

Reinfandt, Christoph. "The Sounds They Are A-Changing...: British Sea Power Provide a 'Post-Rock' Soundtrack to Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*." *Hard Times* 87 (2010): 61-65.

committed democratic socialists. The Liberal Democrats took some positions 'to the left' of New Labour over the last decade.

Voting and Changing

However, the term I have learned during the election campaign is 'love-bombing' (sounds like a relative of 'friendly fire'). It means persuading sympathisers of another party via charm offensives to vote for your own party, because it is about the same things and, furthermore, more serious about them. In such a campaign the mistake made by two Protestant Northern Irish Parties takes on symbolic meaning. They both chose

the same amateur photo model to pose for their election posters – New York based Kristin Mackenzie who did not know anything about either of them. The major parties might have printed different heads onto their posters, but their slogans are all the more similar. Obviously, new ideas have to be developed elsewhere – at the workplaces, in small organisations, associations and self-help groups, in virtual and real discussion circles, at educational institutions. Revitalised politics will only develop from a re-politicised society. Not so long ago, some U.S. political scientists called British society over-politicised. Perhaps it could become that

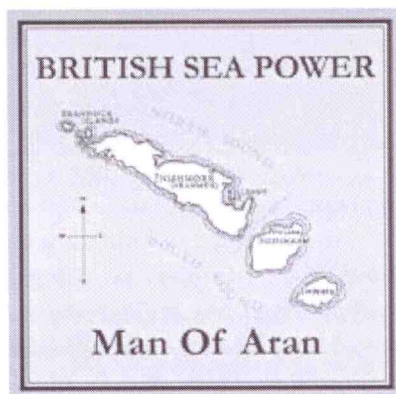
again. One can only hope that people take seriously the title of the Conservative election manifesto "Invitation to Join the Government of Britain". Yes, please join but on your own terms and argue for your version of 'fairness'. My old Scottish friend (whom I mentioned at the beginning of my first column and now mention again at the end of my last) recalled from his early days in late-1930s Glasgow the ironic motto "vote early, vote often!" which made fun of irregularities in elections, of corruption and machine politics. These days, one should recommend voting early in order to have enough of the day left for doing something useful in politics.

The Sounds They Are A-Changing... British Sea Power Provide a 'Post-Rock' Soundtrack to Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*

Christoph Reinfandt

In seiner Musikkolumne schreibt Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) über die Brightoner Band British Sea Power, die nach ihrem großen Erfolg mit dem Album *Do You Like Rock Music?* (2008) nun mit *Man of Aran* (2009) Robert Flahertys gleichnamigen Film (von 1934) neu vertont hat. Er greift einige Diskussionen über *alternative rock* und den besagten Film auf und analysiert das Zusammenspiel von Ton und Bild sowie einzelne Tracks ausführlich.

After teetering on the brink of mainstream success with the stadium-compatible indie hymns of their Mercury Award-winning 2008 offering *Do You Like Rock Music?*, Brighton-based alternative rock band British Sea Power have opted for an unusual follow-up project which will certainly allay any fears of their imminent sell-out: Chancing, while touring Ireland, upon a copy of Robert Flaherty's 1934 pseudo-documentary film about life on the Aran Islands, they immediately recognized that the film is, as they put it in the liner notes to their CD/DVD set *Man of Aran* (Rough Trade, 2009, see picture on the right), "heroic, stunning, camp, ridiculous" and thus "everything a rock band should be." Providing a new soundtrack to a film like this must have seemed an ideal vehicle for countering the charges of blatant commercialism



CD/DVD set: British Sea Power, *Man of Aran*, 2009

which followed in the wake of *Do You Like Rock Music?*, notoriously culminating in internet platform *Pitchfork's* rating of the album as U2 out of 10. But what are the norms of 'alternative' credibility that can be discerned in this move?

'Post-rock Alternative'?

'Alternative rock' has been a double-edged phenomenon ever since its inception in the 1980s: On the one hand, it picked up the Do-It-Yourself ethos of late-1970s punk and positioned itself in opposition to the polished and commercialized forms of popular rock music in the 1980s which were perceived as 'inauthentic' and 'alienated'. On the other hand, it became unequivocally clear through the fates of U2 and R.E.M. that there is no clear-cut boundary between alternative authenticity and mainstream success. Aspiring but critical alternative performer Mark Oliver Everett (aka 'E' from the Eels) puts this succinctly about half-way through his wistful autobiographical retrospective of his involvement with the music scene of the 1990s:

