

# *Belfast after 1994*

## *Narrating the Troubles in*

### *Post-Ceasefire Film*

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**Abstract:** *The project carried out as an associate researcher of the W. B. Yeats Chair of Irish Studies at University of São Paulo is part of an ongoing book project entitled “Framing Division. Belfast, Beirut and Berlin in Contemporary Film”. Following a comparative approach, I set out to explore the cinematographic representation of three cities famous for their different internal boundaries. Films focussing on Belfast shall be analysed in comparison to feature films dealing with Berlin during the Cold War and Beirut during the Civil War.*

**Keywords:** *Contemporary films; the Troubles; Belfast.*

The present study concentrates on the illustration in Post-Ceasefire film. Since the outbreak of the Northern Irish conflict in 1968, a great number of cinematographic works depict the consequences of political violence. Feature films such as *Angle* (1982) and *The Crying Game* (1992) by Neil Jordan, *Cal* (1984) by Pat O’Connor, Jim Sheridan’s *In the Name of the Father* (1993) or Philipp Noyce’s *Patriot Games* (1992) spring to mind among many others. As the epicentre of political violence, Belfast has become a recurrent setting for a variety of films. Most of the films produced in the 1980s, and even at the beginning of the 1990s, render a rather grim picture of Northern Ireland, concentrating on paramilitary fighting, the British Army, imprisonments or the Hunger Strikes. Belfast is frequently illustrated as a place in which the peaceful co-existence of the two ethno-religious communities is seen as impossible. The city’s fragmented urban space as well as its internal ethno-religious boundaries<sup>1</sup> have inspired numerous action films featuring shootings, bombings, raids and abductions.

However, in the years following the first ceasefire declaration made by the IRA in 1994, a search for new forms of cinematographic expression can be observed<sup>2</sup>. The improvement of the political climate in the region gave rise to gradual growth of mental and emotional distance from the conflict<sup>3</sup>. As a result, a young generation of scriptwriters

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and producers started to represent the Troubles from a fresh angle in order to express the “new mood of optimism”<sup>4</sup> generated by the more peaceful atmosphere in Northern Ireland. In addition, the emergence of alternative forms of funding encouraged innovative filmmaking activities: The newly founded Northern Irish Film Council (NIFC) provided a production fund in support of locally-made films<sup>5</sup>. The development of Northern Irish cinema was further encouraged through the introduction of UK lottery funds, increased Arts Council funding, and the BBC Extending Choice policy, a policy aiming at greater regional autonomy<sup>6</sup>.

Before the 1990s, a Northern Irish cinematographic tradition was literally absent as most of the films on the Troubles had been produced in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain or the US. Only in the early 1990s, the calmer political atmosphere made it possible to shoot films directly in Northern Ireland. During the most turbulent years of the Troubles, filming on location had not been possible because of security risks and the connected high insurance costs. In those days, Dublin, London or Manchester had habitually served as substitutes for Belfast<sup>7</sup>. John Hill claims that due to the shooting in stand-in locations, Belfast appears in many films as “an abstract place of the imagination”<sup>8</sup>. The key landmarks of the city are absent in those productions and therefore, the place lacks in “specific geographical and physical markers”<sup>9</sup>. The only Belfast-specific features which can be spotted in those films are murals and kerb-stone paintings, which had been artificially added to walls and pavements of the stand-in location in order to recreate the Northern Irish décor. For this reason, Hill argues that Belfast-films shot in other places communicate only little sense of Belfast as “an actual lived-in-space”<sup>10</sup>.

The changed post-ceasefire situation, however, spawned alternative perspectives on the Troubles and films produced after 1994 are widely considered as “Ceasefire cinema”<sup>11</sup>. The term suggests not only that these films were enabled by the ceasefire – thanks to alternative financial resources, the possibility of shooting on location –, but also due to an achieved psychological distance towards the Troubles<sup>12</sup>. Due to the changed political situation, the region’s history could be revisited and the future imagined with more optimism. Whereas a number of “Ceasefire films” concentrate on the new situation in Northern Ireland generated by the Peace process, others return to troubled periods of the conflict, illustrating them from an alienating angle.

