Film, Television and The Troubles

A Troubles Archive Essay

Martin McLoone

Cover Image: FE McWilliam -Woman of Belfast (1973)

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

About the Author

Martin McLoone is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Ulster. He is the author of *Film, Media and Popular Culture in Ireland: Cityscapes, Landscapes, Soundscapes* (2007) and *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (2000). He has also edited *Broadcasting in a Divided Society: 70 Years of the BBC in Northern Ireland* (1996) and *Culture, Identity and Broadcasting in Ireland: Local Issues, Global Perspectives* (1991), and co-edited *Irish Films, Global Cinema* (with Kevin Rockett, 2007), *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations between Film and Television* (with John Hill, 1996), Border Crossing: Film in Ireland Britain and Europe (with John Hill and Paul Hainsworth, 1994) and *Television and Irish Society* (with John MacMahon, 1984).

Film, Television and the Troubles

At the Cannes film festival in May 2008, *Hunger*, Steve McQueen's harrowing account of the Bobby Sands' hunger strike, won the prestigious Camera d'Or award for best first-time director. The film went on that year to win countless festival awards around the world and to garner great critical acclaim wherever it was shown. It has become the most critically acclaimed film ever to have been made about the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

This extraordinary success, coupled with the general consensus among critics about the film's artistic merits, seems to condemn by default the majority of other films and television drama about the Troubles, none of which achieved anywhere near the critical plaudits afforded to *Hunger*. What, then, is so special about this film and what was so wrong with the fictional representations that came before?

The first thing to note is the fact that *Hunger* was made ten years after the signing of the Good Friday agreement that brought a relative peace to Northern Ireland and it was released at a time when international attention had long since shifted to political problems elsewhere. Perhaps *Hunger* is testament to the old adage that artistic creation is difficult in the eye of the storm itself and benefits from a period of relative distance from the events depicted. When assessing the film and television drama of the past, it is well to remember that artistic creation then had to contend with an almost daily catalogue of violence, political instability and a climate of censorship and control that severely challenged artistic expression. Furthermore, *Hunger* was appraised in a different cultural context than most other films about Northern Ireland. McQueen was already a celebrated video artist whose work had always been reviewed in the context of gallery art rather than the cinema screen and this meant that *Hunger* was approached in the first instance as a work of art rather than as a piece of entertainment. It had serious intent already built in and the critics generally responded in this way. The film is, of course, artistically daring, marrying a range of cinematic styles to tell the story of the 1981 hunger strikes in a challenging and complex way. Most films about Northern Ireland, in contrast, may seem exploitative and simplistic, using the tragedy of the Troubles as a backdrop against which entertainment thrillers and dramas are played out. Much of the critical praise engendered by *Hunger* was based on such an assumption about the films that preceded it.

However, if *Hunger* is remarkable, it is hardly exceptional and the artistic precursors of its complex visual and narrative style can be found in the film and television drama of the past. It is, in fact, a hybrid of the many different approaches and styles, the most recognisable of which are found in the television drama about the Troubles produced when these events were a daily occurrence on the streets and a nightly topic on television news.

For example, it is only fair to recall that the critical reception afforded to *Hunger* is in sharp contrast to the furore that followed the screening in January 1989 of Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (produced by *Slumdog Millionaire's* Danny Boyle), which, according to newspaper reports at the time, drew an unprecedented number of complaints to the BBC from outraged viewers throughout the UK. Press reviews of the film, whether the national broadsheets, the national tabloids or the local press, vied with one another to come up with the most vitriolic condemnations. Clarke's film is a much more intensely ambiguous piece than McQueen's but belongs firmly within the same avant-garde, experimental mode as the later film. Indeed Clarke had made an earlier television film, *Contact,* screened in January 1985, in which the action, set in the border areas of South Armagh, is seen through the night sights of a soldier on patrol. This experimental style renders Northern Ireland as a barely glimpsed vista of ghostly green, mirroring the confusion and lack of clearsightedness that seemingly characterised political and security policy of the time.

Elephant is equally demanding and equally critical. It is a short forty-minute piece which re-enacts eighteen brutal murders, one after the other, without narrative or character motivation. Each murder follows a similar pattern. The camera picks up and follows a character in an everyday setting (a swimming pool, a park, a taxi-rank, a petrol station or an ordinary home) and follows him until he either cold-bloodedly kills or is himself the victim of an unexplained, seemingly motiveless killing. After each shooting, the camera dwells on the body of the victim for an excruciatingly long time, before the next cycle of killing is introduced.

At the time, the BBC explained the title as a reference to writer Bernard MacLaverty's wry comment that it is as difficult to ignore the Northern Ireland Troubles as it is to ignore the presence of an elephant in your own sitting room. Yet the film surely argues the opposite - that if the elephant is there long enough and an explanation of its presence withheld for long enough, then, unlikely as it might seem, its presence no longer excites much interest. In other words, the catalogue of unexplained and seemingly motiveless violence, removed from any explanatory framework, becomes an unpleasant, misunderstood phenomenon that people accept as part of their mental landscape. It holds no prospect of being resolved because it no longer seems extraordinary enough to demand sufficient attention. In this regard, the film was an attack on the way in which the media, especially television news, had covered the violence, rendering it as a nightly catalogue of seemingly aimless and unmotivated atrocities. By implication, there is also a harsh critique of other television drama as well - the elephant has been ignored not just by government, politicians and journalists but by the artistic community as well. The film expresses then a general dissatisfaction with the way in which film and television has responded to the nightly catalogue of horror. The ambiguity of the film rests in the fact that it then reproduces the very situation which it sets out to criticise - a catalogue of random, de-contextualised killings and much of the negative reaction resulted from this ambiguity.

