

Constructing Hegemony: Political murals in Northern Ireland



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Introduction

This research project investigates political murals in Belfast, the memorialization of the Northern Ireland conflict in public space and the paramilitary appropriation of public space in Belfast. I seek to understand the meanings by which paramilitary groups maintain hegemony and keep alive a specific narrative and purpose in relation to the sectarian conflict. More specifically I will focus on how political murals can be seen and understood as semiotic tools to consolidate hegemonic views and how that affects public space.

From the territory of political architecture, I seek to create awareness of specific spatial components of hegemony such as murals, and to give an account of how they are related to an overarching assemblage of hegemonic elements that condition power relations.

The site of this project is East Belfast, a traditionally Protestant district that has been a stronghold for hegemonic practices of the Ulster Volunteer Force UVF, one of the most violent paramilitary groups still in operation and historically one of the main actors involved in The Troubles, the darkest and bloodiest periods of time that are consequence of the Northern Irish conflict.¹



King William III mural
This mural commemorates the victory of King William III, also known as William of Orange (Oranje), in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.
Image on first page: Collage of political murals in Belfast. 2022

Political murals are one of the most perceptible expressions of the Northern Irish sectarian conflict, mostly due to the violence that they project into the public space. In fact, many people visiting Belfast, or locals living outside of the working-class areas in which the murals are painted think these murals are unsympathetic, offensive, gross, and they are seen, on a par with graffiti, as acts of vandalism.² It might be the case, that the act of painting a mural that depicts

¹ Edwards, Aaron. *UVF: Behind the Mask*. Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017.

² Personal communications with local people in East Belfast, informal interviews by author during fieldtrip, October 18, 2022

two masked men holding rifles is an act of vandalism since it is a negative impact on the urban public space, it is in fact an intrusion of violence into the collective perception of streets and squares.

But what I have discovered during my fieldtrip in Belfast is that murals are more than simple acts of vandalism, they are articulators of narratives, tokens of territorialization and pieces of a bigger assemblage of cultural meanings by which powerful organizations maintain their influence over neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland.³

It is worth questioning the impact of such violent expressions on the public space as it leads to better understanding of the situation, and to the development of re-neighbouring strategies addressing conflicting neighbourhoods. Sectarianism and segregation are conditions that affect millions of people around the world. In the contemporary European context, this kind of investigation at this historical moment is relevant since the latest developments of the Brexit-era.⁴ Today, there is a possibility of a new hard border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which could spark an uprising of paramilitary violence.

This investigation tries also to understand and identify the temporal nature of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, its extremely negative impact on economic, social and cultural life overtime, and also opportunities for its replacement by a process of reconciliation throughout society.⁵ During the research process, it has come clear that spatial expressions like murals are not static, rather a multiplicity of events that enforce narratives into the residents of segregated neighbourhoods, who many times are compliances with this activities.

Mural painting became in effect a quasi-state activity, involving all the classes of unionism. At the unveiling of the mural some dignitary – a politician, judge, retired army officer or businessman – would speak briefly. The artisan painters of the mural – often coach painters or house painters – would be in proud attendance. The working-class residents of the street would welcome enthusiastically their mural. And the cameras of the unionist press would preserve the moment for posterity.⁶

3 In relation to this investigation, a fieldtrip to Northern Ireland took place between October the 2nd and the 23rd.

4 The Irish News. 'Clear Majority in North Favour Rejoining the EU, Poll Shows', 12 December 2022.

5 Morrow, Duncan. 'Sectarianism-A Review'. Ulster University, 2019.

6 Rolston, Bill. *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland. Belfast: Beyond the Pale*, 2010. P. ii

Political murals is a topic that has been explored thoroughly from the perspective of art history and sociology. Professor Bill Rolston has been one of the main contributors to an extensive archiving and research made on the topic,⁷ he has also developed a comprehensive mapping and categorization of more than 5,000 murals in Northern Ireland.⁸ Rolston makes the point that the painting of murals was a way for both loyalist and republican groups to counter their lack of access to mainstream communication channels. In a way, mural painting during this period (and beyond) was a continuation of war by other means. My investigation benefits from his extensive database developed in the past 40 years,⁹ and it will propose a new way of mapping murals.

