

IRISH FILM AND TELEVISION - 2017

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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as looking at the representation of women's voices on Ireland's airwaves. With an interest in arts and culture, Aileen is on the organising committee of the annual Dublin Feminist Film Festival.

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***Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* (Cahal McLaughlin, 2015) and *We Were There* (Laura Aguiar and Cahal McLaughlin, 2014)**

Melania Terrazas

The legacy of the Troubles is a difficult subject for the contemporary Irish scholar, if for no other reason than the scale of the literary, artistic, and critical output inspired by the political conflict in and about Northern Ireland. Within this work there has been a key focus on the iconic site of the prisons where paramilitary prisoners resided, both influencing and being influenced by political manouvres outside the prison walls. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol*, directed by Cahal McLaughlin, and *We Were There*, directed by McLaughlin with Laura Aguiar, are two important contributions to this sub-field within Troubles studies.

After several years of negotiations with various political institutions in Northern Ireland, former prison staff and former prisoner groups, the Prisons Memory Archive filmed inside empty prisons during the summers of 2006 (Armagh Gaol, the primary prison for female prisoners in Northern Ireland), and 2007 (Long Kesh/Maze Prison, which held male prisoners during the Troubles) (McLaughlin "The Prisons"; for further reference see The Prisons Memory Archive). *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* offers the perspectives of women who had passed through the eponymous prison, while *We Were There* is a documentary about the memories of some of the women who had worked in Long Kesh or had male relatives imprisoned there.

Edited by the Prisons Memory Archive, the documentaries tell the story of these two prisons through three main protocols: collaboration, inclusivity, and life storytelling (McLaughlin "Who Tells"). The human aspect of the interviewees, which these three protocols draw out, makes *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* unique. They will be of great value both to film studies scholars interested in gender issues (Johnston "Memory") and their role in the the Troubles, and to a general readership unfamiliar with this significant moment in the history of Northern Ireland.

Both films present in on-screen text the key historical facts: the role of the prisons; the type of prisoners assigned to them; the story behind the films themselves; the removal of prisoners' political status in 1976; the years of prisoners' protest against forced integration (which led to more protest and conflict); their "dirty" protests and hunger strikes in 1980 and; the number of casualties and injuries that resulted from the conflict. All this information is "thrown at" the audience to the accompaniment of a blunt sound drumming these basic verities into the consciousness and memory of the viewer.

Both documentaries present their interviews in chronological order. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* addresses both Protestant and Republican female former prisoners but also includes other relevant figures, like a lawyer, various officers, a priest, an Open University tutor, a doctor, and a male ex-prisoner. *We Were There's* interviewees drawn from the Maze prison include two Open University tutors, two Probation Service (Protestant

and Catholic) workers, a prison officer's widow, mothers and sisters of former prisoners and visual artist Amanda Dunsmore.

Together, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* address the full scope of the representation of women in the Troubles from 1971 to 2000, from the perspectives of 175 people who worked in, were imprisoned in, or visited these two prisons for political prisoners. They follow the same protocols and methodology so that all participants are treated equally. The first protocol, from which the other two evolved, is a collaborative approach (Aguiar).

The Prisons Memory Archive staff worked closely with interviewees and showed their commitment by agreeing co-ownership of the material with them. Participants could withdraw the material from the Archive at any point; this enabled the filmmakers to build a relationship of confidence with interviewees and showed their respect for the sensitive nature of the material. The second protocol is inclusivity. Both films show as full a range of participants as possible, many of whose stories conflict in terms of experience and interpretation. By asking the audience to listen to the stories of the "other," the two films assume a viewership willing and able to listen to stories that may challenge their preconceptions. The third protocol is the use of life story approach to oral history and reliance on the materiality of the institutional sites to stimulate memory recollection. The Prisons Memory Archive staff engaged in conversations with the participants to clarify and tease out what they had identified in a briefing session as the areas the participants wished to cover. There was no list of set questions; participants were encouraged to set the agenda (McLaughlin "Who Tells").

There have been other films about Armagh Gaol: Claire Hackett and Michele Devlin's *A Kind of Sisterhood* (2015), looks at the prisoner experience there but interviews no prison officers and conducts most interviews outside of the prison. *We Were There* is particularly valuable for its contributions on the role of women in male prisons. In terms of context, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* are also very much unique in Irish documentary in returning to the site of the experience, although there are international precedents, such as Pithy Pahn's *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2013), in which guards and survivors return to a Cambodian interrogation Centre or Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012).

Furthermore, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* fit into a genre of oral histories from the Troubles, although their focus on the prison experience is without parallel. In this regard, it is worth noting that there are up to 50 local community-based storytelling projects that fill the vacuum created by the lack of official attention to addressing the legacy of the past (for further information, see *Accounts of the Conflict*).

One of the strengths of *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* is that although there have been many broadcast films about the legacy of the Troubles, these tend to be investigative such as Alex Gibney's *No Stone Unturned* (2017), or Sean Murray's forthcoming *Unquiet Graves: The Story of the Glenanne Gang*. In contrast, McLaughlin and Aguiar's engaging documentaries are crafted from interview recordings, music, and script. They are meticulous in their attention to detail and creative, and both filmmakers have a natural ability to get the best from the two prisons' scenarios, and to draw the participants into very fruitful dialogue. On the site of the experience, as producers and directors, McLaughlin, Aguiar, and the Prisons Memory Archive staff show themselves to be flexible, responsive, and reactive. The two films consistently show effective communication on location, and both weave a storyline that flows seamlessly: their directors are natural storytellers. Despite the bleakness of the stories narrated, McLaughlin and Aguiar demonstrate great ability to find a good narrative and, all in all, tell compelling stories.

The two films complement each other through scenes devoted to crucial aspects of the Troubles, such as the prisoners' hunger strike, the "dirty" protests of 1980, and in their treatment of the prisoners' experiences after they lost their political status. They take up overlapping topics, presenting them from the contrasting perspectives of prisoners in *Armagh Stories* and the women employed by or visiting Long Kesh/Maze Prison in *We Were There*. Both also reveal the human side of the stories, not just the political. While the former inmates of Armagh Gaol contain their emotions and feelings on many occasions during their interviews, the relatives of *We Were There* let them flow freely and exhibit visible relief afterwards. The humanity of all these individuals is reinforced by many agents in both films: in *We Were There* probation service officers Eleanor Mulligan and Valerie Owens speak of their relationships with prisoners in Long Kesh: "You thought one thing and then discovered that these were very nice people".

There is a contrast between the two prisons and the participants in terms of the dynamics of place and space, and sound. In *Armagh Stories*, the prison is filmed from outside, the soundscape is peaceful, birds are singing, and there is a lot of light. This tranquility stands very much in contrast with the anxiety and stress shown by most of the former prisoners and other individuals interviewed in the film. The retelling of their experiences is disturbing and uncomfortable. In *We Were There*, in contrast, the sound of drilling is constant and it is dark. Place, space and sound are intertwined, suggestive not just of the many horrible things that happened there, but that victims' heads are still being drilled. Their traumatic experiences still need to be told, shared with, and known by the general public, but the authorities do not facilitate the process. The Maze Prison is being demolished while the women who visited there are being interviewed, and they seem to feel relief when they are taken to the site of their experience and express their emotions and feelings freely, because *they were there* too.

The interviews themselves in both documentaries are also exceptional high points, extracting the maximum impact from returning to the site of the experience. In *Armagh Stories*, I found particularly powerful the moments in which three former prisoners remember specific moments on location. I found it very revealing when Patricia Moore recalls the way she felt on her first day in prison or the humiliation of being strip-searched by prison officers when she had her period. In another powerful scene, Josie Dowds expresses how sad she and the rest of the girls felt the day her baby was taken away from all of them. Finally, I was very moved when former prison officer Daphne Scroggie tries to hide her anger at the way some of the inmates celebrated when they learned that one of her new colleagues, a young officer and a mother, had been assassinated outside the prison (Side and McLaughlin). The post-traumatic effects of all these terrible experiences are visible to the attentive viewer who observes how all these women have a lump in their throat when they remember these hard times on the sites of the experience (Johnston "Female").

In *We Were There*, I find particularly powerful the ease with which most of the participants are able to communicate in a wide range of situations. In contrast with *Armagh Gaol*, where all the interviewees talk on their own, many of the women in *We Were There* share their traumatic experiences in pairs and groups. This film also shows a broad variety of women recounting very intimate experiences, and their relief afterwards. I was particularly moved by the experiences of Mary Nelis, who smuggled Turkish delight in to her son rolled up in plastic inside her vagina because it would have been confiscated if the officers found it. She also recalls that she saw lice running through her son's hair after a few weeks of the no-wash protest, and her son describes sleeping surrounded by his own faeces, yet he bore no grudge against the prison officers because "they were just doing their job".

Armagh Stories and *We Were There* conclude in a very different manner. In the first, Father Murray's departure is one of the longest shots. It seems as though the filmmakers

wanted to remind the audience that although Armagh Gaol is now deserted, it still holds the memories of his interviewees, and indeed the memories of all those who passed through its gates. Another clever example of this is when the camera films the former inmates of Armagh Gaol recounting their stories and, a little later, walking up and down the stairs in various parts of the prison, one immediately after the other, as if they were still imprisoned. By contrast, in the last part of *We Were There*, visual artist Amanda Dunsmore mentions that a former officer at Long Kesh called Billy had collected many objects owned by prisoners over the years and offered this collection to her so that younger generations would know what had happened. The directors' decision to end the film with the artist's interview seems to be a comment on the demolition of Long Kesh, which was going on around them as they filmed, and also a counter-argument directed at those who are unwilling to address the trauma of the past inclusively. In sum, *Armagh Stories* and *We Were There* are particularly valuable for their contributions to recording the modern history of Northern Ireland, particularly, as Breidge Gadd wrote in an *Irish News* feature article, for the "young people who weren't born during those times", for the "fundamental role" that these stories "have in a future peace resolution" (Gadd).

Together, these two documentaries help both established and new scholars of film studies to come to terms with the scope of the Troubles. Cahal McLaughlin is to be praised for assembling a large and varied group of people from all walks of life in *Armagh Gaol*. He and Aguiar are to be congratulated for bringing together a fairly varied group of women, former prisoners and relatives, and partners and friends of male prisoners at Long Kesh in *We Were There* to draw out touching and spontaneous memories, and for ensuring deep and wide coverage of their subject. *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* are clear and concise documentaries that highlight significant areas of debate. They provide many examples of theoretical investigation in the hope of engaging viewers with the Troubles. Both films will be welcome additions to university libraries and will serve well postgraduate students and lecturers of Irish film and Northern Irish culture and history.

Note

DVDs of *Armagh Stories: Voices from the Gaol* and *We Were There* are available for free to public and academic libraries. Please send your library's details to the Prisons Memory Archive at info@prisonsmemoryarchive.com for more information. After asking the participants/co-owners of the material permission, the Archive will send copies by post. *Armagh Stories* is available in English and (soon) in Spanish. *We Were There* is available in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

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***Michael Inside* (Frank Berry, 2017)**

Tony Tracy

In 1977 Joe Comerford wrote/directed *Down the Corner*, a foundational work in the emergent “first wave” of Irish Cinema. In keeping with many films from a period when filmmakers explored what an emerging indigenous cinema could and should do, the film rejected the picturesque and sided with the marginal. In this case it was a group of five teenage boys from the working-class suburb of Ballyfermot, and the film’s episodic narrative emerged from Comerford’s workshopping of ideas and experiences within the community depicted. The film depicted their world – families, community, social pressures (alcoholism, unemployment) as well as a grandmother’s recollections of 1916 – against a backdrop of a petty crime in which the boys rob an orchard. Clearly inspired by the example of the British new wave and socially-conscious film makers such as Ken Loach (shades of *Kes* in particular), the film also pursued more abstract levels of meaning, notably through the symbolic use of the orchard as a lost Eden that stands in contrast with their dehumanizing modern milieu.

Down the Corner is today rarely screened and thus likely unknown to many younger Irish filmmakers but it is worth invoking as a precedent when approaching the films of Frank Berry: his 2011 documentary *Ballymun Lullaby*; feature debut *I Used to Live Here* (2014) and, in particular his latest, *Michael Inside* (2017). Each of these have also emerged from workshops directed by Berry with working-class community groups, combining an open attitude to the often fragmented narratives of his participants with skillful storytelling. His films thus both take up from and diverge from that earlier moment in Irish film history. Masterfully connecting under-represented places and people, they display an all-too-rare engagement with the issues of the communities depicted (often casting from within such