

## Beyond Hostile Borders

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### Re-negotiating the Gendered Embodiment of Resistance and Agency in the Film, *Some Mother's Son*.

*This paper focuses on the re-deployment of gendered bodies as sites of resistance in the Northern Irish conflict. It brings together an interdisciplinary mix of Peace, Film and Gender Studies in a close analysis of the film Some Mother's Son (Terry George 1996). In focusing on this film text we are able to identify the extent to which socially patrolled gendered binaries dictated the levels of agency afforded to mothers and their sons in the context of the 1981 Hunger Strike in Northern Ireland. We make explicit connections between the gendered embodiment of resistance and the atrophying effects of fixed notions of gendered violence and power. We argue that the disfigurement and self-harm inscribed upon the bodies of the imprisoned male hunger strikers enacted a characteristically 'feminine' strategy of resistance. Indeed, the foregrounding of the body in their campaign of resistance also positioned them as in a relatively 'feminised' position in relation to the political (and, ostensibly, 'rational') discourse of those enforcing their incarceration. The subsequent agency and public profile of their mothers, who initially spoke and acted on behalf of their sons, allowed for their exploration of different gender roles and for the adoption of different modes of operation within the wider conflict, leading to altered priorities within the political struggle. The transgressive agency enacted by these mothers challenged longstanding borders between male and female and secular and state, demonstrating that the larger conflict was underpinned by various culturally entrenched hostilities.*

Dressed in a blue tailored suit (softened at the neck by a patterned blouse), and flanked by British police officers, bodyguards and members of the press—Margaret Thatcher smiles and tilts her head to one side as she briefly affirms her democratic right to assume the responsibilities that await her as she enters Number 10 Downing Street. At this point she proposes to recite some of the words of St Francis of Assisi, which she sees as “particularly apt at the

moment.” This prospect is met with a cacophony of jeering and booing—but deaf to the protestations, she persists:

Where there is discord may we bring harmony.  
 Where there is error may we bring truth.  
 Where there is doubt may we bring faith.

The above is an account of documentary footage in which Margaret Thatcher seeks to construct herself as benevolent arbitrator in the British/Irish conflict. It is also the opening sequence to the film *Some Mother's Son* and is situated before the opening credits. As such, it functions as a framing device that identifies Thatcher's Britain as a most significant factor in the events about to unfold.

*Some Mother's Son* is set in Northern Ireland in the 1980s, and is a dramatic re-creation of the events surrounding the British/Irish conflict. What differentiates this film from alternative accounts is its focus upon the lives of women whose sons were actively involved in the paramilitary resistance. *Some Mother's Son* traces the intensification of forms of resistance offered by the various sons of Irish women as they move from violent resistance to post-incarceration protests and hunger strikes. Whilst little has been documented from the perspective of women in this conflict, the film addresses that imbalance by focussing on the emotional and political turmoil of two female characters in response to the incarceration of their sons. The two main protagonists are Annie Higgins (Fionnula Flanagan), a farmer's wife and Kathleen Quigley (Helen Mirren), a teacher at the local convent school. Each of these mothers experiences a significant shift in her level of involvement and agency in the conflict. In the closing stages of the film, the twin-edged sword of agency is unsheathed as one mother stands by and loses her son to starvation, whilst the other overrides her son's wishes and, taking him off the protest, switches on the life support machine.

In its depiction of the events surrounding the hunger strikes, the film invites a close analysis of the extent to which the participation of women in the struggle at that time explodes traditional gender binaries that police levels of agency and forms of power and violence. In this discussion we take gender to be a category of identity that is culturally constructed and that access to power and individual agency is allocated to either masculinity or femininity in a manner that is in keeping with the ideology of the particular context. The context in this film is Northern Ireland at the beginning of the 1980s, a culture determined by the inflexible teachings of the Irish Catholic Church and a particularly virulent brand of Protestantism. The boundaries between men and women and their respective roles in the conflict were strictly determined by secular and religious mores; in essence, men fought, women tended the hearth.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in its depiction of the overturning of such gender prescriptions in a particular moment of hostilities, *Some Mother's Son* allows a rare insight into non-violent modes of resistance enacted by women. We say rare because

