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Troubles and Northern Ireland: Representations in Film of Belfast as a Site of Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores three films with very different narratives to help map out and frame British colonial representations of Ireland, and the Northern Ireland conflict in particular, over several decades: from a fatalistic, film noir evocation of a troubled urban landscape in *Odd Man Out* (1947) to a video-game-like struggle for survival in an urban maze in ’71 (2014), culminating in a romantic and ahistorical evocation of a memorialised city-space in *Belfast* (2021). Much has been written about the long history of struggle and violence in Northern Ireland that is outside the purview of this paper, yet readers need to grapple with this history if they are to fully appreciate and contextualise such complex political, religious, economic and cultural tensions.

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INTRODUCTION

Feeding off debates highlighted in the initial ARINS editorial,¹ which speaks of the diverse cultures, identities and symbolism and the need to address relationships within Northern Ireland and between the UK and Ireland, this paper seeks to explore the complex cultural and colonial representational conflicts embedded within British representations of the Troubles, which have apparently been transformed in recent years. Yet as Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular, seeks to forge a new post-Troubles identity, it has to also address the unresolved decades of conflict and political strife in the region.

Thomas Kinsella’s celebrated poem on (London)Derry highlights the trauma, conflict and injustice that in turn help to call attention to the need for careful memorialising around ongoing representations of ‘the Troubles’:

‘Butcher’s Dozen: A Lesson for the Octave of Widgery’

And when I came where thirteen died  
It shrivelled up my heart. I sighed  
And looked about that brutal place  
Of rage and terror and disgrace.

OVERVIEW

Film, like all the arts, can help spark debate and provoke new ways of seeing the past and the present, and this paper focuses primarily on the representational geography of Belfast, as creatively visualised and witnessed through the eyes of mainstream (British) directors. The readings explore how such films assist in framing and shaping an appreciation of the on-the-ground tensions and pressures evident in this crisis-ridden city.

There is an ongoing struggle and challenge to uncover a constructive space for the city outside of the sectarian violence of the region, aggravated and often catalysed by a (post-) imperialist colonial mindset, while at the same time striving to support more effective ways of representing and thinking about this troubled topography, while recalling the complex interrelationship

¹ John Doyle, Deirdre Gormley-Heenan and Patrick Griffin, ‘Editorial: Introducing ARINS (Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South)’, Irish Studies in International Affairs 32 (2) (2021), vii–xvii.
between film and history and considering how the audiovisual medium shapes, reinforces or subverts our understanding of the past, constituting a reflexive balancing act. According to Jennie Carlsten, it remains important to emphasise ‘the wide variety of ways in which film shapes our ideas about the past and about history’, alongside focusing on ‘the narratives we construct to give meaning to the past’. As many scholars affirm, memory remains a fundamental mechanism towards creating and maintaining social identity. Jay Winter, for instance, goes so far as to describe memory as ‘the central organizing concept of historical study, a position once occupied by the notions of class, race, and gender’.

More locally and pointedly, Irish film scholar Martin McLoone argues that the two traditions or myths mobilised by British cartoonists, for instance, to depict the fractured Irish identity have remained visible—albeit more subtly—across a large number of filmic representations of the Troubles; these include, I suggest, the three successful films explored in this paper. These two mythic tensions, as summarised by Debbie Ging, include:

- the myth of Frankenstein, whereby political leaders are seen to have stirred up violence and subsequently lost control of the beast they created
- misappropriated Darwinian theory, whereby the Irish are posited as less developed on the evolutionary scale.

According to much of the research in the area, such violence results from a fracturated identity crisis, which in turn is posited as endemic within Northern Ireland and is consistently portrayed as either pre-modern or simply backward. Certainly, this is borne out through many Irish narratives from the past few decades that are preoccupied with themes of loss and grieving, often setting stories of individual mourning within the context of wider national traumas. Of course some historians and film scholars alike have long expressed doubt about the ability of fictional storytelling to adequately represent, much less memorialise, the past. Such doubts stem in large part from concerns about factual accuracy and the reliability of the medium, while

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2 Jennie M. Carlsten and Fearghal McGarry (eds), *Film, history and memory* (Basingstoke, 2015), 1–2.
3 Cited in Carlsten and McGarry, *Film, history and memory*, 9.
4 Debbie Ging, *Men and masculinities in Irish cinema* (Basingstoke, 2013), 131.
5 See Ruth Barton, *Irish national cinema* (Abingdon, 2004).
6 See Carlsten and McGarry, *Film, history and memory*, 151.
other scholars such as Gabriel Rosenstock astutely critique the ‘emotional and melodramatic tug’ of mainstream narrative films.\(^7\)

John Hill’s 2006 study *Cinema and Northern Ireland* captures these varying dilemmas, while continuing to use the trope of the ‘Troubles’ to frame Northern Irish cinema in his conclusion: ‘films concerning Northern Ireland are faced with a number of obstacles. For the last 40 years, “The Troubles” has been the distinctive feature of the region and it is difficult to set a film in NI that does not deal with the impact of the conflict in some way or other, without appearing either naïve or wilfully evasive.’ On the other hand, it is evident that films about conflictual drama ‘may often have settled into conventional patterns; the integration of “Troubles” subject matter into popular cinematic formats has proved problematic’. While the prospect of peace may have spurred the production of a new cycle of ‘upbeat’ Troubles films aimed at the popular audience, again, according to Hill, ‘they nonetheless remain haunted by the realities of continuing social division and the absence of any “quick fix” solutions to the conflict’\(^8\). Such prescient observations of these lingering tensions and pressures will feed off all three films under discussion, with varying results.

**ODD MAN OUT**

Carol Reed’s first masterpiece introduces the theme that would shape all his best films: a stranger’s groping quest through the labyrinth of a great city, recalling the little French boy left to his own confused devices in London in *The Fallen Idol* (1949) or the American blundering through occupied Vienna in *The Third Man* (1949). As Lance Pettitt (2000) affirms, *Odd Man Out* sets out to be an apolitical film, exploring the mental landscape of the principal character, Johnny (James Mason), and lamenting Kathleen (Kathleen Sullivan’s) hopeless love for her IRA leader. Johnny is fatally injured while stealing a textile mill pay-roll in Belfast. Many reviews end up drawing some comparison with John Ford’s *The Informer* (1935).

This northern Irish city was part of the United Kingdom that fought in the Second World War: the IRA were actively pro-German during the conflict,\(^9\), and nationalists in general were perceived as disloyal—not just

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7 See Carlsten and McGarry, *Film, history and memory*, 152.
8 John Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland* (London, 2006), 242.
9 Brian Barton, *The Belfast Blitz: The City in the War Years* (Belfast, 2015), 501–6.
in unionist terms but also from Great Britain and the Allies’ perspective. In many ways, the city’s Britishness is revealed in the process of trying to conceal such aspects of ‘problematic Irishness’. Hill has observed how this tragic narrative typifies the way in which serious British films deal with the political history of Anglo-Irish relations. Odd Man Out certainly created a degree of discomfort for the unionist regime when it first appeared, not because of its politics but as a result of ‘the way in which it cast doubt upon Belfast’s status as a normal industrialised city’. Back in 1987, Hill initially argued that this classic movie was by all accounts ahistorical, decontextualised and fatalistic, suggesting a sort of primal, atavistic violence at the heart of the Troubles rather than a socially constructed problem that can be solved.

For instance, the insistent tempo of William Alwyn’s musical score and the careful deployment of incidental sound contributes much to this sense of fate exerting its forces on the protagonists. Most notably, the opening exposition (as in the other two films dealt with in this paper) focuses on the unmistakable gantries of the Harland & Wolff shipyard in the background, which helps to nail the specificity of the place. The documentary veracity of these establishing shots helps to reinforce the evocation of the Falls Road, with rows of terraced housing blitzed in the Second World War and gangs of children playing on bomb-created wastelands: all the while ‘Johnny hides in a disused air-raid shelter’, while extras are used as uniformed sailors and soldiers or ‘ex-ARP wardens’.

The storyline focuses on a dying Irish rebel who is not in a foreign land, but nonetheless remains an outsider in his hometown and follows the ‘odyssey through the borderline between life and death’. With his cinematographer, Reed developed his signature vision of the city at night, constructing: ‘misty shafts of light probing pools of blackness, bricks and cobblestones glistening with rain, gigantic shadows moving across walls, long alleys tunneling into the screen, desolate squares dotted with the tiny figures of children’.

The viewer in many ways shares Johnny’s vertigo (like after the accidental bombing scene in ’71, to be discussed presently) through a rapid montage of

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10 Lance Pettitt. Screening Ireland: film and television representation (Manchester, 2000), 60.
11 Pettitt, Screening Ireland, 61.
12 Hill, Cinema and Northern Ireland.
13 Cited in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, Cinema and Ireland (Abingdon, 2015), 152–60.
14 Pettitt, Screening Ireland, 61.
15 Pettitt, Screening Ireland, 61.
16 Imogen Sara Smith, ‘Odd Man Out: death and the city’, The Criterion Collection, 14 April 2015.
blurred and tilted shots, establishing an intimate identification with his physical suffering and inner life that remains crucial to the film’s power. An aerial shot travelling over Belfast opens the film in a documentary key that is similar to the 2021 recreation of the city, and the early daylight scenes have a brisk expository style that ‘fits into the post-war trend of neorealist thrillers’.17

According to Imogen Sara Smith, the main protagonist is perceived as ‘helpless, gradually immobilised, while the dying Johnny takes on a fatalistic morbid glamour. He’s both pitied and coveted, a prized object and a cursed thing that no one wants.’18 As the rain turns to snow, it’s impossible not to connect this with James Joyce’s short story ‘The Dead’ from Dubliners (1914), with its snow ‘general all over Ireland’ and falling ‘upon all the living and the dead’. Back in the 1940s, Belfast was certainly a divided city—as was post-war Berlin—yet Odd Man Out makes no mention of such division between Catholics and Protestants, or between republicans and loyalists—even eliminating the Protestant anti-hero bias of the adapted book, making the film entirely non-political in many ways. The city is divided, not apparently between religious and political groups, but between selfishness and charity, the cautious neutrality of those who ‘don’t want to get mixed up in it’ and the fleeting courage of the few who act on their pity.

Most memorably, the sublime tragic ending focuses on a steamship’s whistle mourning over the couple’s fallen bodies, with Johnny’s stubborn will to live almost seen as the opposite of fatalism. For example, Smith ends her review by noting that ‘the anguished howl with which he briefly silences a crowded pub is more defiant than despairing. It is the unanswerable cry of the man who is dying while others are living.’19

This seminal British film got a new lease of life when re-released by Criterion in 2015. Reviews emphasise how the city is currently striving to rebrand itself as a modern, lively and welcoming place while overcoming a reputation for violence and strife—its most indelible cinematic portrayal gets a welcome restoration and re-release on high-definition Blu-ray and DVD from this collection.

By all accounts, reviews constantly note how the opening aerial shot sweeps over Belfast Harbour and the famous Harland & Wolff shipyard that

17 Smith, ‘Odd Man Out’.
18 Smith, ‘Odd Man Out’.
19 Smith, ‘Odd Man Out’.
built *Titanic*, coming finally to rest on the city’s iconic urban timepiece, the Albert Memorial Clock in Queen’s Square. The strict British censorship of the post-war era would likely have taken punitive action against a film that was any more overt in identifying its locus and paramilitary operatives. The ending involves a broad sweep of the dockland region and concludes with a close-up of a clock. Metaphorically and otherwise, time has run out for the main protagonists, with the added sound of the horns of an emigrant ship that might have taken them away to safety.

Echoing the journey into danger historically dramatised in the perennial classic *Odd Man Out*, this evocative and visceral video-game-like thriller captures the tensions and passion of an alien ‘troubled landscape’ and site of ongoing conflict for a new generation. *’71* (2014) became one of the most commercially successful Troubles thrillers on its release, written by Gregory Burke and directed by Yann Demange in his feature debut. It stars Jack O’Connell in a (fictional) story of a British soldier who becomes separated from his unit during a riot in Belfast at the height of the conflict in 1971. The storyline provides a good example of a soldier’s outsider view as he strives to hold the peace, and feeds into a growing trend of nostalgic military depictions—recalling for instance the American preoccupation with the ideological defence of soldiers fighting wars abroad, which serves as a ballast to counter-discourses around universal human rights and investigations into army complicity in political conflicts. Somewhat paradoxically, the production was actually filmed on location in Blackburn, Lancashire (April 2013) as well as in Sheffield, Leeds and Liverpool. It was funded by the BFI, Film4 and other British agencies.

Set in the titular year when the nascent ‘civil unrest’ in Northern Ireland escalated into the ‘long war’ that would define the 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. In the opening exposition, the senior army officer making the announcement of their impending redeployment 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!’ This is before Hook
goes through his paces in army training, facing up to the harsh natural elements and getting bloodied, wet and extremely cold in a process designed to help build morale, discipline and cohesion within the army unit that will be fully tested.

A key geography lesson on Belfast is given to the fresh recruits during their first morning’s briefing: ‘the Protestant part is in the east and the Catholic nationalist area is in the west’. To illustrate the lie of the land, a close-up of a crude map is shown, demarcating the sectarian situation on the ground. The soldiers are informed, with no context provided, that front-line Catholics and Protestants are ‘at each other’s throats’. The Divis Flats are noted as an IRA stronghold and deemed very dangerous, with the ‘Falls Road demarking this division’. These cursory geographical details and exposition are designed to foreshadow the perilous journey to follow.

By choosing not to have his men wear full riot gear, the equally inexperienced commander Armitage (Sam Reid) affirms that they should make citizens feel that the British soldiers are there to protect civilians of all persuasions. Of course this liberal view on the role of the army is very much contested on the ground, when the irrationality and chaos of rioting and anger spill out into the streets. An initial taste of this is given when the convoy lose their way, with no signposts to follow on the roads and maps of little use. The local children, who are constantly seen playing in the street, hide behind barricades, representing tough little Belfast boys who taunt the soldiers by throwing objects at them. This extends to ‘mooning’ and throwing piss-bags, recalling earlier representations in *Odd Man Out* where children brandished imaginary guns and shouted in unison ‘I’m Johnny McQueen!’ to emulate their local tragic hero. Eventually the recruits are shown the way by RUC armoured cars and drive in formation to their destination, a closed-off warren of streets similar to those seen in *Odd Man Out* and later in the background in *Belfast*.

Echoing the children’s disrespect for the army, and to call attention to their arrival in a hostile environment, local women bang the lids of steel refuse bins on the footpaths. The British army is certainly not wanted here, notwithstanding the gentle manner and actions of the somewhat two-dimensional soldiers who are portrayed in *Belfast* as being there to protect all civilians. But the local RUC in this re-creation of forced entry into some nationalist houses highlight the sectarian nature of the Troubles, with Catholic families verbally abused and beaten up as the police attempt to uncover ammunition. Meanwhile, the erstwhile peacekeeping British soldiers stand by with guns
at the ready as civilians display their anger and resentment. Soon rocks are
thrown and the scene becomes very violent, the soldiers having no riot gear to
protect then. Travelling cinéma-vérité shots of the soldiers’ dilemma ensure
audience empathy in feeling part of the conflict, as the army contingent
become unsettled by the dangerous situation that they are in. A boy takes a
rifle left on the ground by an injured soldier and runs back up the street. Hook
and another soldier (Thompson) are ordered to follow and retrieve the gun.

Showing a total lack of discipline, the army and RUC quickly retreat when
the situation escalates, forgetting the two soldiers, who are left to fend for
themselves. After a melee, Thompson is brutally shot dead at close range
by an IRA gunman, Paul Haggerty (Martin McCann), while Hook escapes
with guns firing in all directions. Atavistic violence has broken all the basic
rules of military training. Later an ex-army doctor who is stitching Hook’s
wounds affirms bluntly that in the (British) army: ‘it’s all a lie—you’re just a
piece of meat!’

