

# No Simple Answers and No Simple Narratives

An Interview with Director Cathy Brady

BY PAUL RISKER  
*Independent Film Scholar*

Two sisters are reunited when Kelly (Nika McGuigan), missing and feared dead, returns home. Lauren's (Nora-Jane Noone) conflicting feelings of relief and anger are complicated by her sister's mental fragility, and the intense bond of a shared childhood trauma (Fig. 1). Living on the Irish border in a community that was torn apart by the Troubles, Kelly and Lauren's anxieties are as political as they are personal, and her return unsettles her sister's peace at home and in the community.

Irish filmmaker Cathy Brady's feature debut *Wildfire* (2019) is an emotionally moving and unsettling piece of filmmaking. "There are no simple answers and there are no simple narratives" says the director, whose story looks at the complexity of truth. The wounds of a country ripped apart by religious and political violence are not fully healed, and Brady avoids a simplification of the interaction between past, present, and future. She instead nestles into the complexity of how personal and social truths are communicated, and the different forms of truth that comprise this personal journey of closure for the sisters.

Following the screenings of *Wildfire* at the 2019 editions of the Toronto International Film Festival and the BFI London Film Festival, Brady discussed with *MSJ* her interest in the connection between the mind, body, and spirit. She also spoke about the appeal of complicated characters and the magical nature of film that is influenced by one's life experiences.

**PR:** *Wildfire* strikes me as a film that will be difficult to forget because there are scenes that leave a lasting impression. One of those scenes occurs in the bar, where a playful encounter between the two sisters and two men suddenly turns violent, and then ends abruptly. Throughout the film those key moments, as in life, are often small and concise.

**CB:** ...The structure of how the film was made, it has a different DNA to something that I'm sitting down at the laptop and hitting my story beats, because that's what the book says you do at this point. When it's built and grounded in research, and hearing real stories, and you're trying to feed that through, it sometimes will take a looser organic shape. For some people that can be unsatisfying because they're so used to subconsciously thinking, "Okay, so they have to pay this off; where's that going to pay off?"

These men live in the town and the girls confront them, but there's not going to be a massive retribution. Their biggest retribution is going to be dancing and going, "Fuck you" in the bar in their own way, and that's it – that's the smallness and the truth at the moment (Fig. 2).

They're not going to go in there and set the world on fire. They're not going to all of a sudden expose them in the papers because it's not a conspiracy thriller. It's a very personal story about what personal retribution feels like, and that can just be the freedom to stand up and say, "I'm not afraid of you." It's confronting the bully in the school yard and that's all they get to do. There's no massive satisfaction because they're chucked out, but there's a freedom in that. The scale of it might feel very small, but in someone's life, that's massive.

**PR:** What you convey through this story is the tentative nature of peace, because there are those in Northern Ireland who see the Good Friday Agreement as a betrayal. One of the interesting ideas that emerges out of the drama is the idea of truth and honesty. There's a



**Fig. 1** | Set photograph featuring Lauren (Nora-Jane Noone) and Kelly (Nika McGuigan) from the nightclub scene where a playful encounter turns violent. Photograph by Aidan Monaghan, 2019.

time and place to be honest, but we must be aware of the sensitivity surrounding the truth.

**CB:** That's interesting about truth and who's ready to hear it. I come from a family where again, do you really need to speak your mind, is that helpful? I've grown up questioning that, and the truth is important, but sometimes you just realise that for some people the truth is just too difficult to hear. They're not ready in that part of their life to hear whatever truth it is, and that has been a hard lesson for me to learn.

There's something about the mother's story and Kelly wanting to know the truth, and how that's all that matters. She thinks if she somehow gets the truth, she'll be healed, but the event has still happened. Veronica [their aunt] has tried to suppress it and Lauren is terrified of it because she's so close to the truth. It's very difficult to know about secrets and families, and how hidden the truth is. I do feel that somehow it's different for each of us.

For the likes of Veronica, I don't know if she will ever come to terms that the mother's death was through suicide because it's too difficult for her to take on, whereas for Lauren and Kelly, it's something that they need to assimilate. But equally by assimilating that, they also need to know that she loved them the best she could, and that's the real truth, rather than she died by suicide.

The bigger truth is the woman was struggling and it just meant that her love might not have been as supportive as other parents, but it didn't mean that her love was any less. It was just everything she could give, and so it's also understanding what the truth is - it's the truth in retribution and justice. All of those things are so interesting and difficult, and the minute you try to make it black and white, you're in trouble because the truth is very complex.

