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Learning to live with ghosts: spectres of "the Troubles" in contemporary Northern Irish cinema

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ABSTRACT

That Northern Ireland remains profoundly troubled by its own violent past becomes readily apparent in many of the movies that have appeared since the Good Friday Agreement and not least those released since its tenth anniversary. In this article, I provide a broad sketch of recent Northern Irish cinema before moving to a close reading of two critically and commercially acclaimed features released in that period: *Hunger* (2008) and *'71* (2014). The discussion is framed by Mark Fisher's reading of the Derridean notion of "hauntology" and focuses specifically on the idea that the spectre is a figure that is both retrospective and prospective. In their evocation of the ghosts of the Troubles, these movies offer an insight into a society that remains haunted both by the "no longer" of *those* who died during the conflict and also, perhaps, by the "not yet" of *that* which suffered a similar fate during the peace process that followed.

KEYWORDS

Northern Ireland; cinema: hauntology; Mark Fisher

> "The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention."[1]

Introduction

In Andy and Ryan Tohill's claustrophobic 2018 directorial debut *The Dig*, Ronan Callahan returns home to a small Irish town after serving 15 years for the murder of a local woman whose body has never been found. Long since in the grip of alcohol, he was "blackout drunk" when the death occurred and cannot recall anything of what may have transpired that fateful evening. On his first morning back, Callahan notices someone on the family land and he charges from the farm house, hurl in hand, to confront the trespasser. It turns out to be Sean McKenna, the murdered woman's father who has spent the last decade and a half searching the bog for her remains. Having sought unsuccessfully to have McKenna barred from entering his land, Callahan seeks to expedite his departure by joining him in the search for his daughter's body. Some of the most dramatic scenes in the movie set this unlikely, hostile pairing beneath menacing skies, excavating the bog in what appears to be a hopeless quest. Then the chance discovery of a photograph from the evening of the murder leads Callahan to

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

the realisation of where the woman's remains may reside and who may have placed them there.

One of the puzzles *The Dig* sets for the viewer is where precisely the film might be located. The feature was supported by the state-funded *Northern Ireland Screen* and reviews routinely identified it as being set in the six counties.[2] That supposition would seem to be borne out by the livery of the police cars that appear at certain critical moments in the movie. The law enforcement vehicles that feature in the drama belong, after all, to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) rather than their southern counterparts An Garda Síochána. These details are, however, countered by certain others that suggest the location of the movie is rather less certain than many reviewers chose to presume. The central narrative of the feature, for instance, is rather closer to the rural blood feuds of southern Irish drama than the urban sectarian violence that has often defined its equivalent north of the border. It is also worth noting that all of the principal actors in *The Dig* hail from the Irish Republic and deliver their lines in their native accents.[3] There is, then, a palpable ambiguity in terms of place in the movie. The narrative that threads *The Dig* centres on a moment of heinous violence that may well have happened in Northern Ireland but somehow results in the remains of the victim being interred in an unmarked grave somewhere south of the border. For anyone familiar with the detail of recent Northern Irish history, this curious spatial equivocation at the heart of *The Dig* could scarcely fail to call to mind one of the more repugnant practices that marked the Troubles.

Over the course of the conflict, republicans would prove especially ruthless in their treatment of anyone deemed to be acting as an informant for the security forces. At least 16 of those adjudged to be "touts" were not only murdered but "disappeared" as well. This practice typically entailed the suspect being driven across the border to locations usually in counties Louth and Monaghan where they would be interrogated, shot and buried in an unmarked grave. While the stories of all of those "disappeared" during the Troubles are heartrending, there is one that has exercised a particular, enduring resonance. A Protestant widow with 10 children living in the republican stronghold of Divis Flats, Jean McConville was abducted twice in late 1972 by the Provisional IRA on suspicion of passing intelligence to the British army.[4] On the second occasion, she was driven across the border by the infamous republican figure Dolours Price and met the summary "justice" routinely meted out to those deemed to be acting as informants. The death of their mother would condemn the McConville children to unimaginable hardship. Abandoned both by the Catholic Church and the local community, they were separated and sent to a sequence of children's homes, some of which were identified later as places of sexual and other forms of violence.[5] It would be three decades before the children of Jean McConville would have the opportunity to give their mother a proper burial. Acting on information from republicans, the southern Irish authorities had carried out several excavations in County Louth that failed to yield a body. Then in August 2003, a storm happened to disturb Mrs McConville's unmarked resting place and her remains were discovered by a passers-by strolling on the Cooley Peninsula.[6] While several prominent republican figures, Gerry Adams included, have been questioned about the disappearance of Jean McConville, to date no one has been prosecuted for her death.[7]

The traumatic memories that are dredged up by the allusions drawn in *The Dig* might be seen as emblematic of an important contemporary trend in how Northern Ireland is represented on the big screen. While Northern Irish politicians have often proved reluctant to deal in any meaningful or sustained way with the past, film-makers have become

ever more willing to summon the "ghosts" that continue to haunt a region with a violent recent history. The dramas for cinema that have appeared since the restoration of devolution in 2007, in particular, have frequently focused upon those – and perhaps *that* – lost during the conflict and the transition to peace. In calling our attention to the spectres that attend the region's new political dispensation, these films issue a critical reminder that for all the progress that has undoubtedly been made, Northern Ireland remains, in the indelible phrase of John Hewitt, a "ghost-haunted land."[8]

"A delightful setting for romantic comedy"

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998 is widely regarded as the moment that brought down the curtain, finally, on a conflict that cost more than 3,700 lives. The text of the deal opens with an explicit acknowledgement that the Troubles entailed many "tragedies" that have "left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering."[9] It soon becomes apparent, however, that those who signed the Agreement were unwilling, or at least unable, to deal with the multiple traumas arising from three decades of political violence. The myriad atrocities and fatalities that marked the Troubles are consigned in the document to "the past," an historical period evidently assumed to be entirely discrete from that under construction in a society intent on making "a fresh start." That ambition to subject Northern Ireland's turbulent recent history to a moment of "cauterisation"[10] inscribed in the Good Friday Agreement has defined the nature of public policy ever since. There have of course been several public tribunals into key moments during the Troubles, most crucially the "political exorcism"[11] of the Saville Inquiry into the deaths of 14 civilians at the hands of British paratroopers in Derry on Bloody Sunday in January 1972. The absence of a more systematic "truth and reconciliation" process has ensured, however, that most of the murders that occurred during the conflict remain unsolved. In an apparent attempt to deal more comprehensively with these "legacy deaths," the Westminster government established the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) in 2005 to examine 3,268 "cold cases" arising from the Troubles.[12] However, hampered from the outset by paltry resources and multiple charges of bias, the HET would, predictably, prove largely ineffective in solving crimes dating in many cases from several decades earlier. The first 1,850 cases reviewed by the agency, for instance, resulted in only eleven attempted prosecutions and two convictions.[13]

The abject failure of the legislatures in London and Belfast to deal adequately with what are often euphemistically termed "legacy issues" has meant there are tens of thousands of people in Northern Ireland still traumatised because they do not know what happened to their deceased friends and relatives and/or who bears responsibility for their deaths. That "the ghosts of history"[14] continue to haunt the region has found reflection in multiple ways but not least in the substance and tone of many of the dramas scripted for cinema over recent years. The conflict in Northern Ireland would inevitably prove fertile ground for script writers based in Hollywood and beyond. Over the course of the Troubles, the region would be depicted on the silver screen in a constant, glaringly disproportionate, stream of movies typically operating within the constraints of the thriller genre and invariably fixated on the activities of the Provisional IRA. In these productions, the violence happening in Northern Ireland was often depicted as atavistic rather than political, with republicans represented as animated rather less by the politics of Irish unification than the pathologies of the "dark Celtic soul."[15] The ending of the

conflict would, however, signal a remarkable shift in how the region was represented on the big screen. As commentators such as McLoone, McLaughlin and Baker have noted, with the advent of the peace process all those increasingly hackneyed thrillers began to go out of fashion and were replaced by a series of rather gentler, more optimistic movies. A region that had in the recent past been portrayed as a place of senseless, "tribal" violence would in short order become a "delightful setting for romantic comedy."[16] In the late 1990s, as the peace process appeared, finally, to bear fruit in the guise of the Good Friday Agreement, a whole stream of movies in this genre began to materialise, among them *With or Without You* (Michael Winterbottom, 1999), *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (Dudi Appleton, 1999), *An Everlasting Piece* (Barry Levinson, 2000), *Mad About Mambo* (John Forte, 2000), and *Wild About Harry* (Declan Lowney, 2000).

