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Peripheral Fissions? Soap Operas and Identity in Scotland, Ireland and the Basque Country

Introduction

This paper centres on three domestically produced European soap operas launched in the course of the nineties, whose common characteristic is that the languages in which they are spoken—either exclusively or primarily—belong to that category known as “minority languages.” The concept of a minority language is, of course, to some extent a controversial one.¹ A language like Catalan, for example, may be a minority language within the Spanish state, where it is spoken by around fifteen per cent of the total population, but it is spoken by a *majority* (over sixty per cent) within Catalonia, and many Catalans react angrily to attempts from Madrid to ascribe it “minority language” status.² The definition of minority language which I am using here is that such a language is spoken as a mother tongue or native language (as opposed to a learned language) by a clear minority of the population of the political unit responsible for its defence, maintenance or promotion in the geographical area in question, whatever form

that political unit might take. Using this definition, the three languages in question here— Gaelic in Scotland, Irish in the Republic of Ireland and Basque (euskara) in the Basque Country (Euskadi)—clearly enjoy minority status whether the political unit in question be defined as a “region” in the cases of Scotland or the Basque Country, or a nation-state as in the case of the Republic of Ireland, being spoken by around one, two and five per cent of the population of those units respectively.

The three productions covered in this paper are the Gaelic-language production *Machair* in Scotland, the Irish-language production *Ros na Rún* in Ireland, and the Basque-language production *Goenkale* in the Basque Country (“machair” is a type of grassland bordering on a sandy beach, “ros na rún” translates into English as both “headland of secrets” and “headland of sweethearts,” and “goenkale” is a name given in Basque to a street which goes up a hill). The Basque case is introduced here to operate as a control in order to minimise the possibility of reaching over-hasty conclusions regarding either the Scottish or Irish cases by focussing exclusively on their relative status as “nation state” and “region” and thereby failing to place them within a broader perspective. As regards their language use, while *Machair* always included a certain amount of English in every episode, and all Gaelic was subtitled for non-Gaelic-speaking viewers, both *Goenkale* and *Ros na Rún* are entirely in their respective minority languages, though a subtitled version of the latter can also be obtained.

These three productions have had varying fates. Launched in 1993, *Machair* went out once a week on a seasonal basis and, after a triumphal and highly promising start, ran somewhat fitfully for a further six years before finally petering out rather ignominiously

in 1999. *Goenkale* was launched in 1994 on a five-day-a-week seasonal basis, and is still running to this day, having now clocked up well over a thousand episodes. Following a brief outing in 1992, *Ros na Rún* started in earnest as a genuine soap opera in 1996 on a twice-a-week basis, and is also still continuing. Of the three, *Machair* had by far the highest production values and, with its extensive location shooting on Harris, was also by a large margin the most expensive to produce (see below). The main focus of this article will be an attempt to explain why, despite these apparent “technical” advantages, it failed to thrive in the long term while the other two much more “bargain-basement” productions are continuing to flourish.

(There are, of course, other minority-language soap operas in Europe, such as the long-running *Pobol y Cwm* in Wales which began in 1974,³ but I have chosen to concentrate on these three due to the relative closeness of their starting dates. The Galician-language *Mareas vivas* in Galicia, Spain,⁴ does not qualify as a minority-language soap using the criteria outlined here.)

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework within which this analysis will be developed is, broadly speaking, neo-Gramscian hegemony theory, a framework whose applicability to soap operas in general I argued for in detail in an earlier analysis of the new European soaps of the 1990s.⁵ My starting premise is, therefore, not only that all culture is political, but that in contemporary western societies culture—in particular popular culture—is the main arena in which political (or more precisely ideological) struggle takes place on a day-to-

day basis (hence the particular appropriateness of such an approach to the study of soaps). It is necessary first, therefore, briefly to consider the three countries studied—Ireland, Scotland and the Basque country—as polities. In the following sections, I will be dealing with such concepts as the nation and the state, and indeed what is often called “national identity.” My use of these terms does not, of course, imply any acceptance of “nations” or “national identity” as something which unequivocally exists in any material or taken-for-granted way, let alone in any kind of essentialist fashion. Though the concept of “national identity” is a deep-rooted and indeed powerful one in contemporary societies in both political and cultural practice, it emerges from and is sustained by a complex set of both discourses and practices by which it is overdetermined and which are fundamentally contingent in nature. They—and the “national identity” which they sustain (and which, therefore, certainly “exists” to that extent)—are, like all discourses and practices, sites of ongoing negotiation and contestation, and are therefore the bearers of multiple and often conflicting meanings, and are susceptible to change.⁶

The Political Situation

The Republic of Ireland has, of course, been an independent state since 1922 (a situation which has not, however, prevented the continuation of strong economic and cultural influences from the UK, above all England). Despite having achieved and consolidated its own statehood on a political level, discourses of uncompleted nationhood—of nationhood as an unfinished product—still circulate reasonably widely (if now mostly informally). These mainly take the form of irredentist claims on the Six Counties

which—despite the relatively recent official abandonment of such claims at a political level—nonetheless continue to be extant in both the Republic of Ireland and among certain sections of the population of Northern Ireland.