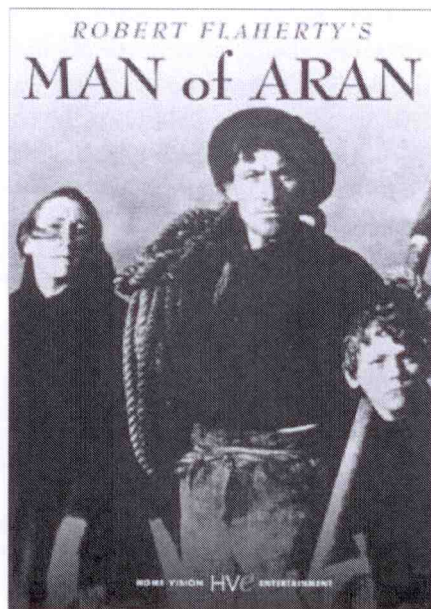
The so-called 'alternative' culture brought with it an ugly new reality: it wasn't really an alternative at all. It was for sale just like anything else in the mall. It was rebelling against nothing. It just looked like a rebel and made the motions and noises of a rebel, but it wasn't any kind of rebel, or individual, to be sure.¹

While rock noises of all kinds became increasingly amenable to mainstream distribution in the course of rock history, one of the few remaining options of going through the motions of being an authentic alternative was to go for other noises. In this respect it does not come as a surprise that the term 'post-rock' was coined or at least made prominent by the influential critic Simon Reynolds in reviews and essays for music magazines like *Mojo* and *The Wire* from 1994 onwards. According to Reynolds, 'post-rock' is a brand of experimental music inspired by the Velvet Underground's 'dronology' and German Krautrock's notion of 'motorik'. It is broadly (and negatively) defined by "using rock instrumentation for non-rock purposes, using guitars as facilitators of timbre and textures rather than riffs and power chords."² And while this description fits the noises on British Sea Power's *Man of Aran* quite nicely, it sits uncomfortably with their focus on "everything a rock band should be": How can the 'post-rock' focus on sonic experimentation be reconciled with the romantic tradition of rock seriousness based on the unattainable, but nevertheless highly effective ideals of authenticity that are a strong ingredient in alternative's rock heritage and Flaherty's film?

Romantic Fakery

Ever since its first screening in 1934 Flaherty's film has been at the heart of heated ideological controversies about the methods and purposes of documentary film. Should it, as suggested by the film's early success at the box office and its winning of the Mussolini Cup for Best Foreign Film at the 1934 Venice Film Festival, be fully assimilable into nationalisms passing off a romantic version of an idealized heroic past as realism, be they Irish, Italian or whatever? Or should it rather be an accurate rep-

resentation of physical and social reality? In spite of some left-wing criticism favouring the second position it is interesting to note to what extent the reality effect of documentary cinema held sway even when the romantic features of Flaherty's vision were clearly recognized, as in these October 19, 1934 comments by *New York Times* film critic Andre Sennwald:



Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran*, 1934



Film still from Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, 1934, 18:21

With the fervor of a poet and the skill of a magnificent cameraman [Flaherty] examines the theme which lies close to his heart, the grim and ceaseless struggles of primitive beings to preserve their lives against the crushing assaults of their environment [...] he strips his new work of dramatic artifice and plunges to the heart of earthy and basic experience. It is bare, cruel and authentically real; it is ardent with life, and it represents the pure cinema at its best.³

Today, this reality effect should no longer be there – or should it? Right

after pointing out in their liner notes that Flaherty's film is "everything a rock band should be", British Sea Power sum up the current disillusioned attitude to the film: "But it isn't documentary in any accepted sense. The 'family' at the film's centre aren't a family at all. When the fishermen row out in a frail curragh to catch a basking shark, they're employing methods that hadn't been used for decades." Taking their cue from a 2003 DVD edition of *Man of Aran* which includes a 60-minute (meta-)documentary on *How the Myth Was Made* (see upper picture on the left), today's viewers can be fully aware of the fact that the film is by no means depicting Aran reality as it really was, but rather stages the eternal struggle of Man (and his family) against nature by means of an episodic structure suggesting cyclical recurrence by anachronistically suppressing all traces of *social* organization beyond an 'organic' village community occasionally coming together to greet returning shark hunters and process the goods nature has reluctantly yielded. Moreover, there is no visual trace of the stretches of arable land which were available on the island at the time, but all owned by landowners from the mainland – in the film, there is only rock surrounded by water, rock which has to be flattened with the Man of Aran's powerful hammer strokes before it can be cultivated with precious soil painfully collected from rare crevices and seaweed collected from the beaches and shallows of the rugged coastline (see lower picture on the left). But then again, British Sea Power (and possible many viewers of the film) have to concede in the end: "But none of this matters. This strange cinema-vérité fantasia rapturously documents these islands' past and present. Aran is a dream, allowing you to imagine how things might be." And guitarist Martin Noble comments in conclusion: "We made this soundtrack because we liked the romantic notion of people living on the edge of existence. It's something I'd like to think I could do, but I know I never will."