The film proved to be such a demanding piece not only because of the disturbing nature of the violence it depicted but also because it withholds from the audience the kind of narrative coherence and character identification which is central to the operation of conventional drama. It is an avant-garde piece in the sense that it chooses to jettison normal artistic rules and to challenge the television audience aesthetically as well as politically. Thus, despite the undoubted quality of McQueen's film, much trumpeted by contemporary critical opinion, in retrospect, *Elephant* seems a much braver and more challenging break with the conventional dramatic modes of representing Northern Ireland. If it was conceived originally as a reflection on the way in which the news portrayed the tragedies of the time, the reaction to the film suggests that, as drama, it was ahead of its time in its criticism of how the events had lost their political context. As well as attacking the news agenda of the time, the film also, by its very nature, attacked the dominant dramatic modes of representing the daily violence and its seemingly intractable political context.

Television Drama: Recurring Themes in pre-Troubles Drama

Although there had been a long tradition of locally-produced radio drama at the BBC going back to the 1930s, there was no television drama produced from Belfast until the mid-1970s. This does not, of course, mean that there was no television drama about Northern Ireland at all. During the 1960s, in what is often referred to as "the golden age" of television drama, there were a few plays produced centrally by both the BBC and the ITV network which addressed the political issues of Northern Ireland. The most celebrated of these was Granada's 1961 production of Sam Thompson's controversial anti-sectarian stage play, *Over the Bridge*, but there were some other early attempts at dramatising Northern Ireland, including another play by Sam Thompson, *Cemented With Love* (BBC, 1965), a satire on the sectarian politics of Northern Ireland set during an election campaign. Despite the fact that political satire was very much in vogue on television at that time, *Cemented with Love* was pulled from the schedules at short notice when the BBC in Belfast complained that it had not been consulted about the play and needed to vet it for local sensitivities. During the controversy, Thompson died of a heart attack and the play was finally screened a few months later, now as a tribute to the late playwright. This established a pattern that was to emerge constantly over the next two decades. Any drama or television film which sought to explore the political realities of Northern Ireland – like *Elephant* – became the subject of some controversy, while those dramas that explored the human cost of the political instability, whatever their artistic merit, were likely to receive a favourable critical response.

Alun Owen's *Progress to the Park* (Theatre 625, BBC, 1965) transposed the sectarian tensions of Belfast to Liverpool and explored how these tensions, at this stage verbal and familial rather than violently paramilitary, impacted on young lovers from opposite sides of the sectarian divide. *Progress to the Park* thus established what was to become the hardy perennial of much Northern Ireland television drama, the Romeo and Juliet syndrome. Mag Keegan and Billy Loughlin are in love, but she is Catholic and he is Protestant. Their blossoming romance was broken up five

years earlier by their bitterly sectarian families and the play traces their attempt to rekindle this love as adults against the still strongly expressed wishes of their respective families. Like all "Romeo and Juliet" scenarios, the emphasis is on the effects of a family feud on the young (and on the very notion of "love" itself). There is, however, no exploration of why the respective households are feuding in the first place. As a comment on the politics of Northern Ireland, the thwarted love scenario can only work by jettisoning the politics in the first place.
A characteristic trait of much of the drama of the next twenty years or so is that it played safe as far as the complex politics of Northern Ireland was concerned and by concentrating on the human tragedy of ordinary people caught up in the conflict it largely ignored the political context that brought about the conflict in the first place.

Television Drama: After 1968

These underlying politics burst on to the world's television screens on October 5th 1968 and became a major news and current affairs story for the next thirty years. However, it took television drama a long time to catch up. Even as late as 1980, a full twelve years after the initial upsurge of violence, radical television dramatist Trevor Griffith was lamenting the paucity of drama which attempted to address the situation in Northern Ireland. At a conference held at Goldsmiths College that year, 'The Television Play and Contemporary Society', he launched an attack on the poor response of television drama to what he considered to be the outstanding political question in contemporary British politics. He claimed that there had been only nineteen television dramas during these twelve years, commenting that had the Troubles been affecting any other part of the UK, the television response would have been less parsimonious.

As a radical dramatist with strong anti-imperialist and anti-colonial politics himself, it is hardly surprising that Griffith should find the little drama that had been produced up to that point both tame and threadbare. However, there were undoubtedly some key achievements in the 1970s. In December 1977, BBC Northern Ireland transmitted Stewart Parker's first television play, *Catchpenny Twist,* bringing to a popular audience the work of Northern Ireland's finest young dramatist of the time. Parker's reputation may have been forged in the theatre but the drama he originated for television as well as the television productions of his theatrical work were also significant artistic achievements. The BBC was also responsible for promoting other new dramatists of the time and the first television dramas or adaptations of Ron Hutchinson, Maurice Leitch, David Hammond, Derek Mahon and Jennifer Johnston had appeared by the early 1980s.

