

From rage to reconciliation

The portrayal of Northern Ireland's Troubles in

Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Five Minutes of Heaven*

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Abstract/Abstrakti

This study examines the portrayal of Northern Ireland's Troubles in the 2008 docudrama film *Five Minutes of Heaven* by Oliver Hirschbiegel. The study's goals were to determine if the film manifests any kind of bias against Northern Ireland's Catholics/republicans or Protestants/loyalists, and how the film relates to earlier Troubles films and their conventions. The film was analysed on the levels of content and style, with focus being divided mainly between the film's main characters and its use of documentary film techniques. Scholarly literature dealing with earlier Troubles cinema was consulted for the purpose of comparing the film to its predecessors. The study's findings suggest that *Five Minutes of Heaven* portrays the Troubles with exceptional neutrality and authenticity.

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan, kuinka Pohjois-Irlannin konflikti on esitetty Oliver Hirschbiegelin vuoden 2008 dokudraamaelokuvassa *Five Minutes of Heaven*. Tutkielmassa selvitetään, onko elokuvassa nähtävissä puolueellisuutta Pohjois-Irlannin katolilaisia/republikaaneja tai protestantteja/lojalisteja vastaan, sekä lisäksi arvioidaan elokuvan suhdetta aiempiin konfliktista kertoviin elokuviin ja niiden konventioihin. Elokuva on tutkielmassa analysoitu sekä sisällön että tyylin kannalta keskittyen pääasiassa elokuvan päähenkilöihin ja dokumentaariseen toteutustapaan. Konfliktista kertovien elokuvien historiaa käsittelevää tieteellistä kirjallisuutta on hyödynnetty elokuvan vertaamisessa edeltäjiinsä. Tutkielmassa esitetään, että *Five Minutes of Heaven* käsittelee Pohjois-Irlannin konfliktia poikkeuksellisen puolueettomasti ja todenmukaisesti.

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1. Introduction

From 1968 to 1998, Northern Ireland (also referred to as Ulster) was afflicted with a sectarian conflict involving the region's Catholics and Protestants. Known simply as the Troubles, the conflict was devastating to the people of Northern Ireland, costing the lives of almost 4000 individuals and causing over 40,000 injuries (Marie-Therese Fay et al. 121). The main factions fighting against each other were the Irish republicans (Catholics) and the Ulster loyalists (Protestants), each with their respective paramilitary groups. Of these, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (referred to as the IRA in this paper) on the republican side and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) on the loyalist side are among the best-known. As for the groups' ideologies, the republicans advocated Irish nationalism and fought for a united Ireland, while the loyalists, who were driven by unionism, wished to remain in the United Kingdom. Although officially long over, the Troubles have left a lasting mark on Northern Ireland and its people, and the state of the region is still far from blissful. Hostility and sectarianism still exist among the population, of which the peace walls between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods, to give just one example, serve as saddening evidence.

The research interest of this paper lies in how the Troubles have been represented in cinema. The phrases 'Troubles cinema' and 'Troubles film' will be used to refer to any films that feature the conflict as a central theme. In particular, this study examines the portrayal of the Troubles in one 21st century film, namely *Five Minutes of Heaven* from 2008. More specifically, the study's primary aim is to investigate if the film manifests any kind of distinct bias against either of the two parties involved in the conflict. In order to do this, the film will be closely analysed to gain insight into the attitudes and moods that it exhibits, whether clearly visible or more subtly present. The focus of the analysis will be divided between examining the two main characters of the film and discussing how the cinematic techniques used in the film affect its overall tone.

The second purpose of this study is to put the analysed 21st century portrayal of the Troubles into its proper film-historical context to see if any attitudinal shifts have occurred since the turn of the millennium. In this study's case, this means comparing the newly obtained analysis results to pre-existing research dealing with Troubles cinema of the 1990s. Furthermore, the analysed film's relation to the conventions of pre-90s Troubles cinema will also be addressed in order to see how the film fits into the continuum of Troubles films on a larger scale.

As for why the 90s specifically have been chosen for the comparison instead of some other time period, there are two reasons. Firstly, the time of the peace process is in itself an interesting point in

the history of Troubles cinema. It marks the rise of the loyalist movie villain defined by his psychopathic need to kill, thus providing an interesting point of reference. Secondly, I believe that in order to get reliable results about how the attitudes manifest in Troubles cinema have developed in the 21st century, the point of reference must be taken from as recent history as possible. For if a comparison was made between films of the 2010s and films of the 1970s, for example, it would be much more difficult to pinpoint which phenomena have emerged specifically in the current century.

The primary piece of background literature consulted in this study regarding the history of Troubles cinema is John Hill's influential book *Cinema and Northern Ireland: Film, Culture and Politics*. The book delves deep into the cultural and political circumstances surrounding the films that have been made in and about Northern Ireland in the course of its existence, covering every development up to the early 21st century. Hill's insightful account of how the Troubles have been depicted in cinema has been the principal source used in crafting the next section of this paper, where I outline the study's film-historical and theoretical background. For the subsection dealing with the 1990s, a few other scholarly works have also been consulted in order to give it sufficient depth.

2. Background

This section introduces some of the key phenomena in the history of Troubles cinema, focusing on the ways in which republican and loyalist paramilitaries have been represented on screen. First, a concise description will be provided of the conventions that have guided many of the Troubles films produced before the 1990s peace process, especially films dealing with republican paramilitaries. Then, in the second subsection, attention will be directed towards films produced during the peace process and their representations of loyalist paramilitaries. The purpose of this section as a whole is to provide the study with a film-historical and theoretical background which can then be reflected upon in the Analysis section to gain insight into how the examined 21st century film relates to earlier Troubles films. The controversial representations of loyalism which emerged in the 1990s have been afforded their own subsection in order to better enable the comparison of the analysed film specifically with Troubles cinema of the 90s.

2.1 The Troubles paradigm

For a long time, the republicans were the primary villains in films set in Northern Ireland. Starting with Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* (1947), which "set the pattern for many cinematic portraits of the 'troubles' that followed," (Hill 191) numerous films have told stories of IRA gunmen. Often, these stories have shared the same group of defining features, referred to by Hill as "the 'troubles' paradigm" (191). In this paper, the spelling of the term is changed to "Troubles paradigm" for the sake of consistency.

The Troubles paradigm has to do with both the narrative devices and the visual style used in much of Troubles cinema. In describing *Odd Man Out*, Hill states the following:

Combining tragic narration with expressionist stylistics (indebted to both French poetic realism and film noir), the film may be seen to have cultivated a particular view of the 'troubles' based upon metaphysics (the pessimistic workings of fate) rather than politics, a conflict between public and private spheres and a tension between different forms of male 'hero'. (191)

The quoted sentence collects together the four main tenets of the paradigm, which will next be explicated to the extent that is relevant for this study.

Firstly, films that follow the Troubles paradigm are visually reminiscent of gangster films. This essentially means that, through the use of low-key lighting and heavily stylised visual design, the films imbue their environments "with an abstract, 'placeless' quality" (Hill 191). Secondly, the films have tragic, even fatalistic narratives that end with the violent deaths of their lead characters (191–192). This, too, is a trademark feature of the gangster film genre. Thirdly, the films make a clear distinction "between the public world of politics and violence ... and the private world of romance, home, and domesticity" (192). This means that the films' characters often lead two different lives, one in the public sphere and another in the private sphere, with the latter being "linked with ... the possibility of 'redemption'" (192). Lastly, there has been "a longstanding tradition of distinguishing between two types of IRA men" (195). In Hill's words, these are "the misguided but fundamentally decent IRA man" and "the more fanatical, hardliner ... who remains wedded to the violent prosecution of 'the cause'" (192).

The Troubles paradigm will be taken into consideration in the analysis of *Five Minutes of Heaven* in order to see how the film relates to the older traditions of Troubles cinema as well as its more immediate predecessors.

2.2 Loyalists as psychopaths in 1990s Troubles films

Next, I investigate a phenomenon that film scholars widely consider a distinct attribute of 90s Troubles films, i.e. the discrimination of the Protestants via underrepresentation on the one hand, and mistreatment on the other. The cinematic misrepresentation of Ulster loyalists and the larger community of Protestants whom they stand for has been noted in several scholarly works, making it a point of discussion not to be bypassed in a film-historical account. Of course, the subject is of paramount importance to this particular study, as the intention here is to evaluate a 21st century representation of the Troubles in comparison with those of the 90s. What follows is a brief discussion of why and how loyalism has been targeted so unforgivingly. All of the articles that are referred to use the same two controversial 90s films as case examples, together providing a remarkably uniform view of what can be called the biased treatment of loyalism in the Troubles cinema of that period.

The 1990s saw noticeable changes in the ways in which Northern Ireland's Troubles were represented in films. What occurred during the peace process was the fading away of violent republicans from cinema screens, with the attention of filmmakers turning instead to newfound visions of peaceful republican domesticity and, since the IRA was finally ending its long-lasting campaign of violence, to the atrocities committed in the past by loyalist paramilitaries (Stephen Baker 88–89; K.J. Donnelly 390–391). According to Donnelly, the change was largely due to the IRA cease-fires that were called in 1994 and 1997. He states clearly: “The high-profile IRA cease-fire allowed for a shift of focus from Republican violence to Loyalist violence” (390–391). But Donnelly also suggests another reason for the sudden increase of anti-loyalism in films: “It could be argued that this reflects the realities of the continued Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) killings and civil disturbances caused by the blocking of Loyalist marches through Catholic areas” (391). Thus, the abrupt changes in the on-screen representations of the two groups can be considered a consequence of two concurrent factors: while the republicans were retreating from violence and ‘going domestic’, leaving in their wake a gap to be filled on the screen, the loyalists were unable to do the same, which in turn made them the likely new movie villains. It could be said that such a shift of focus was in fact long overdue. After all, as John Hill points out, focusing solely on republican violence “led to the relative invisibility of a

significant aspect of the conflict” (197). Nonetheless, the extreme portrayals of loyalist violence which followed raised great amounts of controversy, with *Resurrection Man* (1997) even uniting political opponents “in denouncing the film as ‘irresponsible’” (Hill 205–206).

Stephen Baker begins his account of the topic with a brief discussion of how the Protestants of Northern Ireland feel mistreated by the media, thus joining “the chorus of marginalised and oppressed sections in society that complain of being caricatured or ignored by the press, broadcasters and filmmakers” (83). “Whether loyalism can count itself among the beleaguered and marginalised is a moot point” according to Baker, but he goes on to point out that any privileges the loyalists of Northern Ireland may have enjoyed in the past have since “been eroded” (83–84). He then proceeds to address the issue by presenting examples of how cinematic portrayals in recent times have often ripped loyalism from its proper socio-cultural context, creating and confirming negative stereotypes and thus making it more difficult for the Protestant community to develop a healthy and unified cultural identity. Baker’s firm view on the matter is summarised best in his own words: “Seldom is loyalism presented in any historical or social context that would help illuminate its politics or its actions; nor is it afforded any sense of political idealism, and as a consequence it is reduced to a form of psychopathology” (84).

A recurring notion in the literature dealing with the subject is that, in cinematic representations, the proper context of loyalism is often replaced by the distinctive features and conventions of a film genre, which in effect deprives the loyalist film characters of the chance of having any true substance. For example, Baker argues that Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *Nothing Personal* (1996) is, “[a]t its core ... a gangster film,” owing “more to Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) and its gritty urban drama of male fealty” than to Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), which uses “the style and techniques of *cinéma-vérité* in its depiction of political insurrection” (89). Regarding the Marc Evans film *Resurrection Man*, Baker suggests the following: it “is in part a gangster film,” but also “draws inspiration from the horror genre, indicated immediately by its title that conjures up the notion of the undead” (91). He then goes even further in his analysis, comparing *Resurrection Man* to vampire films (Baker 91), and he is not the only one to do so. Cécile Bazin also points out the vampiric characteristics of Victor Kelly, the film’s main character: “Indeed, Victor’s psychopathology - his lust for the blood of his Catholic victims - shows in every crime and reaches its paroxysm in the bathroom sequence when he bathes one of his victims in his own blood” (9).

What both Baker and Bazin aim to demonstrate is that in genre films like *Nothing Personal* or *Resurrection Man* the genre itself instead of the real world has become the reality which the films attempt to replicate. This in turn diminishes the credibility of such films as historical accounts and,

in the particular cases discussed here, as truthful representations of Ulster loyalism (Baker 89, 91). Hence the statement that concludes Baker's analysis of *Resurrection Man*: "Seen in these terms *Resurrection Man* is less a film about loyalism and substantially a film about other films" (91).

The relation between the emergent trends of the 90s and the Troubles paradigm devised by John Hill is twofold. On the hand, the 90s films deviate clearly from the paradigm in two ways: by mostly focusing on loyalist instead of republican violence, and by developing "new, more optimistic scenarios than had previously been the case" (Hill 196). On the other hand, the films seem to struggle in trying to break free from certain conventions. According to Hill, while some of the 90s films "explicitly call for an end to violence on the part of the paramilitaries ... the films' emergent discourses of 'peace' are partly subverted by their familiar discourses of fatalism and pessimism" (196). Furthermore, as noted in the preceding paragraphs, the discussed 90s films rely heavily on the conventions of the gangster film genre, which is also true for older films that follow the Troubles paradigm. Thus, there is definitely a certain continuum that runs through the history of Troubles cinema and persists even through change.

3. Data and method of analysis

This study's data consists of one feature film, i.e. the 2008 docudrama *Five Minutes of Heaven*. The film is a collaboration of British and Irish production companies, but is directed by German director Oliver Hirschbiegel, probably best known for his critically acclaimed Adolf Hitler biopic *Downfall* from 2004. Starring in *Five Minutes of Heaven* are two of the most successful actors ever to come out of Northern Ireland, namely Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt.

What makes *Five Minutes of Heaven* particularly interesting is the way it combines historical events and real characters with fictional narrative. The film's two main characters are based on existing people, and the prologue reciting the event that changed both of their lives is also grounded in history. The story is about two men, a former UVF member named Alistair Little (Neeson) and a Catholic man named Joe Griffin (Nesbitt). Their fates are intertwined in 1975 when 17-year-old Alistair shoots and kills Joe's older brother Jim in an act of sectarian terrorism. While the prologue depicts the historical killing, the bulk of the film takes place thirty-three years later and is centred on a fictional meeting arranged by the media between the two men.

To begin the analysis of the film, a plot description is provided with the purpose of making the rest of the analysis easy to follow. Then, the film is analysed on the levels of content and style, with emphasis on the former. To be specific, the focus of the content analysis is on the films' characters, both of whom are examined in depth in their own subsections. As for the stylistic aspects taken under closer inspection, they include elements that affect the film's genre identification as well as its overall sense of authenticity, varying from details of *mise-en-scène* to the different cinematic techniques that are used. The objective is not to focus on any pre-determined aspects but to see what kinds of stylistic elements stand out in the film that somehow affect its portrayal of the Troubles. That being said, comparisons of the analysed data and the conventions of Troubles cinema discussed in the Background section are made whenever applicable.

The method used in the analysis is very straightforward. To put it simply, I examine the film carefully, making observations about the character arcs of Alistair and Joe as well as the film's audiovisual style, and then interpret the findings in relation to the study's research questions. In addition to more general remarks, I support my arguments by focusing on details that elucidate my overall interpretations. These details vary in scale from scenes that visualise an important aspect of a character's personality to individual shots that exemplify the film's stylistic features. Lastly, the character analyses contain several quotations from the film, transcribed for the most part by myself. In transcribing one of the quotations in section 4.3, however, a dialogue transcript from an online repository has been consulted (Drew's Script-O-Rama). The full link to the transcript is provided on the Works Cited page at the end of the paper.

4. Analysis

This analysis is divided into four subsections. The first of these contains a description of the film's plot and serves to make the rest of the analysis easier to follow. The second and third subsections deal with the characters of Alistair and Joe, respectively, examining the various ways in which they are humanised and victimised in the film. Finally, the fourth subsection addresses the film's audiovisual style and its connections to the genre of documentary films.

4.1 Plot description

The story of *Five Minutes of Heaven* can be divided into three distinct acts. The first act takes place in 1975 and is told through the perspective of the 17-year-old Alistair Little. In the beginning, we see young Alistair in his room, clearly nervous about the coming evening, and for good reason. He and three of his UVF friends are about to murder a Catholic worker named Jim Griffin, who has ignored Alistair's ultimatum: leave your job or lose your life. Telling his parents that he is going to a party, Alistair leaves home with one of his friends and they meet the other two, who have stolen a car for the job. After briefly discussing the job, they drive to the Griffins' house where Jim is watching television. Alistair gets out of the car, walks to the living room window, and shoots Griffin multiple times. Turning to head back to the car, he sees a little boy, shocked, standing but a few metres away from him. Not knowing that the boy is Jim's little brother, Joe, Alistair stares at him briefly and then escapes the scene. He is then shown arriving at a party, sipping a drink, and smiling with pride. In the last scene of the first act, the film cuts to Joe, who gets yelled at and blamed for his brother's death by his grief-stricken mother.

The second act of the film, taking place thirty-three years later, begins in a moving car with the now middle-aged Joe Griffin sitting in the backseat. He is on his way to a meeting arranged by the media, to see his brother's killer for the first time after the incident. Nervous and constantly speaking to himself — or rather to Alistair, only in his mind — Joe is clearly upset about the upcoming meeting. For some minutes, the film cuts between Joe and Alistair's viewpoints as they are being transported to the manor serving as the filming location. Joe arrives there first and is welcomed by an eager film crew. While Joe is getting ready to meet Alistair, the latter arrives at the set and talks on camera about his past mistakes and the senselessness of sectarian violence in general. The film's tension is then increased even further as Joe's true intentions are revealed to the viewer. He has not come to speak with his brother's murderer; he has come to kill him. However, things do not go according to Joe's plans. Conversing with a member of the film crew, he comes to doubt his conception of Alistair as a complacent and arrogant felon who is merely using his stature as a repenting murderer for his own benefit. The situation unravels before the two even get to meet each other, as Joe backs out at the last second, dashing out of the building and leaving for home.

While the second act focuses mostly on Joe, the third act makes Alistair the centre of attention again. After the failed meeting attempt, he is shown living his life, seeing a therapist and working as a support person for people with violent pasts. Haunted by his memories and his guilt, he struggles to

get through everyday life, and ultimately decides to contact Joe. He travels from Belfast to their hometown of Lurgan, and has a message delivered to Joe, telling him that he is willing to meet. Seeing this as his last chance of revenge, Joe sets up the meeting at his now deserted childhood home. The film then reaches its climax, as Alistair walks right into Joe's ambush. The two engage in a brutal fistfight that ends with both of them crashing through an upstairs window and onto the street below. Miraculously, both still draw breath, but neither of them are in fighting shape. Alistair attempts to make peace for the final time, telling Joe to forget him and to live his life for his daughters. The tension is then diffused as Alistair leaves the scene and Joe is left alone, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands. In the final minutes of the film, Joe is shown watching television with his family and then attending a group therapy session, where he states that he wants to be a father that his daughters can be proud of, and bursts into tears. The film ends with Alistair walking the streets of Belfast and receiving a call from Joe. "We're finished," Joe says, and hangs up the call. Overwhelmed with relief to the point of tears, Alistair crouches in the middle of a pedestrian crossing. He then looks up with gratitude in his eyes, and finally continues walking.

4.2 Character analysis of Alistair

The story of *Five Minutes of Heaven* begins and ends with Alistair as the focal character. Alistair is an extremely interesting character, as he is simultaneously a protagonist and a villain. On the one hand, he is the one who sets in motion the terrible chain of events that more or less ruins the lives of Joe Griffin and himself. Yet, on the other hand, the crime that he commits is depicted merely as a fatal mistake made under the intoxicating influence of sectarian thinking, and his repentance and emotional suffering afterwards seem sincere. The key word to be used in describing the character of Alistair is 'human'. Unlike the vampiric loyalist killers in 90s Troubles films, he is not portrayed as in any way deranged or violent by nature. The murder that he commits is not a crime of passion fuelled by hatred or bloodlust, nor does the character have any other qualities that might be considered as signs of mental degradation or lack of basic humanity. Instead, he is represented as an ordinary person from the beginning, only misguided and morally blinded by his grim ideology, which in turn has been borne from the miserable circumstances of the Troubles.

The early scene that takes place in Alistair's home is important when considering the film's representations of loyalism and Protestantism at large, as it provides the context for Alistair's radicalisation. Whereas the previously discussed 90s films portrayed loyalists as inherently violent,

in effect serving to denigrate the entire Protestant community, *Five Minutes of Heaven* takes a different approach. When Alistair is in his room preparing for the job, looking at himself in the mirror and loading his revolver, he seems anxious rather than enthusiastic. Although excited about the fame and recognition he is about to receive from his UVF superiors, he clearly does not take the killing lightly, nor does he expect to enjoy it. In other words, his behaviour seems like what could be expected from any human being in his situation. The scene also constructs the character of Alistair more subtly, through set decoration: the poster of Bruce Lee in Alistair's room connects the character to the worldwide phenomenon of Bruce Lee fandom, further supporting the impression that he is, at his core, just an ordinary boy.

Furthermore, Alistair's parents appear to be unaware of his loyalist connections, and they are portrayed as ordinary, kind people. Thus, the film cannot be accused of staining the reputation of all of Northern Ireland's Protestants, as Alistair's lapsing into loyalism and sectarian violence clearly happens in spite of his family conditions and his upbringing, not because of them. It should be noted, though, that while differing from the trend of the 90s, this aspect of the film can be considered to follow the Troubles paradigm, for a line is clearly drawn between Alistair's public world of violence and private world of peaceful domesticity. However, deviating from the paradigm, the conflict between the two spheres is not emphasised in any way, as Alistair is not shown to agonise over whether he should cut his loyalist connections in favour of a peaceful life.

It is made clear in the film that the motivations behind Alistair's violent crime are largely extrinsic, deriving from the UVF's toxic influence on its recruits. The true villain of the film is sectarianism itself, corrupting the minds of youngsters such as Alistair, and leading them to believe that violence committed in the name of their cause is justified or even commendable. This point is explicated many times in the film, presumably in an effort to ensure the viewer's perception of Alistair as a victim of circumstance rather than an evil character to be detested. The first scene where Alistair's motivations are illuminated is before the murder, when he and his friends are having a conversation in the car that they have stolen for the job. Mentioning a senior UVF member named Sammy, who has given the murder his blessing, Alistair is clearly proud of the trust that he has earned from his superiors and devoted to fulfilling their expectations. He later explains these circumstances to Joe, after their fight near the end of the film:

... We were told that a Protestant worker had been threatened. And if he didn't leave the yard, he'd be shot. I asked who the Catholics were working there. Somebody said, Jim Griffin. I said, tell him, if he doesn't leave, I'll shoot him. I knew he was leaving

anyway, but it didn't make a difference. It was my decision. I was up for anything, to kill anyone. I wanted to be someone. I wanted to walk into the bar a man. Walk in ten-foot-tall and hear the applause from the only people that mattered to me then. And I heard it, and it was good. ...

Another, more elaborate explanation of the reasons behind Alistair's radicalisation is presented in the second act, when he speaks to the recording film camera:

... At that time, don't forget, there were riots on the streets every week, petrol bombs every day. ... Fathers and brothers of friends were being killed in the streets, and the feeling was, we all have to do something. We're all in this together and we all have to do something. The thing you have to remember, what you have to understand, is the mindset. Once you have signed up to terror and joined the organisation, the group, your mind closes right down. It becomes only our story that matters, not their story, the Catholics'. It's only my people that are being killed and who are suffering and who need looking after. Catholics being killed doesn't enter your head. And so, when I went up to Sammy, our local commander, and told him I wanted to kill a Catholic man, it wasn't a wrong thing for me to do. In my head, it was the proper, the just, the fair, the good thing to do. And so, it was easy. ...

These scenes serve to make Alistair's actions understandable, essentially establishing him as a relatable character for whom the viewer can feel sympathy, even if his crime remains unacceptable. This manner of approach to sectarian violence, the fact that the perpetrator is not demonised but is presented as distinctly human, is utterly different from the 90s representations of loyalist gangs discussed above. It seems to serve the purpose of making the viewer contemplate on the very nature of sectarianism instead of merely evoking emotions of anger and revulsion towards one of the conflict's parties. In doing so, *Five Minutes of Heaven* exposes the faultiness of the line of thought that Troubles films have often followed, in which catharsis is reached through the inevitable death of the evil main character. Such endings derive their power from the viewer's craving for revenge, in effect ratifying the very sectarianism that the films seemingly attempt to condemn. *Five Minutes of Heaven* bears a different message. It focuses on the shared humanity of its main characters, advocating a solution based on tolerance and peaceful coexistence instead of hatred and continued 'tit for tat' violence.

Thus far, two important points have been addressed: the film's portrayal of Alistair as an ordinary boy with seemingly healthy family conditions, and the way his crime is depicted as the result of the UVF's corrupting influence rather than his own evilness or thirst for violence. To conclude the

analysis of Alistair's character, one more aspect will be discussed, i.e. his own victimisation. Throughout the second and third acts of the film, there are scenes that express Alistair's repentance and the torment caused by his feelings of guilt. Unlike Joe seems to assume, Alistair is not simply benefiting from his stature as a convicted felon, touring the world and getting rich and famous by talking about his experience. In fact, he is struggling to live with himself, seeking some kind of redemption through helping other people in support groups and speaking publicly about the dangers involved in joining a paramilitary organisation.

Alistair's torment becomes the focal point of the narrative at the junction between the second and third acts of the film, starting with a brief flashback from the night of Jim Griffin's murder, which employs point of view shots of Alistair and the horrified little Joe staring at each other in the street. What follows soon after is a sequence depicting Alistair's everyday life in the present day. A scene of him talking to his therapist is interlaced with shots of his daily activities, with his monologue from the therapy session playing continuously on the audio track for the duration of the montage. Liam Neeson's intensive performance is one of the factors that make Alistair a believable character whom the viewer can empathise with, and the following lines quoted from the abovementioned monologue are among the most emotionally charged in the film:

Thirty-three years that boy has been living in this head. Standing there, staring at me, looking up at me. Never leaving me. Never leaving. Every morning waiting for me. And I know he'll be there for always.

[a brief pause as Alistair draws breath and becomes almost tearful]

I don't know what to do anymore, how to deal with this. I feel I've come to the end of what I can take.

Although already hinted at in the second act, this is the first instance in the film where Alistair's remorseful and distressed state of mind is thoroughly examined. The inside perspective into his life and thoughts reveals to the viewer something that Joe does not yet realise or is not ready to accept: that Alistair, just like himself, is a prisoner of his own past, suffering greatly and sincerely from his mistakes.

Lastly, another vague connection between the film and the Troubles paradigm emerges during the montage sequence. While talking to his therapist, Alistair mentions an old UVF friend, whom he is simultaneously shown visiting in a pub. Released from prison after the Good Friday Agreement, the man has returned to his old life of violence and "is still living it, just like he always was." The

distinction made here between Alistair and his extremist friend resembles the above discussed tradition of distinguishing between “misguided but fundamentally decent IRA [men]” and their “more fanatical, hardliner” comrades (Hill 195). However, the connection is indeed vague, for Alistair’s friend only appears in the film for approximately thirty seconds, and the viewer never gets to see his fanaticism in action.

4.3 Character analysis of Joe

Similarly to Alistair, the character of Joe is constructed as ambivalent to some extent. Whereas Alistair starts as the villain of the story but is later portrayed as essentially good, Joe in turn loses part of his initial innocence due to his attempts at revenge. However, the character is so thoroughly established as a severely traumatised and suffering victim that it is difficult for the viewer to condemn his desire to retaliate. In other words, Joe’s actions, although fundamentally unacceptable, are nonetheless made understandable, precisely like in Alistair’s case. Even thirty-three years after the murder of his brother, Joe is still visibly upset about the incident and its horrible repercussions. The feelings expressed by him include guilt, bitterness, and anger, the latter two being directed at Alistair and intensifying as the story progresses towards its climax. In this part of the analysis, I examine how these feelings are manifested in the film and how Joe’s character is constructed as emotionally damaged. These observations constitute the basis for the argument that Joe is depicted as a victim rather than a villain, despite his attempts to take revenge on Alistair.

The first thing to suggest that everything is not right with Joe is his nervous demeanour and continuous internal monologue. When being transported to the manor serving as the filming location, he begins to hesitate whether accepting to meet Alistair has been a mistake, and almost makes the driver turn around and take him back to his home. As the car ride continues, Joe keeps talking to himself internally, occasionally slipping and speaking some words out loud. The following quotation is comprised of both Joe’s internal monologue and his rant to the driver, and effectively summarises Joe’s bitterness towards Alistair:

[out loud, to the driver:]

I mean, where would he be without me? Forty years in the factory in Lurgan making egg cartons like the rest of us. Aye, not him. He can make a living telling the Pope and

the Queen and the Dalai fucking Lama how it feels to kill a man. How it feels, the suffering I have, the burden I carry.

[switching to internal monologue:]

Why should you get women in pastel shades and rosy perfumes giving you tea and buns and wine from fucking Chile, just so's you can tell them how it feels to be putting three bullets into my brother's head? Twelve years for armed robbery, membership and murder.

[out loud again, startling the driver:]

Fuck!

As the quotation indicates, Joe is angry with Alistair not only for killing his brother, but also because he thinks that Alistair has got away with his crime too easily. On top of getting out of prison after serving only twelve years, Joe believes Alistair to be profiting from the crime by touring the world and doing the work of an entertainer. Although the viewer is subsequently presented with the truth about Alistair's life and mental health, it is nonetheless easy to understand Joe's point of view and his resentment.

Joe's nervousness and agitation are manifested in several ways in the film, the constant flow of speech and thoughts discussed above being but one of them. The second factor that adds to the impression of the character's general restlessness is James Nesbitt's efficient acting. To give an example, one of the most distinguishable aspects of Nesbitt's performance is the rapidity with which he delivers his lines. Depending on the situation, it makes Joe seem either edgy or preoccupied, and puts him in sharp contrast with Alistair, whose appearance and speech usually convey calmness. However, possibly the single most telling feature of Joe's behaviour, with regard to his anxiety, is his habit of smoking when under high levels of stress, which will be discussed next.

The first time that Joe is seen smoking in the film is during the journey to the filming location. After a brief flashback from Joe's childhood, showing his mother blaming him for his brother's death, Joe begins to pant in distress and tells the driver to stop the car. He then gets out of the car and hastily lights a cigarette, looking clearly relieved immediately after the first puff. The next two instances of smoking take place at the manor when Joe is getting ready to meet Alistair, and serve to strengthen the impression that Joe's smoking is habitual and very frequent. The fourth instance, which takes place after Joe and Alistair's fight near the end of the film, verges on comicalness. Having fallen through a second-story window only moments before, barely able to breathe, Joe waits for Alistair to finish his speech, and then lights a cigarette with shaking hands. The film then cuts to its fifth and final smoking scene, in which the battered and bruised Joe is shown smoking in front of his current

home, seemingly pondering on something — presumably the words of Alistair, telling him to forget about him and live his life for his daughters.

As evidenced above, Joe's smoking is a recurring motif in the film, and it serves to construct his character in a meaningful way. For Joe, smoking is not merely a bad habit or a way to pass the time, but a way to relieve stress which he could not handle otherwise. Given the deliberate emphasis that is placed on Joe's smoking addiction in the film, it can be seen to exemplify his inability to deal with his emotions. Seeing as Joe reacts to every stressful situation by lighting a cigarette, one can make the interpretation that he has severe difficulties in dealing with emotional stress and negative feelings in general. This in turn can be deduced to derive from Joe's childhood trauma, heightened by his mother's detrimental behaviour towards him. Thus, Joe's smoking is an important factor in the establishment of the character as tragic and pitiable, as it reveals his weakness and serves as a reminder of his constant emotional struggle as well as his traumatic past.

The next thing to be addressed is Joe's guilt. While Joe does not explicitly express or admit guilt at any point in the film, it is nonetheless made clear that he struggles with such feelings and is haunted by memories of being blamed by his mother for his brother's death. The harshness with which his mother has treated him is emphasised heavily in the film, through scenes from Joe's childhood. One of these scenes, namely the aforementioned flashback which results in Joe telling his driver to stop the car, takes place in the kitchen of Joe's childhood home and, judging by the characters' attires, during his brother's memorial service. Holding a saucer and a cup in her trembling hand, Joe's mother cries at him: "You could have stopped him. Why didn't you stop him? You could have stopped him." Unable to defend himself in any way, Joe just stands in the doorway, staring at his mother silently and letting her words take root in his mind. Another, even more horrific instance of Joe's mother blaming him takes place at the end of the first act, soon after the murder incident. In this scene, Joe sits in the backseat of a car, waiting for his family, who have been escorting his dead brother to the hospital. Seized by grief and anger, her mother walks up to the car, flings open the backdoor, and starts shaking Joe, hitting him, and yelling at him: "Why didn't you do something? You didn't do anything. ... You killed him, your own brother."

Both of the scenes described above are charged with emotion and serve to make the viewer feel pity for Joe, who is entirely innocent in the situation. They also explain in large part Joe's current emotional turmoil, and it could even be argued that being maltreated by his mother may have ultimately traumatised him more than witnessing his brother's killing. The point here, however, is that the sympathy garnered for Joe during the first half of the film ensures that the viewer does not regard his later revenge attempts as evil or reprehensible.

Lastly, it would be possible to argue that the inevitability of the violent encounter at the end of the story connects the film to the Troubles paradigm. However, such an interpretation seems inept, for while resolution is sought through violence at first, the film is actually tricking the viewer into thinking that the story will end with Joe and Alistair's final confrontation. In the end, neither of them are killed, and a peaceful resolution is achieved. The fact that Joe cannot simply forgive Alistair is part of the film's grim realism, and can be seen to reflect the difficult situation in which the people of today's post-Troubles Northern Ireland find themselves. However, Joe's bitterness and craving for revenge are ultimately outweighed by his love and concern for his family, especially his daughters, for whom he wants to secure a better future. Here lies the film's final message: that the only way for Joe to truly achieve freedom is to choose peace over violence and let go of his revengeful thoughts.

4.4 Genre and style

In this subsection, I address some of the film's stylistic features and its connections to the genre of documentary films. These are important aspects to consider when evaluating the authenticity of the film's portrayal of the Troubles, and they also provide a useful point of comparison between *Five Minutes of Heaven* and earlier Troubles cinema. As discussed earlier, Troubles films have traditionally followed the conventions of gangster films, with some films also implementing horror elements. According to the literature consulted in this study, this has often resulted in representations that have had more to do with the history of said film genres than the history of Northern Ireland, and the Troubles have essentially been decontextualized. The purpose of this final analysis is to examine how *Five Minutes of Heaven* differs from its predecessors in its genre connections, and how the film's visual style adds to its overall sense of authenticity.

The first thing to be addressed is the film's overall style. Visually, the film can be called minimalistic. The cinematography avoids any grandeur that might draw the viewer's attention to, for example, the composition of the shots, i.e. away from the characters and the narrative. Furthermore, hand-held shooting is used as a device to increase the film's documentary feel, differentiating it stylistically from big budget blockbuster films. On the audio side, there is likewise very little to attract attention. Minimalism is the key word to be used in describing the film's soundtrack, which mainly consists of some high notes played on the piano during flashback scenes, and a melancholic theme played on the guitar that occasionally creates atmosphere in the background. Although the music is used to subtly increase the emotional impact of certain scenes, it is employed in an unobtrusive manner and serves

a smaller function than, e.g., a typical orchestral film score. All of these stylistic aspects work together to make the film's story feel authentic and believable rather than imaginary, giving it a distinct sense of realism.

Of course, the film's connections to the documentary genre are not only aesthetic. As mentioned earlier, the main characters are based on existing people, and the beginning of the story is based on real historical events. Combined with how the film starts, this makes for a setting that convinces the viewer of the film's truthfulness, even in spite of the fact that two-thirds of the plot is completely fictitious. To clarify, the film contains a brief, documentary-style montage sequence which is presented between the opening credits and the actual prologue. First, the following information is presented on screen as text: "An estimated 3720 people were killed as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This film is a fiction inspired by two men who bear the legacy of one of these killings." Then, Alistair's voice occupies the audio track, and he starts to talk about his past: "For me to talk about the man I have become, you need to know about the man I was. ..." The lines that follow are taken from the speech given by Alistair when he is being filmed in the second act of the film. Accompanying the monologue in the beginning of the film is a brief shot of the 17-year-old Alistair staring into the camera on the night of the murder, followed by a montage of real footage of the Troubles. The montage consists mainly of violent images of riots, bombings, dead bodies, etc., culminating in a shot of a man tugging himself forward on the ground with only his hands, in a barren, war-torn cityscape.

The use of real historical footage is common for documentary films as well as historical fiction films, and in the case of *Five Minutes of Heaven*, it helps to establish the film as an authentic and credible account of the Troubles. As for the snippet of Alistair's speech that is heard together with the montage, it too serves the purpose of connecting the film to the documentary genre, for documentary films often feature a person recounting past events of his or her life. Together the speech, the montage, and the fact that the story is partly based on history work effectively to imbue the film with a strong sense of authenticity.

The final point to be addressed has to do with the film's setting, or rather how the setting is made explicit by a few simple yet efficient means. In addition to the montage of real footage of the Troubles at the very beginning of the film, the fact that the story takes place specifically in Northern Ireland is further emphasised during the prologue. The story of the film begins in the year 1975, in the town of Lurgan, and the Northern Irishness of the setting is highlighted in a manner that cannot go unnoticed: on a few occasions, when the film cuts to a new locale, a flag is shown flapping on a pole. Of course, the flags differ according to the neighbourhood that is being filmed, with the Irish flag representing

Catholicism/republicanism and the Union Jack representing Protestantism/loyalism. Also visible in one scene is a loyalist mural on the gable end of a building. In this way, the story of the film is placed firmly in its proper Northern Irish context, which is something that earlier Troubles films have often failed to do, whether intentionally or not. Indeed, one common feature of earlier Troubles cinema is that the films' representations of Northern Ireland's cities have often been "shorn of realistic detail" and filmed in a heavily stylised manner, establishing the setting as "a generalised 'city of the imagination'" (Hill 197). *Five Minutes of Heaven* seems to be aware of this tradition and to deliberately avoid following it, as evidenced by both its attention to detail and its minimalistic, documentary-style cinematography.

All things considered, *Five Minutes of Heaven* can be said to aim for authenticity and realism in its portrayal of the Troubles. Whereas many of its predecessors have relied on the conventions of genres such as that of the gangster film, the film uses realistically detailed *mise-en-scène* and combines fictional narrative with documentary film techniques to make its socio-historical setting feel authentic and its story believable.

5. Discussion/conclusion

Five Minutes of Heaven is an exceptional Troubles film in that it features a Protestant and a Catholic as its main characters and they are treated with equal sympathy. The film transgresses the boundaries of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide in its portrayal of the two men, delving right into the human qualities that ultimately define them both. Unlike in much of earlier Troubles cinema, neither side of the conflict is demonised or romanticised. The characters of Alistair and Joe are both afforded sufficient screen time, giving the viewer a chance to get to know each of them along with their tormenting thoughts. This serves to evoke conflicting emotions in the viewer, making it difficult to perceive either of the characters as evil in their intents. Indeed, the message that *Five Minutes of Heaven* seemingly aims to convey is that there are no villains in the story, only victims. The characters ultimately find their peace not through vengeance, perhaps not even through forgiveness, but through the simple yet difficult decision to let go of the past and end the cycle of violence.

In addition to the impartial representations of its two main characters, the film also differs considerably from its 90s predecessors in its style. Using documentary film techniques and real historical events as its backbone, the film strives for authenticity and truthfulness in its portrayal of

the Troubles. The result is a narrative that feels believable in spite of being half fictional. There is no trace of the gangster or horror genres or their dark, heavily stylised look in *Five Minutes of Heaven*. This places it outside the tradition that many Troubles films before it have followed, including the previously discussed 90s films with psychopathic loyalist main characters. However, for all that it does differently, there is one significant similarity between the film and its predecessors, i.e. its neglect of dealing with the political goals of Ulster loyalists. Considering the notable effort that is put into humanising the character of Alistair and explaining the circumstances of his radicalisation, it is peculiar that loyalism as a political ideology still does not get its concerns voiced. But instead of counting the film as yet another strike against the loyalist side of the conflict, I would like to suggest a more positive interpretation. Indeed, the decision to omit any political views from the narrative seems to serve the film's overall purpose, which is to expose Northern Irish sectarianism for what it is at grassroots level: senseless 'tit for tat' violence that traumatises everyone involved.

As for the film's relation to the Troubles paradigm, it is not completely unequivocal. On the one hand, the film does seemingly adhere to some of the paradigm's conventions, but on the other hand, the connections are vague and appear insignificant. It is difficult to determine with certainty whether the filmmakers' intention has been to consciously avoid following certain traditions, or to indeed follow them but in a very subtle manner. The former option seems more likely, however, especially considering the way in which the film deals with the tradition of violent endings. By falsely leading the viewer to believe that the story will end with Joe and Alistair's fight, the film clearly uses to its advantage the expectations created by the Troubles paradigm. Provided that the viewer is familiar with earlier Troubles films, he or she is likely to be surprised by the fact that neither of the main characters are killed in the encounter.

This steering away from the fatalism and pessimism of earlier Troubles cinema and towards a more positive outlook on the future is one of two key aspects that dissociate *Five Minutes of Heaven* from the Troubles paradigm, the other one being its distinctly documentary style. Considering, then, that the remaining connections to the paradigm, i.e. the distinctions made between Alistair's public and private worlds and between him and his more fanatical UVF comrade, do not play a significant part in the film's narrative, it can be argued that the film breaks the old conventions of Troubles cinema rather than follows them. This, combined with the remarks made about the film's difference from its 90s predecessors, would suggest that the film falls outside of the longstanding continuum of fundamentally similar Troubles films discussed in section 2.2, and is in fact unique in its approach to its subject matter.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that based on this study alone, no generalisations can be made regarding how the Troubles have been portrayed in cinema in recent years. For while *Five Minutes of Heaven* has garnered success at festivals and award shows (for example, at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival) it is still a rather small film, and its novel approach cannot be assumed to be representative of recent Troubles cinema at large. Further research should be conducted on a wide range of films to attain a general view of the attitudes and moods manifest in 21st century representations of the Troubles. However, the findings of this study do tentatively suggest that Troubles cinema has taken a step towards neutrality in how the conflict and its participants are portrayed.

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