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Table of contents

Introduction to the Special Issue[1]

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Contemporary debates in cultural studies often focus on the influence of global economic processes on international, national, regional and local cultural productions, with creative works being subjected to analyses within the context of economic systems of production which are marked by the growing tendencies of neoliberalism and globalization. Anglophone literatures, cultures and media not only represent these trends but also embody the relationships between globalization and glocalization, between global and local identities, between the tendency towards the creolization of culture and the increasingly vocal calls for the preservation of ethnic and regional cultural specifics. Since the advent of mass production, mass consumption and mass communication has brought about a domain in which it is more and more difficult to identify a core which is capable of imposing cultural hegemony, the previously dominant theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism have lost the capacity to address the changing character of the globalized world.

Studies of the cultural mechanisms of identity construction by scholars such as Kirby (2009), Nealon (2012), Lipovetsky (2005), Bourriaud (2009) or Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) suggest that the relationships between globalization, cultural production and identity construction are further complicated by the complex character of the global processes that have fundamentally reconfigured the economic, political, social and cultural spheres, with globalization largely seen as being responsible for the development of structural tension in postmillennial societies throughout the world. This tension is particularly apparent in the interactions between the discourses of globalization and identity. Since globalization has affected all traditional processes of identity construction, postmillennial societies undergo struggles for identity that include the replacement of determination by social standing or by obligatory determination, i.e., self-construction (Bauman 2001, Bornman 2003), the creolization of identities (Bourriaud 2009), the rise of hyperindividualism (Lipovetsky 2005) and pseudoautism (Kirby 2009), the collapse of a sense of community (Bauman 2001) and the rise of surrogate communities such as shared interest groups, professional groups or virtual groups (Bornman 2003). The appearance of new identities not only involves the emergence of a cosmopolitan identity marked by the sense of disembeddedness but also a global identity that implies "global self-reflection" and "identification with the total of humankind" (ibid.).

On the other hand, however, the pressure of globalization has also revitalized ethnic, regional, and communal identities and encouraged the emergence of "glocalization" (Robertson 1995) which integrates "innovative hybrid practices that local cultures have invented to assert their identity" (Tartaglia and Rossi 2015). It has also provoked an increase in regionalism rooted in local identity, i.e., a sense of identity which "harbours emotional and symbolic meanings that people ascribe to a sense of self and the attachment to place" (ibid.).

The authors of the texts included in this Special Issue, all of whom are members of the research team of the VEGA Project 1/0447/20 *The Global and the Local in Postmillennial Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media*, granted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, have studied the processes of identity construction and identity struggles in their respective fields of interest, and their examinations of literary and media products collected here represent a valuable contribution to contemporary debate.

Adriana Saboviková, Silvia Rosivalová Baučeková and Zuzana Buráková approach the phenomenon of space from three different angles, with Karin Sabolíková adding a historian's perspective to the issue, while Martina Martausová focuses on the microcosmos of family complementing the portrayal of space with the post-feminist gender perspective.

For **Adriana Saboviková,** the visualisation of place in British procedural television dramas outlined in **Mapping the Representations of Post-conflict Belfast:** *The Fall* **and** *Marcella* represents a platform on which the latest globalization tendencies are confronted with the regional and local characteristics of contemporary social conditions in Northern Ireland. Saboviková's study of this televisual discourse is enriched by **Karin Sabolíková**'s analysis of ongoing historic changes in Northern Ireland. In **The Vulnerability of the Good Friday Agreement in Light of Brexit**, Sabolíková adds a political and economic dimension to the debate by examining the impact of the Brexit referendum of 2016 on the fragile peace settlement implemented through the framework of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The discussion of landscape continues in **Zuzana Buráková**'s study of a selected aspect of American literary discourse in **The End of the Landscape at the End of the World** where regional spaces encounter the global and universal territories of the writer. The study of the literary portrayal of London's urban space in **Wandering Through London, Getting Nowhere: The Inescapability of Place in Zadie Smith's** *NW* leads **Silvia Rosivalová Baučeková** to the discovery of intriguing relationships between the setting, narrative and class hierarchies. Last but by no means least, **Martina Martausová** reveals how post-feminist sensibilities are transformed into the representation of characteristics of the microspace of family in American cinema in her article titled **What the Hell Do I Do with the Child?: The Persistence of the Father in American Cinema**.

Notes

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Mapping the Representations of Post-Conflict Belfast:
The Fall and *Marcella*

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Abstract

Recent examples of unique visualisation of place and landscape in British procedural drama echo the latest global trends in the Anglo-American televisual landscape which have been significantly influenced by Nordic Noir inspired crime dramas. Representations of Northern Ireland, which offers Nordic-style landscapes, in British procedural dramas have typically focused on the urban landscape of Belfast, with the city featuring as the location for numerous television series (or individual seasons) due to its specific spatial geography and troubled history. The frequency with which the city appears in television and cinema productions has inspired the main aim of this paper, which is to investigate the televisual representations of post-conflict geography of Belfast in two British crime dramas: The Fall (BBC, 2013 – 2016) and Marcella (ITV, 2016 – 2021).

Keywords: *landscape, crime drama, Belfast, The Fall, Marcella*

Introduction

Despite the multitude of television and cinema genres available to viewers in the postmillennial era, the popularity of crime dramas endures on the media landscape, both on broadcast television and via newer streaming services such as Netflix, HBO or Amazon Prime. Nonetheless, the established elements of the crime drama in the Anglo-American television landscape have undergone significant modifications over time and the traditional narratives of the genre have been updated for modern audiences. A general shift towards a transnational context has been identified, not only in terms of transnational co-productions (the quintessential example being the Danish/Swedish TV series *Bron/Broen*)[2] but also in the predominance of regional productions which have gained international audiences such as Nordic Noir crime dramas from Scandinavia. Nordic Noir shows in particular have become globally influential, inspiring the emergence of noir-inflected television shows in other European countries. The United Kingdom is not exception to this trend, and the influence of international crime dramas is apparent in critically acclaimed shows such as *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013 - 2017), *The Fall* (BBC, 2013 – 2016), *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (S4C, 2013 - 2016) and *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021), to name but a few.

The television scholar Glenn Creeber acknowledges the global influence of Nordic Noir in Anglo-American television crime dramas and also argues that it has led to the emergence of a new sub-genre that he terms "Celtic Noir" (2015: 27). Creeber delves deeper into the conventions of the Nordic Noir genre, seeing it as "a broad umbrella term that describes a particular type of Scandinavian crime fiction, typified by its heavy mixture of bleak naturalism, disconsolate locations and morose detectives" (2015: 21). Similarly, Jensen and Waade note that "a specific use of Nordic imagery and a feeling of melancholy are created through landscapes, climate, architecture, colours and light" (2013: 262). What seems evident here is

that place, primarily location, landscape and setting, is an essential feature of Nordic Noir, but many other elements of audio-visual language also play a role, interacting with places to generate a distinctive tone and atmosphere. Creeber characterizes this tone as "a rather slow and understated pace, the dialogue often sparse, monosyllabic and the light frequently muted. While there is clearly action (it is, after all, part of the crime genre), its drama also allows for long moments of stillness and reflection (2015: 24-25). Additionally, Roberts proposes that the term Nordic could actually function as "a signifier of style"[3] which allows us to "categorise or refine a 'type' of police procedural to a niche taxonomy" (2016: 372). He goes on to explain that "[b]eyond merely serving as a generic descriptor of a geographic region, of which 'Scandinavia' serves as a synonym, the term 'Nordic', when appended to 'landscape', is denotative of an idea or imagery of place" (2016: 371-372). This would suggest that even television crime dramas not locally produced in Scandinavia but which bear the archetypical 'Nordic' features and conform to the genre could themselves be labelled as the globally recognized genre of 'Nordic Noir'. Vatsikopoulos (2015) also argues that Nordic Noir has developed into "a genre of its own" and that "[n]ow it's the Scandinavians, with their melancholic characters and dark landscapes, who are setting the agenda". It is therefore possible to suggest that there is a general consensus that the place in which the story takes place (i.e., its setting, landscape and location) and how that place interacts with the story and its characters are a key element of the Nordic Noir crime fiction genre.

In terms of British procedural drama influenced by the Nordic Noir global trend, Roberts identifies a tendency towards location and landscape serving as a significant element of the production process. He describes this tendency as the "locative turn" (2016: 365) and further explains this 'turn' as

> one that points undoubtedly to a shift towards a broader cultural economy of landscape, space and place whereby television productions have engaged with and invested in location in ways that have outstripped those that programme makers had formerly availed themselves of.

These types of investments in the cultural economy of British regions are often encouraged by local development and funding agencies with the aim of stimulating the economic and commercial prospects of location sites. By appearing in popular television or film productions, towns and regions in Britain can increase their national and international recognition and develop their local tourist industries.

One region of the UK which boasts a wide range of attractive rural and urban locations for both British and international procedural drama[4] is Northern Ireland. The success of the region in attracting film and television productions is due in no small part to the committed work of Northern Ireland Screen, a state-funded agency which has helped to boost the region's economy by "maximising the economic, cultural and educational value of the screen industries for the benefit of Northern Ireland" (Northern Ireland Screen, 2022). The geography of the region offers Nordic-style landscapes, while its unique history contributes further to the elements of the Nordic Noir genre. Representations of Northern Ireland in British procedural dramas have typically focused on the urban landscape of Belfast, with the city featuring as the location for numerous television series (or individual seasons) due to its specific spatial geography and troubled history. The frequency with which the city appears in television and

cinema productions has inspired the main aim of this paper, which is to investigate the representation of post-Troubles Belfast in two British crime dramas: *The Fall* (BBC, 2013 – 2016) and *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021). While the former show is set in Belfast for the entirety of its three seasons, and the latter show relocates to the city for its third and final season.

The spatial anatomy of Belfast

The image of the city of Belfast promoted online is of a vibrant metropolitan city, a fascinating tourist destination where visitors can explore local attractions related to the city's prosperous shipbuilding past. The city is rebranding its image around its connection with the ill-fated Titanic[5] through the redevelopment of the former Harland & Wolff shipyard into the Titanic Quarter and its centrepiece of Titanic Belfast, a museum that tells the story of the eponymous ship. This revamping of the city in the global online space is the result of ongoing initiatives by local policy makers to foster and promote non-controversial representations of the city. By choosing which layers of history to promote and which to repress, Belfast's policy makers and tourist officials are at pains to establish the city as a neutral space and emphasize that modern Belfast is an inclusive and a safe place to visit.

However, as Cubitt (2014) has remarked "[a] landscape is a history, just as much as it is a geography", and the complex urban landscape of Belfast is still unable to hide its past and its intrinsic links to the sectarian conflict known as the Troubles[6] that affected the entire region of Northern Ireland. Shirlow (2008: 73-74) explains:

> Belfast's future remains tied to enduring ethno-sectarian separation. This is a city within which some 1,500 people were killed and tens of thousands victimised and traumatised in a conflict that rumbles on, although thankfully in a less dramatic fashion.

Despite the efforts of the tourist authorities, Belfast cannot simply erase its past, as the troubled history of the city is deeply engrained in the specific territoriality and the organization of the urban space itself. Space sharing and territorial belonging are key elements in the complex ethnic geography which is marked by the existence of two conflicting cultural identities which has resulted in the segregation of the city's communities. The territorial demarcations between the two communities are still visible and are an unconventional tourist attraction for visitors who are interested in experiencing the realities of post-Troubles Belfast.

One example of territorial demarcations in the urban landscape of Belfast are the large murals which use defined spaces (originally the sides of buildings but later also peace walls) to portray selective images of people or events which hold significance for the local community (often related to politics, religion or history).

A far more geographically evident physical legacy of the Troubles are locally called 'peace walls' that were erected as protective walls in order to protect republican (Catholic) and loyalist (Protestant) neighbourhoods by keeping the warring communities apart. The barriers (in the form of high usually concrete walls, metal fences or gates that are locked at night) were built from the 1970s onwards to mark the boundaries between areas occupied dominantly by

one of the two communities in a bid to reduce tensions, effectively creating the intricate territorial divisions of the urban landscape. Originally established as a temporary measure and a rather simple solution in periods of increased tension, the walls have become a permanent feature in Belfast and other Northern Irish cities due to their perceived effectiveness, but the long-term value of the structures is disputed. Although the original purpose of these physical interfaces[7] was to ensure the safety of local communities, they have since become an integral part of Belfast's spatial anatomy, gaining considerable cultural relevance and attracting the curiosity of visitors. Many of the walls are adorned with murals and political messages and imagery and have become iconic locations which feature in the "black cab" tours of sites related to the events of the Troubles which are popular among the city's tourists[8].

