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Visualising Peace: Northern Irish Post-conflict Cinema and the Politics of Reconciliation

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> The question 'What does working through the past mean?' requires explication. It follows from a formulation, a modish slogan that has become highly suspect during the last years. In this usage 'working through the past' does not mean seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate. On the contrary, its intention is to close the books on the past and, if possible, even remove it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper for those who suffered injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice.[1]

Theodor Adorno's great refusal of the platitudes of reconciliation, delivered as a lecture in 1959 in a West Germany still brutalized by its recent history of Nazism and genocide, continues to exert a powerful influence on the discourses of post-conflict politics. Indeed, the distinction he draws between 'working through' and 'working upon' the past, although imperfectly rendered in English translation, demarcates one of the central dilemmas in the apprehension of how a reconciliation with historical violence might be achieved. It describes something of the relationship between the immediate needs of the dominant state and those appeals for justice which might be seen to destabilize it, and encompasses the often contingent calls for a strategic amnesia in the post-conflict present in the face of what are often insistent demands for recollection and reparation. More profoundly, if the 'working through' that Adorno dismisses seeks, ineffectually, to repress history in the name of a strategically convenient future, the 'working upon' that he endorses allows the claims of the dead and the dispossessed to be heard. It is only through such attention, he argues, that we can avoid being endlessly transfixed by a past that will not be silenced, a legacy that the rhetorical mechanics of 'working through' will never entirely quell.

With its often uncertain post-conflict status, such issues loom large in present-day Northern Ireland, where issues of remembrance and forgetting and the competing claims of the past and the present dominate much of the public discourse on the legacy of the violence and the charting of paths to reconciliation. In complex ways, then, the North provides a vivid illustration of what Cillian McGrattan has described as 'the simultaneous silencing and revealing that underpins transitional ethnic politics',[2] while revivifying Adorno's opposition in specific and sometimes bizarre manifestations. Most notable among these effects, as Tom Lodge has identified, is the fact that peace in the North cannot be apprehended as a collective condition leading towards a shared future because of the consociational nature of the settlement. As he notes:

> it is not designed to facilitate the fostering of a common perception of citizenship among Northern Ireland's inhabitants. The Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin have agreed to shelve their differences about nationhood for the foreseeable future, but this means that

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working through the Past' [1959], *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia, 1998), 89.

[2] Cillian McGrattan, 'Policing Politics: Framing the Past in Post-conflict Divided Societies', *Democratization*, 21.3 (2014): 402.

their day-to-day cooperation will always be qualified by the absence of a shared patriotism.[3]

A recognition of this stark awareness is key to understanding many of the difficulties that legacy and reconciliation projects face in the North as it means that the condition of post-conflict becomes an endless 'ever-present' based on the negotiation of contingent ideas of co-existence. As a result, and because the settlement is predicated only very tenuously on any kind of shared future, little desire to create a mutual language or syntax of mediating symbols is identifiable.

It is partly because of this reason that the idea of peace in the North is habitually described not as an attainable state or a goal to be achieved, but rather as an on-going process, or narrative, prone to advances and setbacks, and driven by its own unique momentum. This enables the two states that underwrite the process to appear as active agents in the maintenance of the post-conflict condition, intervening where necessary on behalf of what are deemed to be the larger benefits that serve the wider community. 'Dealing with the past is a process and not an event', as one British Government-sponsored report on the toxicities of Northern Irish history puts it.[4] In many ways this positioning helps to effectively depoliticise the role of the state, but, more importantly, it also insists on a singular narrative, or roadmap, for post-conflict policy that cannot and will not allow for any alternative perspectives. In this formation, individuals and groups are deemed either to be for the process or not, and any alternative means of understanding the relationship between the violent past and the fragile present is rendered implicitly aberrant. Under these conditions any activity close to Adorno's sense of 'working on' the past is likely to be judged potentially subversive or, at the very least, liable to unnecessarily disturb anachronistic passions. To put this differently, the peace process has imposed a structure on the legacy of Northern Ireland's history which enables it to have a significance for the present, but this legacy can only speak of itself in very circumscribed ways and through a strikingly narrow vocabulary.

This article seeks to build upon the range of critical work in this area that has identified the unique contours of the Northern Irish settlement and aims to interrogate some areas of policy and practice that encapsulate its contradictions, silences, and ellipses. Following this it will discuss two recent films, Kari Skogland's *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (2008), and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Five Minutes of Heaven* (2009), that are in different ways shaped by the peace process as a historical event and which grant its abstract negotiations a material form. These films ultimately endorse, albeit in qualified ways, the peace process as it is currently constituted, but they also demonstrate a willingness to explore alternative ways of imagining the post-conflict condition and the relationship to violence that preceded it. As a result, although both are in many ways unremarkable examples of mainstream cinema, they do not stand squarely within the ideological assumptions of the current settlement, but rather locate themselves at something of a tangent to its frequently unexamined assertions. As I will demonstrate, this positioning creates a series of peculiar ideological effects which cannot be

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[3] Tom Lodge, 'Northern Ireland: Between Peace and Reconciliation', 3 June, 2009, http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/northern-ireland-between-peace-and-reconciliation. Accessed 10 January 2017.

[4] Consultative Group on the Past, *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* (Belfast: CGP, January 2009), 24.

resolved as such, but which can be reframed at the level of the aesthetic so as to enable a form of reconciliation to become visible at the films' conclusions.

An important overarching context for the discussion of these issues is provided by Colin Graham's work on photography in post-conflict Belfast.[5] Contemplating the relationship between culture and history in Northern Ireland when viewed through the prism of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Graham observes that in the years leading up to the Agreement culture was frequently identified as a testing ground for the possibility of utopian political alternatives in the North and, with this, a means of by-passing the seemingly obdurate impossibilities of organised politics. As a result, for a period the British Government's investment in culture as a site of social and political potential in Northern Ireland was highly visible, both through organisations such as the Cultural Traditions Group and documents such as the Downing Street Declaration of 1993. Underwriting this prioritization was a belief that culture was the expression of social identity, and that this identity — or rather, in the context of the then dominant two traditions model of Northern Irish society, 'identities' — could be mapped onto Northern Ireland's social and political landscape in enabling and interpretative ways. This 'identitarian moment', as it was sometimes termed in critical discourse, assumed diverse forms across different media and genres, but expressed a broadly similar conception of the relationship of culture to historically determined selfhood.[6] As Graham notes, however, this sense of potentiality proved to be short-lived as the eventual Agreement itself articulated a 'different political imperative' that reduced culture to 'the issues of minority languages and the need to curtail the display of sectarian symbols (as defined in the Agreement, under 'Economic, Social and Cultural Issues', paragraphs 3-5)'.[7] Alongside and connected to this new emphasis, the Agreement expressed an impatience with history when conceived of either as a dynamic force in the creation of future possibilities or as freighted with memories of bitter injustice. Instead, as paragraph two of the Agreement illustrated, history was re-read as 'the past', a static concept to be remedied only by a 'fresh start',[8] accompanied, presumably, by all the banalities that that particular cliché indicates. Graham's interpretation of this shift was to see it as part of a 'radical separation of high politics from living ideology', and thus it was another reason why much of the subsequent process of peace has been compromised, halting, and often contradictory in its effects. Moreover, the manner in which the peace process has refined and delimited the effects of culture and history in specific and signifying ways has in turn generated an excess of traumatised but insistent voices, memories, and spaces around the margins of the process, which refuse to be forgotten and which continue to demand reparation.

In the light of these observations it is perhaps unsurprising that state-sponsored commemorative efforts since the Good Friday Agreement have been, according to Leah Wing, 'deemed insufficient, by both State and non-State stakeholders, as an effective means of addressing the conflict's legacy'.[9] Because of this inadequacy, as Wing further observes,

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[5] Colin Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?": Archive Fever, Photography and the Peace in Belfast', *Third Text*, 19:5 (September, 2005), 567-580.

[6] See Richard Kirkland, *Identity Parades: Northern Irish Culture and Dissident Subjects* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002) for more on this phenomenon.

[7] Graham 567.

[8] Graham 567.

[9] Leah Wing, 'Dealing with the Past: Shared and Contested Narratives in "Post-conflict" Northern Ireland', *Museum International*, 62:1-2 (August, 2010): 31.

'thousands of commemorative and remembrance activities, dozens of museums and storytelling processes for reconciliation and archiving, and a variety of truth recovery projects have come into being'. Most of these projects are community-based and operate independently, or quasi-independently, of state sanction, and are of such an extent that, as Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern have argued, they 'bear many of the hallmarks of a social movement'.[10] The variety of these initiatives is striking and, as such, it is hard to typify them, but it is certainly important to recognise that they do not necessarily speak of the need for consensus or of the blurring of historical divisions and enmities, but instead frequently hold these tensions in a constant, electrified present. As such, they often constitute the opposite of the selective amnesia of the archival process which Graham has criticised.[11]

A vivid way of illustrating these different modes of apprehending the past is provided by the work of the Consultative Group on the Past in Northern Ireland, an independent body sponsored by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, which reported in 2009. As its own terms of reference stated, this initiative was perhaps the single most significant attempt to 'consult across the community on how Northern Ireland society can best approach the legacy of the events of the past 40 years'.[12] Co-chaired by the former Archbishop of Armagh, Lord Robin Eames, and the journalist and former priest, Denis Bradley, the Group consisted of figures from both communities, academics, and representatives from the churches and the non-profit sector. With a recognition of the manner in which such ventures have become increasingly comparativist in their methodologies, the Group also had support from two international advisors and a legal advisor. The Group held 141 private meetings with individuals and organizations, and a series of public meetings. Of the conflict's primary 'combatants', MI5 and the Ulster Volunteer Force met the Group, but the IRA refused, seemingly suspicious of its connections with the British Government.

The Group's final 190-page report, *Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland: The Recommendations of the Consultative Group on the Past*, was presented to the Secretary of State in June 2009. Among its proposals was a recommendation for a one-off 'recognition payment' of twelve thousand pounds for the relatives of all those killed during the conflict, including the families of paramilitary members (also known contemptuously by its critics as the 'Ford Focus' payment), the creation of a Legacy Commission (effectively a 'truth commission' for Northern Ireland) supported by a massive bursary of £100 million, a Reconciliation Forum, a new Review and Investigation Unit to re-examine historical cases, and support for an annual 'Day of Reflection and Reconciliation' focused upon a permanent shared memorial to the conflict. If these new structures were to be implemented the group argued that there would then be no need for any further public inquiries into the past events of the Troubles. Alongside this the report observed a general amnesty was not yet a feasible possibility, although in general the group was keen to explore ways in which 'a line might be drawn', 'so that Northern Ireland might best move to a shared future'.[13]

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[10] Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, 'The Politics of Memory in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 13.1 (2001): 28.
[11] Graham 579.
[12] Consultative Group on the Past, 'Dealing with the Past', 44.
[13] Consultative Group on the Past, 'Dealing with the Past', 19.

Broad and ambitious in its conclusions, the report is significant for my argument not because it made policy, but rather because its effective mode of engaging with the legacy of the conflict and the manner in which that engagement was expressed through a specific language encapsulated an elite mode of apprehending the violence of Northern Ireland's history, which was both state-sanctioned and from 'above'. In contrast, the protests that the publication of the report attracted and the terms on which it was condemned by both sides of the community — albeit for different reasons — described a determination to retain and nurture the specifics of traumatised memory from 'below'. As such, the report and its reception described precisely the fault line between the two forms of apprehending the legacies of the conflict in a manner which mirrors that described by Wing previously in this essay.

In many ways the mechanics of this elite mode of apprehension were identifiable as much in the rhetorical strategies of the report's language as they were in its actual proposals. For instance, in a manner familiar from the terms established by the Good Friday Agreement, the report rarely invoked the idea of history (unless in the context of what it terms the 'wider history of Ireland'), preferring instead a reified perception of the 'past', which it presented as a fundamentally static entity to be encountered only in the most unsubtle of ways.[14] As it observed, 'some believe we cannot change our understanding of the past. Some believe the past should be laid out for all to see and that truth should be sought and told. Others say that the past should be forgotten in the interests of the future'.[15] Either way, the past is simply something to be 'dealt with', a mode of engagement that leads to a distinctive methodological circularity; as the Report asserted, 'only by honestly addressing the past can we truly deal with it and then leave it in the past'.[16] As this 'address it, deal with it, leave it' model infers, the group's deliberations perceived the past to be nothing other than dangerously ineffable and difficult to comprehend, repeatedly describing it as 'shadowed' or 'dark'.[17] This is certainly not a history that, in Adorno's formulation, might be 'worked upon'.

The report was widely criticized by individuals and groups from both communities in Northern Ireland, in terms that indicated a reluctance to relinquish the specific details of the conflict's legacies that the report had implicitly deemed anachronistic. The controversial self-styled victim's group 'Families Acting for Innocent Relatives' (FAIR) disrupted the launch of the report with a protest against the recognition payment and the manner in which it refused to draw a distinction between perpetrators and victims, while Sinn Féin, and Republicans in Northern Ireland more generally, rejected it because of its genesis as a British Government sponsored initiative that they argued lacked a proper international dimension. Other criticisms of the report focused on the proposal for a Legacy Commission and the danger that

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[14] Consultative Group on the Past, 'Dealing with the Past', 103

[15] Consultative Group on the Past, 'Dealing with the Past', 24.

[16] Consultative Group on the Past, 'Dealing with the Past', 14.

[17] The report uses the phrase 'overshadowed by the past' or 'overshadowed by the events of the past' six times. With this, it is worth noting that just as the report re-reads history as 'the past' in such a way as to effectively close down other more theoretically enabling ways of understanding the legacy of the conflict, it is of equal significance that 'culture', continuing its fall from grace as a mediating concept in post-conflict Northern Ireland, is almost entirely overlooked. Other than in passing references, such as noting the value of 'painting, sculpture, ceramics and other abstract forms of art' as a means of helping storytelling groups visualise their narratives (98), culture is notable only by its absence, and certainly is not considered to be an activity that might have something to say to the past as a means of apprehending reconciliation.

it might prevent a normal path towards justice for the innocent by diverting such cases in its direction rather than the courts. Indeed, the report gained few advocates and its most controversial single proposal, the recognition payment, was quickly ruled out by the then Secretary of State, Shaun Woodward, in February 2009. This decision was reinforced by the Parliamentary Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which observed that 'there is not enough cross-community consensus at present on many of the issues that the Consultative Group raised for the wide-ranging project that it recommended to succeed'.[18] This perspective remains and the report has been effectively shelved.

However, while in itself it was something of a failure, the example of the Consultative Group's intervention, combined with the degree of controversy it caused, allows the terms of what is sometimes nebulously called the 'peace and reconciliation industry' to be seen more clearly. This is because the report reflected the major ways in which the two states managing the process have structured the violence embedded in Northern Ireland's history so as to make it signify in ways that are internally coherent, while allowing for a broadly comparative perspective. Again, this is reflected most clearly in the language of the process itself and the manner in which it has re-read, or re-framed, the past. As the journalist Malachi O'Doherty recently observed, 'before 1993, no one ever called the Troubles a "conflict". This was a new word to establish the idea that, at heart, we had a disagreement between equally legitimate positions inherited from history'.[19] O'Doherty's article links the rise of this word, and the equilibrium it proposes, to the use of 'combatant' to describe the perpetrators of violence, and sees this as part of a project to map the North 'onto a peace-processed world'. Such redefinitions lead, almost seamlessly, to what is conveniently termed the 'everybody's guilty' scenario — a concept at the heart of what the Consultative Group's tentatively termed 'collective responsibility' — which provides another way in which the historical messiness of the violence might be structured in a signifying manner, while also providing a way of incorporating previously disengaged groupings in the North (such as, for instance, the urban middle class) that had traditionally regarded themselves as remote from the violence and the affiliations that created it. Of course, what is lost in this process — and intentionally so — is the intricacy of the violence itself, the specific details of who did what to whom and why. It is this attempt at enforced amnesia, what Graham has pathologized as 'an ache which notices, knows, but can barely comment on the cauterisation of the dark complexity of the past',[20] that provokes the rage of the marginalised and the forgotten. Their calls for reparation are, however, articulated through languages that seem increasingly anachronistic in this new dispensation and, under the terms of the fragile post-conflict edifice, the state is unable to hear or act upon such appeals. As a result, it can offer nothing in return other than money, the slightly weary contempt of a Ford Focus payment.

It is in this way, then, that what Lundy and McGovern have termed 'the state-sponsored "victim agenda"' works 'as a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) component in a

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[18] Consultative Group on the Past, *The Report of the Consultative Group on the Past in Northern Ireland, Second Report of Session 2009–10, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence* (London: The Stationery Office Limited, 2009), 4.
[19] Malachi O'Doherty, 'Peace Process Piffle Makes Me Want to Hit Out', *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 August 2012, http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/news-analysis/peace-process-piffle-makes-me-want-to-hit-out-28776189.html. Accessed 10 January 2017.
[20] Graham 568.

