Loyalism on film and out of context

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Introduction

> We knew full well that the media were short-changing us when it came to representing 'our' side of the story, but what *was* our side of the story? We couldn't even explain it properly ourselves. And it's still the same. There's plenty of times people around here have refused to take part in cross-community meetings, not because we don't want to sit down with Catholics, but because we don't have the self-confidence to do so. Few of us can articulate our case they way they can theirs.[1]

Northern Ireland's loyalists frequently lament what they perceive as their misrepresentation in the media, and in doing so they join the chorus of marginalised and oppressed sections in society that complain of being caricatured or ignored by the press, broadcasters and filmmakers. As Stuart Hall has pointed out with regards cultural representation generally, some people are

> always in a position to define, to set the agenda, to establish the terms of the conversation. Some others [are] ... always on the margin, always responding to a question whose terms and conditions have been defined elsewhere: never 'centred' (1995: 5)

Whether loyalism can count itself among the beleaguered and marginalised is a moot point given its historic association with Britain's imperial mission and its former relatively privileged position in Ireland. But certainly in recent times loyalism's predominantly working class composition and cultural complexion have come into sharper focus as any privileges it enjoyed have been eroded. The industries that once provided employment to the Protestant working class have largely disappeared, while the state to which that community gave its allegiance is disintegrating.

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[1] Anonymous contributor to a community discussion about working class Protestants in Northern Ireland, quoted in Michael Hall (ed) *Ulster's Protestant Working Class*, Belfast: Island Pamphlet, pp. 8

Stormont, of course, was prorogued in 1972 but now the United Kingdom, more broadly, is undergoing a radical transformation with the contraction of the welfare state and the gradual break-up of Britain.

While loyalism has been vociferous in its defence of Northern Ireland's place within the UK it has been relatively silent on the broader economic challenges and political context that face it. Most recently it has made its stand on questions of cultural expression and identity, where it has been confronted by its old antagonist, Irish republicanism, over the display of the union flag and parade routes. However loyalism also faces a more insidious challenge in the determination of Northern Ireland's political and economic leaders to establish the region as a fully signed up member of the global free-market. Loyalism's stout allegiances and noisy public manifestations make it anathema in this new dispensation, where the preferred form of cultural expression is that of individual, consumer lifestyle choices. It is within this context of cultural estrangement, economic impoverishment and political homelessness, that loyalism's dreadful media image and reputation is perhaps best understood.

In this chapter I want to consider film as a means by which to understand loyalism's alienation from the good opinion of others. But I want to argue that film also has the potential to offer a means by which working class Protestants can begin to articulate alternatives to their derogatory representation. This requires a critical cultural practice that demonstrates an understanding of film form and history; an appreciation of the social context in which the practice is formed; and a willingness to see cultural practice as an aid to social transformation and not merely a means by which to achieve 'affirmative' cultural representations, which can be anodyne and trivialising.

In any case audiences will have seen few affirmative representations of loyalism on film. More typically it is captured in the image of a gunman, as a monstrous outsider in cinematic Ireland, or alternatively viewed through the lens of generic conventions – horror and gangster films – where it provides an image of delinquent masculinity

to trouble and thrill contemporary cinema audiences. Seldom is loyalism presented in any historical or social context that would help illuminate its politics or its actions; nor is it afforded any sense of political idealism, and as a consequence it is reduced to a form of psychopathology.

Of course loyalism is not alone in suffering such treatment on-screen. Republicans, while occasionally allowed a degree of political romanticism, have also had their fair share of mad, bad and dangerous gunmen. Indeed as John Hill has pointed out, there is a historic tendency in cinema to portray the conflict in Ireland as a consequence of an inherent flaw in the national character that dooms its combatants to a violent and tragic fate (1987: 147). These representations of Ireland as 'dark and strife-torn maelstrom', and a site of primordial violence are mostly found in British films, so providing an ideological alibi for Britain's history of military and political involvement in Ireland. If the Irish can be presented as predisposed to violence then Britain appears to stand above the conflict, intervening only as a civilising influence. North American cinema, on the other hand, has provided the other dominant image of Ireland as a 'generally blissful, rural idyll' (Ibid), playing to the fond remembrances of the large immigrant Irish population that make up a significant section of its domestic audience. John Hill argues that even early indigenous film production in Northern Ireland tended to pander to the expectations of North American audiences, producing romanticised images that pleased the local tourist industry but failed to satisfy unionism's aspiration for a distinctive 'Ulster' character, differentiating the North from the South of Ireland. More particularly, visions of 'nostalgic pastoralism' (Hill, 1987: 147) provided no place within the film-frame for the North's urban Protestant working class, let alone the Catholic working class.

