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Painting Peace? Murals and the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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ABSTRACT   *Murals have figured as a prominent feature of the visual environment of Northern Ireland since the early twentieth century, developing, during the Troubles, into one of the best-known examples of political art in the world. This article examines the position occupied by these murals in the period (since 1994) of the peace process. It focuses on the multi-government-agency Re-imaging Communities programme (launched in 2006) and its attempt to intervene in the visual environment and steer the Northern Ireland muralscape away from expressions of sectarianism towards more 'positive' themes. The aims and achievements of this programme (to date) are assessed, along with the issues the programme and related initiatives raise with regard to the governance of the visual environment. The article moves on to examine a further means by which murals have been repositioned in the period since 1994 – the attempt to present them as tourist attractions – and closes by discussing the issues raised for remembering the Troubles by these interventions in and attempts to reconfigure Northern Ireland's murals.*

Keywords: governance; murals; peace process; Re-imaging Communities; sectarianism; visual environment

Introduction

Murals have figured as a prominent feature of the visual environment of Northern Ireland from the origins of Northern Ireland in 1922, on through 'the Troubles', to the present period of the peace process. In so doing these murals have evolved into some of the best-known examples of political art in the world (see e.g. Conway, 2010: 163).

There exists an extensive literature on the history of murals in Northern Ireland. This article takes as its focus the most recent stage of this history – the position occupied by these murals in the midst of the ongoing 'peace process' – and in particular the attempts to intervene in and remake the muralscape of Northern Ireland, and to

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steer these murals away from a concern with sectarian conflict towards more 'positive' depictions of the history and contemporary condition of Northern Ireland.

The article opens with a brief, context-setting overview of the history of murals in Northern Ireland, before moving on to scrutinise the attempts to intervene in the muralscape in the period since the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires, through focusing on the Re-imaging Communities programme – the largest-scale attempt to intervene in the visual environment of Northern Ireland to emerge to date from the peace process – and in particular the impact of this programme in Belfast, where the programme has been most active. The objectives and achievements of this programme are scrutinised, along with the broader issues raised by the programme for the governance of the visual environment in Northern Ireland. The article moves on to examine a parallel and intersecting process – the positioning of murals as tourist attractions in the period since 1994. It concludes with some reflections on the issues these attempts to intervene in and reposition the muralscape raise, with regard to the question of how the Troubles will come to be remembered.

Historical Overview

The history of mural painting in Northern Ireland can be traced back to a 1908 unionist mural on Belfast's Beersbridge Road depicting William III's victory in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne (Rolston, 1987: 8).[1] Early murals followed this format, typically being produced around the 12 July commemorations of 'King Billy's' victory. These murals presented a means by which unionists could express their anxieties that the drive to Home Rule would lead to an (united) Ireland governed by a Dublin parliament. From 1922, with a unionist-dominated parliament *in situ* in the newly formed entity of Northern Ireland, to the outbreak of the Troubles at the end of the 1960s, mural painting evolved into 'a quasi-state' activity, with the unveiling of a new mural being an event that brought together the unionist community, including politicians, local residents, the artists who had produced the mural and the local press (Rolston, 1992: ii).

By contrast, few nationalist murals appeared in this period, an absence that can be attributed in part to the fact that their appearance would have led to harassment by the state, with the 1954 Flag and Emblems Act, ostensibly a means of regulating visual displays across Northern Ireland, in practice being used almost solely against nationalist communities (Jarman, 1997: 232). (Exceptions to this were the two republican murals of Robert Emmet and James Connolly in Ardoyne, north Belfast, as well as the bout of mural painting that took place during religious festivals: primarily the Virgin Mary festival in May and Corpus Christi in June, the existence of which might be explained by their relatively inconspicuous location, on a nationalist estate away from principal thoroughfares; Loftus 1990: 78.)

From the early 1970s there was a marked decline in the maintenance of existing murals and the creation of new ones, a development attributed to the crises in unionist identity and confidence generated by the end of unionist-dominated rule from Stormont, and its replacement by Direct Rule from London (Coulter, 2000: 203). The creation of

'no-go' areas in nationalist districts that followed the commencement of the Troubles enabled republicans to challenge the near-prohibition on the display of their images, most famously in the case of the gable wall of an end terrace in the Bogside, Derry, that first appeared in October 1968, announcing 'You are now entering Free Derry';[2] but these displays were small in number and sporadic, and it was not until the Long Kesh/Maze prison campaigns grew in intensity towards the end of the 1970s that anything more systematic began to appear. Specifically, it was the death of hunger striker Bobby Sands in May 1981, in protest at conditions inside the prison, that triggered a wave of nationalist mural painting (evolving out of initial graffiti), with some 150 murals appearing before the end of that year (Conway, 2010: 163–166).