Somewhat surprisingly, the peace walls have increased in both length and number since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which heralded the start of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Shirlow (2008: 79) notes that

> there were sixteen interface walls in 1994, the year in which almost all the principal paramilitaries in the region announced a cease-fire. Since then most of these constructions have been either extended or heightened. Nine additional walls have been constructed owing to interface-related violence since 1998. The first meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998 was held on the same day as an interface wall was built through Alexander Park, a public park located in north Belfast.

Shirlow (2008) also links the spatial segregation of the city via interface walls to social inequality, as the majority of peace walls lie in the north and west districts of Belfast[9], areas which are generally considered to be the most deprived parts of the city.

Although the peace walls remain standing, the conflict-ridden communities have slowly begun to reintegrate and reconcile as the city itself continues on slow but ongoing transition from a 'troubled' city to a vibrant and rebranded modern city. Public bodies are actively involved in encouraging this process, as is described by O'Neill (2022):

> In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive launched a strategy called Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) which aimed to improve community relations, particularly at interface areas between Catholic and Protestant communities. One of the key aims of the project was the removal of all the so-called peace walls at these interfaces by 2023.

This strategy also applies to the whole region, not just Belfast, and as a result, "[s]ixteen sectarian interface barriers — among them nine in Belfast and four in Londonderry — have now been dismantled" (McAdams, 2021). However, as of 2022, it seems more than obvious that the goal of removing all Northern Ireland's interface walls by 2023 is unlikely to be achieved.

Even though their future remains uncertain, peace walls still attract numerous tourists and represent an explicit manifestation of Troubles-related imagery which Belfast cannot conceal. However, other parts of the city, specifically the riverfront and the former shipyards, which have undergone huge regeneration and redevelopment, thereby transforming the city skyline. Neill and Ellis explain that "[g]lass is now the representational form of choice for

development in the post-conflict city, offering as it does an obvious contrast to the brutalist terror-proofed buildings of the 'troubles'" (2008: 99). Belfast has undergone a radical process of rebranding, with the city authorities positioning the Northern Irish capital as a 'city in transition'.

The ongoing development of the post-conflict city has been assisted to a significant extent, by Northern Ireland Screen which has made considerable efforts to promote the city and Northern Ireland as a whole as suitable locations for television and film productions due to its specific geography and history. Richard Williams, the chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen, sees the undisputable success of the Northern Ireland television and film industry as a "shining example of what was meant to happen post the Good Friday agreement" (cited in Elliott, 2021). Cities or locations which feature in television series or films can become popular tourist attractions for fans and this can elevate the status of a city or region on both a national and international level. Belfast currently houses three film studios and several British television series such as *The Fall*, *Line of Duty*, *Bloodlands* and *Marcella* have been filmed in the city, resulting in a corresponding increase in Belfast's status as a tourist destination. In the next section, we will examine the televisual representation of the post-conflict geography of Belfast in two of these series, the procedural dramas *The Fall* and *Marcella*, both of which also fall within the genre of crime noir.

The representation of Belfast in *The Fall*

The Fall (BBC, 2013 – 2016) is a three-season British procedural drama which is set in Belfast. In terms of storyline, it is less a 'whodunit' than a 'whydunit' as the identity of the serial killer is introduced in the first episode and the viewers get to know his backstory. In contrast, Stella Gibson, the detective, who is on his trail, is something of an enigma,[10] a conscious decision on the part of the showrunner Allan Cubitt who wanted to "tell the audience next to nothing about her private life, but let them learn about her little by little via the choices she makes" (Cubitt, 2013).

Despite the central role of the city in the series, the opening scene is not set in Belfast but London, where the viewer is introduced to Gibson in the private spaces of her bathroom and bedroom. In a later scene, the serial killer breaks into the bathroom and bedroom of a house in Belfast, private spaces of the home of his next victim. The parallels in the views and experiences of the two protagonists are used to introduce Belfast as the location for the drama.

The detective, an outsider to the city who is unburdened by the specific history of the place, is placed into direct confrontation with the embedded ethnic and spatial geographies of post-conflict Belfast immediately upon her arrival in the city in the first episode. She voices her surprise as she is picked up at the airport in an armoured car and gets the deadpan response "Welcome to Belfast" (S1EP1). While being transported through the urban landscape to the fortified police station from where she will work, she sees two iconic landmarks of the Troubles through her car window: the famous stretch of peace walls at Cupar Way and the derelict Crumlin Road Courthouse. The specificity of location is cemented further in the police station itself as Gibson walks past a memorial to "Our Murdered Colleagues" commemorating the members of the Ulster Constabulary who were killed while on duty on the streets of Belfast. From her hotel room she can also see the iconic symbols of Belfast's shipbuilding past – Samson and Goliath, the two giant cranes of the former Harland and Wolff shipyard. As the

series progresses, especially in the first two seasons as she hunts down the killer, the detective repeatedly encounters specific geographic and political arrangements of the space of post-conflict Belfast: she is driven around the city by other police officers even though she can drive herself and she is prompted by her superior to get a firearm even though she does not consider it necessary. As an outsider, however, the detective makes little effort to engage with the history embedded in the urban geography of Belfast even though it is an authentic a part of the cinematic landscape of the series.

The killer, on the other hand, experiences the urban landscape of Belfast in a totally different way. As a local resident, he is fully aware of the conflict-related spatial territoriality of the city, and it is through him that the viewers experience the local knowledge of space and post-conflict memory as he moves around the city by both day and night before he is ultimately captured by the police. In the above-mentioned scene where he breaks into the house and enters the bathroom of his next victim, he pauses in front of the mirror and removes his balaclava, a symbol associated with the paramilitary groups, thereby revealing his own identity but also distancing himself from the narrative of Troubles-era terrorism. This scene, combined with the detective's attitude towards the city and her active refusal to engage with its history, could be seen as an attempt to alter the televisual representation of Belfast.

The series' focus on the male serial killer who preys on young professional women highlights the issue of violence in the context of the specific urban landscape of Belfast, a city that has its own history of violence, sectarian or otherwise, and which carries its own share of traumas related to the conflict. Lynch suggests that the "introduction of a fictional serial killer to the province after decades of violence and a fragile peace process can be seen as an attempt to normalize the region in the popular imagination" (2017: 61). It can also be argued, as Les Roberts notes, that the story "can be said to have grown out of the landscape" (2016: 374). Conflict-related imagery lends an authenticity establishing the cinematic landscape of Belfast and its post-conflict representation. Allan Cubitt, the series creator and director of the last two seasons echoes Robert's "locative turn" (2016: 365), clearly understanding that procedural dramas "have a very strong sense of place" (2013) and further explains that "the whole trick with creating a compelling drama is to create a distinct world. Belfast as a location has a very particular quality – a product, perhaps, of its history. A history, in part, of violence. That history casts a long shadow." (ibid.).

The representation of Belfast in *Marcella*

Like *The Fall*, *Marcella* (ITV, 2016 – 2021) is also a British procedural drama, but this series differs in that only its third and final season is set in Belfast. The location of the series relocates to Belfast after the main protagonist, the eponymous detective, experiences a personal catharsis after an interrupted suicide attempt, mutilating her face with scissors and cutting her hair off. She then fakes her own death and disappears in the streets of London after accessing the repressed memory that she caused the death of her infant daughter during a mental blackout.

As season three opens, we find Marcella working deep undercover in Belfast under an assumed name as she attempts to expose the Maguires, a seemingly respectable, successful family with its dark secrets who are in fact running the local crime scene. By adopting a whole new identity, changing her name, appearance and backstory, and accepting a new undercover job, Marcella has in some respect re-programmed herself, making a fresh start and leaving her

past behind (although not always successfully). The plot mirrors the recent efforts to normalize Belfast by re-branding it as a modern city and emphasising the newly built or renovated parts of the city which are not associated with the conflict and violence. This is particularly apparent in the opening credits of the third season, where the urban landscape of Belfast is introduced with images of the Titanic Museum and more affluent parts of the city. An early scene in the first episode also introduces Belfast by presenting a view of former shipyards and iconic Samson and Goliath cranes which also appeared in *The Fall*, again serving as a reference to the city's prosperous past. The regenerate docklands appear frequently throughout the season,[11] as the criminal activities of the Maguire family also include shipping and trafficking, but the locations are so easily recognisable in the show (McGoran, 2021). Other parts of the urban landscape are also used to code the televisual representation of Belfast as a modern post-conflict city as there is very little imagery related to Belfast's history of sectarian conflict; remarkably, there is only a single brief glimpse of a peace wall over the course of the entire season. Other locations used in the show include the modern glass buildings of a courthouse, an art gallery, a hotel, a hospital and the renovated Titanic Quarter. *Marcella* represents a significant shift in the televisual imagery of post-conflict Belfast in comparison to the city's appearance in *The Fall* where Belfast is coded through conflict-related imagery. The Belfast of *Marcella* retains the rebranded imagery of a vibrant modern city which takes pride in its prosperous shipbuilding past.

The long shadow of the Troubles is not as openly visible in *Marcella* as it is in *The Fall*, although the conflict does form an important background to the plot of the series; it transpires that the deceased patriarch of the Maguire family had a paramilitary past and members of the family often resort to violence in their line of business. Nonetheless, this only emphasises the impression that the Troubles are connected with the city's past rather than its future, and the series predominantly presents Belfast as a city that promotes its non-controversial shipbuilding history and which is slowly but surely attempting to wipe the slate clean on its former reputation as a locus of violence and sectarian hatred.

Concluding remarks

Recent examples of unique visualisation of place and landscape in British procedural drama echo the latest global trends in the Anglo-American televisual landscape which have been greatly influenced by Nordic Noir inspired crime dramas, including those produced outside of Scandinavia itself. Crime noirs of this type are set in carefully and consciously chosen locations which become a significant element of the production process. The geographical imagery of Belfast has frequently featured as a location for several British crime noirs as the city offers a highly distinctive space for the narrative of human conflicts that are so typical of crime dramas. The city of Belfast, with its specific spatial territoriality and violent past, serves as the location of both *The Fall* and *Marcella*, two recent examples of British crime noirs. Each of these procedural dramas represents a different engagement with the location and its specific landscape, and these two approaches to Belfast result in two very different representations of the city. In *The Fall*, Belfast is represented through the use of Troubles-related imagery that is more authentically pronounced. However, as Lynch (2017) argues, the very fact of placing a violent serial killer in a city with its own history of sectarian violence could, ironically, be considered as a sign of normalisation. *Marcella*, uses different yet no less authentic televisual

imagery of Belfast, representing the city as a post-conflict space and simultaneously emphasising its non-controversial, rebranded modern imagery. This approach is indicative of a shift in televisual representations of Belfast and the move away from more archetypal imagery associated with the Troubles and the city's violent past.

Notes

[1] This research was supported by the project VEGA 1/0447/20 The Global and the Local in Postmillennial Anglophone Literatures, Cultures and Media, granted by the Ministry of Education, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

[2] The Danish-Swedish co-production *Bron/Broen* (2011 - 2018) was not only successful among international audiences but also spawned adaptations in several countries. There is the American adaptation *The Bridge* (2013 – 2014) and also the Anglo-French adaptation *The Tunnel* (Sky, Canal+, 2013 – 2017).

[3] Les Roberts understands this 'style' as that characterised by Jensen and Waade who describe it as using the specific colours, atmospheric elements and "bleak urban cityscapes, reminiscent of the film noir" (2013: 262).

[4] Many films and television series have been filmed in Northern Ireland but *Game of Thrones* is generally seen as the trailblazer which kicked off the boom in the film and television industry in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Screen publishes a catalogue of past and upcoming film and television productions which can be found at https://northernirelandscreen.co.uk/made-in-northern-ireland-production-catalogue/

[5] RMS Titanic was built in Belfast by the shipbuilding company Harland & Wolf.

[6] The Troubles is the name for sectarian conflict (also known as the Northern Irish conflict) in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. The conflict, however, was not based on religious beliefs. Therefore, these two groups are also termed republicans and loyalists respectively. Belfast was a focal point of the conflict, suffering regular street violence and terror bombing in the 1970s in particular.

[7] As Peter Shirlow (2008: 87) explains an interface is "a boundary between Catholic and Protestant communities. Many of these interfaces are marked by walls, some by roads and others by derelict housing".