Illiberal and violent loyalism in the reimagined Ireland

If Ireland on film has largely been the imaginative work of British and North American cinemas, their predilections have not gone unchallenged. By the 1980s a

generation of indigenous filmmakers in Ireland had begun to defy the stereotypes associated with Ireland on screen but they also took aim at the shibboleths and essentialist myths of Irish identity. Martin McLoone refers to their films as constituting 'in embryo a cinema of national questioning, an attempt to reimagine Ireland in new ways beyond the confines of traditional nationalism', and as 'explorations of the many-layered and contradictory nature of identity' (1994: 168). Although radical in form and content, these films nevertheless tended to either ignore the existence of loyalism or present it as a threatening, violent interloper. For instance, in Pat Murphy's experimental, feminist feature *Maeve* (1984), loyalism appears inherently malevolent and perverse. The film is a feminist critique of Irish patriarchy, in which Maeve, a young Belfast woman, returns home from London to an environment that she finds stifling and alienating. Through a series of conversations with her republican boyfriend and her more conventional sister, she begins to question the male dominated version Irish republican history and the gendered myths of nationhood. But despite the challenge that Maeve's feminism presents to traditional ideas of Irishness, the film never explores any possible alliance with loyalist women. Indeed it seems to deliberately disavow the idea in a scene that offers an excoriating representation of what is presumably Maeve's Protestant counterpart in the film. Passing through a barricade into Belfast's city centre, Maeve encounters a young woman caught in an act of loveless, passionless sex with a British soldier in uniform. Standing upright, the woman stares impassively over the soldier's shoulder at Maeve, as he, in an automated fashion, rhythmically humps her in the dark. The scene acts as an allegory for a deficient, dispassionate union between Ulster loyalism and Britain, the apparent progeny of which is encountered, briefly, earlier in the film when Maeve's sister is attacked by a loyalist boy, who then threatens Maeve with stream of bigoted invective. There is no attempt to place the assault in any historical or social context of sectarian antagonism in Belfast. Indeed, attributing such violent prejudice to a child seems to reject any contextualisation. It is as if little loyalist bigots spring fully formed from the womb.

Loyalists are similarly decontextualised and malevolent in Joe Comerford's *High Boot Benny* (1993), where they have a walk-on part as murderous automatons, activated at the behest of their 'official' handlers. Like previous Comerford films, it is peopled with apparent nonconformists and the socially marginalised, whose inclusion in the film-frame challenges and contradicts conventional notions of Irish community. In *High Boot Benny*, the eponymous protagonist is a teenage delinquent who flees Northern Ireland and seeks refuge in a small, rural school just over the border, run by a Protestant matron who is cohabiting with a defrocked-priest. When a RUC informant is found dead in the school, a joint British army and RUC patrol make incursions over the border in pursuit of the killers. They suspect the residents of the school of being involved in the murder. Consequently, the Matron, the ex-priest and Benny find themselves drawn into the conflict between the IRA and security forces. When a gang of loyalist gunmen enter the school under the watchful eyes of the RUC and assassinate the matron and the priest, they are quickly apprehended at gun point. Then they lie prostrate, passively and silently at the feet of their British Army captors. This mute, relatively anonymous depiction paints the loyalists as little more than lackeys carrying out the murderous work of their British masters. Their Otherness in the context of the film is further emphasised by the way in which their very clothes look out of place in the film's rural mise-en-scene and Comerford's primitivist aesthetic. Dressed in shell-suits, they appear alien against the often harsh, bleak landscape provided by the Inishown peninsula of Donegal where the film was shot. They also contrast sharply with Benny, who seems to be coded in the film as a 'native', sporting a mowhawk hairstyle and punk attire that draws inspiration from 'Red Indian' styles of dress. In effect, Benny and many of the other central characters in Comerford's film may be offered as dissenters and exiles from Irish society but loyalists are presented as social ciphers and trespassers.

