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## Why Irish protestants are hungry for a voice

There have been many Troubles movies sympathetic to the Republican point of view, but none to that of the Unionists. Why is this? David McKittrick suggests that Protestants have a public relations problem

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Why, oh why – Ulster Protestants and Unionists lament when a movie such as *Hunger* appears – why can our cause not be depicted sympathetically up there on the screen? Why is it that the IRA gets all the attention?

*Hunger* sets out to show how and why IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands deliberately went to his death to advance his cause. It is the latest in a long line of feature films focusing on aspects of Irish Republicanism.

In some of the Troubles movies, members of the IRA are presented as freedom fighters; in some it is shown as evil; in some its members are depicted as conflicted individuals, often trying to leave violence behind. The list of movies sympathetic to the Catholic point of view includes film's such as *The Devil's Own* with Brad Pitt, *The Jackal* with Richard Gere and Bruce Willis, *The Crying Game* with Stephen Rea and *Prayer for the Dying* with Mickey Rourke.

Unionists and Protestants in Northern Ireland have two problems with this. The first is that there is so much concentration on Republicanism. The second is that their community is, in movie terms, practically invisible. One Loyalist view, voiced this week, was that *Hunger* was part of "a carefully coordinated revisioning of the Irish Republican movement." Belfast Protestant playwright Gary Mitchell added: "If you judged Northern Ireland purely on the basis of films you would think there are no Protestants here."

Although many movie-makers are clearly anti-IRA and anti-violence, many of them simultaneously display a fascination with the organisation and the Republican cause. Even those who deem it evil nonetheless find it interesting. But few writers or producers find the Protestant community interesting; few identify with it and few have sought to champion it or express its concerns. As a result, Republicans have had the big screen pretty much to themselves. There is no Protestant equivalent to *Hunger*: the Republican tradition is regarded as a rich source of cinematic material, but not the Protestant perspective.

Proposals for movies told from a Unionist point of view are rare, according to Richard Williams, chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen, the Belfast agency that helped finance *Hunger*. "There isn't a pile of projects in our office that we're somehow rejecting," he says. "That sort of material is rarely written. Interestingly, writers from a Protestant background have a tendency to just shift away from here and ply their trade elsewhere. But, even when they do stay here, they've a tendency not to write about this sort of thing."

One very obvious exception to this trend is the talented playwright Gary Mitchell, who comes from a working-class background. His work has been hailed as an unflinching portrait of ordinary Loyalists, including members of paramilitary groups. With the emergence of Mitchell, working-class Protestants at last seemed to have found a dramatic voice.

He has described how distrustful Loyalists are of the arts. "There is a deep-rooted ignorance of the arts within Loyalist communities," he said. "In Loyalist areas they do not trust drama. They will tell you coldly that drama

belongs to the Catholics – drama belongs to the nationalists."

Mitchell was apparently destined to write for the screen, but his career was interrupted when unwanted drama entered his own life. The paramilitaries he wrote about did not like his work, and expressed their displeasure in traditional backstreet fashion. They attacked his home in a Loyalist part of north Belfast, forcing him and his family out. He has been living at a secret address ever since.

There could hardly be a starker illustration of just how alienated from the arts many on the Protestant side are. And this is only one facet of Protestants' problematic relations with the outside world. Journalists who visit Northern Ireland often speak admiringly of the presentational skills of Sinn Fein, while saying they find Loyalists shockingly poor at the business of winning friends and influencing people.

One Unionist writer, Ruth Dudley Edwards, has spoken of "the Ulster Protestant's fantastic ineptitude in public relations". Another sympathetic commentator, The Independent's Bruce Anderson, wrote: "In one competition the Ulster Protestants invariably win – year after year, they always retain the Pulitzer Prize for anti-public relations."

Unionism's difficulties with cinema are just part of a deeper problem centring on relations with the outside world. Everyone knows the IRA, but many in Hollywood and elsewhere know little or nothing about Loyalism. And outsiders who take the trouble to research the Protestant paramilitary undergrowth generally recoil from what they find.

They quickly discover that Loyalists killed more than a thousand people, the majority of them Catholic civilians, often in sectarian assassinations. This is, to say the least, unpromising territory for a feature film. On the Protestant political side, meanwhile, there are not a lot of figures who strike a positive international chord. There was talk at one stage of a biopic of the Rev Ian Paisley but, unsurprisingly, it has not emerged.

The world finds much of interest in the Republican story. There is violence, intriguing personalities, a sense of the underdog pitted against the might of Britain. Add in some swirling Celtic music by the Chieftains or Enya, and a movie can easily take shape.

The perceived Protestant narrative, however, is one of a reactionary frontier community grimly holding on and opposing change. This is enough to make film-makers shudder and turn their attentions elsewhere: they find the Republicans intriguing but the Protestants problematic.

There are several ironies here. One is that, for decades, scores of non-Irish movies have featured songs by Van Morrison, who is an east Belfast Protestant, though a non-political one.

Another is that movies are today regularly made in Belfast, many of them in the huge paint hall which stands on the spot of the now-defunct shipyard. The yard was once a great symbol of Ulster Unionism, but the film-makers use it for horror movies and science fiction. Rarely do they shoot anything casting light on today's Protestant predicament.

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