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Research in **F**ilm and **H**istory

“...will you show that on your British television?” **ACCEPTABLE LEVELS** as Historiographic Metafiction: Problematising Historical Reconstruction

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ACCEPTABLE LEVELS, John Davies, UK 1983

Introduction

The scene is one of utter pandemonium. The Divis Flats, off the Lower Falls Road, West Belfast at the height of the Northern Irish conflict in the early 1980s; a close-up shot, the body of a bloodied child as it is covered with a white sheet. The camera tilts up from the child, a young girl, to reveal an onrushing film crew. They immediately begin to film. “Will you get that camera away, can’t you see she’s hurt, you bloody vultures,” screams Mrs. Nolan, played by Rose McAllister, as crowds descend on the emerging scene. The child is dead. A stray plastic bullet, fired by a British soldier on patrol, has killed the young girl. We cut again to her bloodied body, but this time through a different camera, that of the film within the film. The

scene shakes violently to again reveal Mrs Nolan, holding aloft the fatal plastic bullet, as she screams into the lens:

Do you know what that is? That's a plastic bullet! That's what your bloody fine British soldiers shoot at our kids to kill them! Don't turn your face away, look at her! Look at the damage that it does! Now, will you show that on your British television and let the people know what the British soldiers are doing to our children...they're murdering them!

This is the climactic scene in *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* (John Davies, UK 1983), a film that sets out a powerful critique of the British media and their handling of the Northern Irish conflict of the latter half of the twentieth century, the “Troubles.” In filmmaking parlance, the term “acceptable level” refers to the quantity of light or sound, required to register on tape. The acceptable level of the film’s title refers to the amount of violence, of civil unrest, that is deemed tolerable on British television screens, or rather, that this violence is only acceptable when framed in the context of oppositional politics and Irish Republican extremism. Produced in collaboration with the Belfast Film Workshop and Frontroom Productions, London, it is at once a social realist and deconstructionist film, a film in other words that problematises “the nature of historical knowledge.”¹ It does so by directly questioning the formation of prevailing historical narratives and the ethics of filmmaking. It is a fiction film concerning a BBC film crew who arrive in Belfast to film a typical Catholic family for a documentary series called “Britain’s Children: Ulster,” ostensibly about the effects of violence on children in Northern Ireland. While filming an interview with a young girl, Róisín, in her home in the Divis Flats, the BBC crew are interrupted by the above scene. What follows is a moral standoff between members of the documentary’s crew and its producers back in London over the inclusion of this footage. Through this device, of a film within a film, its production and subsequent broadcast, *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*’ focus is on the way in which the media reports, constructs, and interacts with significant news events, how it engages with the historical moment and the audiovisual trace it leaves behind through the reporting, or non-reporting, of moments of violence and civil unrest.



Problematising the nature of historical knowledge

This article is a textual analysis of *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* and its wider position within the context of cinematic representations of the Northern Irish conflict. The two filmmaking workshops that collaborated on the film's production, Belfast Film Workshop and Frontroom Productions, were part of a wider community of filmmaking workshops to receive significant funding under the auspices of the then recently signed Workshop Declaration, a UK initiative, established in 1982 between the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) and Channel 4. The primary aim of this declaration was "to nurture a film practice radically different from the mainstream film and broadcasting industry,"² to democratise filmmaking practise, production, and distribution among regionally based filmmaking workshops. *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* was the first feature film produced under this new funding model and was one of several Northern Irish films produced via the same avenue. These include Anne Crilly's remarkable documentary *MOTHER IRELAND* (UK 1988) and Margo Harkin's *HUSH-A-BYE BABY* (UK 1990), both of which were produced by Derry Film and Video Workshop. A crucial stipulation of the Workshop Declaration was that the copyright and ownership of films produced under its support would be retained by the filmmakers, by the filmmaking workshops themselves, rather than broadcasters. This has led to films produced under the declaration remaining relatively unavailable outside of specialist circles, causing their "being overlooked by film and media scholars for much of the last thirty years"³ and thus from debate around the representation of Northern Ireland on screen. In recent years however, due perhaps to a renewed appreciation for the significance of egalitarian, community engaged filmmaking of this nature, we have seen a reappraisal of sorts of these films: The 2021 edition of The Folk Film Gathering, a film festival held annually in Edinburgh, Scotland, included a screening of *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* accompanied by a roundtable discussion with members of its production team. The Barbican Centre in London included *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* as part of its "The Television Will Be Revolutionised" series of events in 2018, which delved into the 1982 Workshop Declaration and other "oppositional films from Channel 4's first decade: a radical, game-changing era that opened doors for diverse voices in cinemas and on British television."⁴ In 2020 Derry Film and Video Workshop was the

focus of a series of online dossiers, titled “It’s not for you we did it,” produced as part of EVA International, Ireland’s Biennial for contemporary art, by curator Sara Greavu and artist Ciara Phillips.

ACCEPTABLE LEVELS can be read as a work of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction,” due to its direct interrogation of the formation of the very history it represents, positioning it as a film that “realises[...]we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know [the] past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process.”⁵ ACCEPTABLE LEVELS highlights the tension that exists between “official” history and the experiences of those on the ground, those living through these moments of historical significance. This tension is encapsulated in Mrs. Nolan’s above realisation, an anagnorisis of sorts, regarding the potency of historical mediation. One moment she is lambasting the film crew for their attempts to film the body of the dead child, to sensationalize her death, and in the next she is encouraging them to film the fatal plastic bullet and to “show that on your British television.” ACCEPTABLE LEVELS is a film that calls into question the very formation of cultural hegemony in that it “problematizes the [...] possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic [...] just unresolved contradiction.”⁶ The overarching implication of the film being we as an audience cannot possibly take documentaries produced through mainstream channels at face value. This sentiment is echoed by filmmaker Pat Murphy, whose 1981 film MAEVE (UK 1981) was conceived in response to Murphy’s frustration with the narrow focus of documentary, and representations of Northern Ireland on British television, throughout the Northern Irish conflict.⁷

This article shows how these more typical trends in the audiovisual tracing of this period of Anglo-Irish history manifest themselves on screen and how ACCEPTABLE LEVELS operates as a comment on these prevailing forms of shorthand cinematic coding and on dominant trends in terms of both narrative and aesthetics. It is a film that forces the viewer to re-evaluate and re-constitute these culturally embedded tropes of historical reconstruction, and also to question the media’s function as an apparatus of cultural memory making. In that sense ACCEPTABLE LEVELS can be viewed, in historian Robert A. Rosenstone’s terms, as a radical history film in that it operates as a “commentary on, and challenge to traditional historical discourse.”⁸ The Northern Irish conflict indeed proved a fertile time for film production, though it is significant that nearly all British financed films concerning the conflict tended to reinforce the status quo in terms of the representation of Northern Ireland. ACCEPTABLE LEVELS challenges this pervasive ideology through its laying bare of that illusion.



Still from *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* (UK 1983): Mrs. Nolan brandishes the fatal plastic bullet

The Workshop Declaration

ACCEPTABLE LEVELS was produced under the terms of the Workshop Declaration, which was established in the early 1980s between the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), the Regional Arts Associations, the Independent Filmmakers' Association, the British Film Institute and the newly formed Channel 4. The declaration's primary aim was to establish a network of permanently funded regional film and television workshops that would actively engage with their respective communities. It was viewed as "a radical intervention within the UK film and television industry [...] that aimed to nurture a film practice radically different from the mainstream film and broadcasting industry."⁹ The declaration, which in practice worked as definite set of principles—a manifesto rather than a more conventional agreement between funding bodies and creatives—was born out of a movement of film and video workshops that emerged in the UK in the 1960s that were characterised by their socialist politics and their "non-hierarchical, collective management structure[s]."¹⁰ What eventually drove the declaration to fruition was the dissatisfaction of "a small group of regional filmmakers and campaigners, for whom the London-based film industry was inaccessible and altogether irrelevant to their regional film activities."¹¹ The Workshop Declaration, which was officially signed on the 25th of March, 1982, required that those regional workshops that would be franchised through the declaration, functioned "on a non-commercial and non-profit distributing basis."¹² Furthermore the copyright of works produced would be maintained by the individual workshop rather than the broadcaster, a fact that has, as previously noted, led to many films produced under the Workshop Declaration remaining inaccessible to contemporary audiences. Other key stipulations of the declaration were the continuation of the non-hierarchical operating structures, the presence of four fulltime members of staff who would each receive an equal salary of around ten thousand pounds per annum, and the implementation of "cross-grade working—as opposed to the rigid specialism of director, editor, camera,

sound, etc.”¹³ This final point is crucial in appreciating the open and egalitarian working model that the Workshop Declaration sought to engender, one that would promote education and engagement across the various filmmaking disciplines as well as engagement with the communities in which these workshops were embedded.