Furthermore, what Griffith could not detect at the time was that the impetus to dramatise aspects of the Northern Ireland crisis had already started to gather momentum, fuelled by an increasing demand (especially within the BBC) for more local input into mainstream television drama. Over the next fifteen years or so, down to the cementing of the peace process in the late 1990s, Northern Ireland featured more regularly as a topic for television drama across a diverse range of genres. There were three broad categories into which this drama has fallen: drama/documentary, thrillers and authored drama (or the single play). Drama/documentary (or documentary/drama, depending on the balance which is attempted between "real" events and the fictionalised mode) is more closely aligned to events in the real world, and to their mediation through news and current affairs. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this type of production, whether set in a Northern Irish context or not, was at the centre of controversy almost continuously over the years. It might also be noted in this context that the interplay between the factual and the fictional mode became increasingly complex during this long period. If dramatists moved to incorporate elements of news and current affairs reporting into their fictional universe (a tendency at least as old as Orson Welles' production of *The War of the Worlds* for American radio in 1939), then it became increasingly common for news, current affairs and documentary producers to incorporate fictional reconstruction within their factual universe.

One of the earliest controversies over dramatic portrayals of Northern Ireland involved precisely such a dramatic reconstruction, *Willie - The Legion Hall Bombing* (BBC, Play For Today, 1978). The script by Caryl Churchill was edited from the actual transcripts of the trial of Willie Gallagher in a Belfast "Diplock" court (a court without a jury established to prosecute paramilitary cases without fear of jury intimidation). Gallagher was sentenced to twelve years for the bombing of the Strabane Legion Hall. A strong cast that included David Kelly and Niall Toibin acted out the actual words of the transcript, interpreting in their own manner the characterisation which these suggested. The controversy, though, was not about matters of interpretation or reinterpretation but rather about the fact that the BBC changed the wording of a prologue, written specially by Churchill and director, Roland Joffé, and dropped altogether a similarly scripted epilogue. The BBC's argument at the time was that the changes to the prologue were required in terms of accuracy and that the epilogue was tantamount to the BBC "editorialising" on

behalf of one interpretation (or "verdict"). It was surely for viewers to make up their own minds on the basis of the evidence presented in the trial transcripts. For the production team, it was a clear case of political censorship and further evidence of BBC timidity in the face of establishment hostility. The fact that the original screening date for the production in February of 1978 had been cancelled because of the horrific bombing in La Mon restaurant in Belfast earlier that month only fuelled the controversy. Historically, it proved that drama could enjoy no privileged position where it was above the possibility of legal or other kinds of pressure and certainly not when it sailed so close to the concerns of news and current affairs.

Most of the drama/documentary controversies about Northern Ireland involved productions from the commercial channels, rather than the BBC - for example Channel 4's similar dramatising of a court transcript of the (failed) Birmingham Six appeal of 1988; Granada's *Who Bombed Birmingham?* (1990) and Yorkshire Television's *Shoot to Kill* (1990). It might be noted, too, that the BBC's dramatisation of the Maguire Seven case, *A Safe House* (1990) caused barely a ripple, since by that time anyway the enormity of the miscarriage of justice had become clear. However, a couple of years earlier, the Corporation had rejected Tom McGurk's moving version of the same story, produced later by RTE as *Dear Sarah* (1990). Clearly, the closeness of the drama/doc to news and current affairs made it a troublesome genre for all television companies and given the centrality of this hybrid form to television drama generally over many years, it is perhaps surprising (or not) that so few in relative terms were made about Northern Ireland.

It is worth noting the BBC's two attempts at comedy at the height of the troubles - *Foreign Bodies* (1987-89) and *So You Think You Have Troubles* (1991). Here, a genre - the sit-com - which is rarely associated with such a complex and disturbing topic was reconfigured to allow for an exploration of the politics of the situation. *So You Think You Have Troubles* is particularly interesting. It was written by two of television's top comedy writers, Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, and attempted to address the political deficit that *Elephant* drew attention to by using the slightly bewildered observations of a visiting British Jewish entrepreneur to probe the political and sectarian contexts of the violence. The programme only ran to one, six-episode series and was neither a critical success nor popular with audiences despite the fact that the immensely popular Warren Mitchell played the lead role as the bemused visitor. To an extent, the programme was an elaboration of the old joke, "Are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew", but this attempt at smuggling a political context through a sit-com was a brave but ultimately unsuccessful one.

Despite these occasional exceptions the tradition of concentrating on the human dimensions of the Troubles rather than its underlying political causes predominated throughout the period and was especially the preserve of the single authored drama. In a sense, the authored drama over the years of the Troubles transformed itself from the "single play" to the "television film". The distance travelled in this evolution is encapsulated in a tendency that has seen the author of the drama being replaced by the director of the film as the recognised controlling vision of the piece - a move from the theatricality of the single play to the cinematic status of the television film. There were, again, some notable artistic and critical successes.

The most celebrated were the 'Billy' plays written by Graham Reid, the most prolific and successful television dramatist of the 1980s and 1990s. When the first of Reid's cycle, *Too Late to Talk to Billy*, was transmitted in February 1982 it was an immediate critical success, introducing audiences to the acting skills of a young Kenneth Branagh in the lead role as teenager Billy Martin and establishing Graham Reid's position as television's leading chronicler of life in Northern Ireland. Although it was set within a Protestant working-class environment at the time of the Ulster Workers' strike and the rise of the UDA, the play was as much about family tensions and strife as it was about strife on the streets. The play was especially concerned with father-son tensions, exploring the personal demons that tormented the family patriarch, Norman (James Ellis). These character flaws drove away his wife earlier and now drive him to neglect his motherless family and bring him into conflict with his son, Billy. In three subsequent plays, *A Matter of Choice for Billy* (1983), *A Coming to Terms for Billy* (1984) and *Lorna* (1987), Reid explored the further tensions of the Martin family, chronicling the ways in which Billy and his sister Lorna cope with the uncertainty of a dysfunctional family and the pressures of being young in a society torn apart by conflict and violence.

