Representing community mobilisation on film: learning through and about movements and their struggles

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Abstract

This article offers a brief critical overview of some the challenges associated with media representations of community-based protest and social movements. It is followed by a discussion of three Irish documentary films - *The Pipe*, *Meeting Room* and *The 4th Act* - that have profiled community struggles in Dublin and Mayo. The article proposes that, taken together, the films are problem-posing texts, of potential relevance to any readers seeking to learn with and through the praxis of community development and social movements. Generative themes raised by the films include: the hegemony of particular conceptions of development and solidarity and the denigration of alternatives; the repressive character and responses of the state when faced with dissent; and the meaningfulness of and constraints on the tactics 'chosen' by oppressed and peripheralised communities.

Introduction: the challenge of representation

The documentary form seems to be having something of a moment, particularly 'true-crime' productions that tease audiences with unpredictable and unreliable narratives. Common among them are documentaries that supposedly look deep into the hearts of given communities, probing around in their fallacies and dirty secrets. While some raise valuable questions about the operation of justice systems by urging us to reassess controversial or forgotten cases or by countering accepted wisdom on conventional news stories, they can be compromised ethically, and they may further objectify people who are already marginalised within/ by dominant media cultures.

When it comes to recording and representing social movements, community politics or activism, additional concerns emerge. It is difficult to distil the nuance, range and

multiplicity of participants' voices within the constraints of the documentary form. Academic research on social movements and their framing within and by 'mainstream media' records the recurring challenges movements face when attempting to access broadcast and print media on something approximating their own terms. These include but are not limited to: power asymmetries vis à vis 'opponents' and/or the media institutions movements seek to influence; the resilience of a 'protest paradigm' (Chan and Lee, 1984) whereby media fixate on what is presumed risky or outlandish about movements, their demands and tactics; the limitations imposed on content by journalistic conventions and story selection criteria; the fracturing of the mediascape and the flightiness or distractedness of audiences; the hegemony of particular economic, political and cultural world-views and norms within media institutions; and the hollowing out of journalism, its blurring with infotainment, and the precarity of many journalists' working conditions (Halloran, et al., 1970; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; McCurdy, 2012; Diprose et al., 2017; Power et al., 2017; McCabe and Harris, 2021).

Spectacular moments of protest or celebration notwithstanding, the reality of community organising typically involves more prosaic or everyday encounters that take place in community centres, local spaces, back rooms of pubs and health centres, schools and offices. It is difficult to capture the dull grind of institutionalised power or to isolate specific, media-friendly moments when 'change happens'. The tendency for popular documentaries to confer celebrity onto stand-out characters or heroic/demonic protagonists is disorientating for groups and movements that profess democratic or distributed forms of leadership, or that reject notions of individual leadership altogether . While celebrating the depth of commitment individuals bring to collective action, media can miscast those individuals as de facto leaders and instigators of protest.

And, of course, there are the limits of mediated representation itself as it is institutionalised and commercialised within late capitalism. Indeed, this problem emerges forcefully in two of the documentaries discussed here: they highlight how news and entertainment media have stigmatised working-class communities in

Dublin as disordered and dangerous places, in turn legitimising state coercion and neglect. Unsurprisingly, many activists recognise media institutions and content, whether traditional or new, as sites of struggle that require democratisation and even dismantling, and thus create their own alternative/activist channels of communication with varying degrees of success and endurance (Gillan and Cox, 2015; McCabe and Harris, 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2014; Thomas, 2021).

Despite strong reservations about the media's potential to (mis)represent collective action, here I consider what three Irish documentaries might contribute to our understanding of the complex dynamics of community mobilisation and protest. I cannot speak to the accuracy of their portrayal of the specifics of the struggles in question, or how effectively they capture the aspirations of all community members, but I am confident that they raise important generative themes for movements and activists in Ireland and beyond. Taken together, the films are problem-posing texts that, when viewed and discussed within a critical pedagogical or activist environment, spotlight key tensions besetting praxis. These include: the hegemony of particular conceptions of development and solidarity and the denigration of alternatives; the repressive character and responses of the state when faced with dissent; and the meaningfulness of and constraints on the tactics 'chosen' by oppressed and peripheralised communities. These documentaries invite us to inhabit the subject positions of the activists, demonstrating an empathy with their struggles and acknowledging both the reflexivity of activists and the scope for divergent approaches within what look like 'single-issue' campaigns. Consequently, I value these documentaries as pedagogical tools that can be drawn upon by anyone seeking to learn with and through the praxis of community development and social movements.

Documenting struggles in Dublin and Mayo

The Pipe (2010), directed by Risteard Ó Domhnaill, focuses on the Shell to Sea campaign that was centred around Rossport in Mayo in the West of Ireland during the first decade of the 2000s. Adopting a 'fly-on-the wall' approach interspersed with interviews and observations of local activists, it tracks different tactical arcs in the

campaign to divert the planned gas pipeline off-land and onto the sea. A multi-layered mobilisation that sustained resistance over 15 years, it came into direct conflict with the Irish state, the police (Gardaí) and Shell. Although the campaign was led by locals, and local voices are the mainstay of *The Pipe*, Shell to Sea generated significant national and international support and solidarity. As Hilary Darcy and Laurence Cox (2019:17) explain,

> Solidarity came from Irish direct action campaigners, product of more than a decade of collaboration between radical ecologists and anarchist activism; from British and European activists of a similar bent; from student groups; from the unorthodox republicans of Éirigi; from some development, human rights and civil liberties organisations and individuals; from international opposition to the oil industry and Shell in particular; and from Norwegian trade unions critical of Statoil's involvement.

Meeting Room (2010), directed by Jim Davis and Brian Gray, presents a visual-oral-history of the Concerned Parents Against Drugs (CPAD) movement that emerged from Dublin's North and South inner-city areas around 1982. Adopting somewhat different forms in different parts of the city, CPAD aimed to highlight, halt and demand a coherent state response to the heroin crisis that was ravaging certain working class areas in the 1980s. Or in Catherine Doyle's (2014:1) precise formulation, activists 'set out to tackle a problem nobody else was addressing'. *Meeting Room* unsettles the dominant and enduring public perception of the movement as constituted by a rabble of vigilantes that was in thrall to the Provisional IRA. Making extensive use of archival photos and video, it presents retrospective interviews with CPAD members/supporters as well as with journalists who covered the movement at the time. There is footage from community meetings, which doubled as an alternative court system where 'drug pushers' were named and where 'cease and desist' ultimatums were issued. When 'pushing' continued, communities often mobilised to secure the eviction of individuals and families involved – a tactic that aroused outraged commentary from Irish newspaper and broadcast organs.

Meeting Room's interviewees' historical vantage point contrasts with that of the activists featured in *The Pipe*; the former looking backwards, taking stock of experiences, while the latter are – at the time of filming - still enmeshed in an ongoing campaign, hoping for victory however remote its prospects. That contrast is illuminating, inviting viewers to consider when is the right time to assess the successes of a movement and what success means. Should the mere fact of visible resistance - particularly when it is opposed by the full weight of state and corporate capital's repressive and ideological apparatuses - be recognised as a victory in its own right? Or is that setting the bar too low, accepting 'heroic failure' in the place of transformative change? Or is there a more dialectical, contingent relationship between success and failure, one that reassessment from different temporal and experiential standpoints helps to illuminate?

Director Turlough Kelly's film, *The 4th Act* (2017), critically appraises the Ballymun regeneration that unfolded between 1997 and 2013. That regeneration programme led to the wholesale rehousing of residents of Ireland's first high-rise public housing project and the demolition of its familiar tower blocks. Costing in the region of €923 million, it was the largest such outlay in Europe at the time. *The 4th Act* includes commentaries by key state and non-state personnel linked to Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, members of local organisations - many of which were forced to close by/during the regeneration programme - and some external proponents and critics of regeneration. Movingly, it also incorporates previously unseen footage of Ballymun residents, young and old, going about their business, playing, celebrating and mourning together and living their lives in place, thus evoking 'ordinary' culture in the sense that Raymond Williams (1989) used that term. That footage eloquently expresses why communities must record and document their worlds from their own perspectives. Official perceptions of cultural and moral deficit, concerns that the existing community was not sufficiently 'responsible' for its own affairs, and the conviction that Ballymun was a 'failed estate' - assumptions explicitly articulated by some interviewees associated with the regeneration company - are countered by The 4th Act's low-key but compelling insistence that this was already an active, engaged community, with really existing formal and informal networks of support. The film

asserts that, by pre-determining Ballymun primarily as a place of deficit, the regeneration agenda was inattentive to the multiple dynamics of community life, and that, ultimately, it negated and displaced those invaluable human networks.

Communities, social movements and state power

An inescapable theme across the documentaries is the character of the 'state' and its recourse to coercion when interacting with communities that challenge government mandated conceptions of development, security and order. The films suggest that, even when the state is not the initial target of community protest, it is likely to become perceived as a/the key opponent as campaigns unfold. CPAD members confronted illegal drug-dealing in their areas, while residents of Rossport contested Shell's dismissal of their concerns about health, environment and the sustainability of their livelihoods. Nonetheless, both campaigns eventually came into open conflict with judiciary and Gardaí who presented themselves as defenders of the hegemonic economic and social order. Gardaí disputed community evidence about the scale of the heroin crisis in Dublin, utilising the courts to repress the direct-action tactics employed by activists: in Mayo, police and navy were deployed to protect Shell's interests by constraining and arresting protesters who stood in its way. To the activists interviewed for the films, it seems that legal sanctions were more readily and more aggressively invoked against community members than against drug importers or corporate law breakers. Some activists appear bewildered that they became the objects of such policing, others nursed more long-standing scepticism about law enforcement priorities in the Irish state. Striking a somewhat different, but still critical and related note, *The 4th Act* considers how, in Ballymun, state agencies failed to adequately resource and maintain the public housing scheme, and how they later overrode local people's reservations about the model of regeneration being unleashed on the area. Here coercion was less obviously punitive, incorporating PR, rebranding and arts activities to win consent, while also cultivating distrust of the representativeness of critical community voices.

Together the films reveal how those who opposed or even questioned centrally determined directives on what was best for their communities were variously treated as cranks, troublemakers, 'thugs', 'vigilantes' and blockers. While it is simplistic to posit the 'state' as a monolithic entity, we witness history repeating itself in the way policy makers and officials constructed these as 'failing' communities that just needed to comply with economic and development priorities. Interviewees in *The 4th Act* describe Ballymun as a 'blank canvas to paint on', 'a place that wasn't really a place' and in both Mayo and Ballymun, the promise of economic windfalls and investment was expected to invalidate local people's concerns. The three films expose how working class and rural status were taken as evidence of communities' peripherality, lack of insight or ambition: portrayed on the one hand as unwilling to accept the inevitability of modernisation, on the other as clinging to dysfunctional, outdated and insular forms of solidarity. Thus, the documentaries incite foundational questions about the nature of democracy and the public's right to shape state policy; about the extent to which community-based movements are permitted to contest hegemonic conceptions and practices of 'development'; and regarding how dissent is managed, discredited and even criminalised by the agencies of the state. They also probe the rhetoric of community consultation, engagement and consent, to illustrate the state's recourse to repression when its power or that of capital is tested.

Reflecting on Tactics

Tactics are the means through which communities and movements, convey their strength and capacity, their depth of feeling, the urgency of their demands and the range of options at their disposal. Tactics, therefore, are a vital form of communication, both within campaigns and with wider publics, and they 'are so integral to popular views of social movements that sometimes a movement is remembered more for its tactics than for its goals' (Taylor and Van Dyke, 2007: 263). This was true for the CPAD and Rossport campaigns, as broadcast and press coverage sensationalised their most conflictual and controversial tactics in reports that were often short on context or rights to reply. In a deliberate contrast, *The Pipe* and *Meeting Room*, convey how specific tactics emerge out of the contingencies of struggle, why

they are adopted and how they are meaningful. Face-offs with security guards and police, collectivised 'trespass', removal of property, blockading, occupations; they are all reframed as situated, evolving and structurally dependent forms of knowledge in action.

Whatever our justifiable concerns about the operations of an alternative court system or the use of threats and evictions by CPAD, *Meeting Room* reminds us that activists were effectively abandoned by the state when they highlighted an existential threat to their communities and families. Thus, they sought to use their limited resources as effectively as they could. In that sense tactics were rational within their own context, generating immediate results, but they also de-legitimised CPAD in the eyes of policy makers, external publics and, tragically, vulnerable members of their own communities (see Donohue, 2013). Those damaging consequences are acknowledged by activists who feature in *Meeting Room* and, in their self-aware accounts, they re-evaluate the choices, constraints, and the interplay between the two, that determined their campaign tactics. In doing so, they generate important questions for viewers. How can we ensure that tactics do not become self-defeating? According to what criteria do we gauge the ethics of any given tactic? Where is the line between becoming a powerful community and an oppressive community?

The Pipe illustrates the necessary mobility or flexibility of tactics, how they must respond to campaign developments or setbacks, how they can and must proceed on multiple fronts, taking account of (state and corporate) power's different spaces and faces. There were operations on land and sea, in the courts, at Government and EU buildings and resistance was variously embodied, intellectualised, legally codified and popularised. Tactics were creative and inspiring, but also wearying and emotionally draining, often requiring huge personal sacrifices. For new or emergent campaigns, there is much food for thought in the images of stressed and harried farmers, fishermen and other rural people, particularly for thinking about how communities and movements can resource, protect and regenerate their membership as struggle plays out or drags on.

The tactics adopted by community groups in Ballymun do not have the same dramatic or spectacular quality as those depicted in the other films. We see community groups attending consultation meetings, launch events or exhibitions, attempting to have their say or to add their concerns to agendas. There are efforts to validate their own forms of knowledge through, for example, an oral history project, or by role-playing their experiences of negotiating with regeneration personnel. Ostensibly, it looks like consensus politics, with community groups participating in the 'invited spaces' that officials have afforded them, contrasting with the 'popular spaces' (Cornwall, 2004) being claimed by communities in *The Pipe* or *Meeting Room*. But *The 4th Act* suggests that this 'consensus politics' is actually resistance of a different sort: resistance that continues to assert itself within those 'invited spaces'; resistance that attempts to push through the hidden and unspoken rules of engagement; resistance that demands that there be no decisions about communities without them. Here too, activists are frustrated by complex processes that are insufficiently accountable; by the demands participation places on them; and by the ways their tactics and modes of engagement are discredited.

Conclusion

Movements and communities must find independent and alternative ways of recording their/our own ordinary cultures, tactics of struggle and their meanings. Although relating distinct histories and focused on distinct contexts, these three films show us why and how community resistance is powerful and necessary, whether it be conducted on the streets or in the council chamber. But they are not romantic stories of Davids ultimately defeating Goliaths. Instead, they remind us that struggle is a struggle, that we need to take tactics seriously, and that when we challenge institutionalised power, we should expect repression or reprisal. *Meeting Room*, *The Pipe* and *The 4th Act* force us to confront the poverty of mainstream representations of protest and community mobilisation, but they also encourage us to imagine how representation could be done differently and done better.

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