**PR:** In an early scene, Kelly startled by a barking dog runs off and passes a placard that reads, "Prepared for peace. Ready for war." From the beginning, you establish the murky grey reality of the country's past and present.

**CB:** Have you ever heard of double bind? It's a therapy term where you say one thing, but your behaviour means another thing. You push them away, but you pull them in at the same time.

They say there's a link to double bind theory in schizophrenia, in terms of family dynamics. A child doesn't know how to read a situation because they're too young, so there's a split, and there's something in the behaviour that can cause schizophrenia in later life. There's something double bind about, "Prepared for peace. Ready for war," something passive-aggressive and untrustworthy, but equally it's promising, and it's very complex.





**Fig. 2** | Lauren and Kelly. Photograph by Aidan Monaghan, 2019.

**PR:** I found the scene in the warehouse when Lauren is on the verge of a meltdown to be disturbing. From my personal experiences, it felt terrifyingly genuine, and I hope that audiences appreciate the insight the film offers into mental health and anxiety, and encourages compassion and understanding through empathy.

**CB:** ... There's this guy in Northern Ireland, he runs this Intergenerational Trauma Conference every year. He'd heard about *Wildfire* and he maybe wanted to talk about the film in terms of the conference. He sent me an article by Marshall Rosenberg, for who it's important to realise that it's not an illness, it's an injury. And it's an injury that can be healed; we just don't know how to do it yet. There's a lack of understanding, discussion, and communication, and it's true that we will only get it through compassion.

The conference is a way to start the conversation about trauma and trauma recovery, but we're only beginning to scratch the surface, and what you're saying, I think a lot of it's coming from fear. People will go to the doctor if they have a sprained ankle or broken leg, they'll go straight to A&E, but there's such a lack of understanding of how the mind works. Even the idea of it being so rooted in the past, and then when you're hearing of inter-generational trauma, you realise that it's not even your own, it's passed on. We're yet to understand, and it feels that Marshall Rosenberg's work is starting to put words and discussion into

these things. But it's difficult when the country is being led by people who aren't willing to think in that way, because they're thinking about profits before people. And when it comes to mental health facilities, they're constantly losing funding.

Psychosis often can be a spiritual awakening, and there are all these these different areas that we don't know how to talk about yet. We're so used to one vision, and the power of storytelling is that it just allows us to break down some barriers and step inside someone's shoes.

Lauren's story, especially in the warehouse and how close she was to the brink, she feels unseen and unheard by the world she's in, and judged. But not only that, she's denying part of herself that wants to speak the truth and that's eating away at her. It's difficult to contain that all in your body without it coming out in some way. So I'm fascinated by the mind, body, and spirit connection, and complicated characters. There are no simple answers and there are no simple narratives.

**PR:** Could we also challenge the idea of a film being in a permanent form as an over-simplification? The way we respond to a film is influenced by our life experiences, and who we are in the moment. If our response to a film is flexible, then is a film an impermanent form?

**CB:** Isn't that the power of sitting in the cinema and witnessing a film? There has been many a film I've absolutely adored, and



**Fig. 3** | On the *Wildfire* set with Nika McGuigan, director Cathy Brady, and Nora-Jane Noone. Photograph by Aidan Monaghan, 2019.

the company I've been in absolutely hated it. *Junebug* (2005) was one of those films - I loved it. I was laughing, crying, and the company I was in thought that it was the biggest load of shit. I was like, "What!" I couldn't understand it, but sometimes for whatever reason, it just touches something in you, and I think you're right that it's about human behaviour.

The films that really intrigue me, there's a gap between what is said, what you see and your own understanding. I prefer films where I am asked to step in, and it's not just being an observer. There's something quite active about that because you're having to piece information like you would if you were in a room and you're trying to read the situation, and piece it together.

It's funny because there are other films, and I remember someone saying, "Oh, you should watch Robert Bresson's work, I think you'd love it," and I sat back and I couldn't get it. "What's wrong with me? I just don't understand what it is." Sometimes there's a magic to why stories work for you, and how films will find you at a certain time. But when they do, it feels very wholesome and pure, and it feels like you're on a wave with something.

You can also tell from the first few frames of a film, and those moments are incredibly special because there's just something about time. I remember the film *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze, and I knew from the first minutes of sitting in that cinema,

the sound of the music and the first images. It was like a holy connection, but it's not like it's a mind-blowing film. There was a sense of loneliness that just spoke to me so fucking loudly, that I felt so sad and so happy, and so touched. But I've never seen that film again because I'm so afraid of not having the same connection.

