

Memory Work: *Omagh* and The Northern Irish Monumentary

By Brian McIlroy

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“We will not go away. We will not be quiet. We will not be forgotten.”

--Michael Gallagher, *Omagh*

In an historical and conceptual introduction which outshines in general utility the essays that follow by diverse hands, John Gillis in the book *Commemorations* (1994) makes the excellent point that memories and identities are not fixed, but are subjective activities. In short, as we age, our memories are often selective to assist the identity we currently inhabit. Probing deeper, Gillis asks why do we have a need for remembrance? Clearly, at the public level, it serves as a way to bind people together from different walks of life. Most obviously, Remembrance Day commemorates the sacrifice of national individuals in wartime. We pay respect to the dead, but the activity is also to thank them as their sacrifice allows us, who survive and who follow, to enjoy the society that ensued.

In response to cataclysmic events, we also have public memorials, such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which as Gillis puts it, finds us “remembering everyone by remembering no-one in particular” (11). This memorial after WW1 made perfect sense when millions were engulfed in combat, and many human remains were unidentifiable or

simply lost. WW2 caused more civilians than soldiers to be killed, so while military cemeteries were constructed, there was a move to “living memorials” by naming new buildings, such as hospitals and sports facilities. My own university has a War Memorial Gymnasium. Out of these traumas, and ones pending, one can see how and why new societal theories were urgently developed in the interwar period, and it is in this context that we can see the heuristic value of the notion of collective memory proposed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992).

Halbwachs moved from the individualist philosophy of Henri Bergson to the group concept of Emile Durkheim following WW1. Halbwachs was a socialist, and his emphasis on placing the individual within a collective without the former’s erasure helped him develop what we now see, at least in the Anglophone world, as his major contribution on “Collective Memory.” Halbwachs sees collective memory as those memories of individuals as group members. He distinguishes between *historical memory* that can only be accessed through written records, including photographs and film recordings; and *autobiographical memory* that can be accessed by individuals through their own experiences, including their own visual or written version of the past. Modern historical writing now seeks to blend both approaches. The implications of Halbwachs’ work are sobering. When we do not share collective memories, we have difficulty in communicating. When we do not share commemorative events, we may cause the preconditions of conflict to be continuously created. I am thinking here, of course, of the separateness of various traditions in Ireland.

In recalling Halbwachs, a socialist who many think was trying to blend the individualist and collectivist sociology, it is now impossible to ignore the fact that he himself (as someone who died at Buchenwald concentration camp) is part of the Holocaust every time it is evoked, along with many other millions. I raise this point not to be melodramatic, but to underscore that individuals also need to be remembered. For many Americans, the turning point in adopting this view is the Vietnam War Memorial, a black wall structure with the names of each of the fallen inscribed upon it. To Gillis, the Vietnam Memorial is “post-national” due to this particularity. However, one can easily take a contrary view. First, as Joep Leerssen reminds us, the wall was deemed insufficient, so a statue of heroic GIs in uniform was added (2001: 219n21). Second, if, perhaps, the names of the reputed one million Vietnamese dead from the war could co-exist with the current wall, surely we would see that as truly post-national. Future wars and their memorials may indeed incorporate this philosophy, and we will then see the Vietnam War memorial in retrospect as an important step towards the recognition of joint suffering, both military and civilian.

But moving on from the traumas of the 1970s and the Vietnam War, we have witnessed a greater mobility of citizens around the world, an apparent diminution of national borders, and certainly the consolidation of global capital. The EU, the NAFTA agreement, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the UN, the dominance of Hollywood film, despite their different agendas, all put notions of specific national identity and agency under question. Pierre Nora (1989) argues we are obsessed with memory now

because of our existence in a world of great change, and hence the often quoted term, “the acceleration of history.” Understanding our role in the midst of rapid change generates a need to restore the link between the present and the past. Another reason Nora cites for this obsession with memory is the “democratization of history,” whereby previously marginalized groups and individuals now have the opportunity and ability to illustrate their losses and identity. This latter point is germane to my discussion of *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004) below.

