The New Northern Ireland as a crime scene

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'I think people are relieved to have fiction coming out of Northern Ireland that isn't about men in balaclavas.' Brian McGilloway[1]

This essay is prompted by the discernible increase in British-made television crime series set in Northern Ireland in the 21st century. With series like *The Fall* (2013, 2016)*, Bloodlands* (2021, 2022) and *Marcella* (2021) set in Belfast, while most of the hit series *Line of Duty* (2012--) has been filmed in Northern Ireland, one aspect of what is sometimes called the Peace Dividend appears to be an increased attractiveness of a 'post-conflict' Belfast as a television setting. I'm interested in the way in which these new Belfast-set crime dramas negotiate the tropes and iconography of twentieth century 'Troubles' Belfast, while also participating in the transformation of the city associated with the arrival of the audio-visual industries. If one context for what follows is the complex, contested political history of Northern Ireland, a region in which recourse to the police for at least part of its population was likely to be punished by paramilitaries, the other is the transnational vagabondage of the audio visual industries, epitomised most pertinently by the production of *Game of Thrones* in the newly converted Titanic studios in the former Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast.[2]

Most scholarship on the cultural industries of the New Northern Ireland focuses on the creation of the Titanic Quarter through the redevelopment of (part of) the Harland and Wolff shipyard with the centre piece of the spectacular Titanic Belfast

experience/ museum and the HBO-Warner series, *Games of Thrones,* which was produced with substantial tax incentives from various government agencies.[3] The way points of this scholarship, in different degrees, are Michael Curtin's productive notion of media capitals, Saskia Sassen's global cities, and David Harvey's discussion of public space and city regeneration. While there is already a fairly substantial literature about tourism and the screen industries, there is a developing body of scholarship about the interplay of audio-visual production, redevelopment and gentrification in locations ranging from New Orleans to Istanbul.[4] In relation to Belfast, the most interesting discussions, such as that of Ipek Celik Rappas (2019) and Phil Ramsey (2013), explore a specific production context and use empirical research to assess the relationship between the 'cultural industry' promises of jobs and rejuvenation and the actuality of what these tax-payer supported, internationally owned enterprises return to these areas.

My interest is a little different. The point about the setting of the story world of *Game of Thrones* is that it is not only not Belfast, it is not really even of this world, whether or not individual scenes are location or studio-shot. In contrast to this fantasy, I'm interested in the recent appearances of contemporary Belfast on screen, and particularly the allure of this city for current television crime drama. What are the features, the landmarks, the characteristics of Belfast in recent television crime drama? What does the New Northern Ireland look like and what types of stories can be told there? What can happen here? To what extent is the televisual use of the new screen Belfast caught in the paradox that it is the old Belfast which makes it an attractive setting for crime drama?

Informing the essay are Franco Moretti's ideas about the spatiality of the novel, and Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, a notion which combines time and place, genre and space. These may be generative for thinking about Northern Ireland in the Troubles as an audio-visual place which has a particular iconography in which certain events occur, certain characters are found and certain stories are told (Moretti, 1998: 5). The chronotope, which Bakhtin elaborated in relation to the literary pastoral, has been used by cinema scholars Paula Massood (2003) to conceptualise 'the hood' in LA-set African American cinema and Paul Newland (2008) to consider the 19th century East End of London. Michael Pigott characterises Bakhtin's idea as 'at once brilliantly simple and brilliantly opaque' in the way in which it identifies a 'conjunction of time and space in the novel' (2018: xx). The interest of the idea lies in the way it proposes a relationship between fictional forms and broader cultures. It works on the same terrain as genre, invoking the recognition of convention by audiences, particularly if we consider genre in Christine Gledhill's terms as 'a switching point between life worlds and fictional worlds' (2008: 15). However, 'chronotope' spatialises and historicises some of these attributes, allowing the identification of particular 'time/places' – such as Troubles-era Northern Ireland – which have particular attributes in a body of audio-visual work. Using this idea in relation to Northern Ireland builds on scholarship, such as the work of John Hill and Martin McLoone, which has established the contours of the Troubles film, the history of Belfast on film, and genre in the Northern Ireland context, to propose Troubles Belfast as an identifiable chronotope.[5] Brian McGilloway's 'men in balaclavas' in the epigraph come from this chronotope. This set of aesthetic conventions which include an iconography of cramped terraced housing, tanks, soldiers and flame in the streets, with plots featuring ubiquitous and incomprehensible violence, and, for individual

characters, conflicts of loyalty and desire between romance/ family and the paramilitary organisation, draws on and inflects news reporting as well as fictional film and television production. The idea of the chronotope is useful as it can incorporate material outside fictional film and television which contributes to what we see in film and television. In the case of Northern Ireland, where so much of the imagery has been generated by news reporting, this is significant. It also shifts the type of question that can be asked of the material. Familiar realist questions – 'is this film, which deploys realist conventions, revealing the real of the Northern Irish situation', or, 'what is the relationship between the world depicted in this television series and the world it depicts?' are displaced. Instead, the analytic emphasis shifts to the identification of the tropes and contours of the world depicted and the analysis of the aesthetic conventions of story worlds set in this time/ place. In the consideration of post-Troubles Belfast-set television crime series which follows, the positing of a Troubles chronotope – which I do provisionally – recognises the overwhelming audio-visual weight of this heritage and tutors an approach in which the nature and quality of the engagement with this chronotope is seen as significant. In particular, which is pertinent to an industry desperate to maintain its attractiveness to transnational productions, the tension between the identification of Belfast as a specific place and the generation of new and different stories becomes a significant area of analytic attention. Is Belfast recognisable as a specific place outside a Troubles chronotope? What are the stories that can be told of Northern Ireland outside a Troubles chronotope?[6]

These questions will be pursued in the analysis of two recent Northern Ireland-set drama series, *Bloodlands* and *Marcella* which were first broadcast on British network

television in February and March 2021, when the UK was in Covid-19 lockdown, and which have very different approaches to post-Troubles Belfast. However, I start with one of British television's big successes of recent years, *Line of Duty,* which was broadcast in its sixth and reputedly final season later during the same period, and proved both popular and, in its investigation of high-level institutional corruption, culturally resonant.

Not Northern Ireland

Line of Duty is definitely not set in Northern Ireland although it is made there with substantial contributions from Northern Ireland Screen. It is set in a British city somewhere: a relatively joyless, grey urban environment with different types of housing (terraces, semis, detached, new-build), expressways, recognisably UK-style public facilities such as hospitals, street signage and phone kiosks, and those mainstays of the crime genre, pubs, clubs and alleys. The accent of the central character, Superintendent Ted Hastings, played by the Irish actor Adrian Dunbar, and his vivid place-specific catchphrases ("I didn't float up the Lagan in a bubble") are the only hint of Ireland in the set-up of the show.

The series' lack of location-specificity could be seen to work in two ways. Firstly, it emphasises the strength of performance, character and script in the production. There is no lingering on the surroundings of the action, no significance beyond the narratively functional to the mise-en-scène. This is particularly marked in the long, acronym-rich set-piece interview scenes which became a signature of the series. The density of the language, with constant, fluent reference to sub-sections of police

regulations, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, and numbered items of evidence, is emphasised by the standard institutional sets, the main props the table, the recording apparatus, the documentation and its display. The viewer can concentrate on the complexity of the plots which always involve duplicity and betrayals of trust. Attention is not diverted from the twists of the narrative and the assessment of the guilt or innocence of the subjects of investigation.[7] However, it could also be seen to render a certain thin-ness to the use of location in comparison to the texture of the rituals of the police procedural deployed so compellingly by the show. In an instance of the coming together of a de-territorialised series with the increasing demands on producers for international sales, one could argue that all an international audience needs to know is that it's set in Britain – no need to get bogged down in incomprehensible local detail. This attitude to location is epitomised through the prop of a map in the interrogation office. There is a city map on the wall, as is standard in crime drama, but it is almost never in sufficient focus to identify the city (Birmingham). It doesn't matter – it's just a British city.

But there remain traces of *Line of Duty's* location origins throughout – moments or scenes marked by the occasional eruptions of setting. These eruptions create a certain unease, an interruption in the taut flow of narrative, a moment when the anonymity of the setting recedes to be replaced with an uncertainty about setting, a 'where is this happening?'. These moments do not elicit Ruth Barton's 'uncanny recognition effect' for Irish viewers of non-Irish set runaway productions, but they do destabilize the fictional world of *Line of Duty,* and are often associated with the striking proximity of city and countryside in the drama, something which is possible, in production terms, because of the size of Belfast.[8] Ramsey et al. (2019) trace the way in which the

compactness of Northern Ireland as a production site, 'the biggest set in the world',

formed a significant element in the marketing of production possibilities in the region

by Northern Ireland Screen. While *Line of Duty* has no call for the spectacular natural

features – mountains and waterfalls – which proved attractive to HBO for *Game of*

Thrones, it has made use of deserted country roads and waterside settings of both

river and lough.

The best example of how this works is the inaugurating fatal ambush on an unlit

country road in series 2, which focuses on the complicity or otherwise of the Keeley

Hawes character, Lindsay Denton. This ambush remains a central investigative focus

throughout the six episodes, with questions about route choices, personnel choices,

tracking and agency. Who knew what, and who was responsible for which decisions

which then led to the death – in a burst of machine gun fire and a crash - of three

police officers and a protected witness? Understanding the ambush, the narrative

suggests, will solve the case for the home team of AC-12 (anti-corruption). But this

proves difficult, and there is something recalcitrant about the investigation which is

narratively attributable to the possible extent of police corruption. My argument is

that there is also something indecipherable about the incident which exceeds 'who did

what?' questions, and that this is the result of the eruption of the real location of the

production. The ambush takes place in an unlit country road shown to be in

immediate proximity to the metropolitan area in which the ambushed vehicle's

journey starts. This road recalls Willie Doherty's Northern Ireland photographs – an

anonymous featureless road, with trees on either side, and no trace of what might have

happened there - what murders, what kidnaps, what ambushes.[9] Doherty's

documentation of the quiet empty scenes of the violence of the 'Troubles' points to

both the persistence and the erasure of history. The ambush at the beginning of the second series, like the one at the beginning of the fifth series, is both shocking and expected. This is the mise-en-scène of terror – balaclavas, automatic weapons, a quiet road. The ambush, and the complicity or otherwise of the senior officer Lindsay Denton, is difficult to assess not just because of Hawes's performance, but because the filmed event floods the scene with too much meaning, too many other murderous ambushes. There is a disturbance in the fictional world carries with it echoes of the Troubles chronotope.