In 1985, Reid wrote a series of six plays under the generic title of *Ties of Blood* that explored the impact of the Troubles on a diverse group of people, including soldiers as well as civilians. The plays attempted to explore what happens when the military has to impact with a range of civilians and the overwhelming impression of the series is that the humanity that links across all the characters, literally their ties of blood, is more enduring and of more significance than the political differences that divide them.

The authored drama or the single play was television's most prestigious dramatic form and throughout nearly thirty years of the Troubles, it was the genre that was most utilised to explore aspects of the Northern Ireland problem. Over these years, many distinguished writers worked on television drama and much valuable work was produced, mostly operating within the humanist framework mapped out by Graham Reid and suggested by the original Romeo and Juliet template. But from the 1980s other forms of television drama turned to the Northern Ireland situation with greater regularity. The most frequent of these was the thriller.

With the thriller, the situation in Northern Ireland was used merely as a backdrop to a plot which operated in a purely conventional manner. This type of drama was mostly (though not exclusively) the preserve of commercial television and was inaugurated by Yorkshire Television's *Harry's Game* (1982), scripted by ex-journalist, Gerald Seymour and directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark. The Northern Ireland setting is used mainly because it provides some of the essential elements to thriller plot lines - double agents, double dealing, dirty tricks and the potential for a conflict of interest, especially where love across the divide can be worked in. *Harry's Game* achieved this admirably and garnered reasonable critical response as well as a large audience. Other examples were often less successful, either because they were poor thrillers or because they were risible in their treatment of the Northern Ireland setting (Channel 4's *The Price* 1985 or Yorkshire's *Circle of Deceit* 1993). The fact that the setting is usually merely a plot device does not, however, exonerate even the best of these from accusations of exploitation or of peddling the same hoary old clichés about Northern Ireland. Indeed, in their treatment of paramilitaries, almost always republican, these thrillers managed to exacerbate the problem by denying the political dimension to the conflict, neatly dove-tailing the "official" line that these men were psychopaths or criminals. In the one thriller which was largely concerned with loyalist paramilitaries, Central Television's co-production with New Zealand television, *The Grasscutter* (1989), loyalism is linked to sexual deviancy and incest, as well as to psychopathology (although in truth, the film, if it was about anything, was about the beauty of its New Zealand locations, lovingly filmed in aerial photography and endless tracking shots). The hardest-hitting of the political thrillers were Yorkshire Television's *Shoot to Kill* (1990) and Ken Loach's *Hidden Agenda* (1990), released to the cinema originally but conceived of in terms of television documentary drama. Both dealt with the shadowy world of deception and counter-intelligence that resulted in the failed Stalker inquiry into the so-called "shoot-to-kill" policy of the security forces in the 1980s. Both were heavily criticised again for their assertions that there was something deep and sinister wrong within the security forces and on legal advice, UTV refused to show the networked *Shoot to Kill* in Northern Ireland.

BBC drama was been less inclined over the years to exploit the situation for the purposes of "mere entertainment", though in Ronan Bennett's *Love Lies Bleeding* (1993) the political potential of the thriller format, and especially of its investigative plot line, is utilised effectively to deliver both an efficient thriller and an interesting exploration of the politics of the situation. Less successful was *Final Run* (BBC, 1988) which used the same plot device (the relocation under an assumed identity of a supergrass witness) as the much glossier *The Grasscutter* and Television South's co-production with Australian broadcasters, *Act of Betrayal* (1988). But unlike Bennett's film, *Final Run* downplays both the thriller elements and the politics to concentrate on the pressures on the family of a situation in which every day must be lived as a lie and in fear of being discovered and here, the downplaying of the thriller element meant that the series came across as merely dull. Closer in spirit to Bennett's film was the BBC's four-part adaptation of MS Power's trilogy about the IRA, *Children of the North* (1991). The screening of this serial was postponed from its original date because the BBC deemed it inappropriate during the first Gulf War to screen a programme that suggested a certain kinship between the machinations of the IRA and their counterparts in military intelligence. When it was finally screened later in the year, it somehow failed to make the kind of impact that such a major production is expected to and which perhaps the interesting marriage of its literary roots, thriller form and political speculation deserved. The scenario, in fact, is similar to *Love Lies Bleeding* - the problems within the IRA between the "hawks and doves" - though to be honest, the image that emerged is of a shadowy world of cross and doublecross on all sides, where the only politics are the politics of bluff, betrayal and misinformation. In the end, the generic requirements of the thriller form can conspire against its use as a dramatic mechanism for dealing with politics, even when, as was the case with Ken Loach's film *Hidden Agenda* (1989), the politics are more overt than is normally the case with the thriller.

Throughout the worst years of the Troubles there was an assumption that, with television news and current affairs subjected to ever greater editorial control within the broadcasting establishment and subject to direct government control in the case of the broadcasting ban on paramilitary spokespeople, television drama might prove to be more daring in its approach. Despite some critical and popular successes down the years, by and large, television drama also steered clear of political controversy. This is a point well illustrated by the contrasting views of radical journalist, Eamonn McCann and the most prolific writer of drama for television, Graham Reid, in a feature

published in 1988 in the television trade paper *Broadcast*. For McCann, the problem was that most television drama was written from the metropolitan viewpoint that "it's a terrible pity what's happening over there and if only the ordinary, decent people on both sides could get together." He went on to argue that "since television drama must by its nature personalise issues, the standard theme, upon which variations are played, is of personal relationships being ripped apart by the sectarian divide ..." He offered his own scenario of the kind of drama which the Northern Ireland crisis can suggest, built around the conflicting pressures and emotions which the mother of a dying hunger-striker must have had to endure (McCann was prescient here and Terry George's film on precisely this theme, *Some Mother's Son*, was released to cinemas in 1996).

