Chapter 12
‘Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol’: Exhibiting Contrasting Memories of a Contested Space
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This chapter describes the collaborative and inclusive protocols employed in creating a multiple-narrative audio-visual gallery exhibition of interviews recorded at Armagh Gaol, Northern Ireland’s prison for political and non-political female prisoners. It argues that the protocols of shared ownership and shared editorial control were essential to bringing these stories to the public.

Context

The conflict in Northern Ireland, commonly known as ‘The Troubles’, refers to the period between 1969 and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, when violence between loyalist and republican paramilitaries and the British state resulted in the deaths of almost 3,700 people. The cumulative effect of intense violence over a 30-year period within this small geographical area has left an indelible mark on the province, the effect of its violence often being referred to as its ‘legacy’. G. Dawson provides this statistical summary of the impact of the conflict:

Most of (the) fatalities – all but 260, thus some 93 per cent – have occurred within the six-county territory itself, an area of only 14,160 square miles. … Some idea of the impact of this scale of loss may be conveyed by extrapolation to the UK as a whole, where the same ratio of killings to the total population of 58 million would have left over 130,000 dead. … In all cases, civilians formed the biggest single category of victims. (Dawson 2007: 9)

Despite political consensus being reached, violence has continued with two police officers (both of whom were Catholic), two British army soldiers, one Catholic community worker and one Protestant prison officer being killed as a result of ongoing violence in the ‘post-conflict’ period. The threat of dissident republicanism continues through the identification and removal of explosive devices found in various locations around Northern Ireland (Irish Times 2011;
BBC 2011) and, more recently, through loyalist protests in Belfast and various locations throughout Scotland and England at the decision by Belfast City Council to fly the union flag at Belfast city hall only on designated days (Devenport 2013; Moriarty 2013). Despite this, the peace process continues, if tenuously, and the devolved power-sharing Stormont Assembly remains in place. Fourteen years after the signing of the agreement, Northern Ireland is in the midst of finding ways to ‘deal’ with the aftermath of conflict. Methods and motivations for so-called ‘dealing’ with the past are fraught with political, economic and psychosocial complexities (Dawson 2007: 17–19; Hamber 2009: 53–4). Within the context of Northern Ireland’s contested historical narratives, broadly, but not exclusively, categorised as Irish-Republican and British-Protestant, practices that remember, or commemorate, past events in Irish history can consolidate divisions and emphasise selective cultural memories:

The commemoration of death and suffering strengthens the political identity of the separate traditions. The impact of trauma within selective narratives of political memorialising or amnesia, makes it extremely difficult for either Northern Irish tradition to recognize the trauma of the other, or for the British government to acknowledge its own role. (Leydesdorff et al. 2004: 22)

Acts of commemoration include the annual Easter Rising Parades to celebrate the attempted overthrow of the British State in 1916, emblematic of the ongoing Irish ‘struggle’ to achieve complete independence from the British state, or the annual Burning of Lundy Ceremony in Londonderry/Derry, emblematic of Protestant resistance to the threat of Irish nationalist rule. What and how to remember, not only in terms of the recent conflict but of many significant events in Irish history, are contested. Within this context of selective cultural memories and commemorative practices, is it possible to create inclusive exhibition practices that allow competing versions of the past to co-exist?

