

# The Troubles Crime Thriller and the Future of Films about Northern Ireland

Richard Gallagher

**Abstract:** *Troubles-based crime thrillers were once a staple of Hollywood cinema in the 1990s. However, these types of films have become something of a subgenre of European crime films in the last few decades given that films produced over the period have all been produced and financed by either the United Kingdom, Ireland, France or Germany. Owing to both the financial and critical success of these films, relative to other types of films about Northern Ireland, and the more market-driven approach adopted by policymakers, the crime thriller genre has also become the primary way that audiences engage with cinema about Northern Ireland. Although some encouraging developments have come with this transition away from, at times, exploitative Hollywood-produced films, continued reliance on genre in this new dispensation—specifically the crime thriller—is still a development that is not without problems. The type of films about the conflict produced today also contrasts significantly with those produced during the “first wave” of Irish cinema in the 1980s.*

Two key developments can be identified in recent years when looking at films that are in some way about the thirty-year conflict in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, reflecting Irish cinema’s current preoccupation with genre, filmmakers depicting the conflict or its legacy have become almost entirely focused on depicting the Troubles through the prism of Hollywood’s traditional genres, such as the comedy, the war film, or the crime thriller. The latter of these has proven to be particularly popular in recent years with “Troubles films” such as *Shadow Dancer* (James Marsh, 2012), *A Belfast Story* (Nathan Todd, 2013), *The Truth Commissioner* (Declan Recks, 2016), *Bad Day for the Cut* (Chris Baugh, 2017) and *Maze* (Stephen Burke, 2017) resembling typical crime thrillers in regard to structure and presentation. Ruth Barton explains that “the thriller remains the primary medium through which audiences engage with Northern Ireland narratives” (*Irish Cinema* 54). Discussing the thriller’s dominance of fiction about Northern Ireland more generally, Aaron Kelly argues: “[t]his vast popular cultural sedimentation has ensured the enthronement of the genre as the dominant fictional mode of representing the North, supposedly granting appropriate literary form to national and historical experience” (1).

Secondly, US funding for films about the conflict has ceased entirely; in fact, Hollywood hasn’t produced a film about the Troubles since the 9/11 terror attacks. This is quite surprising given the significant number of films produced in the 1990s that focused on the main Irish republican and nationalist paramilitary organisation, the IRA. It seems Hollywood’s interest in the IRA and depicting Irish republicanism sympathetically quickly evaporated with the 9/11 terror attacks and the new relationship the US was forming with Britain in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It is worth mentioning that Hollywood films about the Troubles were also increasingly unsuccessful at the box office and the formula may have started to appear stale to producers and filmmakers, but as Mark Connelly explains: “Stunned by the carnage and the images of Arabs dancing in the streets, Irish Americans lost any ability to rationalise or minimise terrorism. The romance of the gunman—or especially the bomber—evaporated” (168). Hollywood noticeably changed tact with funding for films about Ireland

investing mainly on those focused on the Irish immigrant experience, the most notable example of this at the time being Jim Sheridan's *In America* (2002). Sheridan himself, either as director or as writer, had previously received US funding for Troubles-related films, *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993), *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996) and *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1997). After the turn of the century, the funding for films about the Troubles generally came from within Europe—specifically Ireland, Britain, France and Germany. These European productions have attempted to fill the vacuum left in the wake of Hollywood's disinterest and thus the “Troubles crime thriller” has become a subgenre of European crime films.

A certain irony exists here that reflects the internationalisation of the film industry: just as Hollywood has lost interest in the Troubles, European filmmakers and policymakers have begun to embrace the adoption of Hollywood genres to tell stories about the Northern Irish conflict. This article aims to determine how successful these films made use of genres and whether this approach represents the future of films about the Northern Irish conflict. It will also seek to determine what consequences it will have for depictions of Northern Ireland. This is particularly important given that films about the conflict and Northern Ireland are intrinsically linked. Almost all films about the region have, in fact, depicted or referenced the Troubles or its legacy in some way to the extent that “[f]or the last forty years, the ‘troubles’ has been the distinctive feature of the region and it is difficult to set a film in Northern Ireland that does not deal with the impact of the conflict in some way or other without appearing either naïve or wilfully evasive” (Hill, *Cinema* 242).