In a number of films, innovative visions of the Northern Irish conflict are reached through a carnivalesque plot shaped by grotesque characters, comic situations, slapstick as well as subversive word-play. In line with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalisation, they aim at the derision of established authorities and tackle received visions of the Troubles<sup>13</sup>. Productions with a humorous take on the political situation include, among others, David Caffery’s films *Divorcing Jack* (1998) and *Cycle of Violence* (1998), John Forte’s *Mad About Mambo* (1999), Barry Levinson’s *An Everlasting Piece* (2000), and Dudi Appleton’s *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2003), Adrian Shergold’s *Eureka Street* (1998) – a BBC television series in four episodes – Steven Butcher’s television film *Two Ceasefires and a Funeral* (1995), as well as *Give my Head Peace*, a popular TV series running on BBC Northern Ireland from 1995 until 2005. The latter being produced

by Tim McGarry, Damon Quinn and Michel McDowell, a group of filmmakers calling itself the Hole in the Wall Gang.

Some of the films shot after the ceasefire attempt to overcome Belfast's troubled past entirely and try to show the city as a place which is not anymore marked by ethno-religious segregation and political violence. *With or Without You* by Michael Winterbottom (1999) and *Wild about Harry* (2000) by Declan Lowey, are examples for productions in which Belfast is presented as a "normal" European city in which its inhabitants are rather preoccupied with their personal lives than with sectarian fighting. Whereas *With or Without You* narrates the story of a couple having difficulties to conceive a baby, *Wild about Harry* illustrates the amorous adventures of an unfaithful TV cook.

The films chosen for analysis in the present study depict Belfast's division in very different ways. In this context, I shall not only concentrate on the portrayal of the physical aspect of the city but also on the illustration of the urban population. The first part of my analysis is dedicated to the cinematographic representation of Belfast's territoriality, taking Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1995) and Marc Evans *Resurrection Man* (1998) as examples. Both films belong to one of the most popular sub-genres of films dealing with the Northern Irish conflict, the so-called Troubles Thriller<sup>14</sup>.

In contrast to the majority of the Troubles thrillers, *Nothing Personal* and *Resurrection Man* do not concentrate on the IRA. The two films belong to the rare cinematographic representations of Northern Ireland dealing with the milieu of loyalist paramilitaries. The action of both films takes place in the mid-1970s and echoes the violent deeds of the Shankill Butchers, "one of the worst chapters in Belfast's bloody history"<sup>15</sup>. The Shankill Butchers were an eleven men strong splinter group of the UVF, which terrorised the East Belfast's Shankill area between 1975 and 1985.

It is not surprising that the tense political climate has made Northern Ireland a "thriller writer's dream"<sup>16</sup>. Belfast became one of the main thriller settings due to its urban space divided into numerous Catholic and Protestant areas. Boundary markers such as peace lines, murals, flags and kerbstone paintings literally transformed the city into the adventure playground *par excellence* for the urban terrorist<sup>17</sup>. As its political situation provides the essential ingredients for a thriller action, Belfast is almost naturally chosen by writers and filmmakers as a convenient setting for their works. Hinting at James Bond, Alan Titley argues that Northern Ireland has even managed to replace the Soviet Union as an important thriller location: "since the melting away of the worst icicles of the cold war – Northern Ireland has come as a boon to the thriller writer"<sup>18</sup>. Even if *Resurrection Man* and *Nothing Personal* were released after the ceasefire, they still follow the model of the traditional *Troubles Thriller*. Based on novels, both films adopt a realistic, almost documentary format. Due to the city's numerous boundary markers, Belfast's geography gives rise to a film action based on tension and excitement.

The second part of my study is dedicated to tropes of violence, focussing on *Titanic Town* (1998) by Rodger Michell, *The Boxer* (1998) by Jim Sheridan and *Good*

*Vibrations* (2003) by Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn. The three films provide an unusual perspective on Belfast through the eyes of characters, who could be seen as marginalised individuals. In the following, the term “marginalised individual” is employed to describe liminal characters who are on the edges of the mainstream and who are not primarily interested in the perpetuation of political violence nor in the Northern Irish political discourse.

