



April 2009

Small Engine Repair

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Recommended Citation

Fillingim, David (2009) "Small Engine Repair," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss1/20>

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Small Engine Repair

Abstract

This is a review of *Small Engine Repair* (2006).

Small Engine Repair, by Irish director Niall Heery, is a beautiful film about the quiet desperation of small town working-class life. It is a story of friendship, betrayal, redemption, forgiveness, and integrity, told with benign humor. The film also comes closer than any film I've seen to portraying the true soul of country music. *Small Engine Repair* was released in Ireland in 2006, made the rounds and picked up several awards at independent film festivals throughout 2007, and was released on DVD by U.K. distributor Guerilla Films in July 2008.

As the film begins, Doug has recently lost his job as a forklift operator, and is trying to make ends meet by teaching guitar lessons to local children. Doug dreams of being a country singer/songwriter, but, preternaturally under-confident, is too shy to sing his songs in public. His best friend Bill, who owns the small engine repair shop from which the film takes its title, is also frustrated in his own dreams of greater success, and is struggling to repair his relationship with his son Tony, who works with him at the shop but wants nothing more than to escape the confines of their sparse small town existence. Much of the action takes place at the repair shop and at Big Eddy's, a bar where the friends hang out and where Doug wishes he was brave enough to go onstage and sing.

Doug returns home one day after a failed job interview to discover his wife Agnes in bed with another man. He moves into Bill's trailer adjacent to the repair shop and with Bill's encouragement, finally musters the nerve to make a demo

recording and take it to the country radio disc jockey in the nearby city. Despite the cliché formula (man's life turns into a country song, so man pursues dream of singing country music), the film gives a quietly moving portrait of the complicated friendships and relational struggles of the ensemble of characters.

The soundtrack, featuring music by various Irish, English, and American alt-country performers – alongside songs performed ably by Glen in the lead role – regulates the mood, as does the beautifully photographed scenery of the haunting landscape of Irish logging country. Because the film is set in Ireland, it manages to bypass both the gaudiness and the overt evangelical religiosity of American country music culture, and portrays country music for what it is at its rawest – a soundtrack for the lives of folks living perilously close to line that demarcates success from failure in the struggle to eke out the means of daily existence.

A major subplot involves the return from prison of a third friend, Burley, intent on finding out who turned him for a hit-and-run accident in which a child died. As the plot moves through revelations of multiple betrayals among the friends, accompanied by moving acts of redemption and forgiveness, *Small Engine Repair* traverses significant theological ground without any explicit reference to God or religion. Doug turns out to be a paragon of integrity, resilience, and grace – all the while remaining fully and realistically human – a considerable filmmaking and storytelling accomplishment.