[8] Black cab tours are famous tours of Belfast conducted in a London type taxi that cover the city's troubled past, focusing on political history and related places such as murals and peace walls. The guides are taxi drivers who often have personal experience of the Troubles. https://www.getyourguide.com/-l442/-tc259

[9] The Belfast Interface Project has produced an interactive online Interfaces Map available at https://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/interfaces-map

[10] Gillian Anderson, the actress playing the detective Stella Gibson, used the word "enigma" when referring to her character in an interview promoting the series. https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/entries/7a388fd4-fba2-33a6-98bf-75c5680e0e22

[11] Anna Friel, the actress playing the detective Marcella Backland (or Keira Devlin once relocated to Belfast) explained in an interview for Belfast Live (as quoted in McGoran, 2021): "We shot down by the docks. But the thing is, there's so many shows shooting in Belfast at the moment - thank goodness! - that because of that, we had to find locations which weren't too recognisable from other shows." https://www.belfastlive.co.uk/whats-on/be/marcella-itv-belfast-locations-friel-19697297

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The Vulnerability of the Good Friday Agreement in Light of Brexit[i]

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Abstract

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement or Belfast Agreement in 1998 was a watershed moment in the history of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Although the Agreement has not led to the emergence of a truly peaceful polity in Northern Ireland, it was a major milestone on the path towards a less violent political landscape. Nonetheless, the consequences of the 2016 Brexit referendum result have threatened the progress which has been made in Northern Ireland over the last two decades. The first part of this paper focuses on the specificities of the general context of Northern Ireland. While I maintain a theoretical dimension in the second part, I will attempt to examine the impact of Brexit on the Northern Ireland peace process and its implications for the Agreement in more empirical context. Due to the limitations of space, only selected aspects will be presented and examined in this brief analysis which is based on public statements, opinion polls and other relevant documents.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Good Friday Agreement, Belfast Agreement, Brexit, unionism, nationalism

Northern Ireland before Brexit – the general context

In 1921 the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 partitioned the island of Ireland into Northern Ireland (today known as Northern Ireland, NI) and Southern Ireland (today known as Ireland or Republic of Ireland). The south was dominated by Catholics who identified themselves as Irish and after the Second World War in 1949 they formed the Republic of Ireland. Substantial Protestant population who identified themselves as British in six northern counties out of thirty-two counties have remained a part of the UK. Nonetheless, more than 30 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland saw themselves as Irish, sensing a greater kinship to their neighbours in the south rather than to the British mainland. Since partition, Northern Ireland has traditionally been viewed as a dual or bicultural society shaped by the division between its two communities; a region with two cultural identities, each with their own version of history, their own culture, traditions, political affiliation, convictions and identity. In essence, Northern Irish society has long been shaped by the division between the British/Protestant/unionist/loyalist and the Irish/Catholic/nationalist/republican communities. However, it should be noted here that political divisions in Northern Ireland are not necessarily sectarian; not all Protestants are unionists and not all Catholics are nationalists in political terms (Albert 2009).

O'Connor (2002) explains that the two communities have long been segregated both residentially and in the workplace and display low levels of religious mobility and inter-marriage. Divisions are exacerbated by a degree of social inequality since, on average, Catholics remain less affluent than Protestants, are underrepresented in higher occupational groups and suffer substantially higher rates of unemployment (Bell 2002). However, the province is currently undergoing a demographic shift; the results of the 2021 census show that Catholics now represent 45.7% of the population compared to the 43.48% formed by the

15

Protestant population, the first time that Catholics have outnumbered Protestants since the establishment of Northern Ireland and a demographic milestone for the state that had always had a Protestant majority. In conclusion, one can state that Northern Ireland remains a divided society which is characterized by tension between its two main communities. Society in Northern Ireland is not only divided horizontally between Catholics and Protestants, nationalists and unionists; it is also divided vertically between the financially comfortable and the economically deprived (Craith 2002: 14). The process of partition itself has resulted not only in a division between the north and the south but also in the formation of a psychological or mental border between these two communities.

Almost 3500 people were killed between 1968-1998 in the conflict known as "the Troubles" which erupted against a background of Catholic perceptions of political marginalisation and the Protestant dominance of the civil service and police. The Catholic minority protested against their exclusion from the established power structures and the overt discrimination the faced in housing and jobs (Albert 2009). As English has noted (2006: 369), "[c]ulture, economy, symbols, religion and politics all combined to produce…...the worst combination in the north: a disaffected minority and an under-confidant majority". Continuing years of the tension led to the formation of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Movement which campaigned against discrimination and sought to promote equality. After several abortive attempts to stop the violence and solve the conflict, the Belfast Agreement also known as the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), was finally signed on 10 April 1998, followed by the St Andrews Agreement in 2006 which set out a roadmap for political normalisation in Northern Ireland and a definitive end to the conflict. Strictly speaking, however, while the GFA put an end to the violence, the issues behind the conflict continue to affect modern Northern Ireland (English 2006).

The Agreement, which was approved by voters on 22 May 1998 and came into force on 2 December 1999, consisted of the *British- Irish Agreement* between the governments of UK and Republic of Ireland and the *Multi-Party Agreement* between the British Government, the Irish Government and most of the political parties in Northern Ireland. When signed, the GFA was heralded as an historic compromise that would enable and encourage the two main communities in the region to overcome their differences and enter into a new era of mutual appreciation and co-operation (Cochrane 2020). The Agreement sets out a framework of three strands of political structures, covering Northern Ireland's governance, North-South relations and East-West relations, respectively. Strand One established the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive and empowered these bodies to make laws and decisions on issues affecting everyday life in Northern Ireland. Power in the 108- seat Assembly was shared between both communities on a more or less equal basis. Strand Two established the North-South institutions, namely: the North-South Ministerial Council and the North-South Implementation Bodies which were charged with promoting co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Strand Three established the East-West institutions: the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the British-Irish Council whose task was to encourage co-operation between the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The final part of the Agreement covered aspects known as peacebuilding elements, outlining a series of rights for the people of Northern Ireland, including issues relating to identity and citizenship. This element of the Agreement ensuring the creation of a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and an Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) and addressing such sensitive topics as victims' issues, reconciliation, integrated education, the economy, community relations, the promotion of the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages, the decommissioning of paramilitary

weapons, security related issues, the reform of the police and the criminal justice system, and the release of paramilitary prisoners (Albert 2009 : 22).

The Good Friday Agreement allowed the people of Northern Ireland to self-identify their nationality as either British, Irish or both and guaranteed citizens that any change to the constitutional status of the region could happen only with the concurrent electoral consent of the people living in both jurisdictions on the island. The implementation of the GFA and St Andrews Agreements was declared "complete" with the devolution of the governance of the now radically reformed policing authorities to the Assembly in 2010 (Todd 2017). Thus, "the hard border [was] torn down and both governments also acknowledged the diversity of the region and committed to eradicate discrimination to citizens over preference of one's identity" (de Mars et. al. 2018: 3-4). On the whole, the Agreement has been viewed as the cornerstone of the commitment to peace and stability on the island, but it has been subject to criticism by many, including Todd who argues that "it was always a thin agreement, underspecified in important respects despite its length and details" (Todd 2017 : 2).

It might, however, be more apt to understand the GFA less as a resolution or a settlement but more as a consociational power-sharing agreement that started the institutionalisation of the peace process but also left some points open in order to ensure that it could gain the support of both British unionists and Irish nationalists. Devenport (2013) states that opinion polls and analysis of public discourse suggest that although the underlying political conflict remained unchanged and was reflected in the ongoing political difficulties surrounding the establishment of the new institutions and the implementation of the reform process in NI, the majority of the population appeared willing to settle for a process of fragmented and discontinuous reform under the new political dispensation provided by the GFA. Most were willing to leave the long-term constitutional arrangements open ended in the hope that they could be addressed at some unspecified time in the future.

However, some of the provisions of the Agreement remain open to radically conflicting interpretation; for example, while some constitutional theorists read the GFA as indicative of a new concept of sovereignty based on the will of the people, unionists point to paragraphs which insist that British sovereignty remains unchanged (Morison, 2001; Godson, 2004). In spite of the fact that "reconciliation" in Northern Ireland became the basis for a historically new partnership between London and Dublin, with active support from Europe and America, the years after 1998 have been marked by a waxing and waning of this spirit; Todd (Ruane and Todd 2001) remarks that the post-GFA period has been characterized by ongoing crises over decommissioning, demilitarization, executive formation, policing, public symbolism and the right of the British government to suspend the Assembly.

Moltmann (2017) clarifies that the existence of shared government and the continuity of government symbolises progress to the wider world. But internally, the Executive has been subject to repeated breakdowns over unresolved issues of responsibility for killings committed during the Troubles and contentious cultural symbols, with little progress being made on delivering an integrated rather than a segregated future. The permanent state of crisis of the Troubles has been replaced by recurrent mini-crises over policing, flags, parades, interpretations of the past, paramilitaries and language issues. Almost every year since 2010, the political situation in Northern Ireland has required some type of outside intervention. The consistent priority of both London and Dublin has been to restore institutions rather than take on any additional responsibility to address the unresolved issues in depth. As long as it was possible to restore devolution, the welcome and radical reduction in levels of violence in Northern Ireland meant that any challenges to the process of reconciliation were technical

rather than systemic. Nonetheless, the persistent presence of many signs of a divided society remains a striking feature of life in Northern Ireland. "Peace walls" separate Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods, especially in Belfast's socially disadvantaged districts. As the Agreement has aged, the number of these walls has increased from 22 in 1994 to 116 in 2017. Meanwhile, the school system perpetuates social segregation, with only seven per cent of all children attending non-denominational schools. These features, and many others, lay bare the continuing weakness of the 1998 framework.

Despite these failures, the GFA has led the way towards a less sectarian political landscape. Put simply, the citizens of Northern Ireland have learned to live together in a more peaceful post-GFA world. Fenton (2018) states that since the signing of the GFA, Northern Ireland has made great steps towards relative normality, although the communal divide and the legacy of violence continue to permeate many areas of society. However, this delicate equilibrium has been disrupted and placed at risk by the results of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the subsequent implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, with some even questioning whether these developments could herald a resurgence of the Troubles. The status of Northern Ireland has once again become the focus of international attention as Brexit threatens to undermine GFA's main tenets. In words of Cochrane (2020:2) "Brexit hit Northern Ireland like a meteor from space. No one really saw it coming – or really understood its implications. It represents the biggest political and economic challenge for Northern Ireland since its foundation in 1921". This new element is not purely a local problem and its origin lie within a global context; it is a consequence of the enormous stress being placed upon the British-Irish framework underpinning the Good Friday system as a result of Brexit. In the wake of the referendum result, the governments of the UK and Ireland have adopted radically different approaches to the fundamental issues of sovereignty, borders and citizenship which underpin the Agreement. In addition to the disappearance of European and American sponsorship of a shared peace, Brexit appears to be eroding the local and the international structures of reconciliation in Northern Ireland, creating a renewed crisis of primary national interests with no obvious room for consensus in such a deeply divided society like Northern Ireland (Ibid.).

In conclusion, it was not only the process of partition of the island and the subsequent conflict which divided society in Northern Ireland, but it was also the GFA itself; by allowing both communities to develop their own separate interpretations of the content of the Agreement, the GFA has only deepened the pre-existing divisions. The unionists expressed their hopes that the GFA might be a final settlement, but they also expressed their fears that the GFA was only the first step in a capitulation to Irish nationalism and doubted that it represented a definitive end of Irish republicanism (Cochrane 2020: 54). As a result, the unionists have been split over the issue of support for the GFA. On the other side, nationalists saw the provisions for decommissioning all paramilitary weapons as a means of bolstering their own position. No agreement was reached on issues such as the reform of the justice system and the police. Clashes over the issue of decommissioning caused a serious political crisis and jeopardised the continuity of the Northern Ireland peace process, deepening the polarisation of society and placing the political settlement at risk (Ibid.).In essence, despite the progress made following the signing of the GFA, Northern Ireland still had no shortage of problems even before the issue of Brexit arrived on the political scene in 2016.

Northern Ireland and Brexit – Brexit shaping the future of Northern Ireland

On June 24, 2016, a referendum was held in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in which voters decided in favour of leaving the European Union. In England and Wales, the majority vote was for Leave; in Scotland and Norther n Ireland, the majority vote was for Remain. In Northern Ireland 55.8% voted for Remain and 44.2% voted for Leave. Although Northern Ireland as a whole expressed the desire to remain in the EU, a clear majority of the unionist electorate voted Leave, with 66% of those who identified as unionist backing Brexit, a figure which correlates closely with the 60% of Leave voters who identified as Protestant (Garry 2016). Conversely, 88% of those identifying as nationalist voted Remain, a figure again closely correlating with the 85% of Remain voters who identified as Catholic (Ibid.). It is therefore apparent that voting in the Brexit referendum fell mainly along unionist/nationalist lines, confirming the pre-existing division. While Leave voters in the UK welcomed the result as a way of "taking back control", Northern Irish Remain voters were left with the impression that they were "waking up in a different country" (Heenan, Aughey 2017).

Brexit is frequently described as the greatest political and economic challenge which Northern Ireland has faced since its foundation in 1921. Some of the consequences of Brexit were apparent in the days following the Brexit referendum result, such as the dramatic increase in the number of British people exploring their options and applying for citizenship of other EU countries (Cochrane 2020), but many other consequences will be far-reaching, having a substantial impact on the political activity, economic activity or social sphere. In addition to this, the issue of Brexit is presented differently in Britain and in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, two largest political parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin are also divided over Brexit. While the DUP campaigned to Leave and later insisted that Northern Ireland be subject to the the same terms as the rest of the UK, Sinn Féin was on the Remain side and has subsequently called for the region to be granted "special status" (Ibid.).

Northern Ireland emerged as one of the key obstacles in the subsequent Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU and the status of the country remains an indisputably complicated issue. Perhaps the most resonant concern in Northern Ireland is the question of whether Brexit is capable of damaging or even destroying the peace process. The following statements illustrate the wide range of views on the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland:

> Brexit tears up the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP were against the Good Friday Agreement. The DUP were against the Good Friday Agreement and this is their revenge… They want to destroy the Good Friday Agreement and have waited twenty-one years and this is their opportunity to do that. If Brexit goes ahead in the way envisaged by the DUP and the Brexiteers, then you have effectively binned the Good Friday Agreement.
> (Máirtín Ó Muilleoir MLA, Sinn Féin, quoted in Cochrane 2020:1)

> The damage to the Belfast Agreement and the devolved institutions has not been done by Brexit but by the absence of the Assembly sitting. It is ironic that those who are most keen on cross-border institutions are insuring that the cross-border institutions do not meet because there is no assembly and no Ministers to go to cross-border meetings. However, what the current situation has done is to highlight one of the very weak points of the Belfast Agreement, namely that one Party can have a veto as to whether or not the institutions of the Belfast Agreement are allowed to operate.
> (Sammy Wilson MP, Democratic Unionist Party, quoted in Cochrane 2020:1)

> [Brexit] has fundamentally changed the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom. We need to have a new future of how we look at the United Kingdom.
> (Steve Aiken MLA, Ulster Unionist Party, quoted in Cochrane 2020:1)

These statements clearly demonstrate the diversity of opinion on impact of Brexit on the peace process among different political parties, an impression which only emphasises the fact that Northern Irish society remains a divided and fragmented polity.

Once the reality of Brexit became apparent, a broad series of questions concerning the future of Northern Ireland arose, many of which had not been fully considered before the referendum nor discussed during the campaign itself. A major question concerning the future of the peace in Northern Ireland that caused considerable public concern was the future of the Irish border. In the past, the border used to be the physical and legal manifestation of partition and a symbol of the violence of the Troubles but it lost its significance with the passing of the GFA and the establishment of political institutions based on the principle of cross- community power-sharing. Put simply, the GFA transformed the physical border into an invisible border and removed the issue from Irish politics. However, with the advent of Brexit, the roads crossing the border became more than a mere means of transportation, they became political and cultural symbols of Irish freedom, peace, stability and the Belfast Agreement (Cochrane 2020). Cochrane (2020) adds that the Irish border represents both a territorial demarcation and an existential identity crisis. The narrow border roads that might seem like sleepy backwaters are actually emotionally charged frontiers – sites that some Brexit supporters believe have been weaponised by those on the Remain side of the argument who seek to use the Irish peace process as a shield behind which to hide.

In this interpretation, the border is an issue of historical, political, cultural and psychological importance and has a special role in the Irish context which is entirely absent in British discourse. The border issue explains why Northern Ireland is a special case in the context of Brexit negotiations and highlights the fact that Brexit not only links the present and future of Ireland but it also leads back to the past in a number of respects. With this observation as a starting point, this paper will attempt to examine what Brexit represents for Northern Ireland at the present time. For reason of space limitations, only selected aspects of the issue will be presented and analysed here.

In brief, Brexit has redefined the Irish border, shifting it from its traditional binary relationship as a demarcation line between the UK and Ireland into a triangular relationship between the UK, Ireland and the rest of EU. The people of Northern Ireland themselves lie somewhere inside this triangle (Cochrane 2020: 146). Under the Belfast Agreement, the UK and Irish governments and eight of Northern Ireland's main political parties agreed upon "a normalisation of security arrangements" and "the removal of security installations" (Belfast Agreement, 1998). This normalisation and the introduction of an institutional framework of cross-jurisdictional EU membership (Hayward, Murphy 2018) led to the formation of an open border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, a development which was of huge symbolic value to the peace process (Ibid.). As a consequence of Brexit, creative policymaking has been required to ensure that the border remains open whilst recognising the United Kingdom's new constitutional position. The result of this political creativity is the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol, an agreement made as part of the Brexit withdrawal agreement. The Protocol allows Northern Ireland to take part in future UK trade deals while

retaining access to the EU's single market. Since the end of the Brexit transition period on January 1st, 2021, checks have been carried out on goods arriving in Northern Irish ports from Great Britain. These checks have two essential functions. Firstly, by checking goods travelling from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, the EU is able to prevent open access to its single market and maintain what it views as fair competition in the post-Brexit environment. Secondly, and most importantly for Northern Ireland, these checks prevent the need for the resumption of a physical border on the island of Ireland. The Protocol, therefore, upholds the principle of the North-South normalisation process that has developed as a result of the Belfast Agreement's implementation and prevents the re-appearance of the security installations and borders of the past. For those who are opposed to Brexit, the Irish government, the EU and the U.S. administration, the Protocol is compatible with the Belfast Agreement and represent no threat to its provision. However, pro-Brexit unionists see the Protocol as a threat to the GFA which also violates the constitutional status of Northern Ireland by establishing a new trade border. As a result, one can see that the Protocol and the two opposing views of how it affects the GFA further contribute to the division shaping society in Northern Ireland (Ibid.).

Is it accurate to suggest that Brexit arrangements can be compatible with the GFA? Or is it more correct to state that Brexit is damaging the peace process in Northern Ireland ? In a fundamental manner, Brexit has reopened a series of important points included in the GFA and has thus radically transformed the substance of the 1998 agreement to the point that it might no longer be capable of functioning as intended. Put simply, Brexit has stripped away the degree of ambiguity that allowed both unionists and nationalists to believe different things about the constitutional destiny of Northern Ireland (Cochrane 2020). This "constructive ambiguity" - a form of ambiguous language in order to achieve agreement may have enabled the parties to give their consent to the GFA, but it also meant that those parties believed they were signing up to different things; given this, it is even possible to suggest that they were never truly in agreement (Ibid.). On this basis, it is therefore understandable that Brexit has become a highly problematic or even openly contentious issue in contemporary Northern Ireland and why it can rightly be seen as the biggest crisis for both parts of Ireland since the partition, mainly in terms of the implications for the Irish border and the integrity of the Belfast Agreement and for the peace process as a whole (Ibid.).

The Good Friday Agreement is widely seen as having brought the violent political conflict in Northern Ireland to an end and providing a framework for future governance in the region. However, the constructive ambiguity at the heart of the Agreement meant that it never truly represented peace in itself; it was instead the initial step leading to a peaceful future. While violence in the region has been greatly reduced and the conflict has become less overt, the levels of structural segregation, ethnonational sectarianism and community friction remain high (Wilson 2016). The GFA has, then, created a fragile and unstable peace in which much of the hostility was simply deferred rather than resolved in full. The institutions which were created under the auspices of the Agreement were incapable of healing the divisions between the British identity of unionists and the Irish identity of nationalists. This failure was a result of the increasingly dysfunctional relationship between the main political parties of Sinn Féin and the DUP. These flaws were also visible on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the GFA in 2018, where politicians, academics and also the media drew attention to the improbable survival and uncertain future of the Agreement rather than its achievements (Cochrane 2020:170).

When Brexit collided with the relative stability and peace of modern-day Northern Ireland, it disrupted both north/south dynamic on the island and the east/west balance between

the island and Great Britain. Brexit has reopened the issues and differences which divided Northern Ireland both before and after the signing of the GFA. Hayward and Murphy (2018) argue that Brexit opened up a whole series of questions: Is Northern Ireland different from the rest of the UK? Can the people who live there legitimately claim self-determination? Can people in Northern Ireland really be defined as Irish as well as British if that is their wish – as is set out in the GFA? Article 1 of the 1998 Agreement states that the right of self-determination for "the people of the island of Ireland alone" is to be exercised "on the basis of consent", a concept which is immediately defined as the "the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland". Will the UK abide by its obligation to recognise changes to Northern Ireland's constitutional status within the UK and cooperate in the region's reunification with the Republic of Ireland if a majority of the electorate demonstrate such a desire? Brexit has raised concerns on this issue among Irish nationalists on both sides of the border. The principle of consent has traditionally been seen as a crucial tenet of the Agreement and a pivotal aspect of the peace process as a whole, but there is a real risk that Brexit could tear this principle apart.

Prior to Brexit, Northern Ireland was facing numerous problems of its own. Although the GFA brought an end to the violence and produced a compromise between both sides, it has not been successful in transforming Northern Ireland into a truly peaceful and stable society, nor has it eliminated the sharp divisions along political or religious lines, only managing to defer these issues for future resolution. Prior to Brexit, the European Union was closely intertwined into the Good Friday Agreement in an unproblematic fashion; however, after Brexit, the European involvement in the GFA has become far more complicated. The EU acted as a bridge between the UK and Ireland and provided considerable financial resources for Northern Ireland before, during and after the Troubles (Hayward, Murphy 2018). Europe also committed considerable resources in support of peace and stability in Northern Ireland through a grant scheme known as the Peace Funds. According to Cochrane (2020) the EU has been a major peacebuilding force in Northern Ireland and has been invested both economically and politically from the beginning of the peace process and the signing of the GFA, while British political thinking lacks a deeper understanding of the extent to which the EU has been a key asset to political stability in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Brexit is currently forging a new dynamic in Northern Ireland, both in terms of drawing north/south lines between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and east/west lines between the island and Great Britain. Brexit has reopened several questions which had been deferred rather than definitely resolved at the time of the negotiations leading to the introduction of the GFA. The framework of the peace process established by the GFA was successful because of the commitment of the UK and Irish government and the willingness of politicians and others to put aside past differences and allow Northern Ireland to be governed peacefully. Unfortunately, the option of setting aside differences in order to promote the interests of Northern Ireland has become less straightforward in light of Brexit. Line have been drawn in the sand as supporters and opponents of Brexit adopt different stances on whether or not Brexit breaches the terms of the GFA, but both sides are at one on claiming that the GFA only represented a starting point for the peace process rather than a definitive end to the region's conflict. Following on from this, it is apparent that Brexit is far from the only factor which is damaging the peace process, although it undoubtedly destabilises the steps which have been

taken so far and makes the path to an ultimate peace settlement far more complicated. Nonetheless, by reopening the unsolved issues, Brexit offers the potential to develop an updated version of the GFA, although it is not clear what this partnership would look like in the absence of EU involvement.

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Wandering through London, Getting Nowhere: The Inescapability of Place in Zadie Smith's *NW*[1]

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Abstract

Over the last 50 years, space has emerged as a prominent theoretical concept in the humanities in general and in literary studies in particular. Taking the theories put forth by scholars of space including Zygmunt Bauman, Michel de Certeau and Gaston Bachelard as a starting point, this article analyses the role which space plays in Zadie Smith's novel NW*, proposing that urban space functions as a key structural element around which the narrative of the novel is organised. Using the motifs of walking and boundary crossing and the specific setting of the neighbourhood of Willesden, Smith paints a pessimistic picture of class hierarchies at work in contemporary London.*

Keywords: *urban space, locality, walking, Zadie Smith,* NW*, spatial turn*

"To walk is to lack a place." (de Certeau 1988: 103)

The spatial turn and urban space

In his 1967 lecture "Of Other Spaces" Michel Foucault famously predicted that the second half of the 20th century would be "the epoch of space" (1986: 22). While the 19th century had been dominated by belief in progress and the understanding of life as a linear passage through time from point A to point B, this conception of existence no longer seemed valid in the postmodern period. Instead, Foucault proposed that

> [w]e are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Ibid.)

Foucault's words were certainly prophetic. From the second half of the 20th century onwards and continuing into the 21st century, space, place and spatiality have emerged as dominant terms in social and cultural theory. In many respects, this spatial turn represents an attempt to reflect upon and come to terms with a rapidly changing world. The development of globalization, decolonization and the rise of new technologies such as air travel and the Internet in the post-war period has left us acutely aware of the spaces and places that surround us. The "hitherto unthinkable level of mobility" that resulted from these processes "emphasized geographical difference; that is, one's place could not simply be taken for granted any longer. The traveller, whether forced into exile or willingly engaged in tourism, cannot help but be more aware of the distinctiveness of a given place, and of the remarkable differences between places" (Tally Jr. 2013: 13).

The writings of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and the American geographer Edward W. Soja, the two thinkers whose work is most closely associated with the concept of

the spatial turn, explore the social rather than the physical aspects of space. In his seminal work *The Production of Space*, originally published in 1974, Lefebvre outlined his view of the social construction of geographical space and attempted to show how the everyday space of lived experience is related to abstract philosophical or geometric constructions of space. Lefebvre did not conceive geographical space as a mere backdrop against which social relationships unfold but rather as an active agent in these relationships, an entity imbued with political and ideological meaning. This emphasis on the social aspect of space is also apparent in the work of Edward W. Soja. In *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000) Soja focused his attention on the "interweaving of spatiality and sociality"; while he agreed with Lefebvre's assertion that everything spatial is connected to and defined by the social, Soja also believed that this relationship was reciprocal in nature and that "what is described as social is always at the same time intrinsically spatial" (8).

With its focus on the specific sphere of urban spaces, Soja's *Postmetropolis* represents a major contribution to the rapidly developing field of critical urban studies. This increasing interest in the urban environment over recent years is by no means coincidental. More and more of the population of our globalizing planet now live in large metropolises, and city life is becoming the dominant form of human existence. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, observed that contemporary "cities are dumping grounds for globally produced troubles; but they may also be seen as laboratories in which the ways and means of living with difference, still to be learned by the residents of an increasingly overcrowded planet, are daily invented, put to the test, memorized and assimilated" (2007: 92). Bauman and many other theorists of urban space have noted that contemporary cities are complex, contradictory environments. While wealthy city dwellers enjoy unprecedented levels of mobility, they are also afflicted by a growing sense of anxiety and unease that leads them to hide themselves away in walled residential complexes under the constant surveillance of security technology. The urban working class is increasingly comprised of immigrants; paradoxically, once they have been drawn to the metropolis from their various homelands, they become bound to their specific neighbourhoods in which they find themselves trapped by poverty and prejudice. (Bauman 2007: 72-77) City dwellers live anonymous lives surrounded by crowds of strangers, experiencing a "growing sense of homelessness and alienation" (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 9). At the same time, their identities are inextricably linked with the urban spaces that surround them; they build and shape their cities and the cities then shape them in turn. As the British geographer David Harvey has suggested, "[h]ow a city looks and how its spaces are organized forms a material basis upon which a range of possible sensations and social practices can be thought about, evaluated, and achieved" (1990: 66-67). In other words, urban locations represent "bounded, oriented" spaces "in which particular buildings and activities take on a certain character and identity" and where "individual persons are able to take on the role of citizens" (Malpas 1998).

Fictional spaces: Zadie Smith as a literary cartographer

The field of literary studies has not been immune to the attraction of the spatial turn, and recent years have seen increasing numbers of literary scholars adopting spatiality as a theoretical framework for the analysis of works of literature. Indeed, this development is not wholly surprising considering the crucial role which space and place play in fiction. Although it may seem that time is the fundamental organising principle of narrative fiction, it is also possible to suggest that space is equally, if not more important. Robert T. Tally Jr. observed that in addition

to its temporal character, "narrative is also spatial, and the beginnings, middles, and ends of a given story may refer as much to sites or locations in a particular spatial organization as to moments in time in a temporal one" (2013: 49). This is particularly true in the case of postmodern and 21st century texts, many of which deliberately disrupt the traditional linear narrative structure and rely instead upon alternative techniques of narrative organisation.

There are clear grounds for seeing Zadie Smith's novel *NW* as an example of a spatial narrative. As the title suggests, the setting is of central importance for the novel. While the timeframe of the narrative is disjointed and the story is only loosely plotted, space and location are a constant presence throughout the work. Smith depicts the spaces through which her characters move with a hyperrealist focus, paying equal attention to both well-known landmarks and the more mundane backdrops to city life such as corner shops, bus stops or abandoned phone booths. She notes down the itineraries of buses and Tube lines and mentions the brand names of stores and pubs. Space is not just a backdrop in *NW*; instead, it shapes all the other aspects of the story. The narrative of the novel is structured as a series of journeys between places rather than as a time sequence. The characters in Smith's novel are also firmly bound to place, serving as perfect examples of the "dialectic relationship between space and identity" (Duff 2014: 2). They form an integral part of the streets through which they move, claiming them as their own and navigating them with ease. However, this relationship is not a one-sided affair. Instead, the neighbourhood itself emerges as a character in the story, an active agent which seems to hold its inhabitants in its grasp, never allowing them to stray from its orbit for too long.

In this sense, Zadie Smith can be considered a literary cartographer: just like actual maps, Smith's stories are depictions of places in the world, whether real or imaginary. Her technique is also akin to that of a mapmaker. Just like a cartographer, she

> must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish; for example, some shadings may need to be darker than others, some lines bolder, and so on. The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it. The literary cartographer, even one who operates in such non-realistic modes as myth or fantasy, must determine the degree to which a given representation of a place refers to any "real" place in the geographical world. (Tally Jr. 2013: 45)

Moreover, the acts of mapping and storytelling not only share the same techniques but also have similar aims. Just as we use maps to help us navigate an unfamiliar landscape, we use works of literature to orientate ourselves in the puzzling terrain of existence. If it is true that "the 'human condition' is often one of disorientation, where our experience of being-in-the-world frequently resembles being lost" (Tally Jr. 2013: 43), then it is through stories that we try to make sense of the world and find our path within it.

Moving is being, walking means escaping

While the narrative of *NW* takes the reader on a virtual journey across contemporary London, Smith's map of London does not correspond to the official version. The centre here is neither Trafalgar Square nor Piccadilly Circus but Willesden, an area in northwest London which is far off any tourist map of the city. The alternative map proposed by Smith reflects the socio-cultural reality of the novel's four protagonists: Leah Hanwell, Felix Cooper, Natalie (born

Keisha) Blake and Nathan Bogle, all of whom have grown up in the (fictional) run down council estate of Caldwell. The five loosely connected stories that make up the novel follow these protagonists on their various journeys across London as they try to make sense of their lives and forge a better, more meaningful existence for themselves.

The characters share a desire to escape Willesden and free themselves from the grasp of their childhood home, and in this sense it seems apt to see *NW* as essentially "a novel about escape" (Cooke 2012). It is also a novel about journeys, both literal and metaphorical. The characters are constantly on the move, typically walking but occasionally taking the bus or the Tube. If they are forced to stay in one place, they start feeling trapped, claustrophobic. At the beginning of the novel, Leah finds herself unable to relax in the hammock in her garden, because she feels "[f]enced in, on all sides" (Smith 2013: 3). Later, we see her itching to leave her office, painfully aware of each passing minute, thinking: "This too will pass. Four forty-five. Zig, zag. Tick, tock." (33), until she is finally set free at five o'clock. The entire section devoted to Felix is a description of his journey from Willesden to central London and back. Felix has decided to turn his life around and his Tube ride to Oxford Street is also a metaphorical journey towards a bright future of quitting drugs, finding a well-paying job, and maintaining a stable relationship. Naturally, he feels restless every time he needs to make a stop. When he visits his father, he notices all the signs of decay and hopelessness that have characterised his past life: "a dead cactus on the windowsill", "the narrow hall", "several molten radiators" that make the place hot and suffocating "like a sauna", "dishes […] piled high in the sink", and a thick carpet that his feet sink into, trapping him and refusing to let him go (Smith 2013: 105). Similarly, when he visits his ex-girlfriend Annie to formalise their break-up, he feels the same "sense of suffocation and impatience" and a longing to escape (141). Indeed, he soon gives in to this feeling, walking away, feeling "like a man undergoing some not-yet-invented process called particle transfer, wonderfully, blissfully light" (164).

Of course, it is not in fact the grimy flats of his father and girlfriend that give Felix this feeling of suffocation but instead his own past and his ties to Caldwell, to his depressed father and his junkie girlfriend, and his own history of desperation, poverty and addiction. Felix makes a conscious decision to break away from all of this; to leave it behind and forge a better life for himself somewhere else. As a result, the act of walking, the central metaphor in *NW*, does not simply connote change but represents the hope for a change for the better, an escape from the deadening atmosphere of Willesden to some other place, any place else. Walking means possibilities, open horizons, a brighter future. At different points in the narrative Leah, Felix, Natalie, and Nathan each make a conscious decision to move, walk, go somewhere.

However, as Smith makes very clear, neither the protagonists' actions nor their destinies are completely under their conscious control. As David Seamon observed, much of what we do in our everyday lives is guided by a subconscious, bodily knowledge, and "cognition plays only a partial role in everyday spatial behavior". Seamon goes on to argue that "the body holds within itself an active, intentional capacity which intimately 'knows' in its own special fashion the everyday spaces in which the person lives his typical day" (2015 [1979]: 35). Seamon used the term "body-subject" which was coined by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to refer to this capacity of the body to "direct behaviors of the person intelligently" (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 41). The body-subject manifests itself in everyday, habitual actions, such as when "fingers hit the proper piano keys, arm reaches for string or envelope, hands together put letters in their proper mailbox, feet carefully work their way over a stream-bed, *legs carry the person to a destination*" (41, emphasis mine). Clearly, the act of walking can, on many occasions, be a corporeal action independent of our conscious control. Our legs often carry us along a route

that we are used to taking, even if, on that particular day, we actually intend to go elsewhere. As Gaston Bachelard observed, the paths on which we travel frequently remain ingrained in our "muscular consciousness" (1994 [1958]: 11).

The body-subject is invaluable in helping us to carry out everyday tasks without causing constant mental strain. However, this convenience comes at a price. Since it learns through repetition, the "[b]ody-subject is conservative in nature and prefers that movements adhere to their patterns of the past" (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 49). Once it learns certain behaviours, patterns of action or walking routes, it resists changing these routines or creating new ones; for example, we might find it difficult to use our non-dominant hand when writing or to take a different path to work than we are used to. As Felix Cooper or Natalie Blake learn, although they are consciously trying to walk along a different path, their legs always seem to be carrying them back to the place they know best: to Willesden.

Crossing boundaries, breaking rules

As we walk through a city, we are engaged in a constant process of crossing boundaries; moving from one district to another, crossing streets or negotiating crossroads. It is no surprise, then, that the motif of crossing boundaries is so crucial in a novel like *NW* which is structured around journeys and walking. The importance of crossing in *NW* is made apparent by the titles of the five sections that make up the novel. Leah's section is titled "visitation", and its plot revolves around the mysterious figure of Shar, a former classmate of Leah who has since become a drug addict. Shar crosses the border between the public space of the street and the privacy of Leah's home, intruding into her precariously middle-class life, asking for money and eliciting guilt. Leah is fully aware of the fact that she could quite easily have shared the same fate as Shar had circumstances been different, and she struggles to come to terms with the consequences of this realisation.

The second section titled "guest" follows Felix on his journey across London. Of course, Felix crosses multiple geographical boundaries as he travels through the city, but on a more significant level he is also crossing (or hoping to cross) the boundary between social classes. After taking the Tube from Kilburn to Oxford Street, Felix enters the mysterious world of the privileged class of Londoners moving around New Bond Street:

> Fifty yards away, on Oxford Street, people pressed against people, dense as carnival, almost as loud. Back here all was silent, empty. Slick black doors, brass knobs, brass letterboxes, lamp posts out of fairy stories. Old paintings in ornate gold frames, resting on easels, angled towards the street. PRICE UPON APPLICATION. Ladies' hats, each on its own perch, feathered, ready to fly. RING FOR ASSISTANCE. Shop after shop without a soul in it. At the end of this little row, Felix spotted a customer through a mullioned, glittering window sitting on a leather pouffe, trying on one of those green jackets, waxy like tablecloth, with the tartan inside. […] The type Felix saw all the time, especially in this part of town. A great tribe of them. Didn't mix much—kept to their own kind. THE HORSE AND HARE. (Smith 2013: 122)

Felix is acutely aware that he has entered alien territory. Even while travelling there by Tube he felt "like a tourist" (119), a stranger in his own city. It is obvious that the London of Smith's *NW* is a deeply divided city where members of the different "tribes" mix so rarely that they seem like foreigners to each other.

In contrast, Natalie, the protagonist of the third section of the novel titled "host", appears to be an exception to this rule. Like the other protagonists, Natalie was born and bred in Willesden, but unlike them, she has managed to cross the class divide. Thanks to her ruthless ambition, Natalie was accepted at a top university, has become a successful lawyer and is now married to a rich banker. She has moved out of Willesden into a picturesque house with a park view in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood, simultaneously crossing both spatial and social boundaries. However, in the fourth section, which is actually titled "crossing", Natalie recrosses the same boundary once again, this time returning to Willesden to stroll along the familiar streets with her former classmate Nathan.

