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‘All this must come to an end. Through talking’: Dialogue and Troubles Cinema

In late December 2008, the British government released a new round of state papers under the thirty-year rule. Among the files uncensored was a document from the office of the then British Prime Minister, James Callaghan, which revealed that the IRA had sent a message to the British government in 1978 indicating that it was willing to enter talks concerned with ending its violent campaign in the North. The offer was rejected outright by the British government with the then permanent under-secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, Sir Brian Cubbon, remarking that it was ‘essential that we should not say or do anything in reply that gives any hint that we have considered their message or are taking it seriously.’1 Whether this offer might have provided a realistic opportunity to progress a peace process that would take until the late 1980s to begin,2 and cost many thousands of lives in the interim, we will never know. The history of the

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2 While initial talks between British authorities and the IRA may have occurred as early as 1972 (see for instance Tim Pat Coogan, The Troubles: Ireland’s Ordeal 1966–1996 and the Search for Peace (New York: Natl Book Network, 1997), 174–8), the peace process that eventually led to the Good Friday Agreement is usually dated from the talks between John Hume and Gerry Adams, which began in January 1988, and particularly the initiatives of the early 1990s, including private meetings between representatives of the British government and republicans, and the Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993 (see Brian Barton, ‘The Historical Background to the Belfast Agreement’, in Brian Barton and Patrick J. Roche, eds, The Northern Ireland Question: The Peace Process and the Belfast Agreement (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12–37).
Troubles was marked by such an absence of dialogue, an absence that was reflected, and arguably contributed to, by the representation of the conflict in film. Through the recurring depiction of combatants, whether republican or loyalist, as atavistic, deranged and irrationally violent, directors ultimately suggested the impossibility of dialogue with such people. This process was contributed to by the generic forms adopted by directors in their portrayals, but also built upon long standing stereotypes concerning the Irish, particularly at points of political contention. With respect to the overall focus of this volume, the principal concern in this chapter is with the relationship of the arts, and particularly film, in Ireland to society and above all to the contested political sphere of Northern Ireland. This essay will consider some relevant films in this respect and suggest reasons why *Hunger* (2008) represents a significant departure in cinematic portrayals of the conflict, in a film marked by both an absence of dialogue and a real concern to facilitate it when the opportunity arises. Furthermore, *Hunger* purposely eschews a generic approach to its portrayal of a crucial moment in the Troubles while simultaneously foregrounding the ekphrastic potential of film.

Cinematic representations of the Troubles have developed from a long tradition of representing Irish violence, a tradition in which the possibility of dialogue was rarely suggested. Indeed, as both John Hill3 and Martin McLoone4 have identified, representations of Irish violence in American and particularly British cinema draw on the traditions of representing Ireland in popular British media since the nineteenth century in such publications as *Punch* magazine, but with roots as far back as the thirteenth century in colonial writing. While film has rarely provided depictions as crude as those found in *Punch*, cinematic portrayals of Irish violence have nonetheless relied heavily on familiar negative stereotypes. As Martin McLoone has observed, while political cartoons such as those

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found in *Punch* ‘work through exaggeration and the grotesque, laced with humour or irony’, the cinema, ‘on the other hand, works through repetition and recognisable stereotypes’. In fact, as McLoone continues:

popular cinema has never been particularly interested in, or adept at, dealing with political situations, so it is hardly surprising that the great number of films down the years that have dabbled with Irish politics have tended to reinforce existing stereotypes. In the films that have dealt specifically with political violence in Ireland, the tendency has been to use dominant negative stereotypes to deny the politics of the situation and to blame the Irish themselves for their own proclivity to violence.

John Hill has traced the development of cinematic representations of the Troubles from Carol Reed’s 1947 film *Odd Man Out*, the first film to engage with the conflict. The film stars James Mason as the leader of the unidentified ‘Organisation’ (read the IRA) Johnny McQueen, who as the film begins has recently been released from prison. After a bauched robbery of a local mill for funds, Johnny’s shooting, and his failure to get back into the get-away car, he is forced to go on the run from the police. As noted by John Hill, ‘it is the operations of fate […] which are the central preoccupation’ of *Odd Man Out*, in a film stylistically heavily indebted to German expressionism in its low-key lighting, chiaroscuro contrasts, and foreboding ominous shadows, formal strategies which ‘conventionally carry meanings of preordained fate and determinism’.

In its focus on the exponents of political violence as individuals subject principally to the operations of fate, *Odd Man Out* offers little possibility of dialogue as a means to progress or change in the society depicted. This focus on fate is also evident in the use of pathetic fallacy, whereby the weather conditions that Johnny must endure in his attempt to rejoin his comrades deteriorate considerably as his predicament worsens, moving from sunshine, to rain, sleet and eventually snow when Johnny is inevitably

gunned down with his girlfriend Kathleen (Kathleen Ryan) by the police in the final scene. From the moment we witness Johnny strapping on his gun early in *Odd Man Out*, his deleterious destiny is set along with that of other characters within the Organisation, including his lover Kathleen.

As Hill has observed, while fate provides the explanation for violence in *Odd Man Out*, it is the internal flaws of Irish characters that are depicted as responsible for violence in other films from the 1950s, including Basil Dearden’s *The Gentle Gunman* (1952) and Michael Anderson’s *Shake Hands with the Devil* (1959). Similar depictions of Irish political violence would emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, including Tay Garnett’s *A Terrible Beauty* (1960) and Don Sharpe’s *The Violent Enemy* (1967) and *Hennessy* (1975), and this tradition continued to influence depictions of the Troubles in both British, American and Irish cinema in subsequent decades, including films by the Irish directors Neil Jordan (*Angel* (1982)) and Pat O’Connor (*Cal* (1984)). Further commercially successful American examples from the 1990s include *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Blown Away* (1994), with both films depicting deranged republicans engaged in horrific and often irrational acts of violence.

Given the recurrence of such limited depictions of the Troubles, it is not surprising to find the Irish director Pat Murphy responding with frustration in 1995, particularly with regard to

the way people were mythologized, the way forms of rational thinking were taken away, the way the North was seen as being in the grip of these dark mythological forces and the way it was never seen that people created these problems and that people could solve them.¹⁰

Murphy’s *Maeve* (1981), co-directed with John Davies, offered a more complex depiction of the Troubles in a film focused principally on the relationship of women with the republican movement, through the person of a returned emigrant from London, Maeve Sweeney (Mary Jackson).

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Significantly and unusually, a large part of the film is given over to dialogue, particularly between Maeve and her former boyfriend Liam (John Keegan), a republican who is critical of her feminism and the divisive impact it could have on the republican movement. Maeve also adopted an avant-garde approach to its subject, eschewing mainstream narrative conventions (discussed below) and popular genre forms such as the thriller and melodrama often adopted by filmmakers depicting the Troubles. As summarized by Ruth Barton, the film offered ‘little potential for character identification or conventional narrative engagement’.

However, Maeve’s distinctive aesthetic was not followed by other Irish filmmakers, such that by the late 1980s John Hill could observe how ‘representations of the Irish characteristically associated with sources outside of Ireland have now, apparently, become so ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ that they are providing a framework for certain sections of Irish film-making as well’.

In a 1991 review of Ken Loach’s Northern Ireland set film Hidden Agenda (1990), Hill argued that one of the challenges facing directors producing films set in Northern Ireland or concerned with the Troubles was the problems inherent in trying to employ dominant narrative and realist forms to explore complex political realities. The results are such that characters and situations peripheral to the central protagonists are frequently depicted in a stereotypical and clichéd manner. As Hill contends,

Hollywood’s narrative conventions characteristically encourage explanations of social realities in individual and psychological terms rather than economic and political ones, while the conventions of realism, with their requirement of a convincing (or realistic) dramatic illusion, not only highlight observable, surface realities at the expense of, possibly more fundamental, underlying ones but also inevitably attach a greater significance to interpersonal relations than social, economic and political structures.

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Furthermore, the necessity within Hollywood genre film to provide a coherent narrative results in ‘a closed micro-system within which all questions raised are answered’, while few of the real complexities are engaged. As Mark C. Carnes argues, ‘Hollywood history […] fills irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities […] It] sparkles because it is so morally unambiguous, so devoid of tedious complexity’.

The weaknesses of generic approaches to depictions of the Troubles are particularly apparent in those portrayals that emerged from Irish directors such as Jim Sheridan, Thaddeus O’Sullivan and Terry George in the 1990s. The Peace Process significantly raised the profile of the region internationally, and this was reflected in an increase in Troubles themed films produced over the decade, including Sheridan’s *In the Name of the Father* (1993), Terry George’s *Some Mother’s Son* (1996) (also co-written by Sheridan) and Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *Nothing Personal* (1995), all set at central moments in the Troubles. *In the Name of the Father* begins at the height of The Troubles in the early 1970s; *Nothing Personal* is set during a precarious ceasefire in the mid-1970s between loyalist and republican groups; and *Some Mother’s Son* takes place during one of the defining moments for contemporary republicanism, the 1981 Hunger strikes in HM Prison Maze when ten men voluntarily starved themselves to death in order to be classed as political rather than criminal prisoners. This had a crucial bearing on republicans’ engagement with constitutional politics in the North, which would eventually lead to today’s Peace Process. These films are particularly important as (with the exception of *Nothing Personal*) they were among the most commercially successful films set during the Troubles produced in the 1990s. While *In the Name of the Father* broke Irish box office records on its release, taking IR£2.4 million (over €3 million), *Some Mother’s Son* was the tenth most popular Irish film at the Irish

box office in the 1990s with takings of almost €1 million. As studies of the cinema have indicated, popular film can play a critical role in informing understandings of political issues, understandings that may however obscure the actual historical and social complexities involved. While these films revealed the increasing willingness of Irish directors to engage with crucial moments in the Troubles themselves, the choice of dominant generic forms such as the melodrama and the thriller to do so militated against the development of more complex depictions.

The melodrama is a genre characterized by exaggerated plots and characters, often centring on their intense emotional experiences and thereby appealing to the emotions of the viewer. However, as noted by John Hill with regard to the Troubles-set melodrama Cal (1984),


by centring on private emotions, and using them as the yardstick of political action, it is inevitable that the ability to deal with politics will suffer. The contest between love and politics is bound to be unfairly matched; its conclusion predictable. As Joe McMinn suggests, ‘an intelligible and compassionate sense of History’ lies beyond the reach of the story’s romantic conventions. So, while the film’s central characters – the lovers – enjoy a degree of inner complexity, the characters who stand in for ‘politics’ are stripped of all except their malignance.

A case in point is Jim Sheridan’s melodrama In the Name of the Father, his multi-Oscar nominated account of the conviction, imprisonment and eventual release of four innocent people – centrally Gerry Conlon – for the Guildford IRA bombings in 1974. The film moves from an exhilarating (if brief) opening engagement with the context from which Conlon emerged – a petty thief operating in the contested terrain of Belfast in the early 1970s – to a focus on the troubled relationship between Conlon (Daniel Day-Lewis) and his father Giuseppe (Pete Postlethwaite), also wrongly

16 Lance Pettitt, Screening Ireland: Film and television representation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 286.
imprisoned, and for melodramatic purposes depicted in the film as sharing the same cell as Conlon. Indeed, in this respect the film is ultimately less about the Troubles – which again functions principally as a backdrop for most of the film – than a moral tale concerning the father-son relationship at its centre.\(^{19}\) As a consequence, those who represent the IRA are stereotypically portrayed, demonized and marginalized, particularly apparent in the depiction of the IRA prisoner Joe McAndrew (Don Baker), an entirely fictionalized character included arguably to appeal to established preconceptions regarding IRA members in Britain and the United States.\(^{20}\)

Part of British government strategy during the Troubles was to deny that violence in Northern Ireland was politically motivated, a factor that was central to the emergence of the Hunger Strikes. Indeed, British government ministers used terms such as ‘gangsterism’ or ‘Godfathers of terrorism’ in condemning the IRA.\(^{21}\) It is unfortunate in this context that Sheridan’s film should include a scene from Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972) at a central juncture, when we witness a vicious attack on a prison officer by McAndrew take place during a showing of the film. It is a pivotal scene as it marks Conlon’s turning away from men of violence such as McAndrew, who had up until then been a father figure to Conlon in prison. However, Conlon is revolted by McAndrew’s actions and decides instead to help his father Giuseppe’s peaceful letter writing campaign for their release. The depiction of this fictional character of McAndrew as representative of the IRA, however, perpetuates established stereotypes of the irrationally violent terrorist with whom dialogue is impossible.

References to Godfathers and gangsterism have also appeared in reviews of Thaddeus O’Sullivan’s *Nothing Personal*.\(^{22}\) Though not a commercial success on release, the film is one of the few productions to focus on

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the violence of Protestant paramilitaries. It is a work which ‘draws liberally on the iconography of the gangster genre’,23 as evident in the tagline for the film on release: ‘The deadliest gangsters are those with a cause.’24 This depoliticization of the Troubles to the level of ‘crime’ is reflected in the content of the film itself as well as its packaging, described repeatedly on the VHS cover when released in this format in 1999 as a ‘thriller’, a genre often associated with crime and criminals.25 The narrative concerns Liam (John Lynch), a Catholic, who gets lost on the Unionist side of Belfast following a riot and tries to find his way back home to his family. However, in the process he is captured by loyalist paramilitaries who beat him, apparently in an attempt to get information from him on IRA members in his area. However, we discover that the leader of the loyalists, Kenny (James Frain), was a childhood friend and knows that Liam is not involved in the IRA or with its members. Nonetheless, he permits his subordinates to humiliate Liam, reducing their activity to senseless criminal acts without any political motivation. Indeed, characters such as the deranged and ultra-violent loyalist Ginger (Ian Hart) appear to extract a sick enjoyment from the atrocities they carry out, with little interest in negotiation or dialogue.

The melodrama Some Mother’s Son is also suspicious of the potential for real dialogue in its depiction of both British and republican representatives. The film presents the British as manipulative and underhand, concerned only with the demoralization and defeat of the republican project and uninterested in exploring the possibility of dialogue. As Sam Farnsworth (Tom Hollander), the British intelligence officer leading the offensive against republicanism, says at one point: ‘This is war, not diplomacy [...] treat these people for what they are, a bunch of terrorists. You do what it takes to draw them out into the open and then you finish them off’. Sinn Féin and the IRA in Some Mother’s Son are, like the British establishment,

24 This tagline is prominent on the DVD release of the film.
25 This VHS was released by Clarence Pictures as part of the Clarence Irish Classics series in 1999 and referenced the thriller genre four times on the VHS cover, including an excerpt from an Evening Herald review on the front which describes the film as a ‘powerful thriller’. 
also portrayed as shady characters. Danny Boyle (Ciaran Hinds), the head of Sinn Féin in Belfast, is presented as someone manipulating the Troubles to the detriment of many in his own community. As the priest Father Daly (Gerard McSorley) remarks in one scene following the death of one of the hunger strikers: ‘This isn’t a protest anymore. These people are using these funerals to win support’.

Few films, therefore, have foregrounded dialogue prominently or progressively in their depiction of the Troubles, making Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* all the more significant in this respect. In approaching the topic from both outside the culture of Ireland (as a London born director of Grenadian descent) and conventional film (he first achieved acclaim as an artist and winner of the Turner Prize), McQueen offers, in terms of representations of the Troubles, a distinctly novel approach, particularly in light of the discussion above. Gone are the narrative conventions that have dominated previous representations, which as noted already have frequently attempted to apply familiar tropes of the thriller or melodrama genres to stories set during the Troubles. In contrast, in McQueen’s avant-garde approach to the subject, it is firstly the visual and secondly the interactive possibilities of cinema that are exploited, apparent in the manner through which the film features striking visual compositions without the necessity to explain or explicate, while simultaneously providing a meditative space for the audience to contemplate the actions depicted and dialogue featured.

Aesthetically the film is characterized by both a visual richness and complexity and (to begin with) the absence of dialogue. One is struck, for instance, by the evocative use of the colour blue, redolent of (among many things) both coldness and misery, throughout the opening third of the film, evident in one early suggestive scene when a prison officer, Ray Lohan (Stuart Graham), takes a cigarette break in the prison yard while the snow falls. *Hunger* is rarely rushed in its recounting of events, and includes moments of rare beauty amongst the horror and filth of violence and the dirty protest in all its nauseating detail. This includes a sequence where the young republican prisoner Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan) contemplates a

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26 The Turner Prize is Britain’s most prestigious annual award for visual artists.
fly on his hand while pushing his arm through the bars of his cell window, savouring the feel of the world beyond. In these moments, the narrative urgency of commercial cinema, its need to provide dramatic tension and narrative suspense in its furtherance of plot development, is entirely absent. Instead we are encouraged to reflect on the images themselves, in a manner comparable to ekphrasis. As noted by Laura M. Sager Eidt, while the ‘term ekphrasis is generally used to refer to works of poetry and prose that talk about or incorporate visual works of art’, scholars have expanded this understanding to also include film and the manner through which it may also represent other arts, and indeed emphasize by way of its distinctive elements salient aspects of the visual arts, possibly even enhancing or transforming the art so depicted through its visual representation. The scene of Lohan smoking consists of very little movement, and begins with a single take of over forty seconds where the camera zooms in slowly on the prison officer before cutting to a close up of his bruised knuckles. The very unhurried nature of the sequence requires the viewer to focus on the elements within the frame in a manner unusual in commercial filmmaking – including films depicting the Troubles – but more comparable to how one might view a photograph or painting. Significantly, a later shot of Lohan standing in the yard just precedes the encounter of a prison officer cleaning the cells with an evocative circular image created by a prisoner from his face. Here again we have a single take from a static camera position of some fifty seconds in which the image entirely fills the frame as if a painting, before being washed from the wall by the officer.

27 Laura M. Sager Eidt, Writing and Filming the Painting: Ekphrasis in Literature and Film (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 9.
28 See for instance Donna L. Poulton, ‘Moving images in art and film: the intertextual and fluid use of painting in cinema’, PhD Thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1999; Sager Eidt, Writing and Filming the Painting; Kamilla Elliott, Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate (Berkeley: University of California, 2003); Belén Vidal, Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); and Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009).
McQueen’s ability to find beauty in the most traumatic of circumstances was criticized following the film’s release as an over-aestheticization of the grim realities associated with the Troubles. However, this would be to underestimate the potential in these moments and their relationship with both the Troubles and the overall narrative of the film. As the use of the creative arts throughout the Troubles, whether in the form of song or the striking murals that still feature on gable walls across Belfast city, indicate, art and politics have been intimately interconnected, and McQueen is certainly alive to this relationship. Furthermore, such moments allow for viewer reflection on the scenes and dialogue – sometimes very much politically informed – elsewhere in the film. This is particularly evident in the long take, directly after the dialogue between Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) and Father Moran (Liam Cunningham) discussed below, of a prison officer mopping the urine-drenched corridor between the cells.

However, while allowing audiences to contemplate and consider the scene they have just witnessed, there is a further imperative in these moments, and indeed the lack of dialogue of the first third of the film. In the space where dialogue might exist, violence predominates and understanding seems far off. McQueen, however, delays the violence until almost a third of the way into the film, suggesting it instead in shots of blood and wounds, making the moments of its appearance, including humiliating cavity searches, all the more unsettling. Yet Hunger does not diminish or deny the violence of republicans themselves, apparent in one particularly disturbing sequence when we witness the cold-blooded killing of Lohan, presumably by the IRA, while visiting his senile mother.

In addition, in the absence of dialogue, humiliation and, indeed, dehumanization, are recurring features of the film, though it is clear that McQueen views this as the lot of both the perpetrators and victims of violence. This is signalled from early in the film, when Davey Gillen is forced to strip before prison officers after refusing to wear the clothes ‘of a criminal’. In the silence and tension evident, one is struck by McQueen’s patience to allow the scene unfold, with the obvious shame and discomfort of the

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prisoner as he is marched naked to his cell – and contrasting animosity of the prison guards – very apparent. Yet the prison guards too are reduced by their barbaric acts. The shots of Lohan at the beginning reveal a man uneasy with his own actions, as when he washes blood from his bruised hands and stands isolated in the prison yard to smoke. The most striking moment in this respect is the depiction of one of the riot police brought in to break up a prison protest crying behind a wall as his colleagues brutally beat republican prisoners.

However, when dialogue does enter the film at length, it is facilitated in a manner rarely seen in contemporary film. This is an almost seventeen minute unedited sequence (see Figure 1), written by Enda Walsh, from one static camera angle of Sands and the priest Father Moran (who provides the quote included in the title of this essay), discussing the decision to go on hunger strike. Such were the demands placed on the actors to do the scene that Liam Cunningham moved into Michael Fassbender’s Belfast flat, to rehearse for five days from early morning to seven in the evening, ‘running the scene’, Fassbender has recalled, ‘15 or 20 times a day for five days.’ The dialogue itself – which follows the most violent and unsettling moment in the film, the killing of the prison officer Lohan – is marked by an interrogation of the reasons for the strike; but it also critiques, in the comments of Father Moran, the prisoners’ refusal to further negotiate, and their potential vanity and elevation as martyrs in the event of their deaths. For Moran, Sands’s personal crusade neglects his own immediate family’s needs, including his young son, while also leading many others to their deaths on a hunger strike with little certainty, given Thatcher’s intransigence, of any positive outcome. Furthermore, Sands’s own refusal to negotiate required an unlikely complete ‘surrender’, as Moran describes it, by the British, rather than a negotiated settlement. For Sands, the strike is largely motivated by a frustration with negotiations that revealed the bad-faith of the British government, evident in the film in the ‘civilian-type’ clothing (rather than their own clothing) allowed to prisoners, used

30 Kevin Maher, ‘Steve McQueen’s Hunger: featuring one of cinema’s greatest ever scenes’, *The Times* (9 October 2008).
primarily as a means to further humiliate them. Rarely in cinema has such an interrogation of a pivotal moment in the Troubles and the motivations behind it featured, and it is not insignificant that the sequence required the employment of specially altered film stock (with 35mm film reels lasting normally only approximately ten minutes), a symbolic point in terms of the new ways of thinking about identity and conflict in the North that were required to bring an end to the conflict.

Figure 1  Hunger (Film 4, 2008).

For much of the twentieth century, depictions of the Troubles have provided audiences with limited and distorted depictions, which frequently portrayed the exponents of paramilitary violence as deranged killers offering little potential for dialogue or negotiation. While building on long-standing depictions of the Irish at points of political contention, these depictions also contributed to the obscuring of the historical and political context of the Troubles themselves, while offering melodramatic personal narratives set against this backdrop. The decisions of many directors to abide by the principals of dominant mainstream genres, such as melodrama and the thriller, ultimately limited the possibility of more complex engagements with the
Troubles themselves. Rarely did film suggest that dialogue or negotiation might be possible with the exponents of paramilitary violence. It is this chapter’s contention that Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* marked a significant moment in the depiction of the Troubles, both in terms of its cinematic aesthetic and its foregrounding of dialogue. While the film’s long takes, capturing images of rare beauty among the filth and trauma of the dirty protest and subsequent hunger strike, suggest the ekphrastic potential of film, these moments also cue the viewer to view the film in quite a different manner to conventional cinema. Its unhurried pace provides audiences with moments of reflection on what are often deeply unsettling depictions of violence. That these depictions are characterized by an absence of dialogue is not accidental. Where dialogue is absent, violence predominates. Significantly, when dialogue enters the film, it is facilitated in an innovative manner unprecedented in depictions of the Troubles. As Father Moran remarks to Bobby Sands in the pivotal dialogue sequence at the centre of the film: ‘All this must come to an end. Through talking.’

**Filmography**