This investigation could also dialogue with Elisabetta Viggiani's investigation on the spatial and temporal occurrence of forms of memorialization of the troubles in Belfast. In her book "Talking Stones: The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland" she illustrates how memorials are more than solid artifacts that speak to the collective memory; memorials in Belfast actively contribute to a process of creation of a narrative through symbols and language.¹⁰ Thus, my investigation will test similar claims relative to political murals and their relation to the hegemonic memory of the conflict.

Hegemony should be understood in this thesis from its Gramscian context.¹¹ Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony and "power of attraction" will inform the way that some paramilitary groups gain power and consolidation in this specific territory. More specifically, I will claim that political murals are tools for consent and violent tokens of coercion projecting the threat of violence into the public space.

The starting point of this research project is Belfast, with a three-week field trip that focused on collecting impressions around the topic and developing an archive of material which was further analysed in Copenhagen. The material gathered during the fieldtrip includes maps, informal interviews to neighbours, drawings, publications and photographs of files and documents found at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

7 Bill Rolston was the Director of the Transitional Justice Institute from 2010-2014 when he was appointed Emeritus Professor. He was also Professor of Sociology in the School of Sociology and Applied Social Sciences at Ulster University from 1977 - 2014. His research interests have been in the areas of popular political culture, in particular, wall murals; community and voluntary politics in Northern Ireland; the mass media.

8 'Politics, Painting and Popular Culture: The Political Wall Murals of Northern Ireland', *Media, Culture and Society* 9(1), 1987: 5-28

9 Rolston, Bill. 'Map - Extramural Activity'. Accessed 18 November 2022. <https://extramuralactivity.com/map/>.

10 Viggiani, Elisabetta. *Talking Stones: The Politics of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland*. New York: Berghahn, 2016.

11 Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Vol. 1. Paperback ed. European Perspectives. New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011.

Back in Copenhagen, further research and analysis gave particular attention to the way that paramilitary murals speak to a strategy of territorialization of the hegemonic paramilitary narratives and materialise specific messages of attraction and rejection of certain communities, as a part of the Northern Ireland conflict. The research also analyses the politics of negotiation and power relations among multiple groups and organizations involved in the production of murals.

Understanding paramilitary groups in East Belfast

East Belfast during the Troubles

Northern Ireland has long been a region with deeply rooted social divisions. These divisions are result of religious wars that are centuries old. The Catholic and Protestant traditions have repeatedly clashed since the seventeenth century, when protestant immigrants came into Northern Ireland from Britain during a process of colonization starting in the sixteenth century, involving the English Crown confiscating lands owned by Irish Catholics and redistributing them to Protestant settlers from Great Britain.¹²

After this process of colonialization, Protestant immigrants slowly overpowered the Irish Catholic inhabitants. The difference between these religious roots caused socio-political conflicts in which multiple confrontations of large scale are based. The war of independence from 1916 to 1921 is mainly a consequence of this difference and resulted in the formation of the Republic of Ireland, which is since then conformed by the provinces of Connacht (Connaught), Leinster and Munster, and Northern Ireland, conformed by the province of Ulster, remaining part of the United Kingdom.

Ideological division was in the background of the politics that led to the war of independence and has still been shaping politics after 1921. Since its formation, two main political ideologies have been present in Northern Ireland. The Nationalist ideology seeks to reunite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland and its proactive wing is called Irish Republicanism. Historically, the Irish Republican Army IRA was the main paramilitary group responsible for more than 1700 deaths during the twentieth century.¹³ These strong ties to the Irish identity come primarily from its Catholic background.

12 Goalwin, Gregory. 'The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland 's Political Murals, 1979-1998'. *International Journal Of Politics, Culture & Society*, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, 26, no. 3 (September 2003): 190.

13 English, Richard. *Armed Struggle: A History of the IRA*. London: Macmillan, 2003. P. 31

On the opposite spectrum, the “Unionist” ideology stands for those who believe in the maintenance of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. This identity is often taken into an active engagement with the conflict and “Loyalist” groups claim a strong “Ulster” identity. Loyalists view reunification as not only a loss of British identity, but a possible subservience of Protestants to Catholic dominance as well.¹⁴

Republican mural depicting motives from the independence war. Falls Road, Belfast. 2022



This possibility of violence has reinforced community divisions along sectarian lines and political experience, as well as access to power and resources, the descent into open and violent conflict after 1968 resulted in even deeper divisions. Between 1971 and 1973, minorities fled from the mixed, and working-class districts of Belfast and armed groups rooted in separated communities and territories dominated the political landscape. Northern Ireland as a whole, became the land of The Troubles: a religious war between ‘Protestants’ and ‘Catholics’ and civil violence.

