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ELEPHANTS OF THE FUTURE

Derry and the Promise of Culture

AARON KELLY



DURING the conflict there was always a prevailing view – at governmental, policy, legal and mass media levels – of the North as an irresolvable tribal dispute that was mired in an almost mythically repetitive and reiterative stasis, impervious to the goodwill of liberal democracy. Hence, mainstream political discourse would not only partake in a lexicon of ‘cycles of violence’, ‘tit-for-tat killings’ or ‘things spiralling out of control’, it could also, once self-instantiated as the honourable broker or the liberal centre seeking to manage this turmoil, deliberate “an acceptable level of violence”. Implicit in this concept of an “acceptable level of violence” is that the best the forces of liberal democracy may do with such recalcitrant historical stagnancy is to police, quarantine, and manage it. There was always a large body of cultural representation that was not only complicit in such political discourses of crisis management but also helped to produce and affirm them. In popular culture, the thriller often performed this function on page and on screen. Christopher Newmann’s *The Devil’s Own*, which also made it onto the big screen, resignedly discloses: “In Ireland, there are no happy endings”¹. So there is a consonance between the understanding of Northern Ireland as a fated place, where no substantive change is possible, and the thriller form. The latter must suspend final resolution and seek only to enact move and countermove in a chain of endless violence and retribution where the local erasure of a few bad guys will never fix the bigger picture. The overarching frame can only ever be ongoing and vigilant monitoring and policing.

Here the subject matter and the form of its representation are rendered identical. This convergence proposes a very weak or passive provision of Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* wherein representation is made the mere reflection of its referent. It thus forgoes a fuller sense of Aristotle’s concept as *praxis*, of art as an intervention that may reshape, contest and reformulate its materials rather than surrender itself to the imitation of an already agreed set of actions in a pre-designed form.² In a sense, if only by default, Margaret Scanlan, by deciding the inaccessibility of proper or High Art to the Troubles and thus clearing the ground for popular cultural mediations, justifies the appropriateness of the correlation of the thriller form to Northern Ireland, so that both embrace one another in predetermined and interwoven fixity: “the aesthetic impulse is as alien to the Shankill Road as the well-shaped plot is to the erratic behaviour of home-made bombs; a private life, in the face of repeated violations, becomes almost as inconceivable as a simple moral judgment or a happy ending”.³ So the North, wherein history as dynamic, as change, as process, is supposedly impossible, requires an arrested form of representation; a narrative which abjures its own status as narrative (as movement, shaping and action), and instead joins its referent in refractive immobility. This paralysed *mimesis* is found even in parodic takes on the thriller, such as Colin

Bateman’s *Divorcing Jack*, that are designedly intended to play with the genre. Therein Bateman’s hero, Starkey, claims: “you didn’t need a reason to kill people, not here”.⁴ This sentiment epitomizes rather than subverts the dominant portrait of the North as an unintelligible terrain voided of human agency or historical intervention, which it is the task of the crime narrative merely to superintend and regulate. Although Bateman’s novel must leave a space for its own satire and disdain, these are bound to, and must rely upon, the self-same governing narrative of the North as entrenched atavism. It thus repeats that narrative and offers not an alternative but a sardonic glance thereupon (so that it is nothing more disruptive than North Down snootiness).

So even though, on the one hand, the North was regarded as an irredeemable and inexplicable antagonism, it was also, on the other, made consensually reducible to the one, readily explicable narrative of violence. Such a terminal exegesis – a regime of representation whose forms and outcomes are resigned to already knowing what they feign to seek and uncover – even sears itself on more serious literary treatments such as John Hewitt’s Regionalism programme. This project sought to reconceive the North as a regional space (rather than a failed or contested state) in which Protestant, Dissenter, Catholic and other strands might interconnect in shared ways that circumvented any necessary identification with the British or Irish states at a national level. But Hewitt’s mining of these varying cultural histories, even before the Troubles thoroughly intensified, also encountered an ‘exact geology’, which initially may have been intended as markers of the endurance of each tradition, but which degraded very readily into the unstoppable collisions of unyielding fault lines.⁵ Hence, art is ultimately imprinted by elemental and non-historical forces. Hewitt’s construction of these various traditions as excavations of the North’s diversity rather than its static homogeneity (an entirely laudable aim) actually supersaturates the terrain of different strands that he wishes to make the basis of a pluralistic regionalism, so that each once more adds up to a total historical inevitability without alternative outcomes to its violence. Towards the end of his life and career, he appended ‘Postscript 1984’ to the earlier poem, ‘Ulster Names’, which had sought to map the linguistic entwining of Irish, English and Scots words in place-names, so as to construct a mutually lived landscape that was also a template for future belonging together. However these very locales, in the postscript, become sites of violence and mayhem during the Troubles: “the whole tarnished map is stained and torn, never to be read as pastoral again”.⁶ The very places and place-names, which were to be woven together into a shared belonging and future as diverse but agreeable signs of a shared history, are transmuted into static, unchanging horror. And “never to be read as pastoral again” implies that amidst this stasis,

art must forgo its own active forms and modes before the brute reality of the Troubles. Pastoral can no longer be pastoral but solely an emptied mode that can only list what might have been its raw materials, which were already the signs of a narrative of predestined violence and murder. So form must supplicate itself as passive *mimesis*, the mere semblance of the Form of Forms, the intractable inexorability that is the Troubles, which may prescribe not only its own self-perpetuating meaning but also the form of any artistic encounter with it.

