"Ordered Dreams": Ideology and Utopia in the 'Troubles' Thriller

Aaron Kelly
Queen's University, Belfast

Abstract
This article examines the 'Troubles' thriller, which has become the dominant fictional mode of representing the North of Ireland. It interrogates the complicity between the enduring confrontations, conspiracies and mysteries of the thriller form and hegemonic views of Northern Irish society as itself suspended in a recurrent, reiterative and befuddling stasis. I utilize Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious to undercut the reading of History as a reified, passive object to be reflected or represented. History is instead an experience of sheer exigency which lacerates literary production. Such a model permits us to examine the problematics of textualizing History without viewing Irish history as problematical in itself. My methodology here intends to uncover the multifarious historical dynamics which both prompt and rupture the 'Troubles' thriller. I also wish to affirm that, in tracing the historical problematics of the 'Troubles' thriller, popular fiction cannot be dismissed as mere false consciousness, but rather contains a complex and continual dialectic between ideology and utopia through which the material conditions of the text's production are inscribed with both hope and anxiety.

Over the last thirty years various publishing houses—from the local to the international, the 'literary' to the 'popular'—have flooded the marketplace with several hundred thrillers responding to the current phase of political upheaval in Northern Ireland. In doing so, they have ensured the enthronement of the genre as the dominant mode of fictional representation of the North, putatively giving appropriate form to national and historical experience. This paper sets out to interrogate the complicity between the enduring configurations of the thriller's conventional mechanisms—its displaced and reiterative terrain wherein the conflict between good and evil, integrity and corruption is endlessly performed—with hegemonic socio-political and cultural views of Northern Ireland as being itself ashistorically suspended in a perpetual stagnation equilibrated by two tribalized homogeneities. For example, Brian Moore's *Lies of Silence* depicts Belfast as comprising "graffiti-fouled slums where the city's Protestant and Catholic poor confronted each other, year in year out, in a stasis of hatred, fear and mistrust" (1992, 21).

It is my contention that, in contrast to the discourse of 'The Two Communities', Northern Ireland is not neatly divided into self-contained and

monolithic binaries: it is an integrated constellation of forces and relationalities simultaneously fractured and affiliated by the global dynamics of capitalism, class, gender, sexuality, the city, regionality and so on. I am seeking, therefore, to undercut the representational conjuncture whereby the interminable, repetitious oppositions and conspiracies of the thriller form augment the habituation of what Joep Leerssen has termed "the traumatic paradigm" (1998, 37) of Irish history in which a nightmarish model reverberates ceaselessly and immemorially in irresoluble crisis. My means of destabilizing the interpretation of the dehistoricized stasis of the thriller's formally unresolved conflict as a direct reflection of the anachronistic aberration of Irish politics is Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious. Jameson's model of History as an "absent cause" does not deny the referent of History but rather recognizes that "it is inaccessible to us except in textual form … our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious" (1996, 35). It insists upon an ideology of form, upon the uncovering of determinate structures of formal antinomy, through its grasp of History not as some reified or passive object of reflection but as the experience of sheer necessity which lacerates literary production. Such a model enables us to examine the problematics of textualizing History without viewing Irish history as problematical in itself. In short, it ensures that an analysis of Northern Ireland may proceed in terms not of peculiarity and anomaly, but rather of specificity and intensity.

This Jamesonian sense of the text as "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (1996, 79) permits us to suggest that the closed, ahistorical continuum of the thriller's representation of the North—as with Moore's detailing "that endless mindless chain of killings" (1992, 64)—is an attempt to offer more profound resolutions at deeper formal and interpretative levels to a host of historical problematics and anxieties. In tracing the ideological multiplicity textualized in the political unconscious of the 'Troubles' thriller, I also hope to demonstrate that popular fiction cannot be dismissed as mere false consciousness or mass distraction, but rather that it contains a complex and continual dialectic between ideology and utopia, between what I shall term the *repressive* and *redemptive* modalities of its imaginary, through which the text inscribes the material conditions of its production with both hope and anxiety. Thus, the dialectic of the *repressive* and *redemptive* modalities of the popular text attempt to produce what are, in effect, "ordered dreams" (McDonald 1996, 81), the articulation of collective desires and fantasies through strategic codes of symbolic containment. This paper aims to effect the rupture of this political and aesthetic negotiation by affirming that the historical raw materials which the 'Troubles' thriller simultaneously strives to utilize, transform and repress, encode themselves in determinate structures of formal absence and aporia.

