for the

economic turmoil the NFSI were going through⁵, and accuses them of being incompetent and non-transparent and using both the film facility and the IFB for their own profit. The text, which also makes reference to the *Fé-ach* interview and the failed attempt by investor Vincent O'Donoghue to acquire the NFSI in late 1981, ends by casting yet another shadow of doubt over Boorman. Although the development of the NFSI land for housing has loomed over the studios since the early 1970s, reporter Angela Phelan maliciously points out that Boorman would have hired an architect friend of his to draw up development plans in 1979⁶.

On 3 December, the Board was informed that Wynne-Simmons was to start shooting *The Outcasts* shortly, in spite of the fact that he had not arranged for private funding or distribution yet. Surprisingly, they agreed to offer him a loan of up to £42,000, which, nevertheless and “because of budgetary constraints”, would be made payable only if the Irish Parliament “made available” funds to the IFB in 1982 (Irish Film Board, 03/12/81). The sum can seem small when compared to the £100,000 lent to the MPCFI, but it should be taken into account that the IFB was willing to finance more than 50% of the total cost of a film that, unlike Jordan's, had not yet secured distribution or funding and whose budget was set at £82,000. Besides, although the risks were significantly higher, the terms were better than those offered to Boorman, as Wynne-Simmons was asked to share just 30% of the net profits.

Kieran Hickey, who, by early December, was also prepared to commence shooting *Afterwards*, was not so lucky and did not get IFB funding in 1981. As a result, on December 13, he complained bitterly about the Board in a piece called “Top director rebuffed by Film Board” in *The Sunday Independent* and related the rejection of his project to a supposedly foreign-gearred, obscure, nepotistic policy of film support by the IFB, as illustrated by their decision to back “the English production” *Angel*, “produced by Board member John Boorman” (*The Sunday Independent*, 1981).

Two days later, Louis Heelan announced his resignation from the Board, and Boorman told the Minister to consider his position open. Asked about the chairman's resignation, the filmmaker told *The Irish Press* that Heelan was resigning because “he could not stand the climate of hostility which had surrounded the new body”, especially “the campaign of vilification” from the AIP (Molloy 1981). However, in a letter to the government and a statement to *The Irish Press*, Heelan attributed the decision to “the pressure of work” and denied that it had anything to do with the *Angel* controversy, though

⁵ The annual losses at the time were about £600,000 and the accumulated debt about £2.5 million (Agnew 1981).

⁶ Boorman ended up suing the newspaper for libel. According to the British filmmaker, they desperately tried to reach an extrajudicial settlement with him (Boorman 2004, 250).

he added that the AIP should be represented on the Board, as their absence from it “had been one of the reasons for ‘the amount of flak’ the body had suffered” (*The Irish Press*, 16 December 1981).

3. *The extended Board (January 1982-December 1983)*

3.1 *Policy layout: Appearance v. reality*

On 12 January 1982, the Board first met under the official name of the Irish Film Board/Bord Scannán na hÉireann. It was not the only major change. Besides Robin O’Sullivan, in attendance were the secretary Michael Aherne and four of the five newly-appointed members: Muiris MacConghail, RTÉ head of production; Michael Algar, Irish Film and Television Guild chairman; Tiernan MacBride, AIP chairman and writer Carolyn Swift. In other words, the appointments followed the recommendations made at the 24 August meeting, where Jordan, Heelan and O’Sullivan expressed that they hoped the vacancies would be filled with representatives for the AIP, the Irish Film and Television Guild, the trade unions “and possibly RTÉ” (Irish Film Board, 24/08/81). Although still officially a member, the resigned chairman decided not to attend⁷ the meeting and sent his apologies instead, as did Boorman and another newly-appointed member, producer Noel Pearson.

The very first decision of the revamped IFB was to note, rather than approve, as is customary, the minutes for the previous meeting. Next, they went through the Irish Film Board Act and “noted in particular the provisions of Section 17 of the Act – Disclosure of interest by Members of the Board” (12/01/82), which, as seen above, had been the *casus belli* for the AIP campaign against Boorman and the Board’s decision to support *Angel* in late 1981. Following this, MacConghail informed that, before being appointed to the Board, “he had acted, without financial advantage or prospect of gain, as adviser to Mr. Wynne-Simmons in connection with [*The Outcasts*]. Whilst he no longer so acted, he did propose not to take any part in the Board’s consideration of or decision on this case” (*ibidem*).

At the following meeting, the Board resolved that “members should declare their interest, including representations received, in relation to each item that comes before the Board for consideration, immediately prior to the consideration of that item by the Board” (19/01/82). In consequence, it was agreed that MacConghail would not take part in any discussions or decisions

⁷ Heelan also resigned as member in December, but the resignation was made effective at this meeting.

related to *The Outcasts*. Having cleared that conflict of interest,⁸ they went on to confirm the up to £42,000 interest-free loan to Wynne-Simmons and better the terms, so that the maximum budget was set at £108,669 and the net profit rate to be shared at 20%.

From January to March, the extended Board would spend a great deal of time laying out policy guidelines that, while keeping an indisputable appearance of objectivity and fairness, allowed them ample room for channelling public money into whatever projects they wanted⁹. Thus, on 1 February, they decided that funding requests would not be considered unless they were “supported by a completed script, budgetary details, and a synopsis” (01/02/82). One month later, however, they agreed that “if the applicant [had] a track record”, they would make an exception and “consider treatments” (01-15/03/82)¹⁰. Likewise, an investment cap of 50% of total budget was set on 19 January and then revised on 1 February to state that it would only normally apply¹¹.

Regarding project assessment, on 1 February, they agreed that, to be eligible for funding, projects had to employ many Irish creative crewmembers, as this would be “one of the principal criteria to be applied by the Board” (01/02/82). In March, however, they agreed that they would also consider the regard for promotion and the “commercial viability” of projects; “the standard of the material and the technical competence”; “employment in Ireland including, if appropriate, use of the facilities of the National Film Studios”; “whether or not the production would otherwise happen if Board support were not forthcoming” and “the possible use of the finished product for theatrical exploitation” (01-15/03/82). The weight each would have in the assessment is never made clear, though, and neither is the assessment process itself. Furthermore, they decided that an expert (Fred Haines) would be hired to assess the scripts submitted, though, “in cases which the Board consider ap-

⁸ Given the tiny size of the film industry in Ireland at the time, it was almost unavoidable that one or more Board members had some kind of relationship with the projects under consideration. The minutes put extra care in emphasizing that, whenever a conflict of interest arose, the member(s) left the meeting before discussions started.

⁹ In a document entitled “Chief Executive’s Review of Activities of the Board” dated 1 December and included in the volume of minutes for 1981-1982, Algar shows at least some degree of self-criticism about these policies: “While not wishing to tie the Board with rigid decision making, I believe firmer guidelines in a variety of areas would aid our work and place us on a stronger footing, both within the industry and as progressive body within the commercial sector generally” (Algar 1982, 6).

¹⁰ The 1 March meeting was adjourned and continued on 15 March.

¹¹ On 1 February, the IFB rejected Kieran Hickey’s urgent application for full funding of *Afterwards* on the basis of the cap. The project was rejected again on May 14, though the specific reasons for the decision at that time are unknown. On neither occasion, however, does Hickey seem to have complained in the press as he did in 1981.

appropriate, they would commission a second opinion/assessment of a script from an assessor who would be paid a rate per script" (19/01/82).

However busy they were laying out policy guidelines, the extended Board did not forget for one moment about *Angel*. Starting 1 February, progress reports on the projects supported are routinely attached to the minutes for each meeting. The first of these reports points out that *Angel* "may run slightly over Budget" (01/02/82). By the time of the next meeting in March, the film was already expected to go £5,000 over budget, a derisory amount for a production budgeted at more than £500,000. Still, the Board rushed to send a letter to the MPCFI "expressing the Board's concern and enquiring how it is proposed to finance the overrun" (01-15/03/82).

The concern, if not suspicion, over *Angel* sharply contrasts with the enthusiasm about *The Outcasts*, in spite of the fact that as late as March 1982, with principal photography almost completed, Wynne-Simmons had no private funding for finishing the film yet. Undeterred by this, not only did the Board offer to "share security and repayment *pari passu*" with any investors willing to put money into the project, but they also allowed the filmmaker to cash his directorial fee of £4,000 (*ibidem*). Significantly, both decisions were taken before a progress report on the project was presented to the Board. Written by Grainne O'Shannon, who had visited the set on behalf of the IFB twice in February, the report notes that the crew was "very well organised" and experienced, and "receipts and invoices [agreed] with each other". Still, she remarks that she is not "an accountant nor an auditor" and advises them to send in one to check the books. She also points out that "considering the size of the budget, the salaries were rather generous", although the crew naturally did not agree (*ibidem*).

There followed a discussion about the role the Board should play in the distribution of *Angel* and *The Outcasts* and whatever films they could fund in the future. They resolved that they should support distribution, even though this was "primarily a matter of the production company" (*ibidem*), and postponed the discussion on how exactly this should be done to a meeting with a representative of the advertising agency AML London. Right after that, however, they approved an interest, security-free loan of £5,000 to Cathal Black for the promotion of *Our Boys* and passed a set of ad hoc rules for making distribution loans and, therefore, justifying the loan they had just arbitrarily made:

Additionally, the Board decided that in order to encourage some Independent film producers to undertake new productions, the Board might make an interest free loan available to enable those producers to complete the distribution and marketing of their previous productions and that such loans would be repayable against the proceeds of marketing and distributing those films. The Board decided that such loans would not exceed £5,000 per loan and a maximum of 3 might be made in 1982. (*Ibidem*)

3.2 *The second AIP boycott*

On 31 March, the AIP escalated the campaign against *Angel* yet another step by calling a general meeting at the time the film was scheduled for a trade premiere at the third Festival of Film of Television in the Celtic Countries in Wexford. The meeting was followed by a press release which, besides quoting part of the statement of 4 November, accused Boorman of using the Festival “to legitimise and give respectability to his activities in the Irish funding of the film”. Also, it reminded readers of Boorman’s alleged “contempt for Irish film makers” but remarked that the AIP had no dispute with Jordan, the crew and cast of *Angel* or C4 (Association of Independent Producers Ireland 1982).

The unofficial boycott on the screening of *Angel* had the support of the vast majority of the AIP members. Still, at least one of them protested it. In a resignation letter to the executive committee of the AIP dated 19 April, producer John Jeremy considers the boycott “as mean-spirited as anything I’ve encountered in twenty years in the business”. He also expresses his disappointment at the abandonment of the spirit of solidarity and camaraderie that had bound Irish filmmakers together and allowed them to work out “effective, pragmatic policies” which were still badly needed in the area of film distribution (Jeremy 1982).

Fed up with the AIP, Boorman, who had stopped attending IFB meetings in December, resigned from both the IFB and the NFSI on 2 April¹². Two days later, the Irish government closed down the studios. The Board met on 5 April and decided to ask the Minister for Industry and Energy to keep them open, as they had “facilities essential for film making [...] not available elsewhere in Ireland”¹³. Also, in a rather unprecedented decision, they agreed to ask Bob Quinn “to retract the statements” he had made about Boorman and the Board during the Festival and warned him that should he refuse to do so, they would take legal action against him (Irish Film Board 1982, 05/04/82).

¹² No comments on these absences are ever made in the minutes; however, his resignation allowed room to further express the Board’s unease with Boorman: “The Board agreed that the Chairman should write to the Minister suggesting that the person appointed to fill the vacancy [of Boorman] on the Board should have a knowledge of the industry and be prepared to make time available for the business of the Board” (Irish Film Board 1982, 03/05/82). The IFB would remain incomplete for several months after Boorman’s resignation. In December, casting director Nuala Moisselle was appointed to fill the vacancy. In January 1983, two new vacancies arose, as Algar had become CE in June and the one-year term he and MacBride had been appointed for came to an end (Rockett *et al.* 1987, 120). On the CE’s suggestion, the Minister for Industry and Energy appointed documentarian Louis Marcus and reappointed MacBride to the Board for another year. On 11 April 1983, the IFB held its first meeting with seven members in attendance.

¹³ Although beyond the scope of this paper, it should be pointed out that the deep uncertainty over the future of the NFSI recurs periodically in the IFB minutes for 1982-1983.

Despite the small conciliatory gesture towards Boorman, at the meeting they also agreed to write to Blackmore and remind him of his obligation to submit the distribution plan for approval and express disgust at how the IFB funding had been acknowledged in the credits, which had not been submitted either. Also, they approved a loan of up to £3,000 to finance Jordan's attendance to the Cannes Film Festival, should *Angel* be selected for it. It should also be noted that, out of the five funding applications considered, only Jordan's turned into a loan – Aisling Walsh, Oliver Jennings, the National Film Institute of Ireland and the Dublin Cinema Club were all given grants.

3.3 *Mirror opposites: the distribution of Angel and The Outcasts*

By May 1982, whereas an extrajudicial agreement with Quinn seemed likely, Blackmore had not yet replied to the reminder. The Board decided to turn to Sheamus Smith, one of Boorman's closest associates, who had "been appointed to manage the distribution of the film" (03/05/82), and offer him a personal loan of £1,250 to help him promote *Angel* at film festivals. On 14 May, however, the loan had to be deferred to the MPCFI, as Smith informed that he was no longer a partner in the company and neither could he accept the loan nor "answer the Board's queries" about *Angel* (14/05/82).

Maybe Smith was no longer a partner in the MPCFI, but there is little doubt that he was managing the distribution of *Angel*, which had a general release in Ireland on 14 May. Ten days later, the Board authorised him to make two extra copies of *Angel*, at a cost of £800 each, "to be recouped" from the MPCFI (24/05/83). On 18 June, the Board discussed a report submitted by Smith on worldwide distribution arrangements and the Irish box-office of the film. Perhaps noticing the contradiction between his response to the loan offer and the report, the Board demanded further information on his position in the MPCFI and the promotion plan for *Angel*.

In the meantime, although C4's willingness to advance £47,000 for the completion and promotion of *The Outcasts* is noted on 5 April, by late May, the Board had not yet seen the film nor received any information on promotion and sales. On 24 May, they resolved to ask Wynne-Simmons for information on these matters and a copy of *The Outcasts*. The filmmaker's response is unknown, though one can easily deduce that it was not what the Board was expecting, as, on 18 June, they "noted the possibility of an additional investment requirement to cover promotion for the film" and their "concern with regard to obtaining adequate credits setting out the Board's involvement in the finance of the film" (18/06/82). Despite the concern, on 12 July, the IFB released "its ownership of the copyright to '*The Outcasts*,' on the understanding that its charge over the copyright gave it adequate security" (12/07/83). Still, it refused to allow distribution to "remain in the hands of Tolmayax Limited", which Wynne-Simmons would have also asked, "until such time

as a release print is available” (12/07/83). Two weeks later, the Board took over the promotion of *The Outcasts* and hired Michael Dwyer and Donald Taylor-Black, who had recently “submitted a paper to the Board” on film promotion, to “put together a promotional package for the film” (26/07/83).

Funnily enough, at the July 26 meeting, Tiernan MacBride, who along with Bob Quinn had led the campaign against John Boorman, was rebuked for having sent the Board a letter as chairman of the AIP. Besides being inappropriate, the letter proved that he would have been leaking “information on matters discussed at Board Meetings to non-members of the Board” (i.e., AIP members) and, therefore, was at least as guilty of a conflict of interest and breach of the obligations for Board members stated in the Irish Film Board Act as Boorman could have been (26/07/82).

Relations between the IFB and the MPCCI deteriorated further in the latter half of 1982. On 12 July, the IFB decided against covering the £5,000 overrun. By mid-October, the London premiere of the film had been arranged for 4 November, and RTÉ had purchased the broadcasting rights for Ireland. On 18 October, however, the CE complained that the MPCCI had not given any information about the sale, and the IFB “re-emphasised its concern at the absence of information and co-operation from the Motion Picture Company of Ireland” (18/10/82).

Angel had a press screening in London on 1 November. The IFB, which, by this time, was much aware of the paramount importance of distribution and promotion¹⁴, decided that Robin O’Sullivan and the CE would go to London to attend the event and meet with representatives of C4 and the MPCCI to discuss the overrun. At the meeting, C4 would have put forward a proposal “to handle theatrical and television distribution and have first charge on returns to cover their funding of the contingency and overrun costs”, “outlined their plans for distribution of the film” and offered to submit “details of which to the Board” (03/11/82). There is no reference in the minutes about what the MPCCI representatives said, but we find it highly significant that, on 3 November, the CE “was authorised to write, on the instructions of the Board’s solicitors, to Mr. Enda Marren, solicitor for the Motion Picture Company of Ireland, to consolidate the position of the Board” (*ibidem*).

When the Board first met in 1983, the MPCCI had already replied. Although there is no copy of the letter in the IFI Archive, the minutes make it explicit that the Board did not find it agreeable so they decided they would sue the production company for breach of contract (Irish Film Board 1983,

¹⁴ This awareness was also aroused by a report by Oliver Jennings on distribution on the West of Ireland and a series of meetings with Ronnie Saunders, Tom Nicholas, Mary Jane Walshe, Leo Ward and Kevin Anderson in September 1982.

10/01/83). The decision was, however, never implemented, as the IFB's solicitors advised them against it (07/03/83).

Meanwhile, there was clearly something going on with *The Outcasts*. On 20 September 1982, the Board discussed Wynne-Simmons's request for a further grant of £15,000 to blow out the film to 35 mm. A 16 mm copy of the film was screened for the press on November 5 and at the Cork Film Festival one week later¹⁵; however, by early December, the director was asking "to re-shoot an optical" on the grounds that the producers were planning "to enter it in the Berlin Film Festival" (Irish Film Board 1982, 06/12/82). Although the minutes provide no information on the Board's decision, we can infer that the grant was eventually given, as a 35 mm copy was submitted to the Moscow Film Festival in the spring of 1983 (Irish Film Board 1983, 16/05/83).

What the minutes do provide, though, is a rather detailed account of the successive cycles of hope and disappointment that, despite the Board's best efforts, surrounded *The Outcasts* for most of 1983. On 10 January, the Board was informed that the film had been accepted for the Berlin Film Festival. The statement had to be retracted at the 7 March meeting, where nonetheless *The Outcasts* was said to have been "entered for the Cannes Film Festival" (07/03/83). As entrance failed to turn into acceptance, on 11 April, the CE had to admit that the French festival had also rejected it. Still, the minutes for the meeting report that *The Outcasts* had just been screened at the fourth International Festival of Film and Television in the Celtic Countries in Glasgow. Also, after months of conversations with domestic and international distributors, one distributor, Petro Films, had agreed to distribute the film internationally.

At the 16 May meeting, the Board was informed that *The Outcasts* would premiere commercially in Ireland at the Dublin Metropole. Wildly enthused at the prospect of a theatrical release of the film, they "agreed that a strong publicity effort should surround" it (16/05/83). By July the Board's expectations were running even higher, as *The Outcasts* was screened in Moscow on the 9th and, according to the minutes for the 11th, scheduled for projection at the New York Film Festival in September. The publicity effort was further discussed on 11 July, when they decided that "a detailed promotional campaign" would "be undertaken in conjunction with the Irish opening of the film in September, the cost of which will be supported by the Board" and "authorised the Chief Executive to investigate the possibility and expense of arranging simultaneous openings of the film in Cork and Galway" (11/07/83). Furthermore, on 25 July, they were told that there were distribution offers from Australia, the UK and the US and resolved that the Board "should organise a press conference to promote the film" (25/07/83).

¹⁵ We can only wonder why the minutes make reference to the press preview and leave out the Cork Film Festival screening.

In spite of the high expectations, by early October, the film had not been released in Ireland yet. On 3 October, the Board was told that *The Outcasts* was to have a press screening on the 5th and open at the Metropole on the 14th. Also, they agreed that “the possibility of producing a trailer for the film may be considered in the light of the success of the Dublin opening” (03/10/83). *The Outcasts*, however, did not premiere until the 21st and, to the Board’s dismay, turned out to be a commercial failure and was withdrawn one week later after its release.

The Board put the blame on the distributor for not having confirmed the final release date “until three days beforehand” (07/11/83), which would have “caused difficulties in relation to the publicity effort” (21/10/83). Nevertheless, they decided that “a meeting should be sought with Leo Ward of Abbey Films to discuss the matter further and to seek his advice on distribution generally. The Board also agreed that the advice of an independent expert should be sought in relation to the possible release of the film in a venue outside Dublin, e.g. Cork, Limerick or Galway” (07/11/83). Although there are no data on whether this advice was actually sought, *The Outcasts* was released in Cork and Galway on 9 December, supported by an advertising campaign in the local press and street posters (05/12/83).

We can only speculate whether it was the impossibility of taking legal action against the MPCFI, the resignation of Boorman from the IFB and the NFSI or the unacknowledged admission that *Angel* was actually the only IFB-financed project that was making money and building a good reputation for Irish film¹⁶ that ultimately eased the conflict between the production company and the Board. Whatever the reason, and although some issues did persist, relations did certainly improve in 1983.

On 7 March, the Board was informed that *Angel* was still being shown in London and had been sold to Germany and America. Also, Jordan had just written to tell that *Angel* had won an award at the Antwerp Film Festival. Still, the CE complained that there was no “cohesive marketing policy for this production” so he was authorised “to come to an agreement with Channel 4 and the Director of the film regarding suitable film festivals and marketplaces for the promotion of the film” and to reply to Jordan “congratulating him on the success of “Angel” at the Antwerp Film Festival and indicating that [he] would be willing to meet with him to discuss promotion” (07/03/83). By the following meeting, he had already written to the director,

¹⁶ Money and public relations were already pressing concerns for the Board in late 1982. Faced with the prospects of an even more limited budget for 1983 and no recoupment from the projects backed in 1982, they were lobbying for tax incentives that could attract private funding into film production, and “bring the nature of the Board’s activities to a wider audience [...] in order that there is no over-expectation [...] of the capabilities of the Board in achieving the objectives which we have set ourselves” (Algar 1982, 6).

and C4 had “authorised to co-coordinate arrangements in relation to Festival screenings of the film” (11/04/83).

Although most of the pages in the minutes for the meetings held in May 1983 have to do with the complaints the AIP made to the Board on 2 May¹⁷, those for 16 May report that *Angel* might have received “a distribution offer in the United States” (16/05/83). The deal was indeed confirmed by C4 a few days later, as *Angel* was acquired by Columbia Classics for US distribution. There are no details about the agreement, which Algar committed to share as soon as he got them from the British television. The references to *Angel* in the minutes for 1983, however, come to an end on 11 July, where a proposal from C4 to make a trailer to help sell the film internationally was discussed and a contribution of £1,000 for the trailer was approved.

4. Conclusion

When the documents about the *Angel* controversy in the MacBride and Algar Collections in the IFI Archive are put side-by-side, it turns into a bitter, sorry story where all the parties involved are as guilty of putting their own interests before those of the Irish film industry, twisting the law to favour these interests and taking up the mantle of the nation to legitimise their self-interest and discredit the other parties’.

It is true that, in accordance with the Irish Film Board Act, the three-member IFB should not have agreed to support *Angel* if a quorum could not be reached without John Boorman; and it certainly could not, as under no circumstances could the British filmmaker take part in a decision-making process that concerned a project he was so deeply involved with. In our opinion, O’Sullivan, Heelan and Boorman might have agreed on the public funding of *Angel* beforehand and were expecting to make it legal by a vote in a seven-member Board. The three-member IFB scenario made it impossible unless a change in legislation was made, but they proceeded anyway. Then, they went on to turn down all the funding applications from Irish independent filmmakers – a decision that was legal, but not sensible, even more so when one takes into account that the AIP and the IFTG were already angry at the Board.

The rejection of these submissions and, especially, *The Outcasts*, winner of the Arts Council film script award, added insult to injury and ushered in the AIP boycott on the Board and a vicious media war against John Boor-

¹⁷ The AIP complained that the Board had not “built on existing film activity” in Ireland nor given any grants to Irish independent filmmakers. Instead, they had mostly invested in “London-based companies” and conventional 35 mm films. The 50% investment cap was also deemed as “unreasonable”, as Irish filmmakers had it very difficult to “secure additional finance in Ireland due to the lack of incentives for investors in film production” (Irish Film Board, 1983, 02/05/83).

man. As Board member and managing director of the loathed NFSI, he was publicly maligned as a British carpet bagger and made largely responsible for all the evils of Irish cinema. Never a diplomat, the filmmaker retaliated with insult and belittling, which made things even worse and eventually left him no choice but to resign from the NFSI and the IFB.

We cannot tell for sure whether the rather unexpected loan to *The Outcasts* in December 1981 was intended as a last resource measure to try to appease the AIP. If so, it was too little, too late, as, by then, the independents were already fully intent on taking over the IFB and getting rid of Boorman, which they managed to achieve in early 1982. As partial as their predecessors, the members of the extended Board were, however, clever enough to develop a kind of legal framework to support most of their funding decisions, although on some occasions they either made the decision first and developed the supporting rules later, or took decisions that went against rules previously agreed on or even the Irish Film Board Act itself. However, as the AIP and IFTG were represented on the Board and many filmmakers shunned in 1981 got funding in 1982, the extended IFB remained controversy-free for about year and a half and could do things that would have likely been regarded as unforgivable sins had they been done by Boorman, Heelan and O'Sullivan.

Many decisions of the extended IFB for 1982-1983 can be explained by a combination of resentment towards John Boorman and an erroneous conviction that *The Outcasts*, if properly supported, would put Irish cinema on the map. That the film was being written and directed by a British filmmaker endorsed by a Board member, who was also involved in the project, and produced by the same British television producing *Angel* was irrelevant to many independents – *The Outcasts* was an Irish film, whereas *Angel* was not and, therefore, should have not ever been supported by an Irish film board. Still, rather than risk to appeal the decision in court, once they took over the IFB, they accepted it as a fait accompli and adopted a strategy of setting as many obstacles as possible in *Angel's* way, making things as easy as possible for *The Outcasts* and hoping that all the wind they could take out of the sails of *Angel* would go into *The Outcasts*.

The wind, however, was not to go into those sails. Not easily dismayed, the extended Board kept pouring public money into *The Outcasts* throughout 1982-83, in spite of repeated delays, scarcity of reliable information about the production, evidence of too high salaries, non-commitment of private investment, festival and distribution rejection and, last but not least, a disastrous run at the Irish box office. All in all, *The Outcasts*, budgeted at £82,000 in December 1981 and £109,000 just a month later, ended up costing £130,000 (Rockett 1996, 32), of which a minimum of £57,000 were granted by the IFB, which was also responsible for marketing and promotion. The large overrun, however, did not seem to worry the extended IFB – or at least not as much as the £5,000 that *Angel* went over budget.

The Outcasts won seven awards at film festivals in Brussels, Geneva, Oporto and San Remo (Wynne-Simmons 2018); however, the IFB has not ever recouped its investment and the film was soon forgotten. Besides, it was the first and last feature film directed by Wynne-Simmons, who has since tried his luck in other artistic forms. By contrast, *Angel* launched the Irish film industry and the career of the most successful Irish filmmaker ever and, most importantly, allowed the IFB to make some money out of an investment in a feature film. As said before, we do believe that, by mid-1983, the IFB started to acknowledge that, in spite of all the bad blood, *Angel* and Neil Jordan were exactly the kind of project and filmmaker Ireland needed to kick off a film industry.

We would like to have finished by saying that the IFB learned from their mistakes and, in the following years, tried to offset the losses of films like *The Outcasts* investing in films like *Angel*. That was not the case, though. By May 1983, the AIP was complaining that the IFB was not Irish enough, supportive enough or artistic enough. Even though the debt was already mounting, in 1983, the Board contributed £200,000 to *Anne Devlin* (Pat Murphy 1984) and £90,500 to *Pigs* (Cathal Black 1984). Both were considered pretentious by critics and flopped badly at the box-office, as did most of the feature films supported by the IFB over the following three years. In 1987, the government, disappointed at the negligible ROI – £106,000 out of £1,247,000 (Flynn & Brereton 2007, 183) – of the IFB-funded films closed it down. When it was re-established in 1993, all the parties understood that a film like *Angel* was not only as Irish as one like *The Outcasts*, but also essential for the survival of Irish cinema and, especially, the IFB. Whether they liked it or not, very few could afford to ignore that it was the international success of another Jordan film, *The Crying Game* (1992), that ultimately made the Irish government come around to re-establishing the Irish Film Board.

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