The focus of these movies released as the century turned is no longer on the "men of violence" but rather on what McLaughlin and Baker term the "ordinary people" of Northern Ireland.[17] Those who remain engaged in paramilitary activity are cast not as sources of fear but rather as figures of fun. The republican who appears at the door of a neighbour who is one of the toupée makers in *An Everlasting Piece*, for instance, seems to believe that his balaclava will conceal his identity even though his voice is instantly recognisable to people who have known him all his life.[18] And in the distinctly flaccid comedy *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland*, the pair of paramilitaries from across the communal divide competing for the services of the title character to enhance their community's chances of victory in the region's demographic dogfight are both exposed as suitably impotent.[19] Those men of calibre who were once in the ranks of the paramilitaries are shown to have now chosen a different course. The figure of "O" who appears in the charming coming-of-age drama *The Mighty Celt* (Pearse Elliott, 2005) might be seen as paradigmatic here. Having spent more than a decade "on the run" after a gunfight with British soldiers in which he was injured and his best friend killed, O returns to a west Belfast enjoying the relative normality of the peace process. Shrugging off the goading of dissident republicans with quiet exasperation, the lapsed republican opts not to return to the "armed struggle" but rather to build a new life with his former romantic interest and her son, of whom he comes to learn he is, almost inevitably, the father.

In opting for a life of quiet domesticity, O joins the ranks of the "ordinary people" who are the heroes and heroines of the steady slew of movies that appeared in the years immediately after the Good Friday Agreement.[20] The characters who appear in these features are preoccupied by distinctly quotidian matters and seem indifferent, at times hostile, to the incendiary political issues that had hitherto dominated films devoted to Northern Ireland. The lives of these plain folk are animated not by the "constitutional question" but rather by the desire to make a living, start a family, or repair a marriage damaged by serial infidelity. The backdrop against which these everyday dramas are played out is one far removed from that which dominated the movies of the Troubles era. The films that emerged during the early years of the peace process portray a "new Northern Ireland"[21] that is prosperous and progressive. Once depicted as a "pariah city"[22] on the big screen, Belfast is transformed in the movies that mark the turn of the century into an affluent, "commerce-driven city of glass."[23] This optimism about the present leads almost inexorably towards a certain disposition towards the past. A sensibility common to the movies under consideration here is the belief that Northern Ireland is "moving on" and needs to draw a line under its recent troubled

history. This conviction is articulated most explicitly perhaps in the movie *Wild About Harry* in which the title character, once a political radical, has settled into a comfortable career as a local celebrity chef whose many affairs have prompted his wife to initiate divorce proceedings. After an unprovoked beating at a late night petrol station, Harry blacks out and wakes in hospital to find that he has lost his memory. He cannot remember anything after the age of eighteen and has, in effect, returned to the person he was before the Northern Irish conflict began.[24] With all memory of troubles both personal and collective now "magically excised,"[25] Harry has the opportunity of a fresh start, rebuilding his relationship with his wife and children and reclaiming a certain verve for life jaded by all those years of questionable living. While this attempt at a new life is not without its pitfalls – his wife proceeds with the divorce when he appears to return to bad habits – the film ends on a defiantly positive note, with the prospect of a reconciliation between the former partners clearly on the cards.

The amnesia that conveniently allows Harry to erase his past and move on with his life offers an instantly legible prescription for how Northern Ireland should proceed at a critical early stage of the peace process.[26] That propensity among the films released in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement to echo the official doxa that the region would best serve the memory of the deceased by making "a fresh start" has drawn criticism from several quarters. McLaughlin and Baker are especially scathing in their remarks, insisting that the movies that marked the turn of the millennium reflect how the "new dispensation" in Northern Ireland has "quashed politically engaged film" and "impoverished the cultural imagination."[27] While that critique definitely has a kernel of truth, it employs too broad a brush to be entirely persuasive. The early years of the peace process would certainly witness a succession of lightweight romantic comedies rehearsing the official orthodoxy that Northern Ireland needs to "move on." At the same time, the period also saw the release of other features with, at times, rather grander artistic ambitions and altogether more critical approaches to dealing with the past.

"Works of mourning"

As Carlsten has illustrated, the evolution of the peace process would see the emergence of a "commemorative cinema" in Northern Ireland functioning "as representations of national trauma, as works of memory, and as works of mourning."[28] In the main, the expressly political movies that appeared in the immediate wake of the Good Friday Agreement address specifically the "traumatic past" of the nationalist community.[29] *H3* (Les Blair, 2001) represents a panegyric for the republican prisoners whose demands for political status would lead inexorably to the hunger strikes, while *Silent Grace* (Maeve Murphy, 2001) provides an overdue reminder of the role that women played in that critical passage of the conflict. The fateful events in Derry on 30 January 1972 provide the focus for two features released within weeks of one another to mark their thirtieth anniversary. *Sunday* (Charles McDougall, 2002) recounts the deaths of 14 nationalist civilians that day in a conventional narrative style, while *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2002) would draw rather more critical plaudits for its bold "documentary, cinéma verité style"[30] and its arresting use of "the fracturing devices of flashback, ellipsis and repetition."[31] While the "commemorative cinema" that appeared in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement would primarily deal specifically with the traumas of Northern

Irish nationalists, one landmark movie would appear dealing with the suffering of "civilian victims and their families who hail from various traditions and backgrounds."[32] Released in 2004, *Omagh* (Pete Travis) would act as a "monumentary"[33] to the twenty-nine civilians and two unborn children who lost their lives when dissident republicans detonated a bomb in the market town just four months after the signing of Northern Ireland's celebrated peace deal.

The suitably elegiac tone of that cluster of movies commemorating real-life events during the Troubles would at times become apparent in fictionalised accounts of the period as well. Set in Belfast in 1970, *Mickybo and Me* (Terry Loane, 2004) recounts the charming tale of an unlikely friendship "across the barricades" between two pre-pubescent boys who are drawn together not least by their mutual love of the classic cinematic bromance of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. As the troubles, both personal and political, surrounding them proliferate, the pair run away from home and end up south of the border, the entire escapade choreographed by the deeds of their outlaw heroes from the big screen. Eventually rounded up by the authorities, the friends are escorted back to Belfast where the "civil unrest" is escalating apace. While Jonjo returns to a broken home, a rather more harrowing scene awaits the diminutive figure of Mickybo. The presence of a police cordon signals that there has been a loyalist gun attack on the local pub frequented by the titular character's genial, wastrel father. Freeing himself from his mother's protective embrace, Mickybo runs straight towards the scene of the crime to tell of his adventures. What follows is a powerfully evocative scene in which the child has an imaginary conversation with his recently murdered parent. Propped up at his usual spot at the end of the bar, the father shakes his head gently in disbelief as he recounts that he was "just having a wee pint, thinking about the world, all its glory" when "some joker just came in, started shooting all round him." There are many ghosts in the movies that have emerged during the transition to a nominally "post-conflict" Northern Ireland, but there is perhaps no other scene that captures more memorably the truly haunted nature of that society even all these years after the Troubles.

