

Tribeca Belfast and the on-screen regeneration of Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This paper looks at media representations of the projected regeneration of Northern Ireland, paying particular attention to a recent promotional film made to elicit support for the redevelopment of a part of Belfast's city centre. Commissioned by Castlebrooke Investments, 'Tribeca Belfast' offers a future prospectus of the city that is as superficial as it is bland. It is, however, illustrative of two influential ideas and strategies that took flight at the end of the Cold War and the 'triumph of capitalism'. One seeks peace through the application of neoliberal nostrums; the other combines brand theory with state-craft in pursuit of global competitiveness. Both propose models of citizenship that are politically benign, either preferring middle class solipsism or demanding brand loyalty. In Castlebrooke's projection of a future Belfast, this translates into a city peopled by a mobile professional class, waited upon and entertained by servile locals. But such a sterile vision is inimical to building peace and political progress because it underestimates and downplays the significance of marginalised groups who through their activism and expressions of solidarity can lay better claim to the 'heart and soul' of Belfast, evoked by Castlebrooke.

Introduction

With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the erstwhile troubled province of Northern Ireland secured itself a reputation as an international ‘good news story’, achieving a political settlement after 30 years of bloody civil conflict. It seemed that the region could boast a blue-print for peace that could be exported to other similarly troubled and divided regions across the world. Its new political accord stood not only for peace between historic antagonists – Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists – it also held out the possibility of a ‘peace dividend’ that would lift Northern Ireland out of the economic doldrums that had seen it rely on a large subvention from the British exchequer. Peace, it was assumed, would allow the redirection of money into public services and infrastructure that was once spent on security measures. Northern Ireland would enjoy the goodwill and largesse of wealthy patrons – the US in particular – and the region would at last be able to take its place as a proper constituent of the global economy, enjoying all the perceived economic spoils that this entailed.

The optimism of that time has abated, dashed by the financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent deep cuts implemented by the United Kingdom (UK) government in London. Then, and perhaps not unrelated to the austerity imposed by Westminster, the Northern Ireland power-sharing executive collapsed in January 2017 amid allegations of financial malfeasance and political bad faith. On top of this the UK’s decision in 2016 to leave the European Union reopened the question of the border in Ireland. Yet Northern Ireland’s entry into global capitalism continues, and with it an acute sensitivity to the region’s global image and reputation, the good maintenance of which is seen as a prerequisite to attracting inward investment and tourists. Northern Ireland is, of course, not alone in its concern to present-

well on the global stage, but as the one-time poster-boy for peace and as a relatively peripheral region taking its place in the global free market, it offers an intriguing case study in the exercise of branding and media marketing of a region that bears a reputation for political dysfunction and violence.

This paper looks at media representations of the projected regeneration of Northern Ireland, paying particular attention to a recent promotional film made to elicit support for the redevelopment of a part of Belfast's city centre. Commissioned by Castlebrooke Investments, it offers a future prospectus of the city, and by extension the region, that is as superficial as it is bland, proposing a benign form of citizenship to the inhabitants of the city. Viewed within the context of previous on-screen representations of Belfast, the Castlebrooke film reveals something of how the contemporary city can be subject to a corporate imagination, distinct, that is, from the prevailing cultural tropes associated with the region. To understand this change the paper situates the Castlebrooke film in relation to two harmonious and globally influential ideas and strategies that took flight at the end of the Cold War, and that have been at work in the local political economy. The first is what may be termed a liberal peace strategy that equated peace with the nostrums of neoliberalism, and banked on the growth of a self-interested middle class that would put its material comforts before political passions. The second strategy advanced the idea that to compete in the global free market, nations, regions and cities needed to behave like commercial brands, and organise and market themselves accordingly. Like the liberal peace approach, it is predicated upon a model of citizenship that forgoes political conviction and instead submits to, or works in accord with purely commercial imperatives. In Castlebrooke's projection of a future Belfast, this translates into a city inhabited by a mobile professional class, waited upon and entertained by subservient locals. While Castlebrooke's promise of a commercially vibrant, cosmopolitan

Belfast at peace with itself is beguiling, this paper suggests that it is nonetheless a fantasy in denial of the sectarian realities; persistent, deepening poverty; and social exclusion and discrimination in the region. Furthermore, and crucially, it is a politically sterile vision that underestimates and downplays the significance of the very marginalised social groups whose activism has been integral to building peace and who continue to improve the quality of that peace by fighting poverty and social inequalities. This paper concludes by suggesting that such committed activism and expressions of solidarity lay better claim to being the ‘international heart’ and ‘Belfast soul’ evoked in Castlebrooke’s promotional film.