After a peace process was begun in the 1990s and the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the Troubles were officially considered to be over. Paramilitary groups agreed to a process of disarmament in exchange of the early release of paramilitary prisoners. Today, most people would think that Northern Ireland is at peace. Violence has dropped; according to the Police Service of Northern Ireland Statistics Branch, homicides have been only decreasing from more than 200 yearly between 1972 and 1976 to less than 50 yearly in the past 20 years.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the conflict unofficially remains alive in Northern Ireland, and many of the loyalist Protestant community claim that there is little care for their cause and what they stand

14 Kerr, Robert. *Republican Belfast: A Political Tourist's Guide*. Belfast? MSF Press, 2008.

15 PSNI Statistics Branch. ‘Trends in Police Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland 1998/99 to 2020/21’, 2022.

for.¹⁶ Today, loyalist and republican terrorist groups are still in existence. They have also portrayed the narrative of being prepared for any violence that could arise because of political decisions.

This possibility of violence is one of the main characteristics of paramilitary murals in Belfast, most of the messages are messages of threat, and the willingness to combat any opposing narrative. In a sense, political murals are preservations of this conflict that in many ways has died, and in other ways is very alive.



Paramilitary mural.
Belfast. 2022

But how alive is the conflict today? And to what degree murals play a roll in its preservation? According to what one can see and sense on the gables of the Shankill or East Belfast, the troubles are very alive, there is a permanent state of alert and preparedness for confrontation; in the other hand, according to local opinions, the conflict is far gone and buried in the past. This contradiction between public representation and opinions are the lead to a way of understanding conflict and the representation of the collective memory in public space.

It might be that opposing opinions come also from opposing demographics. Informal interviews made during my fieldtrip were mostly with young, educated people that admitted never ever being to segregated zones of Belfast, mostly because they are perceived as unattractive.¹⁷ When talking to older generations, a more evident awareness of the conflict is noted and, in most conversations, personal stories give evidence of still hurtful events from the past.

16 Feeney, Oisín. 'Hoy Did the Troubles Begin and Who Was Involved?' The Troubles Podcast, n.d. Accessed 6 September 2022.

17 Personal communications with local people in East Belfast, informal interviews by author during fieldtrip, October 18, 2022

Ulster Volunteer Force

The Ulster Volunteer Force, or UVF, are a loyalist paramilitary group responsible for over five hundred deaths throughout the troubles, two-thirds of them being Catholic civilians. UVF were behind some of the most notorious killings of the troubles.¹⁸ Its violence, like the one perpetrated by its Catholic counterpart IRA and its nearest rivals in the loyalist Ulster Defence Association UDA, has left behind a bloody scenario in a relatively small region of 600,000 people in Belfast and 1.8 million of inhabitants in Northern Ireland.



UVF Mural.
Shankill Road, Belfast. 2022

The group came to existence in 1966 in Northern Ireland, taking its name from the Ulster Volunteers, which formed in 1912 to fight against home rule on the rising moment of Irish republicanism, which was growing in the Republic and would culminate with the Easter Rising of 1916.

18 Feeney, Oisín. 'How Did the Troubles Begin and Who Was Involved?' The Troubles Podcast, n.d. Accessed 6 September 2022.

They did this by issuing a threat to any members of the IRA that they came upon. In addition to this, the UVF that began in 1966 claimed that its sole purpose was to protect the Protestant community and maintain Ulster's place within the United Kingdom.¹⁹ On May the 21st 1965, they gave this statement so that nobody was under any illusion what the organisation was about:

“From this day, we declare war against the Irish Republican Army and its splinter groups. Known IRA men will be executed mercilessly and without hesitation. Less extreme measures will be taken against anyone sheltering or helping them, but if they persist in giving them aid, then more extreme methods will be adopted... we solemnly warn the authorities to make no more speeches of appeasement. We are heavily armed Protestants dedicated to this cause.”²⁰

Although they claimed initially that they only planned to kill Republican combatants, unfortunately, it was not always the case; in fact, many civilians would die at the hands of the UVF, just like many civilians died at the hands of Republican paramilitaries.

