

Bloody Sunday: Classically Unified Trauma?

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The construction of cinematic Ireland has been influenced by numerous historical schisms, perhaps most notably the dominant ideology of cultural nationalism in Ireland, combined with the 'cinematic occupation' of Ireland by Britain and the United States. An indigenous film community emerged in Ireland in the 1970s intent on re-coding the landscape by overriding the derogatory stereotypes of the pastoral and the atavistic. This move towards 'authentic representation' spans across social, cinematic and critical spheres and can be associated with the drive towards a collective working through of Irish conflict. Early filmic representations shunned the formal aesthetics of Hollywood and strived for a text that would shift the mythical ideology of Ireland. Thus, cinema became a cultural and political weapon. However, as the global economy expanded and co-production agreements dominated the film industry, Irish cinema became divided on its role on the international stage. Irish 'radical' text now conflicted with the Hollywood drive towards universality.

Bloody Sunday (Paul Greengrass 2002) rests precariously within this contextual framework as both a representation of Irish history and an intertextual critique of the history of Irish representation. The film recounts the 24 hours surrounding the 1972 massacre of civilians in Derry, Northern Ireland by British Armed Forces. What interests me is the way that 24 hours is reconstructed in this film. Greengrass presents two conflicting viewing positions within the Irish and British representations. He also makes two key stylistic choices in his reenactment of *Bloody Sunday*: observational documentary style, applied to the fictional realm of history and emphasized by handheld camera and rigorous rhythmic editing; and reflexive narration, used to invoke commentary on historical and representational intertextuality. In addition, Greengrass chooses an extremely balanced formal structure that cues the viewer to an overarching Classical influence. The central question that emerges is how this confluence of elements impacts the ideological message of the film.

It is useful to incorporate a stylistic analysis to locate these streams. The film opens with parallel media conferences that establish the primary polemics of the film: the Irish Nationalists versus the British, and concurrently the theme of peace versus war. Over the course of the film, these polemics splinter into four locations - the Civil Rights march, the counter-march that escalates in violence, the British Army ground troops and Army headquarters. This splintering continues throughout the film emphasizing the perpetual divisions amongst alliances and enemies and illustrating the complexity of the history it is attempting to represent. The use of crosscutting further exemplifies these narrative/historical fractures and establishes a definitive cause and effect chain.

Overall, the film can be characterized as providing an obstructed point of view throughout, however there are distinctions. In the first half of the film, the viewer is

frequently placed in observational distance from the Irish and as 'occupying' the British point of view. From the onset of meeting the main protagonist, Ivan Cooper, we are set in motion as his follower as he prepares for the Civil Rights march. He is the embodiment of the frenetic forward momentum of the film that is paralleled by rigorous rhythmic editing. As we are introduced to other Irish characters, we typically view them through doorframes, from hallways, from within crowds of anonymous bodies or in the distance down a barricaded Derry street. It is rare that we participate in the perceptual subjectivity of Irish characters, until the massacre when our viewing position shifts so that we occupy the collective body of the Irish. In contrast, British soldiers are typically photographed in mid to close-up range in a tight huddle within a fortified setting. These scenes are often edited in a component style, thereby omitting the spatial orientation of establishing shots in order to emphasize circumstantial reactions of individuals. The viewer is often placed within the huddle, part of the tight circular formation, positioned in the same close proximity as the military personnel to one another. This visual compression of space and figures simultaneously connotes the limitations of character point of view, further accented by the soldiers' obstructed vision through viewing slots or front windshields of tanks, over the tops of walls, around corners. Perceptual subjectivity, albeit fractured, is used throughout the footage of the British soldiers. This lack of a complete picture on the part of the British is further enhanced by the blind viewing position found in Army headquarters, a position epitomized by the disembodied voices that deliver reports off-screen or via telephone and repeated in the schematic reconstruction of viewing positions indicated on the map.

Nick Browne's critical writing on spectator positions offers some incite into the reading of this film. Describing the various positions of the spectator he hones in on identification processes and notes the fictional position occupied within the action: "insofar as we see from what we might take to be the eye of a character, we are invited to occupy the place allied to the place he holds, in, for example, the social system... in another figurative sense of place, it is the only way that our response can be accounted for, that we can identify with a character's position in a certain situation." (111) The reflexive observational recording of the reenactment of the *Bloody Sunday* massacre is the full revelation of this idea. All previous viewing positions and distancing mechanisms are collapsed into one traumatized viewing position that is viscerally subjective. In this scene, the camera becomes the memory body, the instigator of a phantasmic primary witness position. The pandemonium induced by the handheld camera that shakes out frames of fractured bodies and disorienting movement provides the most jarring emotional response in the film. Bill Nichols describes observational cinema as conveying "the sense of

unmediated and unfettered access to the world...we expect to have the ability to take the position of an ideal observer, moving among people and places to find revealing views." (43) In this scene the viewer is cast into the subjective field of vision of the British that induces a dialectic response: the viewer simultaneously occupies the 'Irish space' and witnesses the 'British affect'.

The historical intertextuality of the film favours a contextualized reading of the event across history. The Civil Rights march itself can be identified as signifying a procession through history. The march proceeds down the hill out of the rural landscape and into the urban city of Derry. The march is largely shot from the front of the parade, from the point of view of the lorry looking back at the marchers. The IRA provos along with the Irish youth are positioned at the rear of the march and are therefore photographed from the opposite direction, from the back of the parade looking forward, until they splinter off into the counter-march. This visual opposition heightens the narrative tension and epitomizes the conflict of war/peace within strategies of resolution. It also harkens back to a conventional representation of youth in Irish cinema, characterized as future motivated but weighed down by the burden of history - youth are viewed as inheriting all the conflicts of their forefathers.

This historical intertextuality is an overdetermined element and Greengrass walks the fine line of parody in conjuring up conventional stereotypes and traditions of cultural nationalism: Ivan Cooper still lives at home with his aging parents; the Catholic Church is signified by the presence of the priest who counsels young Gerald at the march; the 'new' position of women in Irish history is invoked in the comment that the march is for 'women and children' and further emphasized by the presence of the character Bernadette Devlin, a key feminist MP in the 1970s. The 'Irish and their drink' are cited in conversation while the 'brawling' Irish appear around every corner as Ivan hands out pamphlets for the peace march. While attention is drawn to these representational traces, they are fleeting. Once acknowledged they are quickly discarded. This purging of Irish stereotypes may be a tip of the hat to the past as Irish cinema reformulates Irish tropes for the future, but it also plays into the paradigm of Classical unity that seeks to discard extraneous details that detract from the narrative flow. One must ask whether *Bloody Sunday* as a filmic text is being reduced to a generic drama for universal appeal.

David Bordwell describes the canonic narration of classical Hollywood as presenting "psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or attain specific goals". The classical story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and the principal causal agency is a character, in particular "a discriminated individual." (1985:157) Classical narrative is also marked by two narrative streams: the primary action motivated by a deadline or appointment, and the heterosexual romance. *Bloody Sunday* is no exception and includes the deadline of the march and the romance of Ivan Cooper and his lover Frances, paralleled by the young

romance of Gerald and his girlfriend. Each romance is representative of the threat imposed by 'love across the sectarian divide' and is also used as a moment of pause, a formal reprieve from an accelerating and frenetic narrative. The Hollywood narration in *Bloody Sunday* may be the most problematic. Its absolutism and its drive towards resolution foisted upon an historical reenactment embodies all the problems of a 'totalizing history' that attempts to bring the event into full presence, full meaning. (LaCapra 103)

In order to examine this totalizing effect in *Bloody Sunday*, I have chosen to utilize Dominick LaCapra's mode of inquiry as described in his "History and Memory After Auschwitz." In this essay LaCapra analyses the documentary *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann) through a series of questions that locate and interrogate the historian/filmmaker within a text in relation to the totalizing impulse of historical analysis, that is. LaCapra's principles of analysis are drawn from his acknowledgement that neither the historian, nor his/her critical tools, nor history itself is neutral and therefore must be questioned throughout a process of analysis. While I don't wish to compare these two texts, I believe LaCapra's mode of inquiry can be applied to *Bloody Sunday* to move from a surface reading to a deeper reading associated with identification processes.

Clearly, the reenactment of the event of *Bloody Sunday* itself is subject to the powerful denotative value of cinema in its ability to reproduce reality to the point of believability. Our previous knowledge that the film event is based on historical reality further informs our engagement with the surface of the text. This relationship triggers a predetermined identification process, whereby the past is compressed into the moment as the event appears to be reincarnated on screen. Because of this cinematic affect, LaCapra emphasizes the need for the filmmaker to acknowledge that any account of knowledge is limited and more specifically he believes it is essential for the filmmaker to reveal this awareness rather than attempting to mask it as 'totalizing authenticity'. This tangible revelation can take the form of a disruption in the historian/filmmaker's own mode of inquiry and narration. I believe the reflexive narration of *Bloody Sunday* attempts to respond to this need.

One can argue that Greengrass strives to unhinge the totalizing potential of the filmic text through explicit intertextual references to the modes of recording, in particular the role of the media in the construction of meaning. The media are invoked throughout the narrative in literal constructions of press conferences that bookend the film, in character dialogue that cites the need for media presence and the desire to "win the propaganda war." In its observational form the film also conjures up eyewitness news formats. Add to this the fact that Greengrass himself had a career in investigative television journalism and docudrama with the BBC and it appears we have a consciousness form of disrupted narrative that inserts the filmmaker's awareness of the communicative nature of the media in general, and the event of *Bloody Sunday* in

particular. However, I'm not entirely convinced that Greengrass reveals the limitations of inquiry that LaCapra pinpoints, since the film's disruption exists comfortably within a unified form and the overall narrative is rendered into a definitive statement. Greengrass quite literally pits the ill-fated Northern Ireland Civil Rights march against the trigger-happy British Armed Forces in a landscape that is so historically and politically volatile that violence seems inevitable. It is difficult to read the narrative differently. Fundamentally, he sets out to create a heightened emotionalism in the viewer through the (re)construction of the primary witness position, in order to wage the charge of complicity - at the British and at the viewer. It would seem that Greengrass' intent, particularly in the scene of the massacre, is to induce feelings of trauma, helplessness and guilt, primarily for affect rather than for the purpose of creating new layers of inquiry, or casting doubt on the tools of representation themselves. Further inquiry is necessary here.

In his analysis of *Shoah*, LaCapra builds on notions of the limits of knowledge to the point of an absolute refusal for total understanding, or an acknowledgement of the incomprehensibility of the event due to the intervention of the forces of 'trauma' and 'performativity.' (109) It is conceivable to argue that a text like *Bloody Sunday* can propose a collective working through of trauma but it is simultaneously troubled by the very nature of trauma and reenactment as "entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated". (Laub 69) Clinician Dori Laub identifies a key concept in trauma recovery that can be extended to the impact of filmic reenactment:

[The] re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (69)

In the case of *Bloody Sunday*, the primary and secondary witness positions are reconstructed and the viewer asked to bear witness to the trauma to become a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event. Although it is not the actual event, the use of observational eyewitness news format and the reconstruction of the mediated image of the event attempts to provoke a traumatic response in the viewer. However, as La Capra points out "Trauma is precisely the gap, the open wound, in the past that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present." (109) This concept not only runs counter to notions of unified narrative closure, but the act of inducing trauma via the dramatic vehicle purely for emotional impact denies the complex processes of trauma recovery. In short, 'trauma' becomes a built in 'special affect' that the spectator brings with them in every viewing experience. The filmmaker can count on this trigger and is not required to engage in the corresponding procedures for recovery that a therapeutic situation would warrant. Therefore the absolute refusal of the idea of a total understanding can become an

excuse for the induction of heightened emotionalism instead.

With this in mind, we can analyse the construction of the traumatic event and its aftermath in the film to determine whether a process of transformation occurs. The effect of the massacre and its aftermath are heightened through the devastating contrast of the fast-paced abstraction of the murders followed by the halting tableaux of the victims and their families. This shift in the rigorous momentum of the narrative achieves the heightened emotionalism it seeks. Intertwined with the structural and thematic representation of trauma is the iconic representation of 'family'. The family is a primary signifier within Irish cinema connected to the nation as a whole, its enemies, its relationship to past, present and future. The representation of the fractured family therefore connotes larger issues and is used as a major signifying device within Irish cinema. The culmination of family as ruptured nation is exemplified in the scene of the aftermath of the massacre in the hospital where the massive collective organism of the family appears disemboweled, strewn across the floor, heaped in sobbing masses, frozen in shocked stasis. Rather than discarding this iconic trope of family as he does with numerous other Irish conventions, Greengrass uses its Irish specificity and universal conventionality to maximum affect thereby transforming the "Irish problem" into an identifiable humanist condition. This generalization aids the transference of the traumatic event across a variety of positions within and without the text. However, once the traumatic wound is opened, it is prolonged through the closing memorial to the victims. Clearly no closure can occur within this particular story at this point in time, if ever. However, the viewer is also left without emotional closure - the only consolation the filmic text can offer is the possibility for violent retaliation which constitutes the continuation of the cycle of trauma. In an interesting aside, I am reminded of John Hill's comparison of representation of violence in American and British cinema. For Hill, violence in British cinema is largely positioned as an obstacle to be overcome, while American cinema utilizes violence as a tool to overcome obstacles. I believe the representation of violence in Irish cinema may combine these two concepts so that violence becomes both an obstacle to overcome and a tool to overcome it. This is certainly the paradoxical position we are left in at the end of the film.

Can we extend the concept of the disruptive force of trauma and performativity onto the critical engagement of Irish history and representation itself? Is it possible to say that the analysis of cinematic representation in Ireland is thwarted by an unconscious working through process that paradoxically seeks out a resolution to conflict where no resolution exists? Multiple layers of historic trauma combined with a cinema of reenactment of that trauma suggests the double bind of individual acting out/working through within the construction of knowledge and collective identity. Irish cinema and criticism is preoccupied with the notion of authentic representations, and Irish filmmakers are confronted with the lofty task of "getting it right", that is

of encoding Irish cinema with socially acceptable signification. But can an ideal cinematic image of Ireland be found amongst its political, historical, and cultural divisions, within the open wound in the past "that resists being entirely filled in, healed, or harmonized in the present?" Or at the very least, can we expect a single film to serve this purpose?

I believe the tension between the linear narrative structure and its lateral self-reflexivity across history is not enough to dislodge it from the dominant unifying structure of Hollywood Classicism. However, that unity serves a very specific function: it is precisely the Classical obsession with balance and a clear cause and effect ordering that instigates the major representational imbalance in the film - the construction of a good and evil polemic within an historical narrative. Combined with the fractured point of view and the visual unrest that is constructed throughout the film these seemingly conflicting narrational strategies instigate a dialectical response in the viewer. Furthermore, the film's constant splintering of character relations and viewing positions also implies the development of individual histories within a collective framework.

While a totalizing narrative is impossible, and *Bloody Sunday* may not shift the dominant ideology, I believe it does shift the stereotypes of Ireland by pointedly calling attention to the British engagement in Irish history, identity construction and violence and dislodging the notion that Britain is saving Ireland from itself. It also serves as a memorial to the victims of Bloody Sunday and transforms the 'strangeness' of the Irish problem into the familiar. Conversely, this unified form makes *Bloody Sunday* a marketable commodity in the U.S. given its genre conventions that embody biopic, melodrama, and action. ☺

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