This is not the case in Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *December Bride* (1990) with its engaging depiction of a rural Presbyterian community in the early 20th century that appears thoroughly integrated into the landscape around Strangford Lough in Co. Down. Based on the novel of the same name by Sam Hanna Bell, the film's central character is Sarah Gomartin, a young woman who establishes a *ménage à trois* with

two landowning brothers, Hamilton and Frank Echlin. As a consequence, the three are ostracized by their conservative neighbours, and when Sarah has a child, the local minister intervenes and tries to persuade her to marry one of the brothers for respectability's sake. However, Sarah refuses, determined to preserve the matriarchal relations that she has established on the farm.

December Bride, like *Maeve* and *High Boot Benny*, focuses on dissenters and non-conformists and once again loyalism is represented as a largely illiberal and violent force. It manifests itself in the film in the shape of an Orange parade and the beating of a Lambeg drum, and as a constituent of the broader puritan community from which Sarah and the Echlin brothers stand apart. As such it is implicated in the vicious assault on the younger brother, Frank, whose attempt to reintegrate himself into the communal life of his neighbours is violently rejected, leaving him a cripple. Nevertheless the film is an important milestone in the cinematic representation of northern Protestants generally. As Martin McLoone (1999) argues its strength lies in the way it takes a rural landscape usually associated with Catholic, nationalist Ireland, and peoples it differently with Protestants, whose belonging there is emphasised by the film's sustained attention to that community's labour in that landscape. There is barely a scene in the film in which its characters are not engaged in some work or other, which runs contrary to the long held association of the Irish rural scenery with leisure and romanticism. In this way *December Bride* not only strives to 're-imagine the cultural map of Ireland and the Irish differently', it also invites reflection upon northern Protestant identity and its relationship to the landscape (Ibid: 53).

It is precisely the cultural relationship between landscape and people that Brian Graham draws attention to in his discussion about the crisis in Protestant identity. He argues that Ulster Protestants in general, and unionists in particular, suffer from 'the lack of an agreed representation – or imaginary – of a place to legitimate and validate their domicile in the island of Ireland (1997: 34). 'Ulster', in Graham's phrase, is 'a place yet to be imagined' in a way that would culturally link people to territory (Ibid: 36). He argues that this is because of unionism's reliance on sectarian

discourses, which has resulted in it being unable to confer upon Northern Ireland an agreed and inclusive representation of place. It is perhaps the absence of an imaginary homeland that allowed subsequent filmmakers to easily appropriate loyalism's image and disassociate it from its proper historical and social context, relocating loyalism to the generic cinematic landscapes of gangsterism and horror.

Generic loyalists in ceasefire cinema

The peace process that began in the 1990s might have provided the cultural environment for the inclusive and 'integrative place consciousness' that Brian Graham argues is necessary if Northern Ireland is to achieve legitimacy and integrity (1997: 52). Indeed the peace process saw a significant shift in the cinematic representation of the Northern Ireland as film sought to contribute to the mood of determined optimism at the time. Where Belfast had previously been imagined on-screen as a maelstrom of primeval violence, in the new dispensation it became the backdrop to a number of romantic comedies that offered an upbeat and sometimes gentrified vision of the city. Cinema audiences also saw less of the monstrous or tragic Irish gunman, whose apparent predisposition to violence left him ostracised from civilised society and domestic life, and doomed to a brutal and premature death. In his place appeared a new 'housetrained' republican, presented in films such as *The Boxer* (1997) and *The Might Celt* (2005) as a family man striving to put his violent past behind him (McLaughlin and Baker, 2010).

Two films that are striking in their contrast to these largely affirmative and upbeat representations of the period are Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1996) and Marc Evan's *Resurrection Man* (1997). Both bring loyalism to the centre of the big screen for the first time and present it as the image of unconscionable violence in Ireland, in effect stepping into the gap left on screen by the newly domesticated republicans. Both films include graphic scenes of torture and sectarian assassination that evoke some of the most barbarous murders in Northern Ireland's history. In

particular they deliberately recall the notorious loyalist gang known as the Shankill Butchers that terrorised Belfast in the mid-1970s and derived its name because of a preference for torturing its victims with knives and axes before murdering them. However, *Nothing Personal* (1996) and *Resurrection Man* (1997) are not in any way histories of the period. Instead both appropriate the image 1970s Belfast and loyalism as a means by which to explore violent masculinity as viewed through the lens of cinema genres.