During the Troubles, The UVF conducted their military operations via assassinations, home invasion, executions, kidnappings and in particular, no warning bombings. Their weaponry in the early days has been described by some members as lamentable because they struggled to get the advanced weaponry that some of the IRA had. It should be said that the UVF stood out for their bombing strategy. In the summer of 1973, the UVF detonated more bombs than the UDA and the IRA combined.²¹ As the troubles progressed, the UVF used less explosives because they had a shortage of operators who had this experience. It cannot be underestimated that this was a powerful and highly motivated organisation that was able to spread an amount of terror across Northern Ireland equal to their counterparts the IRA.

The more modern UVF, however, is an amalgamation of working-class Protestants. The main areas of operation for the UVF are the Shankill, Antrim, Portadown and East Belfast.²² UVF also has a satellite paramilitary called the Red Hand Commandos, which is considered a lethal arm of the UVF.

19 Cusack, Jim. *UVF: The Endgame*. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 2008.

20 ‘May 21, 1966 | Irish America’, 21 May 1966. <https://www.irishamerica.com/1966/05/may-21-1966/>, <https://www.irishamerica.com/1966/05/may-21-1966/>.

21 Feeney, Oisin. ‘Hoy Did the Troubles Begin and Who Was Involved?’ The Troubles Podcast, n.d. Accessed 6 September 2022.

22 Edwards, Aaron. *UVF: Behind the Mask*. Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Merrion Press, 2017.

Analytics of Hegemony

Consent and Coercion

The dominance of the UVF over East Belfast is a complex power dynamic where multiple actors are elements of a hegemonic relation. Studying hegemony can be a tool to understand multiple aspects of leadership and political dominance/action from one social group to another, in my investigation this is relevant because it is precisely through the construction of hegemony that spatial elements are relevant. Hegemony, with architecture and art as one of its many tools, constructs dominance by creating its own meaning and reality out of the world. The way of creating this reality is relevant because there is a political implication in the way that this construction comes from the top to the bottom.

According to Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, Hegemony requires two dimensions of understanding it in order to function, these dimensions are consent and coercion.²³ Since this theory is based on Marxism, it relates to the class struggle and hegemonic shifts. A way of describing hegemony is by claiming that the ruling class uses hegemonic ideas to gain domination over the subjugated classes, this hegemony of ideas is accomplished not only through using coercive actions like force, but most importantly, also from getting consent from the masses of people.

Today, the hegemonic loyalist power claims to be the sole and true defender of British Ulster, in contrast to the unionist DUP agreeing to a power sharing government with republicans since 1998; it also differs from other loyalist mainstream narratives like the UDA because it seeks moral justification for its militarism.

The narrative portrayed in their messages is about patriotic courage and resistance that justifies loyalist coercive actions during the troubles. The historical aspect of its narrative references to a “golden age” when the UVF and the battle of Somme are used to project a narrative of historical legitimacy and ideological legitimation, both in relation to mainstream unionism and republicanism.

23 Hoare, George, and Nathan Sperber. ‘Hegemony’. In *An Introduction to Antonio Gramsci: His Life, Thought and Legacy*. London ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

In practice, these paramilitary groups have shifted their activities from bombings and killings into more invisible practices of controlling territories. The contemporary UVF has transitioned into a criminal organization responsible for the drug market of vast areas of Northern Ireland. They are also involved in multiple cases of money laundering, racketeering, extortion and smuggling.²⁴ These coercive elements of hegemony are non-architectural, yet they relate to territory and work in conjunction with previously described tools.²⁵

Since the end of the troubles, the State has been occupied with policies towards the reduction of criminal activities, the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme claims to support people and communities in Northern Ireland that are vulnerable to paramilitary influence. It focuses on dealing with harm in the “here and now” as well as setting early interventions to ensure that future generations are not exploited or traumatised through paramilitary coercion, control, and violence.²⁶

*One of the most dramatic and most promising changes in Northern Ireland since 1998 has been the stark reduction in violence connected to politics. Furthermore, there has been no significant rise in other crime, as is sometimes associated with areas emerging from conflict. Whereas in 1998 there were seventy-one murders in Northern Ireland, that number has fallen to less than 20 in every year since 2009/10.*²⁷

Murals as tools for consent and coercion

Consent has then greater relevance in the Gramscian approach to hegemony. This is because it is precisely the validation of the entire system by the dominated classes. The fact that it works in the intellectual level of individuals and collective understanding of societies makes consent a more permanent tool, compared with coercion.

Through consent, the hegemonic actors achieve domination by manipulating language, culture, morality, and common sense. Common sense is understood as the way that individuals look to their

24 Gallaher, Carolyn. *After the Peace: Loyalist Paramilitaries in Post-Accord Northern Ireland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. P. 205.

