A CINEMA OF RESISTANCE, A RESISTANCE OF CINEMA: ON THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF NORTHERN IRELAND'S COMMEMORATIVE CINEMA

by

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Abstract

Within the divided society of Northern Ireland, the incomplete or deficient representation of communities is an obstacle to mourning and reconciliation. Through a cinema that engages with the processes of social memory and identity construction, however, there is an opportunity for the productive contemplation and grieving of past injuries and losses. A 'commemorative cinema' has emerged over the last decade, of and about Northern Ireland, addressing moments of historical trauma and the representations of traumatized communities. Through their implicit and explicit challenges to existing frameworks and images, the films of the commemorative cinema offer a site of resistance for committed and active viewers. The commemorative cinema offers the possibility of a resistant counter-cinema that challenges dominant representations and may lead to positive social change. At the same time, it reveals the limits of film as a medium for challenging pre-existing notions of identity and belonging.

Current criticism posits preferred readings of the films made in and about Northern Ireland. Positioning the films as 'closed' texts with clear and stable ideological meaning, the critical consensus presumes that audiences will understand the works in equally stable ways, but fails to account for the strategies by which actual viewers create meaning form the gaps and fissures of the film.

Resurrection Man, Some Mother's Son, and *Bloody Sunday* are three films which serve as excellent examples of the limits and possibilities of commemorative cinema. The ambiguous nature of the films allows them to perform as 'open' texts, capable of reworking and re-reading by viewers. Audiences may use the strategies of negotiation, selective identification, and textual poaching to exploit these ambiguities. In so doing, audiences find the opportunity to construct alternatives to the unsatisfactory or unproductive representations and positions essentialized by critics, opposing both the progressive and the reactionary intentions of filmmakers, community leaders, and critics.

A resistant cinema has two requirements; first, texts that through ambiguity create opportunities for divergent readings and understandings; second, engaged and committed audiences that read the films selectively. Both of these can be found in the commemorative cinema and audience of Northern Ireland.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Representation of Northern Ireland in the cinema is a concern not only to film scholars, but to anyone concerned with questions of political identity in that divided society. Film is, as Lance Pettitt puts it, "the pre-eminent medium through which Ireland both examines itself and projects its image to the wider world." (*Screening Ireland*, 258) As a medium of both examination and projection, film has the potential to challenge core notions of self and other that form the basis of political identity. By examining the ways society has tried to remember itself and its history, film may become a reservoir of counter-memory: a locus for new representation, alternative conceptions of identity, and even recovery from remembered traumas.

There are two necessary preconditions for such a challenge to conventional representation: first, the existence of texts that through their formal strategies call into question existing paradigms; second, audiences that exploit uncertainties to satisfy their own desires for representation. Despite the pessimism that permeates much of the critical thinking around Northern Irish cinema, these two preconditions can, in fact, be identified within the cinema of Northern Ireland.[1] Northern Ireland's commemorative cinema[2], in particular, models a cinema

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[1] It seems necessary to clarify what is meant by "Northern Irish cinema". The majority of the films which purport to represent Northern Ireland or its people have been made by 'outsiders'. Most frequently, this means the US and UK, but films by artists from the Republic of Ireland, arguably, are external views as well. While this discussion will adopt a working definition of Northern Irish cinema (one that includes films made beyond the geographical borders when those films take on Northern Ireland as their explicit subject matter – to paraphrase Martin McLoone, the films which Northern Ireland inspires as well as those which it produces), the clumsiness of this definition must be an ever-present consideration.

[2] The term "commemorative cinema" is drawn from the work of Gordon Gillespie. While Gillespie has used the term loosely to talk about films based on actual historical events, I hope to further delineate the specific qualities of a commemorative cinema in the course of this thesis.

of resistance and encourages a resistance of cinema which together may provide a space for negotiated identities and understandings of the past.

Previous work on the question of identity and representation has been concerned with the stifled development of the Irish film industry itself, the thematic preoccupations of films made in or about Ireland, and the accompanying exclusion or distortion of the Irish voice. Generally, these works have taken the island of Ireland as their subject, with Northern Ireland singled out as one aspect of the whole[3]. John Hill, for instance, has written on the representation of Irish violence as a product of fate or national character.[4] Luke Gibbons focuses on the use of romanticism and an overdetermined realism to reinforce the sense of the Irish as Other, while Kevin Rockett, along with Gibbons and Hill, uses postcolonial and periphery theories to explain Ireland's onscreen representation. Brian McIlroy's more specific examination of Northern Ireland and representation employs the notion of the 'masquerade' to explain Protestant unionist resistance to cinematic representation. In these critical approaches, there is a shared sense that Northern Ireland (and by extension, the Northern Irish subject) has not yet been accurately or adequately represented on-screen, but that such representation is, ideally, possible. If a lack of adequate and meaningful representation is the problem, what solutions might be anticipated?

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[3] This tendency echoes political viewpoints that insist on Northern Ireland as a part of either the Republic of Ireland or of Britain, eliding its unique circumstances. As those living in Northern Ireland increasingly define themselves as "Northern Irish", rather than Irish or British, a more specific approach in film studies may be called for. In a poll conducted in 2003, for instance, 24% of those living in Northern Ireland self-identified as "Northern Irish', 41% as 'British', and 27% as Irish. (Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2004) This shows a slight increase over those self-identifying as 'Northern Irish' in a similar poll in 2001 (22%); a demographic breakdown shows such identification is proportionally higher among younger individuals. (ibid, 2002)

[4] This avenue is further explored by Martin McLoone in his own discussion of the myth of atavism, a concept elucidated by Tom Nairn.

Defining a cinema of resistance

Those working in the area of Irish and Northern Irish cinema cite the need for a counter-cinema that confronts and challenges the dominant set of representations. Their various arguments advocate what I call here a 'cinema of resistance', one that is shaped by the unique material circumstances of Irish nationhood and the Irish film industry. It is here that the first precondition, described above, may be met, through the construction of films which in their formal strategies and narrative content seek to subvert ideological and linguistic conventions. Significantly, the arguments put forth generally rely upon a new application of the ideas of radical or Third Cinema, one that opens up the definition of counter-cinema to the point that it becomes possible to identify a cinema of resistance in previously devalued works. Hill, for example, proposes an oppositional cinema that does not outright reject dominant Hollywood forms, but engages with them in a self-conscious fashion. McLoone picks up and expands upon Hill's position in his approach of critical regionalism, by which "questions of form are motivated by the encounter of dominant forms with a local cultural agenda." (*Oxford Guide*, 513) McLoone goes on to conclude that "The most significant films, and therefore the most 'Irish' films, are those that operate in a Third Cinema sense of exploring the complex realities of contemporary Ireland, challenging cinema audiences by challenging dominant and sedimented notions about Ireland and the Irish." (*Irish Film*, 127) Gibbons, too, sees a capacity for resistance within Irish cinema. He identifies two approaches in the existing film representations of Ireland: one which relies on romanticism and primitivism even as it strives for realism, and one which problematizes the notions of an essential Irishness. This latter, resistant, strain depends on formal exaggeration, distanciation, and contradiction to highlight the constructed nature of representation. In this way, "...these destabilizing images do show

the potential there exists for reworking, undercutting or transgressing received ideas, even at a highly popular level." (*Cinema and Ireland*, 241)

Rather than strictly distinguishing Third Cinema from First or Second Cinemas, the model of counter-cinema offered by McLoone, Hill, and Gibbons blurs these divisions; a film produced in a First or Second Cinema context may still operate as counter-cinema. In particular, McLoone argues for a reconception of Third Cinema as a cinema of the marginal in a society, rather than a geographically determined cinema of the masses. The redefinition of Third Cinema in this way has particular application in the context of Northern Ireland. A cinema of resistance for Northern Ireland, it follows, will address its colonized, divided, and violently politicized history while accommodating the voices of its multiple marginalized communities (Protestants marginalized within the island of predominantly Catholic Ireland; Catholics marginalized within the Protestant state, Northern Ireland as a peripheral region of Britain, as well as those internal groups marginalized by gender, sexuality, or minority status). Without necessarily following the model of, for instance, Marxist, Queer, or Black American counter-cinema, the ideal cinema of resistance in Northern Ireland nonetheless would rely on unique strategies to oppose the unsatisfactory versions of 'reality' posed in externally imposed or ideologically and formally conservative works. In practice, a counter-cinema for Northern Ireland can be located within a diverse range of films, characterized by a political consciousness, but formally quite distinct from the Third Cinema of other regions. The cinema of resistance as it is found in the context of Northern Ireland uses excess, self-reflexivity and interrogation, to provoke response. Above all, it draws on ambiguity to open the text to a multiplicity of viable meanings. A "resistant" cinema is one that challenges binary oppositions, stagnant representations of communities, and limited versions of history.

Critically, a cinema of resistance may offer the best foundation for recovery from trauma. The resistant cinema should be understood as that which opposes not only hegemonic, but also counter-hegemonic practices. "Resistant" should not be equated necessarily with "progressive"; in offering a space of counter-memory to marginalized communities, this cinema can also encourage inherent audience resistance to non-sectarian identification and a pro-social agenda, one conducive to social harmony and the reconciliation of divided communities..

Despite having suggested the potential for an oppositional cinema, the critics do not see much evidence of it in the cinema of the 1980s and beyond. Gibbons and Rockett see examples of a counter-cinema in the 'First Wave' of Irish film, but are less optimistic about later trends, seeing a rise in conservatism and a reliance on dominant representations. Likewise, McLoone sees the greatest potential for a counter-cinema only in shorts and experimental film. However, it is my contention that resistance can be more widely found. Through ambivalence in form and image, there are a number of films, in particular those that perform a commemorative function, which provoke a significant reexamination; contradictory messages emerge, upon analysis, that undermine or cause a fundamental shift in subject position.

Defining a resistance of cinema

The arguments for a cinema of resistance gesture at that other dimension, the audience, and the need for what I call here a resistance of cinema: the ability of viewers to deny or negotiate inadequate representations. Counter-cinema, after all, relies on the shift from viewer passivity to participation and mobilization. In McIlroy's analysis of Northern Irish spectatorship, he adapts Laura Mulvey and Gaylyn Studlar's gender-based arguments of the masquerade to

equate the position of the Protestant Unionist viewer with that of the female viewer who must take on the gaze of the voyeuristic male spectator. In this model, underrepresented, elided, or demonized images of the Protestant community force those viewers to adopt an unnatural spectator position. The films analyzed by McIlroy contain more or less visible fissures, points where the text cannot sustain the masquerade. Consequently, these films require different levels of engagement, depending upon their status as "simple texts", "ambivalent reworkings of the past", or the "fascinatingly complex". (*Shooting to Kill*, 29-30) McIlroy's discussion and subsequent analysis is thus a plea for audience resistance in the face of false or dangerous representations of the past and its players, advocating an "active and mobile spectatorship [that] thereby exposes the lazy or virtual masquerade." (ibid, 29)

McLoone, too, evokes the need for engaged spectatorship, making the point that it is the context of reception which ultimately determines a film's function. Furthermore, he suggests that the audience may find radical value where none was intended: "Even if these films are not politically engaged, they can be engaged with politically." (*Irish Film*, 168) The notion that audiences will 'read against the grain' is not a new one; the point here is that audiences are able to 'read' meaning into films in ways that the filmmakers may not have anticipated; that a cinema of resistance is perhaps secondary in efficacy to a resistance of cinema. The corollary to this, of course, is that even the presumably radical text is undermined by an unengaged viewer. Just as the level of resistance in Northern Irish cinema has been underestimated in the criticism, so too has the level of resistance on the part of audiences. The ability of viewers to negotiate the representations presented both increases the potential for change by expanding fissures and challenging reactionary and divisive political identities, and decreases the potential

for change by ignoring selected pro-social elements and using other elements to reinforce held identities and group affiliations.

Resistance, representation, and mourning

At this point, it may be useful to ask why a lack of representation is a problem – is it simply an issue of audience pleasure derived from self-recognition, or something else? McIlroy, for instance, observes that cinematic representation has an impact on audience esteem. The deficiency of representation not only serves to "underwhelm or repress history and politics", but to "undermine specific communities." ("The Repression of Communities", 94) Esteem is built by narratives that show heroic figures from the delineated community, that validate the myths groups and individuals rely on to make sense of complex events, and that articulate the meaning behind anger and loss. While McIlroy's work is primarily concerned with the esteem of Protestant viewers, the sense that one's community has not been represented 'fairly' can be seen to extend to most segments of the Northern Irish population. The same bodies of films are read very differently by viewers to support perceptions of bias and exclusion.

For political or community movements, the central issue may be one of solidarity; representation as a way of encouraging empathy and involvement. Through representation in film, as through other popular arts, movements create a sense of continuity with the past. The use of historical figures and symbols on all sides of the Northern Irish conflict points to this desire to unite individuals through the creation of a common origin. Likewise, representations can be constructed to emphasize the difference from the 'Other', while obscuring internal differences among community members. Finally, motivation for continued involvement is provided by the portrayal of justified sacrifice and loss. Accordingly, organizations have an

interest in producing representations that appeal to and satisfy the needs of viewers seeking a point of identification.

On yet another level, a lack of representation may be an obstacle to healing wounds left in the collective psyche of groups of people. Through film, past injuries and losses can be grieved and reconciled. Representation gives voice and agency to those victimized (or those who perceive themselves as victimized), as well as to those seeking to make sense of seemingly unfathomable social disruption. While communities in Northern Ireland have competing claims to victimization, each positioning itself as the injured party, the *perception* of victimization is the critical factor; in studies of traumatized societies, it appears that the same psychic structures, neuroses and identifications are expressed. Film can perform constructive "mourning work" or, alternatively, obstruct mourning. Mourning, the "set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement" (*Sites of Memory...*, 224), allows the bereaved individual or community to progress beyond its melancholic loss. This process, according to psychoanalytic models, requires confrontation and meditation. The symbolic language of film – its use of iconic images, familiar narrative patterns, and generic conventions – make it a vehicle for what Julia Kristeva calls "aesthetic redemption", provoking catharsis and suggesting meaning in the vacuum created by traumatic loss. (Kristeva) While cinema offers an opportunity for catharsis, a refusal or inability to mourn is a powerful obstacle to new conceptions of political identity. As demonstrated by the work of Eric Santner and Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, failure to mourn has social repercussions, perpetuating rigid, binary identifications, the insistence on victim status, repressive institutions, and the tendency to minimize or deny the actual injuries of the past. (Santner, 33-38)

Implicit in discussions of an alternative or oppositional cinema for Northern Ireland is the suggestion that such a cinema can address and ameliorate social divisions. Quite aside from creating a sustainable national or sub-national cinema with a unique character, the concern is also with creating a cinema that responds to the needs of domestic audiences. Does such a cinema exist for Northern Ireland? And can such a cinema be accessed by audiences in ways that not only satisfy diverse needs for representation, but also provide a form of counter-memory that aids in recovery?

There is one subclass of Northern Irish cinema which seems to provide a particular space for oppositional cinema and spectatorship, the group of films which has been termed "commemorative cinema". These are films which attempt to address moments of national trauma and which explicitly and implicitly raise issues of identity and memory. This group includes such films as *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993), *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996), *H3* (Les Blair, 2001), *81* (Stephen Burke, 1996), *Silent Grace* (Maeve Murphy, 2001), *Bloody Sunday* (Paul Greengrass, 2002), and *Sunday* (Charles McDougall, 2002). These films, because of their open engagement with the construction of social memory, are a potent site of resistance. The films use personal narratives to approach the questions of history through the private realm, exploring the ways in which individuals' choices impact not only the events of history, but the nature of remembering and recovery.