Set in the 1970s and 1980s, the films address the topic of marginality through a focus on the lives of unconventional protagonists who offer quirky, non-mainstream views. Different tropes of violence are used in order to depict the characters' life in a deeply divided city. In this context, tropes are defined as recurrent significant themes or motives. In *Titanic Town*, the Troubles are perceived from the point of view of the teenager Annie McPhelimy (Nuala O'Neill). Annie, the protagonist of *Titanic Town*, attempts to lead a “normal” life in Republican West-Belfast, torn between her A-level exams and her first boyfriend. Her youthful perspective on the world around her stands out against more mainstream perceptions of the Troubles as seen through the eyes of adult and mostly male characters in film.

In the *Boxer*, the female protagonist is Maggie (Emma Watson), a young woman who is married to an imprisoned IRA-man. As a prisoner's wife in Republican West-Belfast, she is living on the margins of society. The film stands out against traditional Troubles thrillers, as it illustrates the pressures which the Republican community exercises on women whose husbands are in jail.

The protagonist of *Good Vibrations* is the DJ Terri Hooley, a music enthusiast, idealist and rebel, played by Belfast actor Richard Dormer. Fascinated by the emerging underground punk movement, he opens a record shop in the centre of Belfast in the midst of the Troubles. His unconditional passion for music in a city dominated by sectarian fighting is not always comprehended by his family and friends. As a result, he comes to feel like a “spiritual” outsider. Through the alienating perspectives of the three marginalised characters – Annie, Maggie and Terri – *Titanic Town*, *The Boxer* and *Good Vibrations* communicate a somewhat unusual vision of Belfast and its inhabitants.

In a third part, I focus on the representation of social and spatial division through humour and irony, exploring three films: *Divorcing Jack* by David Cafferty (1998), *An Everlasting Piece* by Barry Levison (2000) and *Mad About Mambo* by John Forte (2000). *Divorcing Jack* and *An Everlasting Piece* can be seen as parodies of the traditional Troubles thriller genre. Through grotesque characters and a subversive use of language, both works create a comically distorted vision of Belfast's society. With humour and irony, they shed a defamiliarising light on the clashes of the two communities.

*Divorcing Jack* is based on Colin Bateman's eponymous novel, narrating the comic misadventures of the journalist Dan Starkey. Bateman himself provided the screenplay and the young Irish director David Cafferty was recruited to direct his first feature film<sup>19</sup>. Whereas Bateman belongs to the Protestant community, McEvoy hails from its Catholic counterpart. The protagonist of *An Everlasting Piece* is Colum, a Catholic barber who has the ambition of setting up a hairpiece selling business with his

Protestant colleague George. The action is inspired by the reminiscences of McEvoy's father, a barber, who worked in Northern Ireland for many years for customers from both communities.

*Mad about Mambo* is set in post-ceasefire Belfast, a city in which sectarian violence has ceased but where underlying sectarian tensions are still seething under the surface. The protagonist of the film is Danny (William Ash), an eighteen-year-old Catholic working-class boy from West-Belfast, who spends most of his time playing football. His dream is to become a professional football player. One day, Danny watches a TV interview with Carlos Rega (Daniel Caltagirone), a Brazilian football player, who has just joined the Belfast United team. When he is asked by the journalist how he feels about being the first ever Catholic having been accepted into the team, he answers: "For me, the only religion is football" (6.00-6.05). In order to attribute to his film a humorous tone, the director plays with a number of stereotypes about Brazil. Carlos explains to the journalist that in his country, people learn to dance *Samba* before they start walking. In a caricature of a Brazilian Portuguese accent, he states: "Well, in Brazil, rhythm is life. We learn to *Samba* before we learn to walk. When we play football, we don't run with the ball, we dance." (6.11-6.20).