project of "organized forgetting"' that actually denies the specific contours of the individual victim's experience, just as it appears to acknowledge it.[21] As a result, the peace process — understood as a series of unfolding events — and the search for justice can become subliminally opposed activities. Indeed, as Michael Rothberg has observed in relation to post-apartheid South Africa, 'to mourn is to move on, but to render justice is to maintain the claims of the past on the present or to maintain the present's interest in the past. At the limit, justice may demand a refusal to mourn'.[22] In Northern Ireland, at least, the unyielding terms of this opposition remain intractable, meaning that much of the intellectual methodology around reconciliation appears to lead only to a form of aporia. Indeed, as the example of the Consultative Group on the Past's report illustrates in its tacit recognition that there can be no alternative to the settlement on the table, policy documents on peace and reconciliation demonstrate a striking reluctance to move beyond a limited number of dominant post-conflict discourses.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the current settlement in Northern Ireland, and the manner in which it relates to violent history, has remained unexamined. Although an insufficiency in state-sanctioned modes of apprehending the past has been identified, it is the case that cultural responses to the current condition have provided a wider variety of interpretations and dissonant perspectives. Such interrogation has occurred in all the North's traditional areas of cultural strength such as poetry, prose fiction, and drama, although it can be argued that much of the most striking work has taken place in the field of visual arts, and, more specifically, photography. To condense what is an inevitably complex range of arguments, this is partly because of photography's close, if frequently ambivalent, relationship to issues of testimony and record — what Graham has observed as the manner in which 'a responsibility to the idea of collectivity, to the dissenting personality and to a wider ethics is kept in play in the image'.[23] Alongside this, it is worth noting that photography is also concerned, almost implicitly, with the ethics of what we have already noted McGrattan referring to as 'the simultaneous silencing and revealing' of the peace process, and much of the more insightful critical discussion of this phenomenon has provided templates for understanding post-conflict art in other media. Another area where significant work in probing the post-conflict condition is taking place is cinema. This activity has been less thoroughly explored than work in the other visual arts, but certainly recent films about Northern Ireland such as *Fifty Dead Men Walking* and *Five Minutes of Heaven*, but also including such works as Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008) and James Marsh's *Shadow Dancer* (2012), constitute important interventions in the popular understanding of post-conflict society in the North. This is not to argue that these films are particularly innovative as examples of cinema. While they come from diverse studios, funding regimes, and ideological perspectives, to a large extent they remain constrained within the restrictive tropes and images of many previous representations of Northern Ireland on screen; to use the memorable phrase that David Lloyd coined in judgement on the poetry of Seamus Heaney, they 'pose delusory moral conflicts whose real form can better be understood as a

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[21] Lundy and McGovern 28.
[22] Michael Rothberg, 'After Apartheid, Beyond Filiation: Witnessing and the Work of Justice', *Law & Literature*, 21:2 (2009): 277.
[23] Graham 570.

contradiction between the ethical and aesthetic elements of bourgeois ideology'.[24] But despite this — or perhaps alongside it — they also demonstrate a striking inclination to test Graham's 'fragile post-consociational consensus', and do so in a manner which can be compelling.

Perhaps the key way in which this tendency is identifiable is in the films' particular apprehension of the Northern Irish past. While many previous films about the North presented the conflict as entirely mysterious, an ineffable world of sadistic violence such as that offered by works as superficially diverse as Neil Jordan's *Angel* (1982) or Alan J. Pakula's *The Devil's Own* (1997), it is noticeable that, following the broad trajectory of post-conflict politics in the North, more recent films reject this perspective and instead represent the social violence of that time as essentially a problem of social and political structure. This recalibration allows for two things: firstly, it indicates that, despite everything, the Troubles were explicable and subject to rational understanding and, secondly, it assumes that, as a structural problem, the violence was resolvable. As such, rather than seeing the social violence in the North as simply a despairing vision of uninterrupted misery, recent cinema typically revisits that period through the techniques of narrative leaps, flashbacks and flashforwards in order to find there a concealed potentiality that will be seen to enable and justify the later peace process. Alongside this, and crucial to these films' effective functioning, is their willingness to rehearse other ways of negotiating a post-conflict future — albeit in limited and sometimes parodic ways — than that which actually came to pass, although ultimately these alternative modes must be found wanting and so rejected.

It is through these methods that even films which are part of what can loosely be termed 'mainstream cinema' have proved able to explore some of the complexities of the new consensus, to probe its limits and, subsequently, to identify where the boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable lies. *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, for instance, engages with the North's violent past from the perspective of an informer, a deliberately ambivalent viewpoint which relocates seemingly assured and accepted oppositions. A (admittedly very loose) portrayal of the life of Martin McGartland (Jim Sturgess), a British Agent working within the ranks of the Belfast IRA during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the film presents the work of the informer as necessary, worthwhile, and even heroic, while acknowledging that it is also an act of betrayal and self-interest. As the title of the film (taken from the title of McGartland's own memoirs) suggests, McGartland estimates that his informing activities saved the lives of up to fifty people, and the film balances the value of this possibility against the high cost to himself and those around him that his activities exact in other ways. Thus, while *Fifty Dead Men Walking* is at one level a conventional piece of film making presenting a vision of Northern Ireland during the Troubles that is familiar from previous cinematic representation, its balancing of morally ambivalent positions gives it a more complex historical perspective.