Memory and commemoration are fundamental mechanisms of political identity. Jay Winter 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." ("Memory Boom", 52)

Without minimizing the centrality of class, race, or gender to identity formation or to Northern Irish cinema, memory does provide a unique function as a point of co-optation or resistance. David Lowenthal writes that "the awareness of 'I was' is a necessary component of 'I am'"; this is true not only of individuals, but of communities. (*The Past Is...*, 41) Like individuals, groups (nation-states as well as internal ethnic or political units) employ memory to sustain established identities. As 'imagined communities', nations rely on common myths, ideas, and symbols to provide cohesion. Social memory, the collaborative sense of continuity with the past as it is understood by a community, provides solidarity through common narratives of shared suffering and experience. For dominant groups or governments, social memory provides legitimacy and endorses the social order. For minority, oppressed, or excluded groups, social memory provides a source of comfort.

While the Freudian approach to memory is useful to an understanding of the individual processes of memory formation, social memory theory transfers the centre of attention to how communities perpetuate these memories. Theorists like Maurice Halbwachs and Emile Durkheim were among the first to recognize the social construction of memory, arguing that individuals rely on the confirmation of those around them to sustain personal beliefs and recollections. This is central to a discussion of cinema, as filmic representation becomes one of the social forces for confirmation, intervention, or denial. Moreover, film is most often experienced socially, within the context of a collective audience, and the discourse around film (discussing films with others, reading criticism of films, even the marketing of films) is a socially mediated discourse. Eric Hobsbawm and others have detailed the ways in which social memory is manipulated and exploited by elites, but just as relevant in a discussion of film is the way that popular culture and traditional or folk ideals and icons are accessed. In his essay

"Memory and National Identity in Modern Ireland", Ian McBride suggests that ethnic and nationalist movements in Northern Ireland construct ideas of nationhood through the use of such popular memories, leading to the prominence of two contrasting frameworks, one Protestant and "providential" and one nationalist and "redemptive". (McBride, 15-16) McBride's argument vis-à-vis the constructed nature of memory frameworks is instructive, as such deeply held notions of identity inform the reception of commemorative films and limit the potential readings of those films by community members.

Narrative film, as a form of highly popular representation, can function within this context of social memory as a site of commemoration. Generally, commemoration consists of the ceremonies, rituals, and physical markers which seek to define past events for a present audience; James Fentress and Chris Wickham define commemoration as "...the action of speaking or writing about memories." (Fentress and Wickham, x) A crucial point is that commemoration is an action. Whereas memorials are fixed and monolithic reminders of the past, commemoration is the active process that occurs around those sites or reminders. Participation in commemorative ritual is inter- and extra-textual; each time a commemorative ritual is performed or repeated, new layers of meaning are added, shaped by present concerns and reworked according to the needs and demands of those participating, witnessing, or protesting. The films discussed in this thesis are themselves acts of commemoration. They also depict acts of commemoration. Film may be understood as a commemorative medium that conveys and shapes social memory. Moreover, it does so in accordance with familiar frameworks that rely on communally held notions of political identity. The commemorative subgenre in Northern Ireland has been seen chiefly to tap into Nationalist frameworks, building community esteem by functioning as a source of comfort for the real or imagined

oppressions of British occupation, building cohesion among members of the Catholic community, or bearing witness to traumatic public events believed to be downplayed or distorted by the historical record. However, the level of resistance in and to these films prevents their dismissal as propaganda or exclusionary narratives.

These films operate as commemorative *ritual*, participatory and fluid, rather than as fixed objects. In his discussion of the role of commemorative rituals within divided societies, David Kertzer, following on Durkheim, argues that the greater the degree and violence of division within a society, the greater is the need for commemoration that emphasizes or suggests the common qualities of the group and elides the differences between subgroups or individuals. (Kertzer, 63) At the same time, commemorative rituals have the potential to create further divisiveness by increasing the solidarity of subgroups rather than of the whole. Through its function as commemoration, film can legitimize the codified narratives told about Northern Irish history. Conversely, it can replace the ideas of an accepted history with a range of competing images, symbols, and discourses. In this latter mode, film can create, transmit, and maintain counter-memory, a set of narratives that challenge the transmission of exclusionary or oppressive history. Counter-memory serves a number of functions. It creates bonds of identity within marginalized groups by providing a shared history, based on representations that are more acceptable and comfortable for viewers than those found in the prevailing history. It may express a history of persecution or loss, allowing 'witnessing' by otherwise silenced voices. Importantly, the commemorative cinema provides an venue for catharsis and confrontation in a public space, an essential aspect of mourning work. Further, by creating subjects who control their own stories and images, counter-memorial texts may be used to give agency to those neglected or absent from dominant cinema. Breaking through calcified or

imposed narratives is a necessary precondition for mourning, and the resistant nature of commemorative cinema may be the best opportunity for effective reconciliation with past trauma.

Most importantly, the way in which viewers interact with film texts shows a use of counter-memory as a tool for resistance of their implications. As audiences negotiate the representations of the text, they rely on their previously held frameworks of belief. From audience studies of gender, genre, and fandom, it has been shown that viewers use the gaps and excesses within films as sites of re-identification.[5] Similarly, studies of Northern Irish media audiences have illustrated how viewers use community-centred counter-memory to reorient themselves to the narrative to create new subject positions, at the same time, selectively interpreting elements and drawing unexpected conclusions.[6] Kertzer, in his discussion of social use of ritual, points out that commemorative rituals do not express a single or fixed meaning; the same symbolic object or action may be interpreted differently by individual observers and participants, who use a process akin to that described by Stuart Hall, in which receivers of a text adopt preferred, negotiated, or oppositional readings. (Kertzer, 67; Hall)

Commemorative cinema that engages with counter-memory constitutes an oppositional cinema that may meet the needs of Northern Irish audiences, responding to feelings of marginalization, exclusion, misrepresentation, and powerlessness. This is the cinema of

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[5] Particularly informative studies include those designed and performed by Thomas Austin, Martin Barker, Kate Brooks, Brigid Cherry, Annette Hill, Annette Kuhn, David Morley, Henry Jenkins, Jackie Stacey, and James F. Tracy.
[6] Useful studies of Northern Irish audiences include those of Raymond Watson, David Miller, Paul Nolan, and Mary J. Kelly.

resistance. Where is it found, and how is it received? These are the questions I will take up in the rest of this thesis. The commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland is particularly open to oppositional and negotiated readings. In the first section of this thesis, I will look at the ambiguities and resistant elements in the films themselves and discuss how these create a cinema of resistance. I will argue that these films use ambivalent and contradictory elements to undermine their surface claims, elements that often place these films at odds with the accepted history and preferred readings, or that call into question the stated intentions of the filmmakers. Looking first at the way these films have been read by critics (Chapter 2), I will then attempt to suggest the possibility of alternative readings (Chapter 3). In the following chapter (Chapter 4), I will consider the role of the audience. It is in this interplay between film and audience, between the cinema of resistance and the resistance of cinema, that meaning is created.

Chapter Two – Critical Readings of the Commemorative Cinema

There is a place for audience resistance in the commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland. The argument for such resistance is a two-sided one. While accepting that there are textual elements to the films which encourage the viewer to construct certain readings, particularly vis-à-vis historical memory and political identity, it also demands that equal attention be paid to the way that these films are received by audiences. In this chapter and the next, I will consider the first dimension of the films' performance, looking at the film texts themselves, but also at the discourses around the films, discourses which may be said to represent the preferred readings of the films. My aim is to establish what 'messages' have been identified in these discourses, while keeping in mind the contradictions within the films which may account for existing but largely uncredited levels of resistance to those established messages.

Locating the 'Preferred Reading'

The concept of the preferred reading emerges from Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding. In this model, the text (or film) is composed of signs and structures placed there, both intentionally and incidentally, by the authors (filmmakers) working within an institutional practice. Form and content are coded in production. It is then up to the reader (viewer) to decode that text, in an active process led by viewer experience, social position, and knowledge of conventions. In the end, viewers will either accept, reject, or qualify the ideas of identity, subject position, and narrative and ideological meaning that are on offer. Hall formulates three reading strategies: in the first, the viewer accepts the preferred or dominant meaning and engages with the text as an open and transparent work. Conversely, the viewer may invoke an

oppositional reading strategy, understanding the preferred meaning, but rejecting it as wrong or ideologically untenable. Finally, the reader may engage in a strategy of negotiated reading, resisting and modifying the messages suggested and finding space for other interpretations within the contradictions and gaps of the film text. The shortcoming of Hall's model is that it ultimately relies on all readers finding the same 'message' in the text, and then choosing how to respond to that message. The possibility exists, though, for readers of a text to perform resistant readings, drawing very different conclusions about the implicit meaning(s) of the work.

This does not mean of course that the films discussed here are open to any number of possible interpretations; there are still limits to the reading permitted by the text. The more ambiguous the work, the more possibilities it offers for resistant reading. While ambiguity might be inherent to all texts, some are more ambiguous than others; hence Eco's distinction of the open and closed text. Eco suggests that for the ambiguous text to be "productive" (in other words, generating meaning rather than simply 'noise'), ambiguities must be present throughout the text, and call attention to the construction of the work. These open works will not only contain an appeal to the viewer to decode them, but suggest possible options; the texts are polysemic, but delimited. *Audiences* can perform resistant readings, but the *texts* provide the necessary openness for meaningful aberrance. This tendency towards a productive ambiguity is a defining characteristic of the commemorative cinema, and it is this characteristic which permits resistance to the 'preferred reading'.

David Morley has asked whether the preferred reading in fact may just be that which "...the analyst is predicting that most members of the audience will produce." (Morley, 103) The

preferred readings might be said then to be those which dominate the academic and critical discourse. It seems clear that the 'preferred' reading emerges from critical reception, not audience reception[7]. The commemorative cinema is created as much by the academic and critical discourses as by the actual existence of the texts or by audience engagement.

The critical examination of the commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland has been text-centred. Perhaps as a consequence, a rather pessimistic view dominates. Hill, McLoone *et al* see the need and opportunity for resistant cinema, but conclude that its existence is contingent on state policy, such filmmaking being possible primarily within an indigenous film industry and visible largely in shorts, documentaries, and experimental films. Certainly, they see little evidence of resistance in (or to) contemporary mainstream feature narratives fully or partly produced outside of Northern Ireland, including those that could be considered to belong to the class of commemorative cinema: films like *In the Name of the Father, Some Mother's Son, H3, Silent Grace, Sunday, Bloody Sunday, The Boxer, Nothing Personal, or Resurrection Man.*

In seeking to explain the essential meaning of the commemorative films, critics have downplayed the ambiguities of the works, as they attempt, through progressivist or demystifying readings, to position the films within Nationalist-Unionist or revisionist-antirevisionist debates. Demystifying readings find many of these films reactionary, emphasizing their underlying formal and narrative conservatism. Conversely, progressivist readings of the same films make the claim that these films offer critical inquiry into issues of race, gender, sexuality, and religious identity.

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[7] The notion of the preferred reading is indisputably problematic, and some theorists have suggested that the model cannot account for polysemic and ambivalent texts. For more discussion, see e.g., Morley or Justin Lewis.

This drive to identify clear ideological agenda within the films reflects a model of reading which not only presumes a fixed interpretation and audience, but defines the films as 'good' or 'bad' texts. It has become a commonplace observation that Northern Ireland's political culture relies too heavily upon binary oppositions; indeed, the questioning of such binarism is held up, by critics as a laudable goal of cinema about Northern Ireland, and is one of the markers of the region's oppositional cinema as it has been so far identified. At the same time, the scholarship itself falls back too readily on a binary model, either valorizing texts or dismissing them as reactionary propaganda. As Richard Kirkland has noted, the discourse far too often centres around perceptions of bias and a model of "critical utopianism" that relies on the impractical notions of an ideal text and audience. In this way, the discourse remains mired in "regret for lost opportunities" and a "mourning of the cinematic ideal". (*Identity Parades*, 33, 35) Symptomatic reading of these films, rather than seeking to demonstrate how the films are inherently reactionary or progressive, might focus on the contradictions and 'grey areas' which permit these films to be, by turns and for different viewers, both reactionary *and* progressive.

Viewers are able to construct negotiated readings precisely because these films are fissured and open to such negotiation. This group of films, rich in contradiction and participating in a performative ritual of mourning and history, seems to offer particularly 'open' texts. This chapter and the next will consider three commemorative films – Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996), Paul Greengrass' *Bloody Sunday* (2002), and Marc Evans' *Resurrection Man* (1998) – and the preferred readings of each constructed by critics. Each offers a representation of a particular period in Northern Irish history; each typifies the wider discourse about filmic

representation of those periods. These three films provide particular examples of resistance at the textual and receptive levels.

Films as acts of commemoration

Certain qualities have been ascribed to oppositional or counter cinema: self-consciousness, exaggeration, theatricality, and a meshing of personal and national concerns. These same qualities characterize commemorative ritual. This may be why the commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland is such a viable source for resistant viewership. Commemoration is by nature ambivalent and contradictory. It looks both backwards to the past, seeking to explain and re-present a notion of historical truth, and forward to the future, reinscribing the historical record for future viewer-participants. The commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland does not only present the 'facts' of the events it depicts, but frames them by, and uses them to comment upon, present concerns. Commemoration simultaneously distances us from events by containing them within discrete narratives and collapses that distance by encouraging identification and emotional involvement through familiar symbols and mythologies. It seeks to unite our fragmented sense of the modern world while also preserving a removed nostalgia for the past. ("New Memory", 344)

Commemorative acts, in their building of internal solidarity, invariably reproduce notions of self and other and so polarize groups within the wider society. This tension between internal solidarity and external alienation adds to the ambiguity of ritual, leaving its codes open to a variety of readings. This ambiguity, in fact, is a necessary if paradoxical component of commemorative ritual, allowing disparate factions to share common texts; building what Kertzer refers to as "solidarity without consensus". (Kertzer, 69)

As commemorative cinema blurs distinctions between public and private histories within the narratives, so does commemoration within the social narrative. The way we experience these films is both public and private. Jay Winter writes of the war film, similarly, as a "semi-private séance", an individual and unmediated act of grieving and a socially mediated form of mass mourning. (*Sites of Memory...*, 138) These contradictory impulses – distance versus investment, solidarity versus alienation, public versus private – are reflected in the commemorative cinema discussed here. There are other common qualities of these films which make them appropriate for examination. As noted, all have explicit and implicit claims to history and living memory. Besides the obvious content – stories set in historical context – these films also are aware of their own role as historical discourse and self-consciously position themselves as a part of that discourse. The films also serve as counter-memory, telling stories and offering perspectives which have arguably been marginalized or mischaracterized by other media.

The films chosen challenge the critical consensus that resistance is absent from the last decade of filmmaking about Northern Ireland. All feature fiction narratives, these films have been undervalued as works of resistance. The opportunities for negotiation of subject position (opportunities which will be explored in later chapters) have been largely ignored in favour of the emphasis on progressivist or demystifying interpretations. Not surprisingly, each of these films has been subject to critical controversy (at best) or critical dismissal (at worst). The availability and marketing of these films, to both the critical elite and the public audience, has of course played a role in their inclusion within the canon of 'Northern Irish cinema' and has somewhat dictated the amount and nature of interrogation on offer.

Some Mother's Son

The 1981 Hunger Strikes have been a source of commemorative activity within the Nationalist community, remembered and refigured through a variety of media - physical memorials, songs, street art (murals, banners and graffiti), websites - and performative rituals such as marches. The relative importance of the Hunger Strikes as a site of commemoration and community building seems to have grown since the 1994 ceasefires, and this post-ceasefire interest in re-remembering the trauma is evidenced in a handful of film treatments of the topic, such as Maeve Murphy's *Silent Grace* (2001), Les Blair's *H3* (2001) and, the most widely seen of the Hunger Strike films, *Some Mother's Son*.

Some Mother's Son is the fictionalized story of two Catholic mothers whose sons are imprisoned for acts of terrorism. The sons join the hunger strike in prison, and the mothers are forced to choose whether to respect their sons' political commitment or to intervene to save their lives. Ultimately, one mother chooses to remove her unconscious son from the strike, permitting medical intervention; the other allows her son to die. The central focus of the narrative is the relationship between the two, quite different, women.

The film's inclusion in the category of commemorative cinema is based on not only its narrative content, but the film's function within the social formation of memory and history. While the film was released fifteen years after the events it depicts, those events could not be said to be over; the Hunger Strikes are very much an open chapter of Northern Irish history, one whose significance and meaning are still in debate and a part of the living memory of communities there. Made during the peace process from an earlier script by George, *Some Mother's Son* was released after a breakdown in the process and so entered the public discourse

in an atmosphere of increased contention. The film quickly became a part, too, of an ongoing critical debate about the representations of the region's history onscreen, a debate in large part formed by reactions to Jim Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996), two other films dealing with divisive traumas of Northern Irish history and Irish-British relations.

George has described the film as a sort of 'coming to terms' with his own personal history. George was involved with the IRA, imprisoned twice, and has said that the film is in part an expiation of his own guilt for the pain his imprisonment and activities caused his family. ("The 'Troubles' He's Seen", 25-27) George positions the film as commemoration, both representing a moment of trauma and engaging in communal remembering of the moment. In so doing, he makes claims to an authentic representation of history, to the film as a self-conscious object of counter-memory, and to the facility of the film to engage with later events.

How the film depicts and encodes historical reality has been a central issue of debate. George has been vocal in his defence of the film's historical accuracy, and claims to have extensive documentation to back up the details of the story he presents – an odd claim given that the story is openly fictive. (McSwiney) The characters in the film are composites, but George asserts that "…those people in Northern Ireland who followed the hunger strikes know who the characters most closely resemble." (*Some Mother's Son* screenplay, xiii) The comment reveals George's investment in the film as the authentic voice of a community. George implicitly takes the position that the film is able to speak for the majority of the Nationalist population. The opening paragraph of George's introduction to his screenplay sets the tone and makes a clear claim to group identity and spokesmanship:

I grew up in Belfast. My friends were like any other boys around the world…We were like all other teenagers throughout Ireland, throughout Europe…We liked the Stones over the Beatles because they had more balls. We all gave our mothers a hard time. We stayed out too late, needed more money than they had, felt we knew it all…Then something happened that changed all of our lives forever. In 1969 a slow-burning civil war broke out on our streets. We were the Catholic rebels fighting a Protestant state supported by the British army." (George, xiii)

In interview, George has maintained, "Something new about this film is that maybe for the first time it's made by somebody who actually comes from Belfast and who was also actively involved in nationalist politics in Northern Ireland." (McSwiney) More than simply establishing his 'street cred', these remarks also reflect the notion that *Some Mother's Son* functions as counter-memory, providing a voice for a community which has been silenced or neglected in the historical record. The film's producer, Arthur Lappin, promoted this notion in remarks in the *Irish Times*: "We're certainly not proselytizing for the IRA, but the film does try to redress a media imbalance regarding the hunger strikes." ("Green on the Screen…", 6)

George makes further claims as to the role of the film in communal memory, pointing out its relevance to the contemporary peace process, in which 'both' sides have become mired in the "manipulation of words" (*Some Mother's Son* screenplay, xiii) and the obduracy of the political players. George's 'preferred reading' of the film, at least as he has publicly expressed it, seems to be that the film speaks for one, homogenous community of 'Catholic rebels'. While not objective, George claims the film does not vilify either the British or the Ulster Protestants; rather, he portrays it as an insular exploration and working through of "…the most tragic event in the recent history of the nationalist community…" (McSwiney) Significantly, George has offered contradictory statements on the film's political meaning, on the one hand claiming that the film has "no message" (George, xiii); on the other, and in accordance with the emergent critical response, that the message is one of an apolitical humanism ("There's No

Such Thing…", 11). Whether or not George is being disingenuous in his claims as to the film's politics (or lack thereof), it does seem that even the filmmaker's intent does not guarantee a single clear preferential reading.

Critics and academics have produced contradictory readings of *Some Mother's Son*. Despite differing valuations of the film, three central concerns can be seen to dominate the discourse. First, the historical accuracy of the film is interrogated. As noted, the critical dialogue was shaped by the debates that arose over *In the Name of the Father* and *Michael Collins*, both heavily criticized for fictionalizing elements of their narratives. Second, the question of bias is raised. On the one hand, some find the film to be too sympathetic to the Nationalist cause or to Republican terrorists. Conversely, others argue that the film is too conservative, in both form and narrative, and so obfuscates the political question to the detriment of the Nationalist case. Finally, the representation of communities is a concern; both the under-representation of Ulster Protestant Unionists and the fragmented representation of Catholic Nationalists are a source of disappointment for critics within each community.

Ultimately, two readings of the film emerge as candidates for preferred reading status. The first is a variation on the humanist interpretation endorsed by George. *Some Mother's Son* is understood as a melodrama that tells a universal story of maternal compassion and demonstrates the futility of both violence and conventional politics. Specific politics are sidelined and the film functions on an emotional, rather than an ideological or intellectual, level. Concerns of bias are ultimately deflated, the consensus being that the film is "politically partisan, but emotionally just". (Alleva, 16) In contrast, a second reading of the film has been constructed which understands the film as what Alexander Walker calls "…the continuation of

Nationalist propaganda by other means" ("Film Propaganda", 11). In this reading, the film is overly sentimental, relying on those same melodramatic elements to offer a suspect and exclusionary version of the Nationalist myth.

The concern with memory and commemoration is obvious in these readings. Concerns about how the film presents the events surrounding the Hunger Strikes are predicated on the notion that the film participates in the ongoing establishment of the meaning of the events themselves, while concerns about representation assume the role of film in shaping group identity and esteem. Walker's criticism, for example, questions the morality of such filmmaking at a basic level, as such films are seen capable of exacerbating tensions and irresponsibly raising contentious issues of memory in a volatile climate. The comment that "what seems art in the script becomes 'politics' in the production by the casting, editing, and creative decisions to exclude this viewpoint, or emphasize that one" (ibid) casts doubt on the possibility of ever producing an aesthetically and ideologically acceptable work of cinema as long as conflict persists over how an event like the hunger strikes is to be officially remembered.

Bloody Sunday

Just as *Some Mother's Son* is an example of recent cinematic interest in the Hunger Strikes, Paul Greengrass' *Bloody Sunday* is one of several films and TV dramas recently made about the eponymous tragedy. The drama attempts to recreate the events of January 30, 1972, when participants in a Derry civil rights march clashed with British Paratroopers; 14 civilians were killed under disputed circumstances. Limiting its scope to the day of the march, *Bloody Sunday* intercuts the stories of multiple parties whose paths eventually intersect at the film's climax.

While it is widely described as a docudrama, and while it adopts stylistic elements of *verité* documentary, the film also incorporates elements of melodrama and art cinema. The release of the film, concurrent with the opening of the Saville Inquiry and the 30th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday march, generated debates not dissimilar from those that formed around *Some Mother's Son*; debates over historical accuracy, bias, and the representation of communities. Further, the critical reception of *Bloody Sunday* reveals concerns about the ethics and aesthetics of commemoration itself. A preferred reading results that undervalues the ambiguity in, and potential for audience resistance to, the film's interpretation of historic events.

Like the Hunger Strikes, Bloody Sunday is an event extensively commemorated within the Nationalist community, both visually (via street murals and neighbourhood memorials) and orally (via the testimony and stories of witnesses and participants). It is also, of course, an event of considerable controversy; Nationalist and Unionist communities each have vested interest in how the events are remembered and how those involved are re-imagined through commemoration. The conviction of many Nationalists is that the original Widgery Inquiry into Bloody Sunday was at best insufficient and at worst a cover-up of British military abuse. Within the Unionist community, the new Inquiry, and the interest in revisiting the day cinematically, has met with suspicion and resentment for the perceived indictment of the military's actions and for the focus on Catholic victims, a focus that is seen by some as misdirected, given the losses of the Protestant community.

Within this climate, Greengrass and the film's producers have framed *Bloody Sunday* as a work of reconciliation that re-examines a moment in history in order to avoid future conflict. The reading suggested by Greengrass downplays the ritualistic and mythic elements of the film.

Greengrass posits a pro-social reading of the film, the message of which he summarizes as "violence cannot possibly lead to progress. On the contrary, violence can only lead to no progress...the best that a guerrilla war can achieve is to turn the oppressed minority into the oppressing majority. You can't in the end get around the fact that there are two people who want to inhabit the same land." (Curiel, D-11) Elsewhere, Greengrass has described the film as a caution to states engaged in a 'war on terror', suggesting a correlation between the actions of the British Government forces in 1972, and those of the post- 9/11 United States (in so doing, making a second correlation between the Derry marchers, and Muslim terrorism suspects). (Ezard, 2) Greengrass also makes an explicit connection between the events of Bloody Sunday and the current peace process; his film, he says, is about the optimism of those willing to strive for non-violent change. (Curiel, D-11) Like Terry George, Greengrass emphasizes the historical veracity of the work in interviews and promotional materials; the film is based in large part on the account *Eyewitness Bloody Sunday*, by Don Mullan, and Mullan's research is cited as evidence of the film's accuracy.

Commemorative cinema functions as a cinema of resistance in part because of its relation with counter-memory; if history is, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, both what happened and what is said to have happened, commemorative rituals are attempts to say more, to provide voices of opposition that fill in the inevitable silences in the historical record. (Trouillot, 2) Greengrass positions *Bloody Sunday* as counter-memory, presenting a version of events that confronts the official record, and the voices of history's actual participants in opposition to the hegemonic discourse. Greengrass' confrontation, though, arises from a notion of inclusivity rather than one of outright opposition: the suggestion is that by including a plurality of voices

and images, he can present for the first time the 'truth' of Bloody Sunday. Echoing Greengrass' claims, producer Paul Redhead declares "we felt from the start that it was important in the light of the history of the conflict to make the project as inclusive as possible." (Redhead) To this end, members of the Derry community, including some of the original marchers, were invited to participate as actors and consultants, and actual British soldiers were cast as the Paratroopers. Ironically, the implication that the film is a more or less objective representation of actual events is offset by observations, such as the one by Redhead, that extras required little direction because "this was a script that everyone knew". (ibid) The constructed narrative framework that sustains community memory is obscured by the film's projected status as documentary.

Greengrass does not share George's claim to insider status; instead, he falls back on this notion of inclusivity to establish his credibility as a bearer of social memory. Greengrass argues that "those communities [Derry Protestants and Catholics, presumably] felt that those films [he refers here to *Bloody Sunday* and 2004's *Omagh*, written by Greengrass and directed by Pete Travis] reflected their struggle, reflected their understanding of what had happened. And they felt that they owned them. Yet in a way those films also spoke to them and showed them new ways of looking at these terrible events." (Faraci) Greengrass seeks to establish not only the veracity of his film and its usefulness as a work of reconciliation, but his own role as a mouthpiece for those who feel a commitment to the story and yet perhaps have not had the power to tell that story.

The preferred reading put forth by critics accepts Greengrass' espoused intentions, endorsing the film as a essentially fair and unbiased presentation of events. This reading treats the film as

a documentary re-enactment of the historical events, legitimizing *Bloody Sunday* as a historical object. While critics might quarrel about the accuracy of facts, or the value of the re-enactment, Greengrass' claims of inclusivity and even-handedness dominate this reading; the film is taken as yet another liberal humanist text, well-meaning, lacking in context and complexity, but driven by a pro-social and pacifistic impulse.

The film *has* been subject to charges of bias and was condemned by some journalists and politicians, including the British Conservative Party. These objections notwithstanding, a critical consensus emerges that ultimately valorizes the film as a progressive text. The appeal to notions of inclusivity and historical integrity may have helped to counter the charges of bias, as did a ruling by the Independent Television Commission, a British regulatory body, that the film (broadcast on television in the UK) did not violate standards of impartiality; the film was determined to be "sympathetic" to the protesters, "but not at the expense of other perspectives". ("Bloody Sunday TV Dramas...", 6) Greengrass' attempts at inclusivity are recognized and endorsed in the critical reading. The intercutting of multiple narratives, giving screen time to the Paras, police, protesters, and politicians, is interpreted as objectivity. Jonathan Curiel's judgement that the film shows "devotion to showing all sides of that fateful day" is fairly typical of the preferred reading established by the critical discourse. (Curiel, D-11) Similarly, the central role of Ivan Cooper, a Protestant civil rights leader, is read as evidence that the film goes beyond the typical inadequate representations of Unionists and Nationalists. Greengrass himself points to the representation of Cooper as a corrective to the dominant image of Protestants: "How many films have we seen about Northern Ireland where the Protestants are portrayed as stereotypical bigots? I wanted this movie to escape all stereotypes." (ibid)

The film mimics documentary visuals, and invokes for critics memories of news coverage as well as iconic images, such as the priest who waves his white handkerchief as he helps the injured, or the blood-stained banner placed over a protestor's body. Such images have represented the event for many over the past thirty years; in popular memory, certain icons stand in for the larger narrative and these may provide a sense of familiarity to Greengrass' images. The preferred reading interprets these iconic images accordingly. Eddie Holt of the *Irish Times*, for example, argues that the film provides a necessary counter to not merely erroneous representations, but absent ones. (Holt, 51) The contemporaneous restrictions on television coverage of the march and surrounding events meant that many of the day's images were not seen at the time. The most traumatic images were censored and victim's voices and images were silenced and obscured. This "castration" of coverage ensured a representational lack which, according to Holt's argument, *Bloody Sunday* has emerged to fill. In contrast to Holt's view that the film operates by presenting unseen images, McLoone posits that the controversy arises from a *similarity* to the actual coverage and the way the film taps into the living memory of events. In fact, McLoone suggests that Greengrass doesn't go far enough in presenting alternative versions and voices, but is content to simply present a re-enactment of those events which are not contested; in so doing, the film lets the British off the hook, disguising the truth by the chaos of the form. (McLoone, "*Bloody Sunday*", 42-43) By leaving it up to the audience to impose a meaningful narrative on the series of disjointed segments, Greengrass' film "perhaps disguises the truth as much as it reveals reality." (ibid) What Holt fails to address is the nationalist community's own creation of compensatory images: art projects, murals, and traditional memorials. Holt's point, that *Bloody Sunday* fills a vacuum and presents images of trauma for the first time to a new generation, ignores that these filmic

images are actually in competition with pre-existing representations passed from one generation to the next through rituals and monuments of commemoration. As a result, these images are experienced more ambivalently and with a greater degree of resistance than readings such as Holt's can account for.

As these examples illustrate, the preferred reading of *Bloody Sunday* that emerges from the critical discourse treats the film as a closed text, and the events it represents as a closed chapter in history. Just as Greengrass' comments on the film assume that there is some empirical truth waiting to be uncovered, the critics' responses to the film – while recognizing the relevance of the text to current political events – underestimate audience commitment to reading the film as part of a continuing narrative, one which is sustained by community memories of an event that is constantly refigured and renegotiated. The film's critical reception is split between those who see it as a fair and even-handed presentation of events, and those who view it as dangerous propaganda, but this split reveals a correlation between those who see a value in remembering the events and those who are opposed in principle to revisiting the trauma. Close analysis of the film, or of the way audiences might experience the film, is secondary to questions of political agenda.

Even amongst those critics whose readings would seem to endorse the film as an attempt at reconciliation, the notion of a closed history prevails. Richard Kelly, for example, on the one hand recognizes the open nature of the wider Northern Irish conflict – "the trouble is that there was no surrender by either side, and hence no clear victor with undisputed right to compose the official history of the conflict" ("It Won't Go Away...", 75) – and on the other, portrays Greengrass' film as a historical re-enactment that closes the narrative, at least insofar

there was no surrender by either side, and hence no clear victor with undisputed right to compose the official history of the conflict" ("It Won't Go Away...", 75) – and on the other, portrays Greengrass' film as a historical re-enactment that closes the narrative, at least insofar as cinema is concerned. "Greengrass' achievement, " he writes in another review, "is such that there is little point in the further restaging of Bloody Sunday as painful history-play. Interested viewers should look now to Lord Saville's ongoing inquiry..." (Kelly, "Bloody Sunday, 39) The problem with such readings is that they ignore the ways in which commemoration is itself an ongoing process; the film, like the monuments and memorials created to 'remember' Bloody Sunday, is not the last word to a passive audience, but an entry in a dialogue with active spectators.