25 Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*. Vol. 1. Paperback ed. European Perspectives. New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011.

26 Northern Ireland Executive. ‘Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime’, 11 October 2017. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/executive-programme-tackling-paramilitary-activity-and-organised-crime-0>.

27 Morrow, Duncan. ‘Sectarianism-A Review’. Ulster University, 2019.

common sense to guide them in their immediate private concerns. As a result, individual common-sensical approaches will guide that individual through their local existence preventing him/her to notice overarching structures of exploitation. So, individuals would not concern themselves with economical and social aspects of oppression and would not engage in social and political activity. In other words, common sense is the understanding that local concerns are more important than overarching structures of power.²⁸



UVF Mural.
Newtownards Road, Belfast.
2022

In the context of East Belfast, UVF uses coercion by forceful physical actions, and they use consent from the masses through using common sense. They also achieve domination by using a manipulated narrative and morality. The murals are only one tool to convey that narrative. They appropriate public space and implant the narrative in the public conversation. These tokens also reinforce ideologies and send a message of protection to those who think alike.

In this Gramscian context, political murals are particularly relevant since they combine in them an overly complex act. They are a combination of physical violence to public space, and they are tools for preserving a moral narrative. Most importantly, they function as a threat of imminent violence, which acts as the only way of keeping hegemonic order. The complexity of this semiotic tool is to be laid out in the following chapter.

28 Ives, Peter. *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*. Reading Gramsci. London ; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004.

Expanding the notion of The Mural

Deconstructing the mural

The use of art as an expressional tool for political conflicts has long been in practice. Paintings can be used in many different varieties and mediums to express goals and ideologies. In July of 1908, Protestants began painting murals each year as a part of an annual celebration of victory in the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Since this time, Protestant communities in Belfast used the murals as declarations of their British identity. These images were also used as a means to reinforce residential segregation and create boundaries for neighbourhoods where Protestants resided. Comparably, there were places that were also defined as Catholic areas.²⁹

Both Republican and Loyalist murals differ in many aspects, but they also show similar themes throughout time. Each group seeks to impose their own version of the Northern Irish history that legitimized their cause and separate political goals. Each group's use of mural imagery reflects their own reality in the complex nature of conflict.³⁰ Even though both organizations share similar themes, there is no historically shared sense of community among the Northern Irish population.

In the context of East Belfast, the depiction of aspects of the sectarian conflict is usually done by expressing icons with ties to some aspects of the community's historical and/or cultural background, like relations to the industrial landscape and its glorious past, memorials of battles where Northern Irish contributed to a British victory and specific traumatic events like the forced displacement of communities to other parts of the United Kingdom. Thus, there is a particular visual code, loaded with cultural specificity that contributes to maintain a specific understanding of the conflict and the community's own position towards the conflict.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to describe the semiotics of these expressions in relation to its political and spatial context, as a way to describe how they can be seen as semiotic tools to consolidate hegemonic views and how that affects public space.

29 Sitkie, Heather. 'Northern Irish Mural Traditions: Opposing Views of History'. *Historia* 23 (2014).

30 McCormick, Jonathan, and Martin Forker. "'Walls of History: The Use of Mythomoteurs in Northern Ireland Murals.' *Irish Studies Review*, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, 7, no. 14 (November 2019): 428.

The mural as a Canvas

Murals are normally on a wall or other surface which serves to separate private from public spaces. The most common sites are gables of houses, with an open space in front of it of at least 10m, where people would normally walk. A mural can be only an image, an image with a complementary text or only a text, and it's main goal is to convey a message and to mark a place with that message. The target of the message is double. It is both projected towards the community (internally) and outside communities (externally). The armed men are symbolically protecting the internal territory from external attacks.³¹

The fact that most of the murals are painted in house gables, gives the opportunity to depict human figures in a 1:1 scale, or even larger than that. There is also a preoccupation for create a tangible solidity and physical presence of these figures that sometimes resemble hyper realistic paintings.



UVF Mural
Castlereagh Road, Belfast. 2022

A very striking illusion is experienced at the mural located in Castlereagh Road, when, the gunmen's steely gaze and the aim of the rifle does seem to track the viewers as they walk past the wall.

Most of the murals are unsigned by the artist(s) and its sponsors are not listed. The armed man is an anonymous combatant who represents the coercive force that is claimed to be used imminently. The anonymity here is an intersection between the globalising tendency of the hegemonic narrative and the hyper local sense of a known neighbour that could be the one behind the balaclava.