Reid, on the other hand, argued in a rebuttal that what is dramatically significant about Northern Ireland is the fact that the people are no different from people anywhere else in the UK. To that extent, then, he argued, as a dramatist, "Whatever subject I tackle, I will do so through human beings and through human relationships". The writer, he feels, must avoid taking sides for fear of reinforcing already held prejudices. "It is worth remembering ... that a soapbox is not a very edifying visual image." He clearly wants to carve out an imaginative space for the writer which is neither circumscribed by the news and current affairs agenda nor hidebound by the need to offer a solution to the problem: "In Northern Ireland there is no solution as such. There is a need for toleration."

Interestingly enough, both writers agree that part of the solution is to have more local drama produced out of Northern Ireland and by the late 1980s, in film and television, the campaign to have more locally-produced fiction was in full force. In their argument with each other, McCann and Reid disagree fundamentally over the merits of Mike Leigh's *Four Days in July* (BBC, 1986), the one television drama that did garner almost universal praise when it was first screened. For Reid, despite Leigh's otherwise impressive career, as an outsider to Northern Ireland, he totally missed the point and ended up offering a perspective on the North which would only reinforce entrenched prejudices on all sides. For McCann, the value of Leigh's piece was that it avoided the perennial liberal desire to find a common ground between the opposing forces, allowing each side to speak in a way that the normal consensus-seeking agenda of most other television drama on the subject had disguised. In a sense, both writers are correct. At the end of the play, the two central female characters, Catholic Colette and Protestant Lorraine, have given birth and are in adjacent beds in the maternity ward. This has been the only point of contact between the two women and the scene is set up to have them discover their essential humanity in the shared experience of motherhood. But when they ask each other what names they will give their children, a cultural barrier comes down. The new-born babies may start with a clean sheet, but they will be educated and acculturated differently.

This is, of course, a break with the liberal "we are all only human beings after all" philosophy which has dominated the authored drama about Northern Ireland and the scene would have played very differently in a Graham Reid play. McCann is right to see this as a significant break with the dominant tradition of humanist drama. However, Reid is correct to argue that the play is fundamentally unbalanced. The plot parallels the lives of Colette's and Lorraine's families, especially their husbands, Eugene and Billy, over the four days leading up to the Twelfth and the birth of their respective children. In these brilliantly realised scenes, the Catholics have the best lines, the best stories and the most heart-warming experiences, despite living with the worst aspects of the violence. The Protestant community is depressed and depressing, caught up in fears about sell-out and betrayal, anchored in a military and paramilitary atmosphere that lacks any mitigating human warmth. Presumably from a perspective like McCann's, it was not before time that the working-class nationalist community in Northern Ireland got a good press, but here it gets a positive endorsement at the expense of demonising the Protestant community.

Four Days in July at least was prepared to go beyond the rhetoric of a common humanity and embrace the reality of the political culture of Northern Ireland. The general tendency, as McCann argued here and which Reid's comments confirm, was for television drama to ignore the politics altogether. In many ways, this became a sub genre in itself, strongly laced with a variety of Romeo and Juliet plotlines, which was guaranteed to evince critical praise in direct proportion to its distance from the uncomfortable reality. The dominant critical response was for just this kind of humanist drama. Thus Hazel Holt, reviewing Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows* on our Skin (BBC, Play for Today, 1980), observed that it "was not really about Northern Ireland: the troubles just happened to be there, souring everything as they do in real life." JohnWyver, reviewing Stewart Parker's *Iris in the Traffic, Ruby in the Rain* (BBC, Play for Today, 1981), observes: "Warm and engagingly casual, Stewart Parker's film is a splendidly understated study of two ordinary lives in Belfast. The British Army continually intrudes in the background but Parker's concern is with his characters." Jennifer Lovelace, writing about Ron Hutchinson's *The Last Window Cleaner* (BBC, Play for Today, 1979) was somewhat bemused. "Although political problems loomed constantly in the background, they were merely the starting point for Mr. Hutchinson's exploration of his characters' eccentricities, as they pursued their several ways, linked by their occupancy of a run-down boarding house set on an island in

the midst of a sea of trouble." Jill Weekes, reviewing one of the BBC's earliest productions set in contemporary Northern Ireland, Martin Dillon's *The Squad* (BBC, Centre Play Showcase, 1976), touches on a key point.

> The problem of linking the atrocities in Belfast to ordinary human beings is probably insurmountable since it remains impossible to believe that ordinary sane people could generate such chaos. Better drama is written from the standpoint of, say, O' Casey where the chaos is a terrible but given fact and ordinary human beings are viewed against this background.

The mention of O'Casey is apt, because much of the better-received and better-written drama over the years, especially the plays of Graham Reid, and certainly Stewart Parker's intermittently brilliant *Pentecost* (BBC, Theatre Night, 1990), end up merely echoing O'Casey's humanist anguish about the absurdity of the violence. The difference was that when O'Casey was writing, the violence was finished and he was concerned with the heritage of those years and how this might impinge on the present. In the Northern Ireland of the Troubles, it took too long for the political context to be addressed. It took too long for the realisation to set in that such chaos was, indeed, generated by ordinary people and that therefore there must be an extraordinary set of factors that pushed them to these extremes.