**PR:** I remember the loneliness of *Lost in Translation* (2003) speaking to me when I watched it in the cinema, and yet it failed to resonate as powerfully on a repeat viewing. And another film, *Sun Choke* (2015), I remember the first viewing being more focused on the sensory experience, whereas repeat viewings became more narrative driven.

**CB:** It's a dark magic that we'll never understand. You're right, I never really thought about cinema being so malleable. I suppose art is malleable as well, just because it's captured on, well now it's a DCP [Digital Cinema Package], it doesn't mean that it doesn't change. When you think of Ken Loach's films, it was very much state of the nation, and you had to make a point, and you had to make it now. It's hard to make a piece of work that is so incredibly timeless.

**PR:** It's important to remember that to experience stories is a privilege, because we will never have access to or the opportunity to watch every film that we'd like to see.



**CB:** ... Covid has taken from us a lot of things that we definitely took for granted – even just the cinema experience. Never did I think that we'd be premiering to a virtual audience. Again, we just got so accustomed to the norm that we forgot the privilege of sitting in a darkened room and sharing a story with strangers. When the opportunity comes and I'm able to sit in a cinema again, I hope I don't take that for granted because I definitely did.

**PR:** And our interests such as the arts feeds our sense of self.

**CB:** Totally. A sense of self and also a sense of purpose. Sometimes it's difficult to know what purpose is, but through other people, hearing and seeing their stories, it can sometimes give you a sense of connection and purpose again.

**PR:** We can find it easier to feel empathy for characters in a story than people in everyday life, where the stakes are real. Cinema offers us an opportunity to perhaps confront the difficult experiences that we would otherwise retreat from, that feeds our own self-awareness.

**CB:** Well, the other thing that stories and cinema offers is it can be more real because you can see a private moment with a character that often people will never reveal to anyone. You get to journey into a private moment or a public moment, and you get to understand what they're hiding. Through that you get a sense of what we're all hiding, and that's where the empathy comes from.

Cinema allows the opportunity to again feel a connection and to feel heard. It's not like a book, there's something when you witness it, when you see a person do something and see a person live through it. A book we're fully using our imagination, and there is something about cinema that feels captured.

**PR:** You seem to understand when to be in close and when to be distant, especially in the penultimate aerial shot of the sisters, where distance is more effective than being in a tight close-up. And in an earlier scene when they're sat in the garden, you choose to cut away from the two characters as they talk.

**CB:** The shot in the garden for example, asks you to sit there with them. It probably held a little longer than it should, but the idea is, that's it, that's all they've got, that's the view. How would you live in that experience? How would you experience that and the beauty just beyond that fence? And the quietness and awkwardness of that moment, and not knowing what to say. The fact that you're not looking at their faces, you're somehow sitting there with them, and you're looking at that view.

There was a Norwegian film I'd seen a couple of years ago, and every so often they would use an aerial shot, and it really blew my mind its power. I remember there was one scene, this nineteen-year-old guy, who shouldn't be a father just yet and his baby has a dirty nappy. He's in the car park and he's panicking because he doesn't know what to do. Instead of being down there with him changing the nappy, all of a sudden it went to top shot

and you were looking down. You were watching people look at him and make judgements about him, and there was something about the God's eye view that made me think, "Oh my God, I can see how people work, and they don't understand how difficult this moment is for him."

I was interested about somehow bringing that language into *Wildfire*. I felt there was a certain idea of fate within the film that I wanted to play with. On some level these girls are trying to break a karmic cycle of some kind, and there's something about this God's eye view. Even in the music there's a certain sense of fate and the hauntingness of the voice, that I felt like the mother was with them, and somehow they had journey to this point in order to overcome something.

So there was a presence about the God's eye shot that would say the mother is released in a sense and the girls are released, but equally from this viewpoint we see that these girls are walking towards help. Are we capable of giving the help that they need, and that's something that the higher shot provides, something beyond our own human perspective. It's broader also in sense of time and how things work.

**PR:** Films can remind us that there is often a lack of a beginning, a middle, and an end, rather chapters of our lives bleed into one another.

**CB:** Every so often I think, "Aren't humans strange and wonderful?" [Laughs] There's so much about storytelling that reminds us of our lives because we are all living our own characters, our own worlds and our own stories (Fig. 3).

I believe you come to life with a sense of who you are and what you're about, and not everybody gets to live that purpose. But when you find the right people, or you find the right interest, there's something that starts to click, and your sense of purpose comes alive. Through characters we get to see what happens when they diverge from their sense of purpose, or when they drive towards it, how their world changes, and there's something about that that's interesting. ■