While the decade immediately after the Good Friday Agreement would certainly be marked by a rash of romantic comedies counselling the need to leave the past behind, the period would also, therefore, be characterised by a series of movies recalling events in which persons both real and fictional lost their lives in Northern Ireland's recent turbulent history. This should not come as a surprise of course. With the events of the Troubles still vivid in the memory, it was entirely predictable that cinema might provide the space for the "memory work" that is essential to the transition to a genuinely post-conflict society.[34] Moreover, it is important to remember that the initial decade after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement was one in which disputes over "decommissioning" in particular led to repeated suspensions of the Stormont institutions and fears that the new political settlement might unravel entirely. It could perhaps be suggested that the "commemorative cinema" of the period gave voice to those widespread misgivings that Northern Ireland might be in danger of returning to its own violent past.

Such fears appeared to have been allayed in May 2007 when erstwhile foes Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness agreed to share power, ushering in what appeared, finally, to be a period of political stability in the region. It might have been anticipated that the new political dispensation would signal a shift in tone among screenwriters concerned with Northern Ireland. As political figures previously dismissed as "extremists" settled into what

appeared, from a distance at least, to be a durable period of power-sharing government, it could have been expected that movies concerned with the region would come to focus rather more on the present – perhaps even the future – than on the past. What has happened is, in fact, precisely the opposite. Since the restoration of devolved government, the desire of film makers to summon the spectres of the Troubles has, if anything, become even more pronounced.[35] Indeed, it is hard to shake the impression that the further we move away from the conflict the more preoccupied have screen writers become with the period.[36] The release in 2008 of the landmark movie *Hunger* (Steve McQueen) would prove the herald of a sequence of mournful movies concerned with the traumas of the Troubles that has stretched right through to the present day. That preoccupation with the past reflects, in part at least, the glaring incapacity of the Northern Irish political settlement to deal with its many debilitating legacies.

Giving up the ghost

In hindsight, the profound melancholia that defines many of the films released in the period since Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) agreed to share power appears rather prescient. Among the principal issues that would plague the partners in government from the outset would be how to deal with the past. Within weeks of the formation of the new Northern Ireland Executive, a team of experts – headed by former Episcopalian Archbishop Robin Eames and former Catholic priest Denis Bradley – was assembled to advise how best to deal with "legacy issues." The work of the Consultative Group on the Past would, however, merely disclose and compound the already stark differences between the strange bedfellows sharing power at Stormont. Published in January 2009, the report of the expert panel advised that the relatives of all of those who died during the Troubles should receive a one-off payment of £12,000. The introduction of such a measure would have resulted in public funds being directed towards the loved ones not only of civilians but combatants as well. Inevitably, that prospect proved anathema to unionist politicians, lending further fuel to an already longstanding row over who should qualify as a "victim" that would see the crucial Eames-Bradley recommendations condemned to wither on the vine.

The failure to resolve the thorny issue of dealing with the past would, predictably, place further pressure on a Stormont executive already dealing with increasingly fractious disagreements over flags and parades. These tensions necessitated prolonged negotiations that would eventually lead to the first of three significant revisions of the Northern Irish peace deal in the space of only six years. Signed in the closing days of 2014, the Stormont House Agreement appeared to promise significant progress in relation to "legacy issues." Amongst the terms of the deal was provision for more systematic recording and investigation of Troubles deaths as well as a (not entirely cast iron) commitment to finding an "acceptable way forward on the proposal for a pension for severely physically injured victims" of the conflict. The return of republican violence to the streets of Belfast in the summer of 2015 would necessitate yet another in Northern Ireland's seemingly endless rounds of political talks. Those negotiations would see the legacy commitments of the Stormont House Agreement reiterated in its successor, the Fresh Start deal. The title of that latest revision of the Northern Irish political settlement would, of course, suggest an unwillingness to acknowledge that the haste for *a fresh start* might

well have been the source of many of the region's problems in the first place. Little progress would materialise in train of this latest deal, however, and "legacy issues" added their weight to the already considerable cluster of difficulties that would lead to the collapse of the Stormont Executive in January 2017.[37]

When the devolved institutions were finally restored after a record hiatus three years later, the traumas of the Troubles era would loom large once more. The New Decade, New Approach agreement forged in January 2020 obliged the British government to introduce within one hundred days legislation to facilitate the legacy commitments made in the Stormont House Agreement some six years earlier. That ambitious pledge would, however, soon run up against a series of political obstacles. There have, predictably, been running battles between unionists and republicans on the Northern Ireland Executive as to who might legitimately be seen as a "victim" of the conflict and eligible, therefore, for financial compensation. In addition, there has been an even more unseemly squabble between Stormont and Westminster over which legislature should foot the bill for the proposed pension scheme for those injured during the Troubles. With politicians of various hues unable to overcome their differences, it has been left to the legal system to bring some resolution to these very public quarrels. In August 2020, the High Court in Belfast ruled that the Northern Ireland Executive was acting unlawfully in its failure to move to the provision of pensions for victims of the Troubles.[38] Some six months later, the Court of Appeal adjudged that it was Stormont rather than Westminster that should assume responsibility for the scheme.[39] That emphatic ruling appeared to bring clarity to proceedings, prompting the Northern Ireland Executive to announce that at the end of June 2021 those injured in the Troubles would, finally, begin to receive monetary compensation.[40]

Looking back across the period since the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland draws our attention to what might well be the most fundamental flaw in the region's widely lauded political settlement. The failure of those who framed the Good Friday Agreement to create mechanisms for dealing with the problems of the past has evidently stored up problems for the future. While there have been various public inquiries into some of the most notorious atrocities of the Troubles – most recently, the inquest that declared the ten civilians killed by British paratroopers in Ballymurphy, west Belfast in August 1971 to have been "entirely innocent" – there remain a great many people who will never know how, or at whose hand, their loved ones died. Moreover, those who sustained physical injuries during the conflict have had to wait a full twenty three years from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement for a pension scheme which, at the time of writing, is imminent but might yet run aground once more. The inability of the peace process to address adequately the legacies of the Troubles has compounded existing traumas and generated fresh grievances which have found expression in many realms but not least in contemporary cinema. Those movies that have appeared since the seemingly historic moment when Paisley and McGuinness stunned audiences at home and abroad by trading jokes in the Great Hall at Stormont, in particular, might be seen as both *an admonition* of those who have failed to deal with legacies of the past and *a premonition* of the perils that would inevitably flow from that failure. The sequence of diverse but mournful films that begins with the release of *Hunger* could be said, in other words, to issue a warning to politicians, and others, not to forget the ghosts that are all about us, an injunction to acknowledge before it's too late that Northern Ireland exists in a perennially perilous state that might be deemed "hauntological."

Ghosts of our lives

The concept of "hauntology" derives largely from the account of transgenerational trauma developed in the work of psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok.[41] Neither of the Hungarian émigrés would, however, use the term which would be coined later by Jacques Derrida in his examination of the cultural world immediately after the end of the Cold War.[42] The demise of the Communist project, Derrida suggests, has created a sense of loss reflected in a widespread mood of mournfulness. The spectres that remain from the dream of a genuinely egalitarian future are, however, unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Living at the "end of history," Derrida observes, requires us to "learn to live with ghosts."[43] One of the most engaging attempts to explore the "hauntology" that defines the contemporary world appears in the writings of the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher. In a collection of essays entitled *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher observes that the triumph of the neoliberal project signalled the demise of other, more progressive visions of the future. This closing down of ideological space – what Berardi terms "the slow cancellation of the future" – has ensured that beneath the glossy surfaces of late capitalism there is a pervasive mood of "melancholia."[44] The term is employed here in a manner akin to Sigmund Freud, denoting a mode of grieving in which the bereaved refuses to relinquish the lost love object, a refusal that gives rise to certain pathologies. One of these disorders, Fisher suggests, expresses itself in the pervasive and debilitating nostalgia of the contemporary culture industries in general and popular music in particular. While the calling card of pop was once its facility for "future shock," it now seems haunted by its own past, constantly re-treading and re-issuing the songs and styles of a previous golden age.

Fisher is suitably withering in his depiction of the "extraordinary accommodation towards the past"[45] that defines mainstream popular culture in the early twenty-first century. He does, however, discern the existence of certain modes of contemporary pop music that while formally nostalgic are politically progressive nonetheless. Fisher is particularly drawn to the "overwhelming melancholy" of those versions of electronic music deploying analogue technologies often associated with the aptly named Ghost Box record label. That he regards the "hauntology" of these forms of electronica to be progressive hinges on a very specific understanding of the term "spectre." As Derrida notes, the most famous appearance of the noun comes in the opening line of the Communist Manifesto: "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism."[46] The use of the term here reminds us that the spectral is not merely retrospective but prospective as well. The figure of the spectre is a disembodied manifestation of that which has passed but also that which has still to come to pass. In the words of Martin Hägglund, it is at one and the same time both the "no longer" and the "not yet."[47]

It is in part the multi-temporal nature of the spectral that informs Fisher's celebration of the "hauntology" of certain versions of contemporary electronica. In their use of analogue technologies from a bygone age, these artists are seeking, Fisher insists, to summon not merely the spectres of the past but those of the future as well.[48] Their intention, in other words, is not to return to some previous sepia-tinted era bur rather to reclaim and reanimate the political dreams of "popular modernism" that germinated in those years before the neoliberal revolution. The melancholia that informs the artists that orbit around the Ghost Box label articulates then not an unwillingness to relinquish the past but rather a refusal to abandon the "lost futures" that once dwelled there. The

"hauntology" of these cultural forms may well represent a form of nostalgia but it is, to quote the late Pete Shelley, a "nostalgia for an age yet to come."[49]

The ideas that Mark Fisher developed in his writings on "hauntology" provide a valuable – if, perhaps, at first glance unlikely – conceptual framework in which to examine recent cinematic representations of Northern Ireland. The films that have appeared since the restoration of devolution, as we shall see, often depict the region as haunted by the spectres of a conflict that has never quite been put to rest. These moving images, moreover, often reveal a certain sense of nostalgia, not only for the past but also for the future, or at least for a future that once seemed possible but was lost somewhere along the way. In the discussion that follows, I examine how these themes play out in two very different dramas for the big screen that were both written and directed by figures from outside the six counties. The discussion begins with what is undoubtedly the most widely debated movie dealing with Northern Ireland to have appeared since the end of the Troubles.

"But I knew I did the right thing by that wee foal"

The directorial debut of English visual artist Steve McQueen, *Hunger* brought a radical art-house sensibility to one of the most controversial passages of the Northern Ireland conflict. A movie in three discrete parts, the opening sequence offers the viewer a "visceral"[50] reminder of the squalor and violence that accompanied the campaign for recognition as political prisoners initiated by republican inmates in 1976. The film opens with some sparse text providing a little context for the prisons dispute, accompanied by the sound of Catholic women rattling bin lids on the street outside their homes, by that stage a traditional means of protest and of warning republican volunteers of the presence of British military personnel. This cacophony of sound will prove aberrant in a movie largely characterised by prolonged periods of silence.[51] The opening passage sees the arrival of a young republican Davey Gillen in Her Majesty's Prison Maze/Long Kesh. Having declared he is a political prisoner and will refuse to wear an inmate's uniform, Gillen is issued a blanket and assigned a cell mate participating in the long-running "dirty protest." As the new arrival struggles to adjust to the gloom, his revulsion at the sight of excrement smeared on the walls mirrors that of the audience. For all its privation, this space will soon prove to be one of comparative refuge. When prisoners are removed so that their cells can be power-cleaned by men in "prophylactic suits,"[52] the warders seize the opportunity to brutalise and humiliate those ostensibly in their care. The first time we encounter the central figure of Bobby Sands he is being dragged into the corridor where he is repeatedly beaten before having his hair roughly shorn and his body scrubbed clean with a yard brush. When the prisoner is eventually dumped head first back in his cell, he turns to look at the camera, his arms extended and his face freshly bruised. This will prove to be the first of many occasions when "the resemblance to Christ is obvious."[53]

The end of the opening passage of *Hunger* is signalled by the murder of a prison officer who is visiting his elderly mother in a care home. Suffering from dementia, the woman does not flinch even when spattered with the blood of her own son, who comes to rest in her lap, in an image that calls to mind the *pietà*.[54] We are then returned to the prison to eavesdrop on a conversation between Bobby Sands and a parish priest from west Belfast to whom he refers only as "Dom." In this "daringly extended"[55] scene of almost 24 minutes scripted by playwright Enda Walsh,[56] we watch from the side-lines as Sands discloses that

the decision has been made to escalate the prison protest by calling a hunger strike. The two men argue back-and-forth about the morality and utility of this course of action. The priest goads Sands that he is motivated by a vainglorious desire for martyrdom, but the republican counters that the hunger strike is driven by the desire to create a "new generation" willing to join the "armed struggle." As the argument reaches a stalemate, the camera moves to focus solely on Sands who begins to recount an incident he claims to have happened when he was 12. In Donegal for a cross-country race, he was part of a group of boys from Belfast and Cork, who stumbled across an injured foal in a stream. While the others postured about how best to put the animal out of its misery, the young Sands chose to act, holding its head under the water until it drowned. His actions led to a beating from a Christian Brother, but this was deemed a small price both for securing the respect of his peers and for acting in the interests of the stricken animal: "But I knew I did the right thing by that wee foal." In this monologue, the communal enterprise that was the hunger strike becomes a solo mission and the motivation for embarking on this course of action becomes one straight from a familiar Hollywood playbook. Bobby Sands ceases to belong to a group of political prisoners and is cast instead in the role of the maverick who "rides alone"[57] so beloved of screen writers down the generations.[58]

After the "avalanche of dialogue"[59] that defines the middle passage of *Hunger*, the film proceeds in almost total silence. This final segment of the movie documents the last days of Bobby Sands in the hospital wing in "excruciating detail."[60] As the hunger strike proceeds, Sands' body begins to consume itself. His eyesight fails, his back is covered in suppurating wounds, he discharges clotted blood into the pristine white toilet bowl. As Sands moves in and out of consciousness, an apparition appears at the foot of his bed in the guise of his twelve-year-old self. The boy stares unblinking at the camera, in a gesture to the closing scene of François Truffaut's celebrated *400 Blows*,[61] a movie already referenced the previous year in the final frames of Shane Meadows' *This is England*. In these agonising closing scenes, Sands undergoes a predictable transformation that had already been signalled earlier in the movie. The prolonged suffering of the republican prisoner clearly echoes the Christian fable of *The Passion* and the presence of his mother watching over him from his bedside merely heightens those connotations. In a hospital room illuminated by sharp, clear light, Sands makes the "Christ-like transcendence to pure image."[62] As he finally approaches death, the figure of his younger self makes another appearance. We see the twelve-year-old Sands running alone along the towpath of a river. He stops to catch his breath and looks quizzically behind him, possibly wondering where the other harriers are, before deciding to run on alone.

On its initial release, *Hunger* enjoyed "enormous critical success,"[63] with director Steve McQueen winning the 2008 *Caméra D'Or* at Cannes for best debut feature. The "formally experimental"[64] nature of the film stood in stark contrast to most previous movies devoted to Northern Ireland which rarely strayed from the stylistic clichés of the thriller or the romantic comedy. Its many admirers often point towards the movie's bold use of sound and silence[65] as well as its willingness to dwell for "almost unbearable"[66] stretches of time on seemingly innocuous details: a prisoner toying with a fly, snowflakes melting on the grazed knuckles of a prison officer, a warder casually brushing streaks of urine seeping from under cell doors.[67] While *Hunger* drew many critical accolades, it also attracted no little political controversy. This was entirely to be expected of course. In its choice of subject matter, the movie had, after all, elected to summon perhaps the most

prominent of the many spectres associated with the Northern Irish conflict. When interviewed, director Steve McQueen sought to resist any claims that the film was "political," countering that it was simply concerned with "human" issues of identity and forbearance, universal themes that ensured the movie had a relevance for other, more contemporary, sites of political incarceration a long way from Northern Ireland, most notably Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay.[68]

These assurances of the essentially apolitical nature of *Hunger* would inevitably fail to convince many of its critics. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Chris Tookey argued that the movie was "pro-terrorist propaganda," adding a predictably puerile flourish in the claim that the feature amounted to nothing less than a "love letter" to Bobby Sands.[69] A rather more considered version of this argument would come from Fintan O'Toole of the *Irish Times*. O'Toole argued that the central flaw of the movie lies in its collusion in the representation of the hunger strike as an event that was aesthetic rather than political.[70] In framing the event in this way, the movie obscures crucial elements of the wider context in which it occurred, with the journalist and cultural critic alleging (wrongly in the latter instance, at least) that the script fails to acknowledge that the prisoners had often been convicted of violent crimes and that the prison protests saw the deaths of more warders than inmates. With these pivotal details neatly removed from view, O'Toole insists, the movie becomes focused on the aesthetics of human commitment and endurance. In doing so, the movie simply cannot avoid repeating a narrative scripted for it in advance by the hunger strikers themselves. This reading finds its academic equivalent in the work of Cillian McGrattan. The essential shortcoming of *Hunger*, McGrattan asserts, is that it removes the fateful events in Northern Ireland's prison system from their appropriate political context. In doing so, the film transforms "the historical record into a morality tale"[71] and produces "a re-politicising, propagandistic exercise in myth-making."[72]

This accusation that *Hunger* represents a politically partisan work has been countered by several writers. The case for the defence here typically entails a simple reiteration of many of the claims that its director has made for the movie. *Hunger* is held to be a film that is only coincidentally "about" Northern Ireland, with the sparseness of the historical context provided in the opening and closing credits offered as evidence of the drama's distance from the particularity of the place in which it is set. Rather than being concerned simply with the Troubles, the movie is depicted as dealing with rather weightier and more universal concerns that transcend the narrow ground of the six counties. This attempt to disconnect *Hunger* from the specificities of its chosen locale and subject matter reaches particularly absurd heights when John Lynch claims that director Steve McQueen "has not made a film about Bobby Sands at all."[73] A rather more plausible version of this argument comes in a thoughtful article by Rebecca Graff-McRae. In her essay, she ponders why it is that the republican movement has been rather more ambivalent towards a critically revered movie like *Hunger* than a more artistically limited work dealing with the same subject matter such as *H3*. The answer, Graff-McRae suggests, is that the former offers a "universalist perspective" that ends up "erasing the political context of the strikes." The outcome of this erasure is that *Hunger* "ruptures Sinn Féin's exclusive claim to ownership of the event and its political legacy" and consequently the film does not feature prominently on what she terms the republican movement's "official commemorative playlist."[74]

While the competing readings of *Hunger* outlined above certainly enjoy widespread currency, neither of them offers a satisfactory account of the film's politics. Although an

assertion made with some regularity, the insistence of Graff-McRae and others that the movie's "universalist perspective" erases the specific context of the Northern Irish hunger strike simply fails to square with the facts of the matter. This is, after all, not a film about someone who bears a passing resemblance to Bobby Sands who finds himself in gruelling circumstances similar to those of Bobby Sands. This is, rather, a movie that is very specifically, and indeed entirely explicitly, *about Bobby Sands*. Those who claim that *Hunger* is not really concerned with Northern Ireland but rather with more universal issues of human rights and fortitude tend to point to a paucity of historical detail provided to viewers of the movie. In reality, however, the explanatory text that bookends the movie is comparable to that provided in most dramas "based on real events" and is certainly sufficient for a reasonably engaged viewer to follow closely what is happening on screen. Furthermore, there are several key moments in the drama that operate effectively as exposition scenes to orientate the viewer not already familiar with all the relevant historical detail, not least the 24 minute central passage in which the arguments for and against the hunger strike are explored at quite extraordinary length. In short, it makes no sense at all to suggest that *Hunger* is a movie that is only tangentially or coincidentally connected to Northern Ireland. This is a film about very specific people in very specific circumstances in a very specific time and place. Admittedly, the impressionistic style[75] of the movie can suggest otherwise at times, but the fact remains that this is a drama that locates itself in a very particular historical context and gives its viewers sufficient information to orientate themselves accordingly.

It is perhaps the quite explicit specificity of *Hunger* – rather than the allusive "universalism" identified by the likes of Graff-McRae – that explains why the movie might well pose difficulties for at least some within the republican movement.[76] Over recent decades, the leadership of Sinn Féin has sought to fold the hunger strike into the subsequent trajectory of republican political strategy. The deaths of 10 young working-class men in the summer of 1981 are portrayed as the catalyst that allowed republicans to secure the electoral gains that would in time nurture a mass political movement with the confidence and stamina to enter into devolved government in Belfast, a move depicted invariably as a mere staging post on the road to a united Ireland.[77] Gerry Adams has often been at pains to underline that the dead hunger strikers would have fully approved of the republican peace strategy. Addressing a twenty-fifth anniversary rally, for instance, the then Sinn Féin President commented that in negotiations with the British government he often felt his side of the table to be "rather crowded" with figures from the pantheon of the republican dead: "There's Bobby, and Francis Hughes, there's Mairead, and Maire Drumm."[78] These quite explicit attempts to integrate the hunger strikers, among others, into the narrative of the peace process, however, have never quite managed to be entirely persuasive. The "renewing death ritual"[79] initiated by Bobby Sands and his fellow inmates is frequently cast as a critical but entirely consistent juncture in the evolution of a political strategy given retrospective coherence in the relentless revisionism of the republican leadership. In reality, however, the hunger strike represented a singular moment of "profound rupture"[80] in the "long war" that was the Northern Irish conflict. The very explicit purpose of the prisoners was, after all, not to create the conditions of a prospective peace – as the republican leadership would now have us believe – but rather to spark an "apocalyptic"[81] escalation in an actually existing war. And for a time it appeared that the republican inmates' ambitions might well be realised. The hunger

strikes would, after all, spark rioting in working-class Catholic neighbourhoods on a scale not seen since the start of the Troubles and in the three months that followed the death of Bobby Sands alone some 31,000 plastic bullets were fired by members of the security forces.[82]

George Legg has suggested that *Hunger* captures something of the genuinely transgressive character of the hunger strike only to squander this insight in the final third of the movie when the prisons dispute comes to be framed in the "exhausted imagery of myth and martyrology."[83] While there is certainly more than a grain of truth in this criticism, the movie does still offer the viewer an indelible sense of what it is that makes Bobby Sands, in a certain sense at least, such a disruptive character in current republican narratives on recent Northern Irish history. It is this quality that ensures that while the hunger striker represents its principal modern icon, he also remains a deeply troubling figure for many at the helm of contemporary republicanism. Bobby Sands is at one and the same time the (dis)embodiment of all of the ideals that republicans claim to hold dear and an omnipresent, nagging reminder of how far they have fallen from those cherished, foundational ideals. He is, in other words, the spectre at the feast of a republican movement long since professionalised and co-opted into the "hollow, depleted, and apathetic"[84] politics of the "new Northern Ireland." And the movie that summons that spectral presence with greatest verve and imagination is, without question, *Hunger*.

In the earlier discussion, it was suggested that the spectre exists not only as the "no longer" but as the "not yet" also. The power of *Hunger* derives in large measure from its facility to summon the troubling figure of Bobby Sands in both of these tenses simultaneously. In his prison writings, Sands revealed an eschatological impulse, a conviction, that is, that the catastrophes of the present are a prerequisite of the triumphs of the future. This particular sensibility was reflected in his famous dictum *tiocfaidh ár lá* ("our day will come") and in his insistence that "our revenge will be the laughter of our children."[85] In the agonising final segment of *Hunger*, we watch Sands waste away until on the sixty-sixth day without food he passes on with his mother at his bedside. In that fateful moment when he breathes his last, the image that flits across his imagination is that of his twelve-year-old self. While this might appear to be a figure from the past, it might be seen more accurately perhaps as one from the future. The boy running along the towpath, after all, pauses at the precise moment that Sands expires but continues to run on even after he has passed away. In metaphorical terms, the figure of his juvenile self might be read then as suggesting that Sands – or, more precisely perhaps, the political ideals he is often held to embody – will experience some version of an afterlife. The dead hunger striker represents not merely the actuality of a political revolution in the past that failed but also the possibility of a political revolution in the future that might have a different fate. He exists, then, as a spectre that gives form not only to the "no longer" but the "not yet" as well.

It is, in part, this Janus-faced figurative power that enables Sands to remain such a profoundly unsettling figure for so many, and not least perhaps for those now at the helm of the republican movement. The spectre that is summoned in the reels of *Hunger* is one that haunts not only the past but the future as well. The figure of the dead hunger striker, after all, continues to articulate a set of political possibilities far removed from the "banality"[86] of the peace process to which Sinn Féin have plied their troth. It is scarcely surprising then that the ghost stories that feature in *Hunger* should have proved

uncomfortable viewing for some within the republican tradition. When the likes of Fintan O'Toole and Cillian McGrattan suggest that the movie offers a narrative deeply convenient for the republican movement they certainly have a point. The rendition of this crucial passage of the Troubles that appears in *Hunger* obscures, after all, a whole slew of inconvenient truths. It neglects to mention, for instance, that the prisoners depicted so sympathetically on screen were themselves personally involved in often heinous acts of violence conducted in the name of an organisation responsible for more deaths than any other during the Northern Ireland conflict. The movie also fails to acknowledge adequately the allegedly Machiavellian role of certain republicans on the outside, most notably Gerry Adams, in prolonging the hunger strikes for electoral gain when a resolution may well have been at hand.[87] It would seem then that the cultural critics who contest that *Hunger* makes for comfortable viewing for the republican movement have no shortage of evidence on their side. What these commentators fail to appreciate, however, is that precisely the opposite might well be true at the same time. The figure of Bobby Sands reminds republicans not only of what they believe to be their valiant past but also of what they know now to be their lost future. In recreating with such vividness the tragic events of the summer of 1981, the makers of *Hunger* conjure up a spectre that continues to haunt many in Northern Ireland, but not least a republican leadership that has long since abandoned the idealism of those who starved themselves to death in pursuit, ostensibly, of a socialist republic in favour of the shabby neoliberal compromises that have been among the more dispiriting hallmarks of Sinn Féin's period in office.[88]

"You are not leaving this country!"

As Martin McLoone has noted,[89] the many cinematic and televisual dramas centred on Northern Ireland that have appeared over recent decades have been marked by the "relative invisibility" of British military personnel. An important exception to that rule comes in the guise of *'71*, directed by Yann Demange, which became the most commercially successful Troubles thriller on its release in 2014.[90] Set in the titular year when the nascent "civil unrest" in the six counties escalated into the "long war" that would define the Northern Irish Troubles, the movie centres on the figure of Gary Hook, a young, (presumably) orphaned man from Derbyshire who leaves his younger brother in care to pursue a career in the British army. The new recruits in Hook's platoon are supposed to be shipping out to Germany but on the eve of departure they are informed that the "deteriorating security situation" in Belfast means they will be heading there instead. In an attempt to reassure the evidently disgruntled squaddies, the officer making the announcement delivers deadpan the following lines: "I take it you all know where Belfast is? Northern Ireland. United Kingdom. 'Ere. You are not leaving this country!"

On arrival in Belfast, however, it becomes immediately apparent that the fledgling soldiers have done precisely that. Their first full day in the city sees members of the newly arrived platoon lost in west Belfast where they have been assigned to support the local police force in a house search for weapons in a republican neighbourhood. As the police officers proceed to humiliate and brutalise the inhabitants, angry neighbours gather in the street, sparking an inevitable riot. In the chaos, a soldier felled by a flying object has his rifle stolen by a child who scampers off behind the protective cordon of rioters. Hook and another soldier, Thommo, are dispatched to retrieve the weapon, but they are set

upon by angry locals and in the midst of the beating an IRA man emerges from the crowd and shoots the latter squaddie dead. Showered in his friend's blood, Hook takes off through the back streets pursued by a pair of republicans who turn out, fortuitously, to be rather poor shots. Eventually, the soldier takes refuge in an outside toilet where he waits until nightfall before venturing out, camouflaged in a pullover purloined from a convenient washing line, in an attempt to return to barracks. Thus begins a harrowing journey through the streets of Belfast that calls to mind the *via dolorosa* of wounded republican gunman Johnny McQueen in *Odd Man Out* (Carol Reed), the 1947 feature whose enduring influence makes it a spectral presence in a great deal of modern Northern Irish cinema.

Only in the city barely a day, Hook is completely disorientated but he happens upon an unlikely guide in the form of a precocious, foul-mouthed young Protestant who offers to bring him to the presumed safety of a pub out of which operates his uncle, a major figure in local loyalist paramilitary circles. When the pair arrive at the bar, they witness something they are not supposed to. In a back room, a member of the Military Reconnaissance Force (MRF) – a covert British intelligence agency skilled in the dark arts of "counter-insurgency" that operated in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s[91] – based in the same barracks as Hook is priming a bomb for loyalists to plant on licenced premises in a nationalist district of the city. The soldier steps out of the pub in search of a lift back to base and at that moment the explosive device detonates prematurely. In the especially powerful scene that follows, Hook searches through the wreckage for the boy, who has lost both arms and is barely clinging to life, a local woman arranging for him to be ferried to hospital in what seems the vain hope he might survive. Shrouded in ash, his temporary deafness mimicked by the now muffled soundtrack, the soldier stumbles off into the night. Lost once more in a strange and hostile city, Hook does not know which way to turn, until through the haze a diminutive ghostly apparition beckons him and he follows dutifully. It will not be the last spook that the bedraggled British soldier will encounter on his second night in Belfast.

We next encounter Hook passed out on a street corner, seriously injured from the premature explosion in the loyalist bar. A middle-aged man, Eamon, and his daughter, Brigid, happen upon the unconscious squaddie on their way back to their flat in the republican Divis Flats complex. Against the pleading of his anxious daughter, Eamon insists on bringing Hook home, and it is only then that the pair realise that they are inadvertently harbouring a British soldier. Realising that their lives are in danger should the fugitive be discovered, they seek to enlist the help of Boyle, an older, relatively moderate figure in the republican movement who we see on various occasions seeking to cool the heels of younger militants itching for battle. It transpires that Boyle is in fact an informant and he contacts the MRF personnel we have encountered already to come and collect Hook. The younger militants have, however, been tailing the older republican all evening and having become aware that the missing British soldier is in the vicinity they eventually capture him and lead him away to what appears to be his certain death. By the time the MRF personnel, supported by several soldiers from Hook's platoon, arrive at the Divis Flats complex, the squaddie is being held in the basement of a local abandoned pub and only remains alive due to the squeamishness of a young republican recruit who cannot bring himself to pull the trigger. When the military intelligence officers storm the bar, it appears that their intention is to save Hook's life but in reality they are there to

ensure they he will never be able to disclose the provenance of the bomb that devastated the loyalist bar earlier that evening. The covert operative who delivered and primed the explosive device is the first to arrive in the basement where he seemingly kills the young republican who could not bring himself to discharge his pistol and then proceeds to strangle the captured soldier. Arriving late on the scene, Hook's platoon leader witnesses what is happening and is about to intervene when two shots ring out. The prostrate young republican who is out of sight has just killed the military intelligence figure and in the confusion the officer returns fire, killing the fledgling paramilitary instantly.

