

Post Celtic Tiger Ireland:

Exploring New Cultural Spaces

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Edited by

Estelle Epinoux and Frank Healy

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Aston Quay Jungle, Courtesy of the artist

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INTRODUCTION

Artistic works act as a mirror, reflecting back at us the society and time in which they were created. They also act as signifiers or architects, shaping, contouring and shading the world in which we live, and can be prophetic of the possibilities not yet realised, the world not yet born.

—Michael D. Higgins, Opening address at Aosdana General Assembly in The Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin. 5 March 2015.

Post Celtic Tiger Ireland

Powerful forces were at work during the Celtic Tiger years that were profoundly remodelling Irish society. At the time, both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland were in the spotlight, the former thanks to its prosperous economy and the latter as a consequence of the peace process. The end of the Celtic Tiger era began in 2008 when the economic crisis hit the country. In Northern Ireland, the peace process was a great step forward, increasing North/South cooperation, while “its potential for resolution [...] fed back in the south”.¹ In the Republic, the reversal of its economic fortunes led to dramatic cuts in Irish public expenditure, renewed emigration and a decline in living standards for most of its population. The recession, also referred to as “the economic calamity”,² threatened the very existence of culture. In the midst of the recession, the role and status of developers, politicians and corrupt bankers, as well as political institutions, were called into question.³ Further issues arose concerning the moral values which had shaped Irish society, and in particular the place and role of the Catholic Church and of Catholic values.

Today, signs of recovery have started to appear,⁴ even if we cannot yet talk of a recovery, and Irish society is still viewed as “maturing (slowly)

¹ Tóibín, in Higgins Wyndham, *Re-imagining Ireland*.

² Dunne, *The Irish Times*.

³ O’Toole: *Ship of Fools* (2010), *Enough is Enough* (2010), *Up the Republic* (2012).

⁴ Unemployment: 8.8 % in February 2016, CSO. GDP growth: 6.8 % in 2015, CSO.

[...] a nation still in puberty”.⁵ New hopes have been nurtured of a reformed and renewed Irish society rebuilt on solid foundations. It is in such a context of transition that culture comes to the foreground as artists question the recent past and present, providing insights into post Celtic Tiger Ireland. This process is thus closely linked to the “re-imagining” of Ireland, which began during the Celtic Tiger years when Irish society was experiencing major changes.

The Celtic Tiger era and its aftermath have coincided with a globalisation process in which the movement of people and exchanges of all sorts have intensified. F. O’Toole even claimed that Irish society had become the most globalised society in the world.⁶ There have been “intensifying motions of people that scramble boundaries” according to A. Dirlík,⁷ and an increasing cultural flux, to refer to Arjun Appadurai’s work.⁸ This permeates every level of society, and is exemplified by “The Gathering”, a 2013 event designed to encourage the Irish diaspora to return to Ireland for a visit. Flux, circulation and transnationalism have enabled artists at large not only to convey and disseminate their perception of Ireland and Irishness through their works, but also to become more visible. The transnational commemorations of Ireland’s past which have taken place outside the country are an illustration of this. Through this, the concept of the national has evolved “in the face of more international opportunities and expectations, more ‘globalised’ systems and experiences”.⁹ Connections with artists around the world predominate. According to the Irish painter Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin, Dublin can now be considered “globalised”.¹⁰ This experience of a “global Ireland” is perceived by some artists in a positive light: “Ireland’s distinguishing feature (is) that we can absorb international cultural influences and render them, renewed, as our own. These and other cultural realities allow both global and local perspectives and possibilities.”¹¹

⁵ O’Connell, cf. chapter 9.

⁶ O’Toole, in Higgins Wyndham, op.cit.

⁷ Dirlík, *Postmodernity’s Histories: The Past as Legacy and Project*.

⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.

⁹ Long, “Contemporary Art and the Matter of Ireland”, 1.

¹⁰ Workshop, *Ireland and the Arts in a Time of Crisis: A Transition to Post-Conflict Politics and Identity?*

¹¹ O’Byrne, *Dictionary of Irish Artists*, 311.

Could it be argued that the financial crisis has “freed the artists”, as Ó Croidheáin claims,¹² thereby opening up new cultural spaces to create what M. D. Higgins called a “world not yet born”?

Exploring new cultural spaces

It is in this context that critics, commentators and artists have begun the task of imagining a post Celtic Tiger space, of exploring new sustainable political, economic and social forms, and cultural identity as “the cornerstone of any new definition of Irish identity must be the development of a new moral vision.”¹³ Our aim in this volume is manifold: to question the overall cultural context of post Celtic Tiger Ireland, to appraise how this imbues cultural works and to investigate the ways artists are exploring this new post Celtic Tiger space. The role of artists is “to interrogate” in times of political, economic and social upheaval.¹⁴ Artists are considered as perceptive, providing a vision for the foundation of the state.¹⁵ Following this thread of thought, let us remind ourselves of the role played by artists and intellectuals during the Celtic revival, as illustrated by D. Hyde, a pioneering figure of the revival who inspired many leaders in the Easter Rising.¹⁶ During The Global Irish Economic Forum in Farmleigh (2009), politicians and artists asserted the importance of culture in regenerating the country. Writers, musicians and filmmakers stressed the essential role of the arts at a time of national crisis and saw their roles as inspirational, as illustrated by the director Mark O’Connor’s manifesto for a new wave Irish cinema, published in July 2012:

The protest film is not conceived for the market. They are emotionally reactive, born out of necessity and a political and social consciousness. These films “RAGE AGAINST THE SILENCE” by expressing the inner most feelings about the society we live in.¹⁷

In this exploration, new ways of understanding, representing and defining both Irish society and Irish identity have been at the heart of debates. Many of the younger artists consider national frontiers an

¹² Workshop op.cit.

¹³ Smyth, “Irish National Identity after the Celtic Tiger”, 136.

¹⁴ O’Byrne, op.cit., 308.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Heaney, “Arts vs Politics: We haven’t got the balance right”.

¹⁷ <http://www.broadsheet.ie/2012/07/23/irish-cinemas-new-wave-a-manifesto/>

irrelevance and no longer want to deal with Ireland in their works.¹⁸ In the Republic, the nation is being questioned: “there are many artists, including myself [Pierce], who find that nation as a legitimizing force is actually, totally delegitimizing”.¹⁹ In the North, Irish identity is no longer merely associated with the other side of Britishness, as illustrated by the Good Friday Agreement. Artists have undertaken an analysis of new cultural spaces, questioning Irish identity, the North, and the relationship between the North and the South, past and present. Spaces, be they social, cultural, economic or political, are being explored; there is a reworking of the “spatial fixes” which have to be thought of as sites of energy, diversity and regeneration.²⁰ Photography illustrates this transformation as it depicts “spectral non-places”,²¹ both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Compositions are also set in traditional places where the stigmas of the Irish crisis can be felt, as illustrated in Ciarán Óg Arnold’s photographs.²²

The exploration of various artistic works and places is closely linked to the present situation, to movement and transition but also strongly connected to time, to the past and memory. Exploration implies the notion of wandering through an unknown country in order to examine and observe its transformations and stigmas. It slowly unveils a place that is still difficult to fathom, reshaped by the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath: “The artist now stands in negotiation with tradition and history, with the present, with context and social processes and with lived experience.”²³

Remembering the past

“New times” became the leitmotiv of the Celtic Tiger period, and the “future” was sublimated while the past was repressed.²⁴ In the post Celtic Tiger era, a need has developed to study the past, particularly the recent past, in order to avoid making the mistakes which led to the crisis. Artists excavate the past to provide different understandings and to highlight a

¹⁸ Long, “Contemporary Art and the Matter of Ireland”, 1.

¹⁹ Pierce, Sarah (roundtable), winter 2008, “Contemporary Art and the Matter of Ireland”, 8.

²⁰ Gibbons, “The Empire’s New Clothes: Irish Studies, Post-colonialism and the Crisis”, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²² Óg Arnold, *I Went to the Worst of Bars*.

²³ McGonagle, “Myths and Mind-Sets or How Can We be Real?” in Higgins Wyndham, *op.cit.*, 112-122.

²⁴ Smyth, *op.cit.*, 135.

shared history and a common future. They also use it as a means to link past, present and future.

The cultural works which grew out of these years were produced in the post Celtic Tiger context. Yet, they are intimately linked with the Celtic Tiger years in terms of time and themes. The different cultural fields of interest studied in this volume will be considered as key spaces where these cultural changes are negotiated. The aim of our collective volume is not to provide the reader with a survey of the economic or political consequences of the end of the Celtic Tiger, but rather to assess the impact of the economic and political fallout on Irish culture, and more precisely to focus on the cultural voices exploring a country located at a crossroads, in a kind of in-between space, illustrating quite relevantly Chris Marker's statement that Rarely has reality needed so much to be imagined.

In bringing these authors together, our main objective is to analyse the cultural creations produced and their interaction with political, economic, historical and social forces.²⁵ This collection of essays addresses the question of post Celtic Tiger culture through various artistic works which interrogate and explore Irish society. It also presents the way these artistic works use artistic, aesthetic, sociological, cinematographic, historical and literary approaches. The contributors have taken into consideration a number of questions raised by these cultural expressions in order to shed light both on their work and how it reflects post Celtic Tiger society. The issues of globalisation, identity, place and creativity are all dealt with according to different fields of interest: poetry, theatre, films, memorials, commemoration, photography and paintings. Several major themes are included: conflicts and reconciliation, past and present, transitional spaces and revisiting the image of Ireland. In assessing the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger period and its impact and influences on today's Irish society, artists also allude to society's possible future transformations.

The first part, "Conflicts and Reconciliations: Past and Present", deals with the context of an evolving Irish society where past and present are

²⁵ Other books have offered complementary approaches such as providing an analysis of the impact of the post Celtic Tiger fallout on Irishness, in Maher, E., O'Brien, E. 2014, *From Prosperity to Austerity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press ; in Slaby, A. 2013, "An Introductory Essay on Culture in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland: A Floating Anchorage of Identities", *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol 37, n°1/2 and Pelletier, M., Peyronel, V., 2015, "La Crise, Quelle crise ? Crisis, What Crisis? ", *Etudes irlandaises*, n°40-2, automne-hiver.

closely intertwined within a process of economic, political and cultural renewal. Past and memory form a continuum, memory being “an unfolding process”²⁶ which is closely interconnected with remembering. When dealing with issues of the past, memory and culture, commemorations and memorials allow us to cast a critical eye on Irish history. In Northern Ireland, memorials can be considered as icons which link past and present. The memorials devoted to the great famine are part of a re-appropriation of specific spaces such as towns, not only in Ireland but also abroad (Glasgow, the USA etc.). History and the Irish diaspora are intermingling in that movement since “history (time) and diaspora (space) are bent and refracted through memory, creating unexpected and distorting effects, the products of cultural relativity”.²⁷ What Irish artists provide through their works is a cultural memory that can be understood as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts”.²⁸

Memories and commemorations are at the core of articles which question Irish history, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. The cultural works under scrutiny in our volume link Ireland’s past to its present, assessing the impact of The Good Friday Agreement. The “Theatre of Witness” plants its roots in the past in order to grow away from it, according to David Grant; it has been forged from the recent past, but also from The Good Friday Agreement and the hopes it laid for the future. In “Shoulder to Shoulder: The co-existence of Truths in the ‘Theatre of Witness’”, Grant presents this work (created at the Playhouse in Derry between 2009 and 2012) as a “challenging project”, a cultural plea for reconciliation in the present as it “serves to allow ideas to be carried across from one story to another by a kind of theatrical osmosis, seepage from one story to the other making similarities manifest even as differences are asserted”. He also raises the issue of the unresolved killings, the immunity for perpetrators and informants, and disputes over parades and flags. Memories are the centre of interest since “when memories diverge, a society’s members can share neither experience nor assumptions”. Grant explores these new spaces of communication, created as an attempt to share the past. In the same way, Brigitte Bastiat, in “*Quietly* (2012), by Owen McCafferty (Northern Ireland): Towards a Quiet Reconciliation in a Post-Conflict Society?” has chosen to analyse a play that examines the question of reconciliation and “change which doesn’t come about because of politics [...] but by people making it

²⁶ Miller, *Modernism, Ireland and the Erotics of Memory*, 12.

²⁷ Cooke, “History Memory, Diaspora”, in Higgins Wyndham, op.cit., 184.

²⁸ Erll and Nünning, eds, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, 2.

happen”. Interestingly, past and present are dealt with through reconciliation within theatrical spaces, but also through relatively new issues such as “racism against the newly arrived immigrants”. Laura McAtackney, in “Remembering the Troubles: Community Memorials, Memory and Identity in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland”, questions the “place making and peace building theories”, without losing sight of the impact of the Good Friday Agreement and of its potential to revitalise the economy. She also stresses the link between past and present, stating that “in transitional societies memories of the past are innately connected to contemporary identity”. The articulation between past and present is achieved through the creation of dedicated places, community memorials which “fill the official vacuum that has arisen from politicians deliberately bypassing narratives of the past”. In “A Struggle for Memory: The Commemoration of *An Gorta Mór* in Glasgow, Scotland”, Frank Healy explores the difficulty of filling this official vacuum, as witnessed by the conflicts that have arisen over the commemoration of the Great Famine in Glasgow, where there is a new “desire to write the history of the Irish community”; but who will do the writing?

The second part, “Transitional Places”, focuses on the perception of national and local spaces within the island and beyond its frontiers. In “Culture-Led Regeneration in Derry-Londonderry, UK City of Culture 2013”, Peter Doak explores the use of culture in an attempt to transform the status and imagery of a divided and economically underdeveloped city. Its urban space was the subject of regeneration strategies, a “reimagined Derry” that would provide a “new beginning” for the city, distancing itself from its “stigmatised” image. Based on a commercial approach, the aim was to transform the “negative external imaginings of the city” in an attempt to bring to an end its “economic stagnation” and to “catalyse its socio-economic regeneration”. This change is analysed in a comparative approach comprising studies of Porto, Glasgow and Cork, highlighting a similar global pattern applied to the different cities of culture. Valérie Morisson, in “Eoin O’Conaill’s Photographic Works”, provides us with “visions of post Celtic Ireland” through her analysis of photographs of today’s cityscapes and suburban places. O’Conaill’s series are “reminders of how economic pressures and fluctuations permeate, rezone and reconfigure everyday spaces and social landscapes”. His photographs lead us to reconsider Irish cultural identity after 2008: they “avoid producing visual representation of social representations” while concentrating on piecemeal elements of post Celtic Tiger society such as “the banal”, places of “in-betweeness” and new spaces such as “rurban Ireland”. Photographs

also link past and present as they excavate the past, reinterpret and document tradition, without forgetting to relate them to “people’s reaction with space”. This re-imagination of time and space takes into account migration and movement. In “*In Bruges* (2008): Treading beyond the Frontiers”, Estelle Epinoux explores the nature of the film *In Bruges*, which appears to be “an enigma, a sort of singular object full of Irish, American and European references”, as it was directed by a member of the Irish diaspora, financed by both American and British companies, played by Irish actors and located in the city of Bruges. She studies how this film illustrates “circulation and crossings within different spaces”, be they geographic, aesthetic or cultural. She analyses the impact of globalisation in today’s Irish cinema and the blurring of cultural and spatial frontiers, yet underlines the fact that the film is deeply embedded in Irish cinema and culture. In “Paul Durcan’s Ireland in a Time of Crisis in *Praise in which I Live and Move and Have my Being*”, Cathy Roche-Liger explores post Celtic Tiger Ireland through both a “satirical vision of Ireland and a glorified vision of an Ireland of love and art”. The trope of Ireland as a woman is employed to depict Ireland in recession. The social as well as moral and financial abuses of the Catholic Church and of the traders and bankers of the Celtic Tiger period are highlighted, yet Durcan does not fail to look to the future, underlining the “diversity and evolution of Ireland” and praising the country through “its artists and people”.

The third part, “Revisiting the Image of Ireland”, centres on the way images of Ireland, in both films and paintings, explore the transformations of Irish society, both in the North and in the Republic. In “Revisiting Old Themes in Recent Irish Cinema”, Díóg O’Connell argues that “the preoccupations of first wave films appear to have resurfaced in post-boom Ireland”. These films tend to be rooted in “a global popular culture”, as well as in “traditional tropes associated with Irish cinema – Northern Ireland, rural Ireland and the legacy of Catholic Ireland”. Some directors deal with the past, exploring both truth and shame; others choose to underline “the tension between re-imagining and re-stating aspects of the social order”. These films also enable the viewer to link two periods of time, creating an exploratory space as “post Celtic Tiger film captures a legacy left by the boom years and the Celtic Tiger economy”. For her part, in “Women in Troubles: Conflicting Images of Women in *The Shadow Dancer*”, Sophie Charpentier focuses her analysis on one film, dealing with “the seldom explored subject of women informants during the Troubles in Northern Ireland”. Through a close study of the film and of the main female character, she contends that “the film, like its women, is both

traditional and innovating”. The film also appears to be an opportunity to explore “new images of Northern Ireland by using old and new tropes”.

Revisiting the image of Ireland is also undertaken by two contributors through their analyses of Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin’s paintings. As both a painter and an academic, Ó Croidheáin uses his paintings to analyse the new cultural elements which have appeared in Ireland. He questions the process of painting “in a contemporary context as business on the one hand but also as opposition on the other”. He locates Ireland within a global context, tackling different social and political issues, both national and international, in paintings such as *Odessa* or *Climate Chaos*. In “Post Celtic Tiger Landscapes in Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin’s Paintings”, Marie Mianowski describes Ó Croidheáin’s paintings as “a walk through time”. She analyses three paintings, *Young Ireland vs Old Ireland*, *Larkin’s Despair* and *The Rise and Fall of James Connolly*, works that initiate “a pictorial Dublin journey” and underline “the moving contrasts between epochs and the paradoxes of the past conflicting with the contradictions of the present”. In her reading of Ó Croidheáin’s paintings, she not only evokes past and present but also politics and the economy, arguing that “the paintings transform the separating chasm between past glory and contemporary changes into a space open to the possibilities that the future might offer”. These paintings can be thus understood as a means to “re-evaluate today’s perspectives for the future”, while at the same time emphasising the “paradoxical contiguity between past and present”. Her analysis of Ó Croidheáin’s paintings is also an opportunity to question the role and place of the past in the present when arguing that “in implicitly questioning the meaning of heroic figures, symbols and commemoration, his work addresses the representation of political space and public spaces”. Amélie Dochy, in “Post Celtic Tiger Expressionism: Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin’s *Great Famine Memorial, Custom House Quay, Dublin* (2007)”, examines one of Ó Croidheáin’s paintings and questions his reading of the famine from his post Celtic Tiger era standpoint. She also links and interrogates past and present, emphasising that “the juxtaposition of a modern symbol of wealth (Dublin’s business district) with the statues embodying Ireland’s past sufferings expresses the ambitious stance of Ireland in the era of the post Celtic Tiger economy”.

Estelle Epinoux

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PART I

CONFLICTS AND RECONCILIATIONS: PAST AND PRESENT

CHAPTER ONE

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER: THE CO-EXISTENCE OF TRUTHS IN THE “THEATRE OF WITNESS”

DAVID GRANT

“Theatre of Witness” is a form of performance in which “the true stories of those who have been marginalised, forgotten or hurt by society are woven into collaborative theatre productions and are performed by the people themselves in spoken word, movement, music and visual imagery”.¹ Unlike Augusto Boal and Jonathan Fox,² who have respectively laid down clear protocols of practice for the Theatre of the Oppressed and Playback Theatre, the founder of the Theatre of Witness, the American theatre artist Teya Sepinuck, has been cautious about describing it as a genre or a system. Her practice with groups as diverse as prisoners and their families, asylum seekers and runaway girls in Poland, has consistently found new forms to serve the stories of each set of witnesses and has emerged organically over nearly three decades, consistently being inflected and adapted to the needs of each discrete context. In the case of her work in Northern Ireland, the context was especially challenging, founded as it was on the shifting sands of the Northern Ireland Peace Process.

The Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 is widely recognised as having been a pivotal moment in the recent history of Northern Ireland, fulfilling the poetic prophecy of the late Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney that “once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up,

¹ Sepinuck, “Living with Life: ‘The Theatre of Witness’ as a Model of Healing and Redemption”, 163.

² See: Augusto Boal. *Games for Actors and non-Actors*. Jonathan Fox. *Acts of Service*. Tusitala, 2003.

/ And hope and history rhyme.”³ But his “hope for a great sea-change / On the far side of revenge”⁴ has been long in coming. As the ’Derry dramatist Dave Duggan once wryly remarked, we might be forgiven for wondering when the endlessly protracted “Peace Process” will result in a “Peace Product”! Instead, the intervening fifteen years have seen talk of a “Peace Dividend” give way to a preoccupation with “The Troubles Legacy” (a predominantly pejorative term often used to refer to the communal state of post-traumatic stress), with funding arising from the former (mainly from the European Union) being focussed on an array of strategies to address the latter. The Theatre of Witness initiative was just one of many such interventions, but as this article will seek to show, by allowing diverse perspectives to co-exist without insisting on a reconciliation between opposing views, it has provided a model, or perhaps more aptly, a powerful metaphor for the wider Northern Ireland society.

This article will reflect on the trilogy of Theatre of Witness productions conceived and directed by Teya Sepinuck, specifically in response to the Northern Ireland Troubles, at the Playhouse in ’Derry between 2009 and 2012.⁵ The first production, *We Carried Your Secrets* (2009), involved a mainly male intergenerational cast, where the stories of the older men who had all been directly involved in the Troubles sat side by side with those of the younger participants, who spoke of the indirect impact of the legacy of the violence on their lives. The second production, *I Once Knew a Girl...* (2010), had an entirely female cast and exposed some of the painful memories so often suppressed during the years of civil discord. These were followed by *Release* (2012), where ex-prisoners and paramilitary combatants shared the stage with a former Prison Governor, a former soldier and a former police detective.

There has been much discussion in the Northern Irish media, especially in the light of the failed 2013 Haass talks and the call by the Attorney-General for Northern Ireland to find an alternative approach to courts and enquiries, of the need for a Peace and Reconciliation process akin to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). But reports from South Africa itself suggest that this has not been the panacea outsiders often imagine. Annie Coombes records that:

³ Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*, 77.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sepinuck’s fourth and final Playhouse production, *Sanctuary* (2013), involved asylum-seekers in Northern Ireland and had a more external perspective.

The TRC has been heavily criticised in South Africa for the compromise made in the name of “national unity” and reconciliation that allowed many to walk free while conditions they had perpetrated under apartheid, and that had reduced so many to poverty and powerlessness, remained intact.⁶

In a distinct but similar way, there has been a growing perception, particularly in poorer Loyalist communities in Northern Ireland, that unresolved grievances have been ignored so as not to stall the progress of the overarching grand narrative of the Peace, and that the rights of victims are being ignored in a race for reconciliation. The Theatre of Witness, however, seeks to eschew labels such as victim, survivor and perpetrator, and to allow sometimes contradictory and unreconciled accounts of the region’s recent history to sit together side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

The general anxiety to keep the fragile peace alive is understandable given what Welsh poet Gillian Clarke has described as its “difficult birth”. Comparing the Good Friday Agreement with the birth of a lamb, she portrays Northern Ireland as:

An old ewe that somehow till this year / had given the ram the slip. We thought her barren... While they [Northern Ireland’s political factions] slog it out in Belfast, eight decades / since Easter 1916, exhausted, tamed by pain [a particularly insightful phrase]... the lamb won’t come... We strain together, harder than we dared... and you find us / peaceful, at a cradling that might have been a death.⁷

This messianic imagery, inherent in the very notion of the Good Friday Agreement (though significantly Unionists tend to prefer the more prosaic “Belfast Agreement”), goes some way to help explain the tunnel vision that has characterised much of the political discourse ever since. But year by year, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain this blinkered approach as the disaffected make their presence ever more apparent.

How, they ask, are more than 3,000 unresolved killings to be investigated? Why should there be an amnesty or immunity for informants and perpetrators? And there are also the seemingly more symbolic disputes over parades and flags. In an attempt to address these issues, the American diplomat, Richard Haass, was jointly invited by the Unionist First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, and the Republican Deputy First

⁶ Coombes, *History after Apartheid*, 8.

⁷ Clarke, “A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998”.

Minister, Martin McGuinness, to facilitate talks. As the New Year's Eve deadline approached in 2013, there was little surprise when it was reported that the talks had foundered, not primarily because of victims' issues, but mainly on account of the "flags".

While it is tempting to dismiss this apparently superficial preoccupation with emblems as the last gasp of the dispossessed dregs of an ideologically bankrupt unionist ascendancy, a more constructive approach may be to engage as artists with the language of symbol and metaphor which is our stock in trade. The display of flags and emblems has long been accepted as a contentious aspect of Northern Irish life.⁸ The most recent crisis was triggered by the decision of the Belfast City Council on 3 December 2012 to restrict the flying of the national Union Flag to certain specified days, as is the usual practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Reaction from some working class Protestants was instant, vociferous and occasionally violent, with numerous street protests throughout the city causing significant commercial and reputational damage, some of which has lasted for more than a year. From a sociological perspective,

the persistence of ethnic conflict and its resistance to traditional techniques of diplomatic or political intervention is widely recognised. One reason for this intractability is the selective focus on the past of those engaged in conflict. Images of the past are used to legitimate the present social order, but social order presupposes collectively shared memories. When memories diverge, a society's members can share neither experience nor assumptions.⁹

One way in which the Theatre of Witness circumvents this intransigence is to accord all memories equal space, permitting them to overlap rather than forcing them to diverge.

Teya Sepinuck has set out some of the core principles that have informed her practice with the Theatre of Witness, three of which are of special relevance here. Epistemologically, Sepinuck emphasises the importance of "not knowing", which she sees as:

the very foundation of "Theatre of Witness". We live in a culture where high value is placed on knowing facts, achieving, proving ourselves, and

⁸ Cf. Bryan et al., *Public Displays of Flags and Emblems in Northern Ireland*.

⁹ Roe et al., "Forgiving the Other Side", 122.

being right. “Not knowing” undercuts all of that, allowing us to see things afresh, to come in without an agenda or judgement.¹⁰

If “not knowing” permits the emergence of undeclared truths, then a further ethical principle, “holding the paradox”, facilitates their transmission into performance. Arguably, paradox is inherent in the very concept of Theatre of Witness, the first word connoting artifice and the third truth. Professor Baz Kershaw has distinguished the concept of paradox from that of oxymoron as follows:

An oxymoron – such as “extremes meet” – is a contradictory coupling of (usually) two words/terms/subjects with no mediating factor, simply a clash of meanings which never resolves. Whereas paradoxes (especially strong ones) tend to yoke together contradicting statements in ways that relate ambivalently and so are capable of producing a range of interpretations but do not exclude “over-riding truths”.¹¹

Thus, the contradictions apparent between different testimonies in a Theatre of Witness performance invite the audience to reflect on the relationship between them. “To ‘hold the paradox’”, says Sepinuck, “means to enlarge one’s sphere of understanding in order to contain these opposites. It means holding the story in a vastness that’s bigger than ‘either/or’. It’s when a multiplicity of meanings can co-exist that a new paradigm can be envisaged.”¹²

The third of Sepinuck’s principles that merits close attention in the present context is methodological: “taking the problem and making it the solution”:

An example of this was in working on *Years* with older performers, one of whom couldn’t discern her direction on stage... I directed another performer to take her hand and guide her to her next position. The simple and caring beauty of that gesture became an integral part of the production.¹³

Beyond this example of a specific piece of stagecraft in an individual production, the idea of turning problems into solutions can be seen

¹⁰ Sepinuck, “Living with Life: ‘The Theatre of Witness’ as a Model of Healing and Redemption”, 227.

¹¹ Email to author.

¹² Sepinuck, “Living with Life: ‘The Theatre of Witness’ as a Model of Healing and Redemption”, 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

throughout the whole Theatre of Witness process, as the apparent initial impossibility of dialogue provides (within a carefully regulated and conducive environment) the stimulus for participants to engage in it.

Whereas political imagery in Northern Ireland all too often becomes fixed within a rigid ideological frame, for artists the power of imagery lies in its potential for ambiguity. Echoing Sepinuck's thoughts on "holding the paradox", Jonathan Freedland has commented on the difficulties that arise when discussion is

reduced to a slanging match of binaries, each side hurling false dichotomies at the other – insisting that every aspect of [an] unfolding crisis can be reduced to an either/or choice, when in fact the truth very often comes down to both... But the world is not like that. It is rarely black v white. It usually requires us to hold two apparently contradictory thoughts in our head at once.¹⁴

Freedland's argument provides a useful foreword for Stanley Raffel's idea of the "Method of Metaphor". Raffel critiques the classical syllogism, identifying the limitations of a traditional analysis based on thesis, antithesis and synthesis in situations where the initial propositions are based on irreconcilable presuppositions. Using the Israeli-Palestinian situation as an example, he argues the impossibility of synthesis where there are mutually incompatible initial frames of reference: for instance, where one side's terrorist is the other's freedom fighter. He posits instead an approach based on metaphor, seeking to understand opposing positions by asking what each is like and unlike. "That is to say, one can try to depict the nature of any one or any thing by searching for the right metaphor for them or it."¹⁵ Raffel acknowledges Derrida's position that "one should prefer the discourse of full truth to metaphor [which] can manifest properties, can relate properties from the essence of different things to each other, can make them known on the basis of their resemblance, but nonetheless without directly, fully and properly stating essence itself".¹⁶ But the very aspiration to establish the direct and full essence of a phenomenon is precisely what has proved so problematic in deeply contested situations such as Northern Ireland's.

Reading Raffel's chapter on the Middle East, I was reminded of workshops I facilitated in July 2009 near Jerusalem with school teachers

¹⁴ Freedland, "As the Ukraine debate rages, both sides are getting it wrong".

¹⁵ Raffel, *The Method of Metaphor*, 5.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 238 & 249.

from a mix of Jewish-Israeli, Arab-Israeli and West Bank backgrounds. I regularly use a warm-up game where participants create images of Samson, Delilah and a lion, and was uneasy about whether this would be perceived as a Jewish story. But my hosts reassured me that these characters would be understood by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike as part of a shared history. I proceeded to ask participants to create in groups an image in tableau form of a typical family. This is a standard Augusto Boal exercise which generates in a consciously stereotypical way predictable results in specific geographical contexts. The usual Belfast image, for instance (regardless of class or creed), consists of children squabbling on the floor, the father sat with either the local paper or the TV remote control, with the mother ironing. I toyed with the idea of dividing the groups in my Jerusalem workshops by religious background, but decided to keep them integrated. The striking result was the centrality of food in all the resulting images, emphasising the common importance across the political divide of families eating together (an image that rarely occurs in Ireland!).

Freud's phrase "the narcissism of minor difference" comes to mind (as it often does in relation to the social reality of Northern Ireland): sundered communities have much in common but it is the few differences that divide and preoccupy them. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, themed many of the early episodes of the series in relation to current affairs. His attempt at addressing the intractability of the early Northern Ireland Troubles involved a storyline where a man, half of whose face was white and the other half black, was "beamed aboard" the Starship Enterprise. Shortly afterwards, a similar looking man arrived and the two fought tooth and nail, to the great bewilderment of Captain Kirk and his crew. It materialised that the difference between them was that the white halves of their faces were on opposite sides. For while Americans could relate to difference based on race, the division of people who seemed so similar was more perplexing. As I once heard an exasperated Irish-American politician complain: "There's more diversity in one New York City block than in the whole of Ireland. Why can't these people get along?!"

While the imagery of flags and emblems continues to set Northern Ireland's communities apart, the use of stage imagery, and by extension of the metaphors that these evoke, has the potential to let them see how much they are alike. Just as the Method of Metaphor operates by allowing us to see differences and similarities between different related concepts, the