Of course it would have been remiss of writers and artists to ignore the Troubles. What is in dispute here, however, is not that the Troubles happened or indeed the extent of the terrible violence wrought in its name. It is more an issue of the nature and meaning of the Troubles (in other words, that it might have a political and social content which is subject to change rather than being a mythic repetition of primordial passions) and also as to the role and function of art therein as *praxis* (as variously, explanation, intervention, endorsement or resistance). Each of these possibilities of art might complicate both a standard response to social turmoil in the North (a certain prescription of aesthetics) and a standard account of the violence as itself an arrested representation, a stalled unhistorical narrative. For even the prevailing version of the conflict had to adjust its terms with the onset of the Peace Process, but this shift was primarily undertaken not on the basis of ongoing social, historical and cultural drives but, rather, on the demarcation between the past agreed as simply the one, all-encompassing traumatic thing and the present as equally and self-evidently contained by its own unexplored inevitability. For example, in 1994 when presaging the shift in dispensation, Francine Cunningham asked: “so now that the ceasefire has been announced, what will happen to all the Northern Ireland writers? Where will they go for their material?”⁷ Implicit in such a question is the sense that a specifically sectarian and atavistic account of the Troubles was the zero sum of all Northern Irish culture and society. Art and society are made homologous in their agreed identity and formal tautology. And if the past and its artistic forms could only mean the one thing, then, by extension, the present is voided of any meaning other than its own self-evidence. Art is required to accept the consensus of what is, as it had previously been directed to formalise an agreed version of what was. Culture becomes the mirror securing the self-identity of the way of the world in both scenarios. But what if the Troubles were irreducible to that sectarian template of tribal stasis? What if *what was* can be reviewed as something which was not homogeneous with itself, but instead harboured heterogeneous possibilities and antagonisms? These heterogeneities would also trouble, as it were, and persist in ways that challenge a version of the present as incontrovertibly agreed. And what if the Troubles – and the governing sectarian narrative that would name and formulate them – were in fact to be cast as partial and situated responses (rather than all-exhausting determinants which simply imitate one another’s underlying reality) to profound change rather than stasis? The dominant narrative would itself be unmasked as *praxis* rather than passive and already formed imitation, as an effort to delimit and contain change and heterogeneous possibilities under the rubric of the repetition of the same.

The prevalent, arrested form of representation of the conflict accords with Homi K. Bhabha’s account of the insecure vacillation between ‘fixation’ and ‘reactivation’ in the construction of the stereotype by a dominant gaze. This model addresses how the need to fix representation (so that it always precludes any alternative forms of intervention) is always anxiously repeated. And this incessant repetition betrays the fixity which such representational forms pursue.⁸ Bhabha inverts the conventional wisdom that stereotypes emerge from positions of representational certainty (i.e., we can say these things about a particular group of people or situation because they are so obviously and common sensibly true). Rather, Bhabha discloses, stereotypes are produced out of moments of representational insecurity and anxiety (i.e., we do not possess the imaginative capacity to understand this otherness and heterogeneity and have to retreat into stereotyping as a defence mechanism to protect our own regime of identity). Hence, stereotypes tell us a lot more about the people who construct them than those who are represented by them. The anxious effort to reactivate and repeat the logic of the same in fixated forms therefore strives to remainder materials which may be redeemed and recovered aesthetically and politically in their very heterogeneity to static *mimesis*. And if Derek Mahon once wrote that “Even now there are places where a thought might grow”,⁹ this entreaty can be unearthed even in the apparently most fatalistically secure forms of Troubles representation: namely, mass media and popular cultural regimes of visibility. For there was always a paradoxical sense that the most mediated visualisations of the conflict were somehow unmediated; that the regimes of images promulgated by newspapers, television and popular culture were transparently at one with their referent as factual self-evidence. Hence, poets such as Mahon or Seamus Heaney would often adopt an oblique aesthetic, encountering the conflict indirectly via Bashō’s Japan or Norse mythology, not only as a worthy attempt to find new pathways and angles of approach and departure, but also because of an underlying pessimism about the capability of art forms to compete with media imagery, coupled with doubts about the wisdom of doing so in the first place. The kernel of this regime of images is expressed by the film version of Tom Clancy’s *Patriot Games*. As Eamonn Hughes discerns, not one scene in that novel is set in Northern Ireland

even though it uses a ‘static and unresolved’ narrative of the conflict to drive the urgent necessity of its own revenge plot.¹⁰ The film adaptation offers one very brief staging that serves as a visual shorthand for the broader governing narrative of the Troubles: the cursory “this is all you need to know” narrative is signed off by fleeting images of Saracens, red brick and barbed wire. It is a visual regime which seeks to find not only its referent but also the origins of its own representational justification retroactively in the ubiquitous supersaturation of its mediations.