On a more specific level, and this time I return to Gillis’s train of thought, it is the case, however, that ordinary people do not generally invest in archives or monuments, but prefer instead to live with their memories and enact private acts of remembrance. Living in England in the early 1980s, I was struck how Margaret Thatcher’s Government invested in heritage as a tourist destination and income generator, all with an uneasy selling of perceived past glories. By contrast, ordinary individuals create shrines of flowers and notes at the site of a deadly road accident in order to draw attention to a life lived and lost. It is a fragile but more authentic remembrance by comparison.

Naturally, memory-work by critics and scholars can easily focus on a state-sanctioned historical moment, its remembrance in different eras, its physical markers, such as a monument, its changing reception, and so on (see McBride 2001; Douglass and Vogler 2003). Individuals, however, often need help to remember—a photograph, a souvenir, a lock of hair, a gravestone, a unique modest monument, a location. Dissatisfaction with state sanctioned remembrance has sparked on occasion a counter-monument movement.

Gillis cites one such in 1986—the Harburg Obelisk to the victims of Nazism. This structure allowed people to write messages on its surface, and then, once filled, it was lowered into the ground. The only trace of the obelisk was that of the memory of those who wrote on it, and people who wrote, and continue to write about it. Whether the traumatic past and the present commentary on that past can be “buried” as a physical act is a moot point. More productive perhaps is the statue erected of Bruce Lee in post war Mostar, a figure intended to represent human values of respect towards others and self-reliance. This statue was regarded by local activists as more inspiring than the state-sanctioned rebuilding of a bridge between two warring communities.

Pace the counter-monument movement, surely it is worth highlighting the good attributes of a monument. It provides a space for different groups of people to meet, to discuss the past and to move forward. Even if that discussion is in the confines of one’s own head, commemorative activity recognizes loss. Documentary and narrative film have been employed to address or trace atrocities or unresolved murders, and they have had a restorative impact. We should not overplay this assertion as no one film can change the world, but film can be seen as another site of commemoration, another way to negotiate complex issues. Reflecting on one Omagh anniversary gathering, Neal Ascherson despaired at the prospect of true remembrance for the victims, pointing out, “They were civilians, and the commemorators, those who centralize memory into metropolitan national monuments, are not much concerned with civilians.” (2004: 201). Ascherson’s observation is correct, but perhaps the more vital sites of remembrance are mobile and

visual, not just the website set up by the bereaved families www.omaghbomb.com but also Pete Travis's 2004 film.

In this essay, I wish to argue for and explore a subset of the genre of Irish Commemorative Cinema: The Monumentary. This neologism is an attempt to appreciate the particular texture of a film such as *Omagh*, and what it portends for the future for cinematic constructions surrounding the aftermath of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. The larger genre of Commemorative cinema incorporates re-visitations of noble actions with tragic results as in the Hunger strikes of the early 1980s (Terry George's *Some Mother's Son* (1996), Les Blair's *H3* (2001), Maeve Murphy's *Silent Grace* (2001) or Bloody Sunday in 1972 (Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* (2002), Charles McDougall's *Sunday* (2002)). What makes *Omagh* special is that it is not directly tied to nationalist and republican mythologies, but focuses on civilian victims and their families who hail from various traditions and backgrounds. It depicts both trauma and post-trauma. For sure, the Omagh atrocity is not unique, but it was the largest loss of life within Northern Ireland throughout the whole "Troubles." Twenty-nine people and two unborn twins lost their lives and two hundred people were injured. The Real IRA, an organization that had rejected The Good Friday Agreement (GFA), admitted responsibility and called a ceasefire soon after. Their bomb killed indiscriminately. No agreed narrative line is evident as to the possible prevention of the fatalities, and no charges have been initiated at time of writing. The film suggests, and it is hard not to come to the same conclusion, that the Real IRA's ceasefire was secured with the tacit acknowledgement that no Omagh bombers would be successfully prosecuted. More controversially, with such acknowledgement, the illusion of the purity of militant republicanism in pursuit of an United Ireland can be maintained in public discourse. The resumption in 2006 of the state-sanctioned commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising, including

the Irish military on parade in the streets of Dublin, confirms this successful handling of mythology. In many respects, *Omagh* speaks to the many atrocities that have gone unremembered except by the families of the victims. It is a moving monument, both in emotion and in time-space.

The term “Monumentary” attempts to sum up a number of salient aspects of *Omagh*. First, it contains the word “Monument.” Although a monument may be intended as celebratory, we often freight that word with a stone marker or sculpture which allows individuals to visit, either in groups or alone, to remember victims of a particular tragic event. Second, the additional “ary” is included to gesture towards its status as a film, a documentary of sorts, with contemporary commentary attached. Third, within film studies terminology, it can be compared, in terms of style, to direct cinema documentary techniques (hand-held camerawork, duration over editing, natural light, no voice-over or physical intrusion of the filmmaker on screen). The latter mode (as with the films of Frederic Wiseman) is often employed with the expectation, however theoretically flawed (see Bruzzi 2000: 67-98), that integrity and authenticity may be achieved. It seeks to place us in the moment in a visceral manner, to make it “real.” Fourth, the Monumentary employs techniques and practices (montage, casting of actors, for example) that are allied to narrative filmmaking. Fifth, a clear prior relationship between the producers of the film and the bereaved families is established, thereby avoiding some of the ethical pitfalls pointed out by Brian Winston (2000). These five points would allow Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* (2002) to be included within this sub-genre, but I believe that *Omagh* marks a turning point in Ireland, for the essential subject matter of Monumentaries is how ordinary people deal and have dealt with their real losses following a tragic event. It is, in short, an attempt to revitalize the Freudian

notion of “working-through” (see LaCapra 1998: 180-210), an effort to blend analysis with traumatic emotions.

Omagh is more than this generic classification, of course. It is a “living memorial” in the sense that each time the film is viewed privately, or in groups, it re-imagines the terrible events of August 15, 1998. More importantly, it pays tribute to the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group, the organization formed by the bereaved families in search of justice. As mentioned above, living memorials have commonly been understood as the act of naming hospitals, churches, airports, research centers, and even apartment buildings after a recently deceased person. More often than not, the persons so chosen had achieved some fame during their lifetimes. Recently, with the death of soccer star George Best, Belfast City Airport has been renamed in his memory. In some senses, the act of naming brings both attention and forgetting. For George Best, the naming celebrates his soccer success but forgets his later problems with alcoholism.

Thus to erect a statue or memorial wall or garden is certainly to give recognition (and indeed Omagh County Hall has a Memorial Garden to the atrocity), but it also has the potential to rewrite the past to the point of undermining the key events commemorated or what research has since uncovered. If there are words on the memorial, how are they to be phrased? The bereaved families of Omagh decided on a plaque in the Memorial Garden with the general words “To Remember and To Honour.” If there are no words, then how do you guide the visitor? This conundrum is part and parcel of setting up an exhibition in a museum that addresses perceived crisis points. At the same time, not to act, not to create a discussion about the past and the understanding of that past in the lives of those who survive, is to live in denial. Naturally, there

are those who may reasonably argue that grief is a private act, and a public monument interferes with that process. Where there continues to be doubt as to what actually happened—as in Bloody Sunday in 1972—representations of the event, despite the extensive research of filmmakers, will inevitably conflict with some people’s eyewitness accounts and their memory of events. Yet, silence or absence is no answer either.

[Fig.18.1 near here]

Memory-work is post-trauma work. If we take the case of another atrocity (this time three car bomb explosions) in Northern Ireland—in the village of Claudy in July 1972 when nine civilians died, four Catholic and five Protestant, it has taken until the last few years—some thirty years after the event—that some recognition has been given to this loss. Again, like Omagh, no-one has been prosecuted for this crime. The sculptor Elizabeth McLaughlin was commissioned to create a memorial in Claudy in 2000 at the request of the village residents. Her statue is of a woman who holds her head in her hands with clear anguish showing on her face. According to Patricia Byrne, whose mother was killed in the bombing, many people in the village remained silent for several years following the blast. As she remarked, “Nine people did lose their lives and I think that should be remembered. It should be talked about.” The sculptor has insightfully discussed the ramifications and purpose of her work: “Although grief might affect hundreds of people, it is always felt by the individual person,” and she sees her statue as the “expression of the grief of the individual.” (BBC News Online 2000) If we accept that genre films pose specific common questions in society, and hence their reproducibility, then what kind of question does the Monumentary ask? Whereas the Western asks how is it lawful to kill a man?, and whereas the Musical asks how is it possible for individual artists to work together as an

ensemble?, the Monumentary asks how do the suddenly bereaved grieve and move on from that grief?

A traditional genre must have identifiable formulas, conventions and icons. The key formula for the Monumentary is the emotional journey of the family or individual before, during and after an atrocity. Key conventions include the funeral, the funeral reception, conflicts of direction between family members, between fellow bereaved families, between bereaved families and the authorities. Another convention is the elaboration of the small victories of the bereaved over the control of the truth in their pursuit of justice. Yet another important convention is a form of speech act therapy, whereby the main individuals voice long repressed feelings. A most obvious iconic image is the camera's quiet and extended attention to the grieving and pained faces of the bereaved. The touching of clothing previously worn by the deceased is also significant.

Tom Ryall (2000) refers to the possibility of taking up an individual film and placing it within a range of generic contexts in order to better analyze its texture. Such an approach often illuminates the way a film borrows or intersects with other discourses and various horizons of expectations on the part of audiences. *Omagh* does indeed pull on a few other film contexts. One of note is the political thriller, which has a respectable history in both US and UK cinema and television. The political thriller normally places an enterprising and resourceful person in the thicket of deception and corruption, often involving murder. We witness the acquisition of incremental blocks of information that allow the protagonist to get close to the truth of a situation. It differs from a police procedural as it often involves individuals outside the law, both as protagonists and antagonists, yet it may not have the stylish trappings associated with film

noir. It might be more accurate to talk of it as a sub-genre of the detective genre. A favourite within this group of films is the journalist who stumbles upon an enormous story—*All The President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976) and *Defence of the Realm* (David Drury, 1985); or, an undercover operation as in *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005). These are sensational stories, of course, and about the last association the bereaved families of Omagh would want.

Suspense is key to the genre, and this emotion is certainly present in the montage build-up in *Omagh* as the bomb is prepared by non-descript individuals, driven to town, and parked in a busy street. One of the most jolting moments in the film is not the actual explosion, horrifying as that is, but the moment when the men are parking the car, and an elderly man crossing the street slaps his hand down on the trunk of the vehicle where the bomb has been placed. It is suspenseful and shamefully exciting as a film convention, since the direct cinema documentary technique places us *inside* the car. The style, therefore, dangerously flirts with creating an audience bond with the bombers. But following the bomb explosion, we are always visually on the outside of the Real IRA. It is with a strange kind of welcome narrative release that the audience accompanies Michael Gallagher's meticulous gathering of clues from the authorities, from undercover agents, such as Kevin Fulton whose career has since been profiled publicly (See Teague 2006), and this painful personal investigation is where the monumetary takes over from the quasi-political thriller conventions, despite the similar atmosphere of distrust and suspicion, anonymous phone calls and clandestine meetings.

A real Michael Gallagher exists, of course, a man whose son Aiden was indeed killed in August 1998. We are witness, through the exemplary acting of Omagh born actor Gerard McSorley, to various stages of grief. First, there is denial, but only of a kind to support a fracturing ego, as we watch Michael's desperate search for his son after the blast, telling himself and others that Aiden would be helping others. Slowly and painfully, we accompany Michael's descent into sheer despair as he waits first to be told of his son's death and then, later, to be brought in to identify his body. He moves, along with his wife, into a state of shock and numbness. The funereal rituals of a service and a reception at their home keep Michael busy (as they are culturally meant to do). Afterwards, he and his wife drop into silence, a quiet but excoriating depression it seems. They stop watching television, and turn inward. Oddly, and perhaps unrealistically, Michael Gallagher is not seen (although this is true of other Omagh family members in the film represented) overtaken by anger.

It is the phone call from Laurence Rush of the meeting of the bereaved families that sparks a renewal, a way forward in the grief process, in a manner that may allow recognition, if not acceptance, but most importantly, agency. What the film reveals is that by becoming a spokesperson for the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group, Gallagher is forced to voice the dissent, the feelings, and the concerns of the community affected, often at the expense of his own personal grief. It is as if Michael Gallagher is the repository of a collective memory and collective grief. By following his trajectory, focalized through the direct cinema documentary style, we are privy to the emotional core of the film.

I think it is significant that we do not have any visits back to the graveyard where we could see Michael Gallagher talk back, as it were, to his son. The real fight in relation to working through grief happens in all previously important spaces—the house and Michael’s garage. Everything else is literally in transit or temporary—the bus rides, the car journeys, the flimsy portacabin that is their resource space and meeting place. Home and work are where most of us live our lives, and the struggle here is how to inhabit spaces that have seen one of its integral occupants murdered. Michael Gallagher’s presence in his modest home is represented almost continuously at a remove, as if we are standing in the small hallway, looking at whoever happens to come down the stairs or whoever happens to be in the kitchen and front room. The filmmaker eschews sentimentalism, as we do not have scenes of Michael or his wife Patsy sitting in their son’s old room. Once Michael becomes chair of the bereaved families group, these hallway and kitchen spaces become a besieged soundscape with the phone constantly ringing. His life utterly changes into a obsessed activist. At first, Patsy goes along with this approach, and she accompanies the group to a pub where the supporters of the REAL IRA are having a meeting. The families are able to get their demonstration and cause media attention, but it comes at a cost. Patsy suffers the indignity of having her poster picture of her dead son thrown into a puddle. The action is too emotionally devastating, and later she absents herself from the campaign, dropping into a depression. When the conflict arises between Michael and Patsy, it is one of determining how one best stays true to your dead child and to yourself. For Michael, it is finding the details of the atrocity: who, how, and why. Patsy does not want that kind of knowledge to assuage her grief, or to help her work through it. She wants the ineffable—is he at peace? The eldest daughter back from college witnesses the dysfunction created by these coping strategies of her parents, and she pleads with her father to come home more often and be mentally present in the family’s lives.

Ultimately, after the disappointments of the meetings with Gerry Adams, the Chief Constable, the former spies and surveillance officers, he heeds her advice and returns to his family.

Michael Gallagher's personal unfinished business is brought to a head not in the home (with Aiden's death, predominantly now a female space), but at the garage where he and his son worked together. The act of clearing out the garage is symbolic of Michael Gallagher's attempt to move forward. Patsy's visit to his workplace is also an enormous positive stage in her ability to address Michael's loss, and in moving out of her own depression. While it is painful for both, Michael's outburst that he felt Aiden mattered more to him than to her, since he wasn't just his son, but his workmate as well, is a clear moment of communication and a vulnerable release of pent-up emotions. That it occurs at the garage, in this primarily masculine space, is important. The family has become accustomed to Aiden's absence in the house, and now it's time to populate the previous working space with life. This reconciliation of sorts allows both of them to come, albeit separately, to hear the Police Ombudsman's report that declares as fact all their misgivings about the police investigation.

To put this report in some context, it must be remembered that one of the results of the GFA was to release paramilitary prisoners, including ones who had committed murder and had planted bombs. This almost universal pardon has led to various problems for acts of redress for the family members of civilian victims in particular. The meeting with Gerry Adams alludes to this compromise—that by effectively preventing further state prosecutions of those who had murdered in 1998 and beforehand, Sinn Fein could bring their hardliners to accept something less than a United Ireland. In addition, Sinn Fein would not pass any information they received

about the Omagh bombers to the local authorities, since their own hardliners still did not recognize the legitimacy of the police force. At the level of street politics, Adams has a case, but the human and ethical cost of turning a knowing blind eye is far too high for the Omagh Self Help and Support Group. For Michael Gallagher, the meeting with Gerry Adams is, I think, pivotal. Sinn Fein is the political wing of the Provisional IRA, and the latter murdered Michael Gallagher's brother Hugh in 1984. This past action explains why he does not shake the hand of Gerry Adams, although the force of that choice may be lost on the general viewer. The two main vocal spokespeople that the film draws upon are both Catholic—Michael Gallagher and Laurence Rush. I raise this fact not to make a sectarian point, but to underscore the trajectory of the film is one of soul-searching within the Catholic community to face up to the inadequacies of the Republic of Ireland, the police service in Northern Ireland, and also Sinn Fein/IRA. The Protestant figure of Stanley plays a quiet supporting role, and one might even say Victor Barker, the sole Englishman among the bereaved, is more dramatically cast.

[Fig.18.2 near here]

Attention to the plight of the family members of civilian victims has begun to be addressed. The establishment of the post of the Victim's Commissioner for Northern Ireland, the establishment of the Historical Enquiries team in January 2006 to investigate the cold cases of 3,268 unsolved killings (see BBC News Online 2006a), the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, the civil suit that will be laid by the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group once it is absolutely clear no state criminal prosecutions focused on the Omagh atrocity will be laid. Bishop Desmond Tutu has become involved in a television program experiment, whereby former killers met their victim's family members (see BBC News Online 2006b). Even terrorist victims are now seeking damages from Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, whose country supplied semtex explosives to republican

paramilitaries. This “internationalization” of terrorism is present in the story of the Omagh atrocity, since among the victims were Spanish tourists. Indeed, the Omagh Support Group have always attempted to incorporate an international viewpoint, a sentiment explicit in Michael Gallagher’s final speech in the film.

Some years back, it was thought that perhaps Northern Ireland could benefit from a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, such as the one chaired by Desmond Tutu in South Africa, but there has been no defining *moral* moment, in my view, in the “peace process” as dramatic as the release of Nelson Mandela and the electoral success of the ANC, spectacular events needed to cross barriers; in the current chronic condition of political stalemate, risks cannot be taken. In Paul Ricoeur’s last book (2004), the philosopher highlighted the intrinsic value of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, comparing it favorably to what he saw as the punitive exercise of the Nuremberg Trials at one end of the spectrum and the absence of any redress by conferring Amnesty (as in Northern Ireland) at the other end. It is unclear, however, whether Ricoeur fully appreciated the pressing need for justice as a pre-condition of forgiveness on the part of individuals. With this film, it perhaps can be said that ordinary civilians killed while involved in the most quotidian of activities, and the grief of their families, will not be totally forgotten. And yet, when interviewed by Mark Harris in March 2006, Michael Gallagher revealed that part of his morning routine is to check under his car for incendiary devices. The “working through” of trauma seems, therefore, endless, and it is this unfinished quality of the documentary, its lack of full resolution, that conveys its necessary power and demands our attention. As more personal

stories of loss in Northern Ireland are rendered on film, we should expect to see more documentaries appear, and it is to *Omagh* that they will be compared. It is a genre to be welcomed.

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