At its core *Nothing Personal* is a gangster film, although in its credits it acknowledges a debt to Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), which recreated the struggle for Algerian independence. However where Pontecorvo's film employed the style and techniques of cinéma vérité in its depiction of political insurrection, *Nothing Personal* owes more to Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) and its gritty urban drama of male fealty. It uses contemporary Dublin to recreate the terrace streets, waste ground and drinking dens of 1970s Belfast. This is the stamping ground of Kenny, the suave leader of a loyalist gang and his evidently psychotic friend, Ginger. The gang are ordered to observe a ceasefire by their commander, but Ginger flagrantly disobeys and Kenny seems at best ambivalent about the peace. As Ginger's insubordination grows, Kenny is ordered by his superior to kill his friend but he prevaricates, reminded of the oath of loyalty they swore to one another when Kenny initiated Ginger into the gang. The depth of their relationship is hinted at during the swearing-in of a young recruit who is clearly infatuated with Kenny and gang membership. The enigmatic gang leader takes the eager boy's hand as they pledge that their first loyalty is to one another. The solemn, ceremonial nature of the occasion appears almost matrimonial, which gives a clue to Ginger's jealous reaction at the inclusion of the young newcomer in the gang. It is as if Ginger sees him as a rival for Kenny's attention and affection, hinting that beneath the violent male camaraderie of the gang lies more libidinous tensions.

Kenny's reluctance to discipline Ginger ends tragically when after a night of rioting in the city and tit-for-tat violence, the gang seeks vengeance. They pick up Liam, a Catholic father who leaves his children at home while he goes out to join his neighbours in defending the district from loyalist rioters. But he gets injured and

then stranded on the wrong side of the peace line where he is rescued by Anne. She is coincidently Kenny's estranged wife, and as she tends to Liam's wounds there is a growing intimacy between the couple that holds out the possibility of some form of romantic restoration among the sectarian violence of Belfast. But shortly after Liam resumes his journey home he is bundled into a car by Kenny and his gang. They drive him to a loyalist bar after closing time where he is subjected to an interrogation and vicious beating. During this the gang engage in misogynistic banter, through which they try to demonstrate their sexual prowess but which in the end only confirms their estrangement from legitimate heterosexuality.

Liam looks doomed (another victim for the uncontrollably violent Ginger) but Kenny recognises the Catholic father as a childhood friend and resolves to see him safely home, much to Ginger's consternation. Once Liam is reunited with his children in the street, Ginger threatens to kill him but Kenny intervenes, wounding his comrade by shooting him in the leg. Even at this stage Kenny is incapable of carrying out the order to kill Ginger. Less hesitant is a Catholic teenager, who in a fit of manly bravado, tries to extract revenge from the loyalist gang but ends up accidently shooting Liam's daughter. Wracked with remorse, and disgusted at Ginger's obvious delight at the girl's death, Kenny finally squares up to his friend and comrade in their broken down getaway car. In this scene they are shown in close up, nose to nose, looking directly into one another's eyes, while they wrestle over a pistol. It looks like a bizarre re-interpretation of the lovers' embrace at the end of a romantic film. However Kenny and Ginger's relationship is not consummated with a kiss. Rather Kenny pulls the trigger just before a British Army patrol, which has belatedly arrived on the scene, opens fire on the stranded car killing everyone inside.

The film's message is a humanist one: violence begets violence, and the desire for revenge leads to tragedy; worthy enough sentiments but far too general to illuminate the Northern Ireland conflict in any significant or specific way. Neither does the film add anything of substance to our understanding of loyalism, which it presents as a form of madness in the case of Ginger, and misguided masculinity in the case of men like Kenny, who forgo domestic life and romantic attachments for the violent homosociality of gang membership.

A similar shortfall in legitimate heterosexuality seems to underscore the violence in *Resurrection Man*, which, like *Nothing Personal*, also tries to recreate the mean streets of 1970s Belfast, although this time filmed in Warrington, Manchester and Liverpool. In it Victor Kelly is a rising star in the loyalist firmament who builds a terrifying reputation on account of his savagery, mortally butchering his victims with a knife. He is clearly a man in the grip of an Oedipal crisis, too enamoured of his overbearing and indulgent mother, and apparently disinterested in consummating his relationship with the his promiscuous girlfriend, Heather. The only thing that Victor seems to derive sexual gratification from is killing, taking libidinous pleasure in the sanguinary imagery of his homicidal work. It is this psycho-sexual perversion that lies at the root of Victor's violent behaviour, not political conviction. Yet *Resurrection Man* shows no sociological curiosity in the erotic appeal of violence; rather its coupling of sex and violence is viewed through the accumulated history of film genres.