Although the parameters of all genres are difficult to define, the crime thriller genre is particularly abstruse. For one thing, it can be considered a hybrid genre that combines both the crime and the thriller. Others do not even consider crime films to constitute a genre given how ubiquitous criminal activities of some sort are present on screen. However, one unifying trait of all crime films according to Thomas Leitch concerns their stock characters. Although admitting that the character roles are becoming less distinct from each other, Leitch points out that:

Every crime story predicates three leading roles: the criminal who commits the crime, the victim who suffers it, and the avenger or detective who investigates it in the hope of bringing the criminal to justice and re-establishing the social order the crime has disrupted. (13)

Nicole Rafter's definition of crime films is even more wide-ranging as she sets the parameters as being “films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences” (6). The type of crime examined in the films focused on here tends to naturally be that of the terrorist or vigilante variety, an overlooked subtype of the crime film genre according to Rafter (5). Instead, the thriller genre is defined more by the emotions it elicits in the audience, particularly excitement and suspense. One irreconcilable difference is identified by Carlos Clarens who distinguishes between the heroes of thrillers, who “almost exclusively represent themselves,” and the heroes of crime films, who “represent the Criminal, the Law, and Society” (13). The crime novelist Val McDermid finds other distinguishing features, claiming that the crime genre

often gives a voice to characters who are not comfortably established in the world – immigrants, sex workers, the poor, the old. [...] The thriller, on the other hand, tends towards the conservative, probably because the threat implicit in the thriller is the world turned upside down, the idea of being stripped of what matters to you.

Nevertheless, an attempt to categorise the films about Northern Ireland analysed here finds that they—like most films that explore crime of some variety—broadly represent such hybridity.

These Troubles crime thrillers can also be seen to be influenced by European film cultures and trends in contemporary European fiction where the crime and thriller genres dominate. Kim Toft Hansen describes television crime drama as being one of the most popular genres in Europe for audiences and arguably also the most culturally sensitive and nuanced, arguing that

this is an effect of the ways in which the genre feeds on social problems and cultural change. The crime drama series is therefore like the proverbial ‘canary down the mine’ when it comes to detecting significant social issues and concerns. [...] Indeed, the vitality of the genre depends on the fact that it simultaneously points to local narratives of moral and legal problems that are not only cross-cultural but also universal. (1)

Often taking its cue from crime drama such as this, the Troubles crime thrillers find a well of social problems, cultural sensitivities, and moral and legal problems to explore in order to enrich crime narratives. The popularity of such contemporary fiction can also be seen to influence funding decisions, and therefore the emergence, of the Troubles crime thriller as the primary way of depicting Northern Ireland in cinema.

The 2012 film *Shadow Dancer*, directed by English filmmaker James Marsh and based on a 1998 novel of the same name by Tom Bradby, is of interest in this regard. The film is credited as a British, Irish and French co-production and received funding from BBC Films, the BFI (British Film Institute) and the Irish Film Board (the state development agency for the Irish film, television and animation industry—called Screen Ireland since 2018). The film has a female protagonist, marking it out as unusual for a film set in Northern Ireland and for the constitutively masculine thriller genre in general. Set in 1993, the film follows this protagonist, IRA member, Collette (Andrea Riseborough), who is arrested in London after leaving a bomb in a tube station. An MI5 agent, Mac (Clive Owen), offers Collette a deal that requires her to inform on IRA members in her family and community back home for the British security services. Motivated by a desire to avoid being sent to an English jail and separated from her young son, she accepts, meaning that she must betray her family and community.

The film’s plot is remarkably similar to the plot of an earlier film, another crime thriller, *Fifty Dead Men Walking* (Kari Skogland, 2009). Directed by Canadian filmmaker Kari Skogland, this film received funding both from sources in Canada and the national screen agency for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Screen. As well as being set in Northern Ireland and resembling typical crime thrillers in structure and presentation, Skogland and Marsh’s films are centred on narratives about an IRA informer’s relationship with their British security forces’ handler and, in the final act of both films, the benevolent handler needs to risk everything to protect their informant from a British state which is willing to sacrifice them for the greater good.<sup>2</sup> *Fifty Dead Men Walking* is a loose adaptation of IRA informer Martin McGartland’s 1997 autobiography, a publication he wrote with Nicholas Davies. Set in a similar era as Marsh’s film, between 1988 and 1991, *Fifty Dead Men Walking* follows McGartland (Jim Sturgess) as he chooses to inform on the IRA to his Special Branch handler, codenamed Fergus (Ben Kingsley). In the process, he goes from being a petty criminal who sells stolen goods door-to-door to rising through the paramilitary’s ranks. This type of narrative greatly resembles narratives in typical “informer films” where criminals must rise through the

ranks of criminal organisations amassing intelligence whilst betraying friends, family and their own criminal code in order to aid police investigations. As in most “informer films”, tension is also ever-present as both protagonists in Marsh and Skogland’s films must attempt to avoid suspicion from characters with whom they interact.<sup>3</sup>

*Bad Day for the Cut* is another recent crime thriller set in Northern Ireland. The low-budget film is directed by Northern Irish filmmaker Chris Baugh and received funding from Northern Ireland Screen. It closely resembles typical revenge thrillers, although the action here is transported to rural Ulster, admirably without a desire to omit any regional idiosyncrasies. Using a contemporary setting, its narrative follows a rural Northern Irish farmer, Donal (Nigel O’Neill), who discovers his elderly mother (Stella McCusker) murdered one evening. The rest of the film follows his attempts at tracking down the murderer and getting revenge. Eventually, it is revealed that an organised crime gang led by Frankie Pierce (Susan Lynch), who is found to have family links to paramilitaries, is behind the killing. Frankie’s motivation for killing Donal’s mother also turns out to be revenge as Donal’s mother has killed Frankie’s father during the Troubles and framed paramilitaries for an act she carried out herself. Another recalling of the Troubles occurs in the film when Pierce references the notoriously brutal unionist paramilitary gang, the Shankill Butchers.<sup>4</sup> She somewhat comically voices her concerns about her henchman’s stabbing of someone being a step too far even for her heinous gang when she tells him, “I know you like fucking around, slicing bellies and all that shit, which is something we are going to have to talk about down the road [...] we’re not the Shankill Butchers.” There are also less direct references to the conflict in such lines of dialogue as “no one seems to know the full story, that’s the problem with this country” and “the whole fucking thing just goes on and on”. Illustrative of the latter quote, the narrative also has an allegorical dimension, as it is a tale of how violence begets violence. Like *Shadow Dancer* and *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, the film sticks somewhat rigidly to genre conventions, with Donal going on a quest for revenge which results in him moving outside his comfort zone and engaging with people whom he would never normally have engaged with. He also continues to subvert expectations and the action culminates in his killing of the evil Frankie and justice being served, at least in filmic terms. Like many films of the genre, partly owing to Donal’s growth throughout his journey, revenge is found not to be the solution he envisaged.



**Figure 1:** *Maze*. Directed by Stephen Burke, Mammoth Films, 2017. Screenshot.

Another film of interest concerning the crime thriller genre being appropriated to tell stories of the Troubles is Stephen Burke's 2017 *Maze*. The narrative is based on a true story, that of the 1983 Maze prison escape when thirty-eight Irish republican prisoners escaped the maximum-security Maze prison in Northern Ireland, which had been described as one of the most escape-proof prisons in Europe. The film's central protagonist is the real-life IRA member Larry Marley (Tom Vaughn-Lawlor), presented in the film as being the cunning mastermind behind the escape. The narrative can be seen to owe a debt to previous prison escape films as, to gain enough knowledge to successfully pull off the escape, Marley must befriend an enemy he will eventually betray, in this case, a prison officer called Gordon (Barry Ward). The protagonist needing to find increasingly clever ways to keep his plan a secret, as he becomes closer to Gordon, also creates tension throughout and is a type of narrative device commonly found in prison escape or heist films. The prison escape can be understood to be such an appropriate topic to explore at this time that another film about the same event was also in the works when *Maze* was released. The film, which was to be called *H-Block*, was to be directed by Jim Sheridan, but it has been postponed having initially run into scheduling difficulties (Busch). As well as sources in France and Germany, Burke's film was funded by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, the Irish Film Board (Screen Ireland) and the national broadcaster in Ireland, RTÉ. It is set in the aftermath of the 1981 republican hunger strikes that were the culmination of a five-year protest by republican prisoners in the Maze and Armagh prisons. The dispute between prisoners and the British government began when republican prisoners demanded political rather than criminal status. Protests escalated to a hunger strike in 1981, during which one of the hunger strikers, Bobby Sands, was elected as a Member of the British Parliament. The protest was not called off until after ten hunger strikers, including Sands, had died. The motivation for escaping the prison is presented in the film as being to raise the morale of republican prisoners, to show the British state that the end of the hunger strikes did not mean defeat for republicanism and to honour a debt to those who died. *Maze* manages to incorporate political and historical elements by taking the typical prison escape film and providing it with a further political dimension by setting it during this tumultuous time.

Although it is difficult to obtain accurate figures for films screened in Northern Ireland and to gauge the films' audience when broadcast and on streaming platforms after their cinema run, it is safe to say that crime thrillers have been considered the most likely way of reaching a large audience and recouping budgets. Total admissions at the British and Irish theatres for *Fifty Dead Men Walking* are reported to be 71,509, whereas *Shadow Dancer*'s figure was 126,098 and *Maze*'s was 116,055.<sup>5</sup> Relative to most other films about Northern Ireland, these amount to successful local box office returns. In fact, *Maze* was the most successful Irish feature of the year in 2017 at both the Irish and Northern Irish box offices, grossing over \$1,000,000 (Murtagh). Later, Netflix purchased the video-on-demand rights giving the film yet another lease of life. As for reaching audiences across Europe, *Maze* was not released in any other European countries, however, total admissions for *Fifty Dead Men Walking* and *Shadow Dancer* went on to total 99,155 and 316,307 respectively. *Shadow Dancer* proved most successful as it was distributed throughout Europe. In particular, according to LUMIERE database, the film achieved its best return in France (65,592), Italy (52,310), Greece (13,994), Netherlands (13,289), and Poland (11,617) *Shadow Dancer* also went on to secure a US release—although it performed poorly—whereas *Fifty Dead Men Walking* went straight to DVD (Barton, *Irish Cinema* 140). *Bad Day for the Cut* had a short theatrical window, as it was picked up by Netflix which, along with the film's critical acclaim internationally, represents a success in terms of visibility and accessibility to a low-budget Northern Irish production.<sup>6</sup> With these figures and the lack of other types of films, genres or models producing similar

admissions, the crime thriller about the Troubles can be considered as the type of film policymakers and local producers could focus more in the future.

Such focus can be also predicted by the shift of policymakers and filmmakers in Britain and Ireland towards more market-focused and commercially viable products. The national screen agencies in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Screen) and the Republic of Ireland (Screen Ireland) have both undergone something of an instrumentalist revamp in recent years.<sup>7</sup> In the post-peace process era, Northern Ireland has emerged as a key global location for high-cost Hollywood film and television productions and home to production facilities for HBO, the American film and television production company. This has seemingly come at the expense of what Stephen Baker has described as “a politically engaged cinema that might illuminate, investigate and question Northern Ireland’s new dispensation” (175). Screen Ireland’s evolution towards a more profit-driven model has been a long process, beginning in the 1990s when Irish cinema became more conservative and focused on universal themes (O’Connell 129). This period also coincides with the second installation of the Irish Film Board, which led to much more output aimed at the US market for reasons of financial return. One of the major British producers of films about Northern Ireland has historically been Channel 4’s film production arm, Film Four. The remit of Channel 4 and Film Four had been seen to be more conducive to nuanced and culturally significant films which explore the Northern Irish conflict; historically this can be evidenced by such films as *Angel* (Neil Jordan, 1982) *Ascendancy* (Edward Bennett, 1983), *No Surrender* (Peter Smith, 1985), *December Bride* (Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1990), *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O’Sullivan, 1995), *With or Without You* (Michael Winterbottom, 1999), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008) and *'71* (Yann Demange, 2014). Channel 4’s remit stressed the importance of offering a platform for alternative views and Film Four’s was committed to making indigenous British productions, especially those having original screenplays focused on contemporary social and political issues (Hill, *British Cinema* 56). However, as can be identified by the decrease in production of films about the conflict, triggered by Channel 4 combining its production, sales and distribution activities under the umbrella of Film Four Ltd. in 1998, a fundamental change to Film Four’s operations occurred and Channel 4’s film output became more commercial in scope. Andrew Higson states that the launch of Film Four Ltd. “signalled a departure in their production and funding policy, away from the innovative and often risky low-budget fare with which they had made their name and towards more expensive international co-productions” (18). Also, partly due to the founding of the Film Council in 2000 (renamed the UK Film Council in 2003), the British film industry in general can be understood to have steered away from the making of risky and culturally significant films in favour of more risk-averse commercially focused films. Higson claims that given the UK Film Council’s commitment to “a commercially viable industry, many of its policy directives were designed to encourage avowedly populist, commercial filmmaking of a kind that would win wide audiences” (41).

A consequence of the embracing of this new model for films about Northern Ireland is that the films that do get made further depart from the less genre-derived films once produced in Ireland. For example, the years 1977 to 1988 are characterised by films that were heavily influenced by avant-garde European film movements and that often explored societal problems and national identity. This has been described as the “first wave” in Irish cinema or the “New Irish Cinema” movement, with the more instrumentalist period that emerged in the 1990s referred to as the “second wave”. Harvey O’Brien describes this “first wave” in the context of a wider European movement as being a determination amongst “independent indigenous filmmakers everywhere that a national cinema should express not so much a single, coherent

view of the nation as express the informed personal perspectives of artists with something to say about their own society” (12). O’Brien acknowledges that by the mid-1970s this attitude had begun to ferment in Ireland. He states: “By the early 1980s, it was evident that Irish film had found its feet as a means of serious self-scrutiny and a challenge to expectations of Irish identity” (12). Furthermore, this movement can be seen to play a significant role in the emergence in the 1980s of films explicitly about the Northern Irish conflict, such as Pat Murphy’s *Maeve* (1981), Neil Jordan’s *Angel*, Pat O’Connor’s *Cal* (1984) and Joe Comerford’s *Reefer and the Model* (1988).

However, claims that the more recent films are populist and somehow insufficient in terms of their cultural significance are complicated by the fact that most of the films do—despite adhering to genre conventions—offer significant political and social commentary. This is generally achieved with the use of narration, allegory and archive footage. *Shadow Dancer* and *Fifty Dead Men Walking*, in their attempt to depict the complexity of the Troubles, are certainly full of political detail and attempt to emphasise fundamental truths about the conflict, while *Bad Day for the Cut* can be understood to operate as an allegory for the Troubles and how violence begets violence. Burke’s *Maze* perhaps exemplifies this best as the prison setting provides an opportunity for social and political commentary due to the prison naturally acting as a microcosm of Northern Irish society. This is a device also used in previous films set in Northern Irish prisons during the conflict that generally don’t adhere to Hollywood’s traditional genre conventions in the same way, such as *Some Mother’s Son*, *H3* (Les Blair, 2001), *Silent Grace* (Maeve Murphy, 2001) and *Hunger*. In prison, republicans and rival loyalist prisoners must traverse the same territory at times and prison officers are used to embody the unyielding unionist state that has ostensibly moulded the prisoners. Commentary enacted in this way is used to an even greater extent in *Maze*. In one scene, a loyalist threatens the new republicans on the wing only to be taken aback and visibly intimidated when it is pointed out to him that there are now more republican prisoners than loyalist. The shift in demographics on the wing and the loyalists’ reaction can be seen to mirror demographic shifts in the outside world that are often understood to be a source of loyalist fear and paranoia. Perhaps mirroring collusion between security services and loyalist paramilitaries in the outside world, loyalists are also depicted as being fierce defenders of the prison officers and an obstacle to the prison escape being successful. Later, when loyalists must vacate the wing after republicans win the right to have it all to themselves, an incensed loyalist asks the prison officers, “Who runs this place, you? Or them?” This question can also be understood as a foreshadowing of what would come in Northern Irish society. The loyalist’s anger reflects the anger unionists would espouse in more recent years when Irish republicans, and specifically former republican prisoners of the Maze, would enter into government and decision-making roles in Northern Ireland.

This is evidence of recent Irish cinema being successfully able to draw on familiar generic themes and then adapt them to regional contexts. Christine Gledhill argues that contemporary Irish filmmaking’s ability to do this and to mix motifs clearly marked as nationally specific with an eclectic array of generic features derived from American popular culture suggests that, if the pairing is to be maintained, a different conception of genre is required from that elaborated for Hollywood (11). Similarly, Barton claims this practice has the double function of providing a recognition factor but also of cuing Irish audiences (and scholars) to recognise in them specific local references, and she therefore concludes that “genre filmmaking is neither a betrayal of avant-garde or political filmmaking, nor of an imagined ‘pure’ national cinema” (*Irish Cinema* 9). The drawing on well-known generic themes and motifs when making films about Ireland is also nothing new. Gledhill identifies this trend in the 1990s films *Into the West* (Mike Newell, 1992) and *The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1997). She claims: “In both films,



tropes and figures from contemporary and traditional Irish cultures intermingle as modifiers or in tension with those from American genres” (17). Regarding films about the Troubles, Barton also points to the presence of genre in 1990s films *The Boxer* and *Nothing Personal*, with *The Boxer* borrowing productively from the conventions of the boxing film and *Nothing Personal* borrowing from the conventions of the gangster film (*Irish Cinema* 8).

Therefore, much must be considered when trying to assess the evolution cinema about Northern Ireland has taken in recent years. The claim that the crime thriller cannot be a model for culturally significant filmmaking is clearly unfair and some encouraging developments have come with this evolution away from Hollywood financed films; productions appear significantly less exploitative than they once were, and Northern Ireland has gained an element of autonomy over depictions of the region that was previously lacking as evidenced by the ability films have shown to amalgamate the regionally specific with the universal. Perhaps owing to this increased level of autonomy and the less exploitative nature of European produced films, a key development in cinema about the conflict over the last few decades has also been that, following the general direction of post-conflict politics in Northern Ireland, the conflict is no longer generally presented in cinema as being incomprehensible and inevitable, but rather a result of political and social problems.<sup>8</sup> Richard Kirkland argues that this recalibration allows for two things: “Firstly, it indicates that, despite everything, the Troubles were explicable and subject to rational understanding and, secondly, it assumes that, as a structural problem, the violence was resolvable” (19).

However, has something been lost with the complete absence of films that take a different approach or resemble those made during the “first wave”? As some scholars have argued, the more recent trend of representing the Northern Irish conflict through the prism of the thriller—perhaps rather than other variations of the crime genre—has significantly diminished the potential for any nuanced exploration of the politics of the period (Barton, *Irish National Cinema* 157–8; McLoone 64–8). Unlike the “first wave” films about the conflict, the lack of nuance in these more recent films is most obviously manifested in the omission of any moderate non-violent voices or civic unionists and nationalists. This must be considered a consequence of the dominance of films that appropriate the traditional crime thriller where combatants are naturally more suitable for exploration than moderate non-violent characters. Speaking about the Hollywood crime film genre, Leitch explains that “Hollywood movies about victims who merely suffer, as opposed to taking arms against their oppressors, are virtually unheard of” (13). In the films about Northern Ireland made in the 1980s, protagonists were generally non-violent or deeply remorseful of past acts of violence. Other, more general, issues with the dominance of genre can also be detected, such as the gendered nature of genre filmmaking; the crime thriller being understood as a masculine genre is likely to relegate female voices just like it does non-violent ones. Although this can conceivably be subverted, cinematic output has thus far largely reinforced expectation in this regard. Therefore, a lack of range, nuance and complexity in this new dispensation can be seen to be a rather insurmountable problem.

The dilemma is also reflected in screen depictions more widely. Television crime thrillers influenced by “Nordic noir” have been a feature of television about Northern Ireland in recent years as evidenced by shows such as *The Fall* (Alan Cubitt, 2013–2016) and *Bloodlands* (Chris Brandon, 2021). Similar to recent cinema, these TV productions have tended to mould Northern Ireland to fit conventional crime thriller narratives rather than adopt narratives that explore, rather than ignore, complexity. Filmmakers, and particularly policymakers, should reflect on the consequences of this in the future. However, the current



model, which allows films to straddle the line between culturally significant nonexploitative “quality” films and the more market-focused genre films in the minds of audiences, if not critics as well, does seem to generally be being rewarded financially. Therefore, without a less market-driven approach to filmmaking being adopted a significant change to the type of films being produced in terms of more nuanced and expansive depictions of the Troubles and Northern Ireland is unlikely.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This period of conflict is understood to have lasted from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s and cost the lives of over 3,600 people. It began when tensions escalated between the majority unionist population and the minority nationalist population towards the end of the 1960s. In basic terms, unionists, who are predominantly Protestant, sought to protect the union between Northern Ireland and Britain whereas nationalists, who are predominantly Catholic, desired a united Ireland free from British rule.

<sup>2</sup> The killing of a young IRA informer also plays a key role in a 2016 crime thriller set in Northern Ireland, *The Truth Commissioner*.

<sup>3</sup> Films about conflict in Ireland and Ireland’s struggle for independence from Britain have played a key role historically in the development of this film subgenre. The appropriately titled, *The Informer*, a 1929 British film directed by Arthur Robison and the film’s better-known 1935 Hollywood adaptation directed by John Ford, also called *The Informer*, are examples of this influence.

<sup>4</sup> The Shankill Butchers worked within unionist paramilitary units in Belfast; the gang was active between 1975 and 1982 and was notorious for kidnapping and brutally murdering Catholic civilians. In total, the gang is believed to have murdered at least twenty-three people making them one of the biggest mass murderers in Britain’s history (Dillon xvii).

<sup>5</sup> Admission data has been collected on the European Audiovisual Observatory Project LUMIERE database in January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> *Bad Day for the Cut* has a 92% score on Rotten Tomatoes.com. Data collected in January 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Additional work on how the outlook of NI Screen has become more market-focused can be found in Ramsey, Baker and Porter’s “Screen Production on the ‘biggest set in the world’: Northern Ireland Screen and the case of Game of Thrones”. Additional work on a similar transformation by Screen Ireland can be found in Tracy and Flynn’s “Contemporary Irish Film: From the National to the Transnational”.

<sup>8</sup> Writing in 2006, Martin McLoone explains that films “tended to portray the violence as essentially pathological—the fault of the Irish themselves. This tragic flaw in the Irish is the result of either their own innate proclivities, the working of fate or the effects of nature and environment on the Irish psyche. The result is that Britain is absolved from any responsibility for the violence and the socio-cultural roots are denied” (61).

## References

- '71. Directed by Yann Demange, Film Four, 2014.
- A Belfast Story*. Directed by Nathan Todd, Adnuco Pictures, 2013.
- Angel*. Directed by Neill Jordan, Bórd Scannán na hÉireann, 1982.
- Ascendancy*. Directed by Edward Bennett, British Film Institute, 1983.
- Bad Day for the Cut*. Directed by Chris Baugh, Northern Ireland Screen, 2017.
- Baker, Stephen. "'Victory Doesn't Always Look the Way Other People Imagine It.' Post Conflict Cinema in Northern Ireland." *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, edited by Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy, Routledge, 2016, pp. 175–85.
- Barton, Ruth. *Irish Cinema in the Twenty-First Century*. Manchester UP, 2019.
- . *Irish National Cinema*. Routledge, 2004.
- Bloodlands*. Created by Chris Brandon, Hat Trick Productions, 2021.
- The Boxer*. Directed by Jim Sheridan, Universal Pictures, 1997.
- Busch, Anita. "Jim Sheridan's Prison Break Movie 'H Block' Being Postponed." *Deadline*, 7 Aug. 2017. [deadline.com/2017/08/jim-sheridan-cillian-murphy-prison-break-movie-h-block-being-postponed-1202143480](https://deadline.com/2017/08/jim-sheridan-cillian-murphy-prison-break-movie-h-block-being-postponed-1202143480).
- The Butcher Boy*. Directed by Neill Jordan. Geffen Pictures, 1997.
- Cal*. Directed by Pat O'Connor, Enigma Productions, 1984.
- Clarens, Carlos. *Crime Movies: From Griffith to the Godfather and Beyond*. Norton, 1980.
- Connelly, Mark. *The IRA on Film and Television: A History*. McFarland, 2012.
- The Crying Game*. Directed by Neill Jordan, Palace Pictures, 1992.
- December Bride*. Thaddeus O'Sullivan, British Screen Productions, 1990.
- Dillon, Martin. *The Shankill Butchers: A Case Study of Mass Murder*. Arrow, 1990.
- The Fall*. Created by Alan Cubitt, BBC, 2013–2016.
- Fifty Dead Men Walking*. Directed by Kari Skogland, Handmade International, 2009.
- Gledhill, Christine. "Genre and Nation." *Genre and Cinema*, edited by Brian McIlroy, 2007, pp. 11–25.
- H3*. Directed by Les Blair, Metropolitan Films, 2001.

- Hansen, Kim Toft. "Down These European Mean Streets." *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, edited by Kim Toft Hansen, Steven Peacock, and Sue Turnbull, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 1–21.
- Higson, Andrew. *Film England: Culturally English Filmmaking since the 1990s*. I. B. Tauris, 2011.
- Hill, John. *British Cinema in the 1980s: Issues and Themes*. Clarendon Press, 1999.
- . *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics*. British Film Institute, 2006.
- Hunger*. Directed by Steve McQueen, Film Four, 2008.
- In America*. Directed by Jim Sheridan, Hell's Kitchen Films, 2002.
- In the Name of the Father*. Directed by Jim Sheridan, Hell's Kitchen Films, 1993.
- The Informer*. Directed by Arthur Robison, British International Pictures, 1929.
- The Informer*. Directed by John Ford, RKO Radio Pictures, 1935.
- Into the West*. Directed by Mike Newell. Channel Four Films, 1992.
- Kelly, Aaron. *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror*. Routledge, 2016.
- Kirkland, Richard. "Visualising Peace: Northern Irish Post-Conflict Cinema and the Politics of Reconciliation." *Review of Irish Studies in Europe*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2017, pp. 12–25. <https://doi.org/10.32803/rise.v1i2.1426>.
- Leitch, Thomas. *Crime Films*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Maeve*. Directed by Pat Murphy, British Film Institute, 1981.
- Maze*. Directed by Stephen Burke, Mammoth Films, 2017.
- McDermid, Val. "Why Crime Fiction Is Leftwing and Thrillers Are Rightwing." *The Guardian*, 1 Apr. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/apr/01/why-crime-fiction-is-leftwing-and-thrillers-are-rightwing](http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/apr/01/why-crime-fiction-is-leftwing-and-thrillers-are-rightwing).
- McGartland, Martin. *Fifty Dead Men Walking*. Blake Publishing, 1997.
- McLoone, Martin. *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*. British Film Institute, 2000.
- Murtagh, Natasha. "Stephen Burke's *Maze* Acquired by Netflix." *Hotpress*, 21 May 2018, [www.hotpress.com/culture/stephen-burkes-maze-acquired-by-netflix-22287300](http://www.hotpress.com/culture/stephen-burkes-maze-acquired-by-netflix-22287300).
- No Surrender*. Directed by Peter Smith, Channel Four Films, 1985.
- Nothing Personal*. Directed by Pat O'Connor, British Screen Productions, 1995.

- O'Brien, Harvey. "The Identity of an Irish Cinema." *IFI.ie*, 2006, [www.ifi.ie/downloads/history.pdf](http://www.ifi.ie/downloads/history.pdf). Accessed 22 June 2021.
- O'Connell, Diog. "The Boy from Mercury: Education Emotionally through Universal Storytelling." *Keeping It Real: Irish Film and Television*, edited by Ruth Barton and Harvey O'Brien, Wallflower Press, 2004, pp. 121–31.
- Rafter, Nicole. *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. Oxford UP, 2006.
- Ramsey, Phil, Stephen Baker, and Robert Porter. "Screen Production on the 'Biggest Set in the World': Northern Ireland Screen and the Case of *Game of Thrones*." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2019, pp. 845–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719831597>
- Reefer and the Model*. Directed by Joe Comerford, Berber Films, 1988.
- Shadow Dancer*. Directed by James Marsh, BBC Films, 2012.
- Silent Grace*. Directed by Pat Murphy, Crimson Films Ltd., 2001.
- Some Mother's Son*. Directed by Terry George, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1996.
- The Truth Commissioner*. Directed by Declan Recks, Big Fish Films, 2016.
- Tracy, Tony, and Roddy Flynn. "Contemporary Irish Film: From the National to the Transnational." *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 52 no. 1, 2017, pp. 169–97. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eir.2017.0008>.
- With or Without You*. Directed by Michael Winterbottom, Film Four, 1999.

### Suggested Citation

Gallagher, Richard. "The Troubles Crime Thriller and the Future of Films about Northern Ireland." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 22, 2021 pp. 42–53. <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.03>.

**Richard Gallagher** was awarded a PhD from Queen's University Belfast in 2021. His research focuses on cinema about the Northern Irish conflict and the cinematic representation of Northern Irish unionists. A forthcoming article titled "Unionist Screws: Analysing a Primary Approach to Depicting Northern Irish Unionists in British and Irish Cinema" will be published in a future edition of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*.