This haunting of the series by its production circumstances with these moments in which location is – to put it most neutrally – anomalous, moves into a different gear in the fifth series, which, towards its conclusion, begins to turn on more direct Northern Ireland connections. Without much warning – the most significant, in episode 4, the torture of Hastings' wife, Roisin, by a balaclava'd man from 'back home', with injuries to her knees, wrists and ankles, an injury pattern characteristic of paramilitary punishment beatings – suddenly the plot is overtaken with inheritances of the Troubles. Long-distant crimes, injustices and disappearances are shown to both motivate, and be exploited by, key players in the present investigation of the involvement of a corrupt senior police officer with an organised crime group. As is characteristic of drama which positions itself as responsible in its engagement with 'Troubles' history, as we shall see with *Bloodlands*, for the audience to understand character motivation and plot, there needs to be some historical exposition. In *Line of Duty* 5, this exposition is mainly reserved for the final, feature length episode in which Hastings is given a complex Belfast backstory as a Catholic officer in the mainly Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary, his name (which is, in Belfast,

immediately identifiable as not-Catholic) the result of a mixed-marriage.[10]

Dramatically it is audacious to postpone this exposition to the final episode, so that it serves as explanation for previous enigmas, rather than an originating context. The Troubles are, as it were, aestheticized, brought into a crime drama to explain the persistence of a connection between two characters who have never met. A history of discrimination, secrecy, abduction and adoption is shown to have been manipulated by some characters within the series, while remaining concealed from the audience and those most affected. The Troubles chronotope is proposed as formative for characters with Northern Irish origins, but in such a narratively condensed fashion that it is almost only formally, rather than actually explanatory. Confining the backstory to the final episode shocks both protagonists and audience - while avoiding the possibility of the series as a whole being labelled as a Troubles or Northern Irish drama, generally regarded by British broadcasters as a turn-off for audiences.

Image Problems

In the penultimate episode of *Line of Duty* 5, a dangerous rendezvous is set up in the public space of a large shopping centre, 'The Palasades'. The familiar architecture of these spaces of consumption, the atria, the galleries, the escalators – and the crowds of shoppers – provide a nervy, multi-focussed location for a dramatic encounter which, in addition to its principals, involves armed police and undercover surveillance. Shot in the new Victoria Square retail complex in Belfast, this scene, as the drama proposes, passes easily as taking place, not in Belfast – all that glass - but within the unidentified English city in which *Line of Duty* is set. As William Neill observes with some asperity, 'Glass is now the representational form of choice for development in

the post-conflict city as an obvious contrast to the brutalist terror-proofed buildings of 'the Troubles' (2006:112). The Victoria Square Centre can pass for somewhere else because it is like so many other places. Dominated by transnational brands (many of which were absent from Northern Ireland in the 20th century) it is anonymous – normal - one of the non-places of contemporary consumption.

The conventions of place-setting in film and television are not place-specific. Titles across an image can read 'Belfast 2018' as easily as 'Liverpool 2019'. Opening sequences in films and titles sequences in television series frequently provide place-setting montages, often a combination of aerial shots, key views and landmarks, maybe moving down to the street or building level where the drama will unfold. John Hill (2006) has traced the combination of political and economic factors which have discouraged the production of feature film in Northern Ireland, and both he and Martin McLoone (2008) have outlined the consequent paucity of landmark imagery for Belfast, and the tendency for Belfast to be presented as an almost abstract *noir* city. While the Albert Clock, Belfast City Hall, the Crown Bar, the (bombed) Europa Hotel and the Harland Wolff shipyards may serve to identify the city for some viewers, more familiar by far are the gable-end murals, the painted kerbstones and burning cars. It is the political situation in Northern Ireland which has produced its landmark imagery, the stuff of years of news broadcasts all over the world: soldiers, armoured vehicles, youth throwing petrol bombs, IRA funerals, wrecked pubs, Orange marches, burning vehicles, security checks, weeping relatives.[11] This is the iconography which identifies the space/time of the Troubles chronotope.[12]

Martin McLoone, writing in 2004, observes 'after nearly a decade of the peace process in Northern Ireland, Belfast still suffers from a profound image problem, (2004: 135). Attentive to the complex interplay of genre, geography and history, he distinguishes between Belfast in 'troubles films', 'peace process films' and 'films of reconstruction', while also outlining the dominant histories of *noir* and 'pariah' city. McLoone's conclusion identifies 'a substantial representational gap' between these historic and emergent screen Belfasts into which the 'concerns of the little streets' disappear, emphasising how unusual the imaging of 'urban banality' (141) is in the context of Belfast. William Neill, writing at the same time as McLoone, when redevelopment of the River Lagan and the former docks is underway or in prospect, also addresses the city's image problem. Neill's concern is with the built environment rather than the moving image, and he discusses government supported attempts to represent 'post-conflict' Belfast in a way which will enable the now necessary official place promotion. Exploring the prospect of the development of both the Maze Prison and the Titanic as potential contributors to an image repertoire to secure the city's identity within a competitive global market, Neill concludes that the city possesses 'scant non-controversial representational resources'(2006: 109-110). Most recognisable sites and landmarks in Belfast are already replete with meaning, and meaning that is contested, speaking to traumatic histories and signifying in opposed ways to different citizens.

Both McLoone and Neill express concern about the exclusion of communities, histories and parts of the city from the new imaging of Belfast, and their work points to the thin-ness of available, uncontested imagery which is specific to the city. The counterpoint to the international river and waterside developments in the city centre

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and the arrival of new landmarks like the Hilton Hotel which featured so suggestively in *The Fall,* has been the erection of more 'peace-walls' and various types of informal defence outside the redeveloped city centre. At the same time, there is evidence of increased segregation within working class residential areas, with Ramsey citing the 22 peace walls existing in 1998 having grown to 48 by 2010.[13] It is not only banal everyday peacetime life which is thinly represented – so too is persistent sectarianism, vernacular defensive architecture and continuing school segregation. Cappuccino culture may have come to Belfast, but its arrival is both uneven and not necessarily welcome.