The closing scenes of *'71* feature a summary army tribunal clearly designed to cover up the events that we have just witnessed on screen. The senior officer of the MRF unit provides a menacing presence in these briefings as the platoon officer is browbeaten into accepting that what happened in Divis Flats that night was at variance with what he saw with his own eyes. Still bearing the wounds of his ordeal, Private Hook maintains a stoic silence as his superiors pressure him into endorsing their convenient version of events. This abuse of procedure evidently shatters any remaining faith the soldier has in the army and, like many other protagonists in recent movies about Northern Ireland, he makes the decision to leave the world of combat behind and opt instead for a life of domesticity,[92] albeit of a slightly unusual stripe. In the closing frames, we see Hook on the boat back to England, casting his dog tags into the brine. On arrival, he heads straight to retrieve his younger brother from the care home where he left him before departing for Belfast. The movie ends with a shot of the siblings seated together on a bus passing through bucolic countryside, on their way to a destination that is unspecified, but presumably this time really does entail "not leaving this country."

As a commercially successful movie, *'71* reminded a mainstream audience that even a full generation after the end of the conflict, Northern Ireland remains troubled by "ghosts haunting the spaces of the progressive present."[93] In most dramas dealing with the region, the British military occupies a marginal position, as though it had been merely "refereeing the fight"[94] that went on for three decades. The reality is, of course, that the British army was a principal player in, and indeed accelerant of, the Northern Irish Troubles. In the course of its longest ever campaign, "Operation Banner," the British military lost more than 500 soldiers and was responsible for more than 300 fatalities.[95] *'71* represents perhaps the most significant recent attempt by filmmakers to capture the experience of those predominantly young working-class men who crossed the Irish Sea to serve in the region. In the main, the movie provides a distinctly sympathetic portrayal of British soldiers deployed to Northern Ireland. The young squaddies who arrive on the streets of west Belfast are depicted as inexperienced and vulnerable, entirely ill-equipped to police a conflict that they do not understand and which already appears to have spiralled out of control. There are several haunting scenes in *'71* but none more so perhaps than when an army patrol returns in the dead of night to recover the body of Thommo, the callow private we saw earlier being shot at close range by a republican gunman while trying to recover a stolen firearm. The body of the young squaddie remains where he fell, his brains scattered across the pavement of a street now eerily quiet. The ghosts that haunt *'71* are not only those of fallen British soldiers but also those of the almost 2,000 civilians[96] who lost their lives in the violence that accelerated in the year that gives the film its title. One of the most shocking scenes in the movie is that where the premature detonation of a bomb levels a pub in a loyalist neighbourhood. For anyone

who remembers the events of the Troubles, this moment would instantly call to mind many similar moments of carnage, the attacks on *McGurk's Bar* or *the Bayardo* among them.[97] As Private Hook stumbles, shrouded in ash, from the wreckage of the bar, a spectral figure appears through the gloom, the spirit perhaps of the dismembered boy he has just attempted to salvage from the ruins of the bombed pub. This fleeting apparition offers a chilling reminder of all of the civilians who perished in the bombing campaigns that marked the Troubles, of those who are no longer with us but whose spectral presence remains in the lives of those left behind.

There is at least one further form of ghost that appears in the frames of *'71*. Among the issues that the movie illuminates is the conduct of those military intelligence figures who operated in Northern Ireland during the conflict and indeed beyond, a theme also prominent[98] in other recent feature films such as *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (Kari Skogland, 2008) and *Shadow Dancer* (James Marsh, 2012). These covert operatives, by their very nature, have a certain spectral quality – they are, after all, both there and (officially) not there at the same time[99] – and it is then rather appropriate that they are often referred to as "spooks."[100] In *'71*, it often appears that it is these shadowy figures who are the principal figures orchestrating the escalating violence in Northern Ireland. We see, for instance, members of the MRF supplying loyalists with a bomb intended to "send a message" to republicans that their acts of violence will be met like for like. Later in the film, it transpires that operatives from the group have "turned" a senior IRA figure and that they are conspiring to have him assassinated and replaced by a newly recruited informant from the younger, more militant ranks of the organisation. While the conspiracy theory that the movie seems to provide by way of explanation of the Northern Irish conflict is clearly overstated, it certainly contains some basis in truth nonetheless.

Over time, the scale of covert operations by British military intelligence in Northern Ireland has become ever more alarmingly apparent. Perhaps the most stunning revelation in this regard came in 2003 when it emerged that the individual who headed the "nutting squad" responsible for identifying and killing informants within the Provisional IRA, Freddie Scappaticci, was himself a long-standing state informant.[101] Those who defend the strategy of running agents within paramilitary organisations insist that the practice has gleaned intelligence that has allowed many lives to be saved. This rationale was projected onto the big screen in 2008 with the release of a movie based on the life of Martin McGartland, the title of which makes the claim that his role as an informant within the IRA ensured that there are "fifty dead men walking." Those more critical of British military intelligence would counter that their activities in Northern Ireland have cost rather more lives than they have saved. The case against covert operations often points to those moments when the authorities have colluded with loyalist assassins as well as those when innocent civilians were sacrificed in order to protect agents within paramilitary organisations.[102] A movie like *'71* offers a genuinely damning indictment of those "spooks" that operated outside the law and often with seeming impunity throughout the Troubles. In doing so, it provides a critical reminder that there are within Northern Ireland many people who remain deeply haunted by incidents of violence committed by many actors, but not least those who were in the employ, or in the pay, of the British state.

Conclusion

In her enigmatic text *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon insists that spectres "appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view."[103] The suggestion that the spectral represents a symptom, perhaps even a herald, of some more fundamental cultural or political malaise that remains unresolved would seem to be borne out in a Northern Irish context. When the Troubles eventually drew to a close, many people in the region felt that they might finally discover how, why, and at whose hand, their loved ones died and that justice might even prevail. The new political dispensation made little provision, however, for dealing with the complex legacies of the conflict. As it has become ever more painfully apparent that most of the deaths that occurred during the Troubles would remain unsolved, or at least unprosecuted, the ghosts of Northern Ireland's recent turbulent history have, inevitably perhaps, returned time and again to haunt the region.

One of the spaces where the haunted nature of a society that is nominally "post-conflict'" becomes most apparent is that of cinema. Since the restoration of devolved government in 2007, there has been a succession of movies that summon the spectres of Northern Ireland's violent past. And that "hauntological" disposition so apparent in recent visual representations of the region shows little sign of abating. In October 2019, for instance, filmmakers Michael Hewitt and Diarmuid Lavery released *Lost Lives*, a feature that blurs the distinction between documentary and movie and succeeds in the seemingly impossible task of translating into moving images the book of the same name which stretches to 1,700 pages to record all of those who died in the Northern Ireland conflict.[104] The film recounts eighteen specific fatalities, with a string of renowned actors reading the relevant entries from the text over images that shift from the carnage of the Troubles to rather oblique shots of both rural and urban landscapes. What the suitably elegiac tone of *Lost Lives* signals is the return of that which was only ever barely repressed during the often choreographed optimism that marked the early stages of the Northern Irish peace process. Like so many of the other genuinely haunting, and indeed haunted, features that have appeared in the era of supposedly stable devolved government, the feature issues a timely reminder that if the people of Northern Ireland are finally to face a genuinely peaceful political future they must find at last the means through which to acknowledge and exorcise the spectres of their own violent recent past.