In retrospect, 1993 was something of a transitional year for television representations of paramilitary violence. Two aspects of this, in particular, are worth noting. First, in the Northern Ireland Office anti-terrorist advertisements, shown nightly on television in Northern Ireland itself, there was a clear shift in perspective in the way in which what are effectively government propaganda films chose to portray the perpetrators of the violence. In a series of three short films promoting the confidential telephone number, the violence was shown with new levels of graphic intensity, mimicking the special-effects style of mainstream cinematic thrillers. However, the male perpetrators of this violence were shown for the first time as ordinary family men, with wives and children to love and look after. The faceless, hooded figures of previous campaigns, seemingly driven by psychological problems or sheer criminal malevolence, were gone. In the 1993 campaign, the gunmen are handsome, trendy and in all respects ordinary, "normal" young men. There is a tacit acceptance, at the very least, that these men are driven, not by psychopathology, but by political principles, even if the victims of their political commitment are ultimately the women and the children who validate them as human beings in the first place.

These advertisements ran through the summer of 1993, and in September of that year there was another significant shift in perspective, this time in regard to television drama. Ronan Bennett's political thriller *Love Lies Bleeding* (directed by Michael Winterbottom) reached the small screen amid an unprecedented splurge of advance publicity and pre-emptive speculation. Shown on BBC 2 onWednesday 22 September, it was contextualised the previous evening by a *Late Show* special, *Telling the Troubles*, which looked at over twenty years of fictional representations of the situation in Northern Ireland; on the Monday evening, a short BBC NI piece, *Re-making the Maze*, looked at various aspects of the making of the film (concentrating on the set specially built in a disused factory to shoot the scenes set in the H-blocks of the Maze prison) and, over the previous weekend, there was a plethora of newspaper features anticipating the likely outcry over the film's unusually sympathetic portrait of the IRA.

There can be no doubt that Bennett's film was a major departure for television drama, concentrating as it did on the IRA and its attempt to purge from its ranks those hardliners opposed to the organisation's strategy of ending the conflict and starting talks with the British government. The film slowly built empathy with the IRA leaders and especially with Conn, the volunteer at the centre of the drama. The political context in which republicanism operated, and the level of popular support which it enjoyed within its own communities, is clearly shown. So too is the organisation's capacity for brutal violence in pursuit of its political aims and the film's denouement is a graphically portrayed and carefully choreographed massacre of the hardline element. Yet interestingly enough, the film generated little controversy – indeed, if anything, there was an overly generous and enthusiastic response to a film that, despite the all-round competence of its production and its unusually interesting theme, nonetheless, strained credulity in purely dramatic terms. Even more interesting is the fact that in the end, Bennett's film hardly progressed the view of political violence beyond that which had been insinuating itself into the popular consciousness all that summer in the NIO advertisements. It seemed that, at last, there was real or tacit acceptance that, despite its savagery and pitiless nature, violence in Northern Ireland was ultimately politically motivated and the politics of the situation would eventually have to be confronted. It was hardly a surprise that just a few months after the screening of the NIO films and Ronan Bennett's drama the government announced that it had "opened lines of communication with Sinn Féin". This was a rare occasion when politics, propaganda and artistic expression came together.

Cinema and the Troubles

The cinema differs from television, and especially from the BBC, in that it has no public service responsibility to be relevant and representative – to educate as well as to entertain – and therefore it had no intrinsic duty to dramatise the political tensions of Northern Ireland during the years of the Troubles. Commercial cinema is box-office driven and Northern Ireland was always considered "box-office poison". It is hardly surprising, then, that the cinema was even slower than was television drama to respond to the growing turmoil in Northern Ireland.When it did, it faced many of the issues and dilemmas that were characteristic of television. Like television, cinematic treatments of Northern Ireland had a pre-Troubles tradition to tap into and in this regard, Carol Reed's 1947 classic *Odd Man Out* was something of a template. There was a level of political imprecision about the film, as its opening titles asserted. It was set in an unnamed city in Northern Ireland, "was not concerned with the struggle between the law and an illegal organisation" but was concerned "only with the conflict in the hearts of the people when they become unexpectedly involved." As with television, few of the cinematic treatments of Northern Ireland that followed actually dealt with the politics of the violence, concentrating largely on the human tragedies created by these politics or offering these tragedies as merely a back-story for an action adventure.

Despite this characteristic disavowal of the politics of Northern Ireland, *Odd Man Out* was subject to two criticisms that were to re-appear in relation to films made during the Troubles from 1968 onwards. Many unionists at the time objected to the fact that the IRA hero of the film was played by matinee idol James Mason, romanticising him through the logic of cinematic stardom. In similar fashion, the casting of heart throb Brad Pitt as an IRA man in Alan J Pakula's *The Devil's Own* (1997) was also severely criticised. Indeed, one of the recurring criticisms of the cinema is that it dealt with nationalist or republican society almost to the exclusion of the unionist/loyalist community and the concentration on narratives about the IRA was taken as an example of this kind of cultural one-sidedness. However, *Odd Man Out* was also criticised by nationalists at the time precisely because of its lack of politics and that remained the main criticism of most of the films made in the 1970s and 1980s. The films may have been more often set within the nationalist community but that did not make them sympathetic portrayals of that community. Indeed, in the most trenchant and influential critique of this tradition of representing the Troubles, John Hill has argued that the dominant impression created by these films is that the violence in Northern Ireland is an atavistic fault of the Irish themselves, a tragic flaw in their make-up that drives them to such extremes. Thus the role that government policy and the workings of history and economics may have played in creating the situation – the background politics – is ignored. And of course any film which dealt in any way with Northern Ireland was likely to find itself caught up in controversy anyway, especially if it strayed off the unremittingly apolitical norm.