The liberal peace strategy

At the end of the Cold War, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the apparent triumph of capitalism, the way was clear for Western-led liberal peace strategies to be applied in a number of war-torn contexts. Key to these strategies was global convergence towards market liberalisation. (Pugh 2005). As Jan Selby argues, liberal orthodoxy takes for granted a broad equation of economic liberalisation, globalisation and peace. Accordingly, what became known as neoliberalism was viewed as having the power to transform violent conflicts, redirecting societal forces away from war and towards commerce and peace (2011: 16). The spirit of the global free market, its advocates believed, corresponded with places distinguished by their openness and good relations. This, then, would best be advanced through processes of regional integration and globalisation, softening national borders to facilitate flows of capital, goods and people (Selby 2011: 17). The anticipated return on this new economic mobility was an attendant decline in the old state-centric national allegiances, and in their place the growth of self-confident diasporas and pluralistic identities (Selby 2011: 18). Crucially, this liberal cosmopolitanism and its associated free trade were the

purported harbingers of economic regeneration, functioning as the proverbial rising-tide that lifts all boats, thus growing the middle class and alleviating the sort of poverty that liberal orthodoxy assumes is the seed bed of conflict. As Selby explains:

The middle class, so the argument goes, prioritise material prosperity and opportunity over war: they are an essentially peace-oriented class. The poor, by contrast, lack these opportunities, and are thus much more likely to be attracted by the lure of self-affirmation through violence (Selby 2011: 19).

For liberal peace strategists, this model of economic and social regeneration, designed to grow and embolden a middle class, naturally proposes a privileged place for business, both domestic and foreign in post-conflict regeneration. The business class would husband the peace, delivering prosperity and strengthening the hand of those constituencies opposed to a return to war (Selby 2011: 19).

Along these lines, Guy Ben-Porat (2006) has argued that Northern Ireland's business community played a key role in persuading politicians to compromise in the interests of peace. Incentivised by the economic opportunities presented by the European Union and globalisation, Ben-Porat credits the local business class with benign intervention in the evolving peace process and engagement in politics more directly. Nevertheless, he argues, business interests were careful to circumnavigate the potential controversies of party politics, taking care to advance its peace agenda through civic channels and by speaking in a strictly 'professional' capacity. Therefore, when the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in Northern Ireland endorsed the Good Friday Agreement, it did so in terms that anticipated economic benefits once peace had been secured. Political accord would enable commerce and industry to flourish, the CBI said, and as a corollary a post-conflict economic boost would

surely deliver jobs and support public services, improving schools, healthcare and the environment (Ben-Porat, 2006: 247).

In orthodox understanding, this was the much vaunted peace dividend. It never materialised; or at least not in the fulsome, evenly distributed manner dreamed of by the CBI. On the contrary, as Colin Knox has argued in respect of the region's most socially and economically disadvantaged wards, the performance gap across a range of key quality of life indicators – education, 'worklessness', mental health, life expectancy and crime – is in fact widening, due in significant measure to the 'deficit reduction'-led squeeze (aka austerity) on public spending as well as, since 2008, the deflationary effects of the global economic crisis (2016: 501). According to a recent Joseph Rowntree Report, 370,000 people in Northern Ireland live in poverty, 110,000 of whom are children, 220,000 working-age adults and 40,000 pensioners (2018: 2). While these levels compare favorably with England and Wales, Northern Ireland has greater rates of worklessness, lower employment and lower wages than elsewhere in the UK. Counter to the fantasy preferred by the business leaders, Colin Coulter notes:

The record of the Northern Irish economy over the course of the peace process has been poor in terms not only of the volume of new jobs created but their quality as well. Relatively few of the positions that have been created over the last two decades have been in high wage, high value added occupational sectors (2019: 126)

On top of this, Coulter highlights the devastating consequences of the UK Government's 2012 Welfare Reform Act on a region that is already at an economic disadvantage, and he remarks: 'What is striking about the poverty that exists in Northern Ireland is not merely its scale but also its inability to make any real impression on mainstream political debate' (2019: 136).

The persistence of poverty in Northern Ireland, deepening during the era of austerity, and its apparent inability to occupy any significant time and space in public debate, is important to

reflect upon given liberal peace strategists' avowed commitment to the global free-market and growing the middle class as valorous agents of economic and social transformation.

Branding Peace and 'living the brand'

Hand in glove with liberal peace strategies, Northern Ireland's integration into the global free market has been accompanied by efforts to brand it as a region that is 'open for business'. In an attempt both to erase the stain of conflict, as well as the view that the region labours under a regime of economic dependency akin to a 'workhouse economy' – a description applied to Northern Ireland during the 'troubles', which referred to how most people appeared either involved in the administration of benefits or policing one another (Rowthorn 1987: 117). On the basis of opportunities thus created by an entrepreneurial genie released from the peace process bottle, the 'new' Northern Ireland strives to present a very different face on the global stage. In key respects a reputation for peace after war becomes part of the Northern Ireland brand, but it is more than that. The region is now subject to what Daniel Jewesbury and Robert Porter call a 'moralising politics of social and economic development'.

By this we mean that there is a strong connection between the twin narratives of political progress and social-economic development in contemporary Belfast; that post-Agreement Belfast has, to a significant degree, become a story in which the twin moral goods of political progress and privatised, neo-liberal economic development are folded into one another (2010: 36)

The idea of branding cities, regions and nations emerged as a commercial practice closely linked to globalization narratives at the end of the Cold War (Curry Jansen 2008: 121). At core it treated places like companies or products, striving to develop for a location a

competitive brand identity in a crowded global market place. However, exponents of the idea emphasize that this is no exercise in mere packaging; it is nothing less than the convergence of brand theory with state-craft. Simon Anholt accordingly argues that it ‘is the glue that binds together a range of different tools for national promotion and reputation management’, but it is about more than competitive advantage and commercial imperatives: ‘properly understood it is primarily about people, purpose and reputation, and only secondarily about money’ (2007: 18). Similarly, for van Ham, branding ‘is not only about “selling” products, services and ideas, it is not only about gaining market share and attention, it is also about managing identity, loyalty and image’ (225). He argues that politicians who successfully manage their region’s brand equity achieve two things: one, they speak to external clients, and therefore attract talent and inward investment; and secondly, internally, they make their citizens ‘feel better and more confident about themselves by giving them a sense of belonging and a clear self-concept’ (2002: 253). Branding is then both an economic and political project.

The depth of branding’s potential penetration into public life is made clear by Anholt’s belief that it is ‘inherently democratic’, since it directs political energy towards persuasion rather than coercion, propaganda and lies (2007: 40). In a serendipitous collision with liberal peace initiatives, it guides regions and nations towards peaceful co-existence, since

Branding is an acknowledgment that territorial actors need to implement competitive global policies and strategies designed to achieve prosperity and influence. Since commerce has become the only legitimate area of competition, location branding, PR and marketing become contemporary equivalents of military doctrine. [...] Brand states still ‘make war’ (and are themselves ‘made’— i.e., shaped and constructed by

‘war’), but here in a non-violent contest for market-share and visibility (van Ham 2002: 265).

Perhaps what branding the nation strives for among its citizens is perfectly encapsulated in Anholt’s term, ‘benign nationalism’, which he refers to as ‘the first and most important component’ of any national competitive identity strategy – ‘the stakeholders in the corporation “live the brand”’ (2007: 16).

The idealism of Anholt’s belief in an enlightened business elite’s capacity to override historic conditions of political and cultural conflict and economic marginality through the magic of marketing is striking. Applied to Northern Ireland, for example, the notion of an unproblematically ‘benign nationalism’ as a transformational force is a farcical nonstarter. However, in more general terms, the nation-as-brand, with its benign national identity, is a shift from traditional academic discourse of nation and belonging. The nation as ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1981) has historically been the work of its ‘scribbling class’ broadly conceived – politicians, pundits, preachers, poets, publicists and scholars (Curry Jansen 2008: 124). Nations have their languages, flags and anthems, myths of origin and the symbols that accompany them, and often such symbols are put to work by Northern Ireland’s political antagonists, mobilizing the familiar tropes of nation in the existential dispute over ownership and hegemony, in the past and, most sharply, in the future. And yet, as Sue Curry Jansen points out, in the contemporary world of mass media and digital communications, the old scribbling class is joined by those skilled in marketing, public relations and media production. In the business-speak of their dubious discourse, these are the architects of the branded nation. For Curry Jansen – drawing upon the work of Anne Cronin (2008) – they are engaged in a project that transforms civic space into a commercial and ‘calculative space’: that is, space ‘constituted by marketing data and decision making rather than conceived in

terms of social relations or governance' (2008: 122). Curry Jansen's conclusions are bleaker about the mechanisms of capitalism than the optimistic prognosis of Anholt and van Ham. She argues that nation branding is an engine of market fundamentalism and profoundly anti-democratic. It is, she says, a:

monologic, hierarchical, reductive form of communication that is intended to privilege one message, require all voices of authority to speak in unison, and marginalize and silence dissenting voices. The message itself is, by design, hyper-visible, but the decision making involved in arriving at it and the multiple agendas incorporated within it are neither legible nor visible in the classic liberal sense. (Curry Jansen: 134).

The Propaganda of Peace

Sue Curry Jansen's critique centred on the experience of Estonia as it emerged out of Soviet vassalage in the early 1990s, facing at that moment the economic and political challenges of globalization in the neoliberal age. McLaughlin and Baker had similar concerns about Northern Ireland, emerging as it was from decades of conflict, with its own political and economic challenges. In *The Propaganda of Peace* they argued that just as citizens sometimes need to be persuaded of the efficacy and righteousness of war, so in Northern Ireland they needed to be persuaded that peace was possible and that erstwhile enemies could become partners in government. They argued that while institutions of the state played a key role in the propaganda of peace, they acted

in concert with other hegemonic social forces, such as local businesses and political elites, trade unions, the voluntary and community sector, academia and the media.

Persuading for peace is no less propaganda because of its association with civil society and its apparently benign intentions, for it displays a coherent set of ideas and values that seek to mobilise people to act and behave in the interests of power. (2010: 11)

There were two main strands to the propaganda of peace. The first sought to act as a ‘persuader’ for peace and reconciliation. The second, implicit in official ‘peace dividend’ narratives, strove to prepare Northern Ireland for entry into the global free-market and ready its people for the anticipated adjustments to their lives and behaviour that the forces of neoliberal political economy and globalization would demand – or, as Anholt puts it, instruction in how to ‘live the brand’. This second strand was manifest in a tranche of film and television dramas made during the period of the peace process, the overwhelming majority of which depicted central characters who eschewed political expression and activism in favour of a blissfully banal domesticity, romantic communion and family life. In fact, forays into the world of politics were routinely represented as abhorrent or endangering the family life of characters. In this way on-screen drama tended to operate a strict demarcation of the public and private, featuring a preferred category of valorous ‘ordinary people’; ‘an entirely constructed category; rarely permitted serious political convictions and motivations, and distinguished by their passive, domesticated citizenship’ (McLaughlin and Baker 2010: 71).

Just as post-troubles Northern Ireland was being presented with this version of brave domesticity, the physical environment and familiar iconography of the place was subject to a make-over. The business optimism of Waterfront developments, cultural and business quarters, grand conference and concert halls, large retail arcades, boutique residence, all

found their correspondence in film and television drama. Here, for example, as Martin McLoone illustrated, romantic comedies now played out against the backdrop of urban renewal, Belfast's brightly lit historic buildings and the glossy imagery of 'an affluent middle class with its culture of high-spend consumerism and metropolitan aspirations' (McLoone 2008: 59). Crucially, the British government through the Northern Ireland Office played its part in transforming Northern Ireland's global image and reputation, promoting the region as commodity real estate and site of conspicuous consumption. In 1995, the NIO commissioned a series of promotional public information films – advancing an anti-sectarian theme of peace and reconciliation. Two of these short films represented Northern Ireland in a commercially affirmative light. *Northern Irish Quality* celebrated the region's sporting and cultural achievements with a montage that included celebrated icons such as footballer George Best, athlete Mary Peters and film star Liam Neeson. Another, *Northern Irish Spirit*, had the look of a tourist travelogue, with images of the region's stunning coastal and rural scenery, accompanied by the strains of Belfast-born Van Morrison's song, 'Have I Told You Lately.' This was quite a turnaround in Belfast and Northern Ireland's troubles-era image, better known for its images of a dark, 'strife-torn maelstrom' and fated violence (Hill 1987). Against such dominant depictions, the clear point of the NIO films was to encourage local viewers, in the context of a 'new dispensation', to see and think about the region as a potentially lucrative commodity in the global market place, attractive to foreign investors and tourists alike, but only, of course, if their 'good' political behaviour could be assured. Northern Ireland was still able to produce psychopathic killers for the screen, but now they committed their crimes in more stylish surroundings and gentrified environments, and for non-troubles related motives. The BBC drama, *The Fall*, about a Belfast serial killer, that ran for three series, is a case in point. Its dark subject matter was no deterrent to tourist agencies that linked to the series' BBC website, which also included an interactive map of the shooting

locations – including the Waterfront Hall, Bert’s Jazz Bar, Botanic Gardens, the Hilton and Merchant hotels – all key tourist destinations.¹

This is not to say that films dealing with Northern Ireland’s violent past have disappeared from screens entirely. Indeed, a residual commitment to public service broadcasting in the UK and a tradition of social realism has played a role in producing a series of films dealing with historical events. Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* (2002) and Jim McGovern’s *Sunday* (Charles McDougall, 2002) re-enacted the murder of civil rights demonstrators by British Paratroopers in Derry, 1972. Greengrass and Guy Hibbert’s drama documentary *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004), brought to the screen the campaign for truth and justice in the wake of the Real IRA’s bombing of the market town on 15th August 1998, which killed 31 people. There have been a number of feature documentaries that investigate allegations of state collusion – *No Stone Unturned* (Alex Gibney, 2017) and *Unquiet Graves* (Sean Murray, 2018). The ‘troubles’ can also still provide the backdrop to generic thrillers such as *'71* (Yann Demange, 2014), about a British soldier, injured in a Belfast riot and left by his unit behind enemy lines. But the ‘official’ strategy is to project NI as an ‘area of outstanding natural beauty’, bucolic scenery and clean modern cityscapes in order to attract inward investment and tourist dollars. As Arlene Foster put it when she was Northern Ireland’s Enterprise Minister: ‘Capturing the attention of prospective holidaymakers is essential to ensure Northern Ireland stands out from other destinations. In order to attract new and repeat visitors, Tourism Ireland will be seeking opportunities to capitalise on the huge worldwide popularity of HBO’s *Game of Thrones* [...]’²

¹ The BBC’s web pages dedicated to *The Fall* include a link to Discover Northern Ireland’s website, as well as an interactive map of the series locations. (accessed on 4 May 2019 here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0295tcf>)

² ‘Hike in visitors to Northern Ireland’, *UTV News online*, 4 December 2013 (accessed 4 May 2019 here: <http://www.u.tv/News/Hike-in-visitors-to-Northern-Ireland/81ebfbf6-bcf3-4333-890d-d1326b25733d>)

The filming of HBO's *Game of Thrones* on location in Northern Ireland is without question the region's finest marketing achievement. The series often highlights the sort of attractive rural and shoreline scenery previously promoted in the NIO's *Northern Irish Spirit*. It also films on the site that was home to Belfast's once thriving shipbuilding industry, now known as the Titanic Quarter, a multipurpose waterfront development named after the most famous ship built in the Belfast yards. Northern Ireland Screen, the region's publicly funded film and television development agency, has given £14.85 million to HBO as an incentive to use local locations. Official claims made for the return on this investment, in terms of revenue generated in goods and services and spending in the regional economy, are estimated at £166 million. However, as Ramsey, Baker and Porter argue, there has been a lack of proper critical scrutiny of the economic claims made regarding *Game of Thrones* and the screen industries generally in Northern Ireland (2019). Other media events located in region include the 2011 MTV European Music Awards, the G8 summit in 2013 and the Giro d'Italia in 2014, each highly prized for the international exposure they give, and all of them at considerable public expense. The cost of hosting the G8 alone was estimated at £92m.³ The then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, pre-empted critics of such public expense by stating that you 'couldn't put a value' on the free advertising Northern Ireland acquired as a result of the summit of world leaders.⁴

If the economic gains of such global exposure are unsubstantiated, the cultural and political consequences of a screen culture committed largely to commercial imperatives has barely been considered. There is a danger that a 'post-conflict society anticipates a post-political

³ 'G8: New report says final cost for Fermanagh summit was £92m', *BBC News online*, 23 January 2015 (accessed on 2 May 2019 here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-30942938>)

⁴ 'Summit location "a fantastic venue"', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 June 2013 (accessed 2 May 2019 here: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/summit-location-a-fantastic-venue-29354879.html>)

cinema; that the achievement of constitutional accord and the aspiration to full membership of the global free market render a politically engaged cinema both apparently irrelevant and undesirable' (Baker 2016: 184).

What need has Northern Ireland of a political cinema when it has achieved a constitutional accord and when film presents a delightful opportunity to market the region on the world stage? Here the confluence of political self-congratulations with economic imperatives and ambitions combine to offer a seemingly cast-iron case for a depoliticised film culture (Baker 2016: 184).

Except Northern Ireland has nothing to be politically complacent about. At the time of writing it has no functioning Assembly, its social divisions and inequalities are stark, and there has been a failure to deal with 'legacy' issues arising from its violent past. Indeed, the depth of Northern Ireland's malaise is seen in its failure to achieve any sense of political and cultural integrity despite the Good Friday Agreement. As David Butler argued in 1995 – and it still holds true today – Northern Ireland has 'no neutral language, verbal or visual, no uncontested images, and certainly no unifying imagery. Every signifier appears to be spoken for' (1995: 105). Twenty-one years after the signing and public ratification of political accord, Northern Ireland does not really exist, not in any deep, emotional, imaginative sense: certainly not for Irish nationalists who have no long-term vested interest in the place and whose cultural imaginations and allegiances exceed the six counties. But it does not even really exist for those unionists for whom 'Ulster' is a surrogate for Northern Ireland; a province of their exclusivist cultural imaginations that bears no proper relation to the territory upon which they walk or the constitution they claim to defend.

This is not to suggest that politics in Northern Ireland are strictly binary. A growing number of people identify as neither unionist or nationalist – 50% of respondents to a recent Northern

Ireland Life and Times Survey.⁵ However this is not reflected at the polls, when votes for unionist and nationalist parties continue to far outweigh those of Others, although political parties of the centre and left have made modest gains in recent elections. Even the small portion of the population that identify as Northern Irish, rather than British or Irish, have according to Tonge and Gomez, ‘failed to flourish on a cross-community basis’ (2015: 294), while McNicholl has found that ‘Northern Irishness is simply not a constituency that demands substantial recognition from the elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly’ (2018: 511). Nevertheless, while relatively small in number, that constituency of Others might have a key role to play in Northern Ireland’s future. What that group decides to do in the face of Brexit and the associated rise of English nationalism might determine Northern Ireland’s constitutional future. Nevertheless, it remains the case that simply put, not enough people care sufficiently about Northern Ireland to build a consensus around how to live, love, work and think there. In effect, it lacks any sense of what Benedict Anderson once referred to as the ‘profound emotional legitimacy’ one associates with the imagined community of the contemporary nation. Little wonder then that in this post-conflict period it is potentially easy prey to developers and marketing moguls who view it, in the words of Harcourt Developments, as ‘a pleasingly blank canvas’ (Quoted in Ramsey 2013: 176) ripe for regeneration and capital accumulation. Or as Northern Ireland Screen put it: ‘the most compact 5196 square miles of back-lot in the world’.⁶ ‘In effect Northern Ireland is rendered a tabula rasa – a mere location for economic activity far removed for the cultural lives and experiences of people who live there’ (Baker 2016: 180).

⁵ ‘NI survey suggests 50% neither unionist nor nationalist’, *BBC News online*, 20 June 2019 (accessed 10 July 2019 here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-48702235>)

⁶ NI Screen Locations – Northern Ireland Screen. (accessed 31 January 2018 here: <http://www.northernirelandscreen.co.uk/filming/locations/>).

Tribeca Belfast

At issue for a region like Northern Ireland, with its fragile executive and administrative apparatus, is that civic space and democratic procedures are conceded to unaccountable corporate power. Of particular concern here, is the outsourcing of the sort of cultural work that would imagine and legitimize a regional or national community and identity. In this respect, it is worth considering Castlebrooke Investment's recent proposals to develop the north east of Belfast's city centre and the promotional film made to garner support for its plans.⁷ What is striking about the film is its imagining of Belfast in ways that make explicit a set of class relations – benign natives whose job it is to service an affluent, global professional class; and an urban milieu in which that class can work, play and live, seemingly spared bland globalization by the provision of local 'colour'. It is also interesting because it is a projection of Belfast, not as it is, but as Castlebrooke Investments imagine it will be – could be – in the future, although it draws upon recognisable landmarks and place names to do this, many of which will presumably be altered by their plans.

Castlebrooke Investments' regeneration scheme takes in a 12-acre site beside Belfast's St Anne's Cathedral and bordering Royal Avenue, Donegall Street, Lower Garfield Street and Rosemary Street. It plans to refurbish the area with residential space, office units as well as retail and hospitality elements at an estimated cost of £500m.⁸ The development was branded 'Tribeca Belfast', to establish a positive association with the Tribeca area in New York, a place once associated with industrial buildings, now transformed into one of hip loft-living, trendy boutiques and restaurants.⁹ Its Belfast incarnation can be seen as part of a process of

⁷ Tribeca Belfast's website and video can be accessed here <http://tribeca-belfast.co.uk>

⁸ 'New £500m Tribeca project "will push Belfast to the forefront of European cities"', *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 November 2018 (accessed 5 May 2019 here <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/business/northern-ireland/new-500m-tribeca-project-will-push-belfast-to-the-forefront-of-european-cities-37575827.html>)

⁹ The name 'Tribeca' in New York is derived from an abbreviation of "Triangle Below Canal Street": in Belfast it stands for "Triangle Beside the Cathedral".

gentrification; this is the claiming of urban spaces for affluent users, or what David Harvey has referred to as ‘a process of displacement’ and ‘accumulation by dispossession’ that lies at the core of urbanization under capitalism (2008: 34). ‘It is the mirror-image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment, and is giving rise to numerous conflicts over the capture of valuable land from low-income populations that may have lived there for many years’ (Harvey 2008: 34). In Belfast, Castlebrooke Investments’ proposal has met opposition from existing users – residents and art groups – who are unimpressed by assurances of ‘sensitive refurbishment’, fearing the loss of heritage and character, and describing the venture as a ‘superficial branding exercise’.¹⁰ I am less concerned here with questions of preservation and conservation. In any case, Castlebrook have reviewed their plans and decided that a ‘greater number of historic streetscape on original buildings in the area can [...] be retained’.¹¹ I am more concerned with questions of political influence in the present, seeing the Tribeca promotional film as an attempt by a powerful interest group to define and imagine the city, and in particular its social relations, in terms that will benefit investors.

The Castlebrooke film is 1 minute and 43 seconds long, and takes the narrative shape of ‘a day in the life of’ a city, at the centre of which are three character-types – a young couple, situated in a domestic context, unsurprisingly this appears to be a well-appointed loft conversion; a young man working in a contemporary office space; and an apparent tourist, subjecting the city to the curious gaze of the visitor. These types comprise the three anticipated purposes of the new development – residential living, working and leisure. The

¹⁰ ‘Save CQ says Tribeca Belfast “superficial branding exercise”’ *Irish News*, 30 November 2018 (accessed on 6 May 2019 here: <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2018/11/30/news/save-cq-says-tribeca-belfast-superficial-branding-exercise--1497490/>)

¹¹ “North Street Arcade to return as part of £500m Tribeca development”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 June 2019 (accessed 10 July 2019 here: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/north-street-arcade-to-return-as-part-of-500m-tribeca-development-38253954.html>)

overarching theme is the convergence of the global and the local, communicated in the concluding line of the voice-over – ‘You are international heart: you are Belfast soul.’ This narration is delivered by Northern Irish-born actor Jamie Dornan, whose international celebrity, achieved through starring in the box office success *Fifty Shades of Grey* (dir. Sam Taylor-Johnson, 2015), makes him an attractive symbol, at once regionally recognisable, with global reach. Throughout the film Dornan recites a poem to Belfast, encouraging the city, and by extension its residents, to come to know themselves: ‘Ask yourself, who you are’, before immediately asserting, ‘For I know who you are.’ The film then goes on to define the city and its people through verse and images that extoll the assumed energy of the city, before referencing a series of stereotypes associated with Belfast – the Belfast bap, the Ulster fry, Guinness and craic etc. These are the symbols of a benign regional identity – a kin to the benign nationalism that Anholt sees as integral to successful branding and marketing exercises. Northern Ireland’s failure to find a neutral language and agreed symbols is overcome by coalescing around the image of a vibrant commercial centre, retailing local cuisine and the laying on of regional entertainment to a global, mobile professional class who are identifiable in the film through the markers of ethnic difference from the almost uniformly white locals.

Middle class working life in this world is depicted within spacious, brightly-lit, hi-spec offices, peopled by well-tailored professionals. The working day is punctuated by lunchtime appointments in fashionable eateries and coffee bars, where the professionals mingle with joyfully eccentric locals, serviced by largely invisible workers, who presumably wait upon tables and pull pints of Guinness. As the film moves into the evening, the city holds out the promise of urban adventure. ‘Follow me’, coaxes the narrator as the camera tails our suave office manager down an indistinguishable street, lit for the evening, and into an urban milieu

of cocktail bars, clubs, restaurants and dancing. In this section, the workers that make possible the commercial life of the city come into view – the bar tender, the chef, the musician, the busker. The portrayal of working life and commercial activity is interspersed with domestic routine – represented by the young couple, introduced at the beginning, waking in bed at dawn, decorating their tasteful apartment, then relaxing on the sofa. This is all delivered at a frenetic pace; a rapid montage of shots, full of movement, over a soundtrack of syncopated drum rhythms, that provide an audio-visual signal of the city's modernity. There are only a few moments of respite from the pace: once, as we watch a pint of Guinness settle; a second moment of apparent reflection atop Cave Hill, when we witness the tourist/visitor looking down contemplatively at the city; and finally, at the conclusion when the film dwells for a moment on its central characters – the professional, the domestic couple, and finally the visitor.

It is surely significant that the film ends with a series of close-up shots of its protagonists, and not an image of Belfast itself. After all, the Belfast that Castlebrooke Investments proposes does not yet exist, and its regeneration scheme will in any case refurbish the city. When Belfast does come into view it is distinguished only in a few brief images: street names; its City Hall, and the famous shipyard cranes, Samson and Golaith. Those sufficiently familiar with the city might be able to discern other locations, despite the tightly framed shots and fussy camera techniques. To be sure, this is no city symphony. Belfast is rendered largely expressionistically and in generically urban form: in dynamic movement, graffiti art, glimpses of street-life and architecture, and the sort of electric illumination associated with the modern urban environment. However, if the physical shape of this future Belfast is uncertain, its proposed social relations are clear: it will be peopled by a mobile professional class, waited upon and entertained by a local working class. Potentially bland, global

corporatism will, it is assumed, be alleviated by the nonthreatening vernacular traditions and tastes of the locals. Those conspicuous by their absence in this urban dream are the children and the elderly. Presumably, infants and pensioners serve no economic purpose and can therefore be elided from the frame. Dependency and infirmity erased, it is a landscape that need not imagine the provision of public services or civic amenities, such as health care, education or welfare.

Tribeca Belfast has met with local resistance and its pretensions have been satirised and mocked on-line through social media. The Belfast City Council took a vote, which while welcoming the investment and development, objected to the name, Tribeca.¹² It was a largely symbolic act since elected representatives are powerless to force the developers to change the name of the city centre project, but it seems that even minor objections to the designs of corporate power have the potential to besmirch the brand image of Belfast. Castlebrooke Investments' response to the council's deliberations carried about them a barely disguised threat of a capital strike. Its chief executive Neil Young commented: 'The council's decision to debate the brand for our scheme will send a very clear negative message to other investors who are considering opportunities in Belfast.'

Conclusion

On the surface, Northern Ireland's transformation has been extraordinary: from bomb-torn, failed state, to an attractive site for inward investment and tourism. However, much of this is precisely 'on the surface', because integral to the neoliberalisation of the region has been appearances: it is a façade, a chimera-like projection of fake shop fronts across Northern

¹² 'Tribeca Belfast development name opposed by council', *BBC News* online, 8 January 2019 (accessed on 6 May 2019 here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-46793162>)

Ireland, erected on poster-board to hide the economic dereliction of its high streets¹³; or the rural landscapes and coasts that HBO has adorned with the computer generated imagery of a medieval-style fantasy; or, more particularly, Castlebrooke Investment's ersatz projection of a gentrified future Belfast. Indeed, the desire to develop the city as normal and neutral has been likened to a cosmetic exercise (Neill, 1995), producing historic amnesia and blandness in a Kafkaesque attempt to deny Belfast's true nature (Neill, 2006); a Potemkin Village masking the poverty, segregation and social exclusion of working class areas (Nagle 2009); and a 'twin speed city' where the educated and skilled race ahead, while those without such resources lag behind in "'sink" estates, stratified by poverty, segregation and fear' (Murtagh 2008: 4).

Beyond the developer's desire to paper over the social cracks, lies the troublesome question of how such alluringly glamorous, gentrified environments will be peopled. Liberal peace strategies and nation branding exercises prefer benign citizens, more concerned with the self-interested pursuit of middle-class lifestyles and material prosperity than political passions and principles. They consequently underplay or ignore the much more decisive role of politically and socially motivated groups in securing peace and building upon it: for instance, women and gender politics, which on one occasion made a direct and influential intervention into the political process in the shape of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). The NIWC succeeded in getting two women elected to the multi-party talks that led to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (Fearon 1999; Kilmurray and McWilliams 2011). Political prisoners have also made a critical contribution to the peace process, bringing their influence to bear on the calling of republican and loyalist ceasefires, and in addition preparing a lot of

¹³ 'In Pictures: £8m spent on fake shop fronts in Northern Ireland', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 April 2014 (accessed 12 July 2019 here: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/in-pictures-8m-spent-on-fake-shop-fronts-in-northern-ireland-30196699.html>)

the intellectual and political groundwork for peace among their respective constituencies (Shirlow *et al* 2010). Like the NIWC, their representatives were elected to the multi-party peace talks, a number of them ex-prisoners. The trade union movement has periodically mobilized its members and the broader working class in defense of the peace process. When the IRA breached its ceasefire February 1996, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) called a lunchtime rally that brought thousands of people into the centre of Belfast calling for its reinstatement.¹⁴ The ICTU also sponsored Counteract, a unit dedicated to tackling sectarianism in the workplace (Eyben *et al* 2002). It ran from 1990 until 2006 when it transformed into Trademark, which continues to maintain the commitment to anti-sectarian interventions, and has extended into a broader human rights and social justice agenda, offering educational programmes, research reports and training. In 2016 Trademark's founding member Joe Law passed away. His obituaries are testament to the 'major contribution' he and Trademark made to dealing with sectarianism in workplace.¹⁵ John Nagle (2008: 2009) has drawn attention to new social movements that have taken to the streets of the city to campaign on issues of gender, sexuality, class and the environment, and he highlights how they transcend the dominance of ethnonational divisions and challenge the hegemonic two-communities model. Nagle argues that these movements display a 'cosmopolitan imagination' that offers expressions of solidarity, not only across sectarian lines, but solidarity that has the potential to 'jump scales' from the local to the global (2009: 344). By contrast, Castlebrooke's Tribeca promo offers a glimpse of a sterile corporate imagination, advancing a version of capitalist cosmopolitanism emptied of civic and

¹⁴ 'Call for IRA to renew ceasefire at Belfast peace rally', *Irish Times*, 17 February 1996 (accessed 16 May 2019 here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/call-for-ira-to-renew-ceasefire-at-belfast-peace-rally-1.30521>)

¹⁵ 'Obituary: Joe Law', *Irish Times*, 26 November 2016 (accessed 16 May 2019 here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/obituary-joe-law-1.2881140>). Also, 'Joe Law: trade unionist, communist, united Irishman', *Irish News*, 5 November 2016 (accessed 16 May 2019 here <http://www.irishnews.com/notices/livesremembered/2016/11/05/news/joe-law-trade-unionist-communist-united-irishman-767786/>)

noncommodified bonds of solidarity. Its cast of politically innocuous local characters can perform their colloquial manners while waiting upon and beguiling the nomadic professionals and tourists who patronise the region. This is what it means to 'live the brand' in post-conflict Northern Ireland. It is to submit to the symbolic obliteration of the region's history, politics and culture in a drive for corporate approval. That history, politics and culture is unquestionably troubled and troublesome, but it is not entirely defined by sectarianism. It has within it residual and emergent political convictions and forms of activism that might yet prove to be the best defence against persistent inequality, poverty, the corrosion of public services and the prevailing democratic deficit in region. Ironically, in its developers' utopia of a future Belfast, Castlebrooke Investments may have given us a glimpse of gentrification's gravediggers; a class who might reject the servility and benign corporate identities being prescribed to them.

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