As with a number of other recent cinematic portrayals of historical violence in Northern Ireland, the film begins and ends in the subsequent time of post-conflict, a spatial and temporal elsewhere indicated by its opening caption 'Somewhere in Canada, 1999'. It is here, in a desolate no-place, that McGartland is ambushed by an IRA operative in revenge for

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[24] David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 14.

his previous activities back in Belfast. McGartland will survive the attack, though we are not to know this until the film's conclusion. At this point the narrative rewinds to the Belfast of the Troubles, and the beginning of McGartland's story as he hawks stolen goods around Catholic West Belfast. Portrayed throughout as trapped impossibly between two competing regimes of surveillance, the film departs from McGartland's biographical narrative in presenting him as a conflicted figure; he is a Republican who loathes the violence of the Security Forces, and is drawn to the paternal affection offered by the local IRA commander Mickey (Tom Collins), while also a reluctant combatant horrified by the violence carried out in the IRA's name. Similarly, his motives for informing are not depicted as entirely selfless; McGartland is as engaged by the money and the car his handler (Ben Kingsley) offers him as he is by the thought of the lives he might be saving. As such, although the film concludes by praising 'the heroic work of Martin' and noting that 'he will never see his family again', the film never quite swings fully behind this assertion, presenting instead a moral landscape where the possibility of an ethical life — the ability to make decisions based on what an individual deems to be right — is compromised at every point by the structurally impossible situation in which McGartland is caught. In this way, one of the most remarkable things about *Fifty Dead Men Walking* is its apparent lack of interest in presenting any kind of singular or coherent message 'about' the Troubles. Indeed, in its multiple perspectives, the film appears dimly aware of the futility of any attempt to signify the complexity of the North in a unitary manner. In turn, those visions of 'true' singular narratives that the film provides — for instance, when IRA operatives articulate the motives that lie behind their actions — are presented merely as warnings from history, siren calls that will ultimately lead our protagonist into yet greater danger. In a similar manner, and despite the developing affection for his handler that McGartland feels, the British moral position is shown repeatedly to be untenable and riddled with hypocrisy. *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, then, expresses no great enthusiasm for reconciliation or the possibility of mutual forgiveness. Instead, the film imagines the future as continually haunted by the past, and in its rehabilitation of the idea of the tout as a crucial figure in the achievement of peace is engaged by the extent to which individuals found themselves hopelessly compromised by the obdurate realities of the conflict. And it is ultimately the exhaustion engendered by this continual moral compromise that will be seen to end the violence.

Because of this precarious moral position the film attracted some controversy. Most notably McGartland himself rejected the version of events that it portrayed, claiming that 'the film is pure fiction. It is as near to the truth as earth is to Pluto'.[25] In his own account, McGartland presents his activities as being that of a 'spy' rather than an informer, insisting in a letter of protest to the London *Guardian* about his representation in the film, that 'I joined the IRA only to infiltrate it, acted consistently to combat terrorism and save life, and did not betray my friends or my beliefs. On the contrary I am proud of my undercover role inside the Provisional IRA as a police agent between 1987 and 1991'.[26] McGartland eventually dropped a threat of legal action after the producers agreed to a number of strategic changes to the

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[25] Martin McGartland, blog dated 2 June 2008, http://martinmcgartland.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/martin-mcgartland-says-kari-skogland.html. Accessed 12 January 2017.

[26] McGartland, Letter, 'Dead Men Walking', *The Guardian*, 3 June 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jun/03/letter-dead-men-walking. Accessed 10 January 2017.

film, including inserting an opening caption stating that 'some of the events, characters and scenes in the film have been changed', and to pay him around £20,000.[27]

Another detractor was the Irish novelist and cultural commentator Ronan Bennett who described the ambivalence of *Fifty Dead Men Walking* around the issue of informing as 'a smear in the film's canvas', and accused Skogland of being unable to 'decide what prompted her protagonist's choices'.[28] For this reason Bennett interpreted the film as flawed in that it failed to offer a clear position on the moral purpose of the informer in a time of conflict. While slightly trite in itself, this judgement is of interest because of the manner in which it neatly encapsulates an identitarian perception of the conflict that insists that political positions can only signify in a unilinear way and are, in turn, created by a coherent set of individual choices expressive of a historicized worldview. In fact, *Fifty Dead Men Walking*'s refusal to recognise the legitimacy of this perspective is another example of the way in which the film is illustrative of post-conflict ideology; here both sides of the conflict are simultaneously repellent and honourable — indeed at their most repellent when at their most honourable — and McGartland himself becomes simply a 'combatant'.

A more direct engagement with the mechanics of the peace process is provided by *Five Minutes of Heaven*, which takes as its genesis the real-life killing in 1975 of a Catholic, Jim Griffin, by a young member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Alistair Little, in Lurgan. The film then departs into the realms of the fictional and imagines a subsequent meeting between Little (Liam Neeson) and Griffin's younger brother Joe (James Nesbitt) for a television documentary about reconciliation in Northern Ireland thirty-three years later. Joe had witnessed the murder and is presented in the film as entirely shaped by the traumatic after-effects of the event; he is blamed by his mother for failing to assist his brother, and is locked in a perpetually nervous, pre-adult state. By contrast, Alistair, although depicted as a haunted figure in many ways, is also a more knowing presence and has become involved in post-conflict reconciliation in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and South Africa. The film asserts a slight ambiguity about his motives for this activity, and suggests there is an element of cynicism in his adoption of the language of international post-conflict discourse. As Joe describes this peace tourism, 'he can make a living telling the Pope and the Queen, the Dalai fucking Lama how it feels to kill a man. How it feels, the suffering I have, the burden I carry'.

As this bald description suggests, *Five Minutes of Heaven* is primarily interested in exploring the efficacy of truth and reconciliation discourse and casts a cold eye on the extent to which this narrative implicitly endorses the political priorities of the states whose interests it ultimately serves. For this reason, after previously being nothing more than a raging outsider denied both justice and social significance, Joe's inculcation into the process takes place via the making of a documentary, and the film teases out parallels between the archly choreographed, yet seemingly natural, structure of this form, and the similarly artificial, if apparently inevitable, discourse of reconciliation. Indeed, it is through this comparison that the mechanics of authenticity at work in both procedures are relentlessly exposed, as the possibility of peaceful resolution is depicted as a kind of game that the urbane Alistair plays

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[27] BBC Northern Ireland News, 'Fury over Actress's IRA Comments', 11 September 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7609856.stm. Accessed 12 January 2017.
[28] Ronan Bennett, 'The Trouble with the Troubles', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/apr/03/fifty-dead-men-walking. Accessed 12 January 2017.

with some sophistication; as the documentary is filmed we are required to hear repeatedly his own personal testimony describing the course of his narrative from child, to killer, and finally to a reformed and grieving mature presence. It is a mantra that seeks spontaneity, yet which is clearly rehearsed and finessed to a fine detail. But the framing of the meeting in the context of a documentary is not just an attempt to draw a structural parallel between two mediating forms; it also, and more profoundly, recognises the extent to which post-conflict reconciliation narratives are dependent on the acceptance of a publically shared discourse for their value. In this way the journey that the subject of reconciliation undergoes is one that moves from particularity to universality, and this is effectively embodied by the anonymous, modern architecture of twenty-first century urban space that the film continually associates with Alistair's new life in Belfast.

Joe, on the other hand, remains in Lurgan, the location of the primary moment of trauma, and is bluntly unassimilated. He has no control of his discourse, cannot speak with any coherency or authority, and secretly perceives the making of the documentary as an opportunity to kill Alistair. 'Truth and reconciliation? I'm going for revenge,' he tells himself. Even in this, however, Joe is unable to achieve his desire. The making of the programme is presented, in part, as an attempt to begin Joe's inculcation into the process of post-conflict subjection and his emotional refusal to accept this narrative eventually leads to the documentary being abandoned and his returning to Lurgan with his revenge plot frustrated. The film, then, presents the journey towards post-conflict acceptance and onwards, ultimately, to reconciliation as a path to enlightenment that all must eventually follow no matter how resistant they appear. Through this, the outcome of reconciliation is seen to be the creation of regretful, wise subjects, whose wisdom can be set against an idea of political and social commitment that expresses itself through immature violence. Joe's traumatised refusal to accept this received truth, and thus to 'move on', stands through much of the film as an implicit recognition of the failure of such totalising narratives. By contrast, his insistent and singular response is only that he wishes to kill the person that perpetrated the violence done to him. As such, he is always prepared for the 'five minutes of heaven' that his killing of Alistair will provide, and this wish is permanently present and given material form by the knife that is never far from his person. In this state of permanent agitation, then, Joe is rendered as a childlike figure, frozen at the traumatised moment of his brother's shooting, and given to nervous gestures, random exclamations, and wilful misunderstandings of 'adult' contexts. It is only the narrative of post-conflict resolution, the film appears to suggest, that can rescue him from this morbid, petrified condition.

As the film moves to its climax Alistair arranges a private meeting with Joe back at the now derelict house where the original atrocity took place. There Joe attempts to ambush him and the pair fight, each causing significant physical damage to the other. At its conclusion an exhausted Alistair commands Joe to 'get rid of me ... so that when you wake up in the morning, it's not me's in your head, it's your daughters'. As a consequence, Joe begins to attend a counselling group for victims of violence and in its first meeting he breaks down in tears, recognising that his paternal role as father to his daughters cannot be reconciled with his seemingly juvenile attachment to the violence done to him in the past. For this reason it becomes clear that he must accept the narrative of post-conflict reconciliation as rehearsed by Alistair and given ideological form by the documentary makers earlier in the film in order that he might assume his proper place in the regulated family unit. The film indicates that

there is literally no alternative to this path; Joe must choose to signify in the post-conflict social order or will lose everything that is important to him. The narrative concludes with Joe calling Alistair and telling him 'we're finished', a communication that leaves the ex-UVF man stunned and disorientated in the middle of Belfast's city centre.

Matthew Brown's analysis of this conclusion argues that it is 'disingenuous' not just for the fact that Joe 'seems entirely incapable throughout the film of forgiving Little, but also because the real Joe Griffin has publically vowed to kill the real Alistair Little if they ever should meet'.[29] The point is well made, but it is hard to accommodate the fictional Joe's ultimately exhausted sense that the business between victim and aggressor is 'finished' within a forgiveness narrative. Instead, Joe's letting go of his obsession implies a redirection of his emotional gaze that is unusually strategic and thus contingent on the new set of realities he can now comprehend. The conditional terms of this conclusion are discomforting, and as such it is mildly surprising that the film won an international 'Cinema for Peace' award for reconciliation in 2012. Indeed, this is not the only unsettling element of the film. In its rehearsal of alternative means of negotiating the emotional and societal terrain of post-conflict Northern Ireland, *Five Minutes of Heaven* offers a passing critique of the dominant way in which this condition has been actualised, and restages a version of the argument between reconciliation from above and from below which I have previously discussed. Ultimately, however, the film's naturalism entails that it must conclude with a recognition that there cannot be any real alternative to this dominant model — unsatisfactory in many ways though it might be — and that other prospective methods of thinking about the violence of the conflict can only prove delusional. As a result, the film accords, albeit wearily, with Graham's observation that the peace process is 'almost impossible to be seen disagreeing with', a stasis that prevents any critique of 'the *effects* of the process'.[30]

Describing the functioning of the dominant post-conflict consensus in Northern Ireland in this way suggests that it is a phenomenon markedly similar to Mark Fisher's recent conception of 'capitalist realism', in that both 'seamlessly occup[y] the horizons of the thinkable'.[31] Just as capitalist realism, in Fisher's terms, 'is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture, but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action'[32], so the discourses of the peace process enable certain possibilities while inhibiting other modes of thought. In both examples, then, it is not that there are no alternatives to the dominant order, but rather that such alternatives can hardly be imagined. Indeed, the hegemonic efficacy of this framing of possibility in both ideological formations reveals their shared roots in the discursive practices of neoliberalism. As Martin McGuinness tweeted in March 2013: 'Bomb in Lurgan has to be condemned. Anti peace extremist living in a fantasy world. Attack futile. Won't change a thing. No going back'.[33] But despite this, and although no alternative can be asserted without ridicule, it remains the case that signs of the dominant order's crucial

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[29] Matthew Brown, 'Cities under Watch: Urban Northern Ireland in Film', *Éire-Ireland*, 45.1-2 (Spring/Summer, 2010): 87.

[30] Graham 579-60.

[31] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

[32] Fisher 16.

[33] Martin McGuinness, tweet, 30 March 2013, https://twitter.com/M_McGuinness_SF/status/318046179231404033. Accessed 12 January 2017.

insufficiency are evident everywhere across the North's post-conflict terrain. Twenty years after the first ceasefire, and with the possible exception of the Saville Report into the events of Bloody Sunday published in 2010, there has been no serious engagement with the legacy of the violence in such a way as might meet the demands of Adorno's 'working upon the past' at anything other than a hyper-local scale. Certainly cultural practice, despite or perhaps because of its marginalisation in the unfolding practices of the state-sanctioned Northern Irish peace, is an activity able to return to these places of insufficiency and to trace there the histories of exclusion and denial that they embody. The example of recent cinema has indicated something of what this activity might entail, although at present, as I have discussed, it can only encounter these possibilities via a mode of ironic rehearsal. For all the interpretative complexity of a film such as *Five Minutes of Heaven*, this is ultimately a timid response as its concluding images of traumatized exhaustion indicate only that the ideological structures that support the current settlement, although under some strain, remain just about hegemonic.

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