Resurrection Man is in part a gangster film with its urban mise-en-scene of narrow streets, backyards and smoky dive bars, coupled with an iconography of guns, cars and chic 70s clothing. It even opens with a scene of Victor as a boy watching *Public Enemy* (1930) from the projection booth of a cinema, an experience which seems formative in Victor's later attempts to project his own Jimmy Cagney-gangster-style image into the public sphere. On the other hand, *Resurrection Man* draws inspiration from the horror genre, indicated immediately by its title that conjures up the notion of the undead. Victor is even presented as almost vampiric in his lust for blood and also in the way he confines himself to nocturnal hours and murky interiors, avoiding sunlight. His horrific credentials are further emphasised by the way in which the film references Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the pioneer of slasher movies, with its Oedipal drama and knife attacks. It even has its own shower-scene writ-large, when towards the end of the film Victor holds-up in the appropriately named Tomb Street bathhouse, with its milieu of ceramic tiles, blood-stained shower curtains, gurgling water-pipes and taps, and Victor's final victim lying lacerated in a bathtub. Seen in these terms *Resurrection Man* is less a film about loyalism and substantially a film about other films. As John Hill argues, its 'aspiration to represent the actual past […]

gives way to a simulation of the past based on a reworking of earlier [film] representations and styles' (2006: 207).

Loyalists in entrepreneurial Northern Ireland

One film stands out as an attempt to understand loyalism within the contemporary social environment – *As the Beast Sleeps* (dir. Harry Bradbeer). Although made for television, it was premiered at the Belfast Film Festival in 2001 and later broadcast on BBC2 in February 2002. Based on the stage play by Belfast playwright, Gary Mitchell, it is the story of a loyalist 'team' who find themselves marginalised by the peace process, and struggling in the wake left behind by their politically aspiring leaders and entrepreneurial associates. At the centre of the drama is Kyle, his wife Sandra and his intemperate friend and comrade, Freddie. Freddie is to all intents and purposes one of the family; the godfather of Kyle and Sandra's young son and frequently referred to as 'uncle'. At the same time, Kyle acts as a father-figure to his more immature and impetuous buddy. Yet despite Kyle's attempts to counsel him, Freddie's impulsiveness and alienation from the new realities of the peace process bring him into conflict with his commanders and this eventually leads to the disintegration of the Kyle's loyalist 'family'.

The film opens against the backdrop of the ceasefire called by the Combined Loyalist Military Command in 1994, which far from being greeted with joy and relief by Kyle, Freddie and the other 'footsoldiers', is viewed with scepticism. This turns to resentment when it becomes clear that an end to all paramilitary and criminal activities means that the gang are faced with a loss of status and illicit earnings. Kyle considers this is a temporary hiatus in their fortunes but is confronted by Sandra's resentment at the drop in household income and Freddie's growing disaffection and dissent. A humiliating trip to the job centre reveals just how grave the situation is for Kyle and his men. They learn that their lack of formal qualifications means that only the most menial, low-paid jobs are open to them. To add insult to injury they are excluded from the local loyalist bar that they once supplied with stolen cigarettes and alcohol. Now the bar is a legitimate business, its profits funding the political ambitions of the loyalist leadership, and in this new political economy, Kyle and

Freddie are considered liabilities. As the bar manager tells his loyalist employers: 'Every time these fucking Comanches come in here it pegs us back. People are feeling uncomfortable and intimidated. That's not an atmosphere that I want to create here and it's not an atmosphere that's good for business.'

Eventually Freddie's provocative behaviour in the bar results in him being banned from the premises. Angry and frustrated he robs the place. When the loyalist leadership find out they order Kyle to punish him and reclaim the stolen money, a command he reluctantly carries out. In the process he discovers that his wife, Sandra, has been Freddie's accomplice. She is disgusted at Kyle's betrayal of his friend, and she leaves him despite his protestations that he had no choice but to punish Freddie.

The limited options available to Kyle and his comrades, and their lack of agency in the new political and economic environment emerging around them, lie at the heart of *As the Beast Sleeps*. As Kyle tries to explain to the disconsolate Freddie, 'this is the way things are going to go no matter what we do.' And so even Freddie's robbery of the bar appears less an exercise in free-will than a futile, nihilistic act of protest against a new dispensation he cannot come to terms with and scarcely understands. Kyle, on the other hand, sounds fatalistic in his view of the future but the film invites the audience to see something more than the hand of providence at work in the lives of its loyalist family. It is doomed, not merely because of a misguided commitment to violence – a common enough trope in films about political conflict in Ireland – they are actively pushed out by the new-found legitimate entrepreneurship of the bar manager who excludes them from his premises and the loyalist leaders who can find no place for their subordinates in the new dispensation. As one loyalist leader tells another in stark terms: 'these violent young men have no place […] in our future.'

Kyle, Sandra and Freddie's place is given figurative and literal expression through the film's social realist aesthetic. The housing estate on which they live looks dismal and bleakly rendered, and the characters frequently appear confined in the film's claustrophobic interiors. This aesthetic strategy is inspired to some extent by the work of British director, Ken Loach, whose naturalism emphasises the social

environment within which his working class characters live. *As the Beast Sleeps* even opens with a football match, reprising the amateur game in Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) that offers a symbol of working class male camaraderie and a fleeting relief from the otherwise grim world around the men. But just as Loach's characters struggle to ever transcend their social environment, so the loyalist gang in *As the Beast Sleeps* appear trapped by their class, their lack of qualifications and the new political and economic realities emerging around them. In mapping out this contemporary terrain the film seems to presage some of the problems and controversies that have beset loyalism more recently.

For instance, in December 2012 the Belfast City Council voted to restrict the number of days the Union flag would fly over city hall. Loyalists were incensed and engaged in a series of street demonstrations that disrupted the commercial life of the city in the run up to Christmas. For this they attracted the ire of the business community, concerned about the loss of customers and profits during the busiest retail period of the year. A campaign encouraging conspicuous consumption in support of the city centre's retailers, restaurateurs and pub owners was organised through social media using the Twitter hash-tag #takebackthecity. Whatever one's views of the rights and wrongs of the flag protests, there is surely an irony in proposing to 'take back' Belfast from people who are among its residents, especially when the city has become increasingly privatised. But what this reveals is not only the level of disenchantment among loyalists at what they perceive as their increasing social marginalisation, but it also highlights their growing alienation from the good opinion of their more affluent neighbours. Indeed, at least one commentator noted, the sneering condescension of 'middle Ulster' for the largely working class Protestants involved in loyalist demonstrations.[2]

As Conor McCabe (2103) points out, Northern Ireland has undergone a 'double transition', from conflict to political accord, and from a broadly social democratic settlement to neoliberalism. Indeed the much lauded 'peace dividend' is better

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[2] Eamonn McCann, 'No unilateral fix to hardship which spawned loyalist rage' in the Belfast Telegraph, 11 January 2013: available on-line at http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/opinion/columnists/eamonn-mccann/no-unilateral-fix-to-hardship-which-spawned-loyalist-rage-29013052.html (accessed 15 September 2013)

understood as the region's incorporation into global capitalism, a world were old political allegiances are a burden and where all are expected to succumb to the atomising, enterprising and commercial demands of the market. Eric Hobsbawm has argued that, 'Free-market theory effectively claims that there is no need for politics because the sovereignty of the consumer should prevail over everything else' (2000: 113). Similarly David Harvey describes the environment in which we find ourselves as 'a world in which the neoliberal ethic of intense, possessive individualism, and its political withdrawal from collective forms of action, becomes the template for human socialization' (Harvey 2008: 31). This new dispensation is no place for loyalism as it is presently constituted. Its predilection for rowdy public demonstrations (and street confrontations) and its ardent political convictions make it a liability in the eyes of those who see the future of Northern Ireland as a mere brand in the global market place. The enterprising new bar manager in *As the Beast Sleeps* speaks for these people when he complains about how Kyle and Freddie's presence in the bar 'pegs us back.'

As the Beast Sleeps is a bleak representation of loyalism but it is not without empathy for the predicament that its characters find themselves in – with little choice and no place. It distinguishes itself from other representations of loyalism by engaging with the contemporary political and economic milieu, rather than portraying loyalism as trespassers and depraves in a re-imagined Ireland, or as pathological killers in a generic landscape. And yet despite the drama's conscientious look at loyalism its writer, Gary Mitchell, and his family were intimidated from their Belfast home in November 2005 by loyalists, who it is said were angered by his depiction of them. In an interview the playwright offered a rather different rationale for the intimidation, saying that he was '99 per cent sure' that his assailants had never seen any of his plays, and that their animosity was rooted in their opinion of him as being 'a fellow who's got above himself.'[3] The Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the organisation widely considered to have been behind the intimidation, denied responsibility, blaming instead 'rogue elements'. But whoever was behind it and whatever their reasons, it added credence to the perception that loyalism is

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[3] Louise Jury, 'Belfast playwright forced into hiding after loyalist threats', *Independent*, 23 December 2005

ignorant of, or hostile towards anything that falls under the rubric of 'culture'. Indeed as one broadsheet journalist saw it, what had up until then 'protected' Gary Mitchell from loyalism's violent attention was 'the paramilitaries' prejudice that culture was something only for "taigs and faggots"'.[4] The notion that loyalists are cultural-less may be tedious, ignoring the fact that they have access to broadly the same popular consumer culture as others and a political lexicon of their own that is rich in symbolism, narrative and ritual. But the accusation highlights another aspect of loyalism's image problem: the perception that it stands apart from and contributes nothing to the broader cultural life beyond its own narrow constituency.

Conclusion

Loyalism needs to be the subject of a politically informed cinema and it needs to be a participant in a critically engaged film culture if it is to challenge and change its lamentable image and reputation on-screen. In short, if loyalism feels it has been misrepresented and misplaced in the films made by others then the obvious solution is for loyalists to make their own! Yet that is a lot to ask of a community that is economically straitened and, as the quote at the top of this chapter suggests, lacks the confidence to articulate itself through anything other than its own exclusive idioms. However there are ways and means and precedents. Filmmaking does not necessarily have to subscribe to the big-budget, high production values of Hollywood features. To this end Colin McArthur has argued that there is virtue in a cinema that works with limited resources, what he describes in the Scottish context as a 'poor Celtic cinema'. He argues that 'the more your films are consciously aimed at an international market, the more their conditions of intelligibility will be bound up with regressive discourses about your own culture' (1994: 119-120). Alternatively, low-budget filmmaking has the potential to free filmmakers from the commercial imperatives that can lead to short-hand generalisations and lazy stereotypes.

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[4] Angelique Chrisafis, 'Loyalist paramilitaries drive playwright from his home', *Guardian* on-line, 21 December 2005 (accessed 09/08/2013)
http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/dec/21/arts.northernireland

McArthur takes as inspiration the Italian *art povera* movement of the 1950s that produced art out of what resources and materials were available, forgoing the need to compete with the 'glitzy and financially inflated world of the gallery circuit' (Ibid: 121). But he also traces the cinematic linages of his proposed 'poor cinema', back to what he describes as the 'quasi-artisanal' practices of the British documentary movement of the 1930s; post-war Italian neo-realism and the French *nouvelle vague*; as well as Third World cinematic practices. In all these instances, he argues, 'the films were low-budget not just for economic reasons, but in order to be able to say things which remained unsaid in more orthodox structures and practices' (Ibid).

Similarly Third Cinema, a film movement with its roots in 1960s Latin America, also attempts to 'speak a socially pertinent discourse' that articulates a set of aspirations that dominant mainstream cinema excludes or marginalises (Willemen, 1994: 184). Paul Willemen highlights how Third Cinema's pioneers advocated an intellectual cinema; a cinema that was aesthetically non-prescriptive; a cinema that while conditioned and tailored by its own social situation was not limited to Latin America in its appeal; and above all a cinema committed to social transformation (1994: 179 – 182). This is film as a critical cultural practice, aesthetically strategic and conscious of the social processes and context of its production.

For many the idea of loyalism's association with Third Cinema or a 'poor Celtic cinema' will seem incongruous given its historical defence of monarchy and imperial power. Indeed its attempts to appropriate the language of the oppressed have been treated with incredulity and have, at times, looked absurd. Yet no community is impervious to change and transformation, and the 'double transition' that Northern Ireland is undergoing at the moment demands a response from working class Protestants whose economic status has been undermined and whose political place seems uncertain. So far loyalism has mobilized in defence of its residual cultural forms – parades, flags and emblems. These are important to a community that feels beleaguered and excluded from social life, but surely what is called for are emergent critical cultural practices, one of which is potentially film. That cultural practice must be neither myopic in its attention to local culture and tradition nor 'evasively cosmopolitan' (Willemen, 1994: 177); and it must also coherently engage with

questions of economic redistribution and political power in an era when austerity is being imposed ruthlessly from above.

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Biography

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