That even the most reactionary of 'Troubles' thrillers must maintain such a dialectic between ideology and utopia is succinctly exemplified by the recurrent 'terrorizing the terrorists' strategy employed particularly by many of the more right-wing British and American thrillers. Undoubtedly, the *repressive* modality not only produces simplified militaristic solutions to the conflict but also vents an often rampant racism which demands the structural elimination of Irish characters. For example, John de St. Jorre and Brian Shakespeare's *The Patriot Game* informs us of the North, "it's the jungle—a green Irish jungle. You've got to descend to their level and treat them in the only way they'll ever understand" (1973, 83). Nevertheless, the terrorist is also the site of a utopian formulation, for the whole premise of 'terrorizing the terrorists' divulges an effort to adopt the values and wish-fulfillments encoded in the ideological figure of the terrorist—an ideologeme invoking allegories of community, of assured masculinity, of national commitment and cohesion. It is precisely this yearning, utopian engagement with the figure of the terrorist which necessitates its formal eradication within the *repressive* modality of the text—it must remain a displaced and erased allegorical unit to be performed and annexed by the dominant British and American subjects of these texts, who seek to restore to themselves the collective value systems ascribed to the other and reworked in the political unconscious.

By way of illustration, then, Tom Clancy considers his *Patriot Games* to be a verification of his belief that "the family is the basic building block of society, period. From my perspective, family is the beginning and end of everything that we're supposed to be working for" (Greenberg 1992, 65). Moreover, in his review of this text wherein the CIA hero, Jack Ryan, saves both his own family and that of the British Royalty from an Irish Republican attack, Marc A. Cerasini postulates, "Clancy utilizes the royal family, and the family of Jack Ryan, for a thematic purpose. The importance—or rather, the necessity—of the family unit to the continued health of human society is the central theme of this novel" (1992, 27). Contrastingly, Cerasini persists, the terrorists are "universal misfits, men without hope—they have no lovers, no families, and, by extension, no future. They possess neither comprehensible human emotions nor the societal bonds that make men truly civilized" (1992, 28). However, this interpretation strategically elides the fact that the plot is actually driven by Ryan's killing of the brother of Sean Miller, the leading Irish terrorist, which then impels Miller on a quest for familial revenge. What this interpretation, therefore, and the surface level of the text itself, seek to eradicate is the utopian investment which an American capitalist society that has increasingly lost sight of itself makes in the "filiative" (Said 1984, 20) commitment and value system of an Irish terrorist. So the text's political unconscious, then, confronts us with a supposed defence of the family which is premised on the destruction of the family—a formal antinomy which exposes the contradictions of Clancy's purportedly organic verfication of the American state. Under such a utopian

formulation, the ideological figure of the terrorist serves as the repository of codes of honour and filiative belonging which the text must rehearse and laud but then anxiously have eliminated even as it presents them for recuperation by the emissaries of the state as residual traces of social formations which capitalism has sought contradictorily to harness and destroy.

Having uncovered the *redemptive* underpinnings of some of the more apparently reactionary 'Troubles' thrillers, I now want to turn my attention to two more self-consciously utopian texts, Keith Baker's *Inheritance* and Ian McDonald's *Sacrifice of Fools*. *Inheritance* is set in 2016, twenty years after the end of the 'Troubles', which have seemingly been consigned to the Ulster Folk Museum that now contains reified artifacts such as Free Derry corner and Carson's statue. We are also informed that Irish Republican prisoners were sent to the United States with green cards because "when you were trying to rebuild a country you did not need platoons of bomb-makers and snipers sitting around with nothing to do" (Baker 1996, 50). That is, one set of the text's formulations the 'Troubles' become reducible to an isolated, extractable blight on an otherwise ordered Northern Irish, society in keeping with the single, resolvable crime expounded by the idealized Golden Age of detective fiction. Think, for instance, of the fiction of Agatha Christie wherein the organic community ultimately reveals and expurgates the criminal. This closure, of course, is an ideology in itself, an imaginary ordering of irresolvable social contradictions. It seeks to disguise the fact that, even in the Golden Age of detective fiction, profound social anxieties are opened up by the crime, which place the whole society under interrogation during the text, and which the closure of the single, resolvable crime is designed to erase. The single closure of crime fiction such as Christie's loses its ideological transparency and historical viability in the era of the thriller. Returning to Baker's text, what emerges in the political unconscious is the structural incongruity and untenability of this account of the 'Troubles' as a sequestered, extricable disorder. For, as Jameson affirms, the cultural hegemony of the thriller denotes the complexity and dislocation of the late capitalist state wherein the ideology of the single, resolvable crime is radically subsumed by "the sense that it is society as a whole that is the mystery to be solved" (1992, 39). Given that we are dealing with crime fiction, it is perhaps useful to employ a stronger terminology, to imply that society is not just mysterious but criminal. Under such conditions, Jameson contends that attempts to map and redefine are pervaded by a "conspiratorial ideologeme" (1992, 22), as traditional social co-ordinates diffuse into increasingly untraceable institutional imbrications. The utopian appeal of the conspiratorial text, the gratification of its thrills, lies in its producing a mechanics of pleasure from the uncovering of the seemingly interminable reaches of the modern state, the unleashing of a desire to chart and interpret our societies. For Jameson, the conspiratorial ideolgeme proffers an

144

imperative popular cultural formulation of his own concept of "cognitive mapping", of the production of the missing psychology of the political unconscious and its transcription of the local onto the global:

> ... the 'conspiratorial text', which, whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality. (1992, 3)

In Baker's *Inheritance*, the conspiracy becomes a mode for the mapping of Northern Irish society as the text's main protagonist, Jack McCallan, unearths a tangle of covert operations and killings which involve not only his late father, but prominent businessmen and even the Chief Constable of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland. Thus the 'Troubles' actually infect and criminalize the social totality as the conspiratorial mapping implicates and interrogates the shadowy reaches of the state. Indeed, whilst I have sought to maintain a critical regard to the thriller's relation to Northern Irish society, we can suggest that perhaps one reason, though by no means the only or most determining one, why some novelists have turned to the thriller in depicting the North, is that, given the legitimacy of the state is one of the most fundamental causes of our conflict, then the thriller, as a form whose subversive formal logic attempts to trace and confront the seemingly unfigurable and illegible complexities, and indeed criminalities, of the state, offers itself as a paradigmatic representational mode.

McDonald's science fiction thriller, *Sacrifice of Fools*, imagines a Northern Ireland in 2001 which becomes home for 100,000 Shian aliens, eight million of whom have arrived on earth from outer space. The purpose, we are told, of sending some of these aliens to Northern Ireland is an effort in social engineering designed to circumvent its historic pattern of social bipolarization. It is an indictment of the 'Troubles' thriller's disavowal of human agency in the North that even this most utopian of texts can only contemplate the imposition of a third, tribalized homogeneity into the North as a means of social transformation. In Raymond Williams's conceptualization of utopian visions, this is certainly not the radical "willed transformation" (1980, 196) whereby a new society is brought about through human effort and struggle, but is rather an example of "the externally altered world" (1980, 196), suggesting that Northern Ireland can only be reformed through unsought impositions or natural events. Nonetheless, in however degraded a form, the deployment of an alternative consciousness through which to circumvent both Irish Nationalism and Unionism does actuate a utopian class allegory. Again, as a series of brutal murders begin to occur, the conspiratorial mapping becomes the repository of a class awareness which

145

confronts the social totality as a number of leading religious and political figures are implicated in sordid underworld activity. However, the text then withdraws from its utopian confrontation of the totality of social forces and relationships when it transpires that the killings were actually the deranged acts of an adolescent female alien during the Shian mating season. Here, then, the text recoils from its subversive interrogation of the legitimacy of the very social order itself into the dwelling upon the single crime, the recondite riddle, of female sexuality.

A similar textual dynamic occurs in *Inheritance* as McCallan becomes implicated in a cover-up which seeks to limit the potential damage of his discoveries by blaming the daughter of one of the conspiracy's victims for all the murders and social disturbance. The cover-up is justified to McCallan in the following terms: "we've seen how thin the fabric of this place is, how easily that can be damaged. It is a delicate equilibrium and we cannot allow Northern Ireland and its future prosperity to be affected any further" (Baker 1996, 335). Thus, even in the very process of the utopian desire to map the vast apparatuses of the late capitalist state, the *repressive* modality of the 'Troubles' thriller recodifies this desire, dissipates it into an aesthetic, a thrill, of political pessimism, as characters are pinioned in networks of reiterative, supersaturated corruption and conspiracy. The use of gender here is significant in determining the dialectical negotiations of ideology and utopia, as the *repressive* modality provides a structure of symbolic containment which attempts to foreclose the utopian contemplation of the social totality and the ultimate horizon of History itself through the recourse to an immemorialized masculinity confronting the crime of femininity. In short, the sublime, desirous thrill, at once fearful and redemptive, of approaching the unfigurable force of the collectivity in all its complexity, becomes, for the text's projected or optimal reading selves and audience, ahistorically reducible to, or underwritten by, the equally fearful and desirous, yet compensatory, masculine decipherment of an eternally mysterious female sexuality. In view of this representational delimitation, it is the task of our own detective work in the political unconscious to restructure the pleasure of the thriller in overdetermining the *redemptive* or utopian modality, which offers us, in however evanescent or pessimistic a manner, a cartography of the social totality, in order to force the text's contradictory imperatives into productive formal rupture. For, despite the often reactionary and fantastic conspiracies imagined by the *repressive* imaginary, its Soviet-sponsored plots, conniving homosexual aristocrats, insidious Arab extremists, deranged female characters, or even, as we have seen, alien invaders, the seemingly ungraspable and penumbral conspiracy which, above and beyond all else, ultimately foreshadows and obsessively stalks these texts is none other than the vast inscrutable logic of the global conspiracy of capitalism itself, which provides the inexorable terminus within the political unconscious.

146

WORKS CITED

Baker, Keith. 1996. *Inheritance*. London: Headline.

Cerasini, Marc A. 1992. "Tom Clancy's Fiction". *The Tom Clancy Companion*. Ed. Martin Greenberg. London: Fontana. 5–55.

Clancy, Tom. 1988. *Patriot Games*. London: Harper Collins.

de St. Jorre, John and Brian Shakespeare. 1973. *The Patriot Game*. London: Coronet.

Greenberg, Martin. 1992. "An Interview with Tom Clancy". *The Tom Clancy Companion*. Ed. Martin Greenberg. London: Fontana. 57–86.

Jameson, Fredric. 1992. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. London: BFI Publishing.

——. 1996 (1983). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledge.

Leerssen, Joep. 1998. "1798: The Recurrence of Violence and Two Conceptualizations of History". *The Irish Review* 22: 37–45.

McDonald, Ian. 1996. *Sacrifice of Fools*. London: Victor Gollancz.

Moore, Brian. 1992 (1990). *Lies of Silence*. London: Vintage.

Said, Edward W. 1984. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. London: Faber.

Williams, Raymond. 1980. *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso.