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"I don't know what the world is coming to. Bloody perverts…": Masculinity and Displacement in Pre-Ceasefire *Derry Girls* (2018–19)

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Abstract. Although widely applauded for its female centrality, *Derry Girls* (2018-19) also problematises the displacement of masculine subjectivities in a period when the peace process and the effects of globalisation permeated the renegotiation of the discursive notions of masculinity in Northern Ireland. Intergenerational relations are key to understanding this displacement of male characters like Granda Joe (the hard man), Da Gerry (the new man), or James. With an emphasis on the carnivalesque, liminality, space, and emasculation, this article will investigate the extent to which male characters, who are caught amidst the rapid cultural changes caused by the spatial and cultural negotiations of the ceasefire, represent the collapsing structural dimensions of the social constitution of gender in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland.

Key Words. Northern Ireland, the Troubles, masculinity, carnivalesque, *Derry Girls*.

Resumen. A pesar de ser aclamada por crítica y público como una excelente ficción coral femenina, *Derry Girls* (2018-19) también aborda la subjetividad masculina en un período en el que el proceso de paz y los efectos de la globalización permearon la renegociación de la masculinidad como discurso en Irlanda del Norte. Las relaciones intergeneracionales son clave para entender la evolución de los personajes masculinos como Joe (epítome del *hardman*), Gerry (*new man*) o James. A través de elementos como lo carnivalesco, la liminalidad, el espacio y la emasculación, este artículo abordará hasta qué punto los personajes masculinos, varados en un tiempo y un espacio tan cambiantes, representan el colapso estructural de la construcción social del género en Irlanda del Norte en los años previos al alto el fuego.

Palabras clave. Irlanda del Norte, el Conflicto norirlandés, masculinidad, carnavalesco, *Derry Girls*.

Set in the nineties during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, *Derry Girls* (2018-19) follows the lives of Erin Quinn (Saoirse-Monica Jackson), Orla McCool (Louisa Harland), Michelle Mallon (Jamie-Lee O'Donnell), Clare Devlin (Nicola Coughlan), and James Maguire (Dylan Llewellyn). The fast-paced comedy, written by Lisa McGee, produced by Hat Trick Productions, and broadcast on Channel 4, relies heavily on classic teen sitcom tropes and touches upon friendship, belonging, rites of passage, sense of place, national identities, ethnicity, religion, sex, and gender. However, central to McGee's semi-autobiographical work is the question of becoming an adult, a universal teenage preoccupation, which McGee presents in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland, through particular teenage female voices. The intergenerational conflict between adults and teens, a constant embedded in all teen sitcoms, is brought to the fore by Erin's family: Da Gerry (Tommy Tiernan), Granda Joe (Ian McElhinney), Ma Mary (Tara Lynne O'Neill), and Aunt Sarah (Kathy Kiera Clarke).

Derry Girls has been widely applauded by critics and audiences for its female centrality, as it clears the space for plural and multidimensional representations of female identities (Royal Television Society 2019). According to McGee, it was high time for a show like this. "For a long time, women in comedies were [reduced to being] girlfriends telling men off", but *Derry Girls* is not a show about four female teens who are just boy obsessed (O'Reilly 2018). This may be one reason *Derry Girls* has become Channel 4's major success since *Max and Paddy's Road to Nowhere* (created by Peter Kay) in 2004, and the most-watched series in Northern Ireland (*Belfast Telegraph* 2018). However, it also recuperates males as non-threatening characters at the end of the Troubles, when contradictory discourses on masculinity, violence, sacrifice, and honour were being (re)negotiated in the public sphere. For McGee, this is an essential part of the show, as at the time, "women were often the family breadwinners […], leading to what she describes as a female-dominated culture" (Blake 2019). For her, male characters in the sitcom should be there just as a supporting act, making *Derry Girls* the first female-led Northern Irish teen sitcom in UK television – especially on Channel 4 – irreverently dealing with the Troubles with a dark sense of humour. For the showrunner, this subversion is connected to space, as during the Troubles, Northern Irish people had to develop a "very dark sense of humour […] to find ways to cope with stuff. It's such a small country and the Troubles affected everyone" (Edinburgh TV Festival 2018).[1] This formula is not new for McGee, who already explored locality, ethnicity, dark sense of humour, and gender in Channel 4's *London Irish* (2013), in *Girls and Dolls* (2006) (Haslett 2013), or in her upcoming psychological drama *The Deceived* (Cox 2020).

As Coulter states, the Troubles mainly comprised "[working-class] men attempting with varying degrees of success to kill other [working-class] men" (1999: 223). Thus, the end of the armed conflict contributed to both a renegotiation of spaces and power and convoluted many gender norms in the region, especially in "the domestic spaces that absorbed the fallout" (DenHoed 2020: 12).[2] This marked the representation of Northern Irish male characters in the cinema of the nineties; "films such as *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan 1992), *In the Name of the Father* (Jim Sheridan 1993) and *The Boxer* (Jim Sheridan 1997), all implied the need for men to adopt new forms of masculinity" in Northern Ireland (Hill 2019: 224). Although critics like Ashe and Harland (2014: 749) partially disagree with such renegotiation, as they believe that the Peace Agreement did not challenge normative notions of masculinity but only "reinforced the political power of ethnic blocs", it is undeniable that Northern Ireland in the nineties became a discursive space shattered by globalisation and the incipient influence of American cultural hegemony, alongside industrial delocalisation, public spending cuts, a dramatic decline in manufacturing, and a rise in the service sector and retailing, which produced a "genderquake"

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[1] For regionalism, memory and sense of humour in *Derry Girls* please see Coulter (2020) and Schwetman (2021).
[2] Joe-and-Gerry plotlines, for instance, are normally set in domestic spaces, which are traditionally considered feminine settings.

(Wilkinson 1994: 11-12). In this sense, *Derry Girls* problematises territorial disputes and symbolic transformations of gender scripts as a consequence of the global permeation of the local. Although we may partially agree with Ashe and Harland, it is through the lens of intersectionality that the changing patterns in masculinity must be scrutinised in the years of the Peace Agreement.

This article discusses how different sets of practices and discourses intersect in the show's ethos of space, with a special emphasis on masculinity. The cultural boundaries of Gerry and Joe's gender politics are set by (i) intergenerational conflicts and (ii) the rapid mutability of their material and symbolic worlds. Men dominate public spaces, but in *Derry Girls*, Derry becomes an urban heterotopia or a discursive space that is incompatible with male practices (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986: 24). Thus, we will investigate the extent to which Gerry and Joe represent the collapsing structural dimensions of masculinity in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland, arguing that the figure of the hegemonic "hard man" that Joe represents will be substituted by that of the "new man" (Gerry). We will see whether James culminates in an effective appropriation of space – to successfully interact with his physical and symbolic surroundings – or his gendered practices, socially inscribed onto the body and space, meet any opposition. We will also see how the homophobic and ethnic jokes on James's behalf are normally problematised to challenge patriarchal performativity, desire, and ethnic abjection through small "becomings" and rites of passage, culminating in the "I'm a Derry Girl" celebratory speech.

Much is yet to be done, as the Northern Irish collective consciousness, central to the "production of specific masculine subjectivities among young Irish [and Northern Irish] men [and women]", is still informed, for instance, by the cultural legacy of the murals that still bombard men and women with dominant imagery of what it means to be a man (Mac an Ghaill 1996a: 138; McDowell 2008: 335-54; Rolston 2018: 365-89). For Kovitz (2003), war and conflict are highly gendered, to which Hartsock adds an erotic component. She points to a "masculine eroticism and manly virility embedded in notions of military strength and valour" (cited in Nagel 1998: 257), something that *Derry Girls* challenges. When the teens' school bus is stopped at a checkpoint, and two armed soldiers come aboard, Michelle asks: "Do you think if I told him I had an incendiary device down my knickers, he'd have a look?" (Episode One). To some extent, the gaze of soldiers is reversed. Michelle's perspective zooms in on a handsome and masculine soldier's face and rifle. Their weapons are an extension of their virility, and the explosive artefact is an extension of Michelle's sexual anxieties. Michelle's pubertal angst renegotiates, even equates, the desire for reciprocal gazing, not to mention that a TV series set in the nineties, a decade in which British popular media "was dominated by lad culture" (Gill 2003: 38), privileges female desire at the cost of male desire is ironic and challenging. The fact that Michelle personifies the archetype of a ladette, transgressing the gender capital normally associated with femininity, may not be left aside, either.[3]

However, the most interesting aspect is the grotesque tone of the sequence which, at the same time, sets the tone for the show. In a climate of mass violence, Michelle's intentions are interpreted by her friends and the audience in a carnivalesque way, a game of inversions where Bakhtin (1984b: 275) sees a world of "anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway" (Lachmann 1988-89: 118). As a comedy, the success of the show is indebted to disruptions like this, where the "[c]arnivalistic laughter is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders, […] where laughter dispels fear" (Bakhtin 1984a: 127), thus disrupting "the stability of the image and its semiotic correlate by making the audience laugh" (Ryan 2020: 80), and triggering a self-reflexive renegotiation of the semiotic composition. All

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[3] According to Rowe, "exposing and making a spectacle of the gazer, [and] claiming pleasure and power" are typical of the "unruly woman", a trope which is associated with the carnivalesque body (2011: 12).

characters in *Derry Girls*, without exception, are exposed to the carnivalesque and its paradigms (Lachmann 1988-89: 137).

This article also draws from semiotic definitions of masculinity and ethnocentric notions of the masculine by taking into account close textual analysis and corporeality (e.g., physical appearance), emotion (anger), behaviour (violence), interactions with other characters (spatial relations), plotlines, camera angles, and other techniques.[4]

Masculinity, the Troubles, and the Peace Agreement

Although the region, conflict, and Peace Agreement have been historically dominated by male combatants and politicians, the British and Irish media have not paid enough attention to critical representations of masculine gender identities in Northern Ireland. Bairner observes that "from 1969 to 1994, sectarianism rather than any other source of division […] dominated the political scene" (1999a: 285). As a result, few pre- and post-ceasefire "films have escaped the cultural conflicts of the time" (Hill 2019: 2) focusing mainly on male-centred narratives "[b]ecause the film industry, like many others, [has been] heavily male-dominated" (Ging 2012: Chapter 1). Not until *The Boxer* (Sheridan, 1996), *Divorcing Jack* (Caffery, 1998) or *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (Appleton, 2000) premiered was "the issue of masculinity that had been bubbling" brought to the fore (Hill 2019: 223), concurring "with the 'official' narrative of the peace process, which, on the evidence of these films at least, is one that is imagined in terms of passive domesticity and a deep antipathy to politics" (Baker and McLaughlin 2015: 107). As for the local intricacies of spatial motifs, only post-ceasefire films have overtly screened "the multiple and collective claims to urban Northern Ireland", aspiring "to transform urban Northern Ireland on screen into ostensible sites of collective, even cosmopolitical identities" (Brown 2010: 68, 59).

(Northern) Irish masculinities in media studies remain mostly unexplored in the scholarly literature. Notable exceptions include Hanke (1998), Pettitt (2000), Ging (2012), Meaney (2007), Barton (2014), and Hill (2019). Focused entirely on the Northern Irish audiovisual landscape, Edge's (2009) and Brown's (2010) works are also worth mentioning. However, in media reception studies, the panorama is not as positive. Theorists like Fiske and Hartley (1978), Morley (1986), and Fiske and Dawson (1996) remain uncontested to date. In cultural and feminist studies, the contributions dedicated to (Northern) Irish masculinities are broader, but the number of theorists remains limited. The most significant case studies range from militarised masculinities in Bourke (1998), Sharoni (2000), and McDowell (2008), sports in Bairner (1999a, 1999b) and Cronin (2007), fatherhood in McKeown, Ferguson, and Rooney (1998), education in Owens (2000) and Mac an Ghaill (1996a, 1996b), body and violence in Feldman (1991), homosociality in Dowler (2001), and deviant masculinities and abjection in Mac an Ghaill (1994). In the pre- and post-Celtic tiger context, seminal works on masculinity by Ferguson and Synott (1995), Ferguson and Reynolds (2001), and Walsh (2010) are also worth mentioning. Other interesting studies include Shirlow (2001), Curtin and Linehan (2002), Lysaght (2002), McDowell and Shirlow (2011), and Ashe (2012), geographers who have mapped political transitions of gender in the Northern Irish urban space, that is, residential segregation. According to Ashe, "[i]n the Northern Ireland context, the dynamics of the peace process briefly opened a space for exploring men's traditional identities and power" (2012: 233). However, the "implementation of the Agreement eventually narrowed the space for exploring gender issues" (233). Unfortunately, this could explain the little scholarly interest in the subject matter and limited previous literature.

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[4] For gender performativity and decolonisation in *Derry Girls* please see Murphy (2021).

Male Intergenerational Relations: Granda Joe and Da Gerry

Hilarity is often built around challenging adults' authority or even their fragile masculinities.[5] Sometimes, the tone is not light-hearted and tends to problematise more internalised multi-layered conflicts. For example, in Episode Nine, the gang has tickets to see Take That in Belfast, but when Mary forbids them from attending, they decide to sneak away.[6] Instantly, Take That, and their concert becomes their final frontier, the point at which their identity can be renewed and regenerated, as a means to access their teen generational space and the globalised dominant culture that their material world does not provide.[7] However, for Joe, Take That problematises something else: a transgression of his gendered, generational, and ethnic spaces. When the family is watching the "Pray" music video (1993) in the living room, Joe erupts:

> Joe: I don't know what the world is coming to. Bloody perverts […].
> Mary: You're overreacting Da […]
> Joe: Why do they keep touching themselves?
> Erin: 'cause they're artists Granda.
> Joe: Dirty English bastards are what they are. No offence, son (addressing James). (Episode Nine)

In this sequence, the members of the boyband hold, arch, and touch their bodies sensuously while praying for a lost lover to come back. First, overt masculine sexuality transgresses the sacred for Joe in a carnivalesque feast of "gay relativity", which confronts "prevailing truths and authorities" (Bakhtin 1984b: 11). This is achieved by exchanging value positions, or the "world inside out" where men (not women) passively await, half-naked, for the female object of affection to return. For Joe, both excess and ambivalence are materialised in the bodies of the boyband, which are "not only presented as desirable, but, by their actions, […] also [produce] performances of desiring" (McDonald 1997: 279). This ambivalence is in line with the "new man", "sensitive, emotionally aware", but also "respectful of women, and egalitarian in look" (Gill 2003: 37), something that McDonald (1997) and Gregory (2019) noted. But these new global modes of pop masculinity also compromise Joe's ethno-Irish subjectivity – "Dirty English bastards is what they are", endangering both his gender and cultural capital, a debate that other Irish boybands have opened with respect to the transformation of Irish national identity, pointing to the need to reconsider transnational masculinities in the context of a global market that permeates the local.[8]

Joe's gendered space ceases to exist because of both intergenerational and global challenges, but also a new institutional position in Northern Ireland. As Sarah Edge points out, institutions tended to officially renegotiate old forms of masculinity in the nineties, targeting male violence as a pivotal source of the Troubles to secure "the peace process" as the conflict entered "its post-Ceasefire stage" (2009: 180-81). This is exemplified in Gerry, who epitomises Beynon's "new man": a nurturant male "emotionally literate, sensitive and in touch with his gentler, 'feminine side'" (2002: 121); non-identified with traditional forms of masculinity and violence (Episode Five), family-oriented (Episode Six), and loving (Episode One). However, not even this "new man" escapes the carnivalesque.

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[5] Mary: "Don't say 'knickers' in front of your father. He can't cope" (Episode One).
[6] Although producers expanded the episode name convention in the second season by adding titles, we will refer to these episodes as Episode Seven, Eight… for clarity.
[7] For a theory on the final frontier please see Turner (1920: 1-38).
[8] For the impact of transnationality, Irish boybands, and masculinities in local cultures, please see Fagan (2003: 130).

On the one hand, when Joe and Gerry argue about chips for dinner, the trope of the breadwinner kicks in, connecting the gag to historical and ethnocentric disasters, like the Potato Famine, when Joe accuses Gerry of "starving the family to death" (Episode Two). Joe wins the argument with his son-in-law, but eventually, the women in the family decide to buy even more chips which, of course, are left over. Here, the carnivalesque disruption was twofold. First, the gag is rooted in the gay relativity constructed around the chips, a symbol of life and death, and the emphasis on the carnival body, corporeality, and excess, by emphasising the practices that connect the body to the world, namely eating, drinking, and birth (Bakhtin 1984a: 11, 1984b: 362-63). Second, Joe's critical perception of Gerry, and his "inability" to take care of his family's wellbeing, is linked to a critical response to incipient forms of masculinity (the new man), mirroring the conflict that "operated to fortify aspects of men's power in communal and formal political arenas" at the end of the Troubles (Ashe and Harland 2014: 752).

On the other hand, the trope of the protector is contested in relation to spatial mastery and social transformation. In Episode Five, the family decides to spend the day out of town to avoid the controversial Orange Walk. The noise produced in the parade irrupts inside their houses and impedes their communication indoors. As forms of coercion, the noise and the parade trespass and violate their domestic space, enacting a ghetto warfare trope (McEvoy and Mika 2001). Street crossing and car driving become military strategies when they take the car to leave the town for the day. Although Gerry works as a driver and usually dominates this material space for a living, Joe cannot trust him with a map or car. Their constant arguments and lack of collaboration put the family in danger because they cannot escape from the Orange Walk in time, and the city instantly becomes an urban heterotopia that is incompatible for both of them as family protectors and soldiers.

These sequences challenge the anxieties of hate, fear, manhood, protection, and even class. Joe's masculine subjectivity is built on the cult of the "hard man", the archetype "of a folk narrative that encodes the historical transition from territorialised to deterritorialising violence" in Northern Ireland (Feldman 1991: 46), a tenet of the construction of working-class masculinity in the area "long before the late 1960s and the beginning of the Troubles" (Bairner 1999b: 128). As a hard man, Joe sees Gerry's job in the service sector – as a driver – as insufficient and not manly enough. According to Lysaght, these "'communities' [were] associated with […] key industries such as shipbuilding, heavy engineering, linen mills and tobacco manufacturing" (2002: 53), industries which disappeared from Northern Ireland in the nineties because of the delocalisation of part of the production process abroad; industries, which "new men" like Gerry were not able to protect, much to the dismay of a hard man like Joe.[9]

As a hard man, war jargon normally proliferates in Joe's lines (Episode Five and Episode Nine);[10] he is institutionally prosecuted and punished for his ideals; at least that is what Joe believes when his driving licence is suspended in what he calls an act of "RUC discrimination" (Episode Six).[11] Both the hard man and the new man may be best treated as discourses (Gill 2003: 38), where, "rather than one displacing the other, they coexist, 'channel hopping' across versions of the 'masculine'" (Beynon 2002: 6), and, according to Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2001), ethnicity and region are connected to this. For Joe, Gerry is "that Free State Fucker" (Episode Six), which, according to Long,

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[9] No male character is seen actually working in their work setting, except Ciaran (Jamie Beamish) at a photography shop, Dennis (Paul Mallon) at the corner shop, and Father Peter (Peter Campion).

[10] Joe's emotions are normally those of dislike, frustration, and anger (with Gerry; Ciaran, Sarah's boyfriend; and James), and a paternalistic tone (with women in general).

[11] Catholic and Irish nationalist minorities historically accused the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) of sectarianism and enforcing British rule.

… conveys the oft antagonistic relationships between people from NI and those in the Republic of Ireland. […] The term "Free State" is sometimes used contemptuously by Nationalists in NI who have felt betrayed or left behind. […] Joe's use of the term with Gerry renders this often unspoken and uncomfortable sentiment, both audible and palpable. (2021: 6)

Joe's ethno-nationalist sentiments can also be perceived when an IRA member, Emmett (Terence Keeley), is caught hidden in their car when they are about to cross the border. Gerry effusively wants to convince the family to drop him at Peggy's Diner, but Joe believes otherwise:

> Granda Joe (to Emmett): Have you killed anyone, son?
> Emmett: No. Well, at least not directly […]
> Granda Joe: Well, that settles it. (Episode Five)

Here, the carnivalesque is marked by displays of excess and Joe's Bakhtinian eccentric behaviour, a comical space where his opinions can be revealed without being socially penalised (Bakhtin 1984b: 122). However, when Gerry confronts Joe about what he believes is a nonsensical position, Joe says: "You know what's wrong with you, Gerry? You're an awful wuss. […] You're afraid of your own shadow. […] Grow some balls and help the fella out". Here, notions of gender and nation operate at the material and symbolic levels. As Ashe argues, "[t]he call to arms in defence of the Irish nation was […] very much 'a call to manhood'" and "discourses of normative masculinities [were] often employed to encourage men to serve ethno-nationalists agendas through engagement in physical force violence" (2012: 238, 2019: 277). Joe's discursive position, which is built on "fella", "balls", "wuss", or "tout" (Episode Five), is one of a hard man who perceives honour and comradeship as central tenets of manliness (Lysaght 2002: 53-54). This contrasts with the official discourse at the time. According to Lysaght, "[m]any paramilitary organisations privilege[d] a public rhetoric which accepts that some individuals [chose] to join paramilitary organisations in order to defend the rest, and that no ill will [was] held toward those who [did] not choose to join their number". However, judgement was generally passed on non-combatant men, like Gerry, for "question[ing] the[ir] masculinity or heterosexuality" (54). The final song in this episode reinforces this. "Whatta Man" (1993), played by Salt-N-Pepa and En Vogue, hints at notions of violence and masculinity: "My man gives real loving. That's why I call him 'killer'".

If concepts like "honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist" (Nagel 1998: 252), Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Féin, epitomises the ideal discursive construction of manhood in *Derry Girls*, at least for Joe and Sarah. In the opening episode of the second season, an interview with Gerry Adams is broadcast but dramatized by an actor. According to Sarah's theory, this is because "his natural voice is actually very seductive", and "he sounds like a West Belfast Bond. As far as English is concerned, a voice like that […] is dangerous", something that Joe also endorses (Episode Seven). Here, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque operates at superficial and profound levels. At the superficial level, the carnivalesque excess is enacted by the hyperbolic synecdoche that challenges prevailing truths and authorities. Adams's manly voice is enough to lure and move people's consciousness, which Gerry rejects. At a deeper level, Bond fiction is also a byword for a few crude ideological positions on patriotism, the rhetoric of containment, the preservation of political and cultural sovereignty, or the infamous "licence to kill" trope. The nationalists' appropriation of the British spy, "a figure designed to resist the decline of [the] empire" (Dodds 2005: 279), and the ideological positions he stands for enacts the Bakhtinian world inside out, offering an alternative construction of the hegemonic order, where the rhetoric of containment

of the nationalist paramilitary masculinity is validated and simultaneously connected to the aesthetics of the hard man.

James and the Liminal Anglo-Ethnic Masculinity

James is visiting his cousin Michelle in Derry when his mother (Bronagh Waugh) abandons him. Though a Catholic of Northern Irish descent, he was born in England. When his mother became pregnant, she went to London to have an abortion and never returned (Episode One). James is not hegemonically masculine or conventionally attractive.[12] His cultural capital and all that he represents are foreign to the eyes of the locals – or what is worse, English – and his main function is that of the "cultural tourist" and joke target.[13]At home, his aunt Deidre feels "pure hatred" every time he sees James (Episode Five). At school, he is the "*wee* English fella" (Episode One, my emphasis). James, who defines himself as "an English rose among thorns" (Episode Eight), does not fit into the middle-class English ideal of Christian manliness or muscular Christianity (Springhall 1987: 52). He is a Doctor Who geek, or as Michelle puts it, a pervert who "wank[s] over some fella who fights with hoovers and rides aliens in a telephone box" (Episode Eleven). However, what unites all these contradictory images of English manhood is that his geekiness is a deviant form of masculinity in Northern Ireland and England and exists outside the confines of (Northern) Irish and English masculinities. James's alignment with geek masculinity not only justifies his exclusion as a potential love interest for Erin – they are going to the prom as friends – but also explicitly feminises the English in the TV series, displacing any potential sexual tensions in the equation.

Family, schoolgirls, and Sister Michael all struggle to place James. He is constantly ignored, as he has "nothing interesting to say", and in early episodes, even his presence is physically blocked out.[14] His perennially baffled expression and inability to understand the codes and cultural conventions of Northern Ireland are probably why he does not speak normally.[15] However, when he does, he explodes. When the family discusses whether it is a good idea to report Emmett to the police, James is taken aback by their forthright response: "Well, how do things work here? How do they work? Will one of you please explain it to me, because sometimes I feel like I've gone through the fucking looking glass!" (Episode Five). His position as a cultural tourist here is not only fragile because of his lack of local cultural capital, but also because of his Anglo-ethnic position in the conflict.

Neither "purely" English nor Northern Irish, James is always in a liminal space, trying unsuccessfully to renegotiate his masculinity and ethnic position in public and private spheres: at school and at home with the girls. Schools actively produce and reproduce, through official and hidden curricula, a range of toxic masculinities (Bairner 1999b: 133). This is mirrored in Sister Michael's (Siobhán McSweeney) words: "James will be the first boy to study here at Our Lady Immaculate College. He was due to start at Christian Brother Boys, but there were serious concerns for his safety because, well, unfortunately, James *happens to be* English" (Episode One, my emphasis). He is deprived of the male spaces of co-existence where he could accomplish "culturally appropriate and geographical contingent versions of masculinity" (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 89), but most interestingly, as Sister Michael puts it, James is an unexpected mistake; he is English by accident, a remark that complements Michelle's comment on his

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[12] James's baby face is accompanied by body language, which conveys shyness, insecurity, and even a bit of awkwardness. He is also small and feeble, and the natural tone of his voice is high pitched when he shouts or cries.

[13] As McGee has stated in several interviews, she has always been interested in the role of "outsiders" (Cox 2020).

[14] In Episodes One and Two, James is present in fourteen different sequences. In three sequences, the girls speak of James as if he were not even present. In seven sequences, James is physically blocked out by the girls' body language. In eight sequences, he is always behind the girls, far away from the camera or zoom blurred.

[15] This is particularly evident in Episodes One and Two. James is present in fourteen different sequences and has a baffled expression in nine different shots.

mother's failed abortion – equating James's self with an accident or failed abortion positions him as a Bakhtinian grotesque body, which transgresses and outgrows its limits (Bakhtin 1984b: 362-63).

James is subdued and ethnically zoned in the all-girls college,[16] a prison trope, or as Foucault puts it, a heterotopia of deviation where "individuals whose behaviour deviates in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (1986: 25). In Episode One, James's full bladder is about to explode. However, in school detention and without any male toilets in the premises, he can only complain and delay urination, bringing to the fore references to the incarceration of paramilitary prisoners during the Troubles and subverting IRA prison narratives by placing the "English" in prison. James is only able to urinate in a flowerpot when an Irish nun in detention dies of a heart attack. His near peegasm in front of the dead nun produces a Bakhtinian carnival, where excrement works as a mediator between life and death, between the living body that gives birth to the dead body and the dead body that gives birth to the living one, transforming terror into a gay monster (Bakhtin 1984b: 365). This grotesque carnival is corroborated a few minutes later when Sarah asks the gang: "Why were you pissing on her dead body and making sandwiches?".