The Basques belong to the category sometimes referred to as “stateless nations,” in other words, groups enjoying a strong sense of individual (or differential) nationality—of which language is often an important factor⁷—but lacking their own state apparatus, and indeed being incorporated within a much larger state which at least some members of the stateless nation will to some extent perceive as alien. As a result of the political processes taking place in Spain since the death of Franco in 1975, the Basque Country now has significant experience of devolved powers—specifically since 1980, if we take the date of the first autonomous elections as our starting point⁸—its so-called “autonomous” parliament having control over a wide range of issues, including—crucially for this paper—education. A strong sense of uncompleted or truncated nationhood can also be found in certain areas of Basque culture and politics—the feeling of belonging to a greater non-integrated Basque “nation” some members of which are physically located in the neighbouring Spanish region of Navarre (Nafarroa) and above all French Basque Country (Iparralde), both of these regions being at least partly Basque-speaking. Indeed, it is these three areas together which constitute the so-called Euskal Herria, the Basque name for the territory of the whole Basque nation, as opposed to Euskadi (the Spanish Basque Country), the name of merely one of its components.

Scotland has also been a “stateless nation” since 1707, and has only recently achieved any kind of devolved status with the setting up of the Scottish Parliament in

1997. There is no sense of national “amputation” in Scottish culture, no feeling that any part of the Scottish nation has yet to be integrated into the homeland, and there is therefore no irredentism of any kind, official or unofficial. There is, however, a strong and if anything increasing sense of national difference and indeed of nationhood reasserted, and discourses of eventual, if not impending statehood, circulate widely in Scottish society.⁹

The Linguistic Situation

English is by far the dominant language in Ireland, and is the language of all its major cities. Genuinely native speakers of Irish are limited mostly to areas along the west coast, the so-called Gaeltacht. Since official sources relating to minority-language speakers often use rather loose categories which conflate various levels of fluency and thereby tend to overstate the number of native speakers, reliable figures can be difficult to come by, but the figure of sixty thousand—or around two per cent of the population—appears to be a generally accepted one.¹⁰ Despite its weak numerical status, however, Irish has historically been linked, as part of a clearly defined political project, to notions of both cultural distinctiveness and of nationhood—particularly in the so-called period of nationalist consensus from the late nineteen-twenties until the late nineteen-fifties¹¹—and is an obligatory subject in Irish schools to this day. Even now it is seen as an important part of what is currently understood as Irish distinctiveness: as Iarfhlaith Watson points out, “To many the perpetuation of Irish is fundamental to the survival of the concept of national identity.”¹² Thus the visitor arriving at Dublin airport, for example, is faced with

the apparently contradictory situation whereby a significant mobilisation of Irish in the sphere of official (as opposed to more broadly public) communication in street signs, traffic information and the like, appears to co-exist easily with the near-impossibility of finding anyone actually speaking this language, and all general public information and communication is in English. But the contradiction is only apparent. The function of this highly visible deployment of Irish is not to communicate linguistically with an Irish-speaking community, but to ideologically signal difference, elsewhere, specifically non-Englishness/Britishness, despite the ubiquity of the actual shared language.

Although its health outside the Gaeltacht appears to be a cause of more or less on-going concern in the Irish media, and young people in particular often express their frustration at being obliged to learn this language (invariably the subject of press comment as the publication of yearly exam results draws near), the preservation of Irish enjoys high levels of support in Irish society, particularly among the older generations.¹³

Castilian (or Spanish) is also very much the dominant language in the Basque Country—and is absolutely dominant in the large cities, where Basque died out in the early years of the twentieth century¹⁴—and there are virtually no monolingual Basque speakers at all, the few that remain being confined to the very old. Nonetheless Castilian is less hegemonic than English in Ireland and Scotland. Basque is still spoken as a native language by around twenty-five per cent of the population, living mostly in rural or coastal areas, some 440,000 people out of a total population in the region of 1.8 million.¹⁵ Since the arrival of devolution in 1980 Basque has been at the centre of a wide-ranging project of reasserted nationhood, driven mainly by the Basque National

Party which, despite considerable efforts to unseat it by the main all-Spain parties, has been in power ever since. Following the Linguistic Normalisation Act of 1982 a Standard Basque has been established (*euskara batua*), and a process of “*euskaldunisation*”—of gradual extension of the Basque-speaking population, “*euskaldun*” being the Basque term for a speaker of “*euskara*”—is underway with strong governmental support, particularly via the Basque-medium schools known as “*ikastolak*.” Despite considerable reluctance and lack of enthusiasm among many young Basques, there has been some increase in the numbers of those able to understand and speak Basque.

As in the case of Ireland, English is likewise the absolutely dominant language in Scotland, with Gaelic—having by optimistic estimates around sixty-five thousand native speakers¹⁶—spoken by just over one per cent of the population, Gaelic-speaking communities being located mostly on the Western Isles (though the official boundaries of the Scottish *Gaidhealtachd*—the area where Gaelic is “officially” spoken—stretch beyond these, there are now few native speakers of Gaelic on mainland Scotland, other than people who have moved from the islands). Unlike the situation in Ireland or the Basque Country, however, the ability to speak Gaelic has never been linked to any political project of nationhood in Scotland, and there is not and never has been any compulsory Gaelic at any level of education.¹⁷ Indeed, there is now no possibility of there ever being so: any suggestion along these lines would raise a public outcry on a scale no political party in Scotland would ever want to face.

The Media Framework

As an independent state, Ireland has, of course, its own press, though this is overwhelmingly in English. The public service Irish-language radio station Radió na Gaeltachta (RnaG) was set up in 1972, and is listened to—though with different levels of frequency—by both native and non-native speakers of Irish amounting to around fifteen per cent of the population.¹⁸ As is only to be expected, Ireland also has its own television channels: the public service channels RTÉ1, launched in 1961, and Network 2, launched in 1978—in terms of British cultural influence it is worthwhile bearing in mind that before Network 2 was set up there was a referendum as to whether or not it should consist of BBC1's programmes relayed live to Ireland¹⁹—the Irish-language channel TnaG (Teilifís na Gaeilge), launched in 1996, which changed its name to TG4 in 1999, and the recently launched commercial channel TV3 (1998). Though the bulk of TG4's programmes are in Irish, some English-language productions are shown on this channel, including quite large numbers of English advertisements. The launch of TnaG/TG4 was preceded by a heated debate concerning whether it should be seen as a television channel for the Gaeltacht or for the Irish “nation,” with the latter point of view eventually winning out.²⁰

As well as these domestic channels, a notable feature of the Irish television landscape is the strong presence of the four mainstream UK channels—BBC1, BBC2, ITV/UTV and Channel 4—initially by overspill, now via cable. Many UK programmes—in particular certain soaps—have large and faithful followings in the Republic, and indeed the recent move of *Coronation Street* from Network 2 to TV3 (in which Granada

is a shareholder) was a major talking point in the early part of 2001. Although *Ros na Rún* did not face direct competition from the other two domestic Irish soap operas, *Glenroe* and *Fair City*, which went out at different times, it did face a certain amount of competition from the UK soaps, some of which have reasonably large followings in Ireland.

Though the Basque Country has its own “regional” press—almost entirely in Castilian—there is also a strong presence of the Spanish “national” press. Since the early eighties it has also had its own TV channels, the public service ETB1 (launched in 1982) and ETB2 (1986), both of which are subsidized by the Basque parliament (Eusko Juralitza). ETB1 is an entirely Basque-language channel, with even initially Castilian advertisements voiced over in Basque despite the visual presence of Castilian on the screen, while ETB2 broadcasts exclusively in Castilian. These two channels face strong competition from the five “national” all-Spanish channels: La Primera, La Dos, Antena 3, Canal +, Telecinco, whose programmes are frequently the most popular or among the most popular in the Basque Country. As well as the two television channels, the public service broadcaster also provides a number of Basque-language radio stations, the most important of which, Euskadi Irratia, broadcasts twenty-four hours a day.²¹ *Goenkale* entered a virgin landscape as far as domestically-produced soap opera was concerned, the only possible competition, the Latin American *telenovelas*, being shown in the late afternoon, while *Goenkale* itself goes out at ten o’clock at night.

While Scotland has its own highly successful press²²—written almost entirely in English, the (very) occasional Gaelic article in the *Scotsman* or the *Inverness Courier*

notwithstanding—it has no truly “Scottish” television stations, the three ITV franchises—Scottish, Grampian and Borders—being heavily dependent on the UK network for the bulk of their output. In that sense it is the least well-served of the three countries in question, enjoying only local television opt-outs for news, sport, current affairs and the occasional Gaelic-language programme.²³ There is no minority-language channel at all, either in whole (like ETB1 or TG4) or in part (like S4C in Wales). In 1985, following a series of reorganisations, the BBC rationalised and expanded its Gaelic-language radio programming, setting up Radio nan Gaidheal. However, its listeners are heavily concentrated in the Gaidhealtachd, and indeed a significant proportion of its programmes cannot be picked up outside that area.²⁴ *Machair* entered a densely populated soapscape, consisting not just of the three already established UK soaps *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* and *Brookside*, but also the English-language Scottish soap *High Road*. In the course of its existence—during which another three UK soaps emerged, the short-lived *Eldorado*, *Hollyoaks* and *Family Affairs*, the latter going out five days a week—it moved around the schedules with some frequency in search of a “home.”

The Soaps Operas: *Machair*

Machair was launched on 6 January 1993 and ran once a week on a seasonal basis until March 1999. Its emergence was the ultimate result of a political rather than an economic or even a cultural initiative, and this initiative came in the first instance not from within Scotland, but from London. In December 1989, in an attempt to woo the votes of the

electors of the Western Isles, the Thatcher government announced that it would allocate £8 million (later increased to £9.5 million) within the framework of its forthcoming Broadcasting Act to set up a Gaelic Television Fund whose aim would be to increase the amount of Gaelic-language television in Scotland from one hundred to three hundred hours per year, starting in 1993. The fund was to be administered by the Gaelic Television Committee, or CTG (Comataidh Telebhisein Gàidhlig), whose offices are now located in Stornoway on Lewis. When the Glasgow-based channel STV (which later changed its name to Scottish) bid unopposed for a renewal of its ITV franchise in 1991, its proposal contained a specific commitment to produce two hundred hours of Gaelic-language programming, including a soap opera. *Machair* was the result of that commitment. *Machair* was an expensive production, costing around £77,000 per episode, and the CTG spent one third of its entire available budget on its first season.

Prior to its launch there was a certain amount of scepticism in at least some sections of the Lowland press about the arrival of this Gaelic soap: indeed, some journalists referred to it dismissively as *Gaeldorado*.²⁵ In the event, however, its audience pull surpassed all expectations. Average audiences for the first season were 451,000, while the second episode was watched by no fewer than 516,000 viewers—almost eight times more people than there are Gaelic speakers in the country. It averaged a twenty-eight per cent audience share in the Grampian area (with forty per cent for the final episode of the first season) and twenty per cent in central Scotland: very healthy—indeed in some senses quite remarkable—figures given the general dislike of subtitled programmes in Scotland and the UK as a whole. *Machair* was deliberately presented as

not just relevant to Gaelic speakers. As an advertisement for the programme in the *Glasgow Herald* put it, “Adultery, loneliness, revenge. Some things do translate. *Machair*, 7.30 tonight, on Scottish.”²⁶

Machair was, in its first season, by any standards the most successful Gaelic-language programme ever to be screened in Scotland. Given the near-total absence of Gaelic from the written press and its relatively poor levels of penetration on radio, these large television viewing figures caused great euphoria among Gaelic-language activists, particularly those working in television. As Rhoda Macdonald, Scottish's Head of Gaelic Programmes, put it in 1993, “Drama is the most popular form of television and it has a spectral appeal. People aged 5 or 85 will watch drama. ‘*Machair*’ makes Gaelic viable.”²⁷ Despite these extraordinary viewing figures and the accompanying euphoria, however, *Machair* was unable to maintain its appeal. By the end of the 1996 season its viewing figures had fallen to 165,000, around one third of its viewers three years earlier. Survival seemed increasingly unlikely. It limped on for another three years with very unimpressive viewing figures before simply petering out in March 1999, with no attempt made even to tie up the narrative lines still open at that point.

Goenkale

Goenkale was not the first long-running television serial launched in Spain, the Catalan production *Poble Nou*, whose first episode went out in January 1994, having preceded it by some ten months. *Poble Nou*—the most successful Catalan-language television fiction programme of all time—was, however, not a soap opera, but a *telenovela*, an

originally Latin-American format usually running for around six months and clocking up around 170-180 episodes.²⁸ When *Goenkale* was launched in October 1994 it was specifically designed to avoid what were seen as *Poble Nou*'s mistakes: the Basque producers could not understand why the Catalans had allowed a highly successful production to come to an end, and planned their own production as a soap opera rather than a *telenovela*,²⁹ with the specific aim that it should run more or less "for ever."

Funded indirectly by the Basque Parliament, *Goenkale* is produced by the independent production company Pausoka at a cost of around two million pesetas (£8,000) per episode, a fraction of the cost of *Machair*. It has now entered its seventh season and passed its thousandth episode on 5 October 1999.³⁰ *Goenkale* is the most watched Basque-language programme of all time. Its highest audience share ever was twenty per cent, or 400,000 viewers, but it averages in the region of fifteen per cent. It is entirely in Basque. As the head of Pausoka put it: "This is a product which is being made for ETB1 and so it is in Euskera ... in ETB1 we are obliged to do everything in Euskera."³¹ A Castilian-language version was launched on ETB2 in September 1996, but appears to be no longer running. Based in the fictitious village of Arralde, *Goenkale* originally dealt with the tensions and conflicts within the various generations of the Lasa family, but has now broadened out to cover developments in the village as a whole. It is regularly referred to as a "sociological phenomenon" in the Basque press, and is still going strong. A decision was taken recently to increase the number of young characters and aim the programme more forcefully at the younger audience (who make up sixty-five per cent of its total viewers).

Ros na Rún

Ros na Rún in fact made its first appearance not on TnaG, but on RTÉ1 at Christmas 1992 achieving 381,000 viewers.³² It now goes out twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 8.30 p.m. Though reliable viewing figures are difficult to come by, press reports suggest that it appears to attract around 400,000 viewers per episode, around fourteen per cent of the total available audience. Like *Machair* in Scotland, it was seen from the outset as TnaG's flagship programme. As the Head of TnaG put it:

But we're clear about one thing. We, the staff and the authority, believe that we must have something as an anchor in this schedule and there's no better way to do that than to provide a credible drama. *Ros na Rún* proved, while it was on RTÉ for that short period, that it can be done. Our hearts are in it because we believe that this will be an enticement for people in the middle of the schedule.³³

The current version was commissioned from EO Teilifis and Tyrone Productions at a total cost of IR£2,500,000, or one quarter of TnaG's overall budget—in fact, the contract to produce *Ros na Rún* is reputed to be the single largest independent production commissioned in the history of Irish broadcasting—again emphasising the importance of such productions for minority-language broadcasting. It costs in the region of IR£10,000 per episode, again only a fraction of the cost of *Machair*. It is by far TG4's most successful programme in a station whose average audience share, however, is usually around two per cent.

Peripheral visions, peripheral fissions?

A significant feature of all three productions outlined above is a wide-ranging attempt to reconcile geographical peripherality with cultural centrality. The locations are all non-metropolitan. *Machair* originally centred on the Bradan Mòr Further Education College in a fairly remote location on Harris—based on the real Sabhal Mòr college on Skye—with breakouts to Stornoway (itself a smallish town) relatively infrequent, and visits to the mainland very rare, particularly after the first season. *Goenkale* is not set in Bilbao or any other large Basque town, but in a small fishing town (location shooting being carried out in the actual fishing town of Getaria). *Ros na Rún* is likewise not set in Galway town, but in a small village in the Connemara Gaeltacht, with inside scenes being shot in state-of-the-art production studios in Spiddal. In all three, city life seems very far away. In fact, the notion of a flight from the city is stated explicitly in *Machair*'s theme song:³⁴

It's long since I went to the city
I had to make my living there
But the machair always drew me
Seed of marram, my people's bloom
Field of my hopes, yours the triumph
As fertile gem as is in the world
Here's the place where I will settle
With all I need of wealth and love

Indeed remoteness is, to a greater or lesser extent, a structural part of the lives of all the characters in all three productions. Thus in *Machair* things not available in local shops have to be obtained by mail order, while the youngsters try to combat the endemic

unemployment of island life by, for example, producing and selling their own knitwear, also distributed by mail order. In one *Ros na Rún* story-line an emergency blood transfusion had to be organised following a road accident since it was going to take too long for blood to be brought from Dublin (in typical soap style this emergency procedure leads to astonishing revelations regarding paternities). In *Goenkale* the townsfolk have to face up to the problems that opening up their town to tourism might bring. A curious feature shared by all these soaps—and not to be found in the fifty or so soaps and *telenovelas* I viewed as part of my earlier study of European soaps in general—is the presence in all three of a local radio station (in *Machair* the characters—in a rather tongue-in-cheek *mise-en-abîme*—even wrote and produced their own radio soap!). This sense of a physically dispersed community of speakers is emblematic of the lack of centre of these soaps.

One area where all three resist notions of peripherality in particular is, however, in the presentation of their characters. Indeed the characters who populate these soaps—in particular the younger ones—are presented as no different in any respect (other than in the language they speak) from young people anywhere else in their respective “regions” or “states.” The students in *Machair* support the same football teams as anyone anywhere else in Scotland, and listen to the same music. Younger characters in *Ros na Rún* dye their hair green or pink like their city contemporaries, while youngsters in *Goenkale* dress in leather and adventurous hairstyles, pretty much like punks anywhere else. In an implicitly ageist move, notions of being “out of touch” are frequently associated with the older characters, who can at times be the object of ridicule by the younger ones.

But it is above all in the uses to which they put their language that they resist notions of peripherality or unmodernity. All of these languages in different ways and at different times, in very much the same way as Welsh, Galician or Catalan, have been accused of being inadequate to the needs of the modern world: the former Spanish Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez once famously claimed that nuclear physics, for example, could not be taught in Catalan,³⁵ while Basque has also been characterised as “incapable of representing the modern cultural and scientific world.”³⁶ There is no question of this here. Although *Machair* was always bilingual—a certain amount of English was spoken in every episode—in the college, in particular, Gaelic was seen as the medium through which the students learned and acquired skills in business studies and computing, speculated on the stock market, did market analyses, drew up business plans, and produced brochures using pagemaking software on their Apple Macs. As Rhoda Macdonald, Scottish’s Head of Gaelic Programmes, put it in a lecture given in the Sabhal Mòr college:

What *Machair* did and still does is make Gaelic look viable and alive.... It shows the language being used by young people for whom it is a vital part of the future and not, as has been the case, only about the past.³⁷

In *Machair* Gaelic was seen as fully integrated in, and equal to the demands of, contemporary Scottish life, nothing, no matter how sophisticated or technical, being beyond its purview. Likewise for Basque and Irish in *Goenkale* and *Ros na Rúin*, where, for example, all the technicalities of running the local radio-stations are handled in

Basque and Irish. As in soap operas everywhere the characters in these three productions are involved in storylines revolving around a whole range of contemporary issues such as drugs, teenage pregnancies, homosexuality, AIDS, all handled effortlessly in their relative languages. Indeed, numerous references can be found in the press of both Ireland and the Basque Country to the extent to which these programmes are contributing to increased interest in the language in question, and the producers of *Ros na Rún* have gone so far as to produce a learning-pack linked to the programme for use in Irish schools.

Conclusion

Given the very considerable textual similarities between these programmes, how are we best to account for the failure of *Machair*—which was, as mentioned earlier, by far the most expensive and most technically sophisticated of the three—while the others have continued to thrive? The fundamental reason—and one which also goes a long way towards explaining the absence of a dedicated Gaelic-language channel in Scotland similar to TG4 or ETB1 (or indeed S4C in Wales)—is the lack of any political or cultural consensus in Scotland regarding the importance of preserving Gaelic as an element of national identity, as, in one sense or another, “the language of the nation.” Indeed, Gaelic is neither “the language of the nation” nor a language which in any sense links Scots in Scotland with “ethnic Scots” elsewhere who are seen as in some sense politically excluded from their true nationhood. Gaelic, in other words—or more correctly its

maintenance and promotion as a spoken language—completely lacks, unlike Basque or Irish, the status of a political project. The fact—whether sad or not—is that for the bulk of English-speaking Scots the survival of Gaelic has come to be seen as largely irrelevant, and those responsible for the creation of *Machair* proved unable to overcome, or even to some extent—despite the use of English and of subtitling—to address that “problem.” In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of *Machair* was the absence (the odd Celtic or Rangers football strip notwithstanding) of any attempt to address the question of a specifically *Scottish* identity whatsoever. The identity of its characters throughout was a Gaelic-speaking island identity, and from their point of view Edinburgh was as far away mentally as London, and people from the mainland were seen as outsiders whether they were from Scotland, England or further afield. For all its attempts to present Gaelic as a modern, culturally central language, *Machair* was unable to look English-speaking Scotland in the face (one English-speaking character who attempted to learn Gaelic was mocked by some of the others for her poor accent), and ended up to a large extent turning its back on it and staring wistfully out to sea. Without the institutional bulwark of a Gaelic-language channel to protect it, it could not cope with the competition from the English-language channels—and even from soaps such as *EastEnders* against which it was, in an act of scheduling suicide, at one point briefly timetabled.

These very different relationships between language, soap opera and viewers are in fact clearly signalled in the opening/closing credits of these productions. Thus the opening sequences of both *Goenkale* and *Ros na Rún* are dominated by shots of people,

either singly or in groups, to the accompaniment of cheerful and energetic music. With its views of fishermen mending their nets and its final shot of a large group of townsfolk coming over the breast of a hill, the first conveys a clear sense of organic community, while *Ros na Rún*, with its shots of dolphins playing in the sea, presents an unpolluted “Atlantic seaboard” imagery which seems somewhat touristic in its overall appeal. *Machair*'s lengthy closing sequence, on the other hand (this production did not really have an opening sequence), resorts to the well-established discourse of the Celtic Twilight—essentially a discourse of the *past*—with its crepuscular, static mountain scenes devoid of human life and its mournful song sung in an ancient and what was, for the bulk of its viewers, impenetrable language.³⁸ *Machair*'s theme song is sung by the well-known Scottish group Capercallie, and in fact uses the same melody—but not the words—as the song “Breisleach” from their 1992 Album “Delirium.” However, it is not just the words which have changed. The tempo of the song has been slowed down very considerably, by about as much as a third. In concrete terms, while one verse of “Breisleach” takes thirty-six seconds to complete, the single verse of *Machair*'s theme tune takes forty-seven seconds: a very significant deceleration. Also, in “Breisleach,” the vocals and the music come to an end at the same time. In the *Machair* theme song the music continues for no less than eighteen seconds after the end of the words: a plaintive, elegiac, mournful melody played out over brooding Hebridean landscapes. These differences highlight the extent to which this new version of the melody has been absorbed into the Celtic Twilight discourse.

This is not to say that the eighties and the nineties witnessed no “national project”

in Scotland. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth, and this phenomenon has been the subject of considerable academic analysis within Scotland.³⁹ The redefinition of Scottish national identity that gathered pace throughout the eighties and the nineties emerged largely in opposition to Thatcherism, and took place as much (if not more) outside official politics as within it. The language it used to emphasise national difference was not, however, Gaelic, but, at least on a popular level, Scots (whether we define this technically as a language or a dialect). Scots is, by any reasonable standard, the preferred mode of communication, for everyday purposes, of a significant majority of the Scottish population. From being almost entirely absent in the Scottish media (barring caricatural forms such as Harry Lauder-type pseudo-Scots), this language or group of dialects has now colonised areas of the Scottish media to an astonishing degree. The trailblazer was, without any doubt, Rab C. Nesbitt, whose Glasgow Govan dialect was crucial to his particular take on life—a kind of defeated yet still defiant Clydeside-ism⁴⁰—but Scots has also won an important place for itself on, for example, football phone-ins such as *Saturday Super Scoreboard* and in particular *Off the Ball* on radio, the latter being carried out almost entirely in dialect.⁴¹ More recent runaway successes for this kind of programming have included *Chewing the Fat* on television—some of whose catchphrases (most significantly “gonnae no dae that”) have become something of a phenomenon in Scotland and have entered everyday speech, and the recently launched *Taxi for Cowan*, based around one of the presenters of *Off the Ball*. Scots has even penetrated television advertising. A recent advertisement for an internet job site shows a young man turning up for an interview at Lavé Enterprises only to find himself later

wandering around Glasgow dressed as a toilet. Two young boys shout at him from a bridge, “Haw lavvy heid, you’re gettin it”—something unthinkable in an advertisement fifteen or even ten years ago.

Given these multiple constraints and counterbalances, *Machair*’s chances of appealing to a broader Scottish constituency in the longer term were very poor indeed. From this point of view, it is surely no coincidence that the initiative which eventually led to *Machair* came not from Scotland, but from a highly unpopular London government pursuing what was, in Scottish terms, an essentially external agenda, and in opposition to which the redefinition of Scottish identity was to a large extent taking place. No amount of money, and no level of production values, can counter forces such as these. Failure was inevitable, and the conditions of possibility no longer seem to exist (if they ever did) for a successful Gaelic-language programme aimed at an all-Scottish audience.

Notes

¹ Mike Cormack, “Problems of Minority Language Broadcasting: Gaelic in Scotland”, in *European Journal of Communication*, 1993, 8, 103.

² David Atkinson, “Attitudes Towards Language Use in Catalonia: Politics or Sociolinguistics?” in *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, 1996, 10.1, 9.

³ See Alison Griffiths, “National and Cultural Identity in a Welsh-Language Soap Opera,” in Robert C. Allen, ed., *To Be Continued... Soap Operas around the World* (London: Routledge, 1985).