Aran Rock(s)

Watching the film today, it is especially John Greenwood's late romantic

symphonic score drawing on motifs from Aran folk songs which strikes the viewer as melodramatic and artificial, but apparently this was not the case in the 1930s. *New York Times* critic Andre Sennwald, for example, responds enthusiastically:

Expelling everything which is artistically alien to the camera, Mr. Flaherty employs only one ally, and that is music [...] The musical score is excellently blended with the screen in a fine emotional composition.

From today's perspective, nothing could be more alien to the camera of a nature documentary than the ostensible presence of a whole symphony orchestra – but in an earlier post-romantic dispensation, it seems, authenticity and aptness could be guaranteed through folk song motifs alone. But then again, the presence of a rock band with their electronic equipment does not come any more naturally after all, and so we are witnessing an interesting case of musical 'naturalization' in an historically evolving cultural context: While for most of the twentieth century, the default position for film music was

quasi-symphonic scoring, this was only slowly supplemented by jazz (perhaps most famously in Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échaffaud* in 1958), rock or pop soundtracks (the earliest example being Mike Nichols's Oscar-winning *The Graduate* in 1967), and while the latter have become fairly commonplace in recent decades, they have also been charged with supplanting aesthetic criteria with commercial motivations (which could, however, be countered for once with, for example, Sean Penn's aesthetically ambitious use of Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder's songs as a transcendent narrative agent in his *Into the Wild* 2007).

So where can British Sea Power's project be placed against this back-

ground? On the one hand, it is clearly parallel to John Greenwood's original music in tapping into an available musical vocabulary. While Greenwood relies on the romantic convention of reworking folk melodies in an orchestral context, signifying an organic fusion of nature and nurture or nation in the process, British Sea Power similarly relies on rock music's romantic claim to authenticity. On the other hand, the main difference between the two projects is, obviously, that Greenwood could still rely on a fairly intact cultural framework with widely accepted conventions, while British Sea Power cannot: Just like romanticism's claims to naturalness and organicism, rock music's claims to authenticity have been thor-



British Sea Power, Core Quartet

oughly dismantled in recent years, and while the instrumentation given in the credits comprises the original BSP rock line-up of Yan (Scott Wilkinson) on vocals and guitar or bass, (Martin) Noble on guitar, Hamilton (Neil Wilkinson) on bass or guitar and vocals and (Matthew) Wood on drums (see the above picture), it is rounded off towards folk, classical and electronic music with Yan doubling on cello and 'tape noises' and by adding Abi Fry on viola, xylophone, vocals and musical saw and Phil the Wandering Horn (Sumner) on 'keys' and cornet (see group picture on the next page). While all these instruments are played by the listed band members without any additional musicians or resources, Hamilton and Noble are even

credited for playing (or providing) 'sea'. Thus, all the trappings of 'post-rock' are in place and can be employed in a genuinely 'post-rock' project negotiating Flaherty's highly artificial view of life between a rock and the sea as an ultimately even harder place, on the one hand, and the material reality of this place as suggested by a literal reading of 'rock' and 'sea' on the other.

This shift towards the literal and material can also be discerned in British Sea Power's move of replacing Flaherty's iconic poster motifs of the heroic Man of Aran and his family with the matter-of-factly map of the CD/DVD set's front cover (cf. the first two pictures in this article). However, it is held in ambiguous limbo in the sequencing of the soundtrack itself, which kicks off with the fairly inconsequential title track 'Man of Aran' combining sea-noises with a persistent but fairly tranquil wavelike piano-motif embedded in an keyboard-enhanced orchestra-like stringscape while the film's opening credits run and the boy goes about his business of playful crab-hunting in the first episode. Interestingly, the musical material hinted at in the opening track takes

slightly more shape with the addition of wordless vocals and more distinctly harmonic scoring in a track entitled 'Woman of Aran' (track 10) towards the end of the movie, when the boy wants to go out shark-hunting with the men but is rejected while the woman goes about the essential business of stirring the cauldron in which the shark's blubber is cooked into oil. These scenes capturing the boy's and the woman's engagement with the spoils of nature are starkly contrasted with the men's pursuits, and here material reality and its representation in music is short-circuited in a deft play on the double meaning of the word 'sound' which designates both noise and a stretch of sea in the vicinity of land, i.e. in this case

between the Aran Islands and the mainland to the south ('The South Sound', track 2) and the mainland to the north ('The North Sound', track 9). In 'The South Sound', the habitat of the boy and his mother, which is clearly centred around the family's frugal hut with its domestic animals, is contrasted with the men's return from the dangerous sea in their damaged boat. Accordingly the track moves from a tranquil mixture of viola, cello and electric guitar plus sea ambience towards a recurring piano figure which then builds up into a drum-propelled cacophonous climax which the *Pitchfork* review of the album calls a "tumultuous post-rock freakout" during the curragh's dramatic but ultimately successful landfall in which the woman is nearly drowned while trying to rescue the fishing tackle and oars from dangerous waves.⁴ After this first climax the music recedes again while the reunited family wanders home along the cliff with its crashing seas.

'The North Sound', in contrast, is built around an insistent four-note motif introduced on electric guitar and then layered in ascending and descending waves while the shark-hunters return and the islanders come together to welcome and help them. While the electric guitars provide more of a rock sound here, the track culminates in receding noise when the dead shark is shown in detail at the end of the episode.

As these brief comments on four of the twelve tracks indicate, BSP's new soundtrack for Flaherty's *Man of Aran* loosely follows the episodic structure of the film, which is organised around the contrast between man and nature, land and sea, and introduces a sense of cyclical recurrence by means of scenes repeated with variations. While the original soundtrack provides a fairly continuous musical background which is only interrupted by silence when the boy notices the basking shark under his cliff or by ostensible ambient sound

from particularly dramatic scenes such as the excited shouts and commands of the men in their frail boat while they are hunting down the shark, the new soundtrack tends to shift between 'post-rock' noise whenever the materiality of being comes into focus and tentative musical forms whenever human activities beyond the immediate reach of material adversity are addressed. Accordingly, the most conventional track is the folk song 'Come Wander With Me' (track 3) introduced by viola and



British Sea Power (Sestet) at Mercury Award Ceremony (2008)

acoustic guitar and then later supplemented by electric guitar, bass, drums and cornet. This only outright song on the album accompanies scenes of domestic activities on land after the husband's happy return with vocals which expound folklore wisdom in a fairly convincing but also conventional fashion before the melody is collectively hummed in a homely fashion in conclusion:

*He came from the sunset
He came from the sea
He came from my sorrow
And can love only me*

*Come wander with me love
Come wander with me
Away from this sad world
Come wander with me*

Similarly, both the boy's deft but playful fishing from the high cliffs and the return of the successful shark-hunters after overcoming all dangers are accompanied by fairly straightforward rock

instrumentals carried by electric guitars ('Boy Vertiginous', track 6 and 'Conneely of the West', track 8), while the Man of Aran's earlier mending of his damaged boat ('The Curragh', track 5) seems slightly more contrived when an ambling piano with xylophone leaves the sea noises behind and breaks into a sprightly waltz with viola and drums after the task has been successfully finished.

On the other hand, the adversity of the material world is clearly demarcated through intruding noises, and the viewer/listener is alerted to this principle most pointedly when the fairly aimless music accompanying the Man of Aran's heroic efforts of flattening the rocky landscape for potato beds in 'Tiger King' (track 4), which otherwise harks back musically to the loose harmonic scoring of the opening track, is framed by strangely technological noise and finally culminates in heavy drumbeats precisely synchronised

with Tiger King's smashing of rock on rock (see left film still on the following page) in a subtle play on the multiple meanings of 'rock' in the context of the project. Later, the noisy 'Spearing the Sunfish' section (track 7) contrasts the men's dangerous efforts of conquering the sea's otherness as 'personified' in the monster-like sharks effectively with the boy's preceding pastime of catching fish from the comparable safety of the cliffs which is accompanied by much more conventional music.

All in all, then, the following pattern emerges so far: Life on the island, both in the sense of successful domesticity ('Come Wander With Me' and 'The Curragh') and an ongoing struggle with nature in the form of rock ('Tiger King') and sea ('Boy Vertiginous', 'Spearing the Sunfish' and 'Conneely of the West') is quite literally surrounded by Water represented in Sound ('The South Sound' and 'The North Sound'), which in turn is framed by 'Man of Aran'

and 'Woman of Aran'. This suggestion that in spite of the noisome intrusions and challenges of the material world the ultimate angle is the human one, is supported by the remaining two tracks, 'It Comes Back Again' and 'No Man Is an Archipelago' (tracks 11 and 12), which sum up many musical motifs sounded earlier. In doing so the music is clearly following the film which also turns back on itself by replaying earlier sequences with a twist, thus establishing a strange ambiguity between cyclical repetition and climactic conclusion. As a coda to the antagonistic structure established before, the prolonged closing scenes of the movie, which cover some 15 minutes of the total running time, suggest that life on the islands goes on as it always has and always will: the men have



Film stills from Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (1934); 23:38 (left) and 1:05:05 (right)

gone out to sea once again, while the boy and his mother go about their domestic cores. As a storm rises, they are increasingly worried and their gazes go out to an increasingly menacing sea with increasing frequency while the wind howls with increasing intensity (see right film still above). Finally, the tiny curragh comes into view amidst towering waves, and in a fairly literal repetition of the earlier return scene the film comes full circle – only that this time the boat is completely destroyed, providing a skeleton-like *memento mori* before the family wanders home again barely sheltered from the towering seas. As the titles of BSP's final tracks indicate, the music, though instrumental, adopts the film's rapprochement with its protagonists by toning down the 'post-rock' elements prevalent in some earlier sections. Both the increasing suspense of the mounting storm and the boat's dramatic return are accompanied by more straightforward rock pieces ultimately carried by electric guitars, while the heroic human perspective is clearly marked by a crystal-clear cornet line in 'It Comes Back Again' before it is joined by the guitars laying the groundwork for a long anthemic crescendo

marked by the onset of the drums when the boat finally comes into view and a recession into ambient sound shortly before it makes final landfall. The closing track, 'No Man Is an Archipelago' picks up the general character from 'It Comes Back Again' and transforms it into an even more rock-like structure with more melodic and harmonic variety alternating between guitars, cornet and viola in the foreground and ending in an extended apotheosis augmented by choir-like but wordless human voices.

As a review puts it:

The final track [...] encapsulates all the themes and styles that British Sea Power use through the album. It swells with an epic sweep [...] and it symbolizes the triumph over adversity theme that is at the centre of both the film and its music.⁵

Rock on Rock

All this might seem to indicate that British Sea Power's *Man of Aran* ultimately redeems the pathos of romantic rock authenticity in its final merging with Robert Flaherty's romantic vision. There is, however, one final twist which acknowledges the romantic fakery of both the film and the new soundtrack: As opposed to John Greenwood's post-romantic film score which insinuated its ultimately 'real' and 'authentic' origin through its incorporation of folk melodies as its core material, the new soundtrack can claim no reference in the real world whatsoever, notwithstanding its occasional 'realistic' or even 'naturalistic' sound effects. As the key scene of Tiger King smashing rocks with rocks suggests, this is rock on rock, and if there is a transcendental signified, it is not the rock of the islands, but rather rock music and other fully mediated

discourses. Nowhere does this become more obvious than in the case of the soundtrack's one ostensible songlike 'folk' reference, 'Come Wander With Me', which turns out to be a cover version of a fake folk song featured in an eponymous 1964 episode of the TV series *Twilight Zone*. And similarly, the musical material of some of the core pieces of the soundtrack is drawn from British Sea Power's own back catalogue of songs, most notably 'North Hanging Rock' and 'True Adventures' (both

from *Open Season* 2005) for 'Boy Vertiginous' and the ominously titled 'It Comes Back Again', and then, seminally, the equally ominously titled 'The Great Skua' (from *Do You Like Rock Music?* 2008) for 'No Man

Is an Archipelago'. 'Here is', one could say, misquoting T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, 'no water but only rock'. There is no folk authenticity and no true encounter with the materiality of the real world, but only the thoroughly mediated worlds of popular culture in (and from) which personal styles can be fashioned.

Notes:

1. Everett, Mark Oliver (2008), *Things the Grandchildren Should Know*, London: Little, Brown, 129f.
2. http://web.archive.org/web/20011202075606/http://www.thewire.co.uk/out/1297_4.htm (last accessed 22 March 2010). See also Reynolds, Simon (2007), *Bring the Noise: Twenty Years of Writing about Hip Rock and Hip Hop*, London: Faber & Faber, 186-193.
3. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=940DE4DA1639EE32A2575AC1A9669D946594D6CF> (last accessed 18 March 2010).
4. <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/13160-man-of-aran/> (last accessed 15 March 2010).
5. <http://doubtfulsounds.wordpress.com/2009/09/21/review-british-sea-power-man-of-aran/> (last accessed 15 March 2010).