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Between Troubles and Peace in Northern Ireland: Cinematic Divisions in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004)

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Abstract. The Troubles officially ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, but the conflict left such profound scars in the history of the region that making a film about Northern Ireland tends to almost automatically assume a discourse informed by division. The question that arises, then, is how this context may be tackled so as to simultaneously do justice to its traditionally rendered black-and-white reality and offer a more complex, contemporary understanding of the past that embraces reconciliation, openness and multiplicity of perspectives. Thus, the paper offers a close analysis of multiple types of division featured in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004) by making use of John Hill's and Fiona Coffey's theoretical categorizations that distinguish traditional Troubles productions from the more recent Peace Process cinema. This genre-based inquiry allows for a probing of the films' positioning in relation to the Troubles paradigm, as well as a revealing of difference at the heart of two otherwise very similar films, whose employment of conventional vocabulary may not allow for their unproblematic alignment with the politics of peace.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Troubles, Peace Process, *Belfast*, *Mickybo and Me.*

Introduction

Cinematic depictions of the political and ethno-sectarian armed conflict that dominated Northern Ireland in the second part of the twentieth century have often lingered on the profound legacy of division that the region has come to be associated with. Its roots lie in the euphemistically-called the Troubles, which

saw the resurgence of the violent divisions generated by the country's partition and brutally brought to surface in the period between 1968 and 1998, claiming the lives of thousands of people on both sides of the Nationalist/Unionist, Catholic/Protestant barricades, before ultimately offering a promise of peace through the 1994 ceasefires and the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. After having initially faced censorship on the part of the British government[1] and having assumed a general wariness to turn such a sensitive topic into cinematic entertainment, filmmakers started to lay the foundation for what would become the conventional Troubles paradigm.

Multiple critics, among whom John Hill, Martin McLoone, Ruth Barton and Fiona Coffey, have sought to identify distinctive patters of the Troubles genre in the cinematography of Northern Ireland, while also underlining the shifts in perspective brought about by the political Peace Process that allowed for a distancing from violence and a more complex, in-depth look at the conflict through the lens of the present. Thus, after the ceasefires of 1994, the decline in violence encouraged a more optimistic perspective which would have been impossible to put forth in the midst of armed struggle: "Given the changes in political climate, there was also the beginning of a move away from the traditional 'troubles' paradigm towards the development of new, more optimistic scenarios than had previously been the case" (Hill 2019, 196).

Although drawing categorical lines between Troubles cinema and Peace Process cinema may be difficult and critics may disagree in terms of the categorization of specific films, the quest for a better understanding of the genre led John Hill (2019) and Fiona Coffey (2013) to create templates that orient viewers with respect to the structural elements that are specific to traditional representations of the conflict. Hill carefully shaped his Troubles paradigm around the classic example of Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), which is taken to be the epitome of the genre and the source of all its staples, while Coffey distinguished between closed and open texts, whose characteristics indicate whether the film is positioned within or outside the cinematic tradition of the Troubles. I have summarized their arguments in Tables 1 and 2 below.

1 According to John Hill, British politicians have proven to be highly sensitive regarding the representation of the Troubles: "This, in turn, led to a growing reluctance to transmit certain kinds of material, the censorship of various programmes and, in some cases, outright bans. This policy also extended to the transmission of films relating to Northern Ireland that were deemed to be either 'controversial' or 'anti-British'" (2019, 193).

Table 1

John Hill: *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics* (2019)	
The traditional Troubles paradigm	**Peace-oriented films**
– Metaphysics over politics (the entrapment of fate > political complexity). – A conflict between private and public spheres (home and domesticity vs violent tragedy; romantic aspirations are destroyed). – Two different forms of male "hero" (e.g. the misguided but good IRA man vs the fanatical hardliner who is inherently violent). Examples: *Odd Man Out* (Carol Reed, 1947) – the first film that has ever dealt with the Northern Irish conflict since the 1921 partition.	– Ceasefire cinema (but the call for peace tends to be undermined by fatalism and sense of enclosure given by claustrophobic worlds that need to be escaped from). Examples: *Nothing Personal* (Thaddeus O'Sullivan, 1995), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1997), *Resurrection Man* (Marc Evans, 1997) – Comedy and romance (optimism suggested by happy, romantic endings and the overcoming of divisions, yet many embrace a traditional return to the private sphere). Examples: *Cycle of Violence* (Henry Herbert, 1998), *Divorcing Jack* (David Caffrey, 1998), *An Everlasting Piece* (Barry Levinson, 2000) and *Mad About Mambo* (John Forte, 2000), among others.

Table 2

Fiona Coffey: Re-Envisioning the Troubles: Northern Irish Film in Transition 1990–2010 (2013)	
Troubles Films as CLOSED texts that are conflict-focused	**Peace Process Films as OPEN texts that are peace-focused (post-conflict outlook)**
– One position on the conflict (mostly Catholic).	– Multiple positions and perspectives.
– The context is closed, specific.	– The context is open, universal.
– Clear heroes and villains (essentialist representations: good, peaceful vs evil, violent)	– Ambiguous heroes and villains (conflicting interpretations)
– Clear victims and perpetrators (one-dimensional characters)	– Ambiguous victims and perpetrators (complexity and blurred lines)
– Demand for justice and punishment	– Questions and discussions of reconciliation

Fiona Coffey: Re-Envisioning the Troubles: Northern Irish Film in Transition 1990–2010 (2013)	
Troubles Films as CLOSED texts that are conflict-focused	**Peace Process Films as OPEN texts that are peace-focused (post-conflict outlook)**
– The breakdown of the family structure (in particular the father figure)	– The family remains intact (signalling positive growth, change)
Examples: many 1990s films, including *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan, 1993), *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan, 1997), *Some Mother's Son* (Terry George, 1996), but also some 2000s films such as *Peacefire* (Macdara Vallely, 2008) and *H3* (Les Blair, 2001).	Examples: many 2000s films, among which most notably *Five Minutes of Heaven* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2009) and *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004).

John Hill's and Fiona Coffey's templates complement each other very well, which allows me to use both of their theoretical categorizations in the analysis of the multiple facets of division that I believe are present in the cinematic representations of the Troubles in Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* (2021) and Terry Loane's *Mickybo and Me* (2004). The aim is to determine how these two films are positioned in relation to the Troubles paradigm and to what extent they reaffirm or subvert the Peace Process Northern cinematic tendency of recent productions. I have chosen these two films based on the discrepancy between their structural formation and the multiple remarking similarities at the level of production and content. Both of them have indigenous Northern Irish directors who are keen to introduce contemporary audiences to a Protestant child's eye view of the onset of the Troubles, while combining upbeat, feel-good and adventurous stories, with first-hand experiences of violence and metacinematic questioning of filmic representation. However, more often than not, underneath these similarities, the films differ in terms of their engagement with tradition.

The Sectarian Divide: Antagonism and the (Im)possibility of Taking Sides

Considering that the stories of both *Belfast* (2021) and *Mickybo and Me* (2004) are set against the beginning of the Troubles, in 1969 and 1970, respectively, they make sure to emphatically underline the segregation of the city of Belfast, where

everyone belonged to either one side of the sectarian divide or the other. What I am interested here is not in determining how historically accurate the films are, but to what extent they make use of conventional Troubles vocabulary, while also reflecting a presentist perspective upon the conflict, which would blur instead of reaffirm the gulf between the two communities and would avoid siding with one group (in particular the Catholics) over the other.

Before addressing the stances taken, it is important to highlight the visual representation of the sectarian divide, which both films employ. If on the level of content, the naïveté and innocence of the young protagonists is infectious and prompts viewers to momentarily forget about the tragic and violent nature of the divided society of Northern Ireland by joining Buddy, Jonjo and Mickybo in a gleeful prelapsarian jump, as they lift their feet off the ground[2] and seemingly forget about the Troubles, the colouring and frame composition of the films work in the opposite direction. The children's escapism, albeit fragmented and short-lived, exists, but the viewers are constantly reminded that the featured historical context embraced binarism and left little room for ambivalence and inbetweenness. Thus, viewers are visually confronted with the black and white reality and splitting nature of the city.

Belfast's black and white aesthetic renders the antagonistic discourse of the region and, as Kenneth Branagh asserts, this is the lens through which he remembers his childhood environment: "The city seemed monochromatic to me throughout this period, including what I could watch on television. Everything stayed gray in my mind, […] Films helped me understand the world at a tender age…" (Branagh quoted in Daniel 2022) [Fig. 3]. It is this last statement about cinematography that explains the sporadic splashes of colour. Branagh begins and ends his film with colourful, contemporary images of Belfast, which seem to announce a look at the past that is informed by the Peace Process, by an openness towards a multiplicity of colours, yet the sky always remains clouded, indicating that regional peace is still a work in progress. Buddy's artistic escapism is also symbolized through the colourful rendering of the film and theatre plays that he watches. Through art, the child's mind transcends the gritty reality in which he lives and literally exemplifies the Wordsworthian "colouring of imagination" (1802, 3) [Fig. 4].

Mickybo and Me also plays with colour, albeit in a subtler manner. The children's attempted escape to Australia is featured in bright colours [Fig. 5], as

2 The posters of both films envision the children midway through their jump, with both feet off the ground, illustrating their playful and innocent separation from the violent world that surrounds them.

they travel along Northern Ireland and even cross the border into the Republic of Ireland, yet all depictions of violence that are based purely on the sectarian divide are displayed in cold, blue shades that are closer to black and white than they are to colour [Fig. 6]. For instance, the explosion at the beginning of the film, the bullying of Jonjo by the older Catholic boys and Mickybo's own violent, sectarian attack on Jonjo at the end of the film differ sharply from the warm, colourful adventure that the boys embark on in their escape. The transitions from colour to almost black and white are a constant reminder of the segregation of Belfast, which disrupts the boys' colourful friendship, but choosing to end the film on a positive note, Loane has the very last scene and ending frame go back to intense colouring, so as to underline the positive change that Belfast has gone through since the Troubles. Yet, much like Kenneth Branagh's last scene, it comes across as a rather forceful superimposition on an already highly impactful black and white division.

In addition, the frame composition is also reflective of the sectarian divide, since *Belfast*'s many split frames (by walls, pillars, alleyways, windows, etc.) [Figs. 7–8] are so frequent that they give the impression that division has become part of ordinary life and is inescapable in the context of the 1969 Troubles. The same strategy is used in the 2004 film and although the splitting is less common, it is far from being less impactful. More specifically, the oxymoronic dividing bridge simultaneously splits the neighbourhood and the cinematic frame horizontally exactly at the midway point, with Jonjo at the centre,[3] while the two railroads, symbolistic of the two communities, provide an additional division on the vertical axis [Fig. 9]. The imposition of division is reinforced by the voiceover: "Back in 1970, the whole world knew that Belfast was a divided city. Neighbourhoods were turning into ghettos […] The bridge was the dividing line between us and them. The Protestant and the Catholic. I'd been told a million times not to cross it. The other side was like the other side of the world."

A second example of this strategic splitting of the frame appears towards the end of *Mickybo and Me*, when Jonjo is chased by the same bullies, with the exception that now Mickybo has joined their ranks after having learned to hate Protestants indiscriminately. Now, viewers are visually reminded of the sectarian divide through a door that occupies the entire frame and divides into two equally blood-red windows that deny Jonjo any shelter from violence and allegorically

3 The two bullies that follow Mickybo also stop at the very same spot, but unlike Jonjo and Mickybo, they do not dare to cross the dividing line and firmly remain within the safety of their own community, showing that they are unable to transcend their one-sidedness.

render the viewers' eyes and the cinematic gaze of a film that self-consciously points towards itself as a Troubles production [Fig. 10].

In the midst of this unrelenting opposition, the point of view from which the narrative is presented is paramount in deciding if and how a different stance may be taken. In both cases, the perspective is that of children seen through the cinematic lens of Branagh and Loane, who reflect upon their own Protestant upbringing during the Troubles,[4] which is also made evident through almost identical framing of boys from behind [Figs. 1–2]. This offers the promise of a refreshing, defamiliarizing take that counters so many Troubles films that mainly embrace the Catholic/Nationalist side, to the point of rendering the Protestant community either blameable for the violence or utterly invisible, off-frame (Bazin 2013, 2). This trend has been established by many critics such as Martin McLoone, according to whom "the majority of screen representations are either about nationalist culture in the south or about republican, as opposed to loyalist, paramilitaries" (2005, 226), Gary Mitchell, who maintained that "if you judged Northern Ireland purely on the basis of films you would think there are no protestants here" (quoted in McKittrick 2008) or David McKittrick, who firmly asserted that "republicans have basically had the big screen pretty much to themselves" (2008).

The nine-year-old boys Buddy and Jonjo are painfully aware that they must distinguish between Protestants and Catholics, but from their point of view this is nonsensical and there is no real basis for discrimination. Consequently, religious differences are a source of humour for Buddy, who jokes with his mother about Catholics being thrown water on them and plays games with his friend Moira, for whom sectarian identity is all about pretending and bluffing. "Moira: They can just come up to you, when yer not expectin' it, and ask you, 'Are you a protestant or a Catholic', but it's a trick question you see, cos they don't tell you what they are, and what do you say then? To not get a dig in the gob?/ Buddy: I'm a Catholic?/ Moira: Wrong. That's exactly what they think you will say. They think you're tryin' to bluff them. But you have to double bluff them […] You say, "I'm a Protestant"./ Buddy: But I am a Protestant. /Moira: That's the point" (Branagh 2020, 22–23). The lack of foundation for segregation and collective hatred is evident through the fact that it is something that the children do not understand and have to be taught about: "Moira: Well how the hell are you supposed to know then?/ Buddy: You have to get taught it" (Branagh 2020, 21).

4 While Kenneth Branagh wrote an original script, overtly and heavily lodged in personal experience, Terry Loane worked with an adaptation of Owen McCafferty's play *Mojo Mickybo*, but also acknowledged the mirroring of his young self in Jonjo, the film's child protagonist and narrator.

Although the stance has shifted and the perspective is that of Protestants instead of Catholics, *Belfast* does not seem to manage to move entirely beyond the Troubles' traditional one-sided view of the conflict, since there is still only one position that is presented: that of peaceful Protestants. While Catholics are not blamed, they are definitely silenced, since in Kenneth Branagh's film there is no insight into what they feel, think or want to achieve, and Catherine, Buddy's love interest and the only individualized Catholic character, barely talks. It thus seems that although omnipresent and often mentioned, the Catholics of this film are little more than a backdrop, a necessary prop for the exploration of the conflicted minds of peaceful Protestants.

When Jonjo and Mickybo meet for the first time, one of the first things they establish is where they are from, but the difference in affiliation does not prevent them from wanting to form a gang and unite against two older bullies. In the ghetto-based region, the question of location betrays one's beliefs, which is why Jonjo, who spends time in Mickybo's neighbourhood, is recognized as an outsider and asked multiple times where he is from: "Mickybo's Ma: You're not local, son. Where did our Micky find you at?" and "Fartface: Where are you from, Jonjo?" This pressure is lifted once the children run away. It is then that they become inseparable so much so that throughout most the film, viewers most likely do not care which of the boys is Catholic and which one is Protestant. There is insight into both communities through the boys' families, but the polarities between them are erased through the protagonists' close friendship and their being seen as children whose world separates them from that of the adults. This perspective is valid until the end of the film, when the divide reappears and becomes deeper than ever, despite an evident attempt at reconciliation. Having considered the alternate tracing and erasing of the sectarian divide, it is important to point out that although the perspective remains that of Jonjo, Terry Loane's equal treatment of the boys entails a refusal to decisively focus on one group more than the other, which places *Mickybo and Me* closer to the conceptual shift given by peace process films.

Perspectives upon the Status Quo: Metaphysics or Politics?

According to John Hill, it is part of the cinematic tradition of Troubles cinema to "avoid focusing on the complex politics behind the violence and instead, retreat into metaphysics which feeds the films' fatalistic perspectives" (Hill 2014, 182). The fact that both *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* are presented as family films featuring children's adventures facilitates this avoidance of politics, and the

violence that does appear is not accompanied by much contextual explanation, but rather simplified as the consequence of a conflict that arose solely on sectarian lines, between Catholics and Protestants. There is no mention of Loyalists and Republicans, nor of the country's instability, which makes sense in a story told from the point of view of boys who know nothing of politics, but the absence of exploration in this direction makes the brutal acts of violence seem sudden and unexplainable. For instance, the riots and explosions that change Buddy's previously peaceful neighbourhood appear to him and to the viewers out of nowhere and with no context attached to them. The little political information that reaches Buddy's ears is through the television and radio reports, but all that he hears is fragments that are difficult to put together in a coherent manner. Therefore, Buddy does not know why their neighbour Billy Clanton targets some people on their street and the lack of understanding turns the villain into a criminal without a cause. Instead of politics, fate seems to come to the forefront: the multiple images of clouded skies go hand in hand with the acceptance that, as Buddy's Ma says: "the Irish were born for leavin'" (Branagh 2020, 64) and as his Pa yields: "it's a mad world" (Branagh 2020, 59), giving the impression that there is nothing to be done other than leave a city that appears to be doomed and devoid of rationality. In this manner, Branagh embraces the Troubles' "adoption of the vocabulary of fatalism [which] must work against a political explanation" (Hill 2014, 181).

Just like Buddy's unexpected plunge into violence, the two main explosions of *Mickybo and Me* are sudden and with no story attached to them: the first one abruptly interrupts the extra-diegetic Irish song at the beginning of the film, while the second one, just as unexpectedly wakes Jonjo up from his sleep. In addition, when Mickybo's father is murdered in a local pub at the hands of a fanatic, the child imagines a dialogue with his father in which explanation for his death is simply that "some joker just came in and started shooting all around him." Hence, as Pat O'Connor sustained, violence is assumed and accepted, rather than explained and analysed (quoted in Hill 2014, 182). The only explanation for violence that Jonjo is given comes from Mickybo's mother at the end of the film. In a similar vein to Buddy's father, she states: "The men in this country's gone clean mental," illustrating the acceptance of irrational violence. The fact that there is no point in actively involving oneself in changing the situation is underlined by Mickybo's impossibility to change his father's death, which is doubled by the impossibility to change his own fateful turn towards violence. The sense of fatalism is so strong that the children can only envision a supernatural, fictional being as their potential saviour: Jonjo says "if Superman was in Belfast, there'd

be no bombs," and later Mickybo declares, "if Superman was there, he would've stopped the bullets, wouldn't he, Da?"

Another characteristic of Troubles cinema that encourages the reliance upon metaphysics rather than politics and fatalistic acceptance rather than optimistic action has to do with the representation of the city. There seems to be a "pattern of decontextualization characteristic of earlier films concerned with the IRA" (Hill 2019, 198) that refuses to engage with the political implications of the city. Consequently, Belfast comes to be stripped of realistic details, of geographical peculiarities and landmarks, becoming an abstract and placeless city, similar to Robert Warshow's "sad city of the imagination" (quoted in Hill 2019, 191). This tradition began with pre-ceasefire cinematography that would use stand-in locations for Belfast (for security reasons) and presented the city as a nondescript place that the characters had to escape from. While for Coffey, this openness of context entails a universality of the plot that is specific to Peace Process films, for John Hill, this feature is found in *Odd Man Out* as well, the quintessential Troubles production: "In this respect, the film's representation of the city works less to denote an actual place (Belfast) than connote 'the city in general' and the 'universal' drama to which it plays host" (Hill 2019, 192).

In line with this tradition, *Belfast* (despite its title) was not filmed in the actual city because of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions which led to building a set just outside of London instead. Not only are there no landmarks or specific Northern markers apart from a few writings on walls, but Buddy's street could be anywhere, all the more since it lacks texture and realistic detail. This aspect, alongside perfectly clean streets and pristine locations, reminds viewers of the artificiality and constructed nature of a film that exists in its own fictional universe. Hence, the nondescript city brings about a sense of entrapment, which confirms *Belfast*'s allegiance to the traditional Troubles paradigm: the barricades that separate Buddy's street from the rest of the city induce a claustrophobic feeling of isolation[5] that is most evident through the small-scale set, but also through the contrastive images of children playing freely versus shots of their games being filmed through the barbed wire of the barricades that imprison them. The same concept is exemplified through the film's topic, as Buddy's family finds it ever more evident that the only way forward is by escaping the city.

Even though *Mickybo and Me* is filmed in Belfast and some of the places on the screen are recognizable, what does not change is the need to escape. This time, the

5 The fact that Kenneth Branagh wrote the script of *Belfast* while isolating himself during the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have been transposed on screen.

children's ardent desire is to leave behind not only the city, but the entire region and head towards perceived salvation and independence in Australia – a dream that only Jonjo manages to achieve as an adult. The beautiful images of Ireland allow for a bracketing of the Troubles, although the children carry the suppressed conflict with them everywhere they go. For instance, when Mickybo looks at the barn fire he accidentally started, the violent burning prompts him to quote his favourite film by saying "for a moment there, I thought we were in trouble." The allusion is not only to the name of the Northern Irish conflict, but because it is a direct quote from George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), it uses metacinema to push the viewers into the realization that they are watching a film and, more specifically, a Troubles film. In this case, the sense of imprisonment is also present, but it comes mostly from the adult viewers' understanding that, whatever the children do, they cannot escape Belfast's troubles and their quest to reach Australia on their own can only be seen as futile child's play.

The Dividing Line between Heroes and Villains: Family and Violence

Through the eyes of young boys, the Troubles seem to be a fight between superheroes and villains, which proves to be problematic in terms of the contemporary cinematic trend of depicting a more complex Northern Ireland in which characters are not defined by a single facet of morality. As both Fiona Coffey and John Hill acknowledge, there has been a long tradition in Troubles cinema to pit two binary types of Irishmen against each other: "the misguided but fundamentally decent IRA man […] versus the more fanatical, hardliner […] who remains wedded to the violent prosecution of 'the cause'" (Hill 2019, 192) or "the fundamentally good/peaceful Irishman and the evil/violent IRA man" (Coffey 2013, 177) or "the classic 'hawk and dove' dichotomy that underlines so many Troubles narratives" (Barton 2004, 160). I argue that this division has not been blurred and the children's perspectives tend to make it even more evident. Despite the fact that there is no mention of the IRA, the two categories of Irish men still divide heroes and villains on account of their peaceful vs conflict-driven outlook.

For young Buddy, the line between good and evil seems to coincide with that between the private and the public spheres: it is his family that provides him with a safe haven away from violence, and thus becomes heroic by offering a very strong support system and educational roadmap for the boy. This is in tune with John Hill's paradigmatic tension between the private and the public realms,

which he recognizes as a staple of Troubles cinema: "it has been a feature of 'troubles' drama to counterpose the public world of politics and violence to the 'private' world of home and family" (Hill 2019, 200). In *Belfast*, there is a clear opposition between the unflinching commitment to peace of Buddy's family and the fanaticism of other Protestants, which "stress[es] the primacy of the personal sphere of home and family over the destruction and chaos of the public world of violent conflict" (Hill 2019, 192), while simultaneously, decisively shaping "'the man of peace' versus 'the man of violence'" (Coffey 2013, 177).

The two models for peace and soft masculinity that Buddy has are his father and grandfather, both of whom articulate a type of masculine identity based on non-violence and a commitment to family, a Peace Process characteristic (Farley 2001, 203) that brings the film close to the sensibilities of contemporary audiences. Thus, as a "man of peace," the father refuses the insistent call to violence that his neighbours impose upon him and stands his ground by teaching his children that there are no sides (although the statement is immediately followed by the past tense). Violence is only an option when there is an immediate threat to the family's safety. Also, as a true father-figure, Buddy's Pop instils in the boy the desire for peace through domestic, mundane conversations such as one about mathematics, which is in fact a social commentary in which the grandfather helps Buddy position himself on the side of the good, moral Irishman who counters "the (religious) long division" with "sums" and "the one right answer" with an openness for dialogue. "Buddy: God, this takes ages, no wonder they call it long division. Pop: Patience. Patience with the sums. Patience with the girl. Buddy: Is it 27?/ Pop: It's close enough. […] Buddy: But sure there's only one right answer. Pop: If that were true son, people wouldn't be blowin' themselves up all over this town. (Branagh 2020, 40)

Conversely, other male figures outside of Buddy's family, such as Billy Clanton, as well as a minister that Buddy is fascinated with are represented as teachers of violence and division. There is no question that Clanton is the villain of the story and his acts of violence are unambiguously evil and positioned at the opposite pole to the father and grandfather's rejection of violence. As a one-dimensional villain, the neighbourhood bully seems to be innately violent and since there is no background or context to soften his portrayal, he becomes a mere caricature of the violent Irishman that, as both John Hill and Martin McLoone point out, originated in the British colonial discourse that stereotyped the Irish as violent: "Ireland was also presented as a society torn asunder by violence and internecine strife, where a proclivity to violence was seen as a tragic flaw of the

Irish themselves. This again was often presented as the result of ignorance and a lack of progress" (McLoone 2006, 34).

Similarly positioned on the side of villains who stand for the public sphere is a minister whose episodic appearance turns into an obsession for Buddy. This is another instance of the advancement of a pro-conflict perspective through an antagonistic, black and white discourse that allows for the existence of only two roads: one towards good and the other one towards evil – a haunting image that the child takes very seriously: "This is the most worrying moment of his life" (Branagh 2020, 61).

In *Mickybo and Me*, the dividing line between heroes and villains becomes one that is traced between the child of peace and the adolescent of violence and, ultimately between children and adults. The two bullies that chase Mickybo and Jonjo are older boys, adolescents who have already internalized the aggression of the men of their society, which is what places them in the role of villains who perpetuate sectarian violence and (for most of the film) are shaped in opposition to the "children of peace," Mickybo and Jonjo. If at first Mickybo unflinchingly rejects the call to join the bullies against Jonjo, he later succumbs to violence, renouncing his childhood innocence in favour of a forcibly assumed adulthood. It is only after his father is killed that the young man imagines being called "the big man" and, as a result, assumes the role of the violent Irishman that he associates with adult masculinity and takes on "violence as the legacy from father […] to son" (Farley 2001, 206).

Through Mickybo's rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, from peace to violence, the film advances the argument that society as a whole is to blame for teaching these children (and future adults) the path towards violence. While both *Mickybo and Me* and *Belfast* employ the old binary division between two types of Irishmen and both intimate that children are not born violent but have to be taught how to play that role, it is only *Mickybo and Me* that shows that process of teaching on screen as a cautionary tale through the painful transformation of a character, whereas *Belfast* plunges in a traditional division that, without context and historical understanding, allows for no middle ground between Buddy's father/grandfather and Billy Clanton/the minister.

The Division between Heroes and Villains: Metacinema and Violence

Another important manner through which the demarcation between heroes and villains is established is through metacinema: all three of the boys (Buddy, Mickybo and Jonjo) have a passion for cinematography. The films that they watch are intermingled with the films in which they exist, giving rise to metacinematic renditions of film within film that have an important role in helping the boys understand their world, the harsh conditions that surround them, all the while constructing images of heroes and villains. Heterofilmic reflexivity (Gerstenkorn quoted in Limoges 2021, 172) is achieved through explicit intertextual references to other films: in this sense, *Belfast* appropriates multiple short scenes from films that Buddy watches in order to deal with the family's potential decision to leave the city as well as films that prompt him to view his family as perfectly good characters and actors; Micky and Jonjo's obsession with a single film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), helps them cope with the violence of their world and allows them to indulge in the illusion that they are main characters who can escape the law like Butch and Sundance and leave behind the adult world of the Troubles.

In both productions, film watching and cinema going are reserved for the good characters: the boys are shown in the cinema through medium close-up shots, with their transfixed eyes glued to the screen, fully immersed in the films they are watching [Figs. 11–12]. Through such frames, the viewers recognize a mirror image of themselves, as they occupy a similar position while watching *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* – this ensures that through the process of identification, the cinema-goers are comfortably placed in the position of positive characters and the cinema becomes a safe place for "children to be children," as they let themselves engulfed by fiction, as opposed to the harsh reality of violence.

As already established, for Buddy it is *his family* that is endowed with the aura of positivity and peacefulness and forms the group of clearly good and moral characters, so they all talk about films and go to the cinema to watch family-oriented feature films such as *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Ken Hughes, 1968). Pa wants to take Buddy to the big picture house, for him to "forget about this whole bunch of eedijits" (Branagh 2020, 16) and Granny tells him that as a child, she used to think she could climb inside the screen. The metacinematic blurring of the border between film and reality affects Buddy too, as he seems to see his parents as film stars: at the beginning of the film, he hears his neighbour, Frankie West,

calling Pa Steve McQueen, a reference to the American actor that is reinforced through the subsequent whistling of the theme of the film *The Great Escape* (John Sturges, 1963), which foreshadows the father's desire to escape Belfast and his heroic nature. Cinema also helps Buddy view Billy Clanton as a fictional villain taken straight out of an animated film, as the script describes the boy witnessing his "superhero punch" "in graphic profile […] like a cartoon" (Branagh 2020, 34) and the direct confrontation between Clanton and Pa unrealistically sees the latter disarming the villain through a single, perfectly aimed throw of a rock that also seems to be taken straight out of a film.

In addition, seeing the world as film helps Buddy come to terms with his departure: for instance, watching *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966–1968) on TV encourages him to view England as a new planet that has to be explored and going to see *Robin and the 7 Hoods* (Gordon Douglas, 1964) eases Buddy into the world of gangsters, which he can recognize in the relationship between his father and Billy Clanton. The same bringing together of cinematic fiction and reality is underlined by the artificial street and houses that draw attention to their status as props, the multiple framing of windows and Buddy's imagining of both of his parents as perfect performers who dance in the street, while people watch and clap, as well as singers-dancers at the end of the film, when Pa sings "Everlasting Love" and dances with Ma in an exaggeratedly extravagant scene that draws attention to them being two beautiful actors whose performance makes them the centre of attention.

Mickybo and Jonjo's assumption of the identities of their favourite outlaws adds another metacinematic level of embeddedness to the story, as the actors John Jo McNeill and Nial Wright engage in roleplaying within the role. That is, they play Mickybo and Jonjo, who, in turn, play Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, respectively, underlining the performativity and constructed nature of film: "Mickybo: Here, I'm Butch, you be Sundance. […] I'm Butch, right? You're Sundance and I'm Butch. I started this gang. I run things here. […] Now come on and we'll blow up something, partner."

Not only are scenes from the original film presented through what Fernando Canet calls "restaged allusion" (the filmic past is brought into the diegetic present through screenings or dreams) in the multiple occasions in which the boys go to the cinema, but they are also "appropriated" (Canet 2014, 21) through interposed shots of the Irish boys and the American cowboys. George Roy Hill's film is also parodically assumed when the young boys constantly employ phrases taken as such from the original dialogue, sing the original theme song and even re-create

a wanted picture of Butch and Sundance and re-enact the cowboys' bank robbery and iconic cliff jump.

The children's fascination with the two film characters may be explained through their relating of the bombings of their community with the explosions in the film and the gun violence of Belfast with the outlaws' constant use of guns and narrow escapes. This is particularly evident when Mickybo uses almost the same words to describe the film and an actual explosion on his street, conflating thus the two ontological worlds: "Mickybo: When he kicked the big ugly guy up the balls. That was class" and "Mickybo: You should've seen that place burning. Nearly burnt down the whole street. It was pure class." It is the violence experienced through the safe place of the cinema that helps the boys cope with the real violence in their lives and leads them to shroud traumatic experiences in the veil of adventure and fictional game, so that a severed finger found in the aftermath of an explosion may be considered a treasure.

Moreover, the cinematic association between masculinity and violence that Mickybo and Jonjo internalize while watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is cemented through the recognition of it as an essential element to their conflict-ridden communities. Yet, despite being robbers, Butch and Sundance are likeable outlaws who can hardly be considered villains. Despite their use of violence, they are charismatic, relatable, entertaining and positive characters, which brings the children into a grey area of ambiguity within which it is no longer easy to separate the good and the bad based on their alignment with the propensity towards violence typified by the villains of the Troubles paradigm.

Catalysts of Suffering: the Gap between Victims and Perpetrators

As maintained by Fiona Coffey, fluidity in the interpretation of victims and perpetrators is an essential element of Peace Process cinema in Northern Ireland: "Peace Process films can be seen through the blurring of the line between victim and perpetrator. Perpetrators in Peace Process films are often riddled with guilt, contradictions, and shame for their actions, and the films ask the viewer to approach these characters with compassion" (Coffey 2013, 180). Thus, it is important to understand the approach that *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* take in the portrayal of these two categories.

The Catholics from Buddy's street, who are most impacted by the conflict, remain silent, yet it is very clear that they are represented as the embodiment of

ultimate victims who have done nothing wrong and who are never seen as engaging with violence, not even at the level of reactive aggression used in self-defence. At the other extreme, the fact that Protestants have traditionally been portrayed as perpetrators does not change in *Belfast*, so Billy Clanton and his gang fit this role perfectly. Indeed, Buddy's Protestant family is the exception that confirms the rule. They are undeniably portrayed as victims who are forced to move in order to escape the threats from their fellow Protestants and even though they are not nearly as harassed and targeted as their Catholic neighbours, there is simply no ambiguity as to the fact that they are on the victims' side. It seems that one of the few characters that have the potential to blur the line between these two categories is the family's neighbour, Frankie West, who does not necessarily agree with the violent cause, yet he joins it immediately. However, this character remains a minor one, is not focused upon in the diegesis, so throughout Branagh's film, viewers know exactly where to stand, who is being treated unjustly and who is to blame.

At first sight, *Mickybo and Me* also seems to firmly dictate who victims and perpetrators are: like their cinematic heroes, the two young boys are sympathetic and charming, and the fact that they are children adds to the feeling of endearment and to the understanding that their pretend-violence does not make them aggressors. Conversely, the older bullies and the adults are always on the side of culprits. Yet, upon closer inspection, Jonjo is the only character who remains categorically spotless. The most violent and shocking transition is that of Mickybo who, at the end of the film, is seen as going from victim to perpetrator and turning on his friend Jonjo, punching, kicking and even slashing him with a pocket knife, in a symbolic reversal of their blood brotherhood, all the while being visibly conflicted.

The status of the Catholic bullies is also questionable since they may both be given a background story, but the fact that Mickybo joins their ranks reflects upon their condition as well and it is not difficult for the viewer to infer that they might have gone through a similar loss and subsequent conversion as the protagonist. This brings ambiguity to their depiction, all the more so, when the superficiality of their courage is visually revealed through one of them wetting himself when confronted with a real gun. Finally, Mickybo's father is evidently a victim of sectarian crime, but his character cannot be interpreted in black and white terms, since his absenteeism, passivity and negligence when it comes to Mickybo's education have been a leading factor in the boy's turn towards violence. Thus, the empathy and compassion for "the enemy," the dual status of victim and perpetrator, as well as the ambiguity and problematization of the two

categories are essential characteristics of Peace Process films and point towards an openness for dialogue and an interrogation of the past that does not have already established answers.

Divided Families: the Frail Line between Optimism and Pessimism

The pessimistic outlook of Troubles cinema is usually focused on division rather than unity, and this becomes most evident at the level of the family and close relationships. There is a fatalistic breakdown of the family structure, particularly driven by the figure of the father, which confers a sense of doom and inescapability that mirrors the state of Northern Ireland: "In Troubles films […] father figures are absent or dead, single mothers abound, and children are killed, imprisoned, or must flee the North for their survival" (Coffey 2013, 185). At the opposite pole, Peace Process films encourage more optimistic perspectives in which romantic relationships eventually flourish and families are reunited, which reinforces the politics of peace: "Reconciliation is thus configured not as the coming together of the two tribes, but as the reinstatement of the family unit" (Barton 2019, Ch. 6).

In *Belfast*, separations from family members and friends are presented as temporary, with the most notable exception of the grandmother's painful isolation. Pop's death is not depicted as permanent and is immediately followed by a farewell party that brings everybody together in song and dance, and as the family leave the city and the boy must renounce his love interest, the absence of romantic resolution is not envisioned as something tragic, but rather a light-hearted departure accompanied by a promise to return. While there is optimism on a personal level (Buddy remains happy, his nuclear family is intact), little to no hope is expressed in terms of the city's eventual peace settlement, since the only way for the family to prosper is by leaving Belfast. The fact that Buddy's grandmother (an important piece of the family structure) is left behind becomes the focus of the final scenes of the film, as it is her grieved face that the camera focuses on as Buddy and his family move on. As her head rests upon the vertical lines of a glass door, the viewer is reminded of the imprisonment of the city (once again, the screen is split down the middle) and although in its very final frames, Belfast returns to colour, to a contemporary view of the city, the image is still dark, the sky still overcast and the dusk is still representative of the North, with no indication of the family's reunification or of Buddy having ever returned to Belfast.

The strong bond between Mickybo and Jonjo may be seen as "a variation on the 'love across the barricades' scenario" (Hill 2019, 211) or as a forbidden brotherly bond that is insisted upon through multiple references to them being partners like Butch and Sundance, "blood brothers," united against everyone else: "Mickybo: It's me and you now, Sundance. Us against the world." The fact that their friendship meets an abrupt and violent separation with Belfast teaching young Mickybo that division takes precedence over friendship is reflective of pessimism in relation to the possibility of there ever being peace between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

In terms of the boys' families, no attempt is made for them to be shaped as perfect, but rather they are revealed as negligent groups that leave the children to their own devices and do not take any interest in their activities. Even so, as the film progresses, there is a marked shift towards disintegration that culminates with the destruction of the father figure in both cases. As Jim Sheridan states, such a downfall is reflective of that of an entire society: "the father figure becomes a kind of decimated symbol when you have a crushed culture. Once you destroy the father figure, the figure of authority, then you haven't got a society" (quoted in Coffey 2013, 185). In this sense, it is impossible to overlook the abrupt death of Mickybo's father at the hand of the opposing sectarian group which marks the breakdown of the entire family and, as the Catholic mother suggests to young Jonjo when she sends him away to his own neighbourhood, the destruction of the private sphere results in lack of stability and security at the level of the entire region: "Jonjo: Looking for Mickybo, missus. Mickybo's Ma: He's not here, son. Nobody's here […] I'm sitting here without a slice of bread and the man I love is in the bloody ground. […] Mickybo's gone. There's nothing for you down here now, son. Nowhere is safe. So... go back to your own."

In turn, Jonjo's nuclear family is dismantled through the father's symbolic death in the eyes of the young boy. The first-hand witnessing of the father's affair and the ensuing separation leave him in search for a father figure and, as opposed to Mickybo, he finds it in his mother: "when Jonjo's Ma visits the same ice cream parlour previously frequented by his Da, in the first time we observe her character outside of a domestic setting, the female character is literally reclaiming space and autonomy from the male" (Pugh-Cook 2019, 56). It is perhaps this newly found stability given by the mother occupying the role of the father, which, coupled with Jonjo leaving Belfast, allows the now-adult narrator to settle in Australia and become a father himself, as shown in the photograph of his picture-perfect family that is in alignment with the Peace Process cinematic vision of an

optimistic ending. However, in the final scenes of the film, the adult Mickybo is found solitary, in what seems to be the same bar that his father was murdered in and despite the letter's explicit mention of peace and hope regarding the situation of Northern Ireland, the Catholic man is not depicted as a potential father and, in his case, the divided family and the lack of paternal authority can only cast shadows upon the future of the city that he has chosen to remain in.

Conclusion

Both *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* tackle the Northern Irish Troubles through children's playful perspectives and while they feature comic, light-hearted moments of endearing tenderness that celebrate the innocence of childhood and its imaginative beauty, the Troubles are never out of sight and multiple divisions self-consciously cut through the fairy-tale surface. My interest has lain in assessing the commitment that these two artistic productions have with respect to either the traditional Troubles paradigm or Peace Process cinema, as envisioned by critics John Hill and Fiona Coffey, through an analysis of multiple types of division.

The first division that I have considered is the sectarian one between Protestants and Catholics. At a visual level, the play between black and white and colour, as well as the splitting of cinematic frames work to aesthetically reinforce the antagonistic discourse at the root of the Northern Irish struggle and prompts the viewers to remember that this is a context in which the pressure of taking sides is ever present. As they come around to this new reality, Buddy and Jonjo present an original Protestant take on the conflict that is transformed into a game of guessing names and living locations. While it is evident that all three boys have to be taught how to discriminate against the other group in order to fit in, *Belfast* shows difference of opinion within the same community while maintaining a one-sided focus on Protestants that does not leave space for any Catholic insight, whereas Terry Loane's film offers equal attention to both communities and cinematically bridges the historical gap between the two.

John Hill's division between metaphysics and politics, with the former overtaking the latter as far as classic Troubles films are concerned, has proven to be valid in both cases, as the wilful elusion of the political context, along with a spatial sense of imprisonment, plunge the films into the metaphysical fatalism of a decontextualized city that is engulfed in an irrational violence from whose imprisonment the only way out is emigration. In terms of the division between

heroes and villains – revealed most evidently through familial depictions and metacinematic games – as well as the line between victims and perpetrators, the criteria that inform them are no longer based on sectarian identity, but rather on the rift between the private and the public spheres and that between childhood and adulthood, both of which are ultimately based on the traditional "man of peace" versus "man of violence" distinction. There is no call for justice or punishment, but *Mickybo and Me* has proven to be more resistant to clear-cut categorizations, whereas *Belfast* lends itself to rather unambiguous constructions that close the filmic text and dictate where viewers' sympathies should lie, which is reminiscent of old Troubles films that structure themselves around binary systems.

Last, but not least, both Kenneth Branagh's and Terry Loane's films ultimately embrace a pessimistic ending that goes beyond and against the positive, escapist and often light-hearted perspective of their children protagonists, revealing the disruption of precious relationships and the disintegration of the family unit. Friendships across the barricades exist in both films and they all end in separation; despite one being smoother and more playful and the other more abrupt and violent, they both elicit a great sense of loss. In *Belfast*, the head of the family, the grandfather, dies and, despite the father's insistent promotion of non-violence, dialogue and love, the city remains a place of division, departure and desolation rendered through the final diegetic image of the grandmother who is painfully left behind, while in *Mickybo and Me*, the end of the boys' friendship and the dissolution entailed by the physical and symbolic deaths of their fathers similarly associate the region with a sense of hopelessness that a belated letter and a photograph of peace in Australia do little to rectify.

Although both films take as historic background the beginning of the Troubles in Belfast, they also overtly acquire a twenty-first century, presentist perspective that makes it possible for them to cast a playful retrospective gaze at the conflict and find levity and playful entertainment amidst violence. *Belfast* and *Mickybo and Me* may be very similar at the level of content and, at first sight, they are undoubtably post-2000 Peace Process films, but upon closer analysis, their characteristics reveal that neither of them may be unproblematically placed within this category. If Terry Loane's film insists upon multiplicity in representation, openness and ambiguity in the interpretation of heroes/villains and victims/perpetrators, it also avoids politics and signals what seems to be an inevitable renewal of the cycle of violence that goes against the optimism required out of peace-oriented cinematic productions. In a similar vein, yet even more decidedly turned towards tradition, Kenneth Branagh's *Belfast* subverts its

commitment to the Peace Process genre by relying upon Troubles tropes that cover the dialogue of peace of soft father-figures underneath the film's singularity of perspective, the metaphysical fatalism that takes precedence over politics, the essentialist distinction between the peaceful and the violent Irishman, the binary dictation of viewers' sympathies and the painful but necessary separations.

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