⁴ See Hugh O’Donnell, “Media Pleasures: Reading the Telenovela,” in Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, eds., *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁵ Hugh O’Donnell, *Good Times, Bad Times: Soap Operas and Society in Western Europe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

⁶ See Philip Schlesinger, "On National Identity: Some Conceptions and Misconceptions Criticized," in *Social Science Information*, 1987, 26, 2 and "Media, the Political Order and National Identity," in *Media, Culture and Society*, 1991, 13.3, 13.

⁷ See, for example, T. K. Oommen, *Citizenship, Nationality and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 19.

⁸ Christopher Ross, *Contemporary Spain: A Handbook* (London: Arnold, 1997), 88.

⁹ This point is argued forcefully both by David McCrone in *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge, 1992), and by Tom Devine in *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London: The Penguin Press, 1999), in particular in his final chapter "A Nation Reborn?"

¹⁰ See Iarfhlaith Watson, "The Irish Language and Television: National Identity, Preservation, Restoration and Minority Rights," in *British Journal of Sociology*, 1994, 47.2, 256.

¹¹ See Martin McLoone, "Strumpet City: The Urban Working Class on Television," in Martin McLoone and John MacMahon, eds., *Television and Irish Society: 21 Years of Irish Television* (Dublin: RTÉ/IFI, 1984), 55-59.

¹² Watson, "The Irish language," 260.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴ Christopher Ross, *Spain, 1812-1996* (London: Arnold, 2000), 45.

¹⁵ Figures taken from the Socio-Linguistic Survey of 1996, in Maitena Etxebarria "The Basque Language: Ability and Usage," unpublished manuscript.

¹⁶ Mike Cormack, "Programming for Cultural Defence: the Expansion of Gaelic Television," in *Scottish Affairs*, 1994, 6, 114-5.

¹⁷ Devine, *The Scottish Nation*, 400.

¹⁸ Iarfhlaith Watson, "A History of Irish Language Broadcasting: National Ideology, Commercial Interests and Minority Rights," in Mary J. Kelly and Barbara O'Connor, eds., *Media Audiences in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1997), 218.

¹⁹ Richard Barbrook, "Broadcasting and National Identity in Ireland," in *Media, Culture and Society*, 1992, 14, 201.

²⁰ Iarfhlaith Watson, "A History of Irish Language Broadcasting," 223.

²¹ See Janet Davies, ed., *Mercator Media Guide* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 100.

²² Marcus Linklater, "The Media," in Marcus Linklater and Robin Denniston, eds., *Anatomy of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1992).

²³ Peter Meech and Richard Kilborn "Media and Identity in a Stateless Nation: The Media in Scotland," in *Media, Culture and Society*, 1992, 14.

²⁴ Cormack, "Problems of Minority Language Broadcasting," 108.

²⁵ See Cormack, "Programming for Cultural Defence," 125-6.

²⁶ *Glasgow Herald*, 7 January 1994

²⁷ Rhoda MacDonald, "Renaissance v. Preservation," in *Media Education Journal*, 1993, 14, 16.

²⁸ Thomas Tufte, *Living with the Rubbish Queen: Telenovelas, Culture and Modernity in Brazil* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2000), 87.

²⁹ Hugh O'Donnell, *Good Times, Bad Times*, 168.

³⁰ On their website (<http://www.pausoka.com/esp/fr12.htm>) the producers claim that this is "unique" for a television programme in southern Europe, but in fact the Greek soap opera *Lampsi* reached one thousand episodes considerably earlier (September 1996).

³¹ Quoted in O'Donnell, *Good Times, Bad Times* 170.

³² Iarfhlaith Watson, "A History of Irish Language Broadcasting," 226.

³³ *Ibid.*, 225

³⁴ I would like to thank Aonghas MacNeacail, who wrote the lyrics of the theme song for *Machair*, for providing me with this English translation.

³⁵ Salvador Cardús, *Política de paper: premsa i poder a Catalunya 1981-1992* (Barcelona: Campana, 1995), 74.

³⁶ José María Lasagabaster, “The Promotion of Cultural Production in Basque,” in Helen Graham and Jo Labany, eds. *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 352.

³⁷ Rhoda MacDonald, “Renaissance versus Gaelic Preservation,” Sabhal Mòr lecture (unpublished manuscript, 1994), 4.

³⁸ Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 102-6.

³⁹ See McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, and Devine, *The Scottish Nation*. The latter provides a particularly useful bibliography on this subject (645).

⁴⁰ See McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 186-7.

⁴¹ Hugh O'Donnell, “Fitba Crazy? Saturday Super Scoreboard and the Dialectics of Political Debate”, in *Culture, Sport, Society*, forthcoming.