Three films from the 1970s/1980s – *Hennessy, The Outsider* and *The Long Good Friday* - show how this process worked. The first film to deal with the contemporary Troubles was Don Sharp's *Hennessy* (1975). Pacifist ex-war hero Niall Hennessy (Rod Steiger) is driven to violence when the British Army kills his wife and daughter during a riot in Belfast. He becomes a modern-day Guy Fawkes and attempts to blow up the Houses of Parliament, Queen and all, in an act of revenge. The film shows the single-mindedness of the potential bomber and suggests that the state, in the guise of both army and police, is also driven to the edge of the law in defence of democracy against such determined terrorism. The biggest controversy lay in the fact that the film used real footage of the Queen looking away to one side. This is edited into the film's narrative in such a way as to suggest that this is a reaction shot to the fracas created when the police finally grab the determined Hennessy. Such creative use of actuality footage was deemed too irreverent to Her Majesty. Since both Rank and ABC, the big distribution and exhibition chains in the UK at the time, refused to show the film, it was effectively banned.

Tony Luraschi's *The Outsider* (1980) met a similar fate and the film has dropped out of distribution completely. In many ways, this is a great lost film of the period, full of the kind of cynical double-dealing and double-crossing that we have since learnt was the reality of paramilitary and special branch behaviour in Northern Ireland at the time. The narrative concerns naive Irish-American Vietnam veteran, Michael Flaherty (Craig Wasson), who, inspired by memories of his grandfather's stirring stories, travels to Ireland to fight for the IRA against the accursed British. After the moral bankruptcy of America's involvement in Vietnam, he was looking for a cause more clearly delineated between good and evil, right and wrong and the Irish struggle against the British seemed to offer him just such an unambiguous cause. He quickly finds himself a pawn in a game between the British and the IRA, both sides exploiting his naivety for their own propaganda purposes. His disillusionment is complete when he discovers that his grandfather's stories were all lies as well. This is an unusually cynical film and it is hard to see how it could ever have been misconstrued as sympathetic to the IRA. Nonetheless, it was severely criticised at the time for showing the British authorities engaged in "mistreatment" and torture of prisoners and for suggesting that the cynical and manipulative IRA are matched by the cynical and manipulative army and police.

The best British thriller of the 1970s was John MacKenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1979) which found itself in familiar controversy because of the way it represented the IRA. In the film, the stable criminal empire of London godfather Harry Shand (Bob Hoskins) is disrupted when the IRA move into his patch. After a brutal struggle for control Shand is ultimately defeated precisely because the IRA are not criminals and therefore cannot be bought, bribed or frightened into submission. The political commitment of the IRA ensures that, in the immortal phrase of Don Corleone in Coppola's *The Godfather*, these are not people "he can do business with". The producers of the film ACC demanded cuts to the final version which would remove references to the IRA as a highly organised political unit. The controversy was only resolved and the film's distribution assured when it was sold to Handmade Films, the company founded by ex-Beatle George Harrison.

The problem with all these films is that behind their thriller motifs the films offer a similar view that the violence in Northern Ireland is ultimately political rather than merely criminal and this suggestion ran in the face of government policy at the time, which was to criminalise the paramilitaries and deny them any political legitimacy. It is interesting that the reference to *The Godfather* is picked up in Jim Sheridan's 1993 film *In the Name of the Father* where the violence of the IRA, although extreme and brutal, is clearly differentiated from that of the ordinary criminal. The implicit suggestion in all these films is that the violence is politically motivated and can only be stopped by a political process and this, by 1993, was the same message that ran through the television film *Love Lies Bleeding* and the confidential telephone ads. When this message dovetailed official policy, the message and the films were no longer controversial.

Most films made about Ireland up until the 1980s/1990s were made by either American or British companies. During the 1980s this began to change as Ireland, north and south began to fund indigenous filmmaking and to encourage filmmakers from within, stimulated on one hand by new funding opportunities provided by Channel Four and on the other by the establishment of the Irish Film Board in the south and eventually Northern Ireland Film Board (now Northern Ireland Screen) in the north. The first Irish film to achieve critical acclaim was Neil Jordan's first feature *Angel* (1982), a stylish film about revenge and violence in which the Troubles are represented in a very metaphorical way as both social deformity and a kind of collective madness. This established the career of Ireland's most acclaimed director and he returned to the theme in his most commercially successful film *The Crying Game* (1992), the most famous and most controversial film made about Northern Ireland in the period. This is a complex and deeply challenging film that adapts the *Guests of the Nation* theme of Frank O'Connor's short story to a film that explores national, colonial, racial, cultural and sexual identity in a dizzying range of contexts in and between Britain and Ireland. The film was a huge success in the USA especially where its daring exploration of sexual identity appealed to an extensive art house and college student audience.

There was also a new range of low-budget, avant-garde and short films made in this early period of experimentation and challenge which attempted to approach the Northern Ireland situation from a more engaged and critical perspective. The most influential of these was Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1980), a complex feminist film which explores the relationship between male republican politics and emerging feminist politics. *Maeve* was the first film to be shot on the streets of Belfast since *Odd Man Out* over thirty years earlier. In 1989, Margo Harkin's acclaimed *Hush-a-Bye* Baby probed many of the same issues in a film about a teenage pregnancy that was a surprise commercial as well as critical success. In many ways these two films book-ended a decade in which the films about Northern Ireland were at their most political and most challenging. As the 1990s dawned, Irish films generally became more commercial and the commercial cinema generally, Hollywood and Britain especially, turned to Irish themes with more regularity. With growing prosperity in the south and the peace process cementing optimism in the north, Irish culture generally became very popular internationally. The dark and sombre situation in the north seemed out of step with the growing party mood and as a result a lighter side of Irishness became the international norm, especially in music, dance and popular television.

There were exceptions, of course, and the 1990s witnessed a range of films about the north which reflected on aspects of over twenty-five years of the Troubles. Jim Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* transposed the story of the Guildford Four into a father/son relationship but still managed to portray the enormity of the miscarriage of justice that was visited on the them and the Maguire Seven. Needless to say, a film which raised issues about police corruption and miscarriage of justice ran into a great deal of controversy, especially in the British tabloids. Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* explored the 1981 Hunger Strikes through the experiences of two mothers whose sons are on the strike and was similarly criticised as nothing but IRA propaganda in a way in which *Hunger* in 2008 was not. Two films which looked back to the 1970s proved particularly controversial, Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1996) and Marc Evans' *Resurrection Man* (1997). Both films looked at loyalist paramilitaries for a change and in their depiction of a deep psychopathic violence they recalled the worst days of

the notorious Shankill Butchers of the 1970s. Since both films appeared at the cusp of the peace process just as a final agreement was in the air, it seemed to many people that their concentration on the darkest days of the 1970s was unfortunate.

In fact, in retrospect, it is easy to see now that these films are actually a reflection of the greater mood of optimism in the 1990s. Indeed, it is possible to see the emergence of what might be dubbed a "peace process cinema" in these films and in Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996) and Jim Sheridan's *The Boxer* (1998). The films reflect on the past from the present, this reflection informed by the more optimistic peace process of the present. Despite their dark and sombre subject matter and their *film noir* rendition of Belfast as a city of a nightmare imagination, the dominant theme of all these films is the need for compromise and accommodation, the need to talk and negotiate rather than to shoot and bomb a way to a solution. These themes are woven through narratives that are, nonetheless, dark and disturbing visions (*Resurrection Man* is especially doom-laden, shot in shadows and a half-light that suggests it is a horror film rather than a political thriller). The mood would lighten in the post-conflict period, a situation presaged in David Keating's *Divorcing Jack* (1997) whose irreverent black humour attempts to do for Northern Ireland and its Troubles what *Trainspotting* had done a few years earlier for Scotland and its problems with drug addiction. This mood was to lighten even more in the immediate post-agreement period with a slate of irreverent comedies like *Mad About Mambo* (1999), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (1999) and *The Trouble with Harry* (2000). As the comedy series *Give My Head Peace* so amply demonstrated on television and these films showed in the cinema, it is easier to laugh at our troubles when we have a solution at hand. The films and television fictions produced in the eye of the storm need to be assessed with more sympathy and understanding than they probably were at the time.

Conclusion

Both television drama and the cinema were slow to respond to the deepening political crisis in Northern Ireland. When they did respond they both skirted the complex politics of the situation in favour of a humanist approach to the tragedy of people caught up in the spiralling violence. This disavowal of the political reinforced the dominant political mood of the time, defined by successive British and Irish governments, which was to deny political legitimacy to the paramilitaries on both sides and to view the situation as a criminal conspiracy requiring a purely security response. Thus, for the most part, films and television fictions played safe and those few which did attempt to probe more deeply were often at the receiving end of considerable hostile reaction. Direct and indirect censorship also made it difficult for such filmmakers and television dramatists. When government policy changed and the talking finally began, cinema and television drama became more adventurous, looking back at the worst aspects of the past with a critical engagement that would not have been possible at the time.

Many careers in the cinema and in television drama were established during the years of the Troubles by artists prepared to tackle a topic so redolent with complexity and difficulty – Neil Jordan, Pat O'Connor, Jim Sheridan, Thaddeus O'Sullivan, Pat Murphy and Margo Harkin in film, Graham Reid, Ronan Bennett, Stewart Parker, Alan Clarke, Michael Winterbottom and Danny Boyle in television drama. Many other writers and dramatists wrote occasional dramas for television or saw their fictional work about the Troubles adapted for both the cinema and for television (Frank McGuiness, John McGahern, Bernard MacLaverty, Maurice Leitch, Ann Devlin and William Trevor among others). These productions taken together amount to a significant legacy in both film and television and are sometimes underestimated as an overall artistic response to a complex political situation. However, the experience of Steve McQueen's *Hunger* suggests that with the relative calm of post-Agreement Northern Ireland, coupled with the considerable benefit of hindsight, there may be greater artistic achievements still to come.

Martin McLoone

Further Reading

Hill, John (1987) 'Images of Violence' in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill *Cinema* and *Ireland* (London: Routledge).

Hill, John (2006) *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics* (London: BFI).

McIlroy, Brian (1998) *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books).

McLoone, Martin (2000) *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI).

McLoone, Martin (2008) *Film, Television and Popular Culture in Ireland: Cityscapes, Landscapes, Soundscapes* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press).

McLoone, Martin (ed.) *Public Service Broadcasting in a Divided Society: 70 Years of the BBC in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, QUB).

Pettitt, Lance (2000) *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press

First published in 2009 by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland