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‘Stop and Search’: How the Militarised Space of Belfast’s Past is Navigated by Feminist Filmmakers

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comparative case study of feminist filmmaking strategies deployed to address issues around the militarised space of Belfast during the conflict, often known as The Troubles. This article makes specific reference to scenes from Pat Murphy’s formally experimental film Maeve from 1981, which contains key moments of gender-based harassment and violence between two sisters and British military personnel in Belfast. Analysis is also provided of the author’s own short film New Threads, which uses elements of BBC archival video of Belfast in 1976 and extracts from a book of first-person accounts of lesbian lives in the 1970s and 1980s to depict LGBT+ lives in a subversive manner.

Embodied Filmmaking: Feminist Strategies

An anti-colonial analogy is offered in a debate by the eponymous character in Pat Murphy’s experimental film *Maeve*. Maeve (Mary Jackson) declares: ‘Men’s relationship to women is just like England’s relationship to Ireland. You are in possession of us. You occupy us like an army.’¹ Bound in ideas of feminism and colonialism, Maeve speaks to wider fears of the historical moment. As a filmmaker, Murphy incorporates strategies that disrupt standard narrative to present a different view of Northern Ireland during the conflict. As feminist film scholars have posited: ‘any alternative must be distinct from the mainstream, in order to free the image from its enslavement to

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¹Maeve Sweeney *Maeve* directed by Pat Murphy (1981 Double Band Pictures, Channel 4, 2010: BFI) <https://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/film/watch-maeve-1982-online>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

patriarchy.² By exploring more experimental formal strategies in an episodic structure, Murphy's work draws into focus the casual sexualised harassment, violence and constant surveillance women in Belfast faced through a series of pivotal encounters between Maeve and her sister Roisin (Brid Brennan) and the British Army.

New Threads was made using BBC archive from 1976 of two women on a shopping trip in Belfast and first-person written accounts of lesbians' experiences in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s.³ The amalgam of these two elements came together through an examination of the physical process of being stopped and searched at barriers in Belfast's city centre. Whilst the male British military personnel posed a threat to women on screen in *Maeve*, for young lesbians in Belfast, there was a thrill, a danger and a flirtation in the act of being searched by female British military personnel, according to these written accounts.

Investigating feminist strategies on screen is important in considering counter-hegemonic perspectives of the heavily militarised zone of Belfast in the context of the 30-year conflict, often referred to as 'The Troubles.'⁴ Feminist modes of filmmaking will be investigated and the article will analyse the techniques used to explore gender and sexuality on screen. Murphy's work, though much renowned in Irish Film Studies, is still considered marginal and works in opposition to a wider canon of films made about Belfast during this period. Much of this hegemonic canon forefronts masculinised military or paramilitary violence and ignores the violation of bodily autonomy and patriarchal structures that this violence upholds. As Scarlata writes of *Maeve*, 'the film offers a subjective and intimate history that contrasts with the official history of the state as well as the heroic histories of Irish nationalism.'⁵ There was a sustained British military presence in Northern Ireland that is portrayed in both *Maeve* and the archival

²Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' *Screen* 16, 3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 6-18; Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter- Cinema,' in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 31-40, p. 22.

³Elsbeth Vischer, *New Threads* (2022: Vish Films), use password Threads2022 to view. <https://vimeo.com/759846997>. Accessed 25 August 2024.

⁴'The Troubles' refers to the period of civil conflict in Northern Ireland after Civil Rights protests in the late 1960s up until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement peace deal. This war was between 'Loyalists' or 'Unionists' who were predominantly Protestant and loyal to Britain and the United Kingdom and 'Nationalists' or 'Republicans' who were largely Catholic and loyal to Ireland and a United 32 county Ireland. See: David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002).

⁵Jessica Scarlata . *Rethinking Occupied Ireland: Gender and Incarceration in Contemporary Irish Film*. (Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. 75.

footage used in *New Threads*. Codenamed Operation Banner, this was 'the single longest continuous deployment of the British Army and from 1969-2007 British security forces remained in Northern Ireland.'⁶

Maeve's words paralleling the military 'possession' and 'occupation' of both women and Ireland speak to the political situation in Belfast and Northern Ireland when the film was made. 'The Wilson Government in Britain in 1969 after the Civil Rights movement gained traction meant that British troops were mobilised en masse to Northern Ireland to help the police supposedly control the spread of violence.'⁷ With the deployment of over 20,000 British army troops from the mid-1970s to contain the conflict, people were under occupation. Having such a 'Massive military effort, however, begged the more basic questions of what its political aim was and whether or not the British army would be deployed on a permanent basis.'⁸ Legacy Investigations are underway in Northern Ireland in relation to civilian deaths caused due to this sustained militarisation. 'Between August 1969 and July 2007 1,441 military personnel died in Northern Ireland. 722 of those personnel were killed in paramilitary attacks. During the same period, the British military were responsible for the deaths of 301 individuals, over half of whom were civilians.'⁹

The presence of army personnel, metal barricades, vehicle checkpoints, and 'stop and searches' became integral elements of Belfast's architecture, shaping the city's landscape. This militarised environment is critically examined in films that delve into the oppression symbolised by this military presence. 'Within a year of the deployment, the conflict had radically changed from one of ethnic conflict policed by the British troops to one of confrontation between the nationalist community and the British army.'¹⁰ In the process, 'the troops became the symbol of British oppression.'¹¹

⁶Andrew Sanders, 'Aid to the Civil Power? The Politics of the British Army's Operation Banner in Northern Ireland'. *APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper University College Dublin* (2012), p. 2. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2106722>. Accessed 13 August 2024.

⁷Colin McInnes and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. "The Dog That Did Not Bark": The British Army in Northern Ireland, 1990-94.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 8 (1997): pp. 137–53, p. 137 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30002048>.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁹Claire Mills and David Torrance, 'Investigation of Former Armed Forces Personnel Who Served in Northern Ireland' Parliamentary Report, *House of Commons Library* 18 May 2022.

¹⁰'Nationalist community' here refers to oppositional 'republicans' who hold allegiances to Ireland and an Irish state as opposed to the British state, see Fn 3.

¹¹McInnes, Colin, and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. "The Dog That Did Not Bark" *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 8 (1997): pp. 137–53, p.137.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BT FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

Films have the power to challenge systems of oppression and explore ideas in complex ways that allow audiences to experience challenging content as an embodied presence in the room. Both *Maeve* and *New Threads* resist representing hegemonic national narratives of the Northern Irish conflict and instead represent both how queer bodies (*New Threads*) and women's bodies (*Maeve*) navigated a particular space and time, through experimental techniques. A consideration of the body is central to much feminist and queer scholarship in discussing how a physical presence of certain sections of society poses a threat to the status quo. In times of conflict, there is bodily risk and bodily harm on a mass scale. As Christina Lamb reports: 'Around the world a woman's body is still very much a battlefield, and hundreds of thousands of women bear the invisible wounds of war.'¹² This concept of 'invisible wounds' is pertinent to an analysis of the invisible nature of invasions of bodily autonomy, harassment and sexualised violence that Murphy addresses through the characters of Maeve and her sister Roisin. Running parallel to this, the lives of lesbians at this time in Belfast were almost entirely 'invisible', yet accounts describe how people were out visiting the first gay bars in Belfast, at a time when military intervention and raids posed a serious threat.

What is key to both *Maeve* and *New Threads* is a feminist exploration of bodies moving around forbidden spaces and experiencing life as it was for them in the 1970s and 1980s in Belfast. This analysis considers film a 'multisensorial' experience.¹³ As Michelle Royer posits: 'While in cinema, information is transmitted through an audio-visual medium, spectators perceive the film with all their senses.'¹⁴ This multisensoriality is bound in an embodied viewing that acknowledges how the audio-visual can enable us to physically respond to the lives of those on screen. It is through the subversive and experimental strategies deployed by feminist filmmakers that a different narrative of the militarised space of Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s can be told, seen, heard and experienced. What these films reveal about counter-hegemonic perspectives of the time has hitherto not been given enough scholarly attention. Exploring how marginalised bodies move through the site of Belfast, both *Maeve* and *New Threads* centre female and queer experience and allow actions on screen to portray perspectives that can resonate with audiences. What follows is a case study of key moments from Murphy's *Maeve* that aims to discuss these concepts of embodiment, bodily autonomy and the experiential reality of women in militarised Belfast, as told through the female characters on screen.

¹²Christina Lamb. *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 11.

¹³Michelle, Royer, 'Film Theory, Multisensoriality and the Feminine.' In *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity*, (Edinburgh University Press: 2019), pp. 8-17, p. 11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvx5w8jh.6>.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 11.

Barriers and Blockades, Bodies in Belfast

A group of 'radical feminists', as envisioned by Anna Burns in the novel *Milkman*, form an International Women's Group in war-torn Belfast that is considered 'beyond the pale' by the majority at the time.¹⁵ As Burns' narrator observes, these women meeting in a 'private' venue was an inherent threat to puritanical patriarchal values. 'They could be plotting subversive acts in it. They could be having homosexual intercourse in it. They could be performing and undergoing abortions in it.'¹⁶ What is interesting about the collective and projected fears of what these women *could* be up to are the connected ideas of queerness and threats to bodily autonomy. *Milkman's* protagonist is an outlier in Belfast during The Troubles in how she physically moves through the city. Reading whilst walking is what draws attention to 'Middle Sister', as something that is not done and is not safe.¹⁷

Walking unencumbered was not a possibility for most threatened bodies in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s. As with Burns' Middle Sister, Maeve and her sister Roisin convey the impossibility of living freely in your own body as young women, navigating Belfast in Murphy's film. As Scarlata writes, there is a need for 'self-generated images of Northern Ireland' through feminist film work that reveals the 'gendered politics of occupation and the ways that space is claimed, guarded, and placed under surveillance by a range of competing forces that often converge on the bodies of women.'¹⁸

Just as the 'radical feminists' are set apart in *Milkman*, for their perceived acts of bodily defiance, Murphy's character Maeve does not fit in, in her Belfast milieu and self-exiles to London to pursue an openly feminist and artistic life. Maeve's return enables a critique of Belfast under military occupation by someone with a renewed sense of distance. 'In Northern Ireland, the severity of censorship facilitated an amnesiac history of colonialism that immediately rewrote the present event as it unfolded. Access to power requires access not only to historical memory but also to its circulation.'¹⁹ Maeve as a character, operates in important contrast to her younger

¹⁵'Beyond the pale' comes from thirteenth century Ireland. 'The Pale' refers to a geographical area in the east of Ireland beyond the arc of counties Meath, Louth, Kildare and Dublin that was under English control. Within 'The Pale' speaking Irish was forbidden and it was seen by English occupiers as representing order and civility. Beyond it, represented being 'disorderly' in terms of gendered, ethnic and social class expectations of the English occupiers.

¹⁶Anna Burns, *Milkman*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), p. 156.

¹⁷Ian David Clark, 'Reading-While-Walking Histories of the Troubles: Anna Burns's *Milkman*.' *New Hibernia Review* 26, no. 2 (2022): pp. 92-111.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2022.0015>.

¹⁸Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 62.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 67.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

sister, Roisin, who still lives at home with their parents in the Republican area of West Belfast. Both sisters are positioned differently in relation to an awareness of historical memory and trying to reclaim power.²⁰ Part of Murphy's feminist filmmaking is to embed these societal problems within the structure of the film itself not just at the level of 'content' as Gibbons describes, but formally as well, 'the structure of the film itself constituting a commentary on the events it portrays.'²¹

An example of formal strategy provoking commentary on the occupied state of Belfast comes in the opening scene. Maeve's father, Martin Sweeney (Mark Mulholland), watches a war film in the family home. We hear sounds of battle scenes on the television, before seeing soldiers silhouetted outside the window. Martin Sweeney answers a knock at the door and a British soldier orders him to evacuate due to a bomb scare. We do not see the soldiers, they are only heard barking orders, an *acousmètre* of state-sanctioned control. In film, the *acousmètre* can be defined as an unseen voice who represents that of authority and challenge in the background and can bring 'disequilibrium and tension. He invites the spectator to go see, and he can be an *invitation to the loss of the self*.'²² Martin Sweeney acquiesces to the disembodied command to either evacuate or 'stay in the back' as he retreats to the back kitchen, 'entering what is conventionally designated as female space'.²³

Though it is Martin Sweeney who narrates this opening sequence, it is the unseen voice of authority of the British soldiers outside who control Martin's set of circumstances. He remains 'freezing in the scullery' as the soldiers never come back to give the all-clear after the bomb scare. State control as omnipotent power is evident through this auditory displacement. Murphy deftly deploys an experimental use of

²⁰'Republican'/'Republicanism' refers to a largely Catholic population in Northern Ireland with ethno-national allegiances to Ireland and a constitutional aim of uniting the 32 counties. Republicanism is seen as in opposition to the British State, and Unionists or Loyalists who were loyal to it. Throughout 'The Troubles' there were oppositional clashes between Republicans and the British Army. See: Garvin, Tom. 'Republicanism and Democracy in Ireland.' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 406 (2013): pp. 181–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23631163>

²¹Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema.' *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): pp. 148–55, p. 151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30060610>

²²Michel Chion defines the *acousmètre* as an auditory effect to create tension through the unseen presence of someone, that which is heard but not seen by the audience. Michel Chion 'The Acousmètre.' *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan et al., (Bedford: St. Martin's, 2011), pp. 156–165, p. 162.

²³Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth' *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): pp. 148–55, pp. 150 - 151.

Chion's *acousmètre* to explore British militarisation and its 'ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence,' for citizens of Belfast during the conflict.²⁴

Bodily Autonomy Under Threat: Key Moments in Maeve

For Darren Anderson, growing up in the northwest city of Derry in the 1980s and 1990s was one of poverty in a material sense and anxiety in a psychological sense, 'We had nothing in those years, but we owned every one of those sunsets and the stars that followed.'²⁵ Anderson describes escaping up to the skies to claim sunsets and stars as: 'searching for a space in which to be left alone.'²⁶ An acknowledgement of the world beyond your immediate reality is a philosophical concept that denies the harsh moment-to-moment existence of most in Northern Ireland at this time. Repression was part of the national formula, bound up in archaic religious protocol and an unwillingness to admit to ideas beyond the literal, for many.

Burns encapsulates this, through an acknowledgement of sunsets too, paradoxically one bound up in collective denial. In *Milkman*, the protagonist's French teacher encourages them to describe the sky after reading a literary description of a sunset in French. This causes ruptures in the class with everyone demanding the sky is blue. Despite this outward projection, the narrator inwardly confesses: 'Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it. Not even the week before when I experienced my first sunset with maybe-boyfriend did I admit it.'²⁷ This is a conscious denial of escapism. Middle Sister provides an acknowledgement of the impossibility of dreaming, thinking or behaving outside the narrow confines of the metaphorical box that was life in Northern Ireland at this time.

In Murphy's *Maeve*, two sisters come to represent transgressive modalities, with their views and actions falling outside of this narrow box of acceptability. Maeve is the exiled older sister transgressive in her feminist ideas while the younger sister Roisin is physically defiant in her behaviour. David O'Grady writes of Maeve as a character trying to find the words for an 'indecipherable' chapter in history, where 'Blindness is the great problem; to think in political, religious or historical terms is the greatest

²⁴Michel Chion, 'The Acousmètre,' p. 162.

²⁵Darren Anderson, 'Sanctuary: I have Grown Up During The Troubles and have Been Seeking a Place of Peace Ever Since,' *The Guardian*, (21 December, 2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/dec/21/sanctuary-i-grew-up-in-the-troubles-and-have-been-seeking-a-place-of-peace-ever-since>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Anna Burns, *Milkman*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), p. 70.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BT FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

oppression.²⁸ Blindness beyond oppression as encapsulated in the denial of a sunset, in the unwillingness to see things beyond certain binaries. In dealing with these systems of oppression 'women negotiate the gendered violence of the British Army and the Northern Irish or British state.'²⁹ Maeve and Roisin face three key moments of on-screen confrontation with the British military forces. Pat Murphy writes of the film's structure as reflecting the time in which it was made (1980-81) saying, 'With Maeve I was dealing with politics now, and it was necessary to work the way I did, with the episodic structures.'³⁰ Politics 'now' incapsulates the immediacy of an all-prevailing threat felt by the women in the film and presented through feminist formal experimentation as well as content.

The first of these moments of on-screen confrontation involves Roisin Sweeney making her way home from a shift in the local pub, on the night of Maeve's arrival for a week-long visit from London. Roisin walks the final part of the journey, her pace quickens, and we hear footsteps turning to a run before a voice calls out of the darkness: 'Stop!' Another example of the invisible yet ever present surveillance of the British military in Belfast's streets. Three male soldiers' approach and ask: 'right, what's your name?' Out of breath she replies: 'Roisin Sweeney.' The soldiers demand to know an address and proceed to voice the incorrect street name into a radio, before accusing Roisin of lying about where she lives. One accusation is met with another about why she is out so late. Her response: 'I was working', prompts a smirk from one soldier, who projects a sexual inference into the kind of work Roisin has undertaken. As Scarlata observes, 'As a woman, Roisin is vulnerable to sexual harassment or assault by armed agents of the state against whom she'll have no legal recourse, but as a republican woman, she is also at risk for being treated as a terror suspect.'³¹ Roisin's behaviour is, therefore, doubly transgressive.

Roisin responds to a soldier's question of whether she has an ID, saying: 'I don't need it, I know who I am.' In other circumstances, this perceived act of insurrection could have gotten her arrested. As Scarlata notes, 'Emergency legislation granted the state the right to detain suspects for seven days without charge without notifying family of their whereabouts and without allowing them access to a lawyer.'³² Maeve could have easily been a film containing sequences depicting one sister in prison for the seven

²⁸David O'Grady, 'Stage and Screen.' *The Furrow* 33, no. 1 (1982): pp. 61–64, p. 63 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27661285>.

²⁹Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 89.

³⁰Will David, and Pat Murphy. 'An Interview with Pat Murphy' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 26/27 (1985): pp. 132–37, p. 133. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111061>.

³¹Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 92.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 62.

days that the other came back to visit. Roisin is the more physically transgressive sister, reacting in the face of adversity, even if these reactions are futile.

Halfway through *Maeve*, children swing around a lamp post on a bombed-out street in West Belfast, close to where the Sweeney family live. Maeve and Roisin walk across the road and a wide-angle shot shows them from a distance as they are stopped by British soldiers. Unlike in the previous encounter with Roisin, the viewer does not know what is said. Instead, the audience's gaze can drift across the entire frame, with young girls playing in the most inhospitable of environs. After a moment, Roisin and Maeve are jumping up and down. There is a close-up of the resigned expression on their faces. Soldiers laugh and ogle Roisin and Maeve's breasts, their guns held firmly in the women's eyeline. This is a power game, soldiers playing with women's autonomy, as children play in the background. Under emergency legislation, put in place by state security at this time in Northern Ireland, 'Women who were detained reported invasive gynaecological exams, humiliating strip searches, and verbal threats of rape during interrogation.'³³ It was of the utmost importance to avoid behaving in a way that would be punishable by detention. Such a scene of public humiliation makes explicit the fact that 'women's bodies are subjected to a constant threat of invasion.'³⁴ Sexual violence is another tool used as leverage and to further divide the 'us and them' in the Belfast of *Milkman*. Burns' narrator describes how the 'renouncers' (or republicans) divide up the crime of rape to allow for more nuance: 'full rape, three-quarter rape, half rape or one-quarter rape'. This is considered better than 'rape divided in two,' as in 'rape' or 'not rape', which were 'the acceptable categories in most fiefdoms as well as in the burlesque courts of the occupiers.'³⁵ These 'categories' acknowledge a sense of sexual violence not being along binary lines, whilst reinforcing this as a co-opted issue, to serve as another marker of difference between the 'renouncers' and 'the occupiers.' The overuse of the word itself implies the commonality of the crime of 'rape'. Lamb writes of the ubiquity of sexual violence in wars throughout history: 'Rape and pillage were a way of rewarding unpaid recruits and for a conqueror to emphasise victory by punishing and subjugating opponents, what the Romans termed *vae victis* (Woe to the conquered).'³⁶ Therefore, the panopticism of the British Army in Belfast as a conflict zone becomes analogous to the term itself. As Lamb continues: 'indeed rape is so common in war that we speak of the rape of a city to describe its wanton destruction.'³⁷

³³Ibid., p. 92.

³⁴Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p. 152.

³⁵Anna Burns, *Milkman*, p. 311.

³⁶Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 6.

³⁷Ibid., p. 4.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

In *Maeve*, ‘Violence against women is enacted by the state, not the men of their community, who are at worst sexist and oblivious to women’s subjectivity.’ In this way the film, as with this idea from Burns’ writing addresses ‘degrees of oppression rather than construct a blanket patriarchy.’³⁸ Violence against women is a fulcrum within Murphy’s feminist filmmaking and the final scene under discussion demonstrates a denouement on this theme, befitting of the subversive formalism of *Maeve* overall.

Two-thirds of the way into *Maeve*, a soldier walks past a van full of used TVs. Cut to Roisin and Maeve passing through the revolving doors of a security barricade. The two women are en route to meet friends in a pub. We see soldiers and hear helicopters overhead. The barricade wardens, often military personnel, pat down the women as they pass through. The moment is nonchalant, yet oddly intimate as people are frisked and intense eye contact made. It is moments such as these that queer women describe in *Threads*.³⁹ Maeve and Roisin turn a corner and the sound is sucked out of the scene. A woman is seen being raped up against a derelict shop front by a soldier. This moment is shocking in its silent prosaicness. The sisters hurriedly glance at the woman, whose eyes appear glazed over. After a brief pause, Maeve and Roisin have no choice but to move on as if they have not seen anything.

Despite the public setting, it is implicit that this crime will never be reported. As Lamb reports, ‘The intimate nature of rape means it is under-reported generally and even more so in conflict zones where reprisals are likely, stigmatisation common, and evidence hard to gather.’⁴⁰ What remains formally subversive is Murphy’s choice to present the starkest example of sexual violence in the film as quotidian: ‘When the film does visualize violent and/or sexual encounters between the British Army and women in Belfast, it does so in specifically anti-spectacular ways.’⁴¹ In depicting sexual violence as ‘anti-spectacular,’ *Maeve* reinforces the problematic nature of the omnipotent power of the military. As Lamb reports: ‘the first prosecution of rape as a war crime was only in 1998.’⁴² 17 years after the release of *Maeve* came the first legal acknowledgement of sexual violence as part of the fallout of war.

In their encounters with the British military, Maeve and Roisin represent different embodied experiences of women. Maeve is exiled both physically and politically for her feminist beliefs, which alienate her from threatening British military presence as

³⁸Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 73.

³⁹Moya Morris, *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s*, (Belfast: Nova, 2013).

⁴⁰Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, p. 7.

⁴¹Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 89.

⁴²Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, p. 8.

well as the male-dominated republicanism of home.⁴³ Roisin maintains closer ties to Belfast's domestic political environ and laughs in the face of hostile soldiers in a way that suggests she is confident of her security, despite being acutely vulnerable at every step. Maeve's didacticism upon her return complements Roisin's physicality and strength of character to subvert expectations of how The Troubles are shown on screen. Maeve overall highlights the counter-hegemonic perspectives of young, disempowered women, navigating this conflict zone. Subverting depictions of this conflict is part of the central concern of both *Maeve* and *New Threads*. Combining BBC archive of a Belfast shopping trip, with first person testimonies of lesbians going out in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s, *New Threads* amalgamates different audio-visual elements to create something new and unexpected, exploring the otherwise invisible queer lives of Belfast's past.

Queer Bodies: Deploying Archive and Source Text in *New Threads*

'My scene was one of city centre barricades which brazen queens flaunted through.'⁴⁴

Belfast's gay 'scene' is described by 'Marion' in a poem contained within *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s*.⁴⁵ Marion's words encapsulate the juxtaposition of Belfast's inhospitable militarised barriers and how queer people permeated these, defying the law and social order of the day. This source text gives voice to the hidden queer scene in Belfast's enclaves through vivid first-person narratives.

New Threads is a short experimental film, imagining a visual scenario of what was invisible – namely, queer women's lives during the conflict in Belfast. Queerness in Northern Ireland is something intrinsically bound in the limitations of living in a militarised warzone, and what this does to freedom of expression. War tactics and violent games apply in different ways to marginalised sexualities which were, until 1982, illegal in the case of men and contested and ignored in the case of women.⁴⁶ Thinking of 'parallel' identities, people want to belong to a group and may have a 'closeted' persona, or different performances of sexuality to suit their settings. It is clear sexuality was situated within a specific socio-historical reality during The Troubles. Through film there is the potential to present 'an alternative, transformative realm, in which it

⁴³Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p. 148.

⁴⁴Moya Morris, *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s*, p. 48.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p.48.

⁴⁶European Court of Human Rights, 'Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom', *EHRC Online* (22 October 1981) <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

is possible to rethink the conditions of the present through uncovering silenced and neglected voices and experiences of the past.⁴⁷

New Threads operates to initiate ‘parallel games’ via its reimagination of the past. ‘The past is dis/uncovered not just in terms of regionality, sectarianism, and violence, but also in its containment of alternative forms of communality and togetherness.’⁴⁸ *Threads*, offers a narrative perspective of the alternative communities and togetherness experienced by women in the queer scene of Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s. Structurally, the film utilises extracts of three accounts: Jayne’s ‘*Time of Our Lives*’, Arlene’s ‘*I Phoned the Line*’ and Marion’s ‘*1983*’⁴⁹

Jayne’s words open the film and connect with the ‘multisensorial’ reading of cinema through an invocation of the sensory memory.⁵⁰ As Jayne writes: ‘These memories are deep in my mind. To me it is like looking through a camera’s lens, so far away, yet being able to zoom close to get a clear picture whenever I choose.’⁵¹ Her prose contains a coy humour that subverts the sentimentality of memory. ‘For example, perfumes popular with women in the 70’s were Patchouli oil, Geminesse, and Youth Dew and usually at the end of an evening I had a mixture of all three. You can take out of that what you like!’⁵² Within *New Threads*, this is edited with archive to match the narration of the three fragrances - ‘Patchouli oil,’ ‘Geminesse’ and ‘Youth Dew’ - with shots of three British soldiers popping up in turn. As if donning the soldiers with perfume titles, implicit in this combination of narrative and archive video is a camp aesthetic that subverts the heightened masculinity of the armed forces on patrol in Belfast to fit a queer reading.

Arlene’s story, ‘*I Phoned the Line*’ details a teenager using the Lesbian Line charity to meet befrienders, in Belfast’s first gay club, The Chariot Rooms.⁵³ Pivotal within this

⁴⁷Stefanie Lehner, “‘Parallel Games’ and Queer Memories: Performing LGBT Testimonies in Northern Ireland.’ *Irish University Review* 47, no. 1 (2017): pp. 103–18, p. 105 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45129204>.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p.107.

⁴⁹Authors are identified by first name only within *Threads* by Moya Morris, (Belfast: Nova, 2013), and some names may have been changed to protect individual’s identities.

⁵⁰Michelle Royer, ‘Film Theory, Multisensoriality and the Feminine.’ In *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity*, (Edinburgh: University Press, 2019), pp. 8-17, p. 11.

⁵¹Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 15.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵³Lesbian Line was a distinct NGO from 1989 offering help and support to women who identified as Lesbian or Bisexual in Northern Ireland. See:

sequence was a consideration of the moment that a 'stop and search' changed from something to be feared to being the site of excitement and sexual tension. Arlene's writing builds up to this moment in a way that relays the topographical obstacles in vivid detail and depicts life under military occupation in diaristic terms: 'The British Army had steel security barriers built around the inner-city centre of town. A security ring to ward off sectarian attacks, everyone going into town had to be searched.'⁵⁴ In war-torn Belfast, Arlene's account reinforces the literal as well as ideological barriers in place making it harder to move freely through the city to express her identity.,

Most of the barriers had exits, but only a few had entrance points. I was now heading towards one myself because the Chariot Rooms lay within the security ring.⁵⁵

Jeff Dudgeon writes of the Chariot Rooms: 'it was well frequented and much loved even by soldiers who duck patrolled through the dance floor, lingering in the warmth and safety.'⁵⁶ British military personnel frequenting Belfast's first gay night club disrupts the idea of destructive security raids, as described by Marion in '1983?' Dudgeon implies that many soldiers stayed in The Chariot Rooms by choice and put on a performance of patrolling the area. Coded performances are sewn up in parallel identities, one of military authority and another of hidden queer desire.

Arlene details these two conflicting ideas when she describes: 'At the security barrier I was searched by a female soldier, not always an unpleasant thing to have done I have to say. In a rarely heard broad English accent she said: "Pass on through". "Nice eyes", I thought.'⁵⁷ This account evokes the tension of the physicality of the 'stop and search.' Arlene's narrative formed part of a catalysing scene in the central section of *New Threads* where her experience, and the visual of the two women passing through the barrier in the BBC Archive clip '*Belfast Shopping Trip, 1976*' combine to create a level of new meaning.⁵⁸

<https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/LesbianLineUK41.pdf>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

⁵⁴Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 5.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁶Dudgeon, Jeff, 'A Century And More of Belfast Gay Life', *AcomsDave*, (23 October, 2021) <https://acomsdave.com/a-century-and-more-of-belfast-gay-life/>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

⁵⁷Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 6.

⁵⁸*Nationwide*, BBCI '*Belfast Shopping Trip, 1976*', (28 January, 1976) Online https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/belfast_city_centre_shopping/z43h6v4. Accessed 6 August 2024.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

First broadcast on 28 January 1976, this BBC footage is a clip from current affairs programme *Nationwide* and features Northern Irish journalist Diane Harron taking English television and radio presenter Valerie Singleton on a shopping trip in Belfast's bombed-out city centre.⁵⁹ The image of the two women moving around the militarised site of Belfast has parallels to that of Maeve and Roisin in Murphy's film. However, there are different class and national connotations of the two women on the BBC, chaperoned by a camera crew. Unlike in Murphy's film, Valerie Singleton is guided as a visitor from England, with no apparent connection to Belfast or its political situation. The women in this clip stay in the 'safe' and 'feminine' zone of shopping. Singleton's outsider status is a way of showing the situation in Belfast for a broader BBC audience, without having to delve deeply into issues of militarisation and its inherent colonial framework.

Just as sexual violence is spectacularly unspectacular in *Maeve*, so too is the ubiquity of city centre destruction evoked through the casual attitudes of shop workers in this BBC footage. Despite Belfast being 'a tangle of hatreds, antagonisms, blindness and ill-defined myths,' those working in the city centre go about their lives.⁶⁰ Valerie Singleton admits to feeling frightened during a bomb scare. One shop worker interviewed casually says that this has happened 'dozens of times,' her tone seems neutral, in stark contrast to Singleton. The shop worker's succinct comments serve as a reminder of the cavalier attitude of Belfastians during the conflict: 'We're out quite often.' Singleton asks: 'Do you get fed up of it?' and the shop worker responds: 'No. It's just a way of life.'

Visual archival moments are combined with testimony from *Threads* to forge a further feminist commentary on the gendered dynamics of conflict. As the BBC camera rotates around Valerie Singleton and the British soldier in the bomb scare, Moya Morris narrates Marion's words: 'My scene was one of segregation – not between Prods and Catholics but between men and women.'⁶¹ The literal image of two women shopping is superseded within *New Threads*, to comment on gender and sexuality within conflict. This is done through positing an imagined visual scenario where two queer women are out and about in this prohibited conflict zone as a couple, placing the debate around queer lives and their existence directly on screen. As Murphy does with women in *Maeve*, it is crucial to put these disenfranchised queer lives at 'the center of the debate' to depict specific ways they may 'suffer and resist the brutality of the army'.⁶² Being visible on screen enables queer women to be represented 'not as

⁵⁹*Nationwide*, BBCI (1969-1983) Online.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00b4z6x>. Accessed 6 August 2024.

⁶⁰David O'Grady, 'Stage and Screen.' *The Furrow* 33, no. 1 (1982): pp. 61–64, p. 63.

⁶¹Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 48.

⁶²Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 95.

an appendage to the nation [...] but as integral and vital members of a nation who share a stake in its future.⁶³

Taking up space on screen, the multisensoriality of *New Threads* aims to invoke a queer embodiment through combinations of formal elements. A 'Bomb Damage Sale' sign, women's perfumes in the 1970s, a 'rarely heard, broad English accent' at a security barrier.⁶⁴ All are sights, smells and sounds that recall a particular time and place. Combining archive testimony and video with contemporary footage of locations in Belfast aims to pose new questions about ways in which counter-hegemonic experiences of Belfast's conflict can be navigated on screen. 'Desire and sexuality, in other words, both having their focal point in the women's movement, become key elements in the struggle to release history from the cycle of myth and violence in which it has been traditionally encased.'⁶⁵ This release applies to formal strategies in *Maeve* around women's bodies and in a consideration of a queer ownership of militarisation as conveyed in *New Threads*.

Conclusion

It has been discussed through a textual comparison of the experimental films *Maeve* and *New Threads* how different strategies adopted by feminist filmmakers can interrogate and analyse counter-hegemonic aspects of the British Army's militarisation of Belfast during Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Both films unpack concepts of embodiment and the audio-visual potential to exemplify threatened bodily autonomy.

Made in 1981, Pat Murphy's *Maeve* deploys an episodic non-linear narrative to depict two sisters Maeve and Roisin and key instances of gender-based harassment and violence in a working-class Republican environment. Both sisters navigate the militarised space of Belfast as threatened female bodies who face ritual humiliation and who witness routine sexual violence happening in the streets. Using auditory techniques such as *acousmêtre*, the omnipotent power of the British military is challenged through Maeve's feminist ideas and Roisin's transgressive actions.

Similarly, the lesbian lives as imagined in *New Threads* work in opposition to the societal convention of female queerness being invisible. Made by the author in 2022 using archive video from 1976 and text source material published in 2013, but written about experiences of the 1970s and 1980s, *New Threads* presents a queer reimagining of Belfast's past. Contrasting the visible destruction of Belfast's city centre with the

⁶³Ibid., p. 95.

⁶⁴Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 15

⁶⁵Gibbons, Luke. 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p. 152.

BELFAST – AS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILMMAKERS

underground queer scene of the time, commentary is made on how LGBT+ lives could subvert the fear of authority, that militarised barriers imposed upon them.

An analysis of key elements of these films demonstrates how innovative strategies depict feminist critiques of dominant narratives of violence and control in Northern Ireland's history. Much analysis of films set in Belfast at this time focuses on the masculinised agendas of paramilitaries, British military personnel and state forces. *Maeve* and *New Threads* instead investigate taboo subject matter such as sexual violence in times of war, and queer desire between the occupier and the occupied. Presenting ideas of a surveillance state through the objectified bodies of women, both films challenge our understanding of different experiences of military occupation through a gender and sexuality lens. Reinforcing the validity of intimate history as opposed to relying on 'official' history, both *Maeve* and *New Threads* problematise the gratuitous nature of The Troubles on screen. A further investigation of queer and feminist histories of the conflict via other filmmaker's work would be pertinent for future research in this area to expand on the findings made here.