The closing scenes of ’71 feature a summary army tribunal clearly designed
to cover up the events that audiences have just witnessed on screen. 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, while recalling an earlier pro-
nouncement of soldiers just being used as bait. Like many other protagonists
in recent movies about Northern Ireland, Hook decides to leave the world of
combat behind and opt for a civilian life, before throwing his army credentials
(dog tags) into the sea.

According to Colin Coulter, as a commercially successful movie,’71
reminds a mainstream audience that even a generation after the end of the
conflict, Northern Ireland remains troubled by ‘ghosts haunting the spaces
of the progressive present’.

In most dramas dealing with the region—unlike this full-blooded examination—the British military tend to occupy a marginal
position, as though they had been merely ‘refereeing the fight’ that went on
for three decades. The reality of course is that the British army was a prin-
cipal 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’.

20 Colin Coulter, ‘Learning to live with ghosts: spectres of the Troubles in contemporary Northern Irish cinema’,
Irish Studies Review 29 (3) (2021), 287–301.
Nonetheless, this film presents a distinctly sympathetic portrayal of British soldiers deployed in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, this film presents a distinctly sympathetic portrayal of British soldiers deployed in Northern Ireland.21

Moving from a game-like recreation of a troubled environment to a more nostalgic recreation of conflict, let’s turn to a successful and well-regarded autobiographical study.

**Belfast**

This popular feel-good recreation by Kenneth Branagh, a seasoned Shakespearian actor and an established director, recounts his deep love of Belfast, where he was born. The film serves as a memorial reprise of the beginnings of the (recent) Troubles, told from a mild-mannered, non-sectarian Protestant family who simply wanted such tensions to go away. It appears that most audiences love this whimsical tale, which is totally engaging emotionally while displaying high production values—it received the Best Original Screenplay award at the Oscars. Basically, the story hinges on a family eventually having to escape to England as the Troubles are about to ignite.

It is often forgotten that many Protestant families as well as Catholics left the region because of the Troubles. Nonetheless, at a political or more broadly ideological level, one might take issue with the narrative trajectory of the film, while wondering if audiences could critically decode and unpack a story told through the rose-tinted perspective of hindsight, while at the same time embracing such an idealised place from a contemporary point of view with the Troubles having ended. Like the other two examples discussed, one wonders whether such a story can simply be decoded as an ahistorical, nostalgic love letter to the city of Belfast and its inhabitants (in this case evocatively using the music of fellow native Val Morrison), as an idealised place that has disappeared forever.

According to Paul Whittington, ‘Britain has never quite accepted the fact that Kenneth Branagh is, in a sense, Irish’.22 He was born and raised in Belfast and left for England at the age of ten, following the outbreak of the Troubles. According to Branagh, this was probably the most significant moment of his

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21 Coulter, ‘Learning to live with ghosts’, 301.
22 Paul Whittington, ‘Kenneth Branagh: “I was being English at school and Irish at home. I didn’t want to upset my parents”’, *Irish Independent*, 14 January 2022.
life. He was the second son of working-class Protestants and lived on Shore Road, which was home to both Protestants and Catholics. ‘People did get on … people were very proud, and when economic hardship occurred, a lot of people visited the pawn shop.’ But of course, the Troubles signalled a turning point. Unfortunately, while acknowledging and celebrating such ecumenically driven cross-religious communities, the film provides little evidence of Catholics and Protestants actually intermingling on the ground, before or after the conflict begins.

The full-colour opening credits use drone and eye-level shots of the iconic Harland & Wolff shipyard, which also end the film. These images stand out for viewers who may know little about the real place, as also witnessed in the previous visualisations of the city. It must be noted, for historical accuracy, that this huge legacy industry and employer was riven with sectarian divisions and reinforced numerous injustices towards Catholics and nationalists, who for many decades were constantly discriminated against as second-class citizens. Nonetheless, the habitus and landscape of the city are romanticised and celebrated, as the camera roams across its buildings and seascape with two big pleasure ships in the harbour, while presenting a close-up of the Titanic Quarter as an explicit memorial and touristic site of the famous docklands. So much contemporary life and energy is displayed as the camera moves into a close-up of a graffiti-laden wall, before seamlessly transitioning into black and white and a clearly coded recreation of a close-knit idealised community from 1969.