Recording Methodology

‘Unseen Women: Stories from Armagh Gaol’, a 26-minute documentary and multi-screen gallery exhibition, shown at Belfast Exposed Gallery for two weeks in June 2011, contained material edited from the Prisons Memory Archive (PMA), a collection of approximately 175 filmed recordings of people who experienced Armagh Gaol and the Maze / Long Kesh Prison during the Troubles. The archive, created by Cahal McLaughlin, grew out of his documentary and gallery exhibition, ‘Inside Stories’, where he filmed a republican former prisoner, a loyalist former prisoner and a prison officer at the Maze (McLaughlin 2006, 2010: 83–107). Recorded in 2006 and 2007, six years after the Maze closed its doors in 2000 and twenty years after Armagh Goal closed in 1986, PMA participants walked and talked their way around the derelict prisons without the use of a formal interview,
using the site itself as a stimulus for their memories. McLaughlin employed specific collaborative protocols, namely shared ownership of the recorded material, shared editorial control, transparency of approach and the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Shared ownership means that participants co-own their final recording with the PMA, which contrasts with traditional models of documentary filmmaking where the subjects relinquish all ownership of recorded material to the production company (see Pryluck 1976: 27). In contrast, the collaborative approach adopted by the PMA aims to reduce the power imbalance between those who share their stories and those who record them. McLaughlin’s background in mainstream television production and his prior experience working in community based Belfast Independent Video (BIV) which employed collaborative workshop techniques, influenced the development of his collaborative approach:

During my years of working in broadcast television, legal accountability had always faced upwards, for example to the producer, the executive producer ... and ultimately the chief executive of the broadcasting company. Working within but also against this system, and based on the workshop ethos from BIV ... I developed a collaborative approach to working with participants and production crew. This collaboration acknowledged the balance of power and skills and allowed for discussion and consensual decision-making, which guaranteed accountability for participants. (McLaughlin 2010: 25-6)

Alongside collaborative protocols, the PMA adopted specific recording strategies which attempted to minimise levels of mediation between the participant and the audience. This non-interventionist recording methodology echoes ‘direct cinema’, a style of documentary filmmaking that arose in the 1960s as cameras and sound recording equipment became more mobile. Steven Feld defined direct cinema as:

A process, visual aesthetic, and technology of cinema ... (which) came to mean four things; (1) films composed of first-take, non-staged, non-theatrical, non-scripted material; (2) nonactors doing what they do in natural, spontaneous settings; (3) use of lightweight, hand-held synchronous-sound equipment; and (4) handheld on-the-go interactive filming and recording techniques with little if any artificial lighting. (Feld 2003: 7)

Direct cinema was not just a style of documentary filmmaking, it was also an attempt to capture ‘reality’. The North American pioneers of direct cinema believed they could film their subjects without the presence of the camera or the process of being filmed influencing their behaviour. Direct cinema documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock famously stated, ‘you can act in such a way as not to affect them’ (in Cousins and McDonald 2006: 256). Documentary theorists and filmmakers have since developed a more complex view of documentary and its relationship to reality, with theorists such as Bruzzi arguing that the direct cinema has left a damaging legacy on documentary in general:
It has taken time for documentary filmmaking to rid itself of the burden of expectation imposed by direct cinema. ... It can be legitimately argued that filmmakers themselves (and their audiences) have, much more readily than most theorists, accepted documentary’s inability to give an undistorted, purely reflective picture of reality. (Bruzzi 2006: 9; see also 73–80; Ward 2005: 4–5; Hampe 1997: 23–4)

The expectation that documentary can provide an unmediated representation of reality that offers an unbiased ‘truth’ is unattainable. Instead documentaries, and the apparent ‘truths’ that lie within them, are viewed as a dialectic, or process of negotiation, between subject, filmmaker and audience (Bruzzi 2006: 6–7; Ward 2005: 10–11, 16). Where McLaughlin’s approach echoes direct cinema, like most contemporary documentary filmmakers, it is not adopted with the intention of recording its subjects ‘as they really are’ or with a claim to offering unmediated ‘truth’ but instead attempts to allow the participants a greater degree of control over how their story is (re)presented. When recording sensitive material in contested spaces, the approach prioritises ethics over aesthetics.