The last part of my study is dedicated to two recent films in which Belfast's past is revisited in contrasting ways. Yann Demange's *'71* (2014) and Nathan Todd's *A Belfast Story* (2013) provide an innovative vision of the political violence acted out on Belfast's streets. Even if only one year lies between the release of *'71* and *A Belfast Story*, both films are set at very different periods of the conflict and revisit the city's past in very different ways. While *'71* takes place at the beginning of the Troubles, the action of *A Belfast Story* is set in post-Troubles Belfast. The different times chosen by Demange and Todd reflect the need felt by contemporary directors and scriptwriters to return to various periods of the Northern Irish conflict in order to come to terms with the regions in the recent past. Through their unconventional protagonists and the way the action is rendered, the two films depart from traditional illustrations of the Northern Irish conflict.

In *'71*, a young British soldier, Garry Hook (Jack O'Connell), is sent to Belfast at the beginning of the Troubles, at a very tense period of the conflict. Hook functions as a focaliser through whose eyes the action is told. The city is perceived through the uncommon perspective of a young British soldier who joined the army for material reasons and not out of political convictions. Through a young innocent protagonist, Demange illustrates the confused situation reigning in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, a situation, in which even the army is unable to get a grip on the functioning of the city. With the perspective of an outsider, the director manages to shed an unbiased view on the political violence on Belfast's streets.

*A Belfast Story*, on the contrary, is set in contemporary Northern Ireland, which seems to be at peace. However, a new kind of violence is addressed at long retired, former IRA members, who have not been judged for their deeds. In *A Belfast Story*, Todd chooses a detective as an uncommon protagonist. Focussing on the detective's considerations and investigations, the film moves away from the detailed portrayal of cruel acts commonly

occurring in *Troubles thrillers*. The violence depicted in *A Belfast Story* clearly differs from the sectarianism in conventional Northern Irish films, as the murders committed are not any more sectarian killings but mere acts of personal revenge.

In the context of the overall book project, my analysis of the cinematographic representation of Belfast functions as a basis against which films on Berlin and Beirut are explored. I set out to investigate whether German and Lebanese filmmakers use similar strategies in order to depict the division of city space as well the segregation of the urban population generated by a war-torn environment. Furthermore, I attempt to answer the question whether – similar to the cinematographic depiction of Belfast – the representation of Beirut and Berlin changes with the changing political situation in the respective country. Can an evolution from a realistic, almost documentary depiction towards a more humorous illustration of Berlin and Beirut be determined or do German and Lebanese scriptwriters and directors chose different means in order to visualise the evolution of the two capitals from places dominated by a political conflict towards modern cities in which political tensions become gradually part of the past?

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Shirlow, Peter; Murtagh, Brendan: *Belfast. Segregation, Violence and the City*. Dublin: Pluto Press, 2006. 57-100, Jon Calame, Esther Charleworth, *Divided Cities. Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia*, Phidaldephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 61-81.
- 2 McLoone, Martin: *Irish Film. The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2000. 64.
- 3 Cf. Morrissey, Mike; Smyth, Marie: *Northern Ireland After the Good Friday Agreement. Victims, Grievance and Blame*. London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 3; Paul Dixon: *Northern Ireland. The Politics of War and Piece*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002. 224-280.
- 4 Kennedy-Andrews, Elmer: *(De-)constructing the North: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles Since 1969*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003. 189.
- 5 Cf. Hill, John: "Divorcing Jack". In Brian McFarlane (ed.): *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003. 228.
- 6 Cf. Barton, Ruth: *Irish National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2004.162.
- 7 Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*, p. 213.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Hill, "Divorcing Jack", p. 229.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Bakhtin, Mikhail: *Rabelais and His World*. Iswolsky, Hélène (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana, 1984.1.
- 14 Cleary, Joe: *Literature, Partition and the Nation State. Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 11,
- 15 Jordan, Hugh. *Milestones in Murder: Defining Moments in Ulster's Terror War*. Mainstream Publishing, 2002. 192.
- 16 Pelaschiar, Laura. *Writing the North. The Contemporary Novel in Northern Ireland*. Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 1998. 19.
- 17 Seymour, Gerald. *Harry's Game*. London: William Collins, 1975. 57.

- 18 Titley, Alan. "Rough Rug-Headed Kerns: The Irish Gunman in the Popular Novel". *Éire-Ireland*. V. 15. n. 4.1980. 25.
- 19 Hill, "Divorcing Jack", p. 229.

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