

Contexts



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OR OTHER, OR BOTH

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1. NORTHERN IRELAND: A BORDER, A BACKSTOP AND 'ISOLATED IMAGES'

On 10 April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, was ratified by the governments of the Republic of Ireland, of the United Kingdom and of the Assembly of Northern Ireland. Sections 3 and 6 of the document articulate how the agreement was to accommodate multiple political identifications both by members of the representative assembly and by the people of Northern Ireland. In 'Strand One' of the agreement titled 'Operation of the Assembly', assembly members were to 'register a designation of identity – nationalist, unionist or other – for the purposes of measuring cross-community support in Assembly votes', and in Article 1, the two governments were to:

(i) recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Great Britain or a sovereign united Ireland;

[...]

(vi) recognise the birth-right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland.¹

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I write this essay from London as the unity of the United Kingdom has been brought into question, and as the terms of the Belfast/ Good Friday Agreement (BGFA) have become undermined. This evolves from a clutter of interconnected histories: a convoluted, partially interrupted and complicated four hundred years since the full colonisation of Ireland; a century since the partition and establishment of devolved governance through the Parliament of Northern Ireland; seventy years since the ratification of the Republic comprising twenty-six counties south of its maintained border; a half a century since the beginning of the conflict in Northern Ireland, regularly referred to as 'The Troubles'; two decades since the BGFA was signed in 1998; five years since the 2016 European referendum results; three years since the Northern Ireland Protocol was drafted (originally called 'the backstop') by Theresa May's government as an appendix to the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement; eighteen long months since Britain voted in Boris Johnson as Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; and six months since Johnson's government proposed the Internal Market Bill, empowering ministers to pass regulations on internal trade, even if contrary to the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement agreed by the EU under the Northern Ireland protocol.

When queried about the legal integrity of the Internal Market Bill and its harmful impact on Northern Ireland by multiple domestic and international legal scholars, judges, diplomats and politicians, Johnson's government cited a 2017 Supreme Court ruling stating: 'Parliament is sovereign as a matter of domestic law and can

Previous page: John Fergus O'Hea, 'Rejoice, Oh! Greatly', *Weekly Freeman*, 4 June 1887, still from *Mother Ireland*, 1988. Courtesy Anne Crilly

pass legislation which is in breach of the UK's Treaty obligations.² Opposition to the International Market Bill was ubiquitous because it allowed Johnson's government to legally override previously agreed conditions of the Northern Ireland Protocol, which, in turn, had carefully maintained many of the terms of the BGFA. Not incidentally, details of the Internal Market Bill were published on 9 September 2020, the same day as the official launch of Festival UK* 2022, the rebranded Brexit festival – a dubiously timed series of projects across the United Kingdom aiming to 'showcase the UK's creativity and innovation to the world'.³

The 2016 referendum and its aftermath have arguably stoked the greatest threat in the modern history of the UK. The results showed a kingdom divided with Northern Ireland and Scotland voting to remain in the EU, overpowered by majorities voting to leave in England and Wales. The subsequent withdrawal plans have regularly pivoted on the tenability of the Northern Irish Protocol (or backstop), a precautionary constitutional measure to guarantee no hard (i.e. land) border appearing between Northern Ireland (non-EU) and the Republic of Ireland (EU). Such a construction of a hard border would have significant implications for trade, and for those living on either side of it and represents both a practical and symbolic breach of the terms of the BGFA. Reinstating a hard border would block the free movement of citizens, services, capital, commodities and opportunities, also inevitably impacting or restricting the fluid negotiation of citizens between identificatory positions. As I write, in spring 2021, there exists a 'regulatory border' (or Irish Sea Border) where trucks entering Northern Ireland by ferry must declare meat and dairy through customs. However, further significant political upheaval resting on border negotiations in the region/state of Northern Ireland seems inevitable.⁴

In London, it has become clear from conversations, media and proclamations from the British government how relatively little is taught or understood of the interconnected and often conflictual histories of these small islands. This was perhaps most grievously exposed in January 2019, when Dominic Raab, the UK's First Secretary of State, previously Secretary of State for Exiting the EU and a graduate of Law from both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, admitted publicly under questioning that he had not read the 35-page BGFA from start to finish 'like a novel', a small task that would seem to many as essential to a negotiator trying to understand the background and basis of their sole political goal. With displays such as this, confidence in the United Kingdom's unity wavers. And as for Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon continues to wage her campaign for Scottish independence. But as the consequences of withdrawal from the European Union start to appear and be felt, there seems to be a widespread appetite for accelerated familiarisation with the intricacies of these histories. In January 2021, the Labour Party began rolling out educational material (including videos) for its 500,000 members on the history of Northern Ireland's BGFA, in which the party played a key role. 'It's not taught well enough in schools', conceded Louise Haigh, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.⁵