For critics like Stanley Kauffmann, this notion of a 'closed' chapter in history results in questioning of the film's very right to exist. Kauffmann's review of the film assumes, rather against the stated intentions of the filmmaker, that "the film's motive was to memorialize the debacle [of Bloody Sunday] and to underscore the long, ongoing history of the Irish Troubles, perhaps with a hope to conclude them." (Kauffmann, 24) He goes on to question whether - like films about the Holocaust – there is any moral justification for such films, and even claims that "after they fulfill their sheerly informational function, the only criterion left...is aesthetic." (ibid, 25) Seemingly, all a film like *Bloody Sunday* may do is to present the 'facts' and once that goal is accomplished, the film's function is purely an artistic one, best judged by the film's adherence to generic and narrative conventions. Kauffmann's argument is not that such events are unrepresentable, but that there is no longer any point in representing them. This line of thinking leads to treatment of the text as a closed text. If nothing else, this attitude helps to explain the strong averse reaction to the film by conservative critics. Walker, for

example, cites the film as further evidence of the same Nationalist agenda which was behind *Some Mother's Son,* and says that the film "reopens" wounds left on society by the trauma of Bloody Sunday. ("Militant Movies", 33) While one might easily counter that those wounds do not seem to have been 'closed' in the first place, Walker's concern is not unique and may explain some element of audience response.

The dominant critical readings of *Bloody Sunday* reduce the film's meaning to an agenda of liberal humanism, regardless of ways the film is actually received. The oppositional reading put forth by conservative critics is, equally, part of a reactionary strategy that is focused on positioning the film as Nationalist propaganda. Treating the film as a historical re-enactment both readings assume that the film is so unambiguous in its assertion of its message of reconciliation and resolution (or conversely, nationalist victimization) that it can only be read in that context. While the very form of the film increases its ambiguity, suggesting clarity and answers it fails to deliver. The preferred reading put forth by critics cannot reconcile the seemingly apposite forces of distanciation and emotional address.

Resurrection Man

Marc Evans' *Resurrection Man* is not as obviously positioned as a work of commemorative cinema as the other two films discussed here. The film has been marketed and to some extent received as a thriller that has more in common with the horror and gangster genres than it does with historical film. Nonetheless, the film unquestionably performs the crucial functions of commemoration.

Resurrection Man is a re-examination of Loyalist violence and group identity in 1970's Belfast. Based on the sectarian murders committed by the Shankhill Butchers, the film parallels the violence and psychosis of the central protagonist and gang leader, Victor Kelly (a fictional stand-in for the historical figure of Lenny Murphy), with that of the journalist, Ryan, who investigates the killings. The two men's stories are interwoven, each mirroring one another's violent proclivities; at the film's close, Kelly is assassinated by death squad. The film is stylized and atmospheric, relying heavily on the visual conventions of horror and noir. The familiar structure is punctuated by moments of formalism. Voice-over 'interview' segments are used to transition between scenes of fractured and circular narrative.

Evans' film is based on Eoin McNamee's novel of the same name; McNamee also wrote the screenplay.[9] McNamee claims in his work as a novelist to be interested in "the process of myth-making, in how people become myths"; about *Resurrection Man*, McNamee has said "We have a moral responsibility to confront our history in this society." (quoted in Traynor, "*Resurrection Man*") McNamee explicitly frames the work as such a confrontation, while Evans tacitly positions the film as commemorative ritual. Evans makes no claims to be an 'insider', nor does he speak of the film as counter-memory, as do Terry George and McNamee. In interviews, Evans emphasizes the fictive nature of the work; not, it seems, to avoid charges of inaccuracy, but to avoid charges of immorality. Likewise, he explains his intent as a ritualistic impulse. "There's a kind of ritual to a horror movie…the catharsis of that is what people want." (Young)

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[9] Perhaps because McNamee has been the target of criticism for the controversial work, he has also, alongside Evans, taken on the task of defending the film. While Evans chooses in interviews to focus on the film's aesthetic and generic attributes, it is McNamee who overtly attempts to position the film as a commemorative work.

The film does have potential to function as counter-memory, in that it confronts and challenges the official history of the Shankhill Butchers and Loyalist violence in general. Critical interest in the film arises in no small part from the fact that *Resurrection Man* is one of a very few theatrical films which feature Protestant Loyalists as prominent characters. Whether this results in a demonization of the entire community or a more complex portrayal of a neglected segment of Northern Ireland's population is the central concern of many who discuss the film. Not surprisingly, then, much of the critical discourse revolves around these characters and how they function, or fail to function, as representations of the Loyalist community. Of secondary concern is the representation of violence in the film and what meanings can be attached to that violence.

For the most part, the critics see the film's violence and villains as decontextualized, finding in the lack of historical context the basis for readings of *Resurrection Man* as a universal morality play or generic text. The preferred readings that arise emphasize this lack of historical referent and, correspondingly, downplay its potential as a work of memory or mourning. McLoone, for example, claims that the film suffers from a common failing of recent Irish – indeed, European – cinema, a reliance on "banal, humanist" messages with no exploration of specific contextual issues. *Resurrection Man* explains its violence as oedipal and pathological; "beyond that", argues McLoone, "the film says nothing about the politics of Northern Ireland and perhaps it does not set out to do so." (*Irish Film*, 82) In a more recent article, McLoone has modified his reading somewhat, allowing some specificity of place as a determinant. Here, McLoone is willing to read the bloodshed the film depicts as the product of a simultaneously "real and imagined" place, a dystopic city that breeds immorality and violence, while still citing the lack of real historical and political context as a fatal flaw in the film's address to audiences.

("Topographies...", 137-139) Perhaps informing McLoone's revisions, Lance Pettitt disagrees with the claim that the film lacks cultural specificity. On the contrary, he understands the films as an implication of a "dysfunctional society, heavily militarised and suffocating under surveillance." (*Screening Ireland*, 263) Pettitt's reading of the film is something of an anomaly in the critical discourse, but nonetheless reflects the understandable emphasis placed on the film as a reflection on the nature of violence.

Critic Desmond Traynor perhaps best typifies the preferred reading of *Resurrection Man* as morality play. He writes that the film is "...not really about violence in the North at all, but recognizes that violence has very little to do with the political and socio-economic context in which it takes place, but is a more immutable trait in individual human psychology...". (Traynor, "*Resurrection Man*") While McLoone faults the film for its perceived neglect of historical reality and Pettitt seeks to demonstrate a way in which the film engages with that reality, Traynor happily endorses an ahistorical approach, in effect denying that violence has a unique character in Northern Ireland. Reading the film as a universal morality play allows critics, like Traynor, to justify the work: it punishes its deviant characters and so can be concluded to be a morally acceptable portrayal. This need to validate the 'message' of *Resurrection Man* reminds us again of the film's place in an ongoing dialogue about memory and history and, as with *Bloody Sunday* or *Some Mother's Son*, the ethics of exploring those memories in a volatile public arena.

Yet another critical position points to the role of genre in the preferred reading of *Resurrection Man*. This position, expressed by Harvey O'Brien, among others, posits that the lack of contextualization is immaterial, given the film's status as genre object. O'Brien argues that

audience understanding of the film will be as a gothic horror text and that this is in fact the only level on which viewers are likely to engage with the film: "...the sectarian psychopath as apolitical metaphor leaves a referential hole in the centre of the text (politics becomes nothing more than another illusory frame of reference with which the unstable character defines himself), but this is the kind of concern which those interested in political representation will find more troubling than the general audience." (O'Brien, *"Resurrection Man"*) This position seems not only to be a rather elitist one, but ignores the question of the demonstrated audience commitment to political readings of films featuring Northern Ireland – in other words, the likelihood that audiences will read this film 'politically' despite any imagined intentions to the contrary. This preferred reading of the film as 'merely' genre object also ignores the ways in which the film engages with genre to engender a variety of subject positions.

Genre is used by critics not only to explain the nature of the film's violence, but also to explain the film's failure on a representational level. The prevailing understanding of *Resurrection Man* – as genre object rather than as work of memory construction – informs McIlroy's characterization of the film as an "unsophisticated" treatment of the Protestant Unionist. McIlroy goes further than this, though, in his attention to the question of community representation. McIlroy discusses the film in a chapter significantly titled "Visioning the Other"; his concern is primarily how the film functions to show the diversity and integrity of the Protestant community – which is, in his estimation, not very well. Engaging with the film as something more than a stylistic, ultra-violent, gangster/horror hybrid, McIlroy reads the film as a comment on the internal divisions and discomfort within the Unionist camps, positing a "...connection between sectarian violence and self-loathing." (*Shooting To Kill*, 121)

It is through this concept of self-loathing that consideration of the audience enters the preferred reading critics have constructed. In a piece written specifically to justify the film's inclusion in the Belfast Film Festival, Desmond Bell argues that the film deals with the abject within the Protestant subject, the "uncontrollable Loyalist monster" that threatens communal self-image. (Bell, 5) He locates the abject within the twinned subjects of Victor Kelly and Ryan, and sees here points of identification for, at least, the Loyalist viewer. Although little attention is devoted to the ways in which the film might encourage or discourage such identification, Bell and McIlroy begin to address questions of spectatorial pleasure and the active audience.

At best, *Resurrection Man* is read as a morality play or stylish genre film to be judged on aesthetic merits alone. At worst, it is read as a sectarian work that demonizes the Protestant community. The critical reception of the film, whether defensive or hostile in tone, does form a consensus which might, despite variations, be characterized as a preferred reading. In this dominant reading, the film presents a largely ahistorical psychoanalytic framework for violent pathologies. Adherence to generic convention is the explanation for both syntax and semantics. While the film can be judged for its lack of adequate subject representation, this lack is generally unqualified; rather it is posed as an absolute and then dismissed on the grounds that the film privileges other concerns. Audience pleasure in the film is explained by generic loyalty. Perhaps most essentially, the film – as well as the events it fictionalizes – is treated as a 'closed' text. There is little room for ambiguity in this reading, and little attention to the ambiguous elements of the text itself.

Limits of the preferred reading

The preferred readings of commemorative cinema are circulated by the critical discourse and invariably become a part of individual viewer experience. Equally, critics play off one another and engage with each other's readings as well as with the text itself. This may seem an obvious point, but it is an essential one, explaining, perhaps, the limited scope of these analyses. The identification of a liberal humanist agenda in the films, for example, is not unfounded, but it is also a reflection of the critics' own academic concerns and ideological leanings, concerns and leanings not universally shared by audiences.

The desire to position the films as closed texts leads to critical work that downplays ambiguity and resistance in favour of an alignment with one communal framework or another, providential or redemptive. In this way, the preferred reading tries to make clear and comprehensible narratives out of history. The resistance of these narratives by audiences begs further consideration of both viewer strategies and those aspects of the text which encourage resistance.

Chapter Three – Film Texts and the Cinema of Resistance

In the preceding chapters, I have claimed that commemorative cinema may represent a 'cinema of resistance' in its role as counter-memory construction and its openness to multiple oppositional readings. If commemorative cinema is a category of film which contains a narrative address and examination of contested events in recent history, the cinema of resistance is that further subsection of these films with an identifiable formal dimension, one which is structured around elements of ambiguity. By ambiguity, I mean here the refusal of stable or single meaning. These films are polysemic, positing multiple meanings in their disjunction between narrative and image and in their inclusion of a plurality of voices within the text. This ambiguity of form results in the blurring of the boundaries of personal and private, inclusion and exclusion, and distance and identification, and provides the space in which resistant readings can be performed. Audiences perform the resistant readings, but the films themselves both delimit possible readings and provide the necessary openness.

Creating a resistant text: the role of ambiguity

Gregory Currie defines the ambiguous narrative as one which intentionally raises a significant question or questions which it then self-consciously fails to answer. (Currie, 24) The "significant questions" raised by commemorative cinema would include those which have so far concerned critics and audiences; such questions as how events are to be memorialized, what the events of the narrative mean for society, how events can be explained in terms of cause and effect, or what we should understand about the players and the communities involved. In reading the films as providing single and coherent (albeit incorrect or

inconclusive) answers to these questions, critics have largely chosen to minimize formal and narrative ambiguities.

Ambiguity is a term most frequently associated with discussions of art cinema. The three films under analysis here - which might be simplistically classified as a melodrama, a genre film, and a docudrama – are generally not treated as art cinema, and I don't intend to suggest that such a shift in approach is necessary or warranted. I would, however, suggest that any discussion of ambiguity in commemorative cinema can be informed by the explanation of the function of ambiguity in art cinema.

David Bordwell has argued that the disjunctive aspects of art cinema (in contrast with the single harmonic diegesis of classical cinema) arise from the problematic union of objective realism, subjective realism, and authorial commentary. In effect, art cinema creates ambiguity when it attempts to simultaneously utilize a realist and an expressionist mode of address. In the end, the film 'hesitates' between the two: "uncertainties persist, but are understood as such, as obvious uncertainties." (*Narration...*, 212) This hesitation creates an opportunity for the reader to construct his or her own meaning.

Commemorative cinema masks its uncertainties through the surface adherence to models of classical and mainstream cinema. The ambiguity and corresponding hesitation is perhaps less 'obvious', but it is within this moment of hesitation that the active viewer may 'read against the grain' of these films. Moreover, it is perhaps within this moment of hesitation that mourning work may occur. An interesting corollary – even the use of similar language – is found in Patrick Grant's work, *Literature, Rhetoric and Violence in Northern Ireland*; Grant describes in

certain Northern Irish prose, and especially poetry, a quality he terms "contemplative hesitation". (*Literature, Rhetoric and Violence...,* 156). It is Grant's contention that contemplative hesitation offers the best opportunity for the working through of trauma.

The familiar argument about dominant cinema tells us that history can be explained through human psychological drives and comprehensible social forces. Philip Green explains that this dominant cinema "derives added weight from the fact that the primary enterprise of modern (but not modernist) storytelling, with its realistic social and psychological surfaces, linear narratives, sympathetic protagonists and emotionally satisfying endings...is implicitly ideological by virtue of its structure alone, without regard to the necessary ambiguities of any particular narrative content." (Green, 103). By calling attention to its own ambiguities, commemorative cinema requires and permits a more active viewership. The films discussed here, for example, complicate the notion of "realistic social and psychological surfaces" through their self-conscious engagement with contested events, demanding a re-reading with attention to the ambiguous elements and the complications of those surfaces.

The arguments over historical accuracy that surround these films are a symptom of this complication; what is understood to be a "realistic" depiction of events is by no means a shared understanding, and the very idea of objective realism is called into question. Because the films do not – in fact, cannot – assume a shared audience definition of historical truth, these surfaces become an immediate site of ambiguity, a shifting foundation of sand on which the narratives are built. The commemorative cinema uses isolated moments of subjective realism in counterpoint to expectations of objective representation. While narratives of commemorative cinema may or may not be linear in structure, the narrative of the events

depicted is understood to be unfinished. The imposition of a linear narrative is an arbitrary ordering of events which the viewer is encouraged to perceive as suspect. Protagonists are not sympathetic, or more accurately, protagonists are not unequivocally sympathetic. Each film presents focalizers who advocate contradictory responses and interpretations. *Resurrection Man* presents two protagonists, neither of whom might be considered "sympathetic" by any colloquial understanding of the term, and yet the film both invites and obstructs identification with the monstrous figures of Victor Kelly and Ryan. *Bloody Sunday* offers multiple points of identification, dividing sympathy amongst them in a manner that engenders instability and uncertainty. *Some Mother's Son* offers two protagonists in Annie and Kathleen, and encourages sympathetic readings of both, a seemingly untenable position for the viewer. As for the endings of these films, none would seem to provide the emotionally satisfying closure of classical cinema. The films' open endings – in each case, the larger social and moral concerns are unresolved – reflect the films' status as commemorative objects, both invoking the past and constructing the present.

Bloody Sunday

By treating the commemorative films as closed texts, critical readings downplay elements which permit a more open approach by viewers. The preferred reading of *Bloody Sunday* which arises from the promotion and criticism assumes that its form reduces the ambiguity of a contested moment of trauma. Reading *Bloody Sunday* as re-enactment rather than narrative enactment suggests an inclusive text which illuminates the 'truth' and guides the viewer to an unequivocal interpretation of a historical trauma. Emphasizing the documentarian aspirations of the work, this reading downplays the ambivalent nature of the film. In fact, the style and form operate to offer multiple points of resistance and interpretation.

Bloody Sunday's simultaneous appeal to the modes of melodrama and documentary both creates and disguises the essential ambiguity within. The invocation of documentary tropes, on examination, calls attention to the very limits of representation; at the same time, the employment of melodrama comments on the instability and insufficiency of the film's pretence to realism. Excessive focus on the 'realism' of the film shows a critical indifference to the interplay of other modes of address. *Bloody Sunday* uses a number of effects that are associated with a *cinema verité* style. Shaky handheld camerawork, unmotivated pans and zooms, naturalistic sound and lighting, nonclassical framing and obstructed point-of-view shots are used in conjunction with a grainy and desaturated film stock. At the same time, the narrative trajectory essentially follows a conventional model in its three-act structure and rising dramatic tension, aspects of melodrama permeate the film, and the sense of objective realism is offset by small, but key, moments of subjectivity.

The realism of *Bloody Sunday* has a counterpoint in the film's use of melodrama. If, in a typical melodrama, the excess of the visual style undermines the sentimental affect of the story, in *Bloody Sunday* the melodramatic elements of the narrative similarly undermine the semblance of realism. The personal and the political realms are not distinct or contained; rather, the film blurs these distinctions, most notably in Cooper's claim that he is marching "for" his relationship. The domestic subplots – Gerry and Hester's doomed relationship and Ivan and Frances' similarly coded romance – are underdeveloped and clichéd, more generic markers than synthesized parts of the narrative; their very excess seems a self-conscious recognition of the film's place within the wider frameworks of Northern Irish story-telling.

Melodrama, according to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, is centred around an element of hysteria, and it is in the moment of hysteria that "the realist representative convention breaks down." (Nowell-Smith, 272) In this light, the melodrama of *Bloody Sunday* may be seen as the expression of the ultimate collapse of a 'realistic' depiction of events. A documentary style inevitably fails to contain the hysteria brought on by the real historical trauma, and melodrama serves as the recognition of this failure, a failure illustrated by not what the film shows, but what it fails to show.

By limiting its coverage to a single day, *Bloody Sunday* removes the events from their wider historical context. As we have seen, this is a familiar criticism of fiction films made about Northern Ireland. In *Bloody Sunday*, this lack of context has two particular effects. First, it exposes the degree to which the film assumes viewer knowledge. Little attempt is made to provide the audience with background information or to explain the significance of players and deeds as they unfold. Second, and in direct relation to this first point, the lack of context allows space for the film to be understood very differently by individual viewers.

The critical readings of *Bloody Sunday*, when they acknowledge ambiguity at all, focus on the narrative ambiguity generated by what is not depicted onscreen. Specifically, one essential detail is unseen - who fired first. The first live rounds fired are heard but are not explained and their source is not shown; the 'mystery' of those shots – perhaps the central point of contention – provides some of the chaos and uncertainty which drives the action in the second act of the film. By leaving some doubt about the origin of those shots, *Bloody Sunday* allows viewers to continue with the film according to their own preconceived understanding,

accepting the narrative by fitting it into their own framework. The film projects doubt, which the committed viewer may ignore if desired, or exploit to meet his or her own needs and orientation.

Through its implicit acknowledgement of the subjective interpretation of events, *Bloody Sunday* calls the very concept of 'witnessing' into question. At the same time that it proposes vision as the source of knowledge, it reminds us that our own vision is always incomplete and subjective. Soldier 27, faced with the choice to assist in a cover-up or speak out against his fellow soldiers, insists "I saw what happened", to which his comrade replies with an alternative version of the day's events, concluding with "You *know* what happened, right?" Soldier 27 reluctantly accepts and repeats this version as truth. What one 'sees' and what one 'knows' and reiterates after the fact are not the same thing, and repetition in this case provides exculpating distance from the trauma. This scene is recalled at Cooper's final press conference, at which he insists "They were innocent. We were there." To the assembled journalists, Eamonn McCann cries "You saw it. You saw it. Go home and tell it." The viewer, of course, was "there" as well and yet his or her own version of the story contains gaps and uncertainties. Commemoration does not, then, guarantee an empirical 'truth', but the perpetuation of collective (mis)understandings.

These are not the only references to the breaches of viewer knowledge, however. The narrative uncertainty is echoed in the frequent use of fades, each lasting only a few seconds, throughout the film. The fades to black that punctuate *Bloody Sunday* serve not to transition between scenes and settings (where a straight cut is more often used), but *within* scenes, where, like jump cuts, they create disjunction and rupture. The blackouts do not serve to unify the

narrative, as some critics have suggested, but to disjoint. Just as the split narrative means that there are some details left unseen, these blackouts are points where audience vision is denied; literal representations of the 'unknowing' that occurs in relation to history, reminding the viewer of the limits to the representation. Trauma theorists have written of the 'black hole' of traumatic memory that "cannot be articulated within the structure of rational discourse". (Gomel, 163) Despite the preferred reading of the film as a complete representation, these blackouts (or black holes) seem at the same time to call our attention to the film's very incompleteness.

The blackouts offer moments of silence in opposition to the (over)spoken narrative, providing a sort of 'breathing room' from the clamour of the film. Visually, with its pans, obstructed composition, and aurally, with incessant telephones and overlapping dialogue, the film is oppressive; the blackouts provide dramatic silence. What is the effect of that silence? Felman suggests that such silence may function as "muted testimony" that makes the viewer aware of the victims of the trauma by their very absence; Gomel – among others – conversely argues that silence covers over the existence of the victim, denying their existence and specificity. (ibid, 164-165) These moments are too brief, perhaps, to be considered reflective, but they do create hesitation and invite contemplation.

If recourse to the models of melodrama or documentary is insufficient to account for the film's ambiguities, the notion of spectacle may provide some explanation of *Bloody Sunday*'s role as resistant, counter-memorial cinema. In his work *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory*, Nicholas Miller argues for a distinction between 'telling' histories and 'showing' histories. The earliest films about Irish history relied on 'showing' the spectacles of the past, rather than on

'telling' narratives. The eventual dominance of narrative filmmaking went hand-in-hand with a conservatism of historical perspective. Miller – who would seem to agree with the majority of critics that Northern Ireland lacks a strong oppositional cinema – uses Tom Gunning's arguments about the cinema of attractions to explain the role of spectacle within historical film, and his points seem especially applicable to the commemorative cinema identified here. An element of spectacle is always present in purportedly narrative films. While narrative strives to impose causality and order, to render comprehensible the chaos of history, "in spite of narrativity, the comfortable separation of viewer and history nevertheless breaks down, where the past suddenly occurs, and demands that the viewer undertake the complex and ambivalent task of memory-work." (Miller, 113) *Bloody Sunday*, like the early films Miller discusses, relies on 'showing'; even more, it relies on 'not showing'. Its use of spectacle has been mistaken for truth-telling. On the contrary, though, spectacle is used, in accordance with Miller's argument, to create a space for memory-work and the contemplative hesitation that may permit mourning.

The ambiguity engendered by the narrative form and the use of blackouts is complemented by the film's refusal to limit itself to a single central subject. The dominant structural device of the film, its intercutting between storylines, results in a polysemic text that offers a plurality of voices. Perspective is split between four groups of players, and the film shuttles between these four narratives – the British General Ford and his men, the Paratroopers on assignment, Ivan Cooper and his fellow march-organizers, and Gerry and his group of friends – intercutting to show the cross-purposes, misunderstandings and mounting tensions. *Bloody Sunday* opens and closes with parallel press conferences, and throughout, commentary on the situation is delivered by the leaders of the respective camps. This creates the opportunity for multiple

points of viewer identification; the assumption that viewers will orient themselves exclusively in respect to Cooper (as most critics do assume) is a tenuous one. The multiplicity of voices and viewpoints not only permits each player to articulate his own position, but also provides some endorsement of those positions. Typically, melodramatic texts depict a victimized perspective; *Bloody Sunday* invokes such a perspective, but problematizes it by granting screen time and authority to conflicting positions as well. Rather than espousing a Manichean view of a universe divisible into 'good' and 'evil' or victim' and 'oppressor', the film presents a more nuanced moral diegesis. Reading Cooper as the heroic moral centre and Ford as the villainous adversary is an overly simplistic approach. While it is true that Cooper is the primary narrator, he is also an unreliable narrator. The viewer is aware of Cooper's own gaps in knowledge; moreover, his motives are proclaimed to be as much personal as political. Cooper is an 'outsider'; his own ability to speak for the community is called into question. Certainly there is room for viewers to shift identification, in a resistant reading, on to another player. Moreover, the film emphasizes the heterogeneity of perspectives through its presentation of dissent within communities. None of the communities created by the film's structure is unified or homogenous; each is fractured and contentious.

The preferred reading fixes *Bloody Sunday* as a cautionary tale about the futility of violence, and yet the film's closing does not privilege such an interpretation. Cooper's idealism has been shattered; asked what he would say to those who would join the IRA, Cooper responds, "I feel very ill-equipped to do any preaching to them after today." The very last line in the film is given not to Cooper, but to a victim's relative, who angrily insists "we will not rest until justice is done." Following on the image of a line of young men waiting to receive guns, this call for 'justice' does not suggest legislative justice so much as frontier style vengeance. This sequence

leaves the "message" of the film in doubt, suggesting that a violent response is not only tactically justified, but morally acceptable.

At the same time, the ending can also be seen to invoke Unionist anxieties about current and contemporary British policy changes. General Ford, having insisted on an aggressive stance towards the protestors, leaves Brigadier MacLellan and the local constabulary to deal with the fallout, saying that, after all, "my role of course was only as observer." The remark might well resonate with those in the Unionist community who see recent British policy (such as the removal of troops, softening of rhetoric, or Saville Inquiry) as abandonment and hypocrisy; or with those Nationalists who perceive the British establishment as insensitive towards their own position as 'victims' of Unionist intransigence. In this way, the ending plays off the real concerns of the two communities in the present day, and offers possible avenues of identification for individuals of varying perspective.

Resurrection Man

Despite criticism and concern over the problematic 'preferred meaning' of *Resurrection Man*, viewers from both Unionist and Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland, as well as a wider audience identifying with neither community, have been able to find sources of pleasure in the film. What elements of the text might account for this? As discussed in the preceding chapter, the film's critics have generally explained *Resurrection Man* in terms of genre, particularly the horror genre. Certainly the film's use of horror convention is one explanation. But along with *Resurrection Man*'s play with generic form, it is a highly ambiguous text which undermines any single coherent reading and allows divergent understandings.

Resurrection Man creates moments of hesitation through its disjunctions, hesitation which the viewer may exploit to create meanings not predicted by the critical discourse. On the one hand, the film incorporates the tropes of crime photography, TV and print news reportage, docudrama, and the social problem film to create an expectation of objective realism, an expectation enhanced by viewer awareness of the real life events that inspired the film. On the other hand, the film plays with conventions of Gothic horror, religious iconography, and hallucination to add a heavy layer of subjective realism. The 'realistic social and psychological surface' of the film is troubled by its allegorical and fantastic dimensions. The narration is fractured and circular, and cause and effect relationships muddied. Identification with a clear protagonist is problematized. The ending achieves little closure or satisfaction – although Victor has been killed, the future of the film's other characters is uncertain; we have also seen the literal destruction of domestic space by violence. Finally, the film's seeming appeal to irony adds yet another layer of ambiguity and increases the contemplative hesitation of the text.

The work is one of a small number of films which confine their diegeses to the Protestant community of Belfast. In the context of the perception that narrative cinema has largely neglected the experiences of the Protestant Unionist viewer, the film may arguably be seen as an attempt to correct this neglect, even as a work of counter-memory in its ostensible narration of events from the perspective of the community held responsible for the actions of the Shankhill Butchers. Rather than a story about the victims of Loyalist violence, or about the forces of British law and order, this is a story about the perpetrators and those who live with them. Confronting one version of history, in which the Protestant Unionist is seen to be absent, the film offers up a collection of Unionist voices. It also makes some attempt to justify

the violent events as symptomatic of the community's own victimization. As Victor's mother, Dorcas, explains it, all Victor wanted was to be loyal to the Crown, but "he's suffered…he was in pain because of life." In this way, the film appeals to the myth of the siege and the sense of betrayal by the British Crown, which - it is implied – has let Victor down and driven him to psychosis.

This aspect of the film, ignored by critics, is made still more apparent in the original novel from which McNamee adapted his screenplay. Victor's uncanny ability to recognize the streets of Belfast (in several sequences, he closes his eyes and names the streets upon which the gang is cruising) is not only a way of setting the film in a specific and familiar locale for domestic viewers, nor simply a way of ascribing a supernatural dimension to Victor, but makes direct reference to place names with symbolic weight. "Palestine Street. Balaklava Street. The names of captured ports, lost battles", writes McNamee, "forgotten outposts held against inner darkness. There is a sense of collapsed trade and accumulate decline." (McNamee, 3). Victor's first appearance at the start of the film would seem to support a reading of Victor as defensive killer. The opening sequence shows a boy, later appearing as the young Victor, aiming a gun directly at the camera/audience. The camera then pans quickly and in a tracking shot, moves in on the figure of the adult Victor, before cutting to another sequence altogether. When the film cuts back to this shot of Victor, he raises a gun and, in an identical fashion as his younger self, points it directly at the camera – in effect, returning fire.

If betrayal and victimization are offered as possible rationales for Victor's actions, another explanation is offered by the revelation that Victor's father was a Catholic. While critics have perceived this as a dramatic device that provides psychological motivation for Victor's anger –

an anger we are presumably to see as pathological – it also serves as a possible source of the monstrous in Victor. In a sense, his 'Catholic blood' is the taint that makes Victor evil. It may also be a strategy that makes Victor 'not Protestant' at the same time he is 'not Catholic'. Viewers identifying strongly with either group may then reject both Victor and the blame attached to his actions (as well as those actions' historical equivalents).

Yet another possibility offered by *Resurrection Man* is that Victor's violence is an inevitable product of the dystopian city into which he has been born; less a product of religion or political identity than environment. (This may be an appealing interpretation, especially, to younger domestic audiences seeking alternative explanations that lie outside of the Nationalist/Unionist framework, or to those seeking to explain the film in socio-economic rather than strictly religious or ethnic terms.) This ambiguity about the cause of Victor's monstrous nature – does it stem from a Freudian mother complex, from his Catholic mutation, or from the community in which he lives? – allows multiple readings of the film's political orientation and would seem to provide avenues of access and identification for audiences.

The framing device of the film casts it as a eulogy for Victor, if not for his victims. Voiceovers by other characters reflect on Victor's persona and speculate as to his motives. Rather than explaining the onscreen events, though, these voiceover segments are separate and autonomous channels within the film. They do not directly correspond to the visuals they accompany, and are often placed over or lead into events that the speaker could not have witnessed or have intimate knowledge of. This disjunction functions both to comment on the film's representation of history (as something shaped by the selection of which stories are to

be told) and also to provide a vacillation between voices and viewpoints within the narrative itself.