However, if this regime of conflict images is understood as a specific example of representational *praxis* rather than the mere semblance of a prior form, it is much more readily critiqued as a dominant ordering of the North rather than a reflection of it. And if some cultural representations form part of that dominant ordering, then there is a counter-tradition just as strong which, even at the heart of the supposedly most resignedly imitative or self-evidently factual regimes of images, attests to how artworks may confound logics of identity patrolling referent and mediation. Alan Clarke’s film *Elephant* (1989) was produced by BBC Northern Ireland’s drama unit and was effectively banned because its representation was supposedly so at one with the conflict and the violence which it screens.¹¹ It comprises just over thirty minutes of shooting scenes, each following one another with the same blank repetitiveness with which the various killers confront their targets. There is no voice-over, no context, no plot or leading protagonists, no points of identification for a viewer to latch onto some discernible or developing narrative. However, *Elephant* brilliantly discharges the disruptive potential of art, its capability to intervene rather than merely reflect or endorse. The film’s title, invoking ‘the elephant in the room’, the thing which is permitted to be self-evidently there but whose incongruous obviousness is never to be acknowledged let alone evaluated and considered, crystallizes the whole work’s interrogation of the standard ‘cycle of violence’ thesis and the latter’s attendant tautology of mediation and referent. *Elephant* transforms the exhausted exegeses of the conflict (at political and cultural levels) beyond their own resignation by turning their logic against itself. Clarke sought to bring viewers to the imperative: ‘make it stop!’ (directed at both the film itself and, concomitantly, the conflict). *Elephant* does this by confronting the standard representation with its own vacuity in the starkest form possible with the effacement of plot dynamics through its killing after killing after killing: the arrested narrative, the explanation that there is no explanation, is divested of its own claims to explicability, knowledge and power. Clarke’s film over-determines the standard explanation of the conflict to the degree that it is unveiled as its own opposite, a lack of explanation, a failure to explain, to represent, to understand. Thus by staging the *reductio ad absurdum* of the fated political management of the conflict and of cultural representations of the North as reiteratively stalled, *Elephant* supersaturates the supersaturated so that these become detached from referent that they would name and govern. The film demonstrates that the conceptual lack of narrative as *praxis* was itself an intrusive narrative of delimitation. The notion that the North may only be reflected in its stasis as weak *mimesis* does not adequately represent or understand the very thing over which it claims propriety; it is unveiled as a narrative strategy designed to disavow other narrative, historical and political engagements with that referent which may energize and contest it as more than stasis and fixity. Once the avowedly total and consummate narrative of the Troubles is staged in precisely its own terms, as total and consummate, it actually and negatively discloses its own limits, its aporia, its nullity, so that it becomes representationally absolute solely in its failure rather than its sovereignty.

Elephant permits the viewer to withhold the verification of its referent by denying the self-sanctioning of its mediation. In so doing, the film reminds us, in Jacques Rancière’s terms, that we can be *emancipated spectators* rather than passive receptacles for already agreed representational forms that merely report already agreed historical conditions. The very passivity of *Elephant’s mimesis* is the measure of the activity it impels in the viewer to contest its representation and its referent. As such, it inverts what has become the standard critical model in Western consumer cultures since Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* in which we are all in thrall to the realm of images (and even those who set themselves up as critics in this arena, such as Jean Baudrillard, repeat the very power relations of assertive knowledge and ignorant reception that they intend to elucidate).¹² So rather than being an anomaly or peculiarity amongst Western cultures, visual art re-engaging this Northern Irish context not only presages what has become a generalised condition or malaise but also offers instructive pathways to and from this supposed condition. It is not just narrative and visual regimes which are contingent, to be evaluated, tied to particular forms and political forces and hegemony, but also their referents, their social materials. They too require analysis: they are never homogenous or static, but always emphasised, graded, coded, reworked, transformed in particular ways. So the counter-tradition of cultural representations of the North has already sharply felt and intensely disputed our apparent supplication to the realm of images which Rancière has more recently pinpointed. As Rancière urges: “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting: when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection”.¹³ Hence the emancipated spectator actively interprets and translates the images and

representations proffered to him or her rather than accepting these *a priori* as the transparent and agreed constitution and transmission of knowledge.

And if that galvanized and empowered spectatorship occurs with moving images in *Elephant*, then it is also to be found in photography, supposedly the medium most statically identical to both itself and its subject matter according to those who would subordinate us to the realm of images. For example, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* makes us 'image-junkies', who, like the chained souls in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, are enticed from reality and experience and to photography by "mere images of truth".¹⁴ Sontag's cultural history of photography links it, correctly, to regimes of surveillance and control, to the round-up of the Communards in 1871 and to criminal profiles, crime scene forensics and modern policing in general. She then argues that this relation of power, truth and representation in photography became disseminated, in a putatively democratic manner that is actually a spurious, consumerist voyeurism and relativism, at a micro-level so that we could all nominally participate in the authority of this gaze which paradoxically supplanted the very reality it captured: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power".¹⁵ However, to Sontag, this relation to the world is actually the antithesis of knowledge, since we are enslaved to and by the medium and its mediation of the referent that provides a degraded interpretative framework on our behalf: "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph".¹⁶ Where writing or painting are selective interpretations, for Sontag, photography offers "a narrowly selective transparency"; it becomes a miniature slice of reality rather than a particular representation thereof.¹⁷ It is at one with its referent in a way that precludes space for interpretation or analysis. And the supreme irony for this line of argument is that this transparent medium ultimately effaces the reality that it apprehends and with which it becomes synonymous.

A comparable sentiment can be found in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Like Sontag, he distinguishes writing from photography on the basis that the former leaves space for play, reformulation and analysis, while the latter forgoes aesthetic method to become homologous with its object: "The Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents [...] no writing can give me this certainty".¹⁸ Photography becomes, at best, a kind of depleted pseudo-ethnography whose task is to authenticate the reality of a moment we will never be able to touch once that-which-is becomes captured as that-which-was in the photograph: "the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent".¹⁹ It becomes a transparent medium shaped only by the pre-existing form of the thing which it displaces into representation. Its form, such that it assumes one in its compliant *mimesis*, is already determined by what is or was there. Barthes does propose some capacity for the photograph to be brushed against the grain of this nakedly referential logic. In his classification of photography, Barthes distinguishes between what he terms the *studium* (the sets of social and cultural expectations which permit us to participate in, identify with, or understand the various figures, faces, objects, gestures) and the *punctum* (that which might grab us in unexpected ways, make us responsive to odd details, struck by strange juxtapositions or disarming contingencies). So Barthes designedly names the *punctum*, literally, as that which pricks, marks, or wounds us, but which also carries with it the sense of punctuation.²⁰ In other words, it punctuates the grammar of the *studium* rather than overturning it; the *punctum's* ability to arrest or surprise is still contained by a banal set of expectations which it occasionally enlivens but in whose field of reference it still takes place. Barthes also tends to make the *punctum* operable solely as a solipsistic and individualized matter, so that the heightened moments of perception, when viewing the self-evidence of what-has-been, are reducible to his own "voice of singularity" and "all the élan of an emotion which belonged only to myself".²¹

So within the wider 'society of the spectacle' thesis, photography, of all the regimes of images, is made the sterile forensics of the referent. It merely documents but also makes us passive consumers of the image of the thing and thus suspends both the reality of the referent and our capacity to engage that reality as anything other than what it already is. In the context of representations of the North, such a model readily connects with, and both intensifies and is intensified by, the standard account of the Troubles: *it just is what it is*. And this coincidence of the self-evident thereness of the referent and the deferent imitativeness of its mediation also pertains to another facet of photography claimed by Sontag and Barthes. Sontag claims that "All photographs are *memento mori*", while Barthes avers that every photograph encapsulates "the return of the dead".²² In other words, the paradox of the photograph, in wishing to freeze and to keep a moment for posterity, actually attests to the fact that this moment is now gone and it has become its preservation in photographic form. So the passing of time, mortality, haunts the yearning for eternal moments in photography. In the conventional framing of the Troubles, because it was viewed as an arrested and traumatic forestalling of history, of time and dynamics of change, to be represented in passively reflective forms that could only ever be the exequies of that stasis, this

proposition is remodelled. *That-which-has-been* becomes repeatable as *that-which-is*; the already deadness of the referent becomes the justification for the form of its representation to a world which has moved on with resigned goodwill.

However, the best photographic interventions in this terrain turn the tables on this model. It is not the referent but the form of representation which is exposed as a kind of death, a frozen and fixated gaze which would visit petrification on its objects. The best photography about Northern Ireland contests the realm of images by refusing to allow dominant forms of representation to become the Panopticon that can see everything but itself, and which would make its prisoners assent to viewing and being viewed solely through and by that gaze. For example, Victor Sloan's *Shop, Dungannon*, from *Moving Windows* (1985), very astutely interrogates the *studium* (which is just as passively or already given and 'there' as the referent in Barthes' classification of photography). The framing through the side window of the car foregrounds the covert transparency of surveillance in mainstream representations of the North, while, most crucially, the camera movement and slow shutter-speed combine to produce the after-image which appears as an explosion to the habitual *studium* of Troubles reportage. But here the *studium* is the framing; it loses the objective factness which it supposedly shares with its referent. The *punctum*, the awareness that an explosion is not an explosion ("ceci n'est pas une pipe-bombe", Magritte might almost have painted here), does not simply punctuate an agreed *studium*. The *studium* becomes its own *punctum* in the manner in which it exposes itself as a strategy of representational containment, an effect of style and framing, where the only fixed and pre-existing thing is not the referent but the ingrained socio-cultural expectations upon which the *studium's* regime of images is based. This regime here discloses its limits; it is simply a visual grammar seeking to place a representation of its referent rather than being identical thereto. If representation is unveiled as contingent, insecure and bound to relations of power and appropriation, then this awareness also destabilizes the status of its referents, which are thereby unmoored and become



open to reinterpretation, reinscription, or redemption. The terrain of the real is not already decided for emancipated spectators.

Sloan's image therefore undermines Barthes' claim: "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see".²³ It mediates that which would mediate us in the 'society of the spectacle' thesis, allowing us new ways to encounter not only representation but also reality. Willie Doherty's work also divests governing regimes of mediation, the invisibility which they seek in determining their own field of the visible. As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev discerns in what she deems the "fallible gaze" of Doherty's various photographs, installations and films, the photographic and representational apparatus is always 'evidently' there.²⁴ And rather than aligning his work with the standard terminus of the 'society of the spectacle' model, that all is mediation and that reality no longer exists other than as a second-order simulation of itself, whose falsity we all passively verify, Doherty's aesthetic actively impels us to re-engage our world by allowing us to recognise supposedly settled worldviews as merely dominant ones. If the whole purpose of ideology is to efface itself as ideology – to masquerade as the natural way of things – then, as with the thought of Slavoj Žižek, Doherty's art makes us aware that the most ideological of all statements is: the facts speak for themselves.²⁵ But rather than meaning there are no facts, no truth and no real, this awareness does not leave us passively in thrall to mediations. Instead it makes us more ably informed to evaluate and to analyse the ways in which our societies are mediated, and to intervene and to challenge these meanings and their referents, and thereby to rethink and transform the material basis of our world. In works such as *The Walls* (1987) a dominant visual regime that offers itself as a total picture is rendered absolute only in its stylised, mediated effort to totalise a field of representation in its own terms so that, by extension, it cannot exhaust the referent it claims and must sit in antagonistic relation to other versions thereof. For once we can evaluate something which feigns to be the total permeation of reality, then our

analysis is already outside of and antagonistic to that mediation, which is therefore only identical to itself and not to reality. It can neither remainder nor freeze those elements which would remain heterogeneous to it, so that the referent remains a space of dispute open to the dynamics of change rather than something we passively accept.

Active and emancipated spectatorship is also furnished by Doherty's *Same Difference* (1990) and *They're All the Same* (1991). In *Same Difference* the images are never simply forensic authentications of their referent; they only evidence their own situated placement in relation to that material. And the use of text also helps confound Sontag's dichotomy between the photograph as passive testimony and writing as active interpretation: "Only that which narrates can make us understand".²⁶ By contrast, here the narrative is also unmasked as a representational strategy intertwined with the regime of images seeking to fix rather than just reflect its referent. This does not lead to passive relativism but to the active evaluation of relations of power and representation. So too the voice-over in *They're All the Same* implores that things are not self-evidently the same by opening up a space in which representation is not *a priori* identical to its referent, but confronted by a difference and heterogeneity that it would exclude in order to sustain its own stylisation and framing. So photography and the regime of images are rigorously made unstable and contestable in these works. And, if photography is unstable in supposedly the most fatalistic of circumstances with the most fixed set of referents, then the latter are opened up to more than just determinism and passive acceptance. These visual engagements with the North during the conflict interrogate the framing or the representation, and, simultaneously, open up a less deterministic history. The motif of surveillance in both Sloan's and Doherty's works not only forefronts issues of power, representation and the placement of evidence. It also, at a very pragmatic and quotidian level, serves as a reminder that surveillance, at its most basic, is a gaze that awaits only what it expects. It is only looking for its objects to become typical, to revert to type (as threat, criminal act, predicted behaviour and deviance) so that it might generalise and justify its whole field of representation around its expectation. If surveillance work is often tedious, Sloan and Doherty also self-referentially make the Panopticon gaze of surveillance expose itself as a kind of representational monotony, as a gaze that would seek to impose only the recidivist repetition of the Same and to blind itself to anything which is non-identical to that premised referent. Sloan and Doherty subvert the consensual transparency of the *studium* in Barthes' model that is only ever punctuated, given a visual syntax by the *punctum*, since we, as emancipated spectators, apprehend it as having planted its own evidence. Moreover, the transparency of medium and referent in the Sontag conception of photography is ruptured in Sloan's and Doherty's works by this sundering of the representational and axiomatic continuum wherein the *studium* founds its evidence (its referent) on the basis of its own self-evidence (its representation). The photograph is never allowed to agree its referent on the grounds of an already agreed frame of representation; the latter is reviewed as the site/sight of a dominance that is contestable.

Hence, the best artworks through the Troubles always contested the idea that they must be *ex hypothesi*; that is, undertaken according to the template already given. They were always a reminder that art is *praxis* rather than just a formally consensual conformity to, and imitation of, already agreed sets of actions. I cover all of this because I feel that this intense vigilance and refusal to accept terms of appropriateness for how art should function is just as necessary now as it was then. For the current dispensation, proclaimedly one of peace and political agreement that is typified by the official grammar of Derry's year as UK City of Culture, also houses a certain set of stipulations and directives as to what is appropriate for art now and in the future, as well as grounding its new artistic provision on a homogenous and fatalistic narrative of what-has-been. The official promotional literature, with some merit and some justice, embraces the opportunity to tell 'Our Story'. Given that the British and Northern Irish states punished Derry for decades for being too Catholic and it was occluded from any meaningful civic participation in these respective polities (or the fact that the city was initially bypassed by the University of Ulster, for which it was the most obvious location), it is entirely understandable that this chance to engage in civic connections within and across Ireland, Britain and the wider world, should be grasped. And "our story" is intentionally an inclusive one that seeks to weave different strands into an agreed narrative "from plantation to peace". As the *Creating A New Story* section of the Executive Summary puts it:

As a cultural melting pot we recognise that our cultural and political traditions sometimes approach the past from divergent places and that the truth itself is lost in translation. The "sum of unreliable parts" ultimately leaves us with some prejudicial thinking and we plan to use our Cultural Programme to define a new narrative through purposeful culture led inquiry which will allow for alternative views and ideas to be absorbed and considered.

Additionally, the executive aim is to place "culture at the heart of regeneration". Again, especially for a city that was on the receiving end of the military apparatus



of the British state as well as its socio-economic sanctioning, this is, on its own terms, an admirable desire. However, there are contradictions and strictures underpinning this template of culture as promise, reconciliation and renewal. The imperative to tell the city's story – “a story which must be told”, according to the executive brochure – is short-circuited by another peremptory narrative request: “In 2013 Derry-Londonderry wants, and needs, to tell a new story”. This need for a new story shapes particular projects such as STORY, BT Portrait of a City, and the public mural competition organized by Culture Company and Tourism Ireland. So Derry must tell its story but equally needs a new story. In this sense, the old story can be agreed only and insofar as it is placed as the traumatic narrative of the past which will no longer suffice. It is reconciled only formally to the extent that, as a narrative, it makes the past homogenous with itself as sectarian violence. Hence a new story is required to move the city beyond that repeated stasis. So we can only tell a new story if we agree that the past was a bad one. Why else would a new story be necessary? The foundations of the requirement for a new narrative are built upon a view of the conflict that is just as static and arrested as *The Devil's Own* or *Patriot Games*. And this contradiction – *now we can tell our story, except we can't and we need a new one* – can be mapped onto the superintending political discourses constituting the Peace Process in its institutional forms. Here there is another bold imperative – *let's make politics work* – but this version of politics actually attenuates politics proper in two key ways. Firstly, it depoliticizes politics and purloins its capacity to disagree and dispute (let's all just agree in our difference and diversity, there is room enough in the devolved assembly for everyone as long as he or she consents to designating him or herself as a constituent of one of two communities). And secondly, it makes politics proper (the facility to dispute and contest) reducible to sectarian murder and violence (so let's have no more of the past unless it is archived as the conceptual folk park of Two Traditions that both suppresses sectarianism and expresses it as kitsch).

If anything, we should have *more* and not *less* of the past, but, in this case, a history not at one with its governing and static representation; a history that views the conflict, and political struggle more widely, as something more than sectarianism. Such a history would include an international set of engagements with Civil Rights (it reminds us that ‘You Are Now Entering Free Derry’ was an act of transatlantic solidarity with protestors in Berkeley, USA, rather than the token of an introverted and tribal Tradition), socialism and class struggle, feminism and anti-sectarianism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, anti-racism and so on. To occlude these dynamics of the past (which make the past more than a petrified stasis that simply furnishes the museum exhibits of today's kitsch), is also to quarantine them from the present and to make it self-evidently homogenous with itself, so that the new dispensation just is what it is. The static, monolithic version of the past cannot explain, for example, why some people today object to the presence of Raytheon in Derry. There is another history heterogeneous to, and never bounded by, sectarianism that makes the Troubles part of processes of radicalism and change, which pre-date and inform them, rather than a reflection of stasis. If art was able to refuse to serve regimes of what was appropriate and permissible during the Troubles (and to contest a prevailing view of that conflict as tribal stasis), then it should also seek to confound the agreed identity of the present. These are the stipulations for the public mural solicited by Culture Company and Tourism Ireland:

To some, it's a wall – to others, a blank canvas.

To be considered the image needs to cover the following points:

- It must capture what being UK City of Culture means to Derry-Londonderry, celebrating the year of cultural events.
- It must be future facing and positive to mark a new chapter in Derry-Londonderry's history.
- It should not carry any political symbolism.
- It will become a semi-permanent art piece, so must be relevant for years to come.
- The image can't be overly complicated with bold shapes and strong colours.
- It should also have a varied colour palette to ensure a clear final image.

Of course it is unsurprising that official commissions like this will desire compliant art identical to its sanctioned and positivist requirements, but the stipulation blocking political symbolism is noteworthy for the way in which it once more construes politics in terms of an implied sectarian iconography. But even political murals in Derry and elsewhere are irreducible to sectarianism in any case. Would Free Derry corner have been eligible as a template if painted in the colours of the Palestinian flag (as it has been)? Again politics are bad or sectarian or disruptive (in a confirmation that ‘make politics work’ is an attempted depoliticization of the spectrum of politics). In strictly regulated contexts, part of the reconciliatory promise of culture in the official events is to express an agreed space for Two Traditions, so that you can have Irish dancing or Apprentice Boys events as well as those enlisting international celebrities and local people made good. And in addition to the Two Traditions template for culture (which embodies a sectarianism that it is paradoxically intended to resolve), the official programme makes room for art to be consumed, aptly enough by its ‘consumers’ who are

repeatedly invoked in the literature. The City of Culture events are in danger of making two peremptory directives about the permissibility of art which actually foreclose the possibilities of artworks. Firstly, that culture is the expression of already agreed identities – an expression of the Two Traditions; and, secondly, that it must be consumed, that its recipients are consumers. Before my hostility to consumer art is misunderstood as elitism, let me turn that argument on its head by suggesting that elitism entails a small group of people deciding in advance how most people may engage with culture. To prescribe to people that they can encounter art as a member of one of Two Traditions or as a consumer is elitist and patrols people's responses for them. There is democracy in allowing art to take forms that are not preordained and, perhaps more importantly, in permitting people to make of art what they want in ways that have not been pre-empted by a cabal. Elitism makes art and the people who encounter it conform to an identity (as a cultural tradition, as a customer); but art also has the capacity to contest and transform identity, to remain non-identical to the way of the world and to unfold other pathways of living and thinking.

Bloody Sunday was, amongst its other murderous violations, an assault on the ownership of public space, the expurgation of Derry's citizens from their own streets. The intense violence done to Derry's civics helps explain the tenor of Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) which is very much estranged from the streets. Belfast novels like Glenn Patterson's *Fat Lad* (1992) or Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1996) notably, in presaging and endorsing the ceasefire and Peace Process eras, feel able to reconcile antagonisms between their respective characters in a supposedly shared and more public sphere, a new Belfast pulsing with diversity.²⁷ Deane's work is much more at odds with this positivism, its recondite enclosure haunting borderlines not only because it interrogates a particular version of nationalism as a kind of protracted and secretive family history but also because of that sundering of urban civics in Derry itself. If the people of Derry were only visible in their own city through regimes of surveillance and violence, placing them as threats, targets, trespassers in someone else's polity – as Willie Doherty's work makes clear, as does Locky Morris' *Creggan Nightlife* (1986) or *Of Note* (2004) across these dispensations – then we also need to be wary of a new regime that only permits the same citizens visibility and participation in civic life as consumers and customers, or as bearers of Two Traditions. This is still a regime of delimitation which prescribes in advance how people must conform to have access to a particular space. When Glasgow was European Capital of Culture in 1990, Jim Kelman, Alisdair Gray, Tom Leonard and other writers were part of the Workers' City movement which opposed the official Merchants' City gentrification of the city centre area. They claimed that the institutional events excluded rather than included ordinary citizens (or sought their consent in a tokenistic way) and that they also destroyed (rather than regenerated or commemorated) a whole organic history of culture that was already there. When Liverpool became Culture Capital in 2008, part of the economic redevelopment of that city involved the demolition of the Liverpool Life Museum, an act which scattered to the winds a host of important archives of working-class culture, including the work of George Garrett, a writer and activist who taught George Orwell a thing or two about life and literature. Let not comparable things be done in the name of culture in Derry.

I began by arguing that the best of art during the Troubles reminded us that a fuller understanding of Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* necessitated more than just passive imitation, and also necessitated *praxis*, the faculty to reshape and rethink. Nonetheless, Aristotle's formal templates for art and their recasting of the world only assume their fullest meaning when they are understood – as they were intended to be – when linked to Plato's extra-artistic notion of *ethos* as elaborated in his *Republic*.²⁸ Plato notoriously wished to banish the poets precisely because he feared art's capacity to disorder divine hierarchies of forms and souls, to reform, de-form, un-form rather than accept the Form of Forms. He felt art was permissible only insofar as it served and endorsed the *ethos*, the organisational principle of his society's hierarchy. So Aristotle's formal template for different kinds of art and narrative establishes certain generic rules but it also ties these aesthetic functions to a prescription about art's adherence to an *ethos* that sets the limits on the latter's *praxis*. But, as Jacques Rancière's work indicates, art's *praxis* was always capable of rebelling not only against its own generic rules but also these extra-artistic constraints, of recasting what was permissible in art at a formal level while simultaneously challenging who had the right to be subjects and objects of art.²⁹ I have tried to indicate that art during the Troubles had this capacity to challenge and disorder a governing representation of the way of the world; but I also feel that this refusal of art to be identical to a consensual worldview is just as vital today. If Alan Clarke's *Elephant* sought to evaluate that which would make itself so self-evident that it was just there, then this imaginative and analytical intelligence and rigour should also be brought to bear on the present and the future. We should not allow the current dispensation to become another elephant in the room. Otherwise, in addition to ceding a monolithic view of the past – it just was what it was – we make the present an already agreed sphere – it just is what it is. Theodor Adorno wrote that “all reification is a forgetting”. Reification – supplanting an abstraction for the replete complexity and contestation of the world – is currently happening in the year of culture



in the name of cultural tradition (art as the expression of Two Communities) and global capitalism (art as the expression of consumers, it is that which gives them their identities and something to consume). These two reifications forget an alternative and heterogeneous history of the North of Ireland irreducible to the narrative of the Troubles as self-verifying tribal entrenchment. They also forget art's ability to dissent from an agreed version of the present as a regime in which two communities meet to consume and find identity in their kitsch heritage and acts of consumption. Inverting the idea that art should imitate life, and thus endorse the latter's prevailing identity and form, Adorno stated:

[...] in a subtle and sublimated sense, reality ought to imitate works of art. By their very presence, artworks signal the existence of the non-existent; their reality testifies to the feasibility of the unreal, the possibility of the possible. More particularly, the longing of art, which posits the possible reality of that which is not, metamorphoses to take the form of remembrance. In remembrance the present is combined with the non-existent in the form of that which was but no longer is.³⁰

Put simply, art is able to constellate the past, present and future in new ways which confound the way of the world: by being able to give form to things as yet unformed; to re-form things de-formed by the violence of modernity. So art testifies to the possibility of the possible by the very fact of its being brought into existence: something which did not exist previously now does. And this yearning for the possible, for the future, is also a longing for, and act of, remembrance; a giving new form and expression to things excised from the present by a homogenization of the past. This model is particularly prescient in a context where the present dispensation would make the past simply the one thing in the one form (a traumatic narrative for which there is now an amnesty) and, in so doing, secure both its own self-identity (it is self-evidently a new story) and its sovereignty over the future. Art, during the Troubles and now, has the capacity to recover the past as more than just a homogenous thing and to recuperate and project the present and the future as more than just the inevitability of what is, as processes that can realise the possible. Art as critique can remain non-identical to the self-identity of the world; it can refuse to delimit in advance what is possible, what might be formed. The twin elephants proposing an *ethos* which would make all things identical to the governing regime of the present are the Two Traditions and consumer capitalist models. We would do well to bring art's aptitude for critique to bear on these before they become a herd.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Christopher Newmann, *The Devil's Own*, London: Bantam Books, 1997, p. 191.
- 2 See Aristotle, *Poetics*. (Trans.) Joe Sachs, Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2006.
- 3 Margaret Scanlan, 'The Unbearable Present: Northern Ireland in Four Contemporary Novels', *Études Irlandaises* 10 (Dec 1985), p. 145-6.
- 4 Colin Bateman, *Divorcing Jack*, London: Harper Collins, 1995, 150.
- 5 John Hewitt, *Collected Poems*, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991, p. 205.
- 6 Hewitt, *Collected*, p. 387.
- 7 Francine Cunningham, 'Writing in the Rag and Bone Shop of the Troubles'. *The Sunday Business Post* (11 Sept 1994), p. 26.
- 8 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 74.
- 9 Derek Mahon, *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin, 2000, p. 54.
- 10 Eamonn Hughes, 'Introduction: Northern Ireland – Border Country' in Eamonn Hughes, (Ed.) *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland 1960-1990*, Milton Keynes: Open U P, 1991, p. 6. See Tom Clancy, *Patriot Games* London: Harper Collins, 1988; and the film version *Patriot Games*. Director Phillip Noyce (Paramount, 1992).
- 11 *Elephant*, Director Alan Clarke (BBC, 1989).
- 12 See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Red and Black, 1983; see also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- 13 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, (Trans.) Gregory Elliott London: Verso, 2009, p. 13.
- 14 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 24; 3.
- 15 Sontag, p. 3.
- 16 Sontag, p. 23.
- 17 Sontag, p. 6.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, (Trans.) Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 2000, p. 85.
- 19 Barthes, 80.
- 20 Barthes, 26.
- 21 Barthes, p. 76.
- 22 Sontag, 15; Barthes, p. 9.
- 23 Barthes, p. 6.
- 24 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, 'A Fallible Gaze: The Art of Willie Doherty' in *Willie Doherty: False Memory*, London: Merrell, 2002, p. 11.
- 25 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989.
- 26 Sontag, p. 23.
- 27 See Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark*, London: Cape, 1996; Glenn Patterson, *Fat Lad*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1992; and Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1996.
- 28 See Plato, *Republic*, (Trans.) G.M.A. Grube, Indianapolis: Harkett, 1992.
- 29 See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (Trans.) Gabriel Rockhill, London: Continuum, 2004.
- 30 Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften* Vol.7., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970, p. 199-200. My translations.

Note:

All quotations from the Culture Company taken from the official website: [<http://www.culturetech.co/story>]

IMAGES:

- Page 16: Phillip Noyce, *Patriot Games*, (Paramount Pictures, 1992).
 Page 18-19: Alan Clarke, *Elephant*, (BBC, 1989).
 Page 21: Locky Morris, *Of Note* (2007).