This turn has been preceded and complemented by the production and availability of numerous serial and feature-length documentaries on the subject of Northern Ireland broadcast on UK television and online streaming platforms. The BBC has

broadcast a number of documentaries in the last two years focussed on Northern Ireland, from the eight-part *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History*, to *The Day Mountbatten Died*.⁶ In the latter, designer India Hicks, the granddaughter of Lord Mountbatten, concludes, 'the damage that was done was so much deeper than any of us could have imagined... I certainly try not to hold resentment in anyway. And that's hard. But forgiveness is important. One has to move on.' Hicks is an English aristocrat, and the documentary focusses on the killing of her grandfather and brother, among others, by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in August 1979 while holidaying at their summer castle in the Republic of Ireland. Hicks's account of her trauma and grief – real and unenviable – is given considerable air time, significantly more than any other affected Irish or Northern Irish citizens interviewed. Her experience is set in inverse relation to the year-round residents of Mullaghmore for whom, the Scottish narrator reads, 'a sense of shame lives on'.⁷

This editorial weighting and prioritising of grief of one subject over many others by the UK's public service broadcaster in this hour-long prime-time documentary is not uncommon, but it serves as an anachronistic reminder of Edward Said's claims that 'all kinds of preparations are made for [Empire] within a culture; then in turn imperialism acquires a kind of coherence, a set of experiences, and a presence of ruler and ruled alike within the culture.'⁸ Writing about the connection between culture and empire, Said observed: 'The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.'⁹ Although Said defined imperialism and colonialism respectively, as 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory', and as 'the implanting of settlements on distant territory',¹⁰ in the case of Northern Ireland whose territory is neither distant nor foreign, to consider it within this paradigm still seems resolutely true when considering the interweaving of culture and imperialism within the islands' interrelated histories.

The BBC's editorial weighting is relatively consistent with the presentation of Northern Ireland in mainstream broadcast and publishing media since the UK voted out of the EU. As a political constituency it is frequently referred to as something of a problematic object because of the obstacle the backstop has posed to swift and therefore economically favourable withdrawal agreements. This narrative has been consistently privileged over the substance of the lives of its people who face intense political, economic and social disruption following its or their severance from the EU.¹¹ Editorial in broadsheet and broadcast media regularly prioritise the perceived interests of the State, that is the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland, as it is understood from the historical centre of Empire – London, England – over the lived realities of its peripheries' constituent citizenries.

To this situation, online streaming services provide a pointed if consistently problematic set of antagonisms. A proliferation of feature-length documentaries present histories of Northern Ireland to UK and international domestic audiences through US corporations like Netflix and Amazon. At the time of writing, Amazon Prime hosts Alison Millar's *The Disappeared* (2013), Brendan McCourt's *Collusion* (2015), Alex Gibney's *No Stone*

Unturned (2017), and Osama Rai's *Fractured Peace* (2017), while Netflix subscribers can watch Valeri Vaughn's *Art of Conflict* (2012), Brendan J. Byrne's *Bobby Sands: 66 Days* (2016) and Maurice Sweeney's *I, Dolours* (2018). Though oppositional to the 'problematic object' editorial, many of these documentaries are composed of various visual repertoires of violence that dramatise and sensationalise past events to incite, excite and divide viewers, rather than foreground historic and ongoing efforts towards solidarity, diversity and equal rights. Frequently the polarising narratives supported by these two production spheres, imperialist and capitalist, respectively, continue to feed public perceptions of the region/state as one founded on and continuously generative of 'trouble'. Few documentarians seem to aim to accommodate complex and regularly negotiated identity positions in Northern Ireland, including, in the terms of the BGFA, 'nationalist, unionist or other', or, 'Irish or British, or both'.

In an interview with British film-maker and theorist Claire Johnston published in 1981, Northern Irish film-maker Pat Murphy said, 'I grew up watching that kind of material on TV and concluded, finally, that it was not simply a question of anti-Irish bias and censorship, it was a problem inherent in a kind of documentary form which has a notion of objective truth and which uses a vocabulary of isolated images, constant climaxes, held together within the narrative authority of the voice-over.'¹² Her frustration with how documentary long-form reduced the complexities of life in Northern Ireland prompted *Maeve* (1981), widely considered to be the first Irish feminist film.¹³

2. ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES: A CITIZENRY OF MOVING IMAGES
Described by Maeve Connolly as 'a semi-auto-biographical portrait of a young Belfast woman struggling to reconcile nationalism with feminism', *Maeve* follows Maeve Sweeney (played by Mary Jackson), a young woman travelling between her family home in Belfast, and London where she has been training as an artist.¹⁴ Much of *Maeve* is shot on location in working-class Catholic areas lined with terraces. Houses' interiors are dark and marked by a tension around windows, curtained off to prevent their inhabitants' visibility to surrounding military and police forces. There's an emphasis on the lived stresses of these environments, contrasted with shots of architectural spaces in London representative of the city's freedom – nocturnal lofts full of soft-postured artists, or plant-filled, book-lined, daylit Victorian living rooms primed for meditative thought. The narrative is constructed through pivotal and fractious conversations with those closest to Maeve – her father, mother, sister and Republican ex-boyfriend Liam – seen through twelve flashback scenes marking a return visit to Belfast, in which dialogues were based on interviews Murphy had conducted across the Catholic community in Belfast.¹⁵ Through Maeve's discussions, the film-maker was able to display the complex of inherited political beliefs, patriarchal cultural nostalgia, Catholic dogma and heteronormative pressures she and her contemporaries faced, while also allowing Maeve to resist any pre-existing measures for challenging them. What results is a play of a secular, socialist and speculative version of feminism.

Murphy had emigrated from Belfast to London in 1972, where she attended the Royal College of Art. In one module on 'Oppositional Cinema' a recurrent focal point for her professors and fellow cohort was Northern Ireland, which she said, 'had become a kind

of anthropological field for certain kinds of film-makers'.¹⁶ In this module Murphy 'was the only Irish person in the class, and she watched with horror films such as *The Informer* [1935], which relied on traditional stereotypes, and newsreel footage of the North'.¹⁷ Maeve is less concerned with maintaining such repertoires or binaries than in showing how the forces of colonialism, capitalism, religion and patriarchy have so forcibly weighed upon individuals living in or away from Northern Ireland. Maeve's critical value continues to resonate, expressing a negotiated positionality through which viewers might understand the intricacies of association in a region/state that has had to legislate for dynamic identificatory processes, for Catholics and Protestants, and for a broad spectrum of 'others' and 'boths'.

Exploring how a woman might navigate difficult interrelated issues within a unique political region/state from a ground-level position was not unique to Maeve within Northern Irish feminist film practice. Three years after Maeve's release the Derry Film and Video Workshop (DFVW) was established by Margo Harkin and Anne Crilly alongside Trisha Ziff (from Camerawork Derry). In 1984 they participated in the Channel Four workshop scheme under the ACTT (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians) Workshop Declaration set-up, in Harkin's account, to 'cater for underrepresented areas, not specifically regional, but areas of interest such as women's politics, racial politics, issues that were not getting attention on TV'.¹⁸ Again, theirs was a collective effort to countenance 'superficial' and 'sensationalistic' coverage of the region, 'and because the TV that people here watch is British TV, even people at home in the North of Ireland weren't getting information about a lot of issues'.¹⁹

The methods and outputs of the collective varied, commencing with the creation of the discursive and investigative *Derry Videonews*, and later with individual members evolving to making documentaries (Crilly, *Mother Ireland*, 1988) and feature films (Harkin, *Hush-a-Bye Baby*, 1999). While working on various film and video outputs, the group also undertook the selection and screenings of works by artists they had met or encountered within the workshop scheme, such as Isaac Julien's *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), and the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) directed by John Akomfrah. These were shown to community groups in Derry with hosted and recorded conversations afterwards. So, while the DFVW began as a self-trained media unit, their embrace of Britain's most radical artists' films, and the way they used them for their own discursive project, represents a fascinating curatorial departure through which they became embedded within Northern Ireland's growing art communities, influencing a great range of prominent artist film-makers working in a variety of registers and across formats, including Willie Doherty and Anne Tallentire.

Through both film-making and film screening, they investigated, problematised and vocalised feminist concerns in Northern Ireland. *Mother Ireland* was a documentary made for Channel 4 and aimed to deconstruct the iconography of its title. It explored, in Crilly's words,

how Ireland is portrayed as a woman in Irish culture and how this image developed as a nationalist motif [from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries]... 'Mother Ireland'

called on her 'sons' to fight to regain her land and her honour. The programme also examines how nationalist and republican women, the 'daughters' who fought for 'Mother Ireland', relate to this image and whether it has any relevance today.²⁰

Through contemporary interviews, archival footage and voice-over analysis, Crilly's documentary considered the contesting foundations of nationalism and feminism, refusing a prioritisation of the former over the latter. What's the point, Crilly's documentary interviewees echoed the steady scepticism of *Maeve*, of reconstituting a patriarchal state that continues to undervalue its women?

Broadcasting restrictions legislated in 1988, the time of the documentary's completion, banned material from an Irish or Northern Irish context deemed of Republican persuasion, including: particular songs, footage, images or voices of named individuals and political groups, references to and archival footage or recordings related to the founding of the Republic – all of which was contained within *Mother Ireland* (the original cut included Christy Moore's 1987 album *Unfinished Revolution*). Interviews with five women who were Sinn Fein, IRA, Republican News and *Cumann na mBan*, as well as rare archive footage of Maude Gonne McBride speaking at a rally in Dublin in the early 1930s were also part of the ban. These elements resulted in a three-year delay in its broadcast, with much revision undertaken before it was eventually screened on Channel 4, as part of its first 'Banned' series, in April 1991. Crilly later reflected that she found it 'ironic that a programme on a cultural metaphor which evolved from a climate on censorship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is now itself censored. It is also unfortunate that this is one of the only programmes which examines Irish history from a woman's perspective.'²¹

Another film, also funded by Channel 4, by a Derry Film and Video Workshop founder, Margo Harkin, was *Hush-a-Bye Baby*. It focussed on the life of a young woman and the decisions she faced when she fell pregnant. Set in Derry in the early 1980s the film opens with three teenage girls practising a dance sequence set to Cyndi Lauper's 'Girls Just Want To Have Fun', but the narrative sequence that follows is exceptionally different from the *Breakfast-Club* teen-tribulation genre developing simultaneously in the US. The film follows Goretti as she meets and dates Ciaran, another Catholic working-class teen. Not long after they get together, he becomes interned for suspected Republican activity. Goretti is unable to communicate her pregnancy to Ciaran through a letter written to him in Irish, prohibited by prison officials after being passed 'through the censors'. So, she visits him in person to tell him the news herself. He is unreceptive to the news and she leaves, furious, and forced to navigate the situation alone as best she can.

As with *Maeve*, there's a juxtaposition between two forms of isolation, self-organised and state-sanctioned, both experienced with different reputational repercussions within their community, disproportionately disadvantaging Goretti. The film was made as abortion was being debated in the Republic of Ireland, radio commentary of which is excerpted in the film, and the results of which saw the majority of Irish people voting against legalising the procedure.²²

'I was concerned not to make a film which eliminates contradictions for audiences... [instead] we wanted precisely to *raise* questions', Murphy recalled of her ambitions.²³ And *Maeve, Mother Ireland* (1988) and *Hush-a-Bye Baby* all did this, and broke ground for a significant body of feminist and queer film and moving image work that has since been made in and of Northern Ireland, problematising types of documentary and film that propagate stereotypes, parrot doctrines, reissue images of violence and polarise viewers. These feminist works refract multiple perspectives to express the complicatedness of navigating, as a female subject, patriarchal, colonial, religious and capitalist systems within a central Western political constituency that is neither exclusively a region nor a state.

In an area so routinely and abrasively pictured in conflict, these films are among a rich body of others that attend to the subjects affected and to their differentiated, negotiated and under-represented positions in ways that are exemplary. They broke away from a history of documentaries about Northern Ireland arguably used as another technology of imperialism, produced by broadcasters such as the BBC, instead presenting biographical films and documentaries as mechanisms for reflection, empathy and self-actualisation. Borrowing Ariella Azoulay's words, they bring viewers into a space for 'rethinking the mechanism that lies at the heart of the institution of citizenship'.²⁴ To reconstruct the political sphere through the civil contract of photography, Azoulay wrote of a distinct Palestinian photographic oeuvre and political context, one needs to recognise, 'photographed persons are participant citizens, just the same as I am'.²⁵ Regarding images of Northern Ireland, past and present, in yet another period of turbulence and change, whether through television, online or other networks and channels, Azoulay's counsel is worth remembering.

The author wishes to thank Maeve Connolly, Anne Crilly, Sara Greavu and Margo Harkin for their assistance in the research of this essay.

- 1 Government of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland Office, 'The Belfast Agreement', 10 April 1998, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement> (last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- 2 Government cites 2017 decision of the Supreme Court in R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Government of the United Kingdom, Cabinet office, 'HM Legal Position: UKIM Bill and Northern Ireland Protocol', 10 September 2020, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hmg-legal-position-ukim-bill-and-northern-ireland-protocol> (last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- 3 Festival UK* 2022, <https://www.festival2022.uk/about> (last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- 4 Although descriptors for Northern Ireland have varied historically, in this essay I use 'region/state' to accommodate different, multiple and possibly fluid identificatory positions held by citizens or diasporas in or from its six counties.
- 5 Heather Stewart, 'Labour to Educate Members on History of Good Friday Agreement', *The Guardian*, 14 January 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/14/labour-to-educate-members-on-history-of-good-friday-agreement> (last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- 6 *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History*, BBC, 2019; *The Day Mountbatten Died*, dir. Sam Collyns, BBC, 2019.
- 7 The killings were part of a day of catastrophic and networked violence throughout Mayo and Northern Ireland, where one teenage civilian and eighteen soldiers (among them sixteen paratroopers) were also killed. In the documentary, the extent of the violence is recounted by victims' families, locals, eye witnesses, journalists, British soldiers, Royal Ulster Constabulary members and retired IRA paramilitaries. In the documentary's narrative arc, the event was isolated from those that preceded and succeeded it, with one-line mention of the Bloody Sunday shootings five years earlier that were thought to have provoked it.
- 8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p.11.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.9. Emphasis the author's.
- 11 For more nuanced information see also Chris McCrudden, *The Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, and Rights*, London: The British Academy, 2017, available at https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/164/2017-10-30_Good_Friday_Agreement.pdf (last accessed on 15 March 2021), and Katy Hayward's analysis on the impact of Brexit on cross-border communities, including 'Northern Ireland's concern about the Brexit deal', *UK in a Changing Europe* [website], available at <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-irish-border-and-the-brexit-deal/> (last accessed on 15 March 2021).
- 12 Claire Johnston, 'Maeve', *Screen*, vol.22, no.4, 1981, p.63.
- 13 Although co-directed with John Davies, the film is increasingly credited solely to Murphy for its formal and experimental qualities, and its seminal place within Irish feminist film-making.
- 14 Maeve Connolly, 'Feminism, Ireland and Women's Video Art', in Laura Leuzzi, Elaine Shemilt and Stephen Partridge (ed.), *EWVA: European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s*, Hertfordshire and Bloomington: John Libbey and Indiana University Press, 2019, p.141.
- 15 The film was researched and scripted around Catholic communities rather than Protestant ones. Murphy has spoken about this as an exercise in exploring the complexities of what was familiar to her, rather than attempting to convey all of the multiple beliefs and identifications held within the region/state. See C. Johnston, 'Maeve', *op. cit.*
- 16 Patsy Murphy, 'Maeve', *IFT News*, vol.14, no.5, 1982, p.4, quoted by Maeve Connolly, 'Irish Cinema's First Wave: Histories and Legacies of the 1970s and 1980s', in John Hill (ed.), *A Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, p.112.
- 17 Megan Sullivan, "'I'll Not Swear One Word against You; It's Not for You I Did It": Anne Devlin and Irish Cinema', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol.25, no.1/2, July – December 1999, p.279.
- 18 Marsha Emerman, 'Derry Film and Video: An Interview with Margo Harkin', *Cineaste*, vol.17, no.2, 1989, p.43.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Anne Crilly, 'Banning History', *History Workshop Journal*, vol.31, no.1, March 1991, p.163.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.165.
- 22 This result was overturned by referendum in 2018 in Ireland, but abortion was only decriminalised (along with same-sex marriage) in Northern Ireland in October 2019 after a long grass-roots campaign and through an odd, if fortuitous, legislative loophole when the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act was voted in in Westminster in July 2019 effectively bypassing the deeply conservative Democratic Unionist Party in Stormont's then dormant Northern Ireland Executive. For more information on this please see Abortion Rights, <https://abortionrights.org.uk/ni-abortion-decrim-a-victory-for-human-rights/> (last accessed on 16 March 2021).
- 23 C. Johnston, 'Maeve', *op. cit.*, p.69.
- 24 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2008, p.74.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.17.



Mother Ireland, 1988, film, colour, sound, 52min, stills. Directed by Anne Crilly and produced by Derry Film And Video Collective. Courtesy the film-maker



Maeve, 1981, 16mm, colour, sound, 1h 50min, stills. Directed by Pat Murphy. © British Film Institute. Courtesy the BFI National Archive