women's actions have been largely ignored and even erased in literature pertaining to the Northern Irish conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the 1981 Hunger Strike in Northern Ireland invites an important conversation about gender, which can be articulated in the discourses of Film, Gender and Peace Studies. Such a conversation recognises the always partial or subjective dimensions of texts that seek to represent and analyse historical events. While *Some Mother's Son* as a filmic rendition of the 1981 Hunger Strike may seem overtly fictional, it nevertheless serves as a valid intervention that can enrich the existing range of perspectives found within conventional academic literature.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in its treatment of the constructed dimensions of gender, power and violence, the film also reveals the possibility that these boundaries can be crossed, and reconstructed. In *Some Mother's Son* these new constructions or re-negotiations are enacted at the level of the body, and for this reason we have structured our discussion of selected sequences of the film under four headings, each of which constitutes a significant stage in the re-negotiated embodiments of the conflict it depicts: violent bodies, naked and/or object bodies, starving bodies and reclaimed bodies.

### **Violent Bodies**

The opening sequence featuring Margaret Thatcher as depicted above, immediately introduces some of the many essentialist binary oppositions that are to be invoked and subsequently disrupted throughout the film. To commence the film with the figure of this Prime Minister, debunks the notion that men are the only political animals, and that only men can execute with ease the many moves and machinations within what has so often been cast as a masculinist public domain. Indeed, Thatcher's greatly compromised performance of femininity in this opening sequence prepares the way for the film's interrogation of various manifestations of Irish women's involvement in the conflict. It also immediately disrupts any universalising or essentialist notions of "woman" as one undifferentiated category of identity and action.

Margaret Thatcher's election as Prime Minister heralded a new era in British/Irish relations. Thatcher's government took a hard line stance on paramilitary Republican activity and shifted the language of conflict from that of politics to that of criminalisation. This shift in categorisation, the introduction of internment without trial coupled with an unwillingness to negotiate were catalysts for the protracted hunger strikes.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it was as a direct result of her policies that hostilities between Republicans and British troops increased. The opening image of Thatcher in the film is one in which she is constructing herself as the smiling face and endlessly patient voice of "Mother England." This is in stark contrast to the seemingly powerless mothers whose sons must endure the "firm but (un)fair" treatment she dishes out. However, it must be acknowledged that far from being passive victims, Irish women have played a proactive role in all aspects of resistance in the struggle in Northern Ireland

(see Rooney; Spence). It is the nature of the role that they play that has been considered problematic by conventional political analysts and so women have been excluded from histories of the conflict not because of political inactivity, but rather because of the challenges that they have brought to conventional notions of power, politics and violent resistance (see Aretxaga; Spence). *Some Mother's Son* represents the significant shift in the site of conflict from organised paramilitary resistance enacted in the public space to the similarly regimented but far more complex and explicitly embodied resistance enacted upon individual bodies and behind the locked doors of Long Kesh/The Maze prison.

In opposition to Thatcher's performance of calm objectivity in the framing sequence of *Some Mother's Son*, the film rapidly moves to a group of Irish Republican Army (IRA) men moving through woodlands on a mission to blow up a British army vehicle. The film cuts back and forth between the stamping and clatter of schoolgirls' Irish dancing in the convent school and IRA men's boots thumping through the woods. The near graphic match of their feet in action emphasises the gendered sites of difference and similarity in these two spheres.

Later as the girls leave the school building, young Theresa Higgins (Grainne Delany) makes her political position explicit as she stands defiant in the path of a British armoured car, ignoring the protestations of the representatives of church and state—a nun and a British army officer. Her actions bring into focus the three main players in the political struggle—the military arm of the British government, the Irish Catholic Church, and the supporters of the nationalist cause. Theresa's stand also elicits a response from her schoolteacher, Kathleen Quigley, whose intervention in this relatively small site of escalating conflict foreshadows the mediating role she is to play throughout the film. She is to be constructed as the voice of reason in the larger conflict, and as a counterpoint to the attitudes of Annie Higgins, young Theresa's mother. Yet as the film progresses, Kathleen's exercise of control and propriety, more commonly coded as educated middle-class rationality, is sorely tested in the face of her own son's incarceration and starvation.

Annie and Kathleen are brought together by the arrest of their sons. Shortly after the two sons are sentenced, Annie makes contact with Kathleen. As the camera cuts from Annie in her overcoat huddled in the public telephone box to Kathleen in the privacy of her own home, social class is invoked as one of the signifiers of difference between these two women. However, when Annie tells Kathleen that her son wishes to see her, the two arrange to travel to the prison together in Kathleen's car, and so their relationship begins. The fact that these two women forge a friendship despite their political and economic differences, transcending traditional class boundaries, which in themselves were often manifested in mute hostility, exemplifies the potentially transformative effects of conflict, and its ability to disrupt existing structural hierarchies. Their relationship is fortified by their commonality of suffering, a connecting factor that rises above traditional divisions.<sup>5</sup>

As it transpires, the phone call from Annie to Kathleen has been engineered by Sinn Fein (the Republican political party), in order to embroil Kathleen in its political enterprise. At the conclusion of her prison visit, her son in the guise of a farewell kiss, lunges towards her, and grasping the back of her neck firmly in his hand kisses her on the mouth. As she struggles to draw away from him, he forces her mouth open and slips in a small piece of paper bearing the message she is to carry with her as she leaves the prison. During this brief struggle Kathleen's face registers a rapid series of emotions moving from initial shock at the explicit and possibly sexual intimacy of the kiss, and the physical violence of its insistence, to being appalled by the manner in which she has been solicited for the cause. It is a powerful moment in the film, inflected as it is by Oedipal anxieties and notions of betrayal as the son's Christ-like appearance invokes an image of Judas's kiss.

Once outside the building, and behind the wheel of her car, Kathleen spits out the note, declaring that she "will not be a stooge for violence." Shortly after this, Kathleen opens and reads the note, despite Annie's attempts to stop her by claiming that it's IRA business, and, by implication, not women's business. In this instance Kathleen reclaims agency—if she is to be used, then she wants to know what she is being used for. Unlike Annie, and her unquestioning obedience to the formal political structures, Kathleen trusts in her own judgement, and ability to choose her own stance in relation to the conflicting interests that surround her. However, this apparent strength of will expressed by Kathleen soon collapses when Annie reveals that she has already lost one son, and in sympathy Kathleen exclaims, "Oh God—it must be a terrible thing to lose a child." It is at this moment that she grasps the distinct possibility that she may be about to lose her child too. The manner in which Kathleen registers this realisation constitutes a "critical event" (Arextaga xii). When it becomes apparent that her family and community life has been violated she decides to act. Her agency is not predicated upon a sense of political necessity nor philanthropy but out of a realisation that she has no choice but to act. This is the cue for the film to cut to the prison and the sons themselves, dirty faces upturned to receive the Communion.

### **Naked and Abject Bodies**

Under heavy guard and with a handkerchief pressed to his face, the Catholic Archbishop makes a significant gesture of support in celebrating Mass with the prisoners. As the prisoners exit their cells to attend Mass in the corridor, we see the prison guards fumigating the cells. Blankets worn as robes, with their beards and shoulder length hair, and uttering in unison the words "Body of Christ," the images of the young men direct our attention to their own Christ-like appearance. At a symbolic level, these abject bodies become the site upon which Christian and non-violent traditions of martyrdom intersect with the Republican struggle against British rule.<sup>6</sup>

At this point in the hostilities, the special category status that afforded prisoners convicted of terrorist acts the right to wear civilian clothes was withdrawn. Republican prisoners reacted by refusing to wear prison uniforms, opting to wrap their naked bodies in standard-issue blankets. Subsequently, in response to the British government's decree "No slop-out without uniform" they began a two-year-long "dirty protest," smearing food and excrement on their cell walls. When no concessions were granted in response to this, prisoners embarked on hunger strikes in the hope that their emaciated bodies would force the British government into conceding to demands for special recognition of their political status.<sup>7</sup>

It is useful to discuss this "dirty protest" in terms of Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, in relation to the effects the protest had on both the protestors and those they were protesting against. Elizabeth Grosz describes Kristeva's notion of abjection as "the subject's reaction to the failure of the subject/object opposition to express adequately the subject's corporeality and its tenuous bodily boundaries" (72). In essence, to ensure the integrity, stability and orderly functioning of the individual speaking subject (and on a larger level, the symbolic order to which that subject has membership)—it is necessary that a positively defining hierarchical relationship exist between that subject, and the object. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva begins with the assumption that with the body, as with societies or cultures, all things threatening and impure, disorderly and improper must be expelled. These are those objects that Kristeva refers to as the abject, and are signified by "*corporeal waste [including] menstrual blood and excrement*" which she sees as representing "the objective frailty of symbolic order" (70). Kristeva sees these wastes as always related to "corporeal orifices" where the borders between the inside and outside of bodily integrity and the perimeters of the body's "territory" are blurred. Elizabeth Grosz's formation of Kristeva's reworking of Freud's position in *Totem and Taboo* (1930) is most apt here. She argues, "what is excluded can never be fully obliterated but hovers on the borders of our existence, threatening the apparent settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution" (Kristeva 70). It is the subject's "recognition of this impossibility [that] provokes the sensation Kristeva describes as abjection" (Grosz 71-72). In essence, Kristeva sees abjection as a reassertion of the semiotic—that pre-Oedipal or pre-symbolic state in which the newly born or very young child's existence is characterised by dependence upon the mother, disunity, and all manner of the "defiling, impure, uncontrollable materiality of the subject's embodied existence" (Grosz 72). This is the largely repressed state that always threatens to emerge and disrupt the order and apparently seamless integrity of the symbolic.

This phenomenon can be broadened to apply not only to the individual bodies of the "dirty protestors" but also to the symbolic order embodied in the British structures of political and judicial rule. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, abjection "disturbs identity, system and order, respecting no definite positions, rules, boundaries or limits." In this respect, it is the body's acknowledgment that its

“boundaries or limits” are defined and protected by culture and ideology, not “the effects of . . . nature” (Grosz 74). In this context of Northern Ireland, the “dirty protestors” harness their abjection and, by spreading their excrement on their prison walls, elevate it to the symbolic level of language—the language of protest. The British government, however, feels that its integrity is threatened by the presence of the protestors—those who constitute its abject others—and who function as the markers and embodiment of that against which the government defines itself and its power.

These male protestors were not alone in their actions. Thirty Republican women embarked on a “dirty protest” of their own, in part as an act of solidarity with these men. However, this is only briefly acknowledged in a footnote in Brian McIlroy’s book, *Shooting to Kill*, and this serves as an indication of how women’s participation in the Northern Irish conflict has been marginalised in much of the literature (72, fn 23). The commencement of the “dirty protest” by women in the Armagh prison provoked a national discussion about what was appropriate in the struggle and what was not. The women smeared excrement and menstrual blood on their walls. The Republican reaction to the menstrual blood was one of disgust, so while the male prisoners were revered for their protest, the women were reviled. This gendered reaction seems to be traditional. The women’s actions were deemed to be transgressive in that even whilst trying to support the male struggle, their actions exceeded the boundaries of the dominant culture. This constitutes another instance of the marginalisation of women’s voices in the conflict and gives some sense of the obstacles to female political and paramilitary agency (see Aretxaga).

### Starving Bodies

The British Government’s continued refusal to respond to prisoner demands articulated by the “dirty protest” led to the escalation of embodied resistance in the form of starvation. These hunger strikes resulted in ten deaths in seven months (Feldman; Ruane and Todd). The agony of this exercise is revealed in the film through the close scrutiny of the deteriorating physical and mental capacities of the two sons, Gerard (Aiden Gillen) and Frankie (David O’Hara). In *Some Mother’s Son* the emaciated bodies of these young men, and the extreme frustration of their seemingly helpless mothers, invoke all too familiar images of starving women’s bodies disciplined or deprived in the name of prescribed gender norms. Imprisoned as they are, these men are excluded from the masculine realm of action and agency in the public domain. Their liberation, and right to political expression, is constructed as involving similarly abject strategies to those employed by women in their struggle to free themselves from the constraints of their gender. In this way, the film depicts the explicit blurring of gender binaries that are called for in this communal war zone. Furthermore, the symbolism of suffering blurs the distinction between violent and non-violent embodiments of conflict, as the fact that the hunger strikers

deploy their bodies as weapons cannot be construed as essentially non-violent, but as just another contribution to the escalating body count that is essential to the continuation of conflict. It is important to make the distinction between the self-starvation strategies employed by the Suffragettes and by Gandhi, and those employed by the hunger strikers. Gandhi and the Suffragettes operated from a highly principled code of non-violence and had previously employed solely non-violent strategies in their struggle. The prisoners, however, deployed their bodies as weapons because they had no access to armaments. Their use of the hunger strike was an extension of violence by other means. Indeed, in the opening sequences of *Some Mother's Son*, the hunger strikers' starving bodies are positioned as on a continuum which began with their seemingly more vigorous and active bodies involved in the bomb blast depicted in the opening sequence to the film. In effect, the earlier exploding bodies of the British soldiers prefigure the imploding bodies of the hunger strikers. Each could be said to be a violent (in)version of the other.

### Reclaiming the Body

The experience of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland problematised a number of easy distinctions in the discourses of conflict such as "legitimate military violence" versus "illegitimate paramilitary violence," and "political violence" versus "criminal violence." As Allen Feldman observes, "The government sought to shift the political comprehension of violence to a judicial reading that consigned paramilitary practice to criminal agency" (148). This semantic re-shuffling is dealt a devastating blow by the incontrovertible, and overtly embodied, protests and political fact of the leading Hunger Striker, Bobby Sands (John Lynch), being legitimately elected to parliament at Westminster. The film itself traces this political development, depicting Bobby Sands and his actions, and the manner in which he was to become the public face (and body) of the protest. A hunger-striking Republican prisoner was now a legal member of British parliament, elected in a democratic process. Unable to take up office whilst incarcerated, and indeed refusing to enter Westminster until Sinn Fein's and the prisoner's demands were met, Sands calls into question the efficacy of traditional politics. His successful election was a turning point in the development of Sinn Finn as a legitimate political voice (McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney and Thornton). His election campaign was another form of political resistance for both the prisoners and their mothers who did all the campaigning, electioneering and lobbying of potential voters. This active participation of women beyond the confines of the home and in the public domain is seen as a direct result of the incarceration of the men. In essence, the women were filling a void. In *Some Mother's Son*, equipped with this new-found political agency, the mothers, Annie and Kathleen, actively contribute to a transformation of the violent conflict and this becomes the focus of the remaining narrative.



From this point on, we see Kathleen and Annie distributing political pamphlets, participating in an all-night vigil, in essence claiming a space for themselves in the public domain. In that newly claimed space, they experience increased confidence, and an increased knowledge of the sorts of political priorities influencing the fate of the hunger strikers. It is this glimpse beyond the domestic and familial, and into the larger public, and largely masculine, domain of international politics, that eventually allows Kathleen to bridge the border between personal and political, and actively remove her son from the hunger strike. In reclaiming public space on behalf of their men they are also claiming it for the first time for themselves, as women.

Bobby Sands died on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1981. Nine other hunger strikers died soon after. Despite this loss of life, there was no evidence of a softening in the British government's attitudes and the hunger strikes only ended when prisoners' mothers took their sons off the strike by turning on the life-support machines. The actions of these mothers were highly controversial and indeed their names have been erased from the political history of the time. Aretxaga describes the mother's actions of turning off the hunger strike as a political betrayal—"women—the closest relatives of strikers, often their mothers—had to decide in the last crucial moment when the strikers lost consciousness whether to save the lives of their sons . . . by politically betraying them or to remain loyal to them by letting them die" (104). *Some Mother's Son* does depict the turning on of the life-support machines as a betrayal of the larger political cause, but, in offering the mothers' perspective, it celebrates their actions as courageous and loving. Whilst a written epilogue acknowledges that some mother's action allowed other mothers to follow suit, the film does not explore the personal consequences of such an assertion of maternal authority. This is in keeping with other historical and political accounts of these events that also make little reference to this personal dimension.

In taking them off the hunger strike and choosing the life of their sons over the political stalemate that had eventuated between the church, the state and the prisoners themselves, the women disarmed this violent deployment of the body and in doing so re-humanised the conflict. They breathed life into their sons and by responding to their emotional commitments they overrode the dispassionate and unproductive political negotiations of the time. The women's actions questioned and upset the moral and political hegemony of the British state, Sinn Fein and the Catholic Church, who were not willing to concede and continued to promote a masculinist model of negotiation where compromise is equated with defeat.

## Conclusion

In its depiction of the troubles in Northern Ireland, *Some Mother's Son* illustrates a moment when circumstances changed and traditional masculinist modes of resistance were removed from the public sphere, allowing alterna-

tive transformative strategies to be explored. The men's violent resistance was relocated to the prisons and re-configured as a different but still violent deployment of their bodies. The public sphere now occupied by the women required that they move away from their traditional embodied roles of home, hearth and mother Ireland, becoming visible and audible agents of change. They negotiated a non-violent and arguably more feminine form of resistance through appropriating and making creative use of their newly found political agency. In this respect, the film's representation of events is consistent with the assertion that, "[v]iolence is culturally constitutive. Its enactment forges, in fact, forces new constructs of identity, new socio-cultural relationships, new threats and injustices that reconfigure people's life-worlds, new patterns of survival and resistance" (Nordstrom 141). However, in Northern Ireland in the 1980s these changes were transient, a period of carnival which ultimately was replaced by a restoration of the dominant political hierarchies and modes of resistance. The conflict continued for another thirteen years.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important things to emerge from this interdisciplinary mix of Film, Gender, and Peace Studies, which in itself constitutes a renegotiation of established disciplinary borders, is the recognition of the value of various forms of representation as potential sites for research. A fictional (re)creation of an otherwise unrepresented event can constitute a case study, a kind of fictional case that can invite similar modes of analysis to those case studies coded as "factual." Here we have shown that a fictional text can substitute for, or complement "facts," as the available accounts of this historical event that are coded as factual are in themselves partial, in that they are a composite of perspectives, inflected by the personal and political contexts of those writing them. In an instance such as this when the actual event, in this case women's experience of the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland, has not been fully recorded, factually or otherwise, a fiction film can allow the excavation of an otherwise buried history. The (re)presentation or (re)creation of those events in the overtly fictional medium of film-drama gives them a form and substance in which the personal complexities at play beyond the more public appearance of an event can be analysed. Analysis of *Some Mother's Son* allows hitherto hidden strategies for conflict resolution in the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike to re-emerge, and provides greater understanding of the issues of gendered identity operating at that time, and the gender boundaries that in themselves were otherwise hostile to peaceful resolution.

<sup>1</sup>Begoña Aretxaga discusses the roles afforded to men and women in the struggle and their cultural significance in her book, *Shattering Silence*.

<sup>2</sup>Aretxaga makes this observation and attempts to redress this lack of research on women in the conflict in her book.

<sup>3</sup>There is a range of literature discussing the Northern Irish conflict in general and the hunger strikes in particular. John Whyte, one time Professor of Irish

Politics at Queens University, Belfast, calculates that by 1990, at least 7000 related articles and books had been written on aspects of the conflict. Given that it is now 2010, this number will have increased.

<sup>4</sup>The effects of these policies are explored further in Feldman.

<sup>5</sup>John Paul Lederach explores the centrality of relationships and their strategic influence in times of conflict in his book, *Moral Imagination* (38-40).

<sup>6</sup>The effect of this symbolism upon the nationalist community is explored in Ruane and Todd.

<sup>7</sup>Feldman and Ruane and Todd discuss these events in detail.

<sup>8</sup>It is important to recognise the date that this film was released—1996—when the peace process was well under way. This re-telling of the story of the hunger strike serves to refocus memories upon the trauma and agony of that era and to show that these are the events that have to be dealt with if the peace process is to be successful in creating a sustainable peace. The re-telling of such a story highlights the need for a recognition of the collective trauma suffered by the Irish community and that it needs to be addressed.

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