It is not just Belfast the city which has image problems. There is also a problem with the police in Northern Ireland – evidently also pertinent for television crime drama. This is not the place to rehearse the contested history of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the only routinely armed police force in Britain, dominantly Protestant in its recruitment, which was renamed and reformed in 2001 to form the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). It is the PSNI logo which figures very prominently in *Bloodlands*, and makes some appearance, in *Marcella.* However, the association of the RUC with the British state, and, in some instances, with Loyalist paramilitaries, meant that recourse to the police was not an option for Catholic working-class communities, and entanglement with the security forces led to IRA punishment. It is this history which is invoked in *Marcella* when a recently-released prisoner, at a memorial for his daughter who has died of a heroin overdose, passionately declaims, 'we used to look after our own - we didn't need politicians and the police – everyone knows the rules – drug dealers will be shot' [Episode 3]. It is this history too which generates one of the noticeable and interesting figures of post-

Troubles fiction, the Catholic RUC officer. Ted Hastings in *Line of Duty* is by no means alone here – in *Bloodlands,* Lorcan Cranitch plays a senior Catholic officer who had survived the RUC (and speaks Gaelic in extremis), while the novels of Adrian McKinty and Claire McGowan both feature the figure.[14] This figure functions as a significant and recurring device through which a certain post-Troubles sensibility can be articulated and enables the setting of drama within the police. The device meets the demands for cultural verisimilitude – the RUC was mainly Protestant, and was perceived as such – while also breaching the singularity of this representation of the RUC. As with Hastings, this character permits the characterisation of the RUC as hostile to Catholics, but, at the same time gestures, in a peculiar backwards/forwards projection to the possibility that a police force of Northern Ireland could be, or could become, inclusive.

Setting television crime drama in this city, with a police force with this history, is a complicated proposition. Brian Cliff (2018) has discussed the long shadow of 'Troubles Trash', the mass-market popular fiction which uses a Northern Ireland setting for its stories of men with guns, much of it originating from outside in Northern Ireland. The gunmen, torture, hijackings, the masked gangs, and, increasingly, the implication of the involvement of British security forces has provided a durable generic vocabulary for crime-related fiction in Northern Ireland cinema. There is, however, in this state of exception, no tradition of the television police procedural with mundane police/ community everyday interaction at its heart. This is a genre which, in its British iterations, is dependent on certain assumptions about the stability of the state and the neutrality of its agents – assumptions which are not sustainable in this context. This makes the setting of two series with central

police characters an interesting test case for the New Northern Ireland.[15] Crime

drama, whether realist or not, it is always concerned with some iteration of the

disruption of normal/banal/everyday by abnormal/criminal/deviant. The issue for

Belfast-set television crime drama – given the existing patterns of representation - is

what normal looks like. What do the streets of Belfast look like when not in flames?

What does family life look like in a room into which a petrol bomb is not about to be

tossed? Who would ask a police officer for assistance? The sexual/ serial killer

Belfast-set Gillian Anderson vehicle, *The Fall,* is pioneering in some ways here as the

drama includes scenes in a number of ordinary residential streets as well as parts of

the redeveloped Laganside. However, as I've suggested elsewhere, while these

representations of the television city as specifically dangerous to women may be

relatively fresh for Belfast, a city in which normality is the sadistic sexual murder of

women is an ambivalent benefit of the peace process (2019: 13-14). The setting and

concerns of *The Fall* have already attracted substantial critical discussion to which I

will return briefly in my conclusion, but my main interest here will be two later series,

Bloodlands and *Marcella*.[16]

Bloodlands and *Marcella*

Bloodlands and *Marcella,* broadcast on British television in early 2021, when the UK

was in its third Covid-19 lockdown, make an incongruous pair. *Bloodlands*, starring

James Nesbitt, promising a 'tough hard-hitting drama from the makers of *Line of

Duty',* while the Scandi-noir influenced *Marcella* was a third outing for Anna Friel's

deeply disturbed detective haunted by a cot-death and now undercover in Belfast. But

both are set in Northern Ireland with funding from Northern Ireland Screen - and the

choices made and difficulties encountered are instructive in the context of the representation of 'post-conflict' Belfast.

The four-episode *Bloodlands,* which features as its inaugurating enigma the present-day, historically resonant kidnapping of a business-man with an IRA past, was heavily trailed by the BBC as coming from 'the makers of *Line of Duty* and *The Bodyguard'*, both successes for the Corporation. Nesbitt, who in addition to his comedy roles has a record of engaged Troubles-related film and television, is a big enough star to feature on the front cover of the Radio Times, interviewed 'on life, loss and *Bloodlands,* his gripping new crime thriller'.[17] Scheduled for the BBC1 Sunday night 9.00 slot its first episode attracted a large audience which had been well-briefed, by the constant trailer reference to *Line of Duty*, to expect plot complexity. As the *Financial Times* reviewer – evidently writing a long way away from Northern Ireland – enthused, 'Such a background of ancient griefs and beefs can't help but provide great atmosphere for a police procedural' (Feay, 2021: 15.). However, although the BBC announced a second series as the first ended, audience figures had dropped, and there was perceptible disappointment in reviews and commentary, with one contributor to the *Belfast Telegraph* discussion suggesting, 'the most shocking revelation is that there's going to be a second series'.[18] What went wrong for a drama that started so well?

The question for the individual characters of the series, as for Northern Ireland itself, the show suggests, is the extent to which the past determines their present. These concerns are established in the first episode when New Northern Ireland imagery (a drive into a sparkly city, a glitzy bar, all night lights and night life high above the city) is contrasted with a message left for the police on the car of a kidnap victim. In the

sombre morning after his daughter's birthday party, Brannick (Nesbitt) must inspect a watery crime scene as the kidnap victim's car is pulled out of Strangford Lough, and then meet a colleague in a deserted wasteland to discuss what he finds. The spectacular setting for this East Belfast meeting is the now empty dockside, loomed over by the remaining, massive Harland and Wolff gantry cranes, known locally as Samson and Goliath. The message is a blank postcard of these same cranes, clearly meaningful and perturbing to Brannick and his colleague. The present of the New Northern Ireland is interrupted by something which seems to be from the past, and which introduces a quite different iconography of desolate, empty spaces far from the glittery night life of the opening scene. **(FIG 1 here if used)**

[Caption: **Figure 1: The postcard of Samson and Goliath held in an evidence bag in** *Bloodlands*]

This postcard, which inaugurates a reinvestigation of the 'Goliath Murders' merits a little further consideration. The image of the cranes features on a number of Belfast-tourist goods (guides, postcards etc.), and has arguably, by 2020, been 'Titanic-Quartered'. By this I mean that the cranes have been emptied of their particular associations with the mainly Protestant space of the twentieth century working shipyards, to signify instead simply 'post-industrial Belfast'. As it is the docks and the Harland and Wolff shipyard that have been redeveloped to host the Titanic visitor attraction and studios, the cranes persist in the very spaces which are now generating new images of Northern Ireland. The use of the postcard is meaningful for the characters within the drama, reigniting the enigma of the identity of the Goliath murderer, but also functions as a little self-reflexive nod to the conditions of production in post-conflict Belfast.

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Bloodlands had serious intentions in relation to its setting in contemporary Northern Ireland, and explicitly – perhaps a little too explicitly - stages questions of the relation between past and present, memory and trauma, and the legitimacy of revenge. If one of the defining features of the Troubles chronotope is that the violence is inexplicable, one of the marks of texts which try to disentangle themselves from these conventions is the provision of context and background. The first two episodes of *Bloodlands* work hard to explain to the viewer the particularities of the Northern Irish situation, and are centred on Brannick, a policeman still traumatised by the loss of his wife in a set of 1998 murders. The BBC institutional context is noteworthy here, with what could be seen as the careful public service distribution of these murders across identified Protestant and Catholic communities, while the record of producer Jed Mercurio's engagement with institutional failure and corruption across a number of highly regarded series was also pertinent. There is a careful exposition, in the second episode, of the way in which the Good Friday Agreement has affected the investigation of past crimes. Under this agreement – which is the beginning of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland – all investigation of human remains from before 1998 must be undertaken by the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR). Instituted as separate from the police, the ICLVR is the civilian body to which the murders, kidnappings and disappearances of individuals within the years of the Troubles must be referred, as is explained several times to characters within the drama. The drama's claim to seriousness is partly established through the depiction of the ICLVR as ecumenical and respectful, visiting the homes of bereaved relatives (the dead one IRA man, one Loyalist paramilitary), bearing

cardboard boxes of the pathetic remaining effects of the dead. At this police drama's heart are crimes which the police cannot themselves investigate.

The plot twist at the end of the second episode, when Brannick commits a present-day murder and is revealed as most likely to be Goliath himself, undercuts all this heavy lifting, while also – and it is easy to see why this was an attractive move within the production planning - providing the drama with a contemporary crime which the police can investigate. What was taken in 1998 to be a politically motivated set of murders of individuals who threatened the Peace Process turns out to be rather more personally motivated. Generically, thrillers and murder-mysteries abound in misdirection – that is one of their pleasures – and the particular sub-genre of thriller associated with this production company through *Line of Duty* and *The Bodyguard* has refined this misdirection through the possibility of treachery as the highest level. However, the twist which identifies Brannick, the investigator, as a murderer, although generically familiar, is contextually – given how very seriously the particular context has been established – aesthetically jarring. Who needs to know about the ICLVR if in fact most of what is in play is a husband's jealousy?

Perhaps one of the difficulties of this series is the drama's generic mixing; its ambition to tell, as a thriller, a story of the personal resonances of historical atrocity down the generations while also remaining relatively accurate about the complexity of this historical context, and, at the same time, appeal to an international audience who might be more attracted to the dynamic young doctor heroine who moves to prominence in the final two episodes. This is Troubles-related television drama that does not wish to be associated with 'Troubles Trash'. The Troubles chronotope

looms over it, provides, indeed, its inaugurating impulse, and it seems, from the first two episodes, that the drive of the drama will be to deconstruct this chronotope. There is, however, a detail of the set-dressing in episode 3 which reveals something of the complexity of the ambitions of the fiction and points to its generic instability.

The set is the senior police officer's caravan in which, in a familiar 'bad-police' plot device, evidence is planted, here by inserting a book into a bookshelf. The shelf contains a mixture of hardbacks and paperbacks, among them two prominent recent crime thrillers, the enormously successful *Girl on a Train* and another by Mark Billingham, an author who specializes in embedding his police procedurals within politically astute evocations of contemporary Britain. For relaxation, apparently, cops read crime fiction. Less prominent on the shelf though, is a different kind of reading, the sombre, encyclopaedic record of the deaths in the Northern Ireland Troubles, *Lost Lives,* which has been recognised for its non-sectarian honouring of the 3,700 deaths directly caused during the Troubles (McKittrick et al. 2015).[19] In this juxtaposition of pacey, successful contemporary thrillers – one with a female protagonist – with a documentary work of remembrance, this bookshelf lays out the terrain of the drama, and, perhaps inadvertently, shows how very difficult it might be to realise its ambitions. However it does provide a neat way to describe the series, with the first two episodes dominated more by a *Lost Lives* paradigm, while the second two are more *Girl on a Train*, with increased emphasis on the agency and intense determination of the young female doctor who is revealed to be the kidnapper of the opening episode and the daughter of one of the 'Goliath' dead. Nesbitt is not a subtle actor – he is no James Mason – but he does have considerable screen presence.[20] This is not, however, a skillset which works well with the part as written, which

requires a frankly implausible range. The combination of the *Lost Lives* impulse with

an appeal to a much less contextualised generic twist results in what could be

described as bad faith in relation to the Nesbitt character, who solicits audience

sympathy but fails to merit or engage it.