Editing Methodology

As a practice-led PhD student at the University of Ulster working alongside McLaughlin, an opportunity arose for me to find ways of bringing the PMA material to the public within the challenging context of post-conflict Northern Ireland. Of 175 recordings made by the PMA, 34 were of people who had experienced Armagh Gaol, including male and female, republican and loyalist former prisoners, two female former prison officers, tutors, solicitors, visitors, doctors and chaplains. Given the smaller number of recordings made at Armagh Gaol, and its tendency to be overlooked in favour of the Maze / Long Kesh, male, political prisoner experience (Corcoran 2006: xvi), it was agreed that the first exhibition of material from the PMA should focus on female political prisoners and staff. We had recently completed a project working with a group of individuals who had either lost a loved one or were themselves injured as a result of the conflict. We developed a methodology of editing six 5-minute self-contained stories placed alongside one another with a short gap between each to form a linear film. This editorial structure worked well when working with politically sensitive material as it allowed the audience to view contrasting narratives whilst allowing each story to maintain its own integrity. The same editing structure was applied to the Armagh material: six stories were selected from the 31 recordings (some of the 34 participants recorded their stories together), and a short story was edited from each recording to approximately 5 minutes in length. These six stories were placed alongside each other, again with a small gap separating each story, to form a 26-minute linear film. This structure rejects the usual propensity in documentary filmmaking to intercut stories to form a single narrative. Alongside this, the full,
minimally edited, PMA recordings were screened on separate monitors, thereby combining a linear documentary with a multi-screen, multiple narrative exhibition.

Selecting material to exhibit from the PMA within a highly politicised and contentious context, where the reception of the stories of perceived perpetrators was uncertain, made the editorial task complex. Whose story should be told? What was the remit and focus of story selection? There was a general agreement to pay particular attention to narratives that were to date ‘unseen’, which immediately led us to focus on women. This excluded all the male recordings made at Armagh. Following the principle of inclusivity that drove the PMA, we decided to include women’s experiences from multiple perspectives: former political prisoners and prison staff. A further selection strategy, and overall aim of the exhibition was to choose clips that would reduce the practice of Othering. In Northern Ireland the I–Other dichotomy is based on political and religious power structures, ranging from Protestant–Catholic, British–Irish, nationalist–unionist, prisoner–prison officer, victim–perpetrator. As Dawson stated, ‘political legacies [of the conflict] include increasingly polarized identities, defined in opposition to the other who is perceived to be responsible for the violence’ (2007: 9). These polarised identities become especially problematic when addressing the victim–perpetrator dichotomy. There is a tendency in Northern Irish politics to see these as binary oppositions, exemplified in a statement by a unionist politician, Jeffrey Donaldson, in September 2009:

What we are not prepared to countenance is a rewriting of the Troubles where the perpetrators, whoever they are, who carried out acts of terrorism are placed on a par with the thousands of people they killed and maimed. (BBC 2009)

Given this context where the I–Other dichotomy remains prevalent, we sought to avoid and even reduce this through the principle of inclusivity and by choosing clips which humanised and personalised each woman. One clip included a loyalist former political prisoner. The selected clip highlighted the ‘insular’ position of female political prisoners who often became an isolated minority within the prison system, as there were relatively few female loyalists in comparison to republican female prisoners:

Their number at any stage was very low. There was no formal [loyalist paramilitary group] structures ... although loyalist women were imprisoned for

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1 The full recordings were edited for two reasons: firstly, to account for technical glitches, and, secondly, when a participant had mentioned the full name of an individual. Surnames were removed to protect the confidentiality of those mentioned and to protect the participants from potential libel.

2 At the height of the Troubles, overpopulation of male political prisoners at the Maze/Long Kesh and Crumlin Road Gaol, meant that male remand political prisoners were temporarily housed at Armagh Gaol, some of whom made recordings for the PMA in 2006.
various ‘criminal’ offences. ... The rare presence of women in loyalist active service units and prison structures, their minority status as a prisoner group vis-à-vis both ‘ordinary’ and republican prisoners, and the lack of acknowledgment they received from their community provided clear reasons for their insularity. (Aretxaga 1997: 131)