The topos of the prison is a constant in several of James's interventions. For example, in Jenny Joyce's party (Leah O'Rourke), he is planning to have sex with Katya (a Ukrainian refugee played by Diona Doherty) but is unable to find her in a house that "is like a fucking maze" (Episode Four). The choice of words may be incidental, but allusions to the notorious Northern Irish jail – H.M. Prison Maze – are unescapable. In the Northern Irish collective consciousness are films such as Les Blair's *H3* (2001), Stephen Burke's *Maze* (2017), and Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (2008), to name a few. All of them outline the events that occurred in this prison, which led to the hunger strikes of its IRA captives. These concomitances are corroborated at the end of the second season when James surprisingly asserts that he has just "developed Stockholm syndrome" (Episode Twelve).

However, in examining any ethnic minority-majority relations in the TV series, contextual ambivalence and contingency are also at play. This is explicitly noticeable when Erin confirms to Michelle that she cannot marry an Orange man: "It's a pity. I think there's something really sexy about the fact they (sic) hate us so much" (Episode Five). According to McGee, "[t]hese Protestant people […] were these exotic creatures" (Blake 2019), which the showrunner explores through the semiotic representations of the Protestant lads in Episode Seven using, for instance, slow motion to emphasise the eroticism of their bodies, but destabilising their laddish image by enacting a carnivalesque game of inversions where the "new lad" is uncomfortable with any form of violence, is not interested in casual sex with women, and is offended when treated like a toy boy. In these sequences, the girls are "looking for trouble", problematising ethnic abjection and desire at the same time. When the girls organise a clandestine party in the lads' bedroom, the iconic tune "Trouble" (1994) by Shampoo reinforces this idea: "Oh, oh, we are in trouble. Something's come along and it burst our bubble". This symbolic and fragile bubble problematises sexual and ethnocentric anxieties driven by "a sensual mode of existence organised around the pleasure/pain axis. [However, to] be excessive/transgressive […] implies the crossing of boundaries" (Williams 1998: 59-60); in this case, bursting the exotic bubble. As it is, the Anglo-ethnic masculinity of the Protestant lads produces pleasure and abjection in the girls. However, James's Anglo-ethnic geek masculinity and his inability to pass as a heteronormative lad only produces laughter.

In the same episode, James tries too hard to perform laddish behaviour, making a considerable effort to maximise his Brit accent, deepening a more manly voice and interposing

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[16] James's plotlines and dialogues normally revolve around other female characters. Out of his close circle of family and friends, he only interacts with two males: Jon, his Protestant "buddy" (played by Brenock O'Connor), and Father Peter.

"mate", "man", or "bird" every two words. Comedy is his inability to pass as a lad. When he questions Jon, his Protestant "buddy", "[s]o, should us two bastards hook up or what?", James rapidly has to translate his words into "[w]ill you be my buddy, please?". His efforts could be perceived (by Jon and the audience) in two ways: hilariously funny, because he tries to engage in male homosocial bonding (unsuccessfully) by enacting an excessive laddish behaviour, or hilariously funny, because this is a poor and unnecessary attempt to pass as someone he is not. The construction of James's new performance is fuelled by cultural stereotypes attributed to masculinity and informed by dominant heterosexuality; he believes he can only befriend Jon if they share an interest in beer, football, poker, and tits, which Jon finds profoundly disturbing and sexist. That these gags are constituted by a combination of plausibility and implausibility entails a Bakhtinian moment of challenging ambivalence, where the lad trope is reverted and challenged. James's inability to find other suitable male role models drives him to emulate the local priest (Episode Three), a problematic role model of masculinity if we add celibacy to the equation. Bakhtinian ambivalence and the "world inside out" trigger the carnivalesque here, when simultaneously, James decides to become a priest and Father Peter abandons his religious habits to start a relationship with a colourist at "Hair and Flair".

James repeatedly clarifies that he is not gay, only to be constantly laughed at or even investigated as a potential sex offender (Episode Two, Episode Three or Episode Six). When he goes to the Take That concert, he is quickly forced to clarify that he does so only because he "respects [Gary Barlow] as a songwriter" (Episode Nine). When the gang plans to find a part-time job and save money for the school trip to Paris, James is deprived of a job as a gardener as "[t]his [would] require a bit of muscle" (Episode Two). According to McGee, James is loved, but with tough love and teasing, they are also disciplining him on the normative confines of gender and sexuality (Moore 2019). As the comedy reproduces the social and cultural conventions of the times, it replicates what Mac an Ghaill postulated regarding "institutionally specific forms of gendered and sexual power" that operate as "key defining processes in sexual boundary maintenance, policing and legitimisation of male heterosexual identities" (1996a: 133). Consequently, homosexuality is associated with femininity, as it is endangered by any form of masculinity that deviates from its hegemonic route. This not only applies to James's gender expression but also to his ethnic position, which threatens local forms of masculine power. However, it is most interesting to see what this policing means in 2021: that is, *Derry Girls* and its carnivalesque jokes on James's masculinity and ethnic position challenge these hegemonic practices (McGee's "tough love") when they are decoded by the audience, renegotiating their original meaning and contours. This was specifically corroborated at the end of the second season.

The most interesting carnival takes place with the "I'm a Derry Girl" speech. In an emotional season finale, James's mother is in town to bring him back to London. Michelle tries to convince him to stay with a remarkable and emotional speech: "You're a Derry Girl now, James… It doesn't matter that you've got that stupid accent, or that your bits are different than my bits, because being a Derry Girl, well, it's a fucking state of mind. And you are one of us" (Episode Twelve). There are several aspects at play here. First, Michelle's words enact a multi-layered imagined community, a utopia that questions the fixity of identity at communal, generational, affective, local, and ethnic levels. At the communal level, these lines celebrate belonging to the gang or "communitas", a group that is "spontaneous, immediate", and not hierarchically structured, as opposed to the "institutionalised, abstract nature of social structure" (Turner 1969: 127). Nonetheless, the communitas "is not only associated with liminality but also with marginality and structural inferiority", aspects that can also be implicitly read in Michelle's words: being a girl – not a woman, man, or boy –speaks volumes of structural inferiority in a heteropatriarchal socio-political system (Turner 1969: 128). Second, celebrating their marginality opens up evident readings at a feminist level, where gender is also a fluid

discourse (e.g., "a state of mind"). Finally, at local (Derry vs Belfast, for instance) and ethnic (Northern Ireland vs England) levels, Michelle's words speak of home as a space of co-existence associated with ideals and cultural expectations that may intersect, but not necessarily coincide with those who share this space with us.

When James emotionally closes the second season, shouting "I'm a Derry girl!", the primary divisions that characterise the social world are allowed to reunite in what Bakhtin defined as the "universality of Being" where men and women, death and life, merge into one. For Bakhtin, any "act [is] actually performed in Being" where the participation of any individual act or discourse in the ontological status of the self produces a disruptive reflection in it (the Being) (1999: 12, 28). From being a failed abortion to celebrating that he is a Derry Girl now, James's grotesque self is able to transgress and outgrow its limits in a Bakhtinian exercise that celebrates and subverts the gang's structural inferiority and acknowledges that another world order is possible. James is staying in Derry as a Derry girl, and also emerging as a new space in communion with the gang, which represents an opening up whereby he no longer has to mimic any unrealistic performativity, a communitas where he can simply be himself.

Conclusion

Derry Girls is the first female-led teen sitcom set in Northern Ireland in British television that not only clears a space for multidimensional representations of femininity, but also problematises masculinity at a time – the end of the Troubles – when gender scripts were being renegotiated both institutionally and in Northern Ireland's popular media. Several factors define *Derry Girls* as a unique product in Lisa McGee's career. However, using the carnivalesque in the sitcom is perhaps one of the most defining characteristics. Bakhtinian excess and the carnivalesque contribute towards renegotiated semiotic compositions from which no character in the show can escape; a carnivalesque that is truly embedded in McGee's grotesque and dark sense of humour, which, simultaneously, are particularly embedded in notions of space and place, providing a vehicle for catharsis.

Male characters, a supporting act for McGee in the show, are significantly important in understanding the rapid mutability of the material and symbolic spaces concerning the renegotiation of local gender scripts in pre-ceasefire Northern Ireland, and the incipient impact of globalisation on local culture and masculinities. This is particularly exemplified by Joe, the epitome of the hard man embedded in local normative forms of paramilitary masculinities that are being displaced by new modes of masculinity, like Gerry, the epitome of the new man, or James, a deviant form of geek masculinity in Northern Ireland and England. However, instability in these new modes of masculinity may be perceived in Gerry and James, and other male characters in the show, who cannot escape the carnivalesque, either. Thus, Derry, and by extension, Northern Ireland, are heterotopic spaces that are both multi-layered and incompatible for all of them.

Only James, the English geek, can culminate in an effective appropriation of space by creating a new one with the gang, Michelle, Orla, Clare, and Erin, a utopian communitas that transgresses local space and hegemony. With the "I'm a Derry Girl" season finale, the girls and James merge into one and challenge ethnocentric notions of patriarchal performativity. The impact of globalisation, which permeates in local forms of masculinity, in their disruptive communitas, at least, contributes towards renegotiating old notions of gender, sexuality, and ethnic abjection. However, it remains to be seen how both normative and disruptive discourses evolve in the upcoming season.

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