Marcella has a quite different project. Here, Northern Ireland is a setting which

produces certain narrative and iconographic possibilities for an already established

central character, a severely traumatised female police officer left for dead at the end

of the previous, London-set season. The genealogy for *Marcella* has nothing to do

with Northern Ireland, but comes instead through Scandi-noir and the notable body of

female-led international detective dramas which have attracted considerable critical

attention.[21] Characters such as *The Killing's* Sarah Lund (Sofie GrÅbøl) and *The

Bridge's* Saga Norén (Sofia Helin), whose professional obsessions shade over into

social incompetence are the precursors to the unhappily divorced, anxious, frenetic

detective Marcella Backland, who is subject to disorientating and disabling

hallucinatory episodes and blackouts. Marcella appears to have miraculously kept her

job in the police, but the cost is a new identity and redeployment to the dark periphery

of Northern Ireland to investigate the role of the Maguire family in drugs and gun

smuggling.

In *Bloodlands* the plot is partly driven and enabled by the setting: the views over

Strangford Loch; the small island with 'a bothy and tree' and the mountains of

Mourne. In *Marcella*, although the contrast between the Maguire crime family in the

country mansion and the mean streets of their origins, 'our people', in Belfast, does

entail a series of Belfast settings and mountain backdrops, it is the violent history of

Northern Ireland which is most important. This is epitomised by the repeated shot in the early episodes of a graffiti'd red brick wall in residential streets: 'DRUG DEALERS WILL BE SHOT'. Alluding ambiguously both to the paramilitary policing and control of the drug trade in Northern Ireland, this warning functions to alert viewers to the local dominance of armed forces quite distinct from the state and the police. What the NI setting gives *Marcella* is an abundance of weapons, excessive violence, casual brutality and normalised torture (in which even the central figure, an undercover police officer, is a perpetrator). John Hill (1988) argued that the dominant tendency in the representation of 'the Troubles' in cinema has been the presentation of violence as incomprehensible and atavistic. *Marcella* reaps this history. What was in origin a London-set British police series in which the genre is reworked round the figure of a female detective is in Belfast transformed into something more like a crime family saga, complete with monstrous matriarch, jealous sons and gothic mansion.[22] But it is the violence which is key – it is this traumatic history which serves to identify the setting, rather than the rather cursory images of the Titanic Museum and the Harland & Wolff cranes that feature in the title sequence.

Marcella doesn't have the public service encumbrances of *Bloodlands*. There is no attempt at contextual exposition, and a viewer familiar with prohibition and mafia gang drama will have no difficulty in understanding the vectors of the plot which include the brutal discrediting of the city mayor who is interfering with the family's smuggling of guns, drugs and people. The series is, in a way, resolutely post-political, although perhaps no one in the production quite grasped the politics of having the only non-corrupt police officer travelling in from London. 'You're not from round here', as one of the family observes to him. While there is talk from the mayor of this

being 'the new Belfast', and the scenes around his elimination in episode 4 do indeed feature the bars, hotels and apartments of the Laganside development, what is revealed is that the new Belfast is absolutely controlled by a crime family with roots in the old Belfast, but with no mention of the origins of this power. There is both an assumption of paramilitary pasts, and a scrupulous avoidance of identifying the MaGuire family's origins coherently. *Marcella* is, despite its central female characters more like troubles trash without the troubles – just the residue of criminal control of the city and the docks. However, like *Bloodlands*, this series too seems to flail around after its first half set-up. While there are moments in which the series seems to offer an emerging landmark views of Belfast, a city on the sea framed inland by the Belfast hills,, the action moves increasingly into the gothic mansion of the Maguire family and the psychodrama which is Marcella's head. Even though the series has constructed its Belfast setting as a type of Irish Chicago, there is no story to tell on the streets after the drug dealers have been shot, the reforming mayor eliminated and the errant family members killed.

Conclusion

In a Belfast set short story titled 'The Grey', the solicitor and author Steve Cavanagh describes the way in which, following the Good Friday Agreement, 'the state had either pulled down or let rot their old institutions of justice such as the Crumlin Road Courthouse, the Maze Prison, and the old Petty Sessions building…Now, in this part of the city centre, it was all about the new grey, the new shining pillars of justice and rejuvenation.' He continues, 'In Belfast, colour was joyful, territorial and frightening. And so the heart of the city embraced a comforting blanket of grey.' (2014: 119). Andy Duncan, who has photographed the city for years, noticed how the new

developments 'were called things like Meridian Plaza or Horizon Building…a kind of
anodyne future being plotted out for Belfast' (Duncan 2018: 11). These descriptions
of a redeveloped city centre embracing a comforting retreat from colour and
controversy can usefully be set alongside William Neill's comments, noted earlier,
about the significance of glass to the post-conflict city (2006:112). The
characterisation of Belfast as a city of grey and glass does not promise much in the
way of distinctive screen imagery. The Victoria Square retail complex used in *Line of
Duty* is unimaginable in Troubles Belfast, but this is its only distinction. It looks like
a shopping centre anywhere. So one of the answers to the question 'What does the
New Northern Ireland look like?' is 'like everywhere else'.

The redevelopment of part of the former docks and the banks of the River Lagan has
resulted in the architecturally distinctive Titanic Experience and the Waterfront
concert-hall and conference centre. The gigantic Harland and Wolff cranes endure,
iconic but completely decontextualized, no trace now of shipbuilding. They are
literally, as we saw in *Bloodlands*, postcard images, or, as they appear in *Marcella,*
gaudy dining-room paintings gesturing to origins overcome. It is no accident that it is
the cranes and the reflective surfaces of the Titanic ship-shaped building which appear
in the title sequence of Marcella, and within the early minutes of *Bloodlands*: these,
rather than the increased number of 'peace walls', turn out to be the landmarks of
Belfast in the New Northern Ireland. The River Lagan is now open to pedestrians
along parts of its banks, and restaurants and cafes seek to attract visitors. As scholars
of dockside redevelopment and gentrification the world over know, these new
consumption-orientated quarters, orientated towards services and visitors, share many
features.[23] While the locality will be inscribed in key aspects of the design concept

(here, evidently, the docks that built the Titanic, but not the much more controversial site of the Maze prison), this is dressing on standard commercial infrastructural elements – internationally owned hotels, chain eating places, cinemas and shops. Just like the Victoria Square shopping centre, the Laganside leisure pathways make Belfast seem like any other city. And this is the complication of location-setting and shooting in Belfast, for looking like everywhere else must surely have its attractions for people living in Northern Ireland – to no longer be distinctive and identifiable in the old ways. The aspiration to live in peace, though, is never just abstract, for the living must be done in particular contexts and communities, and sometimes the costs, the identities and loyalties that must be surrendered may seem too high a cost, particularly in the context of failing and negligent government. As Martin McLoone argues, 'the people of Belfast need to recognise the city that is being reimaged and reimagined, and need to feel they belong in this city (2008: 65).

The evasion of specificity in much of the redevelopment of Belfast, which contributes to a certain placelessness in some drama set there, is accompanied by a new visibility of the surrounding countryside. Northern Ireland – *pace* the obvious political difficulties – has, within a tourist gaze, been revealed as continuous with the rest of a small island known for its green beauty. If the New Northern Ireland looks partly like everywhere else, it also looks a lot like the rest of island of Ireland. The landscape of the six counties, the mountains, the waterfalls, the beaches and the loughs, obscured for years by news photography of flaming city streets, have become visible. These dramatic natural features were, for internationally-aimed television drama production in the twenty-first century, virgin territory. On a less spectacular scale than *Games of Thrones*, each of the series discussed here has engaged with the possibilities of the

proximity of city and countryside, as well as the abundance of watery natural features. The trip to the coast as an escape from sectarianism within the city has featured in a number of Northern Ireland set films, and perhaps a more integrated sense of city and countryside being part of the same place is something to look forward to in developing representations of post-conflict Belfast – particularly if this countryside can develop associations beyond ambushes, roadside bombs and the discovery of bodies.

And what kind of crime stories can be told in and of the New Northern Ireland? It is early days for the answer to this question, but the examples of the series discussed in this essay demonstrate how difficult it is to build up new representational repertoires. Using female characters in central roles is one strategy to dislodge the dominance of the 'men in balaclavas'. However, as the psychic fragility of Marcella and the extensive feminist discussion of *The Fall* has shown, this has its own complications, and there has as yet been no televisual attempt to match the sense of everyday oppression for young women of life in a paramilitary controlled area evoked so powerfully by Anna Burns's award winning novel, *Milkman* (2018). Instead, the familiarity of the chronotopical images proves hard to dislodge, as has been seen with the ambushes in *Line of Duty*. One of the most effective scenes across the three series is the bombing of the police car in the opening episode of *Bloodlands.* This is presented as both warning and retaliation from republicans in response to tone-deaf, disrespectful police (PSNI) investigation (by Brannick/ Nesbitt) in the present day. Suddenly, as the screen lights up with the flames, the location of the drama becomes generically – familiarly – clear. We're in Troubles-town! The strength and persistence of this imagery cannot be underestimated, particularly in an international

context in which men-with-guns is one of the most popular elements in global entertainment. The armed police of Northern Ireland are, arguably, rather more attractive to an international market than English beat bobbies. Ruth Barton, in her persuasive 'reading [of] place and culture' back into *The Fall*, has suggested that one of the achievements of that series is the way it mines 'the politicized spatiality of Belfast to good effect, inducing a sense of imminent threat as much from the local paramilitary vigilantes as from a serial killer' (2021: 39). The evocation of a persistent, local, maintained territoriality, alongside the more transnational Laganside spaces in which the visiting London detective is most comfortable, provides *The Fall* with a textured and quite difficult sense of the place that is twenty-first century Belfast. However, Barton points to the 'creative agility' (2021:42) with which an explanatory clerical abuse backstory is introduced in the second series in order to bring the narrative to a resolution which moves the drama away from the closely observed current Northern Ireland context.

This 'creative agility' may testify to the way in which it is much easier to start a crime drama with a New Northern Ireland setting than it is to resolve it in that time and place. In different ways, the old stories – the Troubles chronotope – both lure the projects in, and wait to ambush them. The 'background of ancient griefs and beefs [which] can't help but provide great atmosphere for a police procedural' is not as narratively malleable – or as 'ancient' - as television producers might hope. *Bloodlands,* which may well have had production difficulties associated with the onset of Covid 19, seems to lose its nerve half way through. The ambition and difficulty of the project is manifest in the instability of the Nesbitt figure. Is he meant to be a traumatised, sympathetic, but nevertheless ruthless, duplicitous and malevolent

bad cop? The high death toll at the end leaves him still standing, but it is hard to anticipate a better second series, and the complexity of the Northern Ireland situation in relation to policing and the peace process turns out to function as set-dressing. *Marcella,* always a rather febrile series, does nevertheless have some grasp of the complexities of its setting in its opening episodes, and does depict, fleetingly, moments of everyday life lived under tight neighbourly observation in working class Belfast. However, the series retreats from the social world it establishes in its opening to become a gothic tale set within a monstrous family in a fancy mansion. Its Jacobean death toll, leaving Marcella as last woman standing – clutching a baby - represents a narrative stalemate. If it was preposterous, as the show recognised, to use the device of a supposedly dead policewoman as an undercover agent to bring down a Belfast crime family, it is hard to see where she goes next. In each case, the question becomes, how do stories set in post-conflict Belfast develop? Can they develop in this setting? Or, as with the paucity of post-conflict landmarks, is there a paucity of plausible narrative endings which are not just accumulations of dead bodies?

Line of Duty is a rather different case as it is set in England. However, as I have shown, it does at moments testify to the iconographic strength of the Troubles chronotope. While it could be argued that the series doesn't count because it's not set in Northern Ireland and doesn't proffer images of the New Northern Ireland, I wonder whether it may offer representations of Belfast that will be repeated. As a setting, it's a bit like the grey and glass of the new parts of central Belfast – anonymous, interchangeable with other places, and aspirantly transnational. Filming a contemporary-set television series in Belfast so that the city signifies not itself, with its traumatic history, but another, unspecified British city, entails a certain cultural

deterritorialisation. And while some income surely stayed in Belfast, there was

probably substantial economic deterritorialisation as well. Perhaps this non-specific,

unidentified contemporary Belfast, rather like the fantasy olden days of *Game of*

Thrones, does represent something of the New Northern Ireland, but rather

inadvertently. Its lack of specificity is both achievement and loss. The issue is what

about the other bits, the bits not shown here?

With thanks to Martin McLoone and John Hill who, some years ago, suggested that I

should 'start with the bus tour' of Belfast.

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[1] McGilloway, author of the border-set Inspector Devlin novels, made this observation in an interview about 'Ulster noir' (Rubin 2014). The preceding sentence contextualises the point: 'Crime fiction allows people to vicariously experience fear, but you don't need that if there's real fear out there. That's why crime fiction wouldn't have worked in the Troubles - it wouldn't have had a function.'

[2] John Hill reports on the failure of the first repurposing, in 2001, of the vast Harland and Wolff ship painting premises as the Paint Hall Studios; it is this building which is relaunched as Titanic Studios (2006: 186). Muir (2013) outlines the Titanic Quarter development, raising more general questions about urban regeneration in Belfast.

[3] See, for example, Ramsey 2013, Ramsey et al 2019, Celik Rappas 2019, McElroy and Noonan 2019: 123-144.

[4] On New Orleans, see Helen Morgan Parmett (2014); on Istanbul, Celik Rappas and Kayhan (2018).

[5] Hill 1988 has been formative, but see also McLoone 2008, Hill 2006: 190-243, and the discussion of the Troubles paradigm, McIlroy (1998), and Barton's hypothesis of an 'all purpose traumatic space' (2019: 16).

[6] The achievement of *Derry Girls* (2018-22) has been its upturning of this question through the generic shift to comedy, but that would be another article.

[7] The series is set in an anti-corruption squad (AC12) of the Police Service and has established a format whereby there is a central guest star in each series who is the subject of investigation.

[8] Ruth Barton, *Irish Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p.15. Barton is not discussing Northern Ireland specifically, but the point holds internationally.

[9] Willie Doherty's works – photographs, films and video - are held internationally in major collections, and he is represented by the Kerling gallery (kerlinggallery.com).

[10] For people who have grown up in Northern Ireland, names, addresses and schools attended reveal, particularly for working-class citizens, whether family inheritance is catholic or protestant. Edward, with its echoes of British royalty, is a unionist name.

[11] Accompanying this imagery of continuing violence, there is also an aural landmarking, a roll call of Northern Irish place names such as Omagh, Enniskillen, the Bogside, Shankill Road, and the Falls Road which are familiar internationally from news broadcasts but which may have no visual referent – and indeed no referent at all other than 'Troubles'.

[12] The origin of this imagery is not necessarily Belfast – Derry/Londonderry is a significant source – but it is primarily Belfast that this type of imagery is seen to identify, particularly outside the UK.

¹³ Ramsey, 2013: 168-9. Ramsey is citing figures from Nolan (2012), Nagle (2009) and the Belfast Interface Project (2012) which counts 99 'different security barriers and forms of defensive architecture'.

¹⁴ Adrian McKinty's Sean Duffy series, published from 2012, centre on a Catholic officer working in the RUC in 1981. Claire McGowan's Paula Maguire series gives her forensic psychologist heroine has a Catholic RUC officer father (2013 --).

¹⁵Since the completion of this article, the BBC has broadcast two series of a 10-part police drama, *Hope Street* (Long Story for the BBC, 2021, 2022), set in the picturesque Port Devine (Donaghadee). The first series was broadcast on BBC 1 at lunchtime (Jan-Feb 2022) introducing the staff, and relatives, of the Hope Street police station, including 'Uncle Barry', 'who was an inspector in the old police force, the RUC'. The tone of this ensemble show, which opens with a cheery port-side festival, marks a very different project for a N.Ireland set police procedural and merits further attention, although the irregular scheduling of the English broadcast of the second series suggests some uncertainty about its future.

¹⁶ In addition to Barton 2021 discussed below, Jermyn 2016 lays out some of the key issues about the mobility and vulnerability of female characters in *The Fall*.

¹⁷ Cover feature, *Radio Times* 20-26 February 2021.

¹⁸ Below the line comment by @geoff33 to Lauren Harte (2021).

¹⁹Northern Ireland Screen (along with the BBC and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland) funded a 2019 feature version of *Lost Lives* made by Doubleband Productions and broadcast in February 2020.

²⁰ James Mason plays the wounded gunman in *Odd Man Out* (d. Carol Reed, 1947), managing to elicit both pity and sympathy in his fatal progress through the noir streets of an unnamed Belfast.

²¹ Hans Rosenfeldt who executive produces and part-writes *Marcella*, was creator/ writer of *The Bridge (Bron/ Broen)* 2011-2018.

²² In 'Ireland of the horrors', Barton (2019: 67-89) discusses the emergence of gothic tropes in Irish cinema, and, as she suggests (2021), this has some pertinence to Northern Irish audio-visual work.

²³ See for example, David Harvey's discussion of the transformation of Baltimore Harbour (2000), pp. 133-181, Sharon Zukin's discussion of 'Downtown' (1991): 179-215. Brownill (2013) surveys discussion of waterfront regeneration as a global phenomenon.

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