The PMA had also recorded two female prison officers. Initially, both were selected, however one withdrew her consent due to the current political climate where threats to the security forces from dissident republican paramilitaries continue. The prison officer clip that remained in the exhibition shows her describing balancing family life with shift work: ‘I started at eight, which meant I was able to dash home and leave the children to school.’ This story of domestic routine is likely to be familiar to the audience, challenging the dominant, negative representations of prison officers as a ‘reactionary and obstructionist core, inimical to progress and motivated by sectional interest’ (Corcoran 2006: 168). To replace the clip of the second prison officer, we maintained the inclusivity principle by including two female tutors discussing how they taught gender studies to female political prisoners using a children’s book that provided examples of gender stereotyping. This fitted in with a further emerging theme of how women simultaneously adopted and adapted traditional female roles whilst in prison.

One issue that seemed to be central to the experience of female political prisoners was strip searching. Corcoran situated strip searching within the wider political climate of punishment:

All the prisoners who spoke about the experience of being strip searched considered the practice to be a defining example of State violence against women in prison. Whilst the compulsory exposure of their bodies was unambiguously connected to sexual domination, its timing, conflictual context and the zeal for implementing it led prisoners to place strip searching firmly in the sphere of political retribution and deterrence. (Corcoran 2006: 184)

A republican prisoner who spoke about strip searching was therefore also included. Two main factors contributed to the second choice of clip from a republican former prisoner. This woman was one of the few people in the Armagh recordings who described the experiences that brought her into prison. She described how the development of her republicanism was not historically informed but grew from directly witnessing acts of injustice to her community by the British state. This counteracted reductive images of republican prisoners, maintained by mainstream media to reinforce the view that they had no legitimate agenda other than ‘terrorism’ (Aretxaga 1997: 92). The third choice was a republican former prisoner who told her story of being pregnant when coming into the jail, giving

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3 The participant’s concerns were confirmed when a prison officer, the first in almost 20 years, was killed by dissident republicans on 1 November 2012 (see Kearney 2012).
birth to her child, keeping him with her in prison for a defined period and finally handing him over to her family until she had served the remainder of her sentence. The clip ends with her reflecting on the difficulty of her years spent in prison: ‘three years. I don’t know how I did it, but like everything else you had to do it.’ Identifying titles (other than the women’s names) were deliberately avoided when they first appeared on screen. Their positions in the prison – prisoner or prison officer, loyalist or republican – were revealed in the course of their testimonies.

After each clip was edited, participants were asked to (re)view their edited clip and full recording and were given the opportunity to remove any section they wished. Four of the seven participants made use of this provision. They removed small sections where they had talked about either a colleague or fellow prisoner and were uncertain if the information they had given was accurate. The changes were minimal and mostly involved the removal of a surname, however the implications for the participants were significant. After making minor changes, they felt comfortable showing their story publicly.

Exhibition

In the final exhibition, the linear film was projected onto a blank white wall. Six monitors showing the minimally edited films were arranged on individual desks on the adjoining and facing walls. The order of the films on each monitor replicated the order in which the stories appeared in the linear film. Headphones were provided for each monitor. By doing so, we sought two modes of engaging visitors through audio-visual storytelling: the individual experience of watching each narrative on a monitor using headphones and the collective experience of watching the linear film in the open space of the gallery. The audience had no control over the linear film which played continuously on a loop. In contrast, whilst sitting at the monitors, the audience could stop, replay and skip sections.

A seminal aspect of the exhibition was the inclusion of audience responses. Bush, Logue and Burns identified the absence of audience response studies to Troubles-related storytelling work as a major gap in current research: ‘in terms of the mechanics of storytelling impact, much more attention must be paid to the audience – and the impact of hearing that story on the sense of self, and other’ (2011: 66). For that reason, and to gauge audience responses to hearing the story of the perceived Other, we held four public workshops, two of which were organised prior to the exhibition. The first workshop was attended by 12 practitioners, including academics and other creative practitioners, all of whom had a specific interest in Troubles-related material and had either produced, or were in the midst of, similar projects. The second was open to the public and was advertised on the gallery’s website and facebook page. It was attended by five women, four or whom were involved in research related to the Troubles and one of whom was a community worker in a loyalist area of East Belfast. Two workshops emerged organically during the exhibition. The gallery was contacted by a group of women
aged 50+ from West Belfast who attend a support group for republican ex-prisoners and their families, all of whom were affected by the conflict and had close relatives who were political prisoners at the Maze / Long Kesh and Armagh Gaol. The group agreed to participate in a workshop discussion after viewing the exhibition. The gallery regularly engages in community outreach work and was conducting a photography project on women and conflict with a group of eight young women aged 14 to 17 in Dunmurry, a suburb of South Belfast. During the exhibition, we brought the linear film to the group in Dunmurry and held a discussion following a screening. All workshops in the gallery involved a screening of the 26-minute linear film and participants were given time to view the minimally edited recordings. A discussion was held after each screening which was recorded using audio recording equipment and later transcribed and summarised.

The Dunmurry youth group reacted empathically to the stories and the workshop acted as a catalyst for the young women to discuss issues of sectarianism that continue to affect their own lives and communities. All of the republican women’s group felt that the film reflected their experiences of what it was like for female republican political prisoners. When asked what it was like to hear the stories of the perceived Other (for example, the prison officer and loyalist former prisoner), all women in the group felt that the selected clip from the prisoner officer’s narrative did not match their personal experience. One explained:

She didn’t really come across as what my perception was of a screw [prison officer]. … [They were] very ignorant [rude, abrasive]. There were nice ones … and other ones where it was more than a job to them it was … a bitterness. … They did whatever they were able to do without being pulled over hot coals. …

If you were ten minutes late for your visit they wouldn’t let you in even if it was the bus came late for you they wouldn’t let you in.

For these women, personal, direct, negative experiences counter-balanced the possibility that a short film might have an impact on their perception of the Other. Similarly, one practitioner, a former member of the security forces also involved in storytelling work, stated that he would have preferred to know why the prisoners were in jail, what crimes they had committed. He asked what value exhibitions like this have:

What use is it? And how is that going to, in the future, resolve conflict? If you’re going to tell your story and for me to acknowledge it in its entirety … for me it’s telling your whole story and how that’s impacted on individuals.

4 Specific participants cannot be identified for reasons of confidentiality and the politically sensitive nature of the material being discussed.
In contrast, one of the women who attended the public workshop, who was a community worker engaged in women’s projects in predominantly Protestant areas, suggested that the exhibition did reduce the process of Othering:

The girl that was interviewed about being strip searched and a republican prisoner, I can recall maybe 20 or 30 years ago laughing and lapping that kinda thing up and saying ‘Well they deserve it’, in all honesty. Through listening and learning and understanding and being able to look at it in that way as a woman and being treated in that way regardless of why you were there and I think it can strike a different chord within you as well and be able to give you an insight into something.

For this woman, her ability to empathise with the experience of being strip searched ‘as a woman’ reduced her view of the former republican prison as the Other, highlighting the potential of exhibitions such as these to shift perspectives. The former security worker’s response also highlights the limitations of audio-visual storytelling and the mechanics of memory recollection: the teller may emphasise, understate or leave out any aspect of their story that they wish. Similarly, the editing rationale of inclusivity, personalisation and humanisation may have excluded more challenging representations of political prisoners or prison staff. For some audience members this absence of what they perceive as the ‘full’ story may prove disappointing and unrepresentative of their own memories and experiences. For others, the role of public exhibition of stories from conflict should be a form of confessional, where the perpetrator admits their crime and shows contrition and awareness of its impact on the lives of others.\(^5\) In this instance, the editing methodology of choosing clips with the aim of producing an empathic response\(^6\) was more likely to be successful in audience members without direct experience of violence and imprisonment.

