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4th year art history project

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Analysis of *Planet* magazine

Planet: The Welsh Internationalist is a bi-monthly English language publication. It was established in 1970 by Ned Thomas, author of *The Welsh Extremist: A Culture in Crisis* (Y Lolfa, 1991). Thomas is also leader of the campaign to introduce the first Welsh language national newspaper to Wales. Considering the cultural climate that *Planet* grew out of offers a context in which to place the magazine; coal mining in Wales of 1970 was politically, culturally and economically weak. Cardiff had been a capital city for only fifteen years. Devolution – and with it, an international arena for Wales’ cultural activity – would not be introduced for a further twenty-seven years. *Plaid Cymru*, The Welsh Nationalist Party, was growing in strength amidst the radical politics of 1970. Two years previously, at the time of the bombings around the investiture of the Prince of Wales, the party had made clear its objections to an English prince being given such a title. In 1970, the development of a magazine focused on Welsh politics and culture was ambitious. Certainly the wider world would not regard such topics as worthy of attention nor celebration. Thus *Planet* grew out of a country’s struggles for recognition.

Thirty-seven years later, Wales is an established post-devolution nation. The introduction of the Welsh Language Act and Welsh language television channel *Sianel Pedwar Cymru* (‘S4C’) gives the language a far higher profile and legitimacy. Welsh cultural figures, celebrities and sports players are held in high esteem by other countries around the world. Although far from mainstream, the magazine is less on the fringes than it once was. Wales’ reputation in politics and the arts has grown considerably since 1970, and *Planet* continues to strive to boost the nation’s profile.

Planet is published in Aberystwyth by not-for-profit company Berw Cyf, with the support of the Welsh Books Council. It is available in some independent bookshops

and galleries (priced £3.75), however its main circulation is by subscription, at an annual cost of £18. The magazine's website states that its aim is 'to create a forum of debate about Wales in English, as well as encouraging a dialogue between English speaking Wales and Welsh speaking Wales'. Glossy-covered, and a little larger than A5, this 128-page publication is more like a book than a magazine in appearance. The average length of a *Planet* article is approximately 3,500 words, although reviews in the entertainments section, *Scene* are shorter at around 1,200 words. There is a high ratio of text to colour photographs, and the content is varied, ranging from interviews and debates, to poetry and short stories. Articles are written by a wide range of authors, including some eminent cultural figures such as artist Iwan Bala.

Planet is concerned generally with contemporary politics, environmental issues, social history and the arts, and specifically with their relationship to Wales. The magazine frequently features Welsh artists and writers, and occasionally selects Welsh language books to review. *Scene* is a section of the magazine which reviews sport, film, theatre, media and entertainment in Wales. Although an accessible, informal tone pervades throughout the magazine, there is a notable change of style in the *Scene* section, which comprises the magazine's final pages. Delivery here is more chatty and opinionated, with topics such as televised coverage of election debates, and the Welsh Pavilion at the Venice Biennale being debated. This section also includes obituaries of people who were prominent and progressive in cultural and community life in Wales. The magazine's political analysis focuses on Welsh affairs in relation to international issues. For example, a recent article by Chris Harvie, a member of the Scottish National Party, focused on the party's recent election results.¹ He wrote of the London-centric media's 'nanosecond stirring of interest in Scotland' – a phrase applicable to the English media's interest in much of Wales' cultural and political activity, highlighting the outsider status of both Scotland and Wales.

The magazine is accessible in its content and manner, stating that as well as commissioned work, 'readers' ideas for articles and features are welcomed'. Its website includes a section detailing submission procedures and authors' fees, and its contributors include highly regarded cultural figures, such as Welsh artists and

¹ Harvie (2007) in *Planet*, 183, p.16.

politicians. Although written in English, *Planet* maintains a commitment to the Welsh language, announcing, ‘croeso i chi ohebu â ni yn Gymraeg’; (you are welcome to contact us in Welsh). There are consistent links between articles’ content and Welsh culture. This reinforces the publication’s successes in delivering informed nationalist content to an Anglo-Welsh audience. The magazine is aimed at an audience who have an interest in the arts and culture of Wales. The wider creative community of Britain seems to hold Wales’ cultural activity in higher esteem since devolution, and it is within this climate that *Planet* flourishes. Welsh artists are no longer regarded as the parochial outsiders they were once considered, and accordingly *Planet* presents the arts in Wales on the wider-reaching stage they now occupy. Its coverage of art is – like its political and historical features – committed to drawing links between Wales and international issues and themes. For example, a recent debate focused on the standing of the haiku in Wales. The content of *Planet* maintains a strong concern that the arts in Wales should strive for an international reputation (an example being a review of Brecon Jazz festival which begins by asking, ‘Is Brecon Jazz going the same way as the Hay festival – in terms of a merely tokenist treatment of Welsh acts?’².) *Planet*’s drive for an internationally acclaimed Wales is also illustrated by an article that asserts, ‘the media in Wales... are under constant threat, yet they have a crucial role to play in building national identity and in underpinning public acceptance of the National Assembly’³.

The magazine roots Wales’ contemporary popular culture within its socio-historical context. For example, a review of Welsh rock band Manic Street Preachers begins by describing them as a band who, ‘first sallied out of the Valleys in feather boas and eye make-up in 1986, soon after the defeat of the miners’ strike’⁴. Thus *Planet* continues to strive for the nation’s cultural activities to be recognised internationally, whilst being contextualised within the heritage from which they grew. Its general tone is forward-looking, striving for a progressive Wales whilst simultaneously paying homage to the country’s history. A further example may be found in Mike Parker’s recent column, in which he explores the changing socio-political make-up of rural Wales; he describes the changes in his village since the local pub was sold to an

² Morgan (2007) in *Planet*, 183, p.118.

³ Williams (2005) in *Planet*, 173, p.75.

⁴ Lewis (2007) in *Planet*, 183, p.122.

English couple, ('There's way less Welsh spoken in there these days... something very deep-rooted has been severed'.)⁵

My review of leading Welsh artist Gwilym Pritchard's recent exhibition at Martin Tinney Gallery in Cardiff will be appropriate to the magazine for several reasons. It will convey an interest not only in art, but also in its socio-historic context and other arts, such as poetry. The Martin Tinney Gallery shares *Planet's* drive for the promotion of Welsh art, and demonstrates this to a level unprecedented even by the National Museum of Wales. Its opening five years ago was a great milestone in the growing regard for Welsh art. In the words of Martin Tinney,

'There is a new confidence in the Welsh market; a maturation. This is a marked change in attitude and shows a new self-confidence. There has always been an element of low expectation in Wales, but now there is a feeling that Welsh artists are as good as any.'⁶

My article will not be a merely visual review of this exhibition (which Tinney says 'is probably the best selection of Welsh art ever put up for sale').⁷ It will question whether, a year after the death of Sir Kyffin Williams, Pritchard deserves the nickname 'Kyffin with colour'. My article will reflect *Planet's* drive for promotion of Welsh artists, by considering the on-going role of the Martin Tinney Gallery. It will also refer to the poetry of R.S. Thomas and Dylan Thomas, drawing comparisons between the Wales they write of and the landscapes that Pritchard paints. Thus it will draw on several Welsh cultural influences and assert Wales' acclaim in the arts, whilst exploring some of the country's recent history in terms of the gallery's efforts to promote Welsh artists.

Gwilym Pritchard is an example of a Welsh artist who enjoys widespread appeal. He is both an eminent artist in his own right, and one who reminds his audience of Sir Kyffin – a late cultural icon in Wales. Coupled with a focus on a gallery that has been instrumental in promoting the country's art, this presents an appealing subject matter to *Planet*. This article is timely, both in relation to the death of Sir Kyffin in 2006, and

⁵ Parker (2005) in *Planet*, 173, p.23.

⁶ Tinney (2007), in *Cambria – Wales' Magazine*, September-October 2007. As seen on website, <http://www.cambriamagazine.com/content/view/37/9/>

to the Martin Tinney Gallery's fifth anniversary. The article will focus on the Pritchard of today, without forgetting the role played by galleries and artists in his development. In keeping with the ethos of *Planet*, the article will look to Wales' cultural future and present, without forgetting its heritage. Pritchard's work focuses on the landscapes of North and South Wales in equal measures, presenting the opportunity to consider the ways in which the artist depicts the two regions, which have differing cultural identities and a history of rivalry. Pritchard has recently returned to live in Wales permanently, after dividing his time between Brittany and Wales for over twenty years. As discussed, *Planet* is concerned with placing the arts in Wales within the wider international community, and this aspect of Pritchard's biography places the art of Wales within a European context. It also offers a link between Wales and Brittany, which have a long standing relationship and similar Celtic languages.

Bibliography

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Cambria – Wales' Magazine website:

<http://www.cambriamagazine.com/content/view/37/9/>