What all these incidents have in common is that each time the characters walk across physical, spatial and geographical boundaries, they are also crossing a social divide, a boundary of race, gender and, most notably, class. As was discussed above, class boundaries are physically built into the urban environment. As urban "space becomes more valuable, it also becomes the dividing factor" between the members of different economic strata (Duff 2014: 11). These types of divisions produce neighbourhoods and areas which are segregated along the lines of class, profession, race or gender and generate a sense of alienation and displacement (ibid.). Throughout the novel, Zadie Smith and her characters question whether the boundaries between such segregated realms can be crossed, and if they can, what price must be paid to get to the other side.

Walking, remembering, and returning

In his discussion of walking across urban spaces, Michel de Certeau draws a comparison between two distinct experiences of the city: one in which the city is viewed from above and another in which it is experienced at street-level. The former, made available to the urban planner (thanks to satellite imagery) or the privileged skyscraper dweller, is a voyeuristic experience, one in which distance is put between the city and its observer. The voyeur's position high above the city "transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (1988: 92). In contrast, the latter experience, that of "the ordinary practitioners", the Natalies, Leahs, Felixes and Nathans of the world, occurs "below the thresholds at which visibility begins". Instead of observing, ordinary citizens experience the city by walking:

> They *walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city*; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose *bodies follow* the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. (Ibid., emphasis mine)

Ordinary city dwellers are thus an integral part of the organism of the city, and it is them, rather than the urban planners, who create the city by walking and living within it. Ignorant of or indifferent to the uses which planners or authorities intended for various spaces, dwellers use them in their own way, often breaking the rules and venturing off from the demarcated routes. In a section of the novel that reads like an echo of de Certeau's theories, Smith juxtaposes a series of travel directions for a trip from Yates Lane (a fictional street set off Edgeware Road) to Bartlett Avenue (another fictional street near Willesden Lane), complete with a note urging the traveler to "obey all signs and notices regarding [her] route"

(Smith 2013: 39), with an account of Leah's experience of the same journey at street level. Instead of "obeying signs and notices", Leah absorbs the multitude of sights, sounds and smells surrounding her. Hers is a physical, sensory experience, and in the course of her walk she encounters countless other rule-breaking city practitioners: hospital patients at St. Mary's sneaking a cigarette, street traders selling stolen goods and drivers blasting hip-hop.

On the one hand, this type of intimate physical connection with a city rewards its dwellers, and this is certainly the case with Leah whose depth of experience with the streets of Willesden will forever lie beyond the reach of a mere voyeur. On the other hand, however, it can also mean that ordinary citizens may be unable to extricate themselves from the city's grasp. Although they perform the physical act of walking, it is the pattern of the streets themselves that leads them to their inexorable destinations: their bodies are "*clasped* by the streets that turn and return [them] according to an anonymous law" and "*possessed*, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of [urban] traffic" (de Certeau 1988: 92). The city merges with its dwellers, each creating the other in turn. This is particularly true in the case of the character of Nathan Bogle. At school, Nathan was a bright child who excelled at mathematics and was talent-hunted for a local football team. However, after an injury ended his prospective football career, Nathan abandoned his aspirations; now in his thirties, Nathan lives on the streets of Willesden, smoking crack, mugging passers-by, and procuring women. Nathan is Natalie's alter ego, he is the embodiment of the story of a Caldwell kid who has ended up on the wrong side of the tracks; someone whose social trajectory is not upwards but downwards. However, Smith suggests that in some sense it is Nathan who is truly free. Natalie feels trapped in her new life, crushed under the weight of constantly needing to perform and meet expectations, unsure either of her place in the world or of her own identity; in contrast, Nathan has cut himself off from society and all of its incessant demands and pressures:

> *Oh Nathan, 'member this, 'member that*—truthfully, Keisha, I don't remember. I've burnt the whole business out of my brain. Different life. No use to me. I don't live in them towers no more, I'm on the streets now, different attitude. Survival. That's it. Survival. That's all there is. (Smith 2013: 317, emphasis in the original)

Unlike Nathan, who has given up on the idea that a better life is possible for a council estate kid, the remaining three protagonists continue to try to break free from their working-class upbringing and from the suffocating power of Willesden to varying degrees. Leah does so unwillingly, in order to appease her hard-working and ambitious husband. Felix decides to turn his life around after he falls in love with Grace, a young woman with a passion for self-help and personal growth. Natalie is driven by a furious sense of ambition, by which she tries to compensate for her lack of meaningful personal connections. However, despite their efforts to move forwards (whether halfheartedly or enthusiastically), to get somewhere, and to change their lives, their journeys always take them back to where they started.

In *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place*, Janet Donohoe writes:

> Like a parchment turned palimpsest upon which memory is written and rewritten, erased and covered over with marks that show through and that can never completely be eliminated, so too our bodies and places cannot completely erase the old. (2014: xvii)

The places we inhabit shape us and make us who we are. They also dictate our actions; they determine what is possible and what is not, where we can go and where we must stop, what we can see and what remains hidden. The places of our childhood wield an even more profound power over us. As Bachelard observed,

> over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the "first stairway," we would not stumble on that rather high step. […] In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. *We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme*. (1994 [1958], 14-15, emphasis mine)

The council estate in which they lived with their parents and the neighbourhood in which they grew up have left an indelible mark on the four protagonists of *NW*. Regardless of how hard they try to walk away, their steps always unconsciously lead them back to Willesden.

Conclusion

The first and final sections of *NW* are both titled "visitation", and in the latter section, Smith takes us back to Leah Hanwell's fenced-in garden, reinforcing the circular structure of the narrative. For much of the novel, the characters have been on the move, walking the city streets; they have covered a lot of ground, venturing as far as Edgeware Road, Oxford Street, Soho and Hampstead Heath. Eventually, however, their journeys lead them all back to where they started — to Willesden, to northwest London. Nathan is left aimlessly wandering the streets, hiding from the police who want to question him in connection with a stabbing. Leah remains in her rented basement flat, just as uncertain about how to reconcile her husband's and her own conflicting expectations of life as she was at the beginning of the book. Natalie runs away from her seemingly perfect, but ultimately insincere existence only to return to her house later the same day, completely unsure of how to go on. And Felix, who seemed to have everything figured out, returns from his day in central London ready for his new life only to be stabbed by a couple of thugs a few metres from his front door because he refuses to hand over his zirconia earrings. Throughout the novel, the number 98 bus appears again and again, shadowing the four protagonists along their various journeys, and eventually returning all of them to its terminus: the Pound Land/Willesden Bus Garage. In the end, Zadie Smith offers us a pessimistic vision of contemporary London; one in which locality is destiny. And in such a London, the four protagonists' attempts to liberate themselves from Willesden by walking, both physically and metaphorically, are doomed to failure. Regardless of how far they travel and how many boundaries they cross, they are ultimately getting nowhere.

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The End of the Landscape at the End of the World[1]

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Abstract
The tension between local and global narratives has emerged as one of the key concerns in contemporary cultural and literary production, and this dichotomy is particularly apparent in our changing understanding of identity in the light of globalization, the increasing difficulty of identifying a cultural centre and our changing attachment to place. Landscape is a recurring topos in the work of Cormac McCarthy, but while his earlier fiction, such as the Border Trilogy (1992-1998), portrays the highly specific regional landscape of the American Southwest, his later novels feature more global or even universal landscapes. This shift can be associated with new readings of McCarthy's works in the light of climate fiction. This article examines the literary representation of landscape in The Road *(2006), a novel which is increasingly recognized as a representative work of climate fiction.*

Keywords: *local, global, climate fiction, landscape, borders*

> There's not a lot of good new on the road. In times like these.
> (McCarthy 2006:186)

Cormac McCarthy is generally regarded as one of the most significant and successful contemporary American writers. In addition to the many literary awards which he has received, including the Pulitzer Prize for his 2006 novel *The Road*, his work has also inspired numerous mainstream film adaptations such as *No Country for Old Men (*Movie 2007), *The Sunset Limited* (TV Movie 2011), *The Road* (Movie 2009) *and The Counsellor* (Movie 2013). This commercial success is matched by the extensive academic interest in McCarthy's writing, but there is little academic consensus on how his works should be read; even after the publication of comprehensive studies such as *Bloom's Modern Critical Views on Cormac McCarthy* (Bloom 2009) or *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* (Frye 2013) the lack of a unified treatment of his works remains apparent. With the recent publication of his first novel in 16 years, *The Passenger* (2022), and its forthcoming sequel *Stella Maris* in December 2022, we can expect to see an even greater diversity in the interpretations of McCarthy's oeuvre in the near future.

The variety of approaches to McCarthy's work range from modernist to post-post-modernist, pastoral to anti-pastoral, theological or even anthropological interpretations. His intertwining of historical events with myths and legends means that some of his works are almost beyond any classification. While his earlier fiction can be read as lying within the framework of the Southwestern literary tradition, his later works show a departure from this tradition and embrace more global themes through post-post-modernist narratives. McCarthy's fiction also represents a challenge to conventional genre classification schemes since he fuses narratives which are both generic but yet also highly idiosyncratic and unique. George Guillemin even distinguishes between high-brow and low-brow works in McCarthy's oeuvre in an attempt to explain the success of *All the Pretty Horses* (1992): ""the *simplicity* of the quest stories, the *generic* proximity to the Western, and the *conventionality* of the plot structures as heroic journeys have apparently caused the novels' *complexity* to go largely

unacknowledged"" (quoted in Dorson 2017). Furthermore, some of McCarthy's works can be re-read within a relatively short time span and acquire entirely new interpretations. This is particularly the case with *Blood Meridian* which was widely considered peculiar and even unreadable upon publication in 1985, a work whose revisionist account of the country's ruthless 19th century expansion was out of step with the mood of mid-eighties America. However, the perception of the novel underwent a dramatic shift in the subsequent decades, most notably with Harold Bloom's interpretation of the work as the most authentic American apocalyptic novel and which has now gained an even greater relevance than when it was first written (Bloom 2019).

A similar process of reinterpretation can be seen in the case of *The Road*, a novel which was initially read as a work of post-apocalyptic science-fiction but which has come to be seen as a reflection of the growing threat of an environmental collapse and a resultant environmental anxiety, a reading which is often interpreted within the context of climate fiction (Stark 2013: 72). Jillet notes that McCarthy had been engaging with the concept of ecocriticism long before the term gained its current prominence:

> One could argue that McCarthy has been interested in issues of ecocriticism since before it became a commonly referred to term in the field of literature. He was exploring the ethics of environmental degradation in his earliest work, The Orchard Keeper, around the time that environmental ethics was beginning to be considered a valid field of research for philosophers and environmental scientists.
>
> (Jillet 2016: VIII)

Another innovative reading of *The Road* is offered in the context of the new capitalism which places a greater focus on the consumerist consequences of the novel's depiction of apocalypse (Schleusener 2017). These newly emerging readings of *The Road* invite novel interpretations of the McCarthy's depiction of landscape in the work, an approach which is very different from that found in the more firmly local and regional spaces of McCarthy's earlier novels. While the earlier Appalachian novels were set in specific landscapes such as Knoxville and rural Tennessee and the Southwestern novels and screenplays are intrinsically linked to the US-Mexico borderlands, the setting of *The Road* lacks any identifiable geographical context; when read in the light of climate fiction, the novel reveals a new treatment of landscape which calls for a redefinition of the term in contemporary literary production in which the human relationship to landscape reflects an individual and collective response to the changing environment.

The term "climate literature" was first coined by the journalist Dan Bloom in 2007 who defined the genre as works whose narratives incorporate the climatological paradigm of anthropogenic global warming into their plots (Andersen 2020: 9). Although the expression of this paradigm is not made explicit in *The Road*, we can nonetheless see the novel as a representative example of the climate novel. Andrew O'Hagan considers *The Road* to be "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation" (quoted in Stark 2009: 74), and the work has received an ecocritical reading in several other studies such as *Borders and Landscapes* by Loise Jillet (2016) or Guillem Georg's *Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy* (2004). Jillet even argues that an ongoing process of critiquing and questioning the mechanism of modernity, the ideology of industrialism, and the imperative to expand into ever-new territory appears in McCarthy's Appalachian and Southwestern novels, a complementary

aspect to the geographic, thematic, and syntactical innovations found in these works (2016: XI).

The story of *The Road* opens by confronting the reader with the two protagonists, a father and his son, who have set out across a world which has been destroyed by some unspecified catastrophe. Throughout the novel, the landscape which McCarthy depicts is extremely monotonous, dull and gray, lacking any of the poetic and pastoral detail which is so characteristic of the landscapes in his earlier novels:

> When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segments of road down there among the dead trees. Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke. He lowered the glasses and pulled down the cotton mask from his face and wiped his nose on the back of his wrist and then glassed the country again. Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.
>
> <div align="right">(McCarthy 2006: 5)</div>

The desolate setting of the novel and the minimalistic descriptive style contribute to the impression of a complete absence of a specific geographical space. In both *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and the *Border Trilogy* (1992-1998), the geographical space is highly specific, with McCarthy's characters inhabiting the shifting and permeable borderlands between the US and Mexico. The crossing of borders in the landscape serves as a metaphor for the period of transition between the old "romanticized" America and the America that is yet to come (Buráková 2020), while the precise socio-historical dimension of the landscape of *Blood Meridian* refers to the geopolitical violence wrought upon the continent through the belief in Manifest Destiny. In contrast, the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Road* eradicates any sense of place or attachment to it and the landscape serves as a backdrop to a pilgrimage or a quest undertaken by the father and son. The lack of a geographical space and the concept of a pilgrimage across a devastated landscape emphasize the lack of borders which McCarthy has used in his previous fiction as a highly effective means of historical, cultural or even genre transitions. This does raise the question, however, of what can actually be traversed in a space that has no borders such as the post-apocalyptic landscape of *The Road*, an environment in which all distinctions between the natural and the artificial have vanished.

The mundanity of the landscape is enhanced by textual devices such the single uninterrupted narrative flow of the novel; through this approach, the absence of geographical borders is emphasised by the absence of textual borders. Jillet references Trotignon's examination of the peculiarly fragmentary nature of the text, the sense that, rather than interrupting the narrative flow, the gaps encourage the reader "to read on" "no matter what"; to persist in their engagement with the text despite the eternal deferral of meaning. Thus, even in a novel in which borders have been all but eradicated (both textually and within the world of the story), there is still a road on which to travel, along with the impetus to do so (Jillet 2016: XIV). The absence of borders is furthermore indicated by the lack of commas or interpunctuation to separate dialogues from interior monologues. While each chapter of *Blood Meridian* is introduced with a brief description of the itinerary of the Glanton Gang or with prologues in *Suttree* (1979), *The Road* lacks any chapter separations. This textual "wasteland"

contributes to the sense of the complete annihilation of the landscape and denies the reader the opportunity to pause and consider otherwise.

The Road is the tale of a nameless boy and his father who head south through a deadened landscape where the few remaining survivors they encounter are either scavengers or cannibals. The world as we know is obviously a thing of the past, and no clear explanation is given regarding the nature of the disaster that has caused this breakdown of civilization. The only direct references to the event that marked the end of the old world are a few inconclusive lines: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy 2006: 45). Although there has been some speculation over the cause of the cataclysm, McCarthy himself explained that ultimately it does not matter: "but it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important" ("Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy"). The dark landscape of the end of the old world is described right at the beginning of the novel where a glimpse of ashen daylight seems "like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (McCarthy 2006: 3).

The journey across the devastated countryside transitions into an uninterrupted pilgrimage as the father and son make their way southwards. Nonetheless, as we learn at the end of the novel, not even this remote destination can offer the pair any hope of survival. Throughout the novel, the depictions of landscape are interlaced with death, ruin and despair, with the lack of borders generating a sense of urgency in the protagonists and driving them across the landscape with a ceaseless flow:

> The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk. He carried the revolver in his belt at the front and wore his parka unzipped. The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latter bogfolk, their faces boiled to sheeting, the yellow palings of their teeth. They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen.
>
> (McCarthy 2006: 23-24)

The pilgrimage mutates further into a sci-fictional runaway survival story, a development which undoubtedly marks a sudden departure from the western tradition which had been predominant in McCarthy's work to date. However, as Ibarrola-Armendariz (2011) has suggested, it might be possible to interpret this odyssey across the post-apocalyptic landscape as a reversal or a retreat from the conquest of the American West.

While the concept of crossing borders in McCarthy's early works appears as somewhat of a gradual process, in The Road we are confronted with the idea of a de-geographied America from the very beginning of the novel. Nature here is treated as a landscape in which trees are charred and limbless, buildings wrecked and blackened, meadowlands stark and gray, rural roads and rivers covered with a thick layer of ash that makes them look frozen and deadly: "Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (McCarthy 2006:6).

Although the father and son carry a roadmap to help them in their journey southwards, the landscape through which they pass remains nameless; no geographical names are mentioned throughout the novel and the map gradually loses its importance. The general futility of navigation of this new borderless world is depicted in the repeated portrayal of the landscape as dark, vacant and silent:

> He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.
>
> (McCarthy 2006: 138)

The map is one of the few material references to the prelapsarian world and serves as a contrast between the humanity of the past and the humanity of the present, but this is also true of the relationship between the father and son and their quest to "carry the fire". The novel also casts the two unnamed protagonists as a representation of good in a Manichean opposition to almost all of the other characters whom they encounter on their journey: "*Are we still the good guys? He said. Yes we're still the good guys. And we always will be. Yes. We always will be*"(my emphasis) (McCarthy 2006: 77). The caring relationship between the father and the son can be seen as a return to the quest narratives which McCarthy had employed in his earlier novels but it also functions as a stark contrast to the charred landscape of the new world which seems to offer little comfort to humanity.

   In addition to the map, the only other references to the material culture of the prelapsarian world are an expired can of Coke and the shopping trolley in which the father and the son carry all their belongings, but there is also a general absence of references to the nature of the pre-apocalyptic landscape. The father is conscious that his memories of how the world was before the fall are gradually fading:

> He slept little and he slept poorly. He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.
>
> (McCarthy 2006: 17)

The description of the landscape in the father's memory is a pastoral, almost Edenic vision, a motif which holds a central place in McCarthy's fiction and which forms a strong contrast to the featureless void of a post-apocalyptic landscape which, shorn of its previous meanings and associations, is left silent and empty. Through the father's fragmentary memories of the pastoral landscape, McCarthy juxtaposes the Edenic past with the dreadful landscape of the present. A similar juxtaposition of landscapes can also be seen at the very end of the novel in a passage which describes brook trout as they swim in the mountain streams:

> They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their back were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.
>
> (McCarthy 2006: 241)

The final passage in the novel brings us back to the old world and its wealth of life and the predominance of nature. The landscape as it appears in the father's fading memories is serene,

beautiful and harmonious, but the last sentence suggests the impossibility of ever returning to such a world. The father's memory of the old world is already filled with an awareness of its transitory nature and the knowledge that it will gradually disappear. "He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost" (McCarthy 2006: 17); ultimately, he will become a witness to the disappearance of the world.

Concluding thoughts

Landscape is crucial in the works of Cormac McCarthy, serving as a recurrent topos throughout his novels, and it has rightly been the focus of considerable academic interest. Our previous study of landscape in the context of his 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* (Buráková 2020) focused on the metamodernistic tendencies present in the literary depiction of the landscape which is used as a means of delineating the transition of American society in the 20th and 21st centuries through the crossing of both territorial borders and also the historical boundaries between modernism and metamodernism. However, McCarthy's use of landscape is radically different in *The Road*, offering a depiction which suggests that global ecosystems have been irreversibly damaged and that they will soon be irretrievably lost. In contrast with much post-apocalyptic fiction which usually offer their readers a glimmer of hope in the future rejuvenation of the Earth, there is an overwhelming sense in McCarthy's work that the human race is doomed to extinction, an impression heightened by the similarity of the world of *The Road* to the predictions of the era of the Anthropocene in which unstoppable environmental collapse will render the planet incapable of sustaining human life. The all-encompassing ecological disintegration in the novel is combined with a psychological and social breakdown, as the father and son are unable to connect with any of the other broken and violent travelers they encounter on the road. The pair are left disoriented in a world which has changed so dramatically that it no longer corresponds to their surviving map, an obsolete guide on which they can no longer rely. This spatial disruption is also mirrored in the borderless textual arrangement of the text which offers the reader few landmarks by which to orient themselves. The ending of the novel confirms our initial assertion regarding McCarthy's departure from the pastoral, local depictions of landscapes found in his previous works, offering instead a depiction of a global landscape in the light of climate change fiction.

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What the Hell Do I Do with the Child?: The Persistence of the Father in American Cinema[1]

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Abstract

The American father is still a viable character in American cinema. One that capitalizes on its ability to internalize postfeminist sensibilities and embrace the multiplicity of masculine representations. The study explores a model of the American father that benefits from the active undertaking of parenthood and the role the child character plays in such representation of masculinity. Attributing otherness to child characters is, in these cases, a crucial determinant of such representation and reveals an attempt to rehabilitate the white heterosexual male authority in line with postmillennial politics of representation.

Keywords: *Masculinity, American cinema, fatherhood, child, otherness.*

Thanks to its frequent representation, the theme of fatherhood in American cinema has attracted considerable academic attention and has been the subject of several successful analyses. Among the most resonant works that contextualize the father figure within American cinema and history is Stella Bruzzi's *Bringing up Daddy* (2005), a study which examines Hollywood (re)productions of the paternal presence or Hannah Hamad's recent in-depth analysis of the postmillennial American father on screen, *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood* (2014). Hamad seems to address the debates that have continued over the last two decades with the assertion that the prevalence of the father in American cinema has transformed the figure into a new form of American hero. Furthermore, she also suggests that fatherhood has emerged as a sought-after social position, arguing that "fatherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of mainstream U.S. cinema" (2014: 1) due to its ability to convey the plurality of male identities through its universal discourse; indeed, it is the universal aspect of the theme which exerts such a powerful appeal among audiences, contributing to the representation of a variety of postfeminist masculinities through the internalization of postmillennial sensibilities (Hammad 2014: 1).

This enduring appeal has inspired a constantly evolving perception of the role of the father in cinema and the model identity has undergone repeated alterations, both in mainstream Hollywood productions and in independent films. Presented across all distribution channels, from mainstream feature films to small-scale productions on streaming services, the character of the father is being brought closer to audiences than ever before. Films such as *C'mon, C'mon* (A24, Mills 2021) which present novel paradigms of contemporary parenting practices that are eagerly adopted by American fathers–no matter how provisional or charming the attempts–are recommended to passengers on long-haul flights by American Airlines regardless of their resolutely offbeat character. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an explosion in the popularity of streaming sites which have exposed wider audiences to films such as *Palmer* (Apple Production, Stevens 2021) which challenges the persistent pervasiveness of images of heteromasculinity, or the Netflix production *News of the World* (Greengrass 2020) which confronts the impossibility of racializing preferred model identities. Similarly, the independent film *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (Nilson and Schwartz 2019) represents an attempt to legitimize authenticity in an effort to connect the father with postmillennial sensibilities. These are just some selected examples of the phenomenon, but they are representative of the

broader trend that I would like to draw attention to in this brief study; more specifically, the persistent attempt to capitalize, if not exploit, the father figure on screen as a means of perpetuating the hegemony of the white, heteronormative American male in American cinema.

Fatherhood, or the focus on the father, is not the only aspect which these films have in common. Another shared characteristic of these films is the different types of fathers which they present with greater or lesser degrees of insistence. Viewers are confronted with initially childless men who, as the story unfolds, undergo the process of becoming fathers on a more or less willing basis. Fatherhood as a status or position is thus not acquired as a result of biological processes but is instead determined and motivated by social circumstances that challenge the protagonists' life situations. These fathers-to-be bond with the children who cross their paths in their journey through life and provoke affective responses which eventually result in their transformation into paternal, father-like figures or legal guardians; they emerge as adoptive fathers who consciously accept the social and financial responsibilities of fatherhood and invest themselves in the new parental role which they have embraced. These protagonists thus step into the role of the father, setting forth into an unknown territory, facing challenges and overcoming hardships, thereby successfully contesting the hegemony of the adult worldview with that of the children who themselves also manage to confront the fathers' own fears and anxieties.

Exploring hitherto unknown social situations involves expectations, making decisions, sometimes an initial reluctance, and a full range of processes generating intense emotions that, due to the father-to-be's ignorance of the scale of the obligations associated with the acquired/adopted child, all of which serves to highlight the naivete of the new father. As Lury explains, fathers-to-be are narratively more precious and appealing because they remain untarnished by the strain of being a parent; untouched by the physical and mental toll it takes to raise a child from the day it is born, these men adjust to the role and perform the process of falling in love with an initially estranged child for the benefit of the audience, gradually bonding and connecting with the child on the axis of desire (2022: 3). This approach offers a much more sympathetic starting point, one that allows for a special relationship to be established and developed based on genuine affection.

This sense of naivete is best demonstrated through the bonding process between Johnny and Jesse in *C'mon C'mon*, where Johnny, Jesse's biological uncle, is asked to look after the child while his mother helps Jesse's birth father to recover from a mental breakdown. As the plot develops, Johnny and Jesse are forced to spend more time together than expected, and the two characters are given the scope to explore each other's worlds and personalities and establish a bond that justifies the uniqueness of their relationship. In addition to Joaquin Phoenix's authentically nonchalant performance, this personal quest into a child's psyche benefits from the film's combination of the fictitious storyline with authentic scenes in which Johnny, a radio journalist, conducts actual interviews with real children to gain their perspectives on their lives, discussing the themes of happiness and respect. These discussions appear more as charming confessions than formal interviews, and the authenticity of the children's recordings complement the film's aim of accentuating the agency of children, acknowledging the authority which children hold in a world otherwise dominated by adult perspectives and validating the unusual degree of narrative attention which Jesse, a child character, receives. In the fictionalized story, the provisional father strives to treat Jesse with the respect which is predominantly granted to adults rather than children, a goal which, the film suggests, is feasible, albeit difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, the film acknowledges that the true originator of this special parent/child relationship established on a bond of partnership

rather than authority is the biological mother, the ultimate guide throughout the bonding process, and this character also takes on the task of providing support and counsel to Johnny over the phone. While admitting that parenthood can be (and often is) a highly challenging task, the motherly contribution remains tangential in terms of the film's narrative, and the focus is placed firmly on Johnny's struggle with his evolving compassion and respect for Jesse. The charming yet bewildered father figure, unaware of the fact that childhood can be "annoyingly material, solid, messy and frequently noisy" (Lury 2022: 5), thus engages the viewer in the development of his special relationship with Jesse to prove that a different model of parenting, one which acknowledges the child's authority and agency, is possible.

A stark contrast to Johnny's attentive connection with a tentative child is offered in the film *Palmer*, in which the titular character, played by Justin Timberlake, not only abides by the white, Anglo/American, heteronormative standard "to which postfeminist fatherhood is predominantly drawn" (Hamad 2014: 137), but also serves as a depiction of performative masculinity. Palmer, an ex-felon newly released from prison, comes into contact with an overtly feminine boy, Sam (played by Allen Ryder). Sam's drug addict mother is incapable of providing a home environment for him, and his happiness eventually comes to depend upon Palmer's ability to accept his otherness. The dichotomy of the representations provides a solid base for the reconciliation of two conflicting types of masculinity. As a former star high school quarterback and an ex-convict, Palmer undergoes a journey of redemption within his former community and reconciles with his past to discover he not only needs to adjust to the post-prison reality but also to adopt a more progressive approach towards what being a boy/man entails. The flamboyantly non-conformist Sam wears dresses and lipstick and adores fairy characters in girls' cartoons, gradually coming to terms with the long absence of a paternal figure in his life. Palmer takes on the alien responsibilities of parenthood with a reluctance that only intensifies with Sam's increasingly open expression of his queer identity. Palmer's motivation to consider the provisional parenting option comes only after the threat of interference by child protective services in the boy's future, with Palmer naturally skeptical of the competence of institutions in his life. Palmer eventually accepts Sam and reconciles not only with his own masculine identity but symbolically accommodates white heteronormative male anxieties through his approach to the child character. Palmer's conscious and active decision to adopt Sam formally only confirms the accomplishment of this symbolic reconciliation.

A similar performative type of masculinity is apparent in the character of Tyler (played by Shia LaBeouf) in *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, one which is perhaps even more intensified by social constraints. Introduced as an unbridled, indifferent "badass" whose only concern is to be left to his own devices and to provide for himself, Tyler finds himself committing to guardianship over a Down syndrome child called Zak (Zack Gottsagen playing himself). Ultimately, it is Zak who determines the nature of their shared journey in which both characters are given the opportunity to reconcile with their pasts and establish a future for themselves. Zak's disability enhances the child-like character of his personality and has a strong rehabilitating effect. Tyler's gradual acceptance of responsibility and his adjustment to the paternal role is effectively defined by his indifference and disregard for social conventions, traits which qualify him to mediate the film's manifest and general advocacy for increased support, respect and authority for the disabled that emerge through the destigmatization of their representation. Tyler's outward treatment of Zak as an individual unmarked by his disability allows the two characters to forge a unique relationship in which they share a general lack of respect for institutionalization, norms and standardization imposed by the social structures

which have stigmatized them both. Tyler's initial reluctance to make friends with Zak is a consequence of his fear of commitment; he has no interest in such bonds due to his irresponsible character and disrespect for authority which is manifested in his criminal past, an aspect of his life which he shares with Palmer. Tyler is also genuinely ignorant of the limitations which Down syndrome imposes upon its sufferers, and Zak's representation is thus largely dependent on the depiction of the conflict that the dichotomy of the social denial/acceptance of Down syndrome engenders. The unique nature of their relationship which, as I have argued in my previously published analysis of *The Peanut Butter Falcon*[1], is purely a narrative vehicle for the realization of the axis of desire; nevertheless, the inherent character of the father/child relationship activates affection and responsibilities that Tyler eventually adopts together with his formal custodianship of Zak.

Child-like otherness is also a determining factor in the father/child relationship depicted in *The News of the World,* a film which historicizes the issue of global conflict on a local/American scale. Centering on the responsibility of a wanderer for an abandoned child, the film's father character is Captain Kidd (Tom Hanks), an archetype of the wandering Western hero; the widower and Civil War veteran lives a solitary and itinerant existence, travelling across the old West to read the news of the world to anyone willing to listen. His bonding process with a child character starts when he agrees to accompany an orphaned German girl and deliver her to her family in Texas. The girl, Johanna (Helena Zengel), had recently been freed from captivity after being kidnapped by Kiowa Native Americans, and her experiences with the tribe are contrasted heavily with the kindness offered by the protective Captain Kidd, with Tom Hank's natural charisma being effectively employed to express and articulate postfeminist sensibilities. Hanks has regularly played father figures in the later stages of his career, and his screen presence is one of the most significant contributions to the melodramatic depiction of the father/child relationship in modern Hollywood cinema. Hank's stardom, his on-screen persona, and his advancing years all contribute to develop an idealization of fatherhood that is expressed by his protective behavior and which is ultimately made manifest in his final declaration to Johanna: "You belong with me" (1.49.20). However, while Kidd originally intends to rescue Johanna from the Kiowa environment to return her to "civilization", the story ultimately plays out differently. After she is rejected and treated as an animal by her family due to her lack of civilized manners, Kidd decides to accept responsibility for Johanna. The girl's otherness is emphasized by her appearance, with her remarkably pale, almost albino complexion and hair symbolically confirming her defective nature, a result of the injuries she suffered during her time with the Kiowas.

Mainstream cinema is predominantly drawn to depictions of this type of paternally signified masculinity that are "affectively charged" (Hamad 2014: 21). However, as Hamad explains, while contemporary popular cinema continues to assert the primacy of postfeminist fatherhood as a new hegemonic masculinity that is founded on a heteronormative, white, Anglo/American-centric template (137), the childlike character which the father figure adopts in these stories becomes a tool for the politics of representation. The otherness is reflected in these films as an inherent attribute of the child, who then becomes the bearer of essential symbolic significance. The child's otherness is revealed through their external features, as in the case of *News of the World*, *The Peanut Butter Falcon*, and *Palmer*, that, according to Olson

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[1] *Authenticity in Representations of Down Syndrome in Contemporary Cinema: The "Supercrip" in The Peanut Butter Falcon (2019).* 2021. In Ekphrasis : Images, Cinema, Theory, Media. Vol. 25, Nr. 1. DOI: 10.24193.

(Olson 2015: 87), deprives the childlike character of agency–"a force determined in part by an assumed interiority" (87). In contrast, the performative otherness of the child as is shown in *C'mon C'mon* is much more affecting, often spontaneous and uncontrolled, and thus serves as a far more authentic depiction of childhood, emphasizing that children perceive and interact with the world in a way which is very different from that of adults. The difference in the representation of the otherness of the childlike characters, the presence of the visible, as Olson suggests, not only belittles their actions, gestures and expressions but also denigrates their narrative status when these qualities become less significant than those of the actors whom they appear alongside (87). Films like *Palmer*, *News of the World* and *The Peanut Butter Falcon* center around an acquired father/child relationship, with the narrative objective being to celebrate the father figure who, along with the child, acquires a set of characteristics representative of the new hegemonic masculinity. While *C'mon C'mon* celebrates the role of the father with no less vigor, it does so through the lens of the child, with the relationship between the two protagonists resembling an equal partnership; while Jesse is forced to temporarily adjust to the logistics of his uncle's adult life, Johnny too has to adjust his behavior and understanding of reality without diminishing Jesse's personal authority, with this effort becoming the central narrative motivation of the film.

As the plot of each of these stories develops and as the fathers' initial positions are placed into conflict with the needs of the children, each film makes symbolic use of characters whose otherness is manifested in varying degrees of visibility. The position of the child has long been a subject of interest in a wide range of cinema analyses studying their representation and agency, but more recent research has focused on other aspects of their representation than their symbolism. Traditionally associated with innocence and naivete but also as a symbol of the past, present and future, the dominant image of children in mainstream cinema has reflected the predominance of Western social perspective and demonstrated the paternalistic European culture of the twentieth century with an emphasis on strict parental control, the unquestioned superiority of the adult and justifications for their rational control of the child (Olson 2015: 9). Karen Lury suggests that the contribution of child actors to mainstream Western cinema has traditionally been undervalued; not only is the acting performance of child actors "rarely valued and celebrated as that of white adult performances" (Lury 2022: 86), but more often than not, the visual construction of the child's agency prioritizes the role of the adult character over that of the child. The technique of the close-up plays a crucial role here, allowing the camera to grant a sense of agency to the child on screen, either depicting or ignoring the child's perspective and greatly determining whether or not the audience can relate to or identify with it. These aspects ultimately determine the film's narrative agency, which in the case of the father/child relationship implies the subjectification of the father. And because, as Donnar explains, the position of children in film is commonly overdetermined by the priorities of the adults, this emphasis on qualities and metaphoric meanings associated with exclusively adult anxieties, fears, fantasies, desires and nostalgia are typically combined with children and childhood (Donnar 2015: 188).

The focus on the child in cinema has often been used to reflect sociocultural anxieties and fears through the sensitivity of the child's perspective. The tendency of mainstream cinema to romanticize the experience of childhood has resulted in children on screen being granted the ability to accommodate themselves to changes and incorporate the process of "othering" (Olson 2015: 9). Child characters also serve as useful advocates and bearers of otherness because of the associations that children evoke. As Olson explains, the overly romanticized and idealized representations of children and the prevailing assumption that children are unaware of their

own visible awkwardness (and that of others) means that child characters are often granted such features which both challenge the politics of representation and provoke responses (9). The notion of innocence that protects the child from adult knowledge allows the display of the significance of otherness but the otherness is performed in a dichotomic representation that reinforces white male authority and exposes broader cultural anxieties. The attributes of children that are associated with weakness and the unconditioned relationship they develop with their protectors in these films thus demonstrates what Lury identifies as a racist and anthropocentric worldview (2022: 6).

In prompting an affective relationship with the paternal character, the child enters into the field of political and cultural discourse and elicits their racial (*News of the World*), sexual (*Palmer*) and ableist (*The Peanutbutter Falcon, C'Mon C'Mon*) anxieties and preoccupations, but also reveal their hopes. Because the child is an embodiment of joyfulness, life, optimism but also of incredible resilience (Donnar 2015: 188), the children in these films gain experiences that the accompanying adults clearly recognize and ultimately acknowledge. The signification of otherness is granted to children who, as "living representations of human potential" (ibid.), not yet exposed to cultural and social restraints, are accepted as the representation of an ominous possibility for contemporary audiences. In this respect, films like *News of the World*, *Palmer*, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* and *C'mon C'mon* address the racial, gender, sexual and disability politics of representation and align with progressive, countercultural values, but they also parallel the reinforcement of white male authority. As such, the films represent what Hamad refers to as the adaptability of cinematically idealized American masculinity (Hamad 2014: 91). In certain cases, the heteronormative white fathers are challenged by the otherness of the child to demonstrate a masculine retreatism that evinces the anxieties arising from the reformulation of gendered social roles which occurs through adjusting to the parental position that requires "men's performance of women's work at a supposed cost to the legibility of the place of heteronormative white masculinity" (93). Child characters and their perceived need for protection thus legitimize paternal and patriarchal authority. And if, as Hamad suggests, fatherhood enables the internalization of postmillennial sensibilities (2014:12–17), the effect appears to be the ultimate reinvigoration of the family. These films contribute to the formation of a romanticized notion of fatherhood by presenting American men who knowingly adopt the role of the father but who also remain unaffected by the physical and mental strain involved in the task of raising a child. And if they don't know what the hell to do with the child at the beginning of the story, they certainly come to find out by the end of the film.

Notes

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