

Introduction: Film, Television and Northern Ireland

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During the preparation of this issue, Northern Ireland was featuring heavily in the news. In 2016, the UK had, by a small majority, voted to leave the European Union (EU). In 2019, the Conservative Party, under Boris Johnson, had achieved a large parliamentary majority on the promise to 'get Brexit done'. In 2020, the UK had formally left the EU. However, in 2023, the position of Northern Ireland post-'Brexit' still remained contentious and unresolved. As in Scotland, the Northern Ireland electorate had voted to remain in the European Union and, despite the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) support for Brexit, there had been a widespread recognition across Ireland that departure from the EU could present a potential threat to political stability in the North. Within England, however, where much of the debate about Brexit was driven by an English nationalist agenda focused on 'taking back control' and immigration, the question of Northern Ireland was largely ignored and scarcely covered in the British media.

It was therefore only after the Brexit vote that the problem of Northern Ireland – and the issue of the Irish land border - acquired UK-wide prominence and emerged as a major obstacle to securing a UK-EU deal. This presented even more of a difficulty given the insistence of the hardline Conservative right on a 'hard Brexit' that involved a full departure from both the EU single market and customs union. This was also the position adopted by the DUP, who not only acquired an unexpected parliamentary influence following the snap election of 2017 but subsequently helped to defeat Theresa May's proposal for a 'backstop' that had been explicitly designed to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland.

It was this conundrum of how the UK might depart the EU single market and customs union without the re-instatement of a hard land border (consisting of over 200 crossings) that the Northern Ireland Protocol was designed to resolve. Declared by Boris Johnson to be a core component of his 'oven-ready' deal, the Protocol did, indeed, avoid a hard land border between the two parts of Ireland; however, it was also claimed by Johnson that it would avoid the only alternative to this, an 'Irish sea border' involving checks at Northern Irish ports (Murray 2022). This was quite evidently not the case and, in the face of opposition

from members of his own party, along with the DUP (who subsequently withdrew from the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont in protest), the Conservative leadership sought to delay implementation of the Protocol and then renege upon it, by bringing forward the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill which gave the UK government the right to override the provisions of the EU/UK Withdrawal Agreement (and unilaterally break an international treaty).

Although this Bill began its journey through the UK Parliament, its progress was halted by the ending of Johnson's tenure as Prime Minister, forced to resign in July 2022 in the wake of a series of lies and scandals, and then by the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss, whose period of office was ended in October 2022 by an ill-judged and economically catastrophic budget. The need for a semblance of economic and political calm did, however, encourage their successor, the unrepentant Brexiteer, Rishi Sunak, to adopt a degree of 'pragmatism' in negotiating a refinement of the EU agreement, rather than a repudiation of it. The proposals contained in the Windsor Framework (2023), dealing with the flow of trade within the UK, Northern Ireland's 'place in the Union' and the 'democratic deficit', were sufficient to win a huge majority in the House of Commons and command the support of the majority of political parties in Northern Ireland. They were, however, rejected as insufficient by the Democratic Unionist Party who continued to boycott the Northern Ireland Assembly which, due to the 'parallel consent' provisions contained in the Good Friday Agreement also permitted them to prevent the formation of a Northern Ireland Executive or government.

Although the Northern Ireland Protocol, and its successor, primarily concern trade and the issues created by the loss of 'friction-less' borders due to the UK's departure from the EU single market, unionist opponents have also sought to present this as a constitutional matter, even though it remains the case that Northern Ireland's position within the UK is guaranteed by the Good Friday Agreement for as long as 'a majority of the people of Northern Ireland' wish 'to continue to support the Union with Great Britain' (Belfast Agreement 1998: 2). However, the agreement with the EU (embodied in both the NI Protocol and Windsor Framework) does bestow 'special status' upon Northern Ireland insofar as is the only part of the UK to benefit from equal access to both the UK home market and the EU single market. While this has been welcomed by business leaders in both Northern Ireland and Britain, and provides Northern Ireland with a degree of competitive

advantage over the rest of the UK, unionist opponents of the agreement have nonetheless been reluctant to acknowledge the special circumstances of Northern Ireland's position within the UK, and the difference from Britain that this entails (even though, historically, they have been content to deviate from British standards and laws in other matters).

The travails of Brexit in Northern Ireland, however, derive directly from the fact that Northern Ireland is undoubtedly 'special' on account of its history and politics. Opposed by a majority within Ireland who sought independence from Britain, the establishment of Northern Ireland, under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, involved the partition of the island of Ireland and the creation of a new six-county semi-state with a built-in Protestant and unionist majority. This led to a situation in which unionists maintained a system of one-party rule for over fifty years through a mix of authoritarian measures and discrimination against Catholics (in jobs, housing and voting rights). This 'democratic deficit' and lack of basic fairness, however, was to give birth to the civil rights movement and demands for political reform in the 1960s. The failure to meet these demands, and indeed active hostility towards them, then led to an escalation of political divisions into armed conflict (as well as the imposition of British government direct rule in 1972). During the period commonly referred to as the Troubles, more than 3,000 people (more than half of whom were civilians) were to die as a result of the actions of republican (mainly IRA) paramilitaries, loyalist paramilitaries and, to a lesser extent, the security forces.¹ The announcement of paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, and the subsequent signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, marked the end of this period of sustained violence and paved the way for a new political dispensation involving power-sharing and recognition of the rights and identities of the different communities within the North.

It was, of course, against this backdrop of historical conflict and social division that the EU and the British and Irish governments sought to avoid the return of a 'hard border' given its potential to exacerbate political tensions and rekindle violence. At the same time, Northern Ireland more generally was undergoing significant changes that were in the process of reshaping its social and political contours. The results of the 2021 census revealed that, for the first time ever, there were more people from a Catholic background (45.7%) than Protestant (43.48%) in Northern Ireland (BBC News 2022b). The changing configurations of national identity were also revealed in figures that indicated that only 31.9% of the NI

population claimed a 'British-only' identity, while 29.1% indicated 'Irish-only'. A further 8% deemed themselves to be both British and Irish while a substantial proportion - 19.8% - identified as 'Northern Irish-only' (ibid.) Given that Northern Ireland had been founded on the basis of a two-thirds Protestant/unionist majority, the growth of the Catholic population, and decline of those subscribing to 'solely British' identities constituted a notable shift in the political landscape. This was made evident in the results of the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in 2022 when Sinn Féin, a predominantly Catholic republican party (with historical ties to the Provisional IRA), won the largest number of seats and earned the right to nominate the First Minister. The Democratic Unionist Party, which is often characterised in the English media as representing the views of 'the people of Northern Ireland', came second but accounted for only 21.3 % of first preference votes (BBC News 2022a). The Alliance party, which does not designate itself as either nationalist or unionist, achieved a significant surge, winning 17 seats (on the basis of 13.5% first preferences). At a time when national and political identities were becoming less clearly demarcated, the DUP boycott of the parliament at Stormont (and the latest in a number of suspensions of the NI Assembly since its re-establishment in 1999) also highlighted one of the weaknesses of a parliamentary system that was reliant upon the majority approval of designated nationalist and unionist members, and that was therefore prone to the 'sectarian stasis' that this could generate (Coulter et al. 2021: 17).

If recent events surrounding Brexit were responsible for encouraging greater awareness of Northern Ireland in the British media, it is fair to observe that this was largely due to the way in which NI issues unexpectedly intruded upon Westminster politics rather than the result of any sustained British interest in NI politics and culture. Indeed, one of the striking features of media coverage of the confidence and supply deal struck by Theresa May and the DUP in 2017, for example, was just how little the media in England appeared to know about either Northern Ireland or the policies of the NI party sustaining her Conservative government. This could be said to correspond to a historical pattern. For much of the first 50 years of its existence Northern Ireland remained, in the words of Martin McLoone (1996: 80), 'an obscure and unknown periphery' that was 'little acknowledged' in 'mainstream British culture'. It was only with the advent of the Troubles, and the despatch of British troops to Northern Ireland, that the British media spotlight fell on the North in any regular way. This

might also be said of cinema. Although the Unionist government sought to promote the region through travelogues and propaganda films, Northern Ireland was too small and isolated to sustain a film industry at this time. This meant that, apart from some 'quota quickies' in the 1930s, and one-off films such as *Odd Man Out* (1947), set in Belfast but primarily shot in a London studio, there were very few feature films made about Northern Ireland until the advent of the Troubles and, even then, there were relatively few due to the problems of censorship and the difficulties of filming on location (Hill 2006).

Insofar as violent conflict has constituted the region's most historically distinctive – if not defining – feature, there can be little doubt that it is the Troubles that have provided the main discursive frames through which feature films and television drama have represented Northern Ireland, even after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. There have, of course, been some attempts to re-imagine a new 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland. An expanding NI film and television industry - fuelled by tax incentives and inward investment - has also generated a range of work that, in representational terms, possesses only a tenuous relationship to the place in which it was made. At the same time, however, the established signifiers of the Troubles have maintained a considerable artistic and socio-cultural pull. This is evident in the numerous film and television works that have continued to reflect on the past, meditate upon its legacy, or explore the obstacles – as well as possibilities – afforded by a divided society emerging from violent conflict (see, for example, Hill 2006: 190-243; Carlsten 2007: 233-44; Baker 2016; Barton 2019:138-63; Coulter 2021). This, in turn, has involved, as Coulter et al. (2021: 32-69) put it, a degree of recognition of the ways in which the 'long war' of the Troubles has been succeeded by a 'long peace' in which the 'peace process' has proved to be more arduous, and more complicated in its effects, than official versions of the 'new' Northern Ireland, sustained by discourses of business investment and tourism, have typically allowed.

It is some of these issues – both historical and contemporary – that the current issue addresses. Consisting of work dealing with Northern Ireland submitted to the Journal, the articles are varied and different in outlook. All share, however, a concern to extend our understanding of specific analytical issues or particular film and television works. The issue begins with John Hill's account of the beginnings of Northern Ireland television drama. Noting how the literature on TV drama has concentrated overwhelmingly on Troubles

drama, he identifies and analyses a largely forgotten group of television plays produced by BBC and ITV in the late 1950s and early 1960s and written by Northern Irish writers. These reveal patterns of representation, associated with rural communities and the working class, that largely disappeared in the Troubles era but which nonetheless spoke to the social anxieties and tensions of their time. If Hill examines work before the conventions of Troubles drama were properly established, Charlotte Brunsdon considers how far television dramas set in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland are able to escape what she refers to as 'the Troubles chronotope'. Focusing on a number of British television police series set in Belfast, or making use of Belfast as an anonymous location, she discusses how these dramas, directly or indirectly, invoke the representational repertoires associated with Troubles drama and, thus, gravitate towards the iconography of the 'old' rather than the 'new' Northern Ireland.

The challenge of representing both Belfast and its troubled past is returned to in the two articles by Jennifer Carlsten and Ruth Barton. Both authors focus on the films *Belfast* (2022), written and directed by Kenneth Branagh, and *I Am Belfast* (2015), written and directed by Mark Cousins. Although different in formal approach and scale, both are personal films exploring the city's past and its continuing legacy. Like Brunsdon, Barton suggests, how the city of Belfast in both films is 'haunted' by pre-existing audiovisual representations. However, situating the two films in relation to debates about autobiographical cinema, she argues that the films are less interested in depicting the actual city than in each filmmaker's psychological experience of it, filtered through 'the distance of time and of exile'. Carlsten also links these films to the history of 'post-ceasefires cinema' and the role that trauma and agency have played in these. On the basis of this approach, she then proceeds to argue how *Belfast's* revisiting of the past exhibits a 'crisis of agency' associated with earlier Troubles fictions while *I Am Belfast*, by virtue of its self-reflective form, encourages a restoration of historical agency and meaning-making.

In his contribution, Brian McIlroy does not specifically focus on Troubles, and 'post-Troubles', film and television drama but incorporates them into a consideration of the career paths and personae of two Northern Irish actors from different religious backgrounds, Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt. Focusing on the range of film and television roles undertaken by the two actors, the article investigates the version of 'Northern-Irishness' they have brought to the screen, identifying Neeson as a 'confident rogue' and Nesbitt as an 'anguished conformist'.

The issue then ends with a combative account of the history of broadcasting and Northern Ireland by Stephen Baker and David Butler. Taking a long view, the article considers the contradictions of British broadcasting in Northern Ireland, arguing how the local NI station departed from the norms of 'consensus' broadcasting as it developed in the post-war period. They go on to identify how BBC Northern Ireland evolved a form of 'balanced sectarianism' which they suggest has continued, in modified form, in the years following the Good Friday Agreement. Taking its cue from the centenary of partition (in 2022), the authors conclude with an examination of a number of recent historical documentaries which they argue demonstrate the continuing 'partitionist predisposition' of the BBC in the north of Ireland.

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¹ The 'Sutton Index of Deaths' provides figures, and related analysis, of the deaths resulting from the conflict between 14 July 1969 and 31 December 2001. See: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/index.html>.