The period from 1984 witnessed a revival in loyalist mural painting, prompted by the UK government's moves towards the weakening of its jurisdiction over Northern Ireland, ratified by the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement with the Republic of Ireland in November 1985 (Jarman, 1997: 215). While some of these murals drew upon the traditional unionist imagery of King Billy, the proliferation of a range of symbols, particularly those that emphasised Protestants' specifically Ulster rather than more general British identity, signified a sense of perceived betrayal by the UK government. These displays were increasingly martial in character, with the reduction in murals depicting King Billy and the proliferation of images of loyalist paramilitaries readable as evidence of a growing disillusionment with mainstream unionism by a younger generation of loyalists (Santino, 2001: 37).[3]

The period of diminished paramilitary violence after the declaration of republican and loyalist ceasefires in 1994 (augmented by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement) witnessed the continuation of mural painting as part of the broader expansion of displays of politico-sectarian symbolism, including flag-flying and parades. At the same time this imagery continued its post-1984 trajectory – particularly among loyalist groups – towards ever more martial themes. This may at first glance seem a surprising development. However, in common with other conflict situations it follows a path whereby the attenuation of violent conflict leads to its displacement to other realms, including the visual environment, where 'the struggle can go on' (Hill & White, 2008: 42–45). (At the same time – as we shall discuss – visual displays have figured as a catalyst to violence in the period since 1994, as is evident perhaps most notably in the dispute over Orange Order marching rights through Drumcree, which reached its nadir in the years 1995–1998 and led to serious civil disorder throughout Northern Ireland.)

Interventions: Murals and the Peace Process

It is against the backdrop of the history of mural painting and its ties to the troubled, sectarian politics of Northern Ireland, as well as the proliferation of murals in the period since 1994, that the attempts in recent years to intervene in and alter the appearance of murals in Northern Ireland have to be understood.

These efforts have taken two broad forms: local, community-based initiatives and the significantly more ambitious government agency-led projects that are the focus of our concern in this piece.

Community Initiatives

Local initiatives have emanated from community members seeking the removal or alteration of murals through requests to and in discussion with paramilitary groups. McCormick and Jarman (2005: 65–66) document instances of such actions in their cataloguing of how murals in Northern Ireland come to disappear,[4] including: the alteration of a loyalist paramilitary mural in Sandy Row, south Belfast, after local business people expressed concerns that it could deter inward investment; the replacement of a Young Citizen Volunteer (the youth wing of the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)) mural with another on the theme of the environment, after appeals from the head teacher of a local primary school; and the agreement of the Monkston UVF in Newtonabbey to replace paramilitary images with a mural depicting the 36th Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme and Edward Carson. As Griffin (2007: 52–53) documents, other more ambitious local schemes have included a 'clean-up'[5] of the Mount Vernon estate in north Belfast in 2000 by the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) (the political wing of the UVF) and Groundwork Northern Ireland (an environmental charity), and a 2004 scheme in the Shankill, in loyalist west Belfast, to remove 27 murals and 7,000 metres of red, white and blue paint from kerbstones.

These actions have taken a discreet form, being addressed towards specific murals – or in the latter cases, estates – rather than constituting a broader attempt to address the condition of the visual environment in Northern Ireland, or to link the attempt to remake the muralscape to the broader politics of the peace process. At the same time, these schemes have in the main emanated from within the Protestant community. Apart from Griffin's (2007: 52) report of the removal of a hunger strike memorial in 2001 in consideration of the feelings of unionists who lived nearby (the location of which was not stated), it is difficult to find many instances of republicans' removing murals in response to local pressure. This may be explained by the comparatively fewer nationalist murals on main thoroughfares, the somewhat lower frequency of martial content in republican murals, as well as the broader level of support for republican groups in nationalist areas in comparison with that for former paramilitary groups and their political offshoots in loyalist areas (Coulter, 2000: 246–247; McCormick & Jarman, 2005: 51–52; Griffin, 2007: 52; Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 53). (With regard to the latter issue, the less than enthusiastic endorsement of some loyalist murals by the communities in which they are hosted is pointed to by Jack Santino (2001: 38), who elicited from those retouching the Ulster Defence Association's (UDA's) long line of 'Freedom Corner' murals in east Belfast the response that many in the housing estate behind did not agree with the sentiments expressed on the tableau.)

Alongside these community initiatives it is worth also pointing to how the removal of paramilitary murals in recent years has taken more politically expedient forms – deriving from the shifting politics of paramilitary groups rather than the more deliberate desire to remove paramilitary murals. The principal exemplar here is the removal of the majority of those murals that appeared in the spring and summer of 2000 in the Lower Shankill at the instigation of Johnny Adair and his wing ('C'

Company) of the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), as part of the attempt to assert their authority over the area. Internal feuding led to Adair's expulsion from the Shankill (and indeed Northern Ireland) in early 2003 and the removal of many of the murals produced by Adair and his supporters (although a number of other paramilitary murals remained), with, as McCormick and Jarman (2005: 64) noted, this development heralding 'the first evidence of the area's renewal and regeneration'.[6]

Government Initiatives: Re-imaging Communities

The period since 2004 has witnessed the second, far more broad-ranging and, in terms of the peace process, significant, attempt to intervene in and transform the appearance of murals in Northern Ireland – with the emergence of government agency-led projects addressed towards not only murals, but also the use of visual displays and symbolism in Northern Ireland more generally. The key development in this process was the launch in February 2004 by Northern Ireland's Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) of a £2.4 million lottery-funded project, 'Art of Regeneration', which provided money for local authorities to carry out art projects in areas in need of social and economic regeneration (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 23).[7] The funded projects took a variety of forms, including North Down Borough Council's replacement of paramilitary murals and graffiti with displays of public art in two loyalist areas – the Kilcooley estate in Bangor and the Loughview/Redburn estates in Holywood (North Down Borough Council Arts Section, 2009). Alongside 'Art of Regeneration', the introduction of the multi-agency 'Flags Protocol' in April 2005 confirmed the broader commitment to intervene in the visual environment, initiating work with local communities to remove sectarian flags, which had by the end of the year succeeded in removing 1,000 such emblems (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), 2006: 15–16).

   The need to build upon these initiatives was recognised by the attention accorded to the visual environment in 'A Shared Future' – the overarching strategic policy framework launched in 2005 to promote the development of 'good relations' in Northern Ireland (and one of the principal policy drivers of the latest stage of the peace process) – that stressed the need for 'tackling the visible manifestations of sectarianism and racism' in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2006: 43). It is as an element of 'A Shared Future' that the 'Re-imaging Communities Programme' – the broadest attempt yet to intervene in the visual environment of Northern Ireland – was born. 'Re-imaging Communities' was launched in July 2006 as a multi-agency initiative led by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, with £3.3 million of funding for an initial 3-year period, with the aim of 'replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner' (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: vii), while at the same time seeking to garner the socio-economic benefits of art-related development projects.

   The programme funded 108 projects up to the summer of 2008, when it was suspended owing to financial difficulties, with a further £500,000 forthcoming in

December 2008, which resulted in another 15 projects (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: vii–viii). The programme has funded a diversity of projects across Northern Ireland, including public art and the clean-up and regeneration of neglected sites, alongside the replacement and transformation of paramilitary and sectarian murals. By the summer of 2009 Re-imaging Communities had initiated 39 projects involving murals, in so doing constituting the largest-scale attempt to date to intervene in Northern Ireland's muralscape (although, as we shall discuss, this constitutes only a small proportion of the total number of murals extant in Northern Ireland).

What type of impact has Re-imaging Communities had on the Northern Ireland muralscape? And what type of contribution can these interventions be said to have made to the peace process?

Murals have been altered and removed, and new murals painted at sites across Northern Ireland, with the replacement of sectarian and paramilitary murals with murals addressing a variety of more 'neutral' themes (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 175–186). The types of change are evident in two particularly prominent initiatives drawn from either side of the sectarian divide in Belfast (the site, perhaps unsurprisingly, of the greatest number of murals in Northern Ireland).

In the Lower Shankill, Re-imaging Communities has resulted in six loyalist paramilitary murals being replaced with alternative images, with four new murals added.[8] These changes have taken the form of: a mural depicting Orangemen marching through Drumcree replaced with an A–Z of historical figures, sites and events drawn from the local area; an Ulster Defence Association Scottish Brigade mural showing two masked gunmen, replaced with a mural of the Brown Square Gold Rush (in which in 1969 children digging around newly demolished local flats found a hoard of gold sovereigns); a siege of Derry mural replaced with images of local boxing legends; a mural depicting street violence and burning houses that asks 'Can it change?' replaced with a 'children's right to play' mural; a 'C Company' (UFF) mural replaced with a mural celebrating the Shankill parish's history as dating back to AD 455; and a mural claiming ethnic cleansing replaced with a declaration of 'sustainable employment for all'. The four murals that have been added reference the Belfast Blitz, VE day celebrations, enlistment for World War I and Martin Luther.

In each case plaques have been installed that make explicit the rationale for the transformation, and (where relevant) include images of the previous mural – suggesting that this process of commemoration played some part in convincing local residents that new murals could be produced without entirely losing the mural that had been there. Hence, in the case of the Drumcree mural, the accompanying plaque announces that, 'the Drumcree mural depicted a fraught time in the late 1990s when violence and dispute attended a traditional Orange Order march to the church of Drumcree through the Nationalist Garvaghy Road district of Portadown', whereas the mural that replaces this 'presents an A–Z of the Shankill, celebrating history and tradition and depicting images of those who have become celebrated far beyond'. Similarly, in the case of the Scottish Brigade mural the plaque explains the replacement of a mural of 'two silhouetted gunmen' with details of the 1969 'Gold Rush'.

The transformation of and addition to the murals in the Lower Shankill presents the largest-scale intervention in Northern Ireland's muralscape by the Re-imaging Communities programme. Yet, as we noted when we visited the estate in the summer of 2009, murals with paramilitary and aggressively sectarian themes existed alongside the newer murals, with the 'Children's right to play' mural flanked on either side by gable ends adorned with a paramilitary mural and a mural on the role played by Ulster regiments in the 1809 Battle of Talavera. (This juxtapositioning raises a range of possible readings, including, perhaps, that children's right to play is protected by the presence of paramilitary groups and/or a martial presence?) Furthermore, it is worth noting the military theme of three of the four completely new murals (which can be read as denoting a persisting tie to violence, be it in more organised or legitimate a form), while the remaining new mural depicts Martin Luther confronting a row of presumably Catholic churchmen. Indeed, the plaque accompanying the later mural notes how 'Luther's Reformation founded Protestantism and divided Catholicism across Europe', which appears to confirm rather than challenge sectarian thinking. (Similar questions can be raised about the changes made to murals elsewhere, as in the replacement of a mural depicting the figure of 'Eddie' – gleaned from the imagery of the heavy metal band Iron Maiden – as a gunman, with King Billy, in the Village, in South Belfast.)

The second example stands a short distance from the Lower Shankill, on the other side of the 'the peace wall' that divides the Protestant and Catholic communities in west Belfast. The Lower Falls contains the only new mural funded by Re-imaging Communities in Catholic Belfast – a work depicting the sky, based on the poem 'The Sky' by Tom Kerr, on a wall on Conway Street, opposite Conway Mill, which contains the line 'This is my sky, I will share it with you', a message of inclusiveness that incorporates images of both the local Catholic and travelling communities.

Yet, despite this being the only mural to be produced by the project in Catholic Belfast, the mural is located in a relatively inconspicuous location, on a side street, away from main thoroughfares. Such a location contrasts with the prominent array of republican murals sited nearby on the Falls Road/Divis Street. Indeed, it is perhaps telling that despite the frequent recycling of images at the latter location, no Re-imaging Communities mural has appeared there, suggesting a disregard for the Re-imaging Communities programme that accords with republican muralist Danny Devenny's disdain for a scheme that he believes gives money to artists who did not support deprived communities during the Troubles (Griffin, 2007: 48–49).[9]

The comparative scarcity of Re-imaging Communities projects in Catholic Belfast reflects the broader pattern of the programme's projects across Northern Ireland, with funding going to only 23 projects that could be deemed to be in predominantly Catholic areas; 61 of the projects were in Protestant areas, while 39 were in areas that could be considered 'mixed' (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 67). This is significant given the historically less-developed levels of community group infrastructure in Protestant areas than in Catholic parts of the city, and the commensurate lower take-up of funding for community projects in Protestant areas (Shirlow &

Murtagh, 2006: 156–157). That the reverse has happened under the Re-imaging Communities programme suggests that nationalists' disposition towards the programme is at best lukewarm. Yet, at the same time this discrepancy might also be explained in terms of the post-1984 trend, mentioned earlier in this piece, towards ever more belligerent loyalist murals, which is in contrast to republican muralists' preference over the same period for promoting Sinn Féin's political and cultural nationalism rather than simply the 'armed struggle' (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 52; Conway, 2010: 164), resulting in a situation in which there are probably significantly more loyalist murals on sectarian themes than there are republican, with the distribution of funds from the programme reflecting this.

    While it would be wrong to be overly cynical about Re-imaging Communities, the programme raises a series of issues that parallel and reach beyond those raised by the projects in the Lower Shankill and Lower Falls. First, and perhaps most obviously, there stands the limited scale of intervention presented by Re-imaging Communities. In total the programme has, to date, included 39 projects that have altered existing murals and/or produced new murals – and while some (although not all) of these projects have, as in the case of the Lower Shankill, altered more than one mural, this is still only a small proportion of the estimated total of around 2,000 murals extant in Northern Ireland (a figure that is constantly changing given the dynamism of mural painting in Northern Ireland) (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 48). Furthermore, even in those instances such as the Lower Shankill where a number of murals have been altered, this has taken place in the context of the continuing presence of multiple other murals on sectarian and paramilitary themes (and we have noted the questions that might be raised about the content of the new murals introduced into the Lower Shankill and elsewhere).

    Second, there is the question of what the impact of these new murals will be. While these new murals seek to alter the visual environment away from paramilitary and sectarian imagery, will these alterations have any effect beyond the changes made at the level of this environment? This question raises the issue of the performative function of these murals and the ways in which they have contributed to the politico-sectarian divisions of Northern Ireland, rather than simply presenting a 'representation' of this conflict (which we shall examine in greater detail shortly). With regard to the Re-imaging Communities programme, the pivotal issue is how these murals connect to the communities in which they are located, and whether they present anything more than a relatively banal attempt at aestheticisation. In this respect it is worth pointing to an earlier attempt to improve Belfast's visual environment – Belfast City Council's 1977 initiative that brought together the Council's Community Services Department, the Department of Environment (Northern Ireland), the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) and the Arts Council Northern Ireland, and saw the creation of 42 new murals across Belfast in the 4 years until 1981 (Rolston, 1987: 27).

    The scheme's prohibition on overtly political messages ensured that the murals were for the most part extremely anodyne, often depicting rural scenes that contrasted starkly with the physical environment in which they appeared, with their refusal to

allude to the politics of Northern Ireland neglecting to reflect key components of the experience of communities at this time. (An exception to this was a trilogy of murals on the 'three ages of [Ulster Protestant] man', which appeared to be a genuine attempt to reflect and celebrate themes that were germane to the communities in which they were situated; Watson, 1983: 8.) Perhaps the most controversial image produced under this scheme was a jungle scene, painted in various areas of Belfast, including a huge 400-feet-long mural in Springhill, a nationalist neighbour-hood in the west of the city. Many were critical of these jungle scenes, including republican community activist Des Wilson, who judged them insulting to local com-munities. As he noted (Wilson, 1983: 19) with regard to the Springhill mural:

> With brilliant and astounding absence of sensitivity, the artists painted a series of wild animals set in a jungle. Then they went away leaving the residents to contemplate their handiwork and to wonder if it really represented the artists' view of them and their district. Local children soon made amendations [*sic*] to the design, a series of additions, subtractions and appendages to the animals which caused the elderly and sedate to look the other way. The mural may have been an outsider's comment on the district; the amendations [*sic*] were the children's comments on the artists.

The murals produced under this scheme quickly came to be overshadowed by the impact of the 1981 hunger strikes, which had such an impact on nationalist Belfast that a prohibition on references to it on its walls was never likely to work. Indeed, amidst all the references to the plight of republican prisoners, the Belfast City Council-sponsored murals must have seemed distinctly out of place. Furthermore, although there were at this time few loyalist murals, the prohibition on political themes was similarly problematic. In an article in *circa* 1983 – titled 'No murals here' – Shankill community activist Jackie Redpath (1983: 21) argued that:

> Even when tenants groups attempted to give some political bite to the paintings, to comment on rent increases or housing conditions, their ideas failed to re-emerge from the City Hall consultation process. The Community Services gable wall painting schemes were not interested in any tradition of such paint-ing in working class areas or in working from any real base. Essentially they were environmental 'spruce-ups'.

Belfast City Council's scheme provides a useful point of comparison with Re-imaging Communities, one that raises the question of how long the murals introduced by the latter programme will last, with the murals produced by Belfast City Council having disappeared by the mid-1980s (Rolston, 1991: 67). For, as McCormick and Jarman (2005: 56–57) suggested, a community's attachment to a mural is a vital factor in ensuring the upkeep necessary for a mural's continuing presence.

    The third issue – which stems from that just outlined – concerns the broader impact beyond the alteration of the visual environment that the Re-imaging Communities

programme will have on the communities it strives to reach. Many of these new murals appear in areas blighted by social and economic deprivation – exacerbated by the Troubles – and include some of the poorest parts of the UK. Although some, limited socio-economic benefits have (already) been identified with the programme (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 93–94), it would be misleading to imagine that the Re-imaging Communities programme can transform the socio-economic status of these communities. Rather, Re-imaging Communities has (at best) a role to play as part of a broader attempt to address the deprivation experienced by these communities – a situation that remains a significant challenge for policymakers. As we observed in a visit in the summer of 2009 to the Lower Shankill, the recreational area where the 'Children's right to play' mural had been installed was littered with debris, including glass, presenting an environment clearly at odds with the activity advocated by the new mural, and with few people, including children, about, despite it being the school summer holiday.[10]

Taken together, these issues raise the concern that the Re-imaging Communities programme runs the risk of accusations of superficial attempts at aestheticisation – that focus attention on the appearance of an area or site (and then only some portion or features of its appearance) as a substitute for, or indeed diversion from, addressing the complex socio-political problems faced by the communities the programme targets.

Governing the Visual Environment

While the Re-imaging Communities programme is directed towards the visual environment, this programme has to be understood as part of the broader body of policy initiatives intended to ensure the continuation and development of the peace process, through tackling sectarianism and the promotion of, in the words of 'A Shared Future', 'good relations' (OFMDFM, 2005) between communities – the rubric employed to define the current stage of the peace process.

The attention and resources devoted in recent years to Re-imaging Communities and related initiatives directed towards the visual environment underline the significance accorded to this environment in achieving these objectives. As indicated above, these murals and other forms of display have to be understood as something more than simply 'representations' or 'outcomes' of the sectarian politics of Northern Ireland. Rather, they need to be understood as playing an active, performative role in contributing to the persistence of sectarian politics and divisions in Northern Ireland post-1994 (Finlayson, 1997). Indeed, it can be argued that the performativity of the visual environment has been extended by the proliferation of politico-sectarian visual displays since the 1994 ceasefires. In this period murals and other forms of display have served to assert – at the level of the everyday, public environment, and to both local communities and visitors – the continued presence of politico-sectarian attitudes and paramilitary groups, and the claims of the latter to suzereignty over the areas in which they appear (McCormick & Jarman, 2005: 50, 54). As Santino (2001) has asserted:

> It is a mistake to view an Orange parade, an IRA funeral, or a Bloody Sunday commemoration as second-order cultural phenomenon ... Because of their real potency and significance, these events and others like them are fiercely contested. Witness the 'Reroute Sectarian Parades' movement, for instance. Orange parade routes through nationalist or republican areas are so controversial that the resultant civil disturbances surrounding them, as at Drumcree in the late 1990s, threaten to permanently derail peace settlement negotiations ... They are simultaneously rites of intensification of ethnic identity, the construction and maintenance of which always involve the construction of differential identity, the creating of an 'other' against which to define itself. (Santino, 2001: 21–22)

As Santino suggests with regard to Orange marches, the performative role of these forms of display is all too evident in the way in which they often come themselves to figure as sources of sectarian violence – a process that is also evident with regard to confrontations over flags (Hill & White, 2008: 44) and the attempts to deface murals (McCormick & Jarman, 2005: 53, 65).

Why then were there not attempts to intervene in the visual environment prior to the initiatives that commenced in 2004? One explanation might be that in the period since 1994 the focus has been above all upon politico-sectarian violence – and if this meant this violence was in part displaced to the visual environment, this was, to a large extent, tolerated. Yet by 2004 – a decade after the ceasefires – the peace process can be said to have developed to the extent that it was felt that the visual environment could no longer be ignored if the promotion of 'good relations' between communities was to develop further. (Such an assessment is echoed in the report commissioned by the Arts Council Northern Ireland on the Re-imaging Communities programme, which points to communities having now arrived at a position where they could countenance such initiatives; Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 115–116.)

Beyond the attempt to counter sectarian imagery, Re-imaging Communities and its related initiatives can be understood as playing a somewhat different role – seeking to assert the authority of government agencies over the visual environment (and the extent to which this is an intended outcome of these initiatives can be debated). The significance of the visual environment with regard to questions of governance in Northern Ireland is highlighted by Davies (2001: 158), who points to the way in which murals – and in particular, he suggests, nationalist murals – served, during the Troubles, as a means of contesting the state's control of this environment. Although Davies's comments are addressed towards nationalist murals, the dynamic he points to can be more broadly applied to the way in which in Northern Ireland murals and other forms of display have served to contest and call into question the capacity of the state to control and order the visual environment. The extent of these challenges is illustrated by the way in which, as Jarman (1997: 210–211) notes, the Housing Executive's (Northern Ireland) (NIHE) formal prohibition on the painting of murals on its properties has not inhibited muralists. Jarman cites

the example from Easter 1993 of the controversy generated by a letter to the *Belfast Telegraph* complaining about a UDA mural on the Newtownards Road. The letter expressed the desire of residents to see the mural removed, yet police were unwilling to act and the Housing Executive would not send workers owing to the involvement of loyalist paramilitaries. This type of process has been taken a stage further. McCormick and Jarman (2005: 66–67) point to the case from 2000 in which the NIHE wanted to demolish a block of flats in Mount Vernon, Belfast, that contained a prominent UVF mural, with two gunmen and the slogan 'Prepared for peace, ready for war'. The local UVF allowed the flats to be demolished only after the NIHE had agreed to construct a new wall overlooking the original site to house a new version of the mural. This was despite the mural being situated on a main arterial route into the city, and hence one of the first visual impressions of Belfast that people travelling there from further north would encounter.

In the face of the history of these challenges to the authority of government agencies over the visual environment, Re-imaging Communities and its related initiatives provide a means by which these agencies have attempted to reassert their authority over this environment (and to shift control of this environment away from the paramilitary groups who had challenged their authority over it). In this respect it is revealing to note the commitment expressed in 'A Shared Future' to the use of 'the police [as the body able to physically assert the authority of government agencies] . . . acting to remove such displays [of 'sectarian aggression'] where no accommodation can be reached [with those behind these displays]' (OFMDFM, 2005: 18). (Although the extent to which the removal of such displays has taken place is unclear.) Yet, as noted above, despite these assertions the impact of these initiatives remains limited – as evinced in the number of sectarian and paramilitary murals still present in Northern Ireland.

Of key significance here is the fact that the visual environment is fundamental to a place's identity, and how it is experienced and inhabited by local communities and perceived by visitors and outside observers. With regard to the latter, a key issue here is the question of Northern Ireland's profile in the world's media, and the way in which, in the period since 1969, Northern Ireland became synonymous with images of violent conflict – the source of the notoriety of Northern Ireland's murals around the world. As such, Re-imaging Communities and related initiatives constitute an integral element in achieving the broader goal of – as the report on the programme puts it – the establishment of 'a normal, civic society' (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 17), and the creation of a visual environment that corresponds to this: creating a society that takes on the appearance (quite literally) of being at peace.

Tourist Attractions?

Government agency-led interventions have constituted the principal attempt to intervene in and alter the Northern Ireland muralscape post-1994. Yet before concluding this piece we want to point to a somewhat different attempt to resituate and reframe

Northern Ireland's murals in the period since the 1994 ceasefires – their positioning as tourist attractions, and the issues this has raised for how Northern Ireland's politico-sectarian divisions and accompanying violence are understood.

Northern Ireland's murals figured as tourist attractions prior to the commencement of the peace process (Lisle, 2006: 43). In the period since 1994 these murals have developed into a significant tourist draw, attracting considerable visitor numbers, as evinced both in the popularity of mural tours in Belfast operated by both tour companies and local residents (Lennon & Foley, 2000: 160–161; Causevic & Lynch, 2008), and the use of these murals to market Northern Ireland as a tourist destination.

The primary example of the latter role is provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) (the government agency for promoting Northern Ireland tourism). It devotes a section of its website to murals, referring to how 'These pieces of public art ... provide the visitor with an insight into the culture and traditions of Northern Ireland' (NITB, 2009). The accompanying images include a number of murals that reference Northern Ireland's politico-sectarian divisions and the accompanying violence, and yet most of the images of murals on the website avoid direct reference to politico-sectarian themes and paramilitary groups, choosing instead to focus on the broader history of Northern Ireland (including celebrating figures such as CS Lewis and George Best, Ulster's contribution to World War I, and labour history) and to emphasise the overcoming of sectarian divisions (including a bird of peace and an anti-sectarian civil rights march). In so doing the website offers a skewed depiction of the Northern Ireland muralscape that, crucially, avoids the unsettling question of whether the extensive number of murals on politico-sectarian themes should be subsumed under the rubric of 'culture and traditions' and reduced to (just) another facet of Northern Ireland, as pleasurable to experience as the attractions they are juxtaposed with on the NITB website, including its beaches, landscape, and food and drink.

The NITB is not alone in seeking to present Northern Ireland's murals in this way. The NITB's web page links to an article in *The Independent* from August 2007, listing 'Best of Britain' attractions, in which the 'Best tourist attraction' is identified as Northern Ireland's murals:

> The UK's top attraction, though, is open 24 hours a day and has yet to start charging admission: the open-air gallery in west Belfast. Wander (safely and comfortably) down the Shankhill [*sic*] Road and back along the Falls Road and try to make sense of the Troubles through the dark, passionate and sometimes shocking murals from both sides of the religious divide. When conflict passes into tourist attraction, the world is a better place. (Calder, 2007)

While the troubled history of the imagery on display is referenced here, the celebrating of these murals (for this is what the article is fundamentally doing) as tourist attractions – with the murals in the locations cited including paramilitary and sectarian imagery – is questionable. (There are a series of further issues here about what the type of 'understanding' generated by seeing these murals might actually be, and

whether this translates into anything more concrete or coherent than (yet) another version of tourist pleasure.) Indeed, it is telling that, as noted in the report on Re-imaging Communities, while acknowledging the value in economic terms of the tourism generated by murals, local communities – including, as Causevic and Lynch (2008) document, some of the most deprived in the UK – recognised that 'the focus on conflict and paramilitary imagery was likely to have a negative impact in the long run and should not be encouraged' (Independent Research Solutions, 2009: 92).

Underpinning these concerns are the broader issues generated by what has come to be called 'dark tourism' and the question of what is at stake when sites of conflict and trauma become tourist locations (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Although, as Causevic and Lynch (2008) note, visitors to the murals provide a source of much-needed income to local communities, at worst these attempts to con-figure the murals as tourist attractions can appear as a crass attempt to cash in on the Troubles and the international notoriety of Northern Ireland's violent recent past – something that is acknowledged by local communities themselves, in the awareness (just referenced) of the long-term, negative impact of sectarian and paramilitary imagery.

Conclusion: Remembering the Troubles

Both the attempt to intervene in and alter the Northern Ireland muralscape presented by Re-imaging Communities and related projects and the locating of murals as tourist attractions raise the broader question of how the Troubles will come to be remembered in the future, as, it is hoped – despite the persistence of incidents of politico-sectarian violence – wide-scale violent conflict in Northern Ireland has become a thing of the past.

Indeed, the question of how the Troubles will be remembered has been raised in the very attempts to use murals as a means of 'marketing' Northern Ireland. As Peter Burns, chief guide for Belfast City Sightseeing's bus tour of murals, noted in July 2009, interest in the recent past of the Troubles is already waning among tourists: 'In 20 years people visiting won't be as interested and we will have to move how we market Northern Ireland'.[11] In one respect this comment can be read as suggesting that the Troubles will 'do for now' as a marketing device – raising questions, of the type just highlighted, about the exploitation of Northern Ireland's violent past. At another level though this comment broaches the question of how the Troubles will come to be commemorated and remembered in the future, and the role played by the visual and built environment in such processes, as evinced in debates that have already begun to take place with regard to, for example, army bases and watchtowers, the Maze/Long Kesh prison and museum practices (O'Hagan, 2007; McDowell, 2009; Jones, 2010).

We would like to close this piece by asking how murals might play such a role. Attempts to reduce the prevalence of politico-sectarian imagery are, of course, to be welcomed. Yet, at the same time it would be wrong if this process ultimately

resulted in the erasure of references to Northern Ireland's troubled past. Given the number of murals that invoke this history, this is unlikely to happen in the immediate future. Yet, such a response is not untypical among societies attempting to deal with traumas, in the guise of the effort to try to ignore (at least to some degree) what has taken place – an accusation that can be levelled at West Germany and France in the decades after World War II, and Spain in the years following the death of General Franco.[12] Only later, in a classic reworking of the return of the repressed, do debates begin to take place about the horrors of what occurred and society's failure to confront this.

It would be wrong to contend that this is what has happened in Northern Ireland; and yet the capacity to 'slip into' such a way of thinking and the need to guard against it might, it can be argued, be traced in the Northern Irish public's lukewarm response to calls from some for a form of truth and reconciliation commission similar to that which took place in post-apartheid South Africa.[13] Similarly, the apparent modesty in terms of size and content of the Troubles gallery in the recently reopened Ulster Museum can also be read in these terms. An article in *The Guardian* (Jones, 2010) on the questions raised by the gallery's apparent eliding of the Troubles was appended by numerous online comments from Northern Irish people who in the main were satisfied with the understated nature of the exhibition (at the same time, references to the gallery are all but absent from the museum's website; Ulster Museum, 2010).

Rather than the limiting of references to the Troubles, it would be a sign of the continued willingness to face up to what has taken place to witness the appearance of murals that commemorate Northern Ireland's violent history in a way that reaches beyond politico-sectarian standpoints and expresses a sense of shared, collective unease at, and responsibility for, what has taken place. The appearance of such murals[14] – that crucially, employ and adapt a medium that has been so associated with sectarianism – would be a sign that communities on both sides of the sectarian divide acknowledge the difficulties they have come through, and are able to move on without the folly of trying to ignore or forget what has taken place.

Notes

1. What though are the 'origins' of mural painting in Northern Ireland? Latent in much of the literature on murals in Northern Ireland is an association with Belfast's tradition of shipbuilding. Like many of the early efforts, the 1908 Beersbridge Road mural was painted by a shipyard worker, a profession overwhelmingly Protestant and which had ready access to mass-produced paint. The huge rise in unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s accentuated this association (Rolston, 1987: 8; Loftus, 1990: 31–32). The ties to shipbuilding were manifest in the content of murals, with the Titanic featuring in interwar murals and a painting of a welder in loyalist north-west Belfast by the son of a shipyard worker being one of the most well known of a Belfast City Council scheme in the late 1970s, discussed later (Rolston, 1987: 8–9; Watson, 1983: 8).
2. Though the row of terrace houses that it abutted have long been knocked down, the gable wall still stands and continues to function as a display for republicans' political campaigns.

3. According to Rolston (1987: 22), loyalist depictions of its own paramilitaries did not appear on the walls of Belfast until a few years after the 1981 republican hunger strike. Loftus (1990: 32) estimated that King Billy featured in only around 12 of 75 loyalist murals in Northern Ireland in the mid-1980s.
4. This piece does not discuss the government initiatives we examine here – it all but pre-dates them.
5. The 'clean-up' involved the Mount Vernon Environmental Group removing sectarian graffiti and transforming a 'mucky' and derelict field in the centre of the estate into a community garden (Sustainable Development Commission [NI], 2010).
6. An addendum to this story is provided by the fact that during the painting of the murals initiated by Adair's supporters, a mural depicting Princess Diana was produced in response to complaints from local residents that the area had become dominated by images of gunmen (McCormick & Jarman, 2005: 64). This image was itself, though, one of those removed in 2003.
7. Independent Research Solutions produced the official report on 'Re-imaging Communities' commissioned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.
8. Belfast City Council (2010), *Re-imaging Communities Project*, available at: http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/re-image/lowershankill.asp
9. After this section was written, the authors were in Conway Mill in August 2011 and noticed the almost complete (and no doubt recent) defacement of Tom Kerr's 'The Sky' by graffiti, a stark contrast to the pristine-looking section of republican murals along Falls Road/Divis Street.
10. Griffin made a similar observation when she visited the Loughview estate in Holywood, an estate that was a recipient of 'Art of Regeneration' funding. There she saw newly planted shrubbery plagued by rubbish, including glass bottles (Griffin, 2007: 45). These observations are made not to undermine the whole ethos of the Re-imaging Communities programme, but to highlight the precarious nature of its interventions.
11. 'Forty years of peace lines', BBC, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8121341.stm, 1 July 2009. With regard to this issue it is worth pointing to Lisle's (2006: 45–46) observation that the Northern Ireland Assembly's September 2002 tourism inquiry did not focus on political tourism, and was not interested in the role of murals.
12. This is an issue that Robert Bevan (2006: 175–201) considers more broadly in relation to the architecture of post-war Europe and the more recent Balkan conflicts, focusing not only on the erasure of the past through the obliteration of buildings and monuments but also on the reconstruction of the built environment in well-meaning, though crude, attempts to restore the *status quo ante*.
13. Lundy and McGovern's study in 2006 indicated that only 27% of people in Northern Ireland thought that a truth and reconciliation commission was 'important' for the future, an additional 23% believing it 'fairly important'. However, even among those who supported the idea, there were considerable disagreements on how a future commission should be constructed, doubts about whether it would uncover the truth and a feeling that it was not a high priority (Lundy & McGovern, 2006). These results prefigured the response to the Eames-Bradley proposals for a truth and reconciliation process in January 2009, whose recommendations had not been taken up by politicians or the general public by the time of writing (July 2010) (see Rowan, 2010).
14. A certain number of murals of this type might already be said to exist – although a mural such as the bird of peace displayed on the NITB website is, primarily, optimistic and forward looking, rather than reflexive about what has taken place.

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