Almost reminiscent of a utopian musical setting, the streetscape is filled with children playing all types of games—unlike the explicit taunts of children in the other two films—and men and women are pleasantly loitering in doorways observing the lived-in nature of their community. No sign of poverty here, with teeming children all well-dressed and healthy looking: a perspective that does not seem to tally with a deprived working-class urban space from the period. Everyone appears in total harmony throughout the chaos and frenetic excitement of the mise en scène, which is explicitly choreographed as a form of idealised social cohesion providing evidence of a protective community.

Then, suddenly—recalling conventional film analysis protocols—a montage-type transition towards chaos erupts, as a belligerent (Protestant) riot-gang arrives on the scene seeking to break up this coexistence of Catholics and Protestants. Rocks are thrown and violence takes over as natives try to get back into the apparent safety of their homes. This is reminiscent in ways
of a musical representation of conflict, such as in *West Side Story* (2021) or, at another generic extreme, the iconic steps sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), but without its particular ideological and dramatic import. By all accounts, a form of choreographed display of negative and positive energy is triggered by so-called rebels and intruders from both sides of the sectarian divide. A more apt cinematic trope, which continues at key junctures up to the end of the film, includes the repurposing of iconic Hollywood westerns such as *High Noon* (1952), as against science fictional fantasies that foreground the sexually innocent charms of Raquel Welch as an escape route for the extended family, alongside the glorious colour displayed in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968).

Buddy (Jude Hill), as the main protagonist and innocent voice of the film, is literally lost in this melee and needs his mother (Caitriona Balfe) to find and save him, as replicated a number of times in different ways throughout the film. The mother remains the moral compass of the family, eventually deciding their fate, while making the huge decision to abandon a protective and supportive community where their core identity was shaped and solidified. This inevitable (fatalistic) journey of escape, at least in hindsight, can feed off cosy libertarian and anti-sectarian values that don’t upset most audiences.

By focusing on an innocent boy, the director’s sympathetic autobiography is carefully registered and forged: he eventually matured and grew up in the bosom of the UK mainland and thrived there, thereby avoiding the confusion of ideological and sectarian contradictions embedded in this historical recreation of a fractured community. This nostalgic theme is eloquently but maybe unconsciously dramatised using intertextual references to *High Noon* (1952), where citizens are asked to take a stand against oppression but few rise to the challenge. As in most westerns, there has to be a consensus around defining the ‘thin blue line’ of law and order and policing the ‘common good’, while at the same time demonstrating that enemies alternately need to be framed and demonised. Meanwhile, the storyline can avoid such difficult contradictions by focusing on the psychology of a child, who is far from being concerned about the truth or historical accuracy, much less worried about political allegiance. The boy’s concerns revolve around a romantic attachment with a Catholic girl in school and wanting his nuclear family to stay

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23 See Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order* (London, 1982).
the same forever. The grandparents—played with measured conviction by Ciaran Hinds and Judi Dench—add a layer of humanity and connectedness to a family who are split because of work patterns, with the father (Jamie Dornan) away most of the time in London. Irish drama from literature to film has captured the struggle and tension around forced emigration, and *Belfast* certainly adds new layers to this ongoing universal and at the same time local struggle. Nonetheless, the solution appears to be always stacked against affirming local and indigenous community values.

Recalling the fatalistic inevitability of Reed’s classic *Odd Man Out* (1947) and his protagonist’s film noirish existential journey around Belfast while trying to escape during earlier ‘Troubles’, not to mention the more game-like excitement of jeopardy and escape in ‘71, here the journey is more passive and inevitable, while being framed by set-piece destructive interventions built into an idealised habitat. Hill’s aforementioned reading of British mediation and representation of the Irish question and the struggle for independence as being predominantly fatalistic, while reaffirming an atavistic indigenous nature of the IRA in particular, is much more muted, I suggest, across later fictional representations. For instance, this trajectory is witnessed most especially through the innocent British army soldier getting literally lost in the streets of Belfast, as choreographed in the adventure thriller ‘71. Yet the struggle and effects are similar in Branagh’s otherwise humanitarian tour de force, while the troubled Irish landscape is also foregrounded. Such evocative urban spaces simply constitute a puzzling and fearful landscape, where survival and most likely escape remain the only options. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, the boy—and probably most non-partisan, pleasure-seeking audiences—wants to simply keep his idealised life in a timeless capsule and follow ‘the yellow brick road’.

As with criticism of the so-called fatalistic nature of British representations of Ireland and the Troubles expressed by Irish scholars cited above, one wonders whether this contemporary romanticised narrative is still serving to reinforce—albeit more subtly and from a post-religious and post-sectarian sensibility—the ideological (historical) values of reifying Northern Ireland as a cauldron of impossible conflict and personal enmity. Note for instance that the Protestant preacher, like many born-again fundamentalists—recalling the ‘fire and brimstone’ persona of Iain Paisley—is simply there to scare the children into believing that only two roads are possible for their future, with only

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24 Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*. 
one leading to salvation. The innocent child at key moments asks, what is the right road to take? Again, this recalls the allegedly crude binary mindset and highlights political (and civil rights) activists as simply troublemakers who have journeyed down the wrong path while insisting that everyone take their side or face the consequences. In the end, however, the same highly charged and emotional one-dimensional preacher gives an impassioned homily at the grandfather’s burial. The old man died apparently after catching a fatal lung disease while working in the coalmines over on the mainland—again affirming colonial and forced migration injustice and cross-generational connectedness, and even acknowledging pressures around communal empathy. Such an excess of emotional engagement with death is conveniently exorcised in a bacchanal (fantasy) musical celebration and traditional Irish wake with a too-perfect karaoke and dance-off sequence, capturing the uniqueness of this idealised Protestant community through the generic power of the musical—which has echoes of the below-decks celebration of (Catholic) Irish dancing in the 1997 blockbuster *Titanic*.

As in a generic western, community and civilisation are signalled most clearly by the extras and how they perform within the confines of a community: from those who strive to protect the sanctity of the street and its boundaries to the neighbours and friends, and especially the children in the street who are all fully drawn into this commercial venture. In particular, the bearded alter ego Billy Clanton (Colin Morgan), as against Pa (Jamie Dornan), the boy’s father, who went to the same local school but took different paths, helps to set up the ever-present generic male conflict. As in any war situation, Clanton affirms that you are either with us or against us, which in the end confirms that the family cannot stay on the fence in such a struggle. They must either escape or take sides, with escape being by far the (easiest) best solution, especially on looking back at their dilemma. Such a fatalistic design frames and essentially memorialises over 50 years of some of the worst political violence in the United Kingdom. It emotionally feels better, and the right thing to do, simply to have walked away. But this trajectory somehow remains unfortunate and a lost opportunity around memorialising, especially from a political and ideological perspective. At the same time the narrative can nostalgically look back and embrace effective conciliatory words as signs of understanding at the end of the movie—using recorded well-chosen sentiments of those who left and those who stayed.

In conclusion, one can suggest across all three films that not taking sides might be decoded as adopting an ahistorical position, while helping to bury
the past, which in turn remains a contemporary outsider’s survivalist solution to an intractable dilemma. Citizens and audiences apparently need closure, and the most recent reworking of ‘the Troubles’ certainly offers such a position for a more settled post-Good Friday Agreement peaceful Ireland. The only hiccup in Belfast’s neat one-road journey towards closure is the grandmother’s silently wishing them well as they escape on a bus, and entreat ing them not to look back. She remains locked into and part of the traumatised community who are about to endure so much (political) violence into the future.

Nonetheless, filmic re-creations need to be framed alongside on-the-ground ethnographic-based investigations, coupled with a broad range of critical historical and political analysis, and fictional narratives certainly serve as a useful starting point for such exploration.