Frontroom Productions, based in London, who produced *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* along with the Belfast Film Workshop, was one of the first workshops to receive funding under the declaration while the Belfast Film Workshop was formed during the film’s production. *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* was devised through the shared experiences of the production team members based in England, some of whom had worked on BBC production crews, and those from Belfast, with their direct experience of living with the conflict on their doorstep. The film’s plot was devised collectively, drawing on the experiences of the whole group, with the final script being pieced together by writer Gordon Hann. The local community, those living in and around the Divis Flats complex in West Belfast, were not simply the subject of the film but active participants in its making through significant contributions to its script and as performers. Indeed the majority of the film’s performers were non-professional actors from in and around the Divis Flats area. Robert Smith, who’s various credited roles on *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* include lighting, art direction, and script writing, speaks of the time afforded to the filmmakers to engage with the community as a result of the relative financial freedom brought about by the Workshop Declaration. Speaking at an event following a screening of the film at London’s Barbican Centre in 2018, Smith recalls the lengthy casting process as one of unprecedented care and focus on authenticity.¹⁴ The Workshop Declaration allowed for this level of engagement due to its non-commercial nature, affording an alternative audiovisual trace of the Northern Irish conflict, reflecting the society and culture from which it was produced.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

“Historiographic metafiction” is a term used by Linda Hutcheon to describe a work of fiction that fuses meta-fictional elements with historical fiction. Works of historiographic metafiction problematise the relationship between history and fiction bringing to attention the similarities between both and demonstrating that history is a construct. *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* operates in this way through its fictionalised telling of the construction of a documentary film, what amounts to a textual remnant of a moment of historical significance. The past can only be known via its textual remains, and history is a narrative construct, pieced together using those remains, or, as Hayden White puts it, “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation.”¹⁵

White defines historiography as “the representation of history in verbal images and written discourse.”¹⁶ In other words historiography can be defined as the process of registering history by presenting purportedly accurate accounts of it. White moreover notes that historiographies are often regarded as debates or discussions between historians about “which events happened and how they happened while at the same time attempting to find a means to adequately picture the significance of these events.”¹⁷ In this context cinema presents a significant problem of interpretation to historians: How exactly should historical cinema be read? This question applies both to the analysis of archival materials as artefacts of their time and to the creation of historical cinema, by which I mean fiction cinema where moments of history are central to the narrative. According to historian Robert A. Rosenstone, history on the page and history on the screen are similar in that:

*they refer to actual events, moments and movements from the past, and at the same time they partake in the unreal and the fictional, since both are made out of sets of conventions we have developed for talking about where we human beings have come from.*¹⁸

The fact remains however that we as a culture typically view history as a “particular kind of practice, one that insists on a certain kind of historical truth and tends to exclude others”¹⁹; the “other” here of course being cinema. History on cinema is often dismissed out of hand as fanciful or blatantly misleading when compared to the rarefied realm of written academic history. For instance, Ruth Barton describes the

reaction in Ireland to Neil Jordan's 1996 epic historical drama *MICHAEL COLLINS* (IE 1996), as "an almost hysterical jostling for knowledge/power,"²⁰ where historians and media commentators scrambled to assert their own claims to historical truth. Barton argues that films such as this "open up little space for alternative versions of the events they describe, presenting themselves as truth."²¹ However, I would argue that, though flawed in its representation of a significant figure in Irish history—the titular Collins—a film such as this, by dint of its very existence in the public sphere, is doing the opposite of what Barton suggests: It is offering an alternative truth through its direct confrontation of traditional and established historical discourse. To appreciate the subversive quality of *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*, the power of its critique of the media, and its railing against this dominant discourse, it is important to position the film within the broader context of audiovisual representations of the Northern Irish conflict and the patterns of representation that exist generally in cinema concerning Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole.