The complexity of exhibiting contrasting narratives alongside one another was expressed by one of the film’s participants who described how she felt on seeing the stories that were alongside hers for the first time:

If you are telling the truth I could take it. I can take the truth whether you like the truth or whether you don’t. You don’t have to accept it, but that’s not the truth. That did not happen, that as she tells the story because that is propaganda. I’m a bit apprehensive of being associated with that but I think people will look at me in a different perspective.

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5 On ethics and documentary practice, see Aufderheide 2007: 22–5; Nichols 200: 1–19; Sanders 2012.
6 On storytelling and empathic responses, see Kidd 2012 and the work of the AHRC funded project ‘Silence, Memory, Empathy’ <http://silencememoryempathy.wordpress.com/>.
In contrast, the other six participants were willing to have their story placed alongside the perceived Other. One participant stated:

It was all true. It was all there. Nothing was made up, everything was true. It was how I felt. It was what happened. Same with the other girls. I mean whatever happens it was all true. I mean nothing was lies so I don’t have any problem.

This exposes the challenges involved in editing and exhibiting contrasting narratives where ‘truth’ is contested. One person’s experience is another’s mistruth. Differences in perceptions of the past also reinforce the need for caution when interpreting memory-tellings such as these as absolute ‘truth’. We do not recall events exactly as they happened: ‘memories easily become inaccurate when new ideas and pieces of information are constantly combined with old knowledge to form flexible mental schema’ (Van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 171). Similarly, Sarkar and Walker stated that whilst remembering, ‘truth may also be “proximate”’ (2010: 9–10). Instead, McLaughlin suggests that we should view recordings and exhibitions of this kind ‘not as historical documents but as interpretive documents of [the] past’ (2010: 20). After expressing apprehension at having her story placed alongside a story that she believed to be ‘untrue’, the participant was offered the choice of withdrawing from the exhibition. She opted to include her story, as she decided ‘people will make up their own minds’. The motivating factor to continue was the fact that she would lose the opportunity to present a contrasting narrative to the audience.

Conclusions

The collaborative and ethical protocols employed during this exhibition were essential in bringing competing versions of a contested past to the public. Participants particularly valued the protocols of the right to veto and shared editorial control, citing the latter as a major factor in their decision both to take part and to remain involved in the project. Editorial control in particular, although minimally used, provided participants with a sense of safety and control. Without this protocol, the withdrawal rate could have been much higher.

Collaborative exhibitions of this type are not without limitations. Firstly, the difficulties of representation. It could be argued that 5-minute edits of a complex experience are reductive – it is impossible to fully represent the complex experiences of political prisoners and prison staff.7 Also, collaborative practice itself may impose limits on adequate representation. The editor may choose clips less likely to contradict each another, in order to prevent participant withdrawal, thereby presenting a safe and non-contentious exhibition. In this case however, although one participant did perceive other stories as directly contradicting her

7 On documentary and the complexities of representation, see Nichols 2001: 5–19.
own, she chose to allow her story to be seen publicly. The workshop discussions highlighted that the potential for the exhibition to reduce Othering was limited for audience members who had had direct, negative experiences of conflict. In contrast, for workshop attendees who had no direct experience of the conflict either through personal injury, imprisonment or losing a loved one, the potential to empathise with the perceived Other was more promising.

In terms of creating a reflective space which allowed competing narratives of contested pasts to co-exist, the editing and exhibition methodologies of allowing individual stories which are not intercut to maintain their integrity within linear narrative structures perhaps offers some indication of how this can be achieved. Not all perspectives need to be merged into a single narrative. We can acknowledge similarities and separateness simultaneously. As a public workshop attendee stated, ‘what we are doing is looking through their window’. In other words, an exhibition of this kind allows the post-conflict audience in Northern Ireland to formulate contrasting views of a contested past from multiple perspectives. As Hamber stated, ‘any society grappling with mass injustice should seek to open as much social and psychological space as possible’ (2009: 139). Multiple-narrative exhibitions of this kind create one such space.

References


