

**Research Space**

Journal article

**Reclaiming the Irish border in contemporary cinema**

**Fox, K.**

## Abstract

Surprisingly, given the range of films covering the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland there appears to be a dearth of analysis on the representation of the Irish border in indigenous and Hollywood/British cinematic narratives. Among a range of film examples, this analysis focuses on the work of Shane Connaughton, author/screenwriter of border films *The Playboys* (Mackinnon, 1992) and *The Run of the Country* (Yates, 1995) shot in the 1990s, before the Belfast Agreement (1998). Both films provide a rich representation of how the border impacts on the lives of those who exist on either side of the divide. Since the Belfast Agreement and the disappearance of border posts and army barracks across the region, movement has been transformed, as have representations of crossing over. This analysis proposes that in Johnny Gogan's post Belfast Agreement films, *Mapmaker* (2001) and *Black Ice* (2013) and Brian Deane's short film, *Volkswagen Joe* (2013) the representations of the border's liminal spaces embrace in-betweenness as a key element of borderlander identity. In doing so, these films help to reclaim the border as a landscape where people dwell rather than an abstract line on a map.

## Reclaiming the Irish border in contemporary cinema

Ken Fox

### Drawing the line, fixing the boundaries

Border regions throughout the world are spaces and places of contestation and conflict but also meeting points. The Mexican-American border is probably the ur-text in terms of filmic representations and scholarly research on borders. Gloria Anzaldúa's<sup>1</sup> seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera: the new Mestiza* provides a provocative and inspiring template for borderlanders everywhere. Anzaldúa's book helps the reader understand how the liminal existence of border dwellers need not lead to despair but can be productive as people learn to develop a tolerance for contradiction and ambiguity. Naficy<sup>2</sup> raises a cautionary note about the way in which the universal adoption of Anzaldúa's view of border consciousness can gloss over the range of factors that might be indicative of specific borderland context.

Since their widely received formulation by Anzaldúa (1987), borderland consciousness and theory have been romanticized, universalized and co-opted by ignoring the specific dislocatory and conflictual historical and territorial grounds that produces them.

The border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has its own set of historical and territorial contexts and is once again a recurring news item in the coverage of Brexit<sup>3</sup>. The history and geography of the Irish border provides the raw material for fiction, non-fiction, poetry, travel writing, television and film stories. The novels and non-fiction of Shane Connaughton, best known for his screenplay work on *My Left Foot* (Sheridan, 1989), author of *The Playboy* (Mackinnon, 1992) and *The Run of the Country* (Yates, 1995) both filmed in the 1990s, before the Belfast Agreement<sup>4</sup> (1998), provide a rich representation of how the border impacts on the lives of those who exist on either side of the divide. Films such as Neil Jordan's debut *Angel* (1982), *Cal* (O'Connor, 1984), *Eat the Peach* (Ormrod, 1986) *High Boot Benny* (Comerford, 1994), *Crossmaheart* (Herbert, 1998), *Divorcing Jack* (Caffrey, 1998), *Mapmaker* (Gogan, 2001) *Puckoon* (Ryan, 2002), *Middletown* (Kirk, 2005), *Breakfast on Pluto* (Jordan, 2005), *Trapped* (Cantwell, 2008), *Black Ice* (Gogan, 2013) and the short film *Volkswagen Joe* (Deane, 2013) constitute a group of films where the border figures in the narrative with varying degrees of significance.

The mediation of the border landscape by these filmmakers is clearly at the service of their narratives but in making choices about what to shoot and how to shoot it they give prominence to certain ways of viewing the terrain, what might be termed regimes of vision, that reveal as well as conceal the border's (in)visibility. These choices impact on how audiences make sense of the narrative but also provide an impression of how border places and people are represented and imbricated with story.

As Hamid Naficy<sup>5</sup> points out:

Border consciousness comes from being situated at the border, where multiple determinants of race, class, gender and membership in divergent, even antagonistic, historical and national identities intersect. As a result, border consciousness, like exilic liminality, is theoretically against binarism and duality and for a third optique, which is multiperspectival and tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence and chaos.

It would be a struggle to fit the films focused on here into Naficy's notion of "accented cinema" but what many of these films do is attempt to represent the idea of border consciousness and, to some extent, border identity, as one that is "tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence and chaos."

The border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is, according to most estimates, 310 miles long with over 208 crossing points.<sup>6</sup> During the conflict in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, through the 1970s and 80s and well in to the 90s the border became more visible through police and army check points, large border outposts, the destruction of hundreds of unapproved crossing points and the campaign of violence that plagued the border regions. Irish film scholars including Martin McLoone<sup>7</sup>, Brian McIlroy<sup>8</sup>, Ruth Barton<sup>9</sup>, and John Hill<sup>10</sup> have focused on thematic elements such as rural life, landscape, politics, identity and religion, incorporating most of the films listed above as part of their insightful analysis. However, the significance of the border setting as part of the films' narrative and its presence as a recurring theme has not been covered as thoroughly as one might expect.

In assessing the significance of the border in the narrative of these films the categories of place (border) as backdrop, character, and metaphor<sup>11</sup> will be used. The focus will be on films that have had a cinematic release, so this precludes material shot for television. There have been some very powerful television fictions dealing with the border and although the boundaries between film and television (streaming services) is blurring these representations do not form part of the analysis.<sup>12</sup>

The Irish border poses its own geographical, social, economic, political and emotional problems and filmic and other cultural representations of life in a border community illuminates that specific landscape with varying degrees of insight. There is a significant difference that comes with the geography of small town existence on or near the border. Some of these representations share common tropes with general depictions of life in a small Irish town; the ennui of teenagers, the lack of privacy, and the desire to escape, but the ominous presence of the border adds a different dimension and enhances the precarity of characters' lives, actions and attitudes. There may not be a coherence in terms of narrative or form to these border films but analysing the significance of the border in the narratives in terms of backdrop, character and metaphor the analysis hopes to highlight shared ways of representing and viewing the border and borderland identities. What these films have in common is the struggle to deal with the Irish border and their construction of a landscape that affects deeply the attitudes and actions of the characters. Since the Partition of Ireland in 1921<sup>13</sup>, the establishment of the Boundary Commission in 1925<sup>14</sup> and the current debate about customs and movement between Northern Ireland (no longer in the EU after 31 December, 2020) and the Republic of Ireland (still an EU member), there is a sense that the border area, while it exists powerfully within political and cultural discourse, is often forgotten as a landscape where people dwell.

The focus on how the border figures in a growing number of films as well as analysing the extent to which the divide is central to the films' narratives points to an attempt to reclaim the landscape for borderlanders in all its chaos and complexity. In films such as *Accelerator* (Murphy, 2001), the border is used as a backdrop, a geographical setting to pass through. In others, such as *Trapped*, *Run of the Country*, *Puckoon*, *Black Ice*, *The Playboys*, *Volkswagen Joe*, the border landscape works like another character. The narrative stays on or near the border and one might argue the narrative arises out of the landscape, and the actions and attitudes of the characters are shaped by the border terrain. In *Puckoon*, *Trapped*, *Volkswagen Joe*, and *Mapmaker*, the border setting also work metaphorically; representing conflict, difference, criminality, confinement, loyalty and betrayal, loss and decay and, on rare occasions, escape

and commonality. These border functions of backdrop, character and metaphor are not mutually exclusive.

The chronological categorisation of these films as pre and post Belfast Agreement figures as part of their analysis. This agreement, signed by the British and Irish governments, and representatives of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social, Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the Alliance Party and the Progressive Unionist Party. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which later became the largest Unionist Party, did not support the agreement. However, the Belfast Agreement enabled the dismantling of the security infrastructure around the border and opened free movement that reconnected people, places and spaces. As Ferriter<sup>15</sup> notes:

The Belfast Agreement also alluded to the relevance of joint UK and Irish membership of the EU and with the peace process ... What also made the EU dimension significant was the importance of open borders to the overall EU project and the perception of the EU as being 'neutral' regarding Northern Ireland.

The Brexit vote on June 23, 2016, and the eventual Withdrawal Agreement of the United Kingdom from the European Union, enacted on January 31, 2020 has raised a whole series of questions about the future visibility or invisibility of the border as it becomes the land frontier between the UK and the European Union. Once again, the border is constructed as a problem space and the people who live on or near the border may face a return to some degree of restriction in their daily movements over and back across that line on the map that had faded to a faint mark.

### **Does anyone know which side we are on?**

An internet search of the Irish border will provide countless documentaries and news reports about the border's current invisibility. One of the most powerful interventions has come from actor Stephen Rea in a lyrical, short film, *Cry from the Border*, shot and written by Clare Dwyer Hogg<sup>16</sup>, which skewers the ignorance of certain British politicians about what it is like to live in the border area and the benefits to peoples' wellbeing the frictionless border has produced. County Monaghan, in the Irish Republic, has a county boundary which bulges north and borders counties in Northern Ireland, Fermanagh to the West, Tyrone directly North and Armagh to the east. Within a short journey a traveller can criss-cross the border numerous times without being fully aware of what side of the line they are travelling. This meandering illustrates the absurdity of the border as an enforceable frontier unless there is a return to the pre-Belfast Agreement days when unapproved roads were destroyed by the British Army and there were a limited number of approved crossing points.

A film representation that captures this absurdity is *Puckoon*, based on Spike Milligan's 1963 comic novel of the same name. Although set in the 1920s in the fictional border town of Puckoon, the production was probably only possible in a post Belfast Agreement world. In one scene the boundary commissioners use a large pencil which they fight over, to draw the incoherent line on a map that becomes the border. For the town of *Puckoon*, this means the border runs through the graveyard and much dark humour follows as corpses must be reanimated to secure passports to cross the border to be buried. Although further along the absurdity continuum than the reality of real border divisions the book and the film portray the surreal experience of living in a landscape divided by a line on a map. *Puckoon* is one of the

few border films that stray into the comedy genre and while Milligan's book and the film version highlight the absurdity of lines on maps the humour is acerbic, slapstick, but overwhelmingly benign.

If borders are meeting points, they are also highly contested sites where characters are forced to take sides, where identities are proclaimed but also challenged. Republican or Loyalist, Catholic or Protestant, but what of the shared identity of the borderlander? Nash and Reid<sup>17</sup> in their study of border communities suggest "... the border and all its inconveniences and more serious effects has created a shared sense of borderland identities." They go on to identify how:

This shared sense of isolation and wider misunderstanding, shared experience of the negative impacts of the border, and shared resourcefulness among those who have lived with the border may be the basis for senses of commonality that both cross the border and crosscut the boundaries of conventional categories of identity. The use of terms such as 'border people' or 'borderlander' suggests the recognition of shared experience as the basis for a sense of collective identity.

### **As tangled as bushes**

There is some evidence of the shared identity of borderlanders in Shane Connaughton's *Border Diary*<sup>18</sup>, a fascinating account of his experiences as writer/observer on the set of *Run of the Country*, the film based on his book. Filmed around the border regions of Cavan/Monaghan/Fermanagh the novel is set in the 1950s but updated to the present in the film. Connaughton's observations identify the feeling of hope emerging from the IRA ceasefire in 1994<sup>19</sup>, that was a prelude to the Belfast Agreement. In his diary, lively descriptions of scenes being filmed and the impotence of the writer in the face of a very experienced director, Peter Yates, and the film's leading man, Albert Finney, are punctuated with conversations with locals and visitors about whether the ceasefire will hold. The responses are mainly positive with a growing sense of awareness that talking must take over from violence as a way forward. Connaughton also captures the bitterness of the violence in the region in his phrase ... "All along the border the land is fertilized by blood"<sup>20</sup>. This echoes the title of novelist Colm Tóibín's nonfiction book *Bad Blood*<sup>21</sup> about walking the border in 1988 when murder linked with the conflict was an almost daily occurrence. There are very few signs of optimism in Tóibín's account, but Connaughton's book, on the cusp of a lasting ceasefire, suggests borderlanders will abide. Perhaps it is to do with the very land itself and how, despite the border, this drumlin country of Cavan, Fermanagh, Monaghan is, as Connaughton<sup>22</sup> suggests, "... as tangled as bushes."

Updating the novel to the contemporary setting for the film is powerful in terms of border representation as the sense of fragility about the ceasefire is heightened. Several of the film's key scenes take place on or near the border. Patrons from an illegal cockfight held in a field escape the arrival of the Gardai by crossing the river which is also the border. One of those fleeing is Danny (Matt Keeslar), the teenage son of the local Garda sergeant (Albert Finney). Their fractured relationship is at the centre of the film's narrative and is widened after the sudden death of Danny's mother. This intensifies Danny's sense of grievance against his father's conservative ways and his desire to escape the family home emptied of laughter and solace by his mother's death. Danny's mentor in his rejection of his father's ways is Prunty, "Coco" (Anthony Brophy), who schools him on sex, fighting, smuggling and turf cutting. Crossing points with army checkpoints detail the rituals of border life pre-Belfast Agreement.

Intimidation by surveillance is evident in the scene where Coco warns Danny as they pass through a British Army border checkpoint. Coco gestures at the nearby watchtower, “They can pick up anything you say.” This call to “say nothing” is repeated several times in the film when questions about the IRA are raised, “say nothing, until you hear more”, Danny is instructed. When Danny becomes involved with a girl, Annagh Lee (Victoria Smurfit) from north of the border, he goes through a check point on his bicycle to get to Annagh’s house. This physical boundary does not seem to get in the way of their relationship; however, it becomes clear Danny is being watched and his movements noted. When Danny, Annagh and Coco go swimming in one of the border lakes they are buzzed by a British Army helicopter that lingers in voyeuristic fashion. Borderlanders know the whop-whop of helicopter blades usually bring their own sonic and material disturbances and although it is an overused cinematic trope from Vietnam war movies it is employed here to good effect, a brief appearance but a lingering presence. The helicopter’s appearance is a presage to the major act of violence in the film which follows; an explosion, viewed at some distance by our young protagonist that kills two SAS undercover operatives at Coco’s farm.

In *Run of the Country* the border landscape is the backdrop, but it also works like a character, where it affects the attitudes and actions of the human characters. The narrative arises out of the location, so it has a significance well beyond providing the mise-en-scene for the action. As McNab<sup>23</sup> writes in one of the few reviews to mention the border location:

*Run of the Country* is as much preoccupied with landscape as character. This is underlined by much of the film’s loving representation of the Irish countryside but also by occasional bursts of self-conscious dialogue about the way the earth moulds and absorbs those who dwell on it.

With the previous success of *The Playboys*, with two well-known Hollywood actors, Robin Wright and Aidan Quinn, playing the love interest, it was in the hope of securing the American market that Matt Keeslar, from Wisconsin, was chosen for the leading role in *Run of the Country* and grapple, mostly unsuccessfully, with the border accent. Although there is a tendency in *The Playboys* and *Run of the Country* to conform to what Hill<sup>24</sup> identifies as a nostalgic pastoralism, this is undercut by other narrative threads that focus much more attention on the difficulties posed by living in a border landscape.

Annagh’s family are Protestant, from north of the border, Danny is Catholic, from the south, and it is this divide that ultimately ends her liaison with him. He suffers the consequences of crossing over as he is tarred and feathered for his transgression. This symbolic divide between almost near neighbours is recognition of what many commentators still believe is the most difficult aspect of border relations to alter; the mindset, almost twenty years after the disappearance of the material border. As Nash and Reid<sup>25</sup> observe:

While the border has changed dramatically in response to the ceasefires of the mid-1990s, the experiences of the Troubles in the borderlands in Ireland and Northern Ireland has left an underlying legacy of division, grief, anger and mistrust that people say does not surface directly in their dealings with each other but will take a long time to dispel completely. As Michael Doherty comments: ‘The border issue, it’s live, it’s a big issue. But the physical parts of it are gone now . . . it’s the mindsets that are still here.

The rural killings in the border regions as well as the broader urban based violence of the conflict has left a society still coming to terms with all this bad blood. The impact of the conflict and other social, economic and geographical factors on the mental health of the population has produced for many a mindset of despair. According to a report in the *Guardian* (February 20,

2018) by Northern Ireland correspondent Henry MacDonald<sup>26</sup>, more people have taken their own lives since the Belfast Agreement, 4,500 is the current estimate, than were killed during the time of the conflict, 1969 to 1997. Dr Iris Elliott<sup>27</sup>, of the Mental Health Foundation summed up the ongoing struggle in the following quote reported in MacDonald's article: "We cannot achieve a peaceful society in Northern Ireland without peaceful minds." A frictionless border has helped in the healing process amongst borderlanders but a return to some measure of restriction, no matter how slight, may well open old wounds.

*The Playboys* (Mackinnon, 1992), also written by Shane Connaughton, can be viewed as a companion piece to *Run of the Country*. The same border village in the Republic, Redhills, was used as a location with Albert Finney, once again, playing the local Garda sergeant. The film is set in 1957 and Finney, although he plays a different character to *Run of the Country*, both are moulded from the same repressed clay. Robin Wright plays Tara Maguire, a young woman made pregnant but unwilling to give up the identity of the father to the local priest and her hectoring neighbours. One of those suspected, a local farmer named Micky (Adrian Dunbar), declares in an early scene his love for Tara at night in the pouring rain, fuelled by whiskey. He is rebuffed by Tara and led away by the Sergeant from his drunken declaration. In the following scene we find him with a group of local men pulling the bodies of two of Mickey's cows from the swollen river, as the rain beats down. The sombre scene is underscored by the film's lighting and the way the exterior world reflects the desperation of Micky's interior world. In despair, he rigs a shotgun and commits suicide as the rain continues to envelop the town and the countryside in its dank shroud. The opening tone of the film does not suggest the story will take this bleak turn. "The rain drove him crazy" declares a child standing near the body and this is answered by another who says, "His cows was dying", and "He had no wife, that's why." It is a short scene, but it captures elements often overlooked when the lush green of the Irish countryside is represented on film. The inclement weather, scraping a living from the land and loneliness help create the conditions for mental health problems, particularly in young men. "It's not bad on a good day but it's no good on a bad day" is how Tara sums up the terrain as she and Tom (Aidan Quinn) row out on one of the countryside's many lakes. This section of the film highlights another recurring feature of the representation of borderland space and place, what Patrick Sheehan<sup>28</sup> identifies as the powerful links between a mythologised, so-called Irish sense of place and how it relates "... to death rather than life." This theme emerges in the film and those that follow but also a questioning of the received idea about the intensity of the relationship between Irishness and sense of place.

*The Playboys* has an IRA sub-plot, and scenes of smuggling across the border by the resourceful Tara, but at its centre is the arrival of a troupe of travelling players from Dublin who set up their tent and perform for the local community. In most reviews the border setting is hardly mentioned but once again the border landscape lies at the heart of the narrative. Smuggling helps Tara and her sister Brigid (Niamh Cusack) survive, but her growing affection for Tom releases her from the strictures of small-town life. In the final scene, she takes her baby and heads off with Tom and the troupe of players. What separates this tale from many others invoking the lure of the metropolis and the narrow world-view of small-town life is Tara's sense of agency. She will not be shamed by priest or neighbours about the child she is raising out of wedlock, a scandal of epic proportions in small town Ireland of the 1950s. She resists the overtures of the Sergeant and the unfortunate Micky as she declares she does not love them. She smuggles goods across the border, driving the narrow country lanes and evading capture by Northern Ireland customs and the Garda. As Tom, her new partner, has been injured in a fracas with the Sergeant and has his arm in a sling, Tara sits astride the motorbike as Tom



lowers himself into the sidecar where he holds the baby. They head out of town with the travelling players to an uncertain future but with Tara clearly in charge.

In contrast to the male rite of passage in *Run of the Country*, *The Playboys* focuses on how the young woman takes on and defeats small town conventions, social mores and more impressively the imperial power of the Catholic Church to fashion her own life and the life of her child. The border landscape shapes her character, her attitude and her actions and contributes significantly to the other narrative threads involving the troupe's players, smuggling and the IRA sub-plot. Metaphorically, her willingness to transgress is symbolised as much by her cross-border smuggling as her determination to stay unmarried despite the birth of her child.

The regimes of visibility for the border crossing are much more evident in *Run of the Country* as it is set in the mid-1990s. Army checkpoints, armed soldiers, and pervasive surveillance make the border visible. In *The Playboys*, it is the mobile customs patrols and some signs welcoming drivers to Northern Ireland that makes the border visible as Tara does her smuggling runs. However, there is a sense that the border is so porous that smuggling is made legitimate by the lie of the land and the labyrinthine nature of small roads criss-crossing the border. Both films are shot in the same region and the presence of drumlins, low undulating hills that run in a band along the Irish border west to east, are another sign of border visibility.

### **How do I get out of here? How do I return?**

A drumlin landscape presents very particular challenges for those who live among these undulating hills. In the short stories of William Trevor<sup>29</sup>, for example, *The Ballroom of Romance* (1972) shot as a television drama by Pat O'Connor for RTE, (the Irish State Broadcaster) in 1982<sup>30</sup>, and *The Hill Bachelors*, the sense of loneliness and the feeling of being left behind is captured in Trevor's beautifully restrained prose that without sentimentality outlines the impact of solitude on his characters. Garret Carr's<sup>31</sup> walk along the Irish border, chronicled in *The Rule of the Land* makes explicit the links between border topography and the sense of isolation that is a feature of Trevor's writing.

A landscape shaped for loneliness ... In Trevor's vision the drumlins divide us, not because they helped create the border but because each small hill is a world upon itself, with only one farm, one family. Homesteads are dotted on the other hills around but each is kept apart and tends to look inwards.

Carr<sup>32</sup> writes of his encounters with these drumlin dwellers. "There are such people around still. I meet them on the border, on lanes or fields, looking towards the horizon from the edge of their land .... These borderlanders say hello in a way that makes you aware it is also a goodbye."

The atmosphere of suspicion identified by Carr (2017) pervades most border films, even those set in the post Belfast Agreement era. Johnny Gogan's *Mapmaker* (2001) has the border at the heart of the film, symbolically and narratively. *Mapmaker* is a brave film willing to take on weighty issues to do with the impact of the border on the lives of the film's main characters, however, the narrative used to support this freight is rather predictable and over-determined. Working in the same thematic domain as Brian Friel's brilliant stage play, *Translations*<sup>33</sup>, Richie Markey (Brian F. O'Byrne), a Dublin based cartographer, arrives in a small town of Rosveagh, on the Northern Ireland side of the border. In what should be the optimistic setting of a post Belfast Agreement border beauty spot, Owen McPolin's cinematography uses the border landscape as a key character, with the narrative arising from the location and the attitudes and actions of the characters shaped by the terrain.

The sensation of being in a border place where memories and bodies are buried, the present haunted by the past, is conveyed to good effect by McPolin's cinematography. Richie makes his maps with a video camera and GPS satellite link and the shift in perception from eyesight to video view as his mapping instrument surveys the land makes strange the narrow lanes and ancient paths. This forensic vision leads to the discovery of the body of a missing local man by Richie. Although much of the film follows Richie as he walks through lush green countryside, wooded valleys and limestone outcrops, there is a sense that those who live on the land who Richie encounters are hostile to his map making. Richie becomes aware of rivalries between townlands, tensions over place names and land grabbing by the forestry company run by Robert Bates (Brendan Coyle). The desecration of ancient burial sites accentuates the bloodied character of the landscape as it gives up one of the town's dark secrets, the corpse of Peter Nolan, a supposed informer, to Richie's camera gaze. Those who are willing to erase ancient burial sites, the materiality of past presences in the landscape, are linked with other forms of erasure in the recent past. This ties in with the recurring theme in *The Playboys* and *Trapped*, echoing the sentiment of Patrick Sheehan's<sup>34</sup> debunking of the Irish sense of place: "For while we Irish credit ourselves with a strong sense of place, the places themselves are left to rack and ruin."

The film confronts the bad blood of border violence and focuses attention on how the landscape of the border region holds and reveals its secrets. Jane Bates (Susan Lynch) wife of Robert, is a broadly sympathetic character, but she has knowledge of the murder and disappearance of Peter Nolan. Her brother, Dawson Bates, a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) was gunned down a decade earlier near the family home. Nolan, a close childhood friend of Dawson, despite their different religious backgrounds, is disappeared in retaliation. Jane is haunted by both deaths and tries to redeem her actions by saving Richie when Robert decides he also needs to be erased. A flashback to the childhood of Peter and his friend Dawson before the film's final scene sees them running in the landscape near the grotto featured in the opening credits. This pre-lapsarian interlude rather heavy-handedly focuses attention on how the violence done to Dawson, and Peter in retribution, is not because of the land, but by forces that are human, flawed and vengeful.

The division over the land's use puts the landscape itself at the heart of the film. The film ends on a more upbeat note than one might have expected given the revelations in the final scenes. The idea of the map designed by Richie, bringing communities together is a kind of wish fulfilment that has a stronger currency in the post-Belfast Agreement world. Richie's identification as a Quaker, not Protestant or Catholic, makes the optimistic denouement more narratively plausible, and in the spirit of the bringing borderlanders together strikes an optimistic note. While the land itself is still a source of dispute, the film reaffirms the idea that the identity of the borderlander can produce commonality as well as difference. The film's final scene has the people who live around the border visible in literal and metaphoric terms by enabling them to walk on the map of the district Richie has made and projected on the floor of the Town Hall.

Themes of escape and return re-surfaces in Johnny Gogan's *Black Ice* where the central characters are caught up in a road racing drama that uses the back lanes of the border region for their night-time competitions. As O'Connell<sup>35</sup> notes: "... the back roads of the border region of Northern Ireland resemble a maze dotted with traps, preventing escape." Gogan captures the vernacular geography of small-town border life with great precision. The roadside garages, the local café and pub, the interminable wait at the bus stop to escape village life. *Black Ice* and *Mapmaker* were shot in County Leitrim, one of the least populated and most underdeveloped

counties in the Republic of Ireland. Leitrim shares a border with Fermanagh in Northern Ireland. Pre-Belfast Agreement the closure of border crossings blighted the economy on both sides of the border. The repercussions of this underdevelopment are still evident in *Black Ice*, set fifteen years after the Belfast Agreement. The local quarry provides employment in the local area, but fear of its closure haunts the community, as a character states: "It will kill the town." The night-time quarry is also the site young racers take their cars to exhibit their prowess behind the wheel. Crossing the border at high speed brings the attention of the Garda as well as the PSNI as the adrenaline rush of possible pursuit fills the emptiness of teenage small-town border lives. Like *Trapped*, *Accelerator*, and *Mapmaker*, *Black Ice* suggests escape from the border landscape is difficult to achieve. The roads meander and journeys become circular; you end up back in the place you started.

Alice (Jane McGrath), is the central character in *Black Ice* who returns to her hometown near the Republic side of the border for the funeral of a friend Carole (Roisin Scully). Carole is the second victim of a high-speed crash, the first being Alice's brother Tom (Dermot Murphy). Alice feels responsible for the crash because of her involvement with 'bad boy' Jimmy Devlin (Killian Scott) and the film recounts the events leading up to the accident. However, the character of Alice takes control of the narrative in the final section with a plan to seek retribution from Jimmy who now spends most of his time north of the border. The film ends with Alice leaving town on the bus, but it is on her own terms. Like Tara in *The Playboys*, Alice's sense of agency is one of the few instances in the range of border films analysed where women confront the patriarchal culture of small-town life. Alice, with her expertise behind the wheel, in a story about petrol-heads most often associated with masculinity, and Tara as she takes charge of the motorbike at the end of *The Playboys*. These instances stand out in a group of films where males dominate, little attention is given to women on the border who assert agency and engage in the internal and external struggle for equality. The border metaphor has many dimensions and the presence of women in active roles is one that requires further research.

The pervading sense of being trapped between two competing mindsets is evident in *Volkswagen Joe* (Deane, 2013), a short film, adapted from a play by Cavan playwright Brendan McCann. Set in a border town in the Republic in 1981 the narrative focuses on Joe (Stuart Graham), a mechanic who services cars for both sides of the political divide. He is passionate about his work and tries to maintain a middle-ground in his dealings with customers of all political persuasion. It is the cars that Joe cares about not the green or orange inflection of the customer. He does not service police or military vehicles but his restoration of a vintage Volkswagen for the local RUC inspector, Sam Johnson (John Delaney) and his repair contract with the Vintage Club brings trouble in the form of an IRA member looking to enhance his reputation. Joe can no longer maintain his neutrality and must decide between being named as a collaborator or a murderer. Rather than delivering a bomb to the RUC inspector in the restored Volkswagen, Joe chooses to sacrifice himself.

In *Volkswagen Joe*, the highly visible border of 1981 demands that sides are taken. The film opens with the foreboding news that Joe's mother needs a nursing home and Patrick Jordan's cinematography captures with great economy the sense of emptiness Joe feels on the journey to drop her off at the home. As Joe pulls away in his jeep with his mother in the passenger seat, towing an old Volkswagen Beetle, the frame holds on the entrance to his mother's terraced house. In shot is a small garden, unkempt and neglected, and leaning against the garden wall an ironing board with pieces of the cloth burned through showing evidence of Joe's mother's dementia. After he leaves his mother at the nursing home, he retires the old Volkswagen to the breaker's yard. The border landscape provides the backdrop, the environment shapes the

attitudes and actions of the characters and the narrative arises from the place. The narrowness of the country roads, the representation of neighbours as being on different sides is shown through the language and gesture of power and control.

Shots are often framed through car windscreens, twitching curtains, or half opened doors. Joe drives the restored Volkswagen but sacrifices himself rather than deliver the bomb. Metaphorically, the border works as a symbol for self-sacrifice but Joe's readiness to die rather than be an accomplice in a murder suggests that shared humanity overcomes ideological or religious hatred.

The film works as an exercise in community building and a way of tackling the corrosive silence that can surround the aftermath of violence in the border region. The film's director, Brian Deane<sup>36</sup>, comments:

The film explores the polarising of people and communities during The Troubles. It was important for us to make a film that offered a balanced view of conflict without casting judgement on either side.

### **Conclusion: It is not just a line on a map, it is where people live**

The analysis of how the border functions in contemporary Irish cinema reveals several reoccurring themes matched with regimes of vision around the visibility/invisibility of the border. The categories of backdrop, character and metaphor set out how the films representation of the border's liminal space/place works to reclaim it as a peopled landscape; as a site that proclaims borderlanders in the process of grappling with notions of identity. This does not suggest a single identity but rather a shared understanding of how to live and survive among the border's drumlins, lakes and rain; how to carry on in a soil full of the hauntings of bad blood in a place distant from the centres of power but often in the news as the Irish border problem. As Barton suggests '... .. within the Ireland that contemporary cinema evokes, place is increasingly contingent. Who may make their own space in the national space and how they do is a fraught dynamic that calls in to play factors of class, gender and race.'<sup>37</sup>

The films' representation of the border's liminality foregrounds the links between a sense of place and death, where the absences and presence of those lives claimed during the Troubles haunt the relationship between characters and their surrounding environment. However, there is also evidence that in post Belfast Agreement films, such as *Mapmaker*, *Black Ice* there is an attempt at reconciliation and crucially the representation of the normalisation of a frictionless border.

As Nash<sup>38</sup> observes:

This border stemmed from the partition of Ireland in 1921 and, unsurprisingly, its subsequent meanings have been deeply entangled with the radically and often violently opposed perspectives of on the legitimacy of Northern Ireland and the political reunification of the island. As a line on a map, it stands for the long and complex political history that led to partition and for the political geography of the island since then. Yet many of those who have lived and continue to live on or near the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic – often known as borderlanders – the border is not only a symbolically loaded political boundary but also a presence that impacts on everyday life as it is experienced on the ground.

In the period of uncertainty that borderlanders in Ireland face over the next few years it will be interesting to see how filmic representation develops. Will there be many more films that add to the border repertoire and what genre will dominate? The production costs of making an Irish film on or near the border militate against indigenous productions so it is much to the credit of filmmakers such as Johnny Gogan and Brian Deane that they were able to secure funding and complete their films. The worldwide success of *Game of Thrones*<sup>39</sup> with key locations in Northern Ireland has given a tremendous boost to the creative and tourist economy, but this dividend is more difficult to translate into home grown film productions<sup>40</sup>.

The focus on how the border functions as backdrop, character and metaphor within the narratives of these films highlights the possible transformative power of cinema. As McIlroy<sup>41</sup> states: "... it gives us the possibility of crossing over not only barriers of gender and race, but also those of politics." Like *Mapmaker*, *Black Ice*, *The Playboys*, *Run of the Country*, and *Volkswagen Joe*, will border films of the future seek to give voice to ambiguity and contradiction following the template set out for borderlanders by Anzaldua and hope that the invisible, frictionless border that currently exists leaves us in a contented state of not being sure which side of the line we are on.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the new Mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> The British Exit – Brexit – refers to the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. A public vote (known as a referendum) was held in June 2016, when 17.4 million people opted for Brexit. This gave the Leave side 52%, compared with 48% for Remain. The UK formally left the EU on 31 January 2020. While the UK has agreed the terms of its EU departure, both sides still need to decide what their future relationship will look like. This will need to be worked out during the transition period (which some prefer to call the implementation period), which began immediately after Brexit day and is due to end on 31 December 2020. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32810887>, accessed on 27/04/20).

<sup>4</sup> The Belfast Agreement is also known as the Good Friday Agreement, because it was reached on Good Friday, 10 April 1998. It was a peace agreement between the British and Irish governments, and most of the political parties in Northern Ireland, on how Northern Ireland should be governed.

<sup>5</sup> Naficy, 2001, p.33.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Hutton, "Ireland has 208 border crossing, officials from North and South agree", in *Irish Times*, Thursday, April 26, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Brian McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland*, British Columbia: Steveston Press, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2004.

Ruth Barton, *Irish Cinema in the twenty-first century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> John Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics*, London: British Film Institute, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Fox, "Space/Place", in Philip Simpson and Rebecca Pearson (eds), *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 411-15.

<sup>12</sup> As a borderlander, brought up in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, 4 miles from the border with Beleek, Co. Fermanagh, the power of television drama struck home when we watched as a family, Radio Telefis Eireann's (RTE, the Republic of Ireland state broadcaster) production of Eugene McCabe's trilogy of television plays titled "Victims" (1973) made up of, "Cancer", "Heritage" and "Siege". McCabe, one of the great borderland writers, is author of "Death and the Nightingales" (1992), adapted in three parts for BBC Northern Ireland, 2018. See Martin McLoone's "Film, Television and The Troubles: A Troubles Archive Essay", Arts Council of

---

Northern Ireland, 2009, for a detailed list of television representations of The Troubles that include some border dramas.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Nash, Byronie Reid and Brian Graham, *Partitioned Lives: The Irish Borderlands*, Surrey, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, p. 1.

“The establishment of the border in 1921 followed the Government of Ireland Act (1920) and the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921) which ended the Anglo-Irish War (1919-20) and gave dominion status to a new Irish Free State composed of 26 of the 32 counties of Ireland and, in response to Unionist resistance to Irish independence, established Northern Ireland as a political entity governed by a Unionist majority in Belfast, under British state authority. The border is thus fundamental to the existence of Northern Ireland, and like the political status of that polity, it remains deeply contested.”

<sup>14</sup> Nash, 2013, p. 17.

Provision was made, under Article 12 of the 1920 Act for a Boundary Commission that would arbitrate on the future status of the border that would be drawn in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants in so far as these were compatible with (undefined) economic and geographical conditions. The Commission’s work was nearing completion when its findings were leaked to a Tory newspaper, *The Morning Post*, in November 1925. As a result, no exact details of its recommendations was made public ... the outcome of the Boundary Commission work was the maintenance of the status quo.”

<sup>15</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Border: the legacy of a century of Anglo-Irish politics*, London: Profile Books, 2019, p.121. Ferriter’s book sets out the history of the border in a concise and well argued form, establishing how the spirit of “Puckoon” elaborated in my analysis is closest to capturing the anarchy and chaos of marking the border by the Boundary Commission and the subsequent misunderstanding and mis-perceptions of the border in the British Parliament.

<sup>16</sup> Clare Dwyer Hogg, 2018, dir. *A Cry from the Irish Border*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cZe2ihEZO8>, viewed May 8, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Nash and Byronie Reid, ‘Border Crossings: new approaches to the Irish Border’, *Irish Studies Review* 18, no.3, 2010, pp. 278-79.

<sup>18</sup> Shane Connaughton, *A Border Diary*, London: Faber & Faber, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> On 31 August 1994, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) declared a ceasefire after 25 years of armed conflict and confirmed their readiness to be involved in the talks about the future of Northern Ireland.

<sup>20</sup> Connaughton, 1995, pp. 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Colm Tóibín, *Bad Blood: A Walk along the Irish Border*, London: Picador, reprint ed., 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Connaughton, 1995, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey MacNab, *Sight and Sound* (0037-4806) v. 6 n. 1, January 1996, 47-8.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, 2006, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> Nash and Reid, 2010, p. 277.

<sup>26</sup> Henry MacDonald, “Northern Ireland suicides outstrip Troubles death toll” *Guardian*, February 20, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in MacDonald, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Sheehan, “Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place” in *Irish University Review* 18, no.2, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988, p.194.

<sup>29</sup> William Trevor, *The Stories of William Trevor*, London, Penguin, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> *The Ballroom of Romance* won the Best Single Drama at the British Film and Television Awards in 1983 and like Eugene McCabe’s *Victims* represents the power of television drama to capture the borderlander identity and landscape.

<sup>31</sup> Garret Carr, *The Rule of the Land: Walking the Irish Border*, London: Faber & Faber, 2017, pp. 191-92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations*, London: Faber & Faber, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Sheehan, 1998, p. 192.

<sup>35</sup> Diog O’Connell, *New Irish Storytellers: Narrative Strategies in Film*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> Brian Deane, interview *Gearr Scannain* website, September 29, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Barton, 2019, p10.

<sup>38</sup> Nash, 2013, p.1.

<sup>39</sup> *Game of Thrones*, HBO (Home Box Office), 2012-19. The series used Northern Ireland as a base for production and location with some sources reckoning the production brought £210 million to the region and an additional £30 million in tourism to locations used in the series.

[https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long\\_reads/game-of-thrones-northern-ireland-film-location-set-got-belfast-tv-hbo-a8860561.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/game-of-thrones-northern-ireland-film-location-set-got-belfast-tv-hbo-a8860561.html) , viewed 9 May, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Coyle, “What happens to Northern Ireland’s film industry now Game of Thrones is over?” *Irish Times*, June 1, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Brian McIlroy, 2001, p. 34.