Irish cinema, from its earliest examples of showing the country on screen, has been dominated by a series of linked tropes, such as the altruistic lure of violence, an obsession with land and landscapes, and, of course, the pervasive, lingering legacy of history. John Hill, in *Cinema and Ireland* (2014) writes that, while there was never any shortage of screen representations of Ireland throughout the history of cinema, these, until relatively recently, never came from Ireland itself due to "the absence of any sustained output from an indigenous Irish film industry." Instead, two images persisted throughout the twentieth century, that of a "simple and generally blissful, rural idyll," or as a "dark and strife torn maelstrom."²² While these two images contradict one another, they do share a similarity in that both imply a society yet to reach a state of civil and social modernity. The first image has come to be associated with American, or Hollywood, visions of Ireland, perhaps most recognisably—and influentially—in John Ford's *THE QUIET MAN* (US 1952). Alan J. Pakula's final film, *THE DEVIL'S OWN* (US 1997), is an example of a Hollywood film concerning the Northern Irish conflict in which the narrative is framed by a desire to return to the congenial, homely comfort of what John Hill labels a "nostalgic pastoralism,"²³ inherited directly from films such as *THE QUIET MAN*. Britain, in contrast has preferred a "darker, more brooding vision" due in part to its "direct legacy of military and political involvement in Ireland."²⁴ British cinema has tended to adhere to the dominant narrative which has come to be rooted both in cinema and in media representations of the conflict: that the situation in Northern Ireland is somehow beyond political resolution, fundamentally portraying Britain as an impartial third party and the warring Irish as an irrational people with a fatalistic inclination toward violence. In *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* this "British" image of Ireland reveals itself in the fictional documentary produced within the film, where the truth is put to one side, the British establishment's culpability in the ongoing violence confined to the cutting room floor. Even films that go some way to address these tropes can end up falling back into these same generic traps. *SUNDAY* (UK 2002), directed by Charles McDougall and written by renowned screenwriter Jimmy McGovern, is one of two fiction films, along with Paul Greengrass' *BLOODY SUNDAY* (UK 2002), produced to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday Massacre of January 1972, where British soldiers shot twenty six unarmed civilians taking part in a peaceful civil rights demonstration, killing fourteen. While *SUNDAY* is damning in its portrayal of the British Army, and the subsequent Widgery Tribunal, by the film's end we are presented with a scenario where continued violence appears to be the only possible solution to the situation in Northern Ireland. The film's closing sequence features an IRA initiation ceremony, intercut with the findings of the Widgery Tribunal, cementing the trope that the Northern Irish conflict is beyond political or social intervention.

This British image of Ireland, an audiovisual trace of a nation produced by its colonial subjugator, has its roots in the long history of derogatory attitudes toward Ireland across British culture. The deployment of British troops to Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, in an effort to curb a resurgent Provisional IRA, whose resurgence itself was a response to the hostile unionist backlash to the civil rights movement, brought with it a rise in anti-Irish prejudice across Britain, where politicians and media commentators refused to properly recognise Britain's responsibility for, and direct role in, the conflict. Britain was instead portrayed as a disinterested mediator of two warring and irrational Irish clans who were innately prone to violence; a trend that continues in the British press and cinema to this day:

*By mid 1970, when British troops went on the offensive against the nationalist community, cartoonists had reverted to Victorian images of the Irish, depicting them as primitive and ape-like in contrast to the more refined-looking squaddies.*²⁵

Liz Curtis, in *Nothing But the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (1984), charts the representation of Ireland in British culture throughout the history of Ireland's colonial subjugation, going as far back as the twelfth century and to Gerald of Wales' *History and Topography of Ireland*, which had a significant impact and influence over the perception of Ireland at the time and subsequently.

*This is a filthy people, wallowing in vice. Of all people it is the least instructed in the rudiments of faith. They do not yet pay tithes or first fruits or contract marriages. They do not avoid incest.*²⁶

Gerald's claim that the Irish were barbaric, that they "live on beasts only, and live like beasts"²⁷ was viewed as an endorsement of sorts for England's colonial ambitions. Indeed, "for almost seven centuries [Gerald's] work was quoted by historians as fact."²⁸

Throughout the succeeding centuries the English consistently attempted to conquer Ireland, while Ireland met these attempts with staunch resistance. This defiance kept alive the derogatory and racist image of the Irish people that was used to justify the exploits of the colonisers. This primitive form of propagandising found new form and voice in accordance with the pre-occupations and considerations of each age. Yet it was consistently and perennially based on the same misleading trope that Ireland and its people needed the English to drag them out of the depths of their barbarity. In the Elizabethan years "the English colonists justified their actions by arguing that the Irish were culturally inferior to themselves, and that the English would civilise them."²⁹ This, and other such arguments, appeared in the first written histories of Ireland, which emerged in 1577. For instance, the first volume of Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* featured passages concerning Ireland by figures such as Edmund Campion and Richard Stanyhurst who, in keeping with Gerald of Wales, described Irish people as "barbarous and backward."³⁰

In allowing these ideas about the cultural inferiority of Ireland to simmer the English were following the example of the Spanish who used similar ideas about the native peoples of the Caribbean and South America to justify a conquest of unparalleled viciousness and brutality. The same can also be said of Britain's attitude to India and its many other colonial conquests. Indeed, Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden*, written in 1899, highlights just how deeply this mindset came to be rooted in the culture. The poem quite succinctly surmises the "overbearing vanity of the British Imperialists"³¹ in their attitude towards "Your newcaught, sullen peoples, Half devil and half child."³² This attitude of superiority over Ireland was reflected culturally, from derogatory caricatures, as extensively highlighted in L. Perry Curtis' *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (1971), to Irish Bulls—absurd, illogical, supposedly comic statements. Irish Bulls were so prevalent across the culture that Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth, wrote in 1892 the satirical *An Essay on Irish Bulls* in an attempt to interrogate the status of Irish Bulls as a trait of Hiberno-English speech and instead expose it as an English colonial construct (an example of an Irish Bull in cinema is Red Will Danaher's remark in John Ford's *THE QUIET MAN*: "He'll regret it 'til his dying day, if ever he lives that long"). This notion reverberates through the centuries to Britain's cinematic representation of Ireland as a "dark and strife torn maelstrom,"³³ whereby this image of Ireland, which has found itself rooted in mainstream cinematic representations—the production of which comes under the microscope in *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*—should be considered a colonial construct.

Fundamentally the ideology behind this historic sentiment is echoed in the audiovisual trace of the Northern Irish conflict in British cinema, and when discussing cinematic representations of Northern Ireland there is one clear starting point, Carol Reed's *ODD MAN OUT* (UK 1947). *ODD MAN OUT* is a film that "artistically [...] set the pattern for many cinematic portraits of the 'troubles' that followed."³⁴ It concerns the fate of an IRA leader, abandoned following a botched robbery, and is an early example of this tendency towards dark, brooding imagery where fate serves as the film's "central preoccupation."³⁵ As

with later news reportage of the Northern Irish conflict, and subsequent mainstream cinematic representations, *ODD MAN OUT* lacks any exploration of social and political contexts, instead dwelling on the individual, on acts of unfounded violence driven by a firm, yet irrational, fatalism, establishing a status quo that would find itself consistently reinforced across subsequent cinematic representations. Generally these films are texts of near total hopelessness and despair, depicting those caught up in the conflict as victims resigned to their fate and the situation in Northern Ireland as beyond the reach of political resolution. This trope is still readily evident in cinema concerning Northern Ireland and the conflict. One notable recent example is Yann Demange's *'71* (UK 2014), a film that, in terms of its narrative structure, bears a striking resemblance to *ODD MAN OUT*. It is my view that a film like *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* serves as the anthesis to such a representation, tearing up the prevailing audiovisual trace of Northern Ireland, laying bare the illusion of its colonial construction.

THE ACCEPTABLE LEVEL

ACCEPTABLE LEVELS functions as a counter hegemonic moment of historiography to the representation of Northern Ireland that found itself rooted in mainstream cinema and media throughout, and beyond, the Northern Irish conflict. French historian Marc Ferro, a significant early writer on cinema and history, viewed subversive filmmakers, such as Jean-Luc Godard in the context of Ferro's writing, "as historians who provide a counter-analysis to the studies of society undertaken by academics,"³⁶ through cinema that creates "space for a new sort of historical world to grow."³⁷ *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* does this by interrogating the very formation of the history it represents. The idea of traditional "written" history as a form of narrative and the parallels that exist between history and fiction are fundamental to Linda Hutcheon's notion of "historiographic metafiction," wherein the historiographic calls our attention to the process of bringing together historical moments and events through the writing of history, while metafiction highlights the inner workings, the structural components of narrative. Central to texts of this nature is their self-reflexiveness, drawing attention to their own textuality, the "construction of a fictional illusion and the laying bare of that illusion."³⁸ *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*, while never directly lingering on its own construction, functions as a self-reflexive text through its deconstruction of the processes of cultural production concerning the Northern Irish conflict, and the narrative surrounding Northern Ireland as a whole; that of a community helpless in the face of war.

A British documentary television crew comes to the Divis Flats in West Belfast to film an episode for a documentary series, called "Britain's Children: Ulster," about the effect of violence on children in Northern Ireland. While interviewing a young girl in her family home, Róisín, a girl of the same age is killed, having been struck by a plastic bullet fired by a patrolling British soldier. This is a tragic echo of the killing of Patrick Rooney, aged nine, on August 15th 1969, in Divis Flats, the first child to be killed during the conflict. The documentary crew sprints from Róisín's home and attempt to film as much as they can. The filmmakers are clearly drawn to sensationalist scenes, that of the bloodied body, scenes that can easily be shaped according to prevailing codes for the reporting of violence, wherein the subject lacks a coherent voice. In a tacit acknowledgment of this fact, that the media frequently misrepresent the situation in Northern Ireland, the residents of Divis Flats attempt to intervene to ensure the real story is told as described in the opening paragraph of this article, where the character of Mrs Nolan holds aloft the fatal plastic bullet and challenges the filmmakers to tell the truth, to "put that on your British Television." The documentary crew later interviews Róisín, as well as another young girl Teresa who witnessed the shooting, about what happened and their emotions surrounding the killing. At this point, beginning with Mrs. Nolan's moment of anagnorisis, the possibility emerges of a community moving beyond the mediation of media, of documentary, of cinema, revealing their truth, and the truth of the violence that surrounds them, to the broader public.

As *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* progresses we witness the process through which this tiny window of possibility is destroyed through the intervention of the powers that be. All of this footage disappears in the editing suite. The army and the program's producer make their pointed suggestions to the film's director as concerns are raised about "balance" in the way these events are presented so as to avoid engendering

“sympathy for the terrorists” among the British public. Thus Mrs. Nolan’s contribution, as well as that of Teresa, are cut completely from the program. The erasure of Mrs. Nolan is a particularly unsettling rendering of censorship in action. First we see the rushes of her interview playing back, their audio removed, as a faceless voice speaks on the telephone to Simon, the director: “Yeah I’m looking at them right now...they’re not too bad. A bit soft and shaky in places.” Later the footage is played again, this time with its audio attached, however now her indictments are drowned out by the hum of the editing machine and the conversation between the editor and director, where they debate over not “pointing the finger too strongly at the army.” The effect of this is twofold: as viewers we are fully aware of the events that have unfolded, of the murder of a child at the hands of a British soldier, and of the ridiculousness of the assertion that the finger of blame must not be pointed “too strongly at the army.” The result of this is the construction then by the viewer of an imaginary documentary, one at odds with the film within the film, that is in accord with the reality of this moment, and by extension life in Northern Ireland during the conflict. We then witness the process by which Róisín’s interview is edited so that she is portrayed as a mere symbolic victim, not as a righteous accuser. Her statement of fact, that “the soldiers did it,” as well as Teresa’s indictment that “it’s natural that people should hit back” to their treatment at the hands of the British army, are all deemed surplus to requirement. Only Róisín’s small contribution, “I just try to keep out of trouble...I just try to get on with it” remains. *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* concludes with Róisín and her family watching the broadcast of “Britain’s Children: Ulster” at home, their exasperation at their treatment by the BBC, by the British establishment, is succinctly summed up in Róisín’s father’s proclamation, “is that it?” and her mother, when she states, “it’s as if we never said a word.”



Still from *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* (UK 1983): The cutting room floor

In a very active way *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* shows how apathy among the British public towards the Northern Irish conflict was encouraged by the British media through its institutional willingness to misrepresent stories emerging from Northern Ireland. In this way it is a film that “problematizes the very

possibility of historical knowledge”³⁹ through its construction of a fictional illusion, the documentary produced within the film, and the laying bare of that illusion as a heavily mediated and falsified construct. This crucial storytelling device, the film within the film, is significant given the sheer amount of censorship and propagandising in the media throughout the conflict. As David Butler states in *The Trouble With Reporting Northern Ireland*, “British reporting [...] privileged certain interpretations of the civil unrest in Northern Ireland.”⁴⁰ Local broadcasters, such as BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television (now known as UTV), colluded with the Parliament of Northern Ireland and Westminster to keep British television screens, and thus the British public, free from events and images of Northern Ireland. Indeed, according to Liz Curtis, “unionist politicians policed the radio and television coverage of Ireland [...] they insured that no criticism of their unjust, anachronistic ‘province’ reached the airways.”⁴¹ Thus, they maintained a consensus view that would be sustained throughout the conflict, limiting reportage to emotive language and imagery that served to quash any wider understanding of the situation by ignoring broader political and social contexts. The BBC’s refusal to “serve the opponents of the State”⁴² recalls art historian Emile Male’s assertion that, in the Middle Ages, “church art and architecture comprised all the history that a Christian was believed to need”⁴³; what the BBC chose to broadcast was all they believed the British public, and by extension the wider world, needed to know about the conflict in Northern Ireland. The British state’s own culpability in the bloodshed, as in *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*, was confined to the cutting room floor. They believed that the BBC “should be part of the State’s propaganda machine and the pursuit of the campaign against the republican paramilitaries should have priority over all other considerations.”⁴⁴

Kate McManus and Alistair Herron from the Belfast Film Workshop, John Davies, Ellin Hare, and Robert Smith from Frontroom Productions, London, all of whom were involved in the production of *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*, initially met in Belfast while working on Pat Murphy’s *MAEVE*. The screenplay for *MAEVE* was born out of Murphy’s frustration with the representation of Northern Ireland in documentary filmmaking. Her issue “was not necessarily to do with censorship or bias in reports on the political conflict in Northern Ireland, but with the documentary form itself.” Murphy’s belief was, given the ideologically invisible nature of a documentary’s construction, (the documentary form’s implicit claim to reality) that fiction cinema, in actuality, grants a filmmaker “more scope to tell the truth” and that these fictional representations “offer a critical space where different representations could be explored.”⁴⁵ John Davies, who co-directed *MAEVE* along with Murphy, brings this same ethos to his direction of *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*. Through the fictionalisation of one such documentary’s production, one that would contribute to the illusion of Northern Ireland as presented in British cultural production, *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* fundamentally “[renders] problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography—and literature.”⁴⁶ Works of historiographic metafiction “openly assert that there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth.”⁴⁷ *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* does this by presenting us with an event, the killing of a child by a British soldier, and then with the “official” truth, as presented to the public. Yet at the same time the film affirms the possibility of the “Truth,” as embodied through Mrs. Nolan and her moment of anagnorisis, of an unmediated representation of the situation in Northern Ireland as experienced by those living in and of its communities. Where the film’s ideology sparks to life is precisely in this interaction between the historiographic and the metafictional. The film rejects the claims of both “‘authentic’ representation and ‘inauthentic’ copy alike” by divulging the inauthenticity of the documentary, while in turn forcing the viewer to question their own position regarding the conflict because history, as with fiction “constitute[s] [its] object of attention; in other words, [it] decide[s] which events will become facts.”⁴⁸ There are other examples of this across films concerning the Northern Irish conflict, such as Ken Loach’s *HIDDEN AGENDA* (UK 1989), about the cover-up of the murder of a human rights lawyer, and Paul Greengrass’ *BLOODY SUNDAY*. Both of these films, like *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*, engage with the way moments of historical significance are traced in the public domain, through the removal of context, relegating the British establishment to a disinterested third party caught between two warring factions, rather than an active participant, and historical instigator, in the conflict. However none of these films challenges “the very meaning of artistic originality [and] the transparency of historical referentiality”⁴⁹ with such ideological potency as *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS*.

CONCLUSION

Mainstream cinematic renderings of the Northern Irish narrative, those overly reliant on the tropes and conventions of shorthand cinematic coding, though perhaps political in terms of content, are nonetheless rendered politically impotent through their adherence to generic convention. Their compliance to worn stereotypes depoliticise their representation through their failure to properly engage with the intricacies of the Northern Irish narrative from the ground up. *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* functions as a counter hegemonic moment of historical reconstruction to the representation of Northern Ireland that found itself embedded in mainstream cinema and media throughout the Northern Irish conflict and beyond.

As a piece of cinema at odds with “official” narratives of the state, *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* brings to mind a point made by John Hill in a review of *HIDDEN AGENDA*. He cites Jean-Luc Godard’s *LA CHINOISE* (FR 1967) as a film which “demonstrated an insistence on the need for revolutionary messages (or content) to be accompanied by an appropriate revolutionary form.”⁵⁰ In *HIDDEN AGENDA* Loach rigidly adheres to the constraints of the political thriller, to the detriment of his intended political message, its potential as a radical political statement instead lost in the wash of its generic convention. The Workshop Declaration was a radical cinematic movement, its foundation a political act, an attempt to give voice to marginalised communities who otherwise may have had no such outlet. Where *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* succeeds is in its highlighting the incompatibility of history from the ground up, the lived experience of a community, with “official” historical narratives from the top down. Its metafictional elements, the laying bare of the illusion of a documentary’s construction—which in a broader sense forces the contestation of visual media’s construction of the entire Northern Irish narrative “from within its own assumptions,”⁵¹ what we perceive as historical truth—lends it an ideological potency rarely seen in cinema concerning the Northern Irish conflict.

ACCEPTABLE LEVELS re-politicises the Northern Irish narrative—seizing the discourse, if you will—through a potent deconstructive energy, one that is woven into the structure of the film. It allows space for a fresh perspective, free from shorthand cinematic coding, though at the same time it foregrounds the futility of such a pursuit. Mrs. Nolan’s plea down the lens of colonial subjugation confined to the cutting room floor because those in power know that “the history of cinema is the history of the power to make history.”⁵²

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), 111.

² Andy Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia – The Workshop Declaration (1982–1989),” in *Contemporary Radical Film Culture, Networks, Organisations and Activists*, ed. Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, Jack Newsinger (New York: Routledge, 2021), 207.

³ Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 208.

⁴ From Barbican Centre website: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2018/series/the-television-will-be...>

⁵ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 122.

⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 106.

⁷ Emmie McFadden’s essay, “Sites of Power – Memory, Storytelling and Identity,” which appeared in a booklet attached to the 2021 Blu-Ray release of *Maevae* by the British Film Institute.

⁸ Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7.

⁹ Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 207.

¹⁰ Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 210.

¹¹ Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 209.

¹² Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 207.

¹³ Robson, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Utopia,” 207.

¹⁴ Robert Smith, speaking at the Barbican Centre London, as part of “The Television Will Be Revolutionised Channel 4 and the 1982 Workshop Declaration,” a series of events which ran from 13th–16th September, 2018. The author received an audio file of the panel discussion that followed a screening of *Acceptable Levels* through the Barbican Centre.

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 122.

¹⁶ Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1988): 1193.

¹⁷ White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” 1195.

¹⁸ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 2.

¹⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 4.

²⁰ Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 142.

²¹ Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, 141.

²² John Hill, et al., *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2014), 148.

²³ Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 149.

²⁴ Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 149.

- ²⁵ Liz Curtis, *Ireland The Propaganda War: The British Media and 'The Battle for Hearts and Minds'* (London: Pluto, 1984), 82.
- ²⁶ Liz Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism* (Belfast: Sasta), 10.
- ²⁷ Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, 8.
- ²⁸ Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, 8.
- ²⁹ Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, 11.
- ³⁰ Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, 16.
- ³¹ Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story*, 66.
- ³² Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" (1899).
- ³³ Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 148.
- ³⁴ John Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland* (London: British Film Institute, 2006), 191.
- ³⁵ Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*, 152.
- ³⁶ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7.
- ³⁷ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, 227.
- ³⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London, New York: Routledge, 1984), 6.
- ³⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 106.
- ⁴⁰ David Butler, *The Trouble With Reporting Northern Ireland* (Aldershot, Brookfield: Avebury Press, 1995), 3.
- ⁴¹ Liz Curtis, "British Broadcasting and Ireland" *Screen* 27, no. 2 (March–April 1986), 47.
- ⁴² Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1984), 229.
- ⁴³ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 5.
- ⁴⁴ Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984*, 230.
- ⁴⁵ These quotes are taken from an essay by Emmie McFadden, "Sites of Power – Memory, Storytelling and Identity," which appeared in a booklet attached to the 2021 Blu-Ray release of *Maeve* by the British Film Institute.
- ⁴⁶ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, xii.
- ⁴⁷ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 109.
- ⁴⁸ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 122.
- ⁴⁹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 110.
- ⁵⁰ John Hill, "Hidden Agenda: Politics and the Thriller" *Circa* 57 (May–June 1991), 38.
- ⁵¹ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 6.
- ⁵² Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2009), 55.

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QUIET MAN, THE, John Ford, US 1953

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