

***Titanic Town* and *Good Vibrations*: Cinematographic Representations of Belfast from the Margins**

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Introduction: Changing Perspectives in Northern Irish Cinema

According to Eamonn Hughes, Belfast is too complex to be easily comprehended: 'There is always more happening than can be apprehended by sight alone, and therefore to understand the city, one has to stand outside it'.¹ In the light of the Belfast's complicated socio-political structures, exploring the urban complex from the margins seems to be a suitable way to achieve a detached vision of the city. For this reason, the following article will focus on *Titanic Town* and *Good Vibrations*, both films providing an unusual perspective on Belfast through the eyes of characters who could be seen as marginalised individuals. In this article, the term 'marginalised individual' is employed to describe liminal characters who are on the edges of the mainstream and who are not primarily interested in the issues which tend to dominate public and literary discourse in Northern Ireland. Apart from that, they do not correspond to any of the classic roles usually given to protagonists in Troubles film. The two films will be analysed through the lens of Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalisation and dialogism,² Viktor Shklovsky's theory of alienation,³ as well as Noël Carroll's approach to humour in general⁴ and Vivian Mercier's seminal discussion of humour in its Irish literary manifestation.⁵ Concerning the representation of Belfast's city space, I shall refer to the writings of the urban theorists Rob Shields⁶ and Liam Kennedy.⁷

In order to illustrate the singularity of the two works, this essay will begin with a brief discussion of recent developments in cinematographic productions dealing with the Northern Irish conflict. As the epicentre of political violence, Belfast has become a recurrent setting for a variety of films. According to Brian McIlroy, the 'standard genres' of Northern Irish cinema are the 'thriller' and the 'revenge tragedy'.⁸ Belfast's fragmented urban space as well as the city's internal ethno-religious boundaries have inspired a great number of action films featuring the British army, paramilitaries from both sides, and members of the RUC.⁹ Frequently, Belfast is depicted as a city dominated by shootings, bombings, raids and abductions. In this context, films such as Mark Evan's *Resurrection Man*

(1988), Thaddeus O'Sullivan's *Nothing Personal* (1995) and Nathan Todd's *A Belfast Story* (2013) spring to mind. Most of the films made in the 1970s, 1980s, and even at the beginning of the 1990s, render a rather grim picture of Belfast, illustrating the city as a place in which the peaceful co-existence of the two ethno-religious communities is seen as being impossible. The plots of those films are commonly marked by speed, action and tension.

However, in the years following the first ceasefire declaration made by the IRA in 1994, a search for new forms of cinematographic expression can be observed.¹⁰ The improvement of the political climate in the region gave rise to a gradual growth of mental and emotional distance from the conflict.¹¹ As a result, a young generation of scriptwriters and producers began to present the consequences of political violence from a fresh angle in order to express the 'new mood of optimism' generated by the more peaceful atmosphere in Northern Ireland.¹² In addition, the emergence of new forms of funding for local productions in the 1990s encouraged innovative filmmaking activities. Previously, a Northern Irish cinematographic tradition was literally absent as most of the films on the Troubles had been produced in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain or the US. In the early 1990s, the newly founded Northern Irish Film Council (NIFC) provided a production fund in support of locally-made films.¹³ The development of Northern Irish cinema was further encouraged through the introduction of UK lottery funds, increased Arts Council funding and the BBC Extending Choice policy, a policy aiming at greater regional autonomy.¹⁴ Last but not least, the calmer political atmosphere made it possible to shoot films directly in Northern Ireland. During the most turbulent years of the Troubles, filming on location had not been possible because of security risks. At that time, Dublin, London or Manchester had habitually served as stand-in-locations for Belfast.¹⁵

The changed post-cease fire situation spawned alternative perspectives on the Troubles, and films produced after 1994 are often considered as 'ceasefire cinema'. The term suggests that these films were enabled by the ceasefire, thanks to alternative financial resources, the possibility of shooting on location, and the more optimistic overall atmosphere in the region.¹⁶ Various films explore the new situation in Northern Ireland engendered through the Peace Process. Others revisited tense periods of the Troubles from a more detached point of view.

In a number of films, innovative visions of the Northern Irish conflict are reached through a carnivalesque plot shaped by grotesque characters, comic situations, slapstick as well as subversive word-play. John Hill claims that only after the ceasefire did it become possible to turn the

conflict into 'a comic matter' on screen.¹⁷ Productions with a humorous take on the political situation include, among others, David Caffery's films *Divorcing Jack* (1998) and *Cycle of Violence* (1998), Barry Levinson's *An Everlasting Piece* (2000), and Dudi Appleton's *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2003). In a variety of films, however, a new perspective of Belfast was rendered through the eyes of unusual characters living marginalised lives. By means of an alternative visualisation of the actual situation in Northern Ireland, the dysfunctional nature of society there was highlighted.

As mentioned earlier, the present essay concentrates on Roger Michell's *Titanic Town* (1998) and *Good Vibrations* by Lisa Barros D'Sa and Glenn Leyburn (2013). Set in the 1970s, both films address the topic of marginality through a focus on the lives of unconventional protagonists who offer quirky, non-mainstream views. In *Titanic Town*, the Troubles are perceived from the point of view of the teenager Annie McPhelimy, played by Northern Irish actress Nuala O'Neill. She and the other young people portrayed in *Titanic Town* are perceived as marginalised individuals because they are neither targets or proponents of any political ideology nor are they agents of violence. As adults are the main political actors, they are inevitably at the centre of the Troubles. Children and young people, on the contrary, are caught in the crossfire rather than being active participants in politics or in acts of political violence. Consequently, they tend to occupy positions that are peripheral rather than central. Not belonging to the adults' world, they become collateral victims of the Troubles. Annie, the protagonist of *Titanic Town*, attempts to lead a 'normal' life in Republican West-Belfast, torn between her A-level exams and her first boyfriend. Her youthful perspective on the world around her stands out against more mainstream perceptions of the Troubles as seen through the eyes of adult characters in film. Indeed, in films focusing on Northern Ireland, the depiction of the experience of political violence from the perspective of adolescents has been largely neglected.¹⁸

The protagonist of *Good Vibrations* is the DJ Terri Hooley, a music enthusiast, idealist and rebel, played by Belfast actor Richard Dormer. Fascinated by the emerging underground punk movement, he opens a record shop in the centre of Belfast in the midst of the Troubles. His unconditional passion for music in a city dominated by sectarian fighting is not always comprehended by his family and friends. As a result, he comes to feel like a 'spiritual' outsider. By choosing the world of music, he sets himself apart from the people surrounding him. Living at a remove from the political tensions that underline the divide between the two communities, Terri is doubly ostracised: he is set apart by his consuming involvement in the world of music in general and more precisely by his

absorption in the vibrant but marginal world of punk. Through the alienating perspectives of these two characters – Annie and Terri – both films communicate a somewhat unusual vision of Northern Ireland.

Titanic Town and *Good Vibrations* refer to the reality of Belfast in the 1970s in comparable ways. They not only recreate the atmosphere of political terror in order to render a realistic picture of the city but they also allude to local personalities and organisations, as well as to events taken from recent Northern Irish history. The screenplay of *Titanic Town* was written by Anne Devlin and is based on Mary Costello's eponymous semi-autobiographical novel inspired by her adolescence in Andersonstown in the early 1970s.¹⁹ Funded by the local lottery,²⁰ the film is set in Republican West-Belfast at a tense period of the Troubles. The action takes place against the background of the Women's Peace Movement, in which Bernie McPhelimy – Annie's mother –, played by Julie Walters, becomes one of the leading figures. This imaginary movement is modelled on the Peace People, a peace initiative founded by Betty Williams and Mairead Maguire in the mid-seventies.²¹ The organisation was started up by a local group of people protesting against the ongoing violence in their area. Eventually, it turned into an internationally supported peace movement for which Williams and Maguire received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976.²² Costello's interest in the Peace People most likely springs from the fact that her own mother was involved in the organisation.

Good Vibrations is a biopic based on the life of Terry Hooley, the founder of the Good Vibration label and record shop. The shop opened in 1976 in Winetavern Street in the centre of Belfast and traded for six years before going bankrupt in 1982. Hooley is regarded as a cultural icon and the 'godfather of punk', having supported bands such as The Undertones, Rudi and The Outcasts.²³ Stuart Baillie claims that Hooley 'saw the bigger picture' and could 'empower young people and save souls'.²⁴ According to Baillie, the music enthusiast wisely recognised that 'an alternative Ulster' existed apart from the clashes of the two communities.²⁵ The site of the original Good Vibrations store was honoured with a commemorative plaque and a tree, an award, which the local authorities had previously only attributed to Elton John and the Dalai Lama.²⁶ The screenplay was written by Belfast author Glenn Patterson. *Good Vibrations* illustrates Hooley's unabated passion for music despite the political violence being acted out on the streets. However, the punk *aficionado* states that the film does not embellish reality: 'We never wanted a glossed-over story because I never was an angel'.²⁷ *Good Vibrations* has a realistic tone as numerous extracts from original footage of the Troubles are integrated into the action.

Given the unusual perspectives from which these two films depict the troubled life of Belfast, Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation springs to mind as a useful mode of analysis.²⁸ Shklovsky claims that in order to raise awareness, art has to make the 'habitual' appear to be 'strange': 'The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception'.²⁹ This means that only if things are presented in an unusual way, will they call attention to themselves and force the observer to contemplate them anew and in detail. Following this approach, it could be argued that the estranging perspectives on Belfast rendered in *Titanic Town* and *Good Vibrations* through the alienating visions of their protagonists succeed in encouraging audiences to engage with the topic of political violence. In light of Shklovsky's theory, we can say that the two films raise awareness of the consequences of sectarianism through their unexpected representations of the conflict.

Belfast from a Juvenile Perspective

In *Titanic Town*, Belfast is illustrated from the defamiliarising perspective of a young girl whose perceptions are in contrast with the habitual depictions of the Troubles as conveyed through an adult point of view. The film shows the different ways in which the city as the centre of violence enters the life of children and adolescents, in particular the life of Annie McPhelimy and her younger siblings Sinead, Thomas and Brenda. As they do not play a central role in the clashes of the two communities, these characters observe political violence from the margins. The action of *Titanic Town* opens with a scene which takes place in a housing estate in Andersonstown, the dwelling place of the McPhelimy family in West-Belfast. One night, Annie observes a violent scene from her bedroom window: she sees a shooting being carried out by an IRA-man who is firing at a British army helicopter. The front garden turns into a battlefield used by both the army and the IRA. In this way, the urban space is seen as a threatening zone which cannot be protected from acts of violence. However, this fierce outbreak of fighting on her own doorstep does not terrify Annie. Instead of panicking, she quietly continues to observe the IRA sniper with emotional detachment as if the scene taking place in such close proximity was not part of reality but merely something happening on TV. The protagonist's unmoved reaction shows the extent to which armed confrontation has become an everyday occurrence to her.

The gunfire in the garden makes Bernie, Annie's mother, storm outside to chase the sniper. In so doing, she follows the central aim of the Women's Peace Movement which is to stop the shooting in the area. However, opposing the paramilitaries is a dangerous enterprise in West-Belfast where the Republicans are seen as fighting to protect the members of the Catholic community. Aidan, the father of the family, is aware of the danger of getting caught in the crossfire between the IRA and the British army and so he tries to prevent his wife from endangering herself. Ignoring her husband's objections, Bernie runs into the garden followed by her three children. In this scene, the adolescent protagonist is not only confronted with the violence generated by the complex interactions of governmental forces and counterhegemonic structures, but also with her parents' disagreement about how to respond to the situation. While the father pleads for keeping quiet and staying out of trouble, the mother insists on getting involved. Consequently, Annie has to make up her own mind about how to act in order to cope with the Troubles which have invaded her family's space. The functioning of the family plays a central part in the film. While the father is represented as a weak person, who is repeatedly taken to hospital because of his bursting stomach ulcer, Bernie is illustrated as a strong character who leads the family and follows a determined political line as a peace activist. Thus, Annie does not only have to come to terms with the danger of sectarian fighting; she also has to handle complex family structures formed by the omnipresence of this same violence.

Despite the violent actions graphically depicted in the film, the scene also takes on a humorous tone. When the shooting wakes up the family, Bernie is as much concerned about the IRA in the garden as about the fact that Annie might see her father in his underwear. Rushing downstairs she shouts at her daughter: 'Annie close your eyes, your father has no trousers on!' In a scene which responds to Bakhtinian ideas of carnivalisation, the gravity of the situation is humorously subverted through Bernie's ridiculous utterance. According to Bakhtin, the established divisions between 'high' and 'low', 'sacred' and 'profane' are dissolved by mockery and irony.³⁰ By giving equal importance to the presence of a violent gunman and the risk that Annie might see her father half dressed, Bernie inadvertently reduces the threatening presence of the IRA to something almost trivial. This juxtaposition and the laughter it provokes make the audience aware of the different ways in which violence becomes the norm in Belfast during the 1970s.

The character of Bernie receives a further comic dimension due to the clothes she is wearing when she tries to stop the shooting. Neither intimidated by the IRA nor by the searchlights of the army helicopter, she

storms outside dressed in her nightgown with curlers in her hair. In his discussion about how humour functions, Noël Carroll claims that the key to 'comic amusement' is a deviation from a presupposed norm.³¹ Consequently, the incongruity created through a digression from an assumed standard serves to generate laughter.³² In the context of the given scene, Bernie's behaviour departs from the conduct expected from a Republican working class mother, who is supposed to respect the IRA and to respond to the code of virtuous conduct prescribed by the Catholic Church. Challenging the paramilitaries in her nightdress would not only be seen as scandalous by the religious institution; it also amounts to a violation of Bernie's own rules of female respectability. While she is eager to prevent Annie from seeing her father in his underwear, she gives little or no thought to exposing herself in her nightwear to the British army and the IRA. The young protagonist has to make sense of her mother's contradictory behaviour in order to find her individual way of surviving in the midst of violence. In contrast to Bernie who is stirred into action by the gunfire, Aidan passively observes the shooting from the safe distance of his bedroom. Due to her parents' diverging reactions, Annie is confronted with two contrasting role models. In order to create her own identity, Annie has to decide with whom to identify and whose approach to adopt. The protagonist's dilemma of allegiance attracts the audience's attention to the choices to which young people are exposed in a situation shaped by political unrest. In line with Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation, it could be argued that through the alienating perspective of an adolescent girl, the spectators are encouraged to enter the mind of young people trying to cope with the Troubles. In this way, the audience is led to reflect on the impact of political violence from a different perspective.

Throughout the film, high-angled shots are used as a cinematographic device in order to illustrate the protagonist as a distant observer. Shooting several scenes from above allows the director to illustrate Annie's detached attitude towards the events happening in her direct environment. On a number of occasions, Annie watches the goings-on in the street while hidden behind a curtain from her first floor bedroom window. Echoing the opening scene of the film, these repeated scenarios underline the omnipresence of political tension in Annie's life. The bedroom window allows the protagonist to follow the violent confrontations between the IRA and the British army from a physical and mental distance. At the same time, Annie's elevated lookout reflects her position on the margins of the conflict.

A further defamiliarising perspective on the Troubles is generated in a conversation taking place at night between Annie and her younger sister

Sinead. While Annie is reading a book in her bed, Sinead eyes her sister's dolls on the shelf, naïvely asking: 'If ever you get shot, will you leave me those dolls in your will?' Annie's annoyed reply is merely: 'No, I want them buried with me'. In the given circumstances, the two girls' dialogue does not appear out of the ordinary. Annie seems to be less irritated by the fact that her sister is anticipating her death, than by Sinead's desire for her dolls. Through Annie's younger sister, the audience is presented with an even more alienating perception of the current situation. By means of Sinead's simplistic perception of her environment, the spectators are confronted with a small girl's ways of thinking. Sinead's pragmatic attitude mirrors the normality of death and violence in Republican West-Belfast during the 1970s. Her innocent comment serves to shed fresh light on the omnipresence of danger and death. The depiction of Sinead's striving to benefit from the situation generates a specific kind of dark humour. According to Michael Storey, black humour contains 'macabre and grotesque elements', and requires 'a sense of distance'.³³ It could be argued that the humour created in the scene shows the mental and emotional distance towards the conflict taken on by the director of the film. This detached attitude was rendered possible by the more relaxed situation which pertained after the ceasefire.

The scene continues with the two sisters observing a British soldier who is waiting for IRA snipers in the rain. As in earlier scenes, the urban space is depicted in dark and unpleasant colours. When Sinead asks her sister what the soldier is doing in their garden, Annie answers in an ironic tone: 'He is getting very wet [. . .]. He is wasting his time, the boys don't come out when it's raining'. By using the almost endearing term 'the boys' to refer to the IRA, Annie is adopting a Republican point of view. Her reply shows that already as an adolescent she is not only tuned into the discourse of her community, but is also ready to transmit the latter to her younger sister. At the same time, Annie's utterance illustrates her awareness of Belfast's sectarian geography. On her personal 'mental map',³⁴ the area in which she lives with her family is clearly marked out as Catholic territory protected by the IRA. Therefore, she perceives the presence of the British soldier as an invasion. According to the historian Anthony Stewart, people in Northern Ireland carry 'maps of religious geography' in their mind almost from birth, knowing 'which villages, which roads and streets are Catholic, or Protestant, or "mixed"'.³⁵ This also applies to the protagonist, who has no trouble in correctly interpreting the kind of political fighting happening in front of her window. Annie's attempt to stay at a remove from the conflict and her subsequent behaviour is shaped by her immediate environment and this implies that even if young

people take on a marginalised position in the conflict, they are well able to comprehend how it functions.

Annie's experience of political violence is not only illustrated through her interaction with her parents and her younger siblings, but also by means of her awakening interest in boys. The scene in which she encounters her first boyfriend is taken out of Belfast's reality in the 1970s. Riding on a bus, Annie is addressed by the medical student Dino, before the bus gets attacked and burned out. The two adolescents manage to escape and take shelter in a pub where Annie cleans Dino's wounds. The urban space in which the scene takes place is depicted as derelict and maimed by the clashes of the two communities. However, the battleground becomes the scene of the beginning of a romance. The film illustrates the young protagonist's striving for a 'normal' life, with 'normal' teenage preoccupations, such as going out with boys. Nevertheless, the love story between Annie and Dino finishes in a sad way, as he gets arrested for his involvement in the IRA. Being confronted with her boyfriend's detention, Annie has to decide whether to wait for him or not. In this way, Belfast is represented as a place in which peaceful encounters are impossible as the complex political situation enters the very private space of the characters' life.

Music vs. Political Violence: An Alternative Vision of Belfast

In *Good Vibrations* an alienating light is shed on the city of Belfast through the distorted perspective of the protagonist, a marginalised dreamer and music lover, who becomes involved in the arising punk movement. Terri sees himself as a pacifist refusing to support the political aspirations of either community. His apolitical attitude in a place shaped by clashing political allegiances makes him stand out among his fellow citizens. Different from most of his friends, his life is not dominated by politics but by a passion for music. The protagonist is portrayed as a self-marginalised individual due to his different outlook on life and his dedication to a largely ostracised underground music movement. Initially, the punk movement found itself marginalised due to its refusal to follow mainstream music traditions and to adopt conventional societal values. Characterised by loud and fast paced songs, hard-edged melodies and singing style, punk music was often seen as offensive. In addition, frequent anti-establishment lyrics gave the movement a rebellious character.³⁶ Terri's growing enthusiasm for the new music trend reflects his own non-conformist attitude towards the development of Northern Irish society in the 1970s. The non-sectarian and

non-racist nature of punk music echoes Terri's rejections of the increasing ethno-religious divide in the region.

Good Vibrations alternates between the representation of the actual violent reality of the city and the illustration of Terri's imaginary Belfast. The protagonist's 'mental map'³⁷ of the city does not contain a patchwork of Catholic and Protestant areas but is inscribed with bars and pubs where he has listened to famous bands. According to Liam Kennedy, parts of cities are charged with 'emotional and mythical meanings', as well as 'localised stories, images and memories'.³⁸ This applies in particular to the Belfast represented in *Good Vibrations*. Whereas in the minds of most characters the city's urban space is inevitably connected to violent acts – such as bomb explosions and riots – for Terry it is linked to musical events. This difference of perspective is expressed through the juxtaposition of footage of local violence taken from the region's recent history and scenes in which Terry happily listens to music in bars, sometimes being the only customer. In this context, Ralph Willet's statement about the cognitive perceptions of urban complexes springs to mind. Willet argues that a city is always an 'observed and imagined environment'.³⁹ In *Good Vibrations*, the reality of war-torn Belfast – the 'observed environment' – becomes contrasted with the city dreamed of by Terri, which according to Willet would be the 'imagined environment'.⁴⁰

Due to the film's binary structure, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' appears to be a convenient tool for analysis. Developed in order to explore polyvocal novels, this theory is perfectly transferrable to films such as *Good Vibrations*, where different perspectives meet or – in Bakhtin's words – where different 'languages' speak to each other. In this context, 'language' is not seen as 'a system of abstract grammatical categories' but as 'a world view' or 'concrete opinion'.⁴¹ In a polyphonic work, contrasting 'languages' in terms of world views enter a dialogue. According to Bakhtin, the 'dialogisation' of conflicting perspectives allows a questioning of received value systems and traditional societal structures.⁴² In the light of Bakhtin's concept, a polyphonic piece of work goes against a one-sided perception of the world, which would elevate one ideological position over another. Consequently, multi-voiced novels or films reject the adoption of a reductive or one-sided discourse, which would claim to be the 'official' point of view promoted by the media or the establishment.⁴³ In *Good Vibrations*, no hierarchy is created between the Catholic or Protestant perspective. Likewise, the idealistic pacifist approach followed by Terri is not elevated over the more politicised point of view held by his friends. Even if Terri's way of thinking is illustrated as an alternative to violence, the protagonist is not sanctified in the film. Represented as an idealist who

wisely understands that Northern Ireland needs to transgress denominational boundaries, he tends to underestimate the complex functioning of reality and its dangerous implications for his own life.

Following Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, it could be argued that Terri's ideal world enters a 'dialogue' with Belfast's harsh reality. In the same sense, the marginalised punk movement becomes presented as the counterpart of sectarianism. Thus, contrasting voices meet each other, turning *Good Vibrations* into a polyphonic film. An alienating vision of the present violence is reached through the eyes of the protagonist. Terri's existence on the edge of the mainstream is clearly established at the beginning of the film. The action starts with a flashback to the protagonist's childhood, explaining the causes for his unconventional vision of life: Terri loses an eye, when he is hit by an arrow fired by a boy. Due to his new glass eye, he starts seeing the world differently. Before the accident, Terri is depicted as joyfully running through his parent's rose garden, the voice-over telling the spectators: 'Once upon a time in the city of Belfast lived a boy named Terri. [. . .] Everything in Terri's garden was rosy'. Simultaneously, the audience hears the country singer Hank Williams performing the song *I Saw the Light*. Dressed in a white suite and an enormous cowboy hat, Terri's idol hovers over him in a cloud. Played while the protagonist is happily running through the garden, the song suggests that it is actually Terri who 'sees the light'. Thus, *I Saw the Light* emblematically stands for the protagonist's detachment from reality, humorously elevating him to a kind of 'visionary' or 'seer'. As Terri's spiritual father, Williams materialises repeatedly in the form of a ghost throughout the film.

This image of illumination goes in hand with a certain symbolism developing around 'eyes' and the 'capacity of seeing'. Terri's distorted vision due to his glass eye becomes a metaphor for his otherness. The film subversively implies that even with one eye, the protagonist perceives the world around him clearer than his contemporaries. Comprehending the absurdities of sectarian fighting, Terri understands that music has the potential of bringing the two communities together. However, Terri's eye not only takes on a symbolic dimension but it is also used as a source of comic effects. In one scene, for example, the protagonist jokingly takes out his glass eye in order to look through the spy hole of a pub door. In another scene, he drops his eye into a pint of beer in a drunken state. These amusing moments give the film a humorous overtone, which stands in sharp contrast to the footage of the Northern Irish conflict accompanying the entire action.

A series of fast-moving images of Northern Irish history precedes the beginning of the main plot. They document the development of the conflict from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1970s, reaching from harmless festivals and peaceful religious processions to Orange Marches, riots and bomb explosions. In this way, the directors Barros D'Sa and Leyburn establish a direct link between the Northern Irish Troubles and the protagonist's life story. The succession of historical material is followed by a scene in which the adult Terri watches news about exploding bombs in Belfast on TV. Appalled he exclaims: 'What a fucking nightmare!' This simplistic utterance summarises the protagonist's attitude towards the sectarian fighting in Belfast. Terrified by the extent of the tragedy caused by political violence, he refuses to take sides, searching for his own way of coping with the situation. His personal solution is to open a record shop in the midst of the Troubles. His shop becomes a neutral space in which the customers are connected to each other through their passion for music regardless of their political convictions. In order to prevent sectarianism in his shop, Terri warns his friends from both communities with the following words: 'When this shop opens, there has to be no coming round for donations for Republican Prisoners or the Loyal Orange widows'. The terms 'Republican Prisoners' and 'Loyal Orange Widows' are euphemistic designations for actions supported by paramilitary organisations from both political camps. A donation for 'Republican Prisoners' would financially support the IRA as in the same way a contribution to the funds of the 'Loyal Orange Widows' would mean aiding the UDA. Underlining the neutrality of his shop, the protagonist expresses his unwillingness to be manipulated by either side.

Most of the scenes in *Good Vibrations* are set in places which are connected to music: the record shop, bars, pubs or concert halls. These locations stand out against the historical footage showing violent events in troubled Belfast. Through the contrasting depiction of two visions of the same city, Barros D'Sa and Leyburn manage to achieve a 'polyphonic film'⁴⁴ in Bakhtin's sense. The sociologist Rob Shields argues that city representations are 'always a paradoxical project undertaken on shifting ground'. According to Shields, in the imaginary representation of an urban complex 'only some aspects are given to be seen, while others remain out of sight'.⁴⁵ This means that the fictional image of a city is created through the conscious inclusion or exclusion of specific aspects of the urban complex. In *Good Vibrations*, we can observe that more weight is put on the illustration of locations providing the scene for musical events than on places in which violent action happens. Thus, the film takes on an optimistic tone suggesting an alternative discourse to sectarian fighting.

The clash between Terri's imagined 'Belfast of music' and the reality of a war-torn city is illustrated during a punk concert. In the scene, the RUC violently enters the venue in order to carry out searches. The presence of the police is perceived as an invasion of a neutral space dedicated to music. Even if the event appears more like a small-scale riot than a concert, it does not follow a violent aim. The deafening music as well as the chaotic dancing are merely the expression of youthful rebellion against society in general, being entirely disconnected from sectarianism. Through the rough controls carried out by the police, music enthusiasts and musicians find themselves treated as criminals. Infuriated by the scene, Terri shouts at the policeman: 'Excuse me officer, I would like to report a civil war outside!' His utterance underlines the absurdity of the police searches at an inoffensive punk concert in the light of bomb explosions and paramilitary fighting on the streets. When the same policeman asks a girl for her papers, Terri shouts angrily: 'The shooting, the bombing, the intimidation that can all wait while you smell the beer she has just been drinking!' The scene ends with the musicians and the audience making the police leave the bar by singing 'We hate the cops' accompanied by rough punk tunes. Having the power to expel the police from the venue, music is represented as stronger than violence. According to Bakhtin, the questioning of power structures and conceived world-views is the result of 'processes of decentralisation and disunification'.⁴⁶ In *Good Vibrations*, punk music becomes a means with which to express a rebellion against existing societal structures. Inserting an alternative voice into the discourse of the Northern Irish conflict, the directors attempt to 'decentralise' received interpretations of the Troubles.

Fascinated by the emerging punk movement, the protagonist decides to support local punk groups, trying to bring their records out under the label *Good Vibrations*. In order to promote the album of the Derry group The Undertones, Terri flies to London with the intention of negotiating with producers. Despite his initial difficulties in promoting the band, Terri finally accomplishes his mission, as he manages to hand over the band's record to the BBC radio journalist John Peel. Listening to the radio after his return to Belfast, Terri is overwhelmed when Peel plays the record twice in a row, giving The Undertones a considerable amount of publicity. In a kind of euphoric trance, Terri storms out on the street, with his arms open in a Christ like gesture, being illuminated by a ray of light falling from the sky. The ironic twist in the scene is, however, that the light does not come from heaven but from a British army helicopter. This humorous scene of enlightenment goes along with the symbolism of illumination created in scenes in which Hank Williams appears as a *deus ex machina*. Once again,

the reality of the Troubles and the protagonist's idealised Belfast enter a dialogue in a Bakhtinian sense.

The film ends with a punk concert Terri organises in order to raise money for his shop, which is on the verge of going bankrupt. For this event, he singles out the Ulster Hall, a symbolic place, which at the time was the biggest concert hall in Belfast. Thanks to Terri's event, punk music becomes inscribed into Belfast's urban landscape. Advertising posters for the concert are pasted on the walls all over the city, covering sectarian mantras venerating the paramilitaries from both sides. The sociologist Robert Park claims that each separate part of a city is 'stained with the peculiar sentiments of its population'.⁴⁷ This statement applies particularly to Belfast, a city in which specific areas are clearly associated with specific political allegiances. The covering of sectarian slogans with posters for a punk concert is to be seen as a symbolic act through which the city becomes spiritually reunited. Thus, Terri's concert is represented as an event able to cross ethno-religious boundaries. Eventually, the concert does not help to save Terri's record shop as in his general euphoria he lets in everybody for free. However, despite its commercial failure, the show turns out to be a big success on a musical level, the film ending in a scene of jubilation and joy of life, which stands out against the political violence carried out in the streets.

Conclusion

In *Titanic Town* and *Good Vibration* Belfast is illustrated through the alienating perspective of non-mainstream protagonists, through which the audience is encouraged to perceive the Troubles from a singular angle. Gerd Hurm claims that 'fictional city images' are shaped 'by the particular issues chosen for treatment'.⁴⁸ In this sense, we could argue that thanks to the viewpoint of individuals living on the margins of society, Belfast receives a specific perspective. These alternative perceptions of the city provided by *Titanic Town* and *Good Vibrations* considerably differ from the visions of the Troubles traditionally rendered in films on the Northern Irish conflict.

In *Titanic Town*, Roger Michell employs the perspective of an adolescent girl in order to illustrate political violence from a new angle. The protagonist's vision stands out against the habitual depiction of the Troubles from an adult point of view. The film suggests that even if young people take on a detached position in the conflict, they are already tuned into the local sectarian discourse at an early age and able to interpret the violent events happening in their direct environment. Through the use of

humour and irony, the film subversively depicts the influence of political unrest on the life of young people. In line with Bakhtin, who argues that laughter is vital to see the world realistically,⁴⁹ Michell aims at the derision of established authorities in order to tackle received visions of the Troubles.

In *Good Vibrations*, Belfast is perceived through the eyes of an apolitical idealist. Consistent with Bakhtin, the directors manage to create a multi-voiced film. In *Good Vibrations* 'centripetal forces', which according to Bakhtin provoke a 'socio-political and cultural centralization', are replaced by 'centrifugal forces' aiming at the narrative deconstruction of established value systems.⁵⁰ Through the central theme of the upcoming underground punk movement, Belfast is represented as a place offering more than one way of handling the Troubles. With ironic detachment, music is subversively illustrated as an alternative to sectarianism.

The innovative light both films shed on the clashes of the two ethno-religious communities by means of their atypical protagonists gives rise to original readings of the political situation. Providing an alienating perspective on the region, *Titanic Town* and *Good Vibrations* present the conflict from a defamiliarising and non-partisan point of view. In so doing, they draw their audiences into an intense engagement with the realities of the region's politics and its daily ration of political violence and lead them to adopt new ways of seeing life in Northern Ireland which go well beyond the obvious and the established clichés.

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