Structuring the film in this way permits Evans and McNamee to present competing voices. Dorcas, Heather, and Ryan each are given the status of narrator at various times. While it is Dorcas who dominates the voiceover – we begin with, return to, and end with her voice on the soundtrack, perhaps suggesting her equally dominant influence over Victor – the fracturing and divided narration prevents a simple acceptance or rejection of Dorcas' version. Victor's own voice is, surprisingly, absent in the film. He is a largely silent onscreen presence, and his motives and emotions are left unexplained, to be pieced together from the claims of the film's competing focalizers. The camera does on occasion adopt Victor's point of view, principally at the moment of murder. The first instance in which the camera shares Victor's point of view is as the child Victor watches *Public Enemy* while listening to the description of the death of a Catholic girl (once again, sound and image are disjointed). This moment predicts the other appearances of Victor's subjectivity, as when he cuts the throat of an unseen victim; the blood splashes up onto the mirror and washes down as Victor's own reflected face appears in its path. In these cases, Victor is identifying with a victim, substituting his own visage for the victim's or voyeuristically studying Cagney's face onscreen, and the viewer is led to make a similar identification. This ambivalence – is Victor a gangster-hero like Cagney or a victim for slaughter – recalls the opening sequence again, positioning Victor as both perpetrator and target. This ambiguity about Victor's role makes him an unstable point of reference and opens his character to a more complicated understanding, one that exists to be exploited or negotiated by viewers according to their own view of the Loyalist subject.

The structural parallels between Ryan and Victor are obvious. The film uses intercutting, graphic matches and sound bridges to transition between scenes of the two men, emphasizing their similar proclivities and downward trajectories. One of the premises behind the prevailing criticism of the film is that viewers are faced with the option of identifying with, or refusing to identify with, Ryan and/or Victor. This assumption, while not incorrect, may be incomplete, undervaluing the ability of viewers to identify with other figures in the narrative; moreover, I believe that the text complicates the issue by its refusal to provide straightforward points of identification for the viewer.

On the surface, it would seem that the journalist Ryan represents the film's central protagonist and source of identification. Alternately (and in keeping with some theoretical approaches to the horror spectator), the monstrous Victor might be a source of identification. Yet again, there is the possibility of identification with the Catholic victims of the Resurrection Men. On closer examination though, none of these provides a complete or satisfying site of orientation.

Possible structural explanations for this have been offered: the polyphony of narration, for instance; the engendering of distance through generic play; the lack of sympathy for psychologically unstable and violent protagonists. We can also connect the lack of stable identification to the film's refusal of Ryan's agency. He is a passive character whose drives seem opaque even to himself. Even the beating of his wife, revealed through incomplete and disconnected flashback sequences, is presented as a clouded, surreal incident. Ryan himself is unsure what has happened and takes no control over his actions. Ryan is finally forced into action at the film's climax: he goes to confront Victor, and failing, is asked to shoot a brutalized Darkie. The sequence is filmed not from Ryan's point of view, but first from

Victor's, then Darkie's, and finally from a third, unmotivated angle, that of a concealed and detached onlooker. Victor is awkwardly framed in the foreground, Ryan in the rear. When Victor leaves, Darkie asks Ryan to kill him. Ryan raises the gun, shakes his head, and the camera cuts away. The killing is not shown, and the possibility (later refuted) remains that Ryan has in fact made a different choice. Even when it is announced that Darkie is dead, Ryan's reasoning is unclear – is this a mercy killing, or the moment in which Ryan embraces his murderous, Victor-like, nature?

The film opens with titles that ground it in historical fact – "January 1975", "...in a divided city..." – but also deny specificity by positioning the film, before it has even begun, as a work of genre fiction – "the streets are in turmoil...gangsters draw boundaries in blood." Right away, the spectator has access to two modes by which to make sense of the narrative. The play with and between genres is not simply a way of avoiding 'real' historical or political context, as some critics have argued, but a way of offering viewers more possibilities. Attempts to read the film via generic markers and polarities (victim and monster, order and chaos, hero and villain, authority and lawlessness...) will ultimately fall short. Generic conventions are combined and exaggerated to create instability.

Resurrection Man's overdetermined qualities increase the ambiguity of the film. This is perhaps best illustrated by the scene in which Victor and McClure meet in McClure's office. The room is decorated with a Union Jack and pictures of King Billy; McClure wears an S.S. officer's cap; 'A Green and Pleasant Land' plays on the radio as McClure gives an impassioned defence of Nazi ideology. Linking Loyalism with Nazism and homosexuality (McClure caresses Victor and the men discuss erotic photographs of German soldiers), the mise-en-scene and

exaggerated dialogue create the possibility of ironic distance. This is on the surface neither an endorsement nor a criticism of Loyalist extremism, but Loyalism as slightly absurd theatre. The scene encapsulates the irony present in the film as a whole, the way in which "...two meanings, the 'said' and the 'unsaid' rub together..." (Hutcheon) *Resurrection Man* exploits the rhetoric and symbols of rightwing extremism at the same time that it implies criticism and an emptying-out of those symbols.

Hutcheon's discussion of irony and nostalgia, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern", points to another function of irony here. Irony, which calls the process and feasibility of representation into question, more specifically draws attention to the futility of representing the past, and to the way in which the medium of film both reconstructs history and its inevitable failure to adequately construct that history in the present. Critical distance and affective engagement are both invoked. While it may be a stretch to read this scene of *Resurrection Man* as a deliberate statement on the nature of commemoration, the excess certainly opens up the representation of Loyalism to a multiplicity of interpretations by engaged viewers. Hutcheon points out that irony is less an intrinsic quality of a work than a response to a work. (ibid) Irony cannot exist, without a subject to read the work ironically. I believe this is a critical point in regard to Evans' film. Critics have tended to receive the film more or less at face value, seeing allegory perhaps, but not irony. The film's frequent consideration alongside films such as *Trainspotting* and *Pulp Fiction* (works mentioned specifically in the films' marketing and packaging as well) suggest that studying the film through the filter of irony might be a productive approach, and it seems to be an approach available to and embraced by audiences.

Some Mother's Son

Some Mother's Son shares many of the same concerns and uncertainties as *Bloody Sunday* and *Resurrection Man*, concerns and uncertainties which define the 'cinema of resistance'. It is essential to approach it as an open text that offers multiple possibilities of orientation and understanding to individual viewers. Like the other commemorative films discussed here, it uses multiple perspectives and contradiction to demonstrate the limits of representation and to complicate audience identification. In doing so, it reveals an implicit ambivalence about its own explicit meaning, allowing for negotiated readings by committed viewers.

Some Mother's Son is positioned explicitly as a work of Nationalist counter-memory; the struggle for engaged viewers is whether to read it as an endorsement of a radical politics or a liberal politics, accepting Annie's or Katherine's as the more tenable position. The preferred reading, unsurprisingly, favours Katherine's perspective, and approaches the film as a closed text that unequivocally guides the viewer towards that understanding. Audiences are thus expected to either accept or reject that reading; the possibility of negotiation is largely ignored. However, *Some Mother's Son* compellingly illustrates how formal and narrative ambiguities create a space for resistance. Through its engagement with melodrama, its problematizing of viewer identification and subject position, and its challenge to dominant representations, the film offers the further possibility of contemplative hesitation.

Within *Some Mother's Son*, the individual and collective dimensions of memory and history are collapsed. The real historical events are accompanied by, but not secondary to, the maternal melodrama of sacrifice. The film approaches the questions of commemoration and representation through the private realm and explores the way in which individual choice and

trauma impact not only the events of history, but the way these are memorialised and transmitted to maintain community. In doing so, *Some Mother's Son* asserts that the personal is political, and – just as importantly – that the political is personal. In the critical discourse, the decision to privilege the experience of individuals is problematic; it is variously claimed that its "melodrama subsumes the political landscape" (Flynn) and that the characters are so "symbolic and universal [that they] have no life of their own." (Barton, 45). For some critics, the film's melodrama masks its political agenda and renders the film inherently dishonest. For others, the use of melodrama simply makes the film unattractive to audiences.

On the surface, George's film appears to comply with at least some aspects of Green's model of the dominant cinema, possessing realistic social and psychological surfaces, a linear narrative, and sympathetic protagonists. *Some Mother's Son* is fairly conventional in its aesthetic choices. Its characterizations seem to encourage a reading of the film as domestic melodrama. The film follows two paralleled women, Annie and Kathleen. The women are different in class, temperament, and political orientation, yet share common social positions as mothers and Catholics. When the prisoners lapse into comas while on hunger strike, Annie allows her son Frank to die, presumably believing that she is respecting his views and aiding the political struggle; Kathleen removes her son Gerard from the strike. Kathleen's decision has been widely interpreted in the critical discourse as the narrative triumph of universal maternal love over political ideology. This straightforward reading, though, is problematized by the film's shift in perspective and by visual cues that keep the political nature of the work always in the foreground.

As the preferred reading of *Bloody Sunday* focuses excessively on the documentary pretensions of the film, and the preferred reading of *Resurrection Man* on the adoption of a horror aesthetic, the preferred reading of *Some Mother's Son* treats the engagement with melodrama too simplistically. In fact, the ambivalence which emerges from this meshing of historical fact and melodrama contributes to the film's status as a vehicle for commemoration and resistance. The incomplete recourse to a melodramatic mode blurs the distinction between political and personal and provides a challenge to viewers by simultaneously distancing and inviting identification. *Some Mother's Son* makes an effort to bring the viewer closer to the historical events by emphasizing individual relationships and encouraging identification with sympathetic protagonists. Simultaneously, though, the film self-consciously speaks to issues of representation and distances the viewer through contradictions and reversals.

From the opening sequence, documentary footage in which Margaret Thatcher pledges to bring order to Northern Ireland, the images of private *and* public history are mediated and controlled. As important as having a voice, being heard and seen, is seeing and hearing, and the transmission and withholding of information and images is a central narrative concern, one that is embodied in the figure of Kathleen. She begins by knowing nothing of her son's involvement in terrorism, of the political machinations, or even of the most common catch phrases (Annie must explain the meaning of the Nationalist slogan *"Tiocfaidh ar lá"*, for example); she becomes the conduit of information within the film. This takes literal form when she carries, in her mouth, a smuggled message for the IRA, a message she insists on reading herself in an act of resistance. Because of the control over the transmission of information and images, the mothers are reliant on the mediated discourse of the visitors' room partition, clandestine communiqués, and news reports. The distance created between

the women and 'the truth' of events is a reminder of the similar mediation performed by the film itself, and by all representations of traumatic history.

This point about the limits of representation is most clearly illustrated by what Terry George has referred to as the "missing image" of the film, that of the hunger striker's body. (George, "*Some Mother's Son*, letter to the editor, 15) While the hunger strikers are given screen time and presence, and the iconic images of the 'Blanketmen' are prioritised, the starving bodies themselves are neither fetishized nor confronted; they are concealed by blankets and kept at a distance. The death of Annie's son Frank occurs entirely off screen. The death of Bobby Sands, so central to the Nationalist mythology of the Hunger Strikes, is depicted in the film, but as a heavily mediated and distanced occurrence. The deathbed scene is intercut with scenes of the crowd that gathers outside for a prayer vigil; the moment of Sands' death is represented by a close-up of an EEG flatline, and by a high angle long shot of the crowd as they receive the news. The death is a symbolic moment, not an intimate one. This emphasis on the reception of the event, rather than its visceral reality, can also be seen in Gerard's description of the 'dirty protest'. Elsewhere in the film, the protest is referenced by the omnipresent face masks worn by the guards and by the smoke of fumigation, but none of the reality is shown as Gerard narrates the events to Kathleen in the visitation room. The filth and excrement covered walls are present only in her imagination; what is driven home is not the conditions of the hunger strikers, but Kathleen's reaction to the story. This not only points to what cannot be represented, the inability to recreate the smells and horrific details of such a scene, but to the way that historical narratives transform individual sufferers into symbols.

I have argued that polysemy is a critical quality of the resistant, commemorative cinema. Like *Resurrection Man* and *Bloody Sunday*, *Some Mother's Son* offers a multiplicity of voices. The narrative shifts between the stories of the mothers, the prisoners, and the officials in the British Foreign Office. The perspectives of the British government, Catholic Church, constitutional nationalists, IRA, and the hunger strikers themselves are allowed some expression through the film. These narratives are not equally privileged, nor are they consistently presented. In particular, the Protestant community is largely unrepresented in *Some Mother's Son*, an erasure of perspective so glaring that it seems not an oversight, but a carefully constructed absence. Accepting the film as counter-memory, it is possible to see this absence as a strategic attempt to limit the narrative range, making the film a story not about Northern Ireland, but about the specific experience of the Catholic community during the hunger strikes. The awkwardness of such an approach only increases the film's ambiguous appeal, as this absence becomes another sort of 'black hole' in the centre, begging viewers to question the text's completeness.

The internal conflicts and heterogeneity of views within communities is also shown (with the notable exception of the hunger strikers, who are presented as a unified community of willing sacrifice; any conflict amongst the men is negated or displaced onto the families). This fracturing of communities adds a layer of ambivalence to the rigid representations of communities on offer in so much of Irish and Northern Irish cinema, and also reflects discomforts and dissensions within Northern Irish communities about their own identities. This is evident in *Some Mother's Son* not only in the most obvious conflict between Annie and Kathleen, but in the film's depiction of the Catholic Church and the British officials involved in the hunger strikes.

Narrative weight is not equally distributed between Annie and Kathleen. Through screen time, gaze, and point of view, the spectator is encouraged to identify with Kathleen, whereas Annie serves as a double or foil. More than just the "emotional centre" of the film (*Irish Film*, 76), Kathleen acts as a surrogate and focalizer for the audience, as in the pub scene in which Annie 'explains' to Kathleen the political circumstances and symbols she would most assuredly already know. Kathleen is given power over the gaze as Annie is not, and her character undergoes change while Annie's remains static. The audience experiences events subjectively through Kathleen's perceptions, as when she watches politicians argue her son's fate: the sound retreats and events move into slow motion as she withdraws emotionally.

This identification with Kathleen no doubt feels comfortable for the spectator; Kathleen's decision to save her son despite the political ramifications is a highly sympathetic (and melodramatically coded) one. George, however, upsets this neat identification in the film's final shots, creating a sense of ambiguity that shifts the spectator's position. As a despairing Kathleen signs the paper to remove her son from the strike, her face obscured by shadow, the suggestion is of failure, not relief. Afterwards, Kathleen is led away by guards, then framed alone in a medium close-up, behind bars. The shot completely personifies the government policy towards the nationalist community (stated by Margaret Thatcher in the film's opening documentary footage): Isolation, Criminalization, and Demoralization. The visual impact undermines the seeming endorsement of and identification with Kathleen's position.

Through their shared experience, the two women arrive at acceptance of each other's perspective: "I had to do it, " Kathleen explains; Annie replies "Someone had to." This

acceptance, though, is underscored by the knowledge that their collective understanding is incomplete: "you're lucky you have a choice", Annie tells Kathleen in justification of her own decision not to save her son, a statement that emphasizes the distance between the two. The film, by this last-minute shift, also encourages a collective approach to mourning and memory; Annie is not alone despite her loss, but is part of a community of other mourners. Meanwhile, Kathleen's isolation is driven home by the film's final shots: standing alone, she looks out to sea in a sequence which through its music and composition recalls an earlier exile, that of Kathleen's emigrating daughter. Kathleen's contrary insistence on individual action and reconciliation over the communal has left her not a mourner, but a victim.

Chapter Four – Film Audiences and the Resistance of Cinema

I began this thesis by arguing that resistance in and to cinema about Northern Ireland is greater than the standard criticism has allowed. I have tried to establish the preferred readings constructed by critics, putting the films into the context of the discourse which dominates their analysis. In the preceding chapter, I have argued that the films themselves are ambiguous and open texts constituting a cinema of resistance. I would like to turn now to the other side of the equation, the resistance of cinema.

The claim for a resistance of cinema is predicated on the assumption that viewers are active participants in meaning creation, and the observation that there is an identifiable level of domestic audience dissatisfaction with the representations and readings on offer. The ideas of spectatorship and resistance which have developed in other areas of film studies have relevance to Northern Irish cinema as well, and suggest both the limits and possibilities of viewer resistance. Applying these concepts to the specific case of Northern Irish cinema audiences shows that the commemorative cinema presents not only a particularly potent site of resistance, but an opportunity for productive renegotiation of identity and memory.

The case for a resistance of cinema

On what grounds can it be claimed that the audiences for these films are, in fact, resistant? Audience reception of Northern Irish cinema generally, let alone of the specific group of films discussed here, has not been explored. Clearly there is a danger in talking about strategies of resistance when that resistance has been inadequately measured. However, anecdotal evidence

certainly suggests that the critical readings are not in sync with the popular reception. Audiences *are* dissatisfied, and yet *are* finding points of access, as can be inferred by not just box office or rental figures, or the continued selection of these films at community festivals and screenings, but by more intangible evidence. Even a quick survey of the various internet forums and message boards reveals a more complex relationship with the films. Viewers are not only dissatisfied with the representations on offer, but they are constructing resistant readings, using identifiable strategies which have clear parallels to those observed in other areas of audience study. Moreover, it seems not unreasonable to take what is known about audience behaviour and extrapolate these findings to the particular case of Northern Irish cinema reception.

What audience studies can show us about the resistance of cinema

The notion of the passive and undifferentiated viewer is no longer widely accepted. The theories of Hall, Morley, Eco and others have provided the basis for a number of audience studies that reposition the viewer in an active relationship with the text. Researchers have illustrated the usefulness of audience studies in challenging our assumptions about the powers of the cinematic text in particular and have given teeth to psychoanalytic approaches by providing qualitative (and, more rarely, quantitative) evidence of how actual viewers respond to specific texts. These studies have been primarily concerned with gendered spectatorship and fandom, but the findings of these studies have wider application, suggesting much about spectatorship, identity construction, and resistance.

Theories of spectatorship have been used as a way of approaching identity issues, most notably in regard to the female spectator. Brigid Cherry's study of women and horror films is one of a

number of studies that challenges the once-dominant theories of female spectatorship, proposing that women actually engage with the films in a more active manner than previously supposed. Assessing women's attraction and response to horror films, Cherry found that women expressed a preference for certain types of horror, emphasizing the storyline and the relationships between characters. Women also emphasized elements of eroticism and emotion in the films; the pleasure they derived was different from that ascribed to men. Women often expressed sympathy with the monster and its isolation, identifying not with the victimized heroine but with the monster – taking possession of the gaze. Cherry also discusses the 'pretended response'. Consciously or unconsciously, she argues, both male and female viewers express their reactions in ways that conform to socially accepted gender traits. Cherry's study shows the ability of viewers to ignore or reinterpret aspects of the text that are difficult to reconcile with the audience's pre-existing beliefs or sense of self. Moreover, it suggests that viewers are able to change their viewing position by identifying with characters in the narrative other than the ostensible hero or heroine. Finally, the participants clearly engage in film-going as a social process: enjoyment of the film experience comes in part from the opportunity to reconfirm social identity.

Cherry's study shows female viewers using the films to confirm their own pre-existing identities. Thomas Austin's study of viewing practices and gender identity reveals similar use of the film texts to negotiate social roles, and further emphasizes the self-consciousness of viewer strategies. Austin's study focused on young heterosexual men and their discourses about the film *Basic Instinct*. As the major reason they choose to see the film, men cited the marketing of *Basic Instinct* as a sexually explicit film, and their responses largely focused on the sexual appeal of the women in the film. Men distinguished the film from 'porn', however, on

the basis of its production values, plot and stars. While women viewers (in letters to Austin as well as in the public discourse) described the female protagonist as strong and powerful, the men in Austin's study tended to ignore this and described the character in aesthetic and sexual terms; further, men sought to position the female characters as sexual objects rather than objects of narrative agency. Austin suggests that the aggressive female poses a threat to men's preconceived notions and that by objectifying the woman, this threat is removed. In this way, the act of watching "effectively reinforces certain viewer dispositions". (Austin, p. 151) Importantly, the men who participated in the study showed self-consciousness about their responses. They sought to identify themselves with appropriate sexual behaviour by distinguishing between 'good' (i.e., consensual) sex and 'bad' (i.e., violent) sex portrayed in the film. Moreover, the men used the act of discussing the film to continue that self-identification, both to assert their masculinity within a group and to legitimize their response by comparing it to that of others. Austin points out that men employed the text to meet both private needs (sexual enjoyment and voyeurism) and public needs (defining membership in a group).

This quality of self-awareness is discussed by Annette Hill as the "shared knowledge of appropriate responses". (Hill, 176) Her study of film violence further articulates the concept. Focus groups of men and women were asked to discuss their engagement with extremely violent popular films. Participants were also asked questions that required them to recollect their own reactions in the theatre, as well as the reactions of other audience members. Watching film violence, according to Hill, is a "risky" activity, as well as a social activity; viewers actively choose to participate in an activity that society labels dangerous or undesirable. At the same time, viewers understand that there are 'appropriate' (socially accepted) and 'inappropriate' (deviant) responses to watching violent films. Accordingly, Hill's subjects were

highly aware of the responses of other individuals. When speaking of particular film experiences, the collective response contributed to the individual's level of satisfaction. For some, the social experience of watching the film with other people took priority over the narratives of the films themselves. Just as the men in Austin's study used their conversation about the film to present their behaviour as appropriate, the participants in Hill's study seemed to use discourse to present themselves as intelligent and sensitive viewers by denying their own susceptibility to the violent messages presented in the text. This allowed them to express belonging with one group – the discerning and intelligent – while distancing themselves from another – the sick and twisted or overly susceptible. Viewers not only used discourse to identify themselves as part of a group, but also tested personal identities by considering a variety of reactions to the film. Some participants, engaging in this practice, explained their interest in the film as a trial of nerves or an attempt to see if they could 'stomach' the violence. Finally, the participants in Hill's study showed awareness of social factors in shaping their responses. They used social and cultural labels such as gender, age, race or class to explain and justify their own responses or to understand the responses of others.

Hill's concept of 'shared knowledge' is further demonstrated by Jackie Stacey's investigation of audience memory, and discourse. Stacey describes the related phenomenon of "double voiced discourse". (Stacey, 29) By this she means the self-aware stance that viewers take when describing their relationship to a text. Stacey studied female filmgoers who identified themselves as fans of female Hollywood stars. Women were asked to recall their experiences going to the cinema in the 1940's and 1950's. The elderly women spoke about their perception of the stars, their memories of film narratives and the circumstances under which they attended the films. Stacey's participants have a strong personal investment in their

identification with the star. Articulating individual response opens the viewer to criticism; the women in Stacey's study anticipated criticisms, and went on to defend against them, pre-emptively. To avoid social ostracization and receive validation, Stacey surmises, the viewer may offer explanations and justifications for their response. Viewers also reconstruct remembered responses; when recounting their memories of film-going, participants aligned themselves with a group, such as their friends or other fans. Their accounts emphasized the social event of going to the film over the text itself. Stacey suggests that this sort of discourse uses memory as a way of preserving (if only in the mind) social bonds, bonds created or reinforced by the original act of reception are reaffirmed through the discourse of communal as well as individual memory.

As the above audience studies have established, film-going is a social process that encompasses audience discourse and audience participation. Martin Barker explains that process as twofold. Audiences are aware of film as a constructed text. Furthermore, audiences are aware of their own and others' responses to that text. Barker and Kate Brooks studied film audiences and their relationship to the movie *Judge Dredd*, interviewing viewers and analysing the patterns of discourse that emerged. Barker's conclusions concur with those of the studies already mentioned, finding that audiences use other viewers as a way of strategically positioning themselves and defining individual identities by judging them against the projected identities of others. Barker has identified three elements to this process. First, a viewer interprets the discourse of others in ways that correspond with his own ideas, either validating these ideas or confirming membership to a group. Much of Barker's analysis is devoted to the nature of the participants' talk about film-going. Talking about films, he points out, is a significant part of the experience as a whole. Besides providing pleasure in social interaction and allowing the

viewer to demonstrate social competence, discussion of the film helps viewers negotiate conflicts between their own ideas and those they perceive in the text. Moments of contradiction or ambivalence in the text provided a foundation for group discussion. Just as Austin and Stacey found that viewers used shared knowledge to create or perpetuate social bonds, Barker finds that participants in the *Judge Dredd* study used filmic references, such as lines of dialogue or comparison with the comic book, to create a common group language. These served as a sort of secret handshake that reconfirmed a sense of group belonging while excluding non-members. Like Austin, Cherry, Stacey and Hill, Barker finds that viewers are sensitive to anticipated criticism of their responses and engage in what Barker calls "disciplinary discourse." (Barker, 68-69)

In the second element of the social process, the viewer chooses a viewing position and his response to the text itself. In the case of the *Judge Dredd* viewers, this position was based largely on how closely the film met with the preconceptions and ideals held by the viewer. It was also a strategic choice based on the response of others in the audience and in the viewer's social group. The participants were again highly aware of the collective response to the film; Barker explains that viewers 'play a role' by choosing a strategic position that meets both social and individual needs.

The third element identified by Barker is commitment. The viewing position taken depends at least in part on the level of commitment the viewer makes to the text. At the lowest level, that of a casual or disinterested viewer, an individual is more inclined to simply receive the text passively. With higher levels of commitment comes greater expectation and greater criticism as well as more resistance to the supposed messages of the text. Viewers that have a high level

of commitment are those who have closely aligned their own values or experiences with those they perceive in the text. This is consistent with other research on fans, such as that done by Annette Kuhn or Jackie Stacey. Barker finds evidence of this in Judge Dredd fans who express possessiveness over the text, as when participants in his study complained about the perceived misappropriation of the Judge Dredd narrative by Hollywood. Fans have created a personal identification with the work, in this case the original comics, and feel they have legitimate claim over how the text is interpreted by others.

Barker's findings are illustrative of the way audiences create a discourse around the text; the work of Henry Jenkins more explicitly relates audience behaviour to the options and ambiguities available within the texts. Jenkins uses Michel de Certeau's notion of 'textual poaching' to explain how communities of fans appropriate and re-read television shows to meet their own interests, salvaging what they find pleasurable in the texts. Again, Jenkins observes that viewers are highly conscious of their relationship to others in their social group and make sense of the narrative through interaction with other fans. His study finds that fans – viewers with a high level of commitment and sense of ownership over the text – use particular viewing strategies and interpretive practices. The viewers in his study exploited the gaps and excesses of the narration or form of the shows, engaged in speculation to fill in missing narrative information, and used the shows themselves as impetus for the production of new cultural products and other texts. The way the viewers engaged with the texts was highly subjective, drawing on parallels to their own life experiences and to the meta-text created through the community discourse.

Perhaps the most significant finding of Jenkins' study is that the audience members engaged in a strategy of 'double viewing'. Viewers are able to shift between two differing positions in relation to the text, one which privileges the fictional world and judges the work according to its generic compliance and melodramatic appeal, and one which privileges the real world, gauging the work's adherence to personal and collective memory of actual events and its compatibility with existing meta-narratives. Jenkins attempts to account for the ambivalence between distanciation and emotional appeal (an ambivalence notable in the commemorative cinema discussed here) through recourse to the double viewing model. Whereas a Brechtian model, of the sort endorsed by McLoone, Hill, et al., argues for distanciation as a necessary tool of resistance, Jenkins argues that "emotional closeness" serves to permit greater possession of the text by viewers. While Jenkins does not explicitly make the point, it seems clear that this possession of the text may provide a basis for resistance.

From these studies, certain principles emerge which can help to anticipate and explain the relationship of domestic viewers to Northern Ireland's commemorative cinema.

- Viewers use the acts of film-going, discussing films, and remembering film-going to strengthen social bonds and to establish or confirm membership in groups. They – both consciously and unconsciously – use group identification to justify or categorize responses.
- Viewers use these same acts to establish or confirm their personal beliefs and sense of self.
- Viewers selectively express their responses to film texts and show awareness of cultural constraints, choosing their relationship to a text in limited ways.
- Viewers are not confined to a fixed subject position, but are capable of selectively identifying with onscreen representations.
- Personal experience modifies a viewer's relationship to a text. Viewers use extra-textual and inter-textual references to inform their readings. They selectively use elements of a text to reconfirm what they already know, feel or believe.
- Viewers ignore or reinterpret elements of film texts to sustain self-image.
- Viewers have varying levels of commitment to film texts and to social contexts.
- Viewers engage in a strategy of double viewing.

- Viewers use the moments of rupture and ambiguity within the narrative as an opportunity for intervention.
- Viewers are capable of resisting the intended or perceived messages of a text.

These principles are borne out by studies particular to Northern Ireland. While much work remains to be done, several key studies have explored the role of the audience within a Northern Irish context. In particular, the studies performed by Raymond Watson, Paul Nolan and David Miller suggest that social and political identities are maintained through viewer strategies not unlike those observed in the studies of fandom and gender. While the Northern Irish studies examine audience responses to television, rather than film, the findings can certainly be applied to a discussion of other media.

Raymond Watson's 1991-1992 study explores the influence of group identification on readings of television news. Watson and his assistant interviewed six families, three who identified themselves as Unionist and three who identified themselves as Nationalist, all living in towns outside Belfast. In the first phase of the study, the families were asked to discuss their cultural and political identities. In addition to questionnaires, Watson also used written diaries kept by participants and the interviewers' impressions. He then analyzed the material by looking for patterns of response on selected themes: the British Army, paramilitaries, the media, police, history, religion and politics. In the second phase of the study, participants watched news programs which Watson had compiled from clips of actual broadcasts. Watson included "clips of culturally charged news topics alongside other news topics which possessed no overt cultural or political significance." (Watson, 152) Viewers were then asked to discuss the stories and to rank them in order of importance. Watson analyzed the responses and found consistent patterns both in ranking of the stories and in the viewing positions taken. For

example, the Unionist families saw a clip about an IRA bombing as most important, displayed anger when discussing the clip, and focused on the damage shown. The Nationalist families downplayed the significance of the story and the event, focused on the political motivations of the act and discussed the comments of the newscaster and interviewees in greater detail.

Watson was able to identify certain pre-existing beliefs on a variety of themes, draw a picture of the viewer's cultural context, and note in-group and out-group attitudes. Watson finds that viewers used their preconceptions and cultural conventions to make sense of and prioritise the news stories. There was a tendency by viewers in both groups to ignore elements in the text that might present a challenge to the participants' beliefs; such claims made by the text were frequently left out or misstated as the viewer presented his or her response. Similarly, viewers remembered more clearly the elements of the text that were in agreement with their own preconceptions. Just as the women in Brigid Cherry's study were observed to identify with the monster, the Catholic viewers in Watson's study showed a similar shift. For example, several viewers chose to identify with the IRA bombers (who were not personalized or prioritised in the clip), attributing sympathetic characteristics and increasing the narrative agency of the bombers.

Viewer commitment seems to have been a factor in the responses. The participants gave highest priority to, discussed in most detail and recalled best those stories which they perceived to have personal relevance. The responses and priorities of the Unionist and Nationalist samples diverged the most on the issues with the highest personal relevance. This is consistent with Martin Barker's findings in regard to *Judge Dredd* fans – suggesting that identification with

a comic superhero and identification with a political orientation may engender similar feelings of 'ownership'.

As in other studies, the viewers used discourse as a way of reconfirming membership in a group. This was done through explicit discussion of group membership, through the use of "us/them" language and through language that belittled or mocked representations of the other group in the text. Watson also finds selective perception of bias. Both the Nationalist and the Unionist families found elements of textual bias against their own group. This in turn caused both groups to express distrust of and resistance to the news stories. Watson concludes that viewers mobilized pre-existing belief structures to make sense of the stories. Their responses were further motivated by their identification with a pre-existing social group. Thus the viewers generated different responses to the same texts.

The ability of the audience to selectively respond means that the text is not all-powerful. This suggests both that the text's potential for social harm is less than some have feared and that its potential for social improvement is less than some have hoped. Paul Nolan points out the limits of the media in promoting positive 'pro-social' messages. His study of community relations broadcasting in Northern Ireland was designed to test the idea that broadcasting can act as a cohesive agent in a divided society. Nolan chose as his text the television program *Orange, Green and Yellow* (1991), part of a BBC series *A Sense of Place*. The series was produced with the stated intention of improving relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; the selected episode deals with the issue of sectarianism and consists of interviews with representatives of several groups: two public servants, two politicians and two entertainers as well as a BBC moderator and an academic. Nolan's study is based on the

responses of men and women from nine pre-existing Belfast community groups, chosen as representative across religious, class and political lines. Nolan finds that most respondents were resistant to the text's perceived messages. Despite the professed objectivity of the creators, viewers from all the groups saw the text as biased, each against his or her own group. Most viewers, in the preliminary questionnaires, had expressed the belief that the media was biased. In discussion, they cited elements of the program that they interpreted as evidence of that bias. In turn, viewers found in the text evidence that supported their own previously held biases. Viewers also saw the text as exclusive, refusing to identify with the 'representatives' presented to them. In this way, they identified selectively with the onscreen subjects. While middle-class audience members were more willing to accept the content of the piece than were working-class audience members, they were also resistant to the tone of the piece, saying that it was overly negative. Conversely, many of the working-class viewers claimed that the piece was not negative enough. As evidence, viewers cited personal experiences. The *Orange, Green and Yellow* program, despite its pro-social agenda and attempts at balance was not accepted as such. Viewers actively resisted the text, finding it exclusive, biased and untrustworthy. It failed to meet the ideals and expectations of the audience.

David Miller also explores the ability of audiences to resist media messages. His own study was conducted in two phases. The first phase considered UK audiences and their general perception of the Northern Irish conflict. In the second phase of the study, Miller looked specifically at audience perceptions of the Gibraltar incident. In both phases, viewers were asked to write their own news bulletins based on still photographs compiled from actual television news broadcasts. Participants then responded to open-ended questions in writing and in group discussions. The created bulletins were compared to the facts and to what

viewers said they believed to be true. Participants also discussed their reasons for accepting or rejecting the perceived messages.

From the first phase of the study, Miller determines that most viewers understood the message of the bulletins in the same way - 95% agreed that the clips showed Northern Ireland to be a violent place – but more than half resisted the message as inaccurate. When participants not living in Northern Ireland discussed their reasons for not believing the message, some cited alternative media sources as evidence, privileging one text over another. Most, though, rejected the message on the basis of personal experience. Their evidence consisted of their own experiences visiting Northern Ireland or, more commonly, the relayed experiences of friends and family. Among viewers living in Northern Ireland, personal experience of events and media coverage was the most commonly given reason for rejection of the message. Miller concludes that the credibility of personal contacts is higher than that of the media. Importantly, though, almost half of the sample not living in Northern Ireland still said that they would not visit because of the violence shown in the media. Miller points out that this shows the limits of resistance; it also demonstrates the uncertain relationship between viewer response and real social action.

The limits of resistance are further explored in the second phase of Miller's study. Here, he examines the extent to which participants accepted the mainstream media version of the Gibraltar incident. Miller finds that most viewers, while resisting elements of the news coverage, did accept the facts presented, including some which were later revealed to be fabricated. Most of the Catholic participants rejected the claim of the SAS (that they believed a bomb was present at the scene) as well as the media smear campaign against Carmen Proetta,

the main eyewitness. Miller credits the "power of political identity in withstanding propaganda assault". (Miller, 131) He goes on, though, to point out that resistance only goes so far. In discussion of Proetta, for example, he found evidence that at least some elements of the smear campaign had been incorporated into viewer discourse. Some participants accepted that Proetta had been a prostitute (as the media claimed) but used political rhetoric to try to restore her credibility; others who claimed to absolutely believe Proetta's account nonetheless expressed doubts about her personal character. Miller finds such discourse as "evidence that even when an oppositional political identity is a strong part of everyday life it is possible for elements of official propaganda to be accepted." (Miller, 134) The media cannot hope to simply replace one set of identities with another; even small changes are likely to be only partially accepted.

Anticipating viewer resistance: some predictions, and more questions

Audience studies of gender and fan communities have shown how viewers participate in meaning construction; meanwhile, studies of Northern Irish television viewers have shown how those audiences participate in memory and identity construction as well. The results allow us to make tentative predictions about the strategies of Northern Irish cinema audiences, predictions which seem to be supported by anecdotal evidence but which require further investigation. The general presumption of academics that cinematic representations of Northern Ireland are inadequate and disappointing, or even damaging to domestic audiences, seems to be upheld by even a cursory look at audience discourse. Upon hearing of this author's thesis topic, for example, one Northern Irish viewer replied via email, "I am glad that someone is looking at the dreadful films that are made about Northern Ireland. The plots are

always the same; poor Taigs v rich Prods blah blah blah,"[10] whilst another complains that "We haven't seen the dimensions of the place; its not like stage or TV where there's more representation."[11] Without suggesting that these are 'typical viewers', these expressions of frustration with the existing representations of Northern Irish history and communities are illustrative, and point to the need for a sustained study of real viewers, their attitudes, and the social discourses they have developed.

As audience studies have amply demonstrated, film is experienced socially, and responses are used to confirm or establish group membership. From what we have seen of audience behaviour generally, and from the work of Watson, Miller, and Nolan in particular, it can be predicted that Northern Irish viewers will use not only the films, but talking about the films and debating the films' meanings, as ways of reinscribing their own ideological and community identification. In the particular context of the commemorative cinema, this becomes also a way of participating in the ritual of commemoration, actively endorsing or rejecting the communal memories of a contested event. As Hoskins has suggested, this may also be a way of witnessing at a distance. Those who were not able to participate in a traumatic event, by dint of age, social position, or geographic distance, may use the films to claim membership in the group of victims or victors. Consciously or not, these same viewers will use group identification to validate their projected responses; 'I feel *this* way because I am *this*.'

The acknowledgement of the social and cultural constraints in place means that viewers will selectively express their opinions. Like the participants in Austin and Hill's studies, they possess a "shared knowledge of appropriate responses" and engage in disciplinary discourse

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[10] Gavin Bell, personal correspondence with author, July 11 2003.
[11] Martin Lynch, private conversation, July 8 2003.

that anticipates criticism and distances them from socially unacceptable responses. Because neither the viewing subject nor his social community is fixed, it can be expected that responses will change, or be differently expressed, according to the venue.

Personal experience will shape, too, how viewers orient themselves to the text. The 'truth' of the representation is judged against, and priority given to, the individual viewer's own perception of the social and historical context. In practice, this means that we can expect viewers, anxious to establish their own authority as participants in moments of history and members of a group, to at the same time engage in a disciplinary and distancing strategy. This may produce an ambivalent viewer who is not only capable of reorientation, but is essentially required to shift between subject positions. When personal experience fails, either because it is insufficient or because it is uncomfortable to the viewer, we can expect the viewer to fall back on the meta-narrative and inter- or extra-textual references offered by the community. The providential or redemptive frameworks delineated along the lines of the two religious communities, provide only one example of subject position, one to which viewers have recourse but are not limited. Viewers identify with multiple communities, ranging from other political affiliations or social and environmental organizations, to professional, university, and artistic communities. Further research would need to consider the tensions and points of discord between these multiple points of identification.

Particularly, viewers are likely to reject such interpretive frameworks when they conflict with other, more deeply held, aspects of personal identity. As evidenced by the audience studies above, viewers are selective in which elements of a text they adopt, choosing those ideas, facts, or representations which best mesh with their own self-identification. In the case of the

commemorative cinema, this means that we can expect viewers to have shifting and complex approaches to the historical 'truths' presented. In practice, viewers of the same films will produce contradictory readings, differing in their memories even of the content of a given film. Similarly, viewers will choose selective elements as 'important' to the ultimate meaning, and dismiss others. Because the films are so ambiguous, there are numerous points and images which can be either co-opted or disregarded.

It can also be seen and expected that members do and will perceive bias against their own group, regardless of the intended messages of the films or of the academic and critical reception of the films. Such findings of bias would be consistent with the findings of Raymond Watson. Watson found that Nationalist and Unionist families viewing the same news clips saw the clips as prejudicial to the other group; moreover, each group claimed to be under-represented in the news coverage. Similarly, Paul Nolan's afore-mentioned study of the supposedly balanced *Orange, Green, Yellow* program found a high level of resistance among all the participants because of the perception of bias on all sides. [12]

On a corresponding note, it can be observed and anticipated that viewers will remember the actual historical events, referenced in the films, differently. What individuals remember of events has been shown to be dependent on the manner in which events are originally reported, but also on the manner in which events are represented over time and on the social

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[12] For ample anecdotal evidence of the perception of bias, see Fionnuala O'Connor's *In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland* or Gillian McIntosh's *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland.* Alan Parkinson insists on the reality of anti-Protestant bias in his *Ulster Loyalism and the British Media*; Louisa Burns Bisogno takes an opposing position in her own *Censoring Irish Nationalism: the British, Irish, and American Suppression of Republican Images in Film and Television, 1909-1995.* Patrick Magee's examination of anti-Nationalist bias in 'Troubles' literature, *Gangsters or Guerrillas?: Representations of Irish Republicans in 'Troubles Fiction,* also has implications for cinema studies.

transmission of memory. While this presents particular challenges to research and analysis, it can also reveal significant fissures between communities and perhaps provide opportunities for reconciliation. Studies by McKeever, Joseph and McCormack and by Hunter, Stringer and Watson have examined memory and bias in regards to violence in Northern Ireland. McKeever et al., in their article "Memory of Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants for violent incidents and their explanations for the 1981 Hunger Strike", attempt a quantitative assessment of such bias. They found not only significant differences in which events were recalled, but in the preferred explanations for events. Groups are most likely to encourage and preserve those memories that sustain positive in-group identification. Elements of events that do not assist in the functions of commemoration are likely to be forgotten. These functions include continuity (members need a consistent view of the past to make sense of the present), collective self-esteem (making heroes of group members, for example), distinctiveness (showing a group's uniqueness), efficacy (by remembering victories) and cohesion (emphasizing the unifying elements in the group's history). This process of selective remembering may account for Watson's discovery that Unionist and Nationalist families remembered different elements from the news stories and forgot facts that would seem not to support their interpretations. As well, the more personally relevant the narrative appears, the higher the level of investment may be expected, as in the aforementioned Watson study, in which participants remembered most clearly those events to which they saw a personal connection. It seems reasonable to anticipate a similar correlation between memory and group commitment in the interaction with fictional works as well, and this too seems a fruitful area of scholastic exploration.

It can be anticipated that resistance to a film's preferred reading will increase according to individual commitment to personal political identity. We have seen that fans of a particular genre or text display more involvement with the texts and the discourses around them; having higher expectations and needs, these viewers are more resistant to misrepresentations of 'their' concerns. In the context of the commemorative cinema, with its depictions of traumatic historical events claimed by communities, this means that the more an individual has invested in aligning himself with a particular group, the more possessive he will be over the representation of the group as well as the events. The more entrenched the sense of group identity, the more emotional and committed the response. This would suggest that the potential of commemorative cinema for productive pro-social change will be most realized amongst those viewers with the least investment in their political identities. Less 'possessive' viewers are perhaps more likely to engage with the films' ambiguities and to take advantage of the contemplative hesitation that is offered.

Conclusion

"...it is recognized that victims have a right to remember as well as to contribute to a changed society..."
- The Northern Ireland Agreement, April 10, 1998

Over the last decade, the central enterprise of cinema made in and about Northern Ireland has shifted. Rather than limiting itself to nostalgic envisionings of the past, this new commemorative cinema addresses the processes by which history is constructed, documented, and contested, and tacitly acknowledges the ongoing formation of memory in the present. This shift is significant; alongside the unfolding and uncertain Northern Irish peace process, artists and audiences have increasingly turned to film as a medium through which to express not only individual but collective memories of traumatic moments in Northern Ireland's conflicted history. Remembering and mourning is an essential component to recovery, and the commemorative cinema of Northern Ireland represents an opportunity for the sort of mourning work that can bring about productive social change.

The critical consensus is that Northern Ireland's cinema is too limited by its adherence to mainstream conventions and its denial of political complexity to produce meaningful opposition. This premature conclusion ignores the complexities of the relationship between text and audience. In fact, the commemorative cinema consists of ambivalent works which allow active and committed viewers to read the films in highly resistant ways.

A cinema of resistance; a resistance of cinema

From a sampling of the commemorative cinema, certain textual elements can be identified, elements which define a cinema of resistance. *Some Mother's Son*, *Resurrection Man*, and *Bloody*

Sunday, each a fictional recreation of a moment in living memory, are examples of a cinema that uses ambivalence and ambiguity to create instability and problematize viewer identification. These films use generic conventions to build and then to undercut audience expectations. They complicate their conventional narratives through a lack of closure, uncertain cause and effect relationships, and shifting perspectives. The films call attention to their own construction through their multiple contradictions. Realistic surfaces are troubled by moments of rupture and subjectivity. At the heart of each work is an implicit recognition of the unrepresentable nature of history and trauma. Through their instability, these films operate as open texts which offer manifold points of access and permit divergent understandings.

For their part, viewers are empowered and engaged, actively exploiting the points of rupture and contradiction within the films. Through recourse to personal experience, communal frameworks, and competing community alignments, viewers approach the films as 'poachers', capable of rejecting or co-opting elements and adding to or replacing the meanings ascribed by the preferred readings. The refusal of the films to provide a single or stable explicit meaning encourages viewers to engage with the work selectively and defiantly, both enhancing and limiting the power of the text to alter social perceptions or influence political identification.

The resistance of cinema has mixed implications for a divided society. On the one hand, viewers have access to multiple and complex sites of identification, allowing the individual viewer to move beyond the simple binary model of identity implied by so much of the criticism. Negotiation of these viewing positions does not only allow for resistant understandings of a particular film, but perhaps more broadly permits refusal of static or entrenched identities. The commemorative cinema can be used as a tool for productive

refiguring of the past. Conversely, this same tendency of resistance means that viewers with a strong commitment to an identity (or identities) may be less accepting of challenges to conceptions of Self and Other. The cinema of resistance can embody opposition to the hegemonic institutions, representations, and narrative frameworks, but equally, to the counter-hegemonic intentions of filmmakers, community leaders, and critics. It is important not to valorize the individual texts, but neither should we be entirely pessimistic about their potential as works of oppositional cinema.

One might therefore ask if commemorative cinema is necessarily a productive avenue of resistance. On the surface, its obsession with the past, and with the harms inflicted upon communities, seems perilous, lending itself to cooptation by the cult of victimization, to further polarizing of the Protestant and Catholic communities, and to what has been called a "political economy of helplessness". (Robert Elias, quoted e.g., in O'Malley, 8) As closer examination of these films has shown, however, a more complex strategy of interpellation is undertaken in these films, and an equally complex response is generated. In navigating the ambiguities of these works, viewers confront and – at least some of the time – compromise or convert.

As counter-memory, these films give voice to communities; as commemoration, they create bonds between individuals; as ambivalent texts, they permit change. The commemorative cinema is not necessarily progressive, but it does provide a model for a progressive cinema and viewership. As we understand more about audience response and involve audiences in the discourse of meaning production, the commemorative cinema may become a site of mourning as well as memorializing.

On the need for further research

It has often been remarked that, for a small region, Northern Ireland has produced a disproportionate amount of political and historical analysis. Considering the overshadowing effects of the conflict, it is perhaps not surprising that film analysis has been somewhat less prodigious; in the context of the serious issues facing divided communities, concerns about film going may seem irrelevant or trivial. The issue of film reception in particular has been largely neglected. As a medium of commemoration and identity formation, however, the cinema's social significance should not be underestimated. Meanwhile, continued debate over questions of cinematic representation is futile without ample consideration to the role of actual audiences.

This thesis points to some of the essential questions and makes predictions about viewer behaviour based upon the existing models of the active audience. Further research, in the form of controlled and detailed audience studies, will help to develop the potential of commemorative cinema as not only an academic concern, but a social instrument. The critical call for more progressive texts that overtly challenge the commonplace dichotomy of Unionist/Nationalist or Protestant/Catholic is certainly valid and timely, as is its critical counterpoint, McIlroy's petition for a more engaged spectatorship. We should not ignore, however, what is being done with the films that already exist and the audience that already engages. Recognizing the inherent resistance *in* and *to* the dominant representations of history and community is the first step towards a truly oppositional cinema that promotes recovery and reconciliation.

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