Notes

1. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
2. Clarke, Donald. "The Dig: A classic western movie set on an Irish bog." *Irish Times*, 25 April 2019. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/the-dig-a-classic-western-movie-set-on-an-irish-bog-1.3870261.
3. The lead Moe Dunford is from Dungarvan, County Waterford while the three other principal actors – Lorcan Cranitch, Emily Taaffe and Francis Magee – are all from Dublin.
4. Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing*.
5. Ibid., 181–96.
6. Conor Pope, "Body found on Louth beach was Jean McConville." *The Irish Times*, 20 October 2003. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/body-found-on-louth-beach-was-jean-mcconville-1.505509.

7. Henry McDonald, "Former IRA chief cleared over Jean McConville killing." *The Guardian*, 17 October 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/oct/17/former-ira-chief-cleared-over-jean-mcconville-killing.
8. McKay, *Bear in mind*, 11.
9. The quotations here are taken from the text titled *Agreement reached in the multi-party negotiations*. Belfast, 1998.
10. Graham, "Every passer-by," 568.
11. Long, *Ghost-haunted land*, 36.
12. McIlroy, "Memory Work", 270.
13. Shirlow, "Truth Friction," 422.
14. Dawson, *Making Peace*, 14.
15. Debbie Ging, *Men and Masculinities*, 132.
16. Baker, "'Victory doesn't Always Look,'" 176.
17. McLaughlin and Baker, *The Propaganda of Peace*, 72, 83.
18. Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*, 210, 230.
19. Ibid., 223.
20. McLaughlin and Baker, *The Propaganda of Peace*, 78–9; Baker, "'Victory doesn't always look,'" 175–85, 176.
21. Ramsey, "'A Pleasingly Blank Canvas,'" 165.
22. McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular*, 2008, 52.
23. Long, *Ghost-Haunted Land*, 31.
24. Ging, *Men and Masculinities*, 147.
25. McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular Culture*, 63.
26. Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 142–3.
27. McLaughlin and Baker, *The Propaganda of Peace*, 96.
28. Carlsten, "Mourning and solidarity," 233.
29. Ibid., 242.
30. Carlsten, "Not Thinking Clearly," 161.
31. Ibid., 151.
32. McIlroy, "Memory Work," 264.
33. Ibid., 263.
34. Ibid.
35. That period has seen the release of the following films that might fall into that category: *Hunger* (2008), *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (2008), *Peacefire* (2008), *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), *The Shore* (2011), *Shadow Dancer* (2012), *Good Vibrations* (2013), *'71* (2014), *Shooting for Socrates* (2014), *The Truth Commissioner* (2016), *Maze* (2017), *Penance* (2018), *The Dig* (2018), *Lost Lives* (2019). There have also been several feature-length documentaries dealing with the Troubles, including *No Stone Unturned* (2017), *A Mother Takes Her Son to be Shot* (2017), *The Image You Missed* (2018), *The Ballymurphy Precedent* (2018), *The Life After* (2018), *Unquiet Graves* (2018), and *I, Dolours* (2018).
36. The preoccupation with the Troubles is also apparent, but much less pronounced, in the realm of television. For a discussion, see Coulter, "'What is this, the Seventies?'"
37. Coulter and Shirlow, "From the 'Long War.'"
38. Breen, Suzanne. "Victims see light at end of tunnel as judge to rule on Troubles pension logjam." *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 August 2020. https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/victims-see-light-at-end-of-tunnel-as-judge-to-rule-on-troubles-pension-logjam-39466636.html.
39. "NI Executive must fund pension scheme for victims of the Troubles, court rules," *Irish News*, 9 February 2021.https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2021/02/09/news/ni-executive-must-fund-pension-scheme-for-victims-of-the-troubles-court-rules-2215321/
40. McClements, Freya. "Stormont commits to funding Troubles pension scheme." *Irish Times* 12 April 2021.https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/stormont-commits-to-funding-troubles-pension-scheme-1.4535575
41. Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel.*

42. Hickey, "The old cause."
43. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xvii-xviii.
44. Fisher, Ghosts of my life, 6.
45. Ibid., 9.
46. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 2.
47. Fisher, *Ghosts of my life*, 18.
48. Ibid., 22–5.
49. The lyric appears on the track "Nostalgia" from the second Buzzcocks album *Love Bites* (United Artists, 1978).
50. Lynch, "Passion of the Militant," 191.
51. Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 152.
52. Lynch, "Passion of the Militant," 194.
53. Garden, "Proving their 'Virility'?" 59.
54. Ibid., 60.
55. Legg, *The politics of boredom*, 171.
56. McNamee, "Eye witness," 288.
57. Ging, *Men and masculinities*, 163.
58. Pine, "Body of Evidence," 163.
59. Comment made by the director Steve McQueen in a press release by Maple Pictures, 2008.
60. Melvin, "Sonic Motifs," 24.
61. Pine, "Body of Evidence," 164.
62. Ibid., 163.
63. McNamee, "Eye Witness," 281.
64. Lynch, "Passion of the Militant," 186.
65. Melvin, "Sonic Motifs."
66. Lynch, "Passion of the Militant," 194.
67. McNamee, "Eye Witness," 289.
68. Ging, *Men and Masculinities*, 150.
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70. O'Toole, Fintan. "Hunger fails to wrest the narrative from the hunger strikers." *Irish Times*, 22 November 2008. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/hunger-fails-to-wrest-the-narrative-from-the-hunger-strikers-1.913725.
71. McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity*, 88.
72. Ibid., 96.
73. Lynch, "Passion of the Militant," 102.
74. Graff-McRae, "Fiction, Encryption, and Contradiction," 26.
75. Crowdus, "The Human Body."
76. The controversies surrounding whether films dealing with the political conflict in Northern Ireland can, or indeed should, seek to transcend that specific context have, of course, a long pedigree. See, for instance, Hill's 1987 critique of two movies released more than three decades apart – Odd Man Out (1947) and Angel (1982) – in which he insists that the pursuit of a more "universal" understanding of violence obscures the specific political context that makes it intelligible.
77. Finn, *One Man's Terrorist*, 207.
78. McKay, *Bear in Mind*, 320. The references here are to the first two men to die in the 1981 hunger strike: Bobby Sands, who, tellingly, requires no surname, and Francis Hughes. The two female republicans mentioned are Mairead Farrell, killed by British undercover soldiers in Gibraltar in 1988 while on active service but unarmed at the time, and Maire Drumm, the former Vice-President of Sinn Féin who was murdered in her hospital bed by loyalists in 1976.
79. Feldman, *Formations of Violence*, 242.
80. Ibid., 215.
81. Ibid., 254.

82. McKay, *Bear in mind*, 99.
83. Legg, *The Politics of Boredom*, 197.
84. Ibid., 62.
85. McKay, *Bear in Mind*, 319.
86. Legg, *The Politics of Boredom*, 176.
87. Hennessey, *Hunger strike*, 463–4; O'Rawe, *Blanketmen*.
88. Coulter, "Northern Ireland's elusive peace dividend."
89. McLoone, *Film, Media and Popular Culture*, 217.
90. Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 155.
91. Tonge, *Northern Ireland*, 72–3.
92. Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 157.
93. Long, *Ghost-Haunted Land*, 3.
94. McGrattan, *Memory, Politics and Identity*, 67.
95. Fay et al., *Northern Ireland's Troubles*, 169.
96. Ibid., 159.
97. The bombing of McGurk's Bar in Belfast's republican New Lodge district by loyalist paramilitaries in December 1971 caused the deaths of fifteen civilians, including two children. The bomb attack by republicans on the Bayardo Bar in the nearby loyalist Shankill neighbourhood in August 1975 resulted in the deaths of four civilians and one loyalist paramilitary.
98. Barton, *Irish Cinema*, 157.
99. Shaw, *Hauntology*, 6.
100. Hennessey and Thomas, *Spooks*.
101. Cowan, Rosie. "He did the IRA's dirty work for 25 years – and was paid £80,000 a year by the government." *The Guardian* 12 May 2003.https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/may/12/northernireland.northernireland1.
102. Cadwallader, *Lethal Allies*.
103. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
104. McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives*.

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