31 Jarman, Neil. 'Painting Landscapes: The Place of Murals in the Symbolic Construction of Urban Space'. In *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, 81. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies QUB, 1998.

But the most important part of the mural is not its intrinsic value: the painting on a wall or a gable is not important, what is important is what is outside of the mural, more specifically in front of it. What happens in front of it is an experience that affects the intellectual level of individuals and affects the communal behaviour of the vicinity. It is in the public space surrounding these tokens where the violence is projected, and sensibilities are affected.

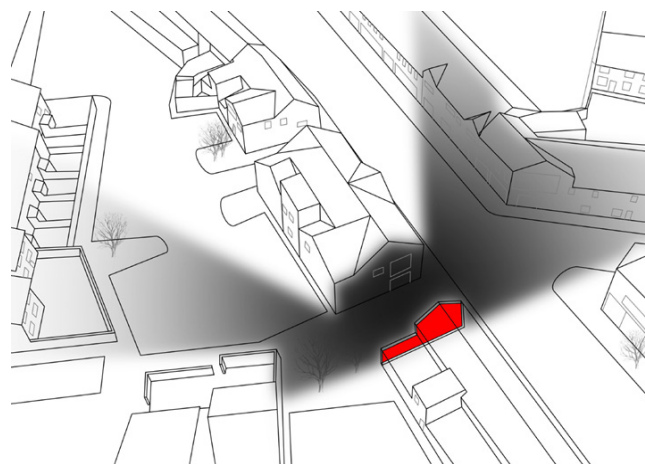


Diagram of area of influence of UVF Mural located in Castlereagh Road. Belfast. 2022

The exploitation of the mural

Other techniques of mass communication can reach larger audiences, as the murals are restricted to local passers-by. But the fact that murals are static convert them into a situated tokens of a standardising hegemonic power.

In the context of Belfast, the tradition of mural painting all over the city has been captured by multiple actors. Over the past decades, there have been different takes on the use of murals as media for portraying a narrative. One important aspect of this process has been the intervention of the State itself in the commissioning and production of murals in Belfast over the past decade. Primarily financed through the 'Re-imagining Communities' scheme, this has also taken the form of State sponsorship of local community groups or also specific projects through a variety of governmental and non-governmental agencies.³² On occasions, the new murals were commissioned to replace paramilitary texts and images, and elsewhere, they were simply additions.

Considered from one perspective, this can be viewed as a late official recognition of the significance of the murals, and of the fact that they will not be disappearing anytime soon. It can also be interpreted as an attempt by the State to portray safer representations of the past. The State is in fact, other form of hegemony that appropriates this tool of consent to maintain power.

32 Crowley, Tony. 'Hegemonic Shifts: The Latest from the Walls of Northern Ireland.' *Journal of Irish Studies* 10 (2015): 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2015-5176>.

The mural as an Event

Over time, murals can be also seen as temporal occurrences that appear and disappear inside the timeline of the Northern Irish conflict. Belfast as a place of contestation lives with the dynamic of new murals being commissioned, old murals being repainted, violent murals being taken down, some of them reappearing in neighbouring gables. With this perspective, the matter of time adds a new layer of complexity that suggest considering murals as temporal tokens or “semiotic bombs” in a conflicting territory.

Within weeks the area had descended into its worst sectarian rioting in a decade, the latest stark reminder that 13 years of official peace has failed to remove political violence from Northern Ireland’s streets.

“First came the murals and then the petrol bombs,” said Arthur McDonald, 70, a Catholic whose estate was attacked by a mob, which police said was orchestrated by Protestant paramilitaries. “It’s the only way they can get recognition.”³³



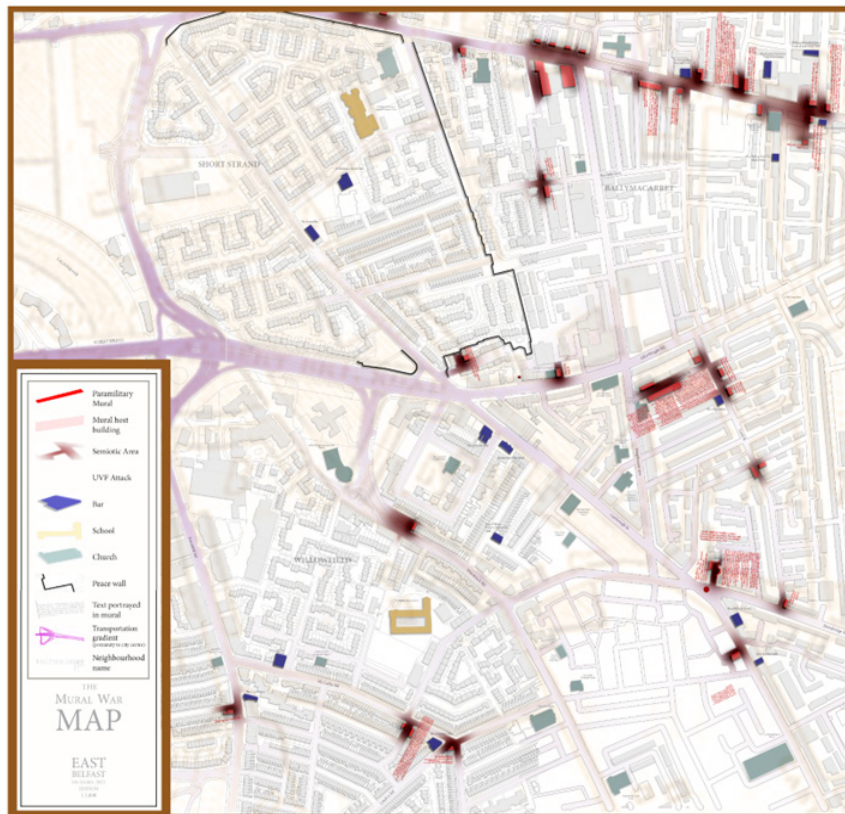
Development of the same mural overtime.
Carrington St. Belfast. 1995-2022

33 Reuters. ‘Guns make unwelcome return to Belfast murals’, 26 July 2011, sec. Lifestyle. <https://jp.reuters.com/article/us-irish-tensions-idUSTRE76P4OJ20110726>.

Assemblage of murals

After analysing the multiplicity of violent murals spread throughout the territory one can also start to treat these events as a multiplicity of elements than act as an assemblage of tokens existing in relation to other meanings for consent. I propose to see this assemblage as one of murals, and in a large scale, an assemblage of paramilitary tokens when one could include other modes of territorialization, i.e., flags, painted curb stones, graffiti and memorials.

The individuality of each mural then starts to lose importance, and one can distinguish a multiplicity of semiotic tools that are not uniform in their material nature, but rather diverse in their upbringing, messages, techniques. This multiplicity creates an extrinsic relationship between them and allows for individual elements to be taken out without affecting the overall influence of the assemblage.³⁴



Mural Map of East Belfast. 2022

One can also start to speak of an assemblage of murals affecting the territory as in a war map where distinct attacks over-time are represented in a 2-dimensional drawing of the territory with wounds, scars and tissues that are affected by a harmful attack of paramilitary tokens of control and territorialization.

34 DeLanda, Manuel. 'Introduction.' In *Assemblage Theory*, 2. Speculative Realism. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of political murals in East Belfast is one that is alive, it is ongoing, and it is a series of events that combine the two elements of hegemony in itself. Through consent of the society and the threat of coercion they mark the territory and keep its narrative alive.

This investigation has given multiple names and levels of analysis to the political murals: tokens, bombs, events. My conclusion is that they are that, but most importantly they are semiotic tools, as long as they affect the sensibility of the neighbourhood by blending hyper local messages of territorialization, re-historicising of the conflict and the threat of coercion.

They also affect a power relation that exists between society and paramilitary groups. They are tools to keep the narrative alive and they do so by the simple act of being there, static, but threatening.

This is also an example of the politicization of public space, these murals create a new type of space, they redefine public space and claim new politicised places by restating old arguments on existing sites.³⁵

This investigation can be a starting point towards awareness of more precise elements of the current conflict and can help to catalyse proposals towards a hegemonic shift that could benefit neighbourhoods affected by segregation and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

35 Jarman, Neil. 'Painting Landscapes: The Place of Murals in the Symbolic Construction of Urban Space'. In *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, 81. Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies QUB, 1998.

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Crowley, Tony. 'Hegemonic Shifts: The Latest from the Walls of Northern Ireland'. *Journal of Irish Studies* 10 (2015): 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2015-5176>.

Cusack, Jim. *UVF: The Endgame*. Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 2008.

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