



'Hey, That's Interesting!':

Richard Hamilton's

Finn MacCool

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A consensus is emerging within cultural criticism regarding the containment of history as a functional necessity of progress within the peace process in Northern Ireland. Colin Graham, in perhaps the most compelling articulation of this position, claims that critical and historical engagement with the legacy of the Troubles and the peace process is placed on hold:

Part of that waiting process has been to filter out that which does not fit into or attend on the present moment . . . Thus the difficult and the embarrassingly recent past, or the irritatingly non-conforming present, is archived.¹

Graham finds value in contemporary photographic practices in how they tend to the gaps and evasions of an 'official culture that is based on forgetting'.² The idea is that visual culture can act as a critical supplement to grander political processes. The aim is not to derail current political progress but to visualise that which can be found in its wake, or, as Graham puts it, 'at least to begin to show, analyse and maybe criticise *the effects* of the Process'.³ Yet the more one dwells on the rhetoric of an 'official culture of forgetting' and a contrasting new critical vision focused on uncovering class division as a factor of urban redevelopment and the detritus of previous political allegiances, the more one senses that this new critical vision contains its own gaps and evasions. These are not the product of denial but the fallout of a significant, yet valuable, shift in tack. The fear here is that these new critical shifts in visual culture might well keep trickier subject matter out of the frame. For an emphasis on present *effects* might well be at the expense of a commitment to interrogate the underlying structures of thought and action, and their grounding in cultural and political institutions, that must bear

some responsibility for allowing the conflict to emerge and to have persisted for so long. It is in this light that it is worth dipping into the archive to revisit an example of artistic production and critical reception dealing with aspects of the conflict in the North. The idea is that analysis might reveal forms of motivation and critical evasion that characterise the cultural and political sump of British–Irish relations in the 1980s. If such matter can be uncovered, the question is raised as to the degree in which the visual arts managed to rise above that desperate political squabble: a notion that has all too often been ascribed as the selling point of visual culture in the North.

Richard Hamilton's *Finn MacCool* (1983) is a useful starting point to explore such questions. Hamilton completed *Finn MacCool* when he returned to a project based on James Joyce's *Ulysses* that he had begun many years before. Initially, Hamilton produced some sketches for the image of *Finn MacCool* in the late 1940s. These arose from his reading of the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses* and his interest in a key character in this chapter known as the citizen.⁴ On returning to these works in the 1980s, the work took on a more contemporary feel. Hamilton, working with Aldo Crommelynck, produced a heliogravure (a photo engraving) based on a media image of republican hunger striker Raymond McCartney. Hamilton thereby visualises a relationship between the character of the citizen in *Ulysses* and a more contemporary image of Irish republicanism. This work was shown in the Orchard Gallery (Derry) in 1998 and in the Arts Council Gallery (Belfast) in 1989 as part of the touring *Works in Progress* exhibition of Hamilton's work on *Ulysses*. More recently, it was displayed in the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2002 as part of the touring exhibition *Richard Hamilton: Imaging James Joyce's Ulysses*. An edition of the work was then purchased by IMMA in 2003 and shown as part of the *High Falutin Stuff* exhibition (an exhibition of artists' responses to the work of James Joyce) the following year.

Hamilton is acknowledged as a key figure in twentieth-century art. To date, he has had three retrospectives at the Tate Gallery, London, and his work has consistently attracted the attention of major critics over the years. Hamilton, as part of the Independent Group in the 1950s, is recognised as playing a seminal role in instigating the shift towards an analysis of mass culture as the matter of fine-art practice. A consensus has emerged regarding the value and general character of his practice. This revolves around the democratic impulse at the heart of his work and the peculiar ambivalence registered in various readings of it. For William R. Kaizen, the value of Hamilton's work lies in how it blurs elitist distinctions between high and popular culture:

... no one form of cultural production was inherently more valuable than any other. Each product would have to be judged on its own merits,

each as potentially valuable as the next in terms of interest or as a point of critical reflection.⁵

David Robbins echoes such sentiments, arguing that Hamilton's engagement with the language of advertising resulted in a 'remarkably analytic visual discourse about its technique and iconography' that is 'profoundly destabilizing'.⁶ Richard Morphet describes Hamilton's artworks in the following way:

They reflect an attitude of intense curiosity . . . Hamilton does not come up with dogmatic answers; indeed, both his initial choice of image and his treatment of it are directed, among other aims, towards the provoking of questions. He asserts that, in many aspects of life, to question is itself as responsible an approach as to insist on a fixed viewpoint.⁷

David Mellor adopts a stronger stance when claiming Hamilton as an 'acute social and political artist' who has 'developed and intensified a critical moral vision'.⁸ More recent appraisals of Hamilton's work focus on whether an ambivalent curiosity or a critical stance is the key marker of his practice. Ben Highmore, for instance, when considering specific works by Hamilton finds it significant that Hamilton's 'political allegiances and critiques' are unable to 'find a referential form'. Subsequently, Highmore places emphasis on Hamilton's ambivalent approach to the world he pictures.⁹ Hal Foster recognises how Hamilton practices an 'ironism of affirmation' (a phrase Hamilton borrowed from Duchamp) in which it is not always clear if subsequent work 'is analytic and when it is charmed'.¹⁰ Foster continues:

. . . it is also communicative, almost pedagogical . . . The tabular picture is also more a research model than an 'anomic archive' as suggested with regard to Gerhard Richter.¹¹

It is important to note that these considerations of Hamilton's work are undertaken whilst accepting Hamilton's pivotal role in late-twentieth-century art. It is in the shadow of this critical reverie that this essay asks what a form of inquiry sensitive to the cultural and political context of Northern Ireland (and to contemporary visual-art discourse for that matter) can reveal from an analysis of *Finn MacCool* and its reception.

Finn MacCool was one of a number of works based on chapters from *Ulysses*. Commenting on his ongoing project, Hamilton has stated:

My illustrations became a group of independent prints having their inspiration in Joyce – not bound to the works in a straight-book-jacket, but free to speak for themselves about the experience of learning ways to make images from a master of language.¹²

Terry Eagleton also places emphasis on this method of approach when commenting on Hamilton's work:

The techniques he deploys in his own medium here – visual allusion and citation, blendings of fantasy and realism – are visual translations of Joyce's own verbal modes – not 'representations' of the novel, whatever that might mean, but a kind of parallel extravaganza in a different key, a perceptual counterpoint to Joycean prose.¹³

This 'perceptual counterpoint' not only takes Joyce's modes of address as inspiration but in *Finn MacCool* also takes on board Joyce's concern with a specific strand of Irish nationalism. Hamilton makes this clear when he comments:

The Fenian bar-fly 'citizen' was associated by Joyce with an heroic Irish chieftain (I chose the name Finn MacCool from dozens listed throughout the orgy of name-droppings littering the Cyclops episode) who became identified in my renewed consideration of the mythic character with a photograph of a nationalist detainee, Raymond Pius McCartney, on hunger strike in the Maze prison in Northern Ireland.¹⁴

A 'coincidental likeness' between Hamilton's initial sketches and the image of the hunger striker spurred the connection.¹⁵ Where Joyce links the citizen to a lineage including Finn MacCool, Hamilton updates this by incorporating the image of McCartney. It is in this way that Eagleton's notion of a 'perceptual counterpoint' becomes a useful concept in that *Finn MacCool* may be understood as having a relative independence from *Ulysses* but will still nonetheless retain its Joycean connection. It is the nature of this connection that will be crucial.

As stated, the citizen is a central character in the Cyclops episode of *Ulysses*. Leopold Bloom joins a group of drinkers in Barney Kiernan's pub which includes the citizen, Joe Hynes and the narrator of the episode, known only as 'I'. Just as Odysseus encounters and escapes from the giant Cyclops in the land of 'arrogant lawless beings', Bloom also encounters the monocular bigotry of the citizen before escaping from Barney Kiernan's. The citizen is modelled on Michael Cusack, the founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association. Cusack had been named in earlier drafts but was later removed by Joyce.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the 1922 text makes this link apparent:

— There's the man, says Joe, that made the Gaelic sports revival. There he is sitting there. The man that got away James Stephens.¹⁷

The citizen character also calls to mind the tone of mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism set by the Young Ireland movement since *The Citizen* was

the title of a journal founded by John Mitchel and T.F. Meagher in 1854. Joyce himself described the citizen as one who ‘unburdens his soul about the Saxo-Angles in the best Fenian style and with colossal vituperativeness alluding to their standard industry’.¹⁸ This is most evident when the citizen speaks of the ‘Sassenachs [Englishmen] and their *patois*’:

— Their syphilisation, you mean . . . To hell with them! The curse of a goodfornothing God light sideways on the bloody thicklugged sons of whores’ gets! No music and no art and no literature worthy of the name. Any civilisation they have they stole from us. Tonguetied sons of bastards’ ghosts.¹⁹

The citizen’s venom is not just aimed at the English. Bloom, ‘the bloody jewman’, quickly becomes the target for his barely suppressed rage over those coming to Ireland and ‘swindling the peasants . . . and the poor of Ireland’.²⁰ The question of Bloom’s ethnic and national allegiances becomes a key point of tension between the two characters before the citizen finally erupts into rage as he and his rabble leave the pub in comical chaos.

A consensus has emerged within literary criticism on the role of the citizen and the political resonance in Joyce’s work. Jeri Johnson has argued that the role of the citizen in *Ulysses* serves to highlight a clash between two forms of authority. She claims:

Ulysses repeatedly reminds us that certitude aligns itself with bigotry, racial hatred, blind nationalism, egotism, violence. (‘Cyclops’ distils this alliance.) Joyce’s alternative authority is one which recognizes the inevitability of error, exercises a healthy scepticism, and yet happily embraces the new world occasioned by the fall, the lapses.²¹

David Cairns and Shaun Richards similarly see Joyce as ‘holding to the principle of liberation of self and nation through loyalty to individual truth rather than in obeisance to short-term nationalist shibboleths’.²² The argument between Bloom and the citizen is seen to replicate a familiar division within late-nineteenth-century nationalist debates between a pluralistic and non-sectarian conception of national identity and more Anglo-phobic and sectarian conceptions. The citizen is therefore seen as a means by which to deride militant nationalism. Seamus Deane is largely in accord with these readings. However, in contrast to Johnson, Joyce is not seen happily embracing the new world but as having a much more troubled stance, particularly in relation to the prevalent cultural aim of restoring vitality to the heart of national identity. Deane argues that Joyce’s work is dominated by ‘the idea of separation as a means to the revival of suppressed energies’.²³ Deane continues:

The separation he envisages is as complete as one could wish. The English literary and political imperium, the Roman Catholic and Irish nationalist claims, the oppressions of conventional language and of conventional narrative – all of these are overthrown, but the freedom which results is haunted by his fearful obsession with treachery and betrayal.

Such a stance is seen to contrast with what Deane calls the heroic tradition: a tradition seeking the ‘incarnation of the nation in the individual’.²⁴ It is possible to read the character of the citizen as a derisive attack upon this tradition of ‘spiritual-military heroics’ with the character’s constant reference to Irish heroes and heroines of a mythical past, political martyrs and the tragedy of failed rebellion.

In each of these appraisals there is a consistent polarity between Joyce and that which he critiques. It is an opposition between scepticism and dogmatism; between, on the one hand, an individual’s fraught encounter with received ideologies, and, on the other, an individual whose allegiance to the nation is secured through blinkered adulation. The character of the citizen is a valuable site through which these divisions have been articulated.

Quite how the character of the citizen colours an understanding of Hamilton’s foray into the field of contemporary Irish politics can be explored by examining two diverse reactions that characterise critical responses to Hamilton’s print. The first response is from Susan Tallman. Her attention to *Finn MacCool* focuses on the question of technique in the work of Joyce and Hamilton. The second response is from Brian McAvera who, in contrast to Tallman, downplays the links to Joyce in his critique of *Finn MacCool*.

Tallman’s analysis begins with the idea that ‘the mythic Irish hero of the title is not so much a character as a concept’.²⁵ The figure in Hamilton’s work is seen to preserve the ‘repeated contrast of the grandly pretentious with the lowly scatological’ that occurs throughout the ‘Cyclops’ episode.²⁶ Tallman is referring to the narration of the episode where ‘I’ shifts between grand parody in recounting the tale and a colloquial mode when involved with the rabble in the pub. Hamilton’s figure is seen to retain this dynamic in the amalgam of a grandiose mythic hero and hunger striker. Pleasure, for Tallman, resides in contrasting elements cohabiting in the same image. This is seen as a visual analogy of Joyce’s technical finesse. There is a distinct formal emphasis in her reading of the work as she concludes:

Yet, as one studies it longer, the photographic image and the engraved lines begin to come apart as the techniques of the dramatization reveal themselves.²⁷

The work calls attention to its particular mode of address. Initially, attention is drawn to the relay between the grandiose and the scatological. Finally,

though, this relay settles when the means by which technique generates effect are recognised.

Tallman's reading finds its ally in Eagleton's understanding of Joyce when he claims:

Joyce's perverse delight in the sheer bodily thickness of language thus becomes a tactic for holding out against that insidious 'naturalisation' of the world which always suits the purposes of a particular group or class within it.²⁸

Eagleton, like Tallman, finds value in the act of calling attention to the ways in which conventions order the world. The idea is that ambivalence – the refusal of a final signified by illuminating the 'sheer bodily thickness of language' – is seen to be destabilising. Such an understanding falls in line with standard critical appraisals of Hamilton's work. It also falls in line with other evaluations of Hamilton's work on *Ulysses*. Stephen Coppel, for example, argues that the strength of Hamilton's project lay in rising to the challenge of developing a different pictorial style for each episode of *Ulysses* that would be in tune with Joyce's stylistic complexity.²⁹

Tallman's account, however, has its limits. It can be argued that *Finn MacCool* is not only a visual analogy of Joyce's technical finesse but articulates the dissonance between Joyce and his character of the citizen in the light of contemporary Irish politics. Hamilton links the citizen to the figure of McCartney and thereby retains a vision of contemporary Irish republicanism within Joyce's loaded framework. The monocular bigotry and pathological violence of the citizen spills over to colour perceptions of the hunger striker. This point is reinforced if one accepts Tallman's understanding of the Finn MacCool/citizen/McCartney amalgam as a unitary concept.

Yet, at the same time, there are qualities in the image that run counter to such a description in the sense that certain visual motifs heroise and dramatise the figure. The viewer's eye line is set low. The eyes of the figure gaze up and beyond the viewer as if fixing on some distant horizon or grand destiny. The head is defined by sharp tonal contrasts and the facial expression is dramatised by the slope of the extended eyebrow and the blackened eyelids. The unkempt appearance of the hair and beard as well as the blanket draped over the bare chest recall imagery of Christ or the ascetic hermit. In this context, the bearded figure attains associations of power, wisdom and divinity. It appears that the visual qualities of *Finn MacCool* tap into a rich vein of associations that stretch from the Christian tradition of solemn and noble sufferance to neoclassical depictions of republican virtue. Indeed, it has been noted how the latter has drawn heavily on the former. Hugh Honour, for instance, recognises how Jacques-Louis David's depictions of

Marat, Bara and Le Pelletier draw upon Christian iconography so as to characterise them as martyrs to the revolution. Virtue in French neoclassical painting could be found in the nobility and tranquillity of the expiring hero. Hence it is Honour's point that the hero takes the place of the saint in the iconography of death in this period. Interestingly, Thomas Crow has also noted that the display of the martyr portraits (David's portraits of Marat and Le Pelletier) in the court of the old Louvre in 1793 was such that they were contained in a temporary chapel-like structure and viewers formed a ritual line, singing funerary hymns and reciting 'oaths of patriotic loyalty to the death'.³⁰ It is Crow's point that this presentation was 'distinctly pre-modern in character' and that the painting of Marat, for all its 'proto-modernist daring of composition and handling, reverts to the status of coercive cult object'. *Finn MacCool* sparks such associations not only because the act of hunger striking is underpinned with notions of death for a higher communal cause but that the aesthetic conventions through which eighteenth-century republican virtue have been imagined resonate in the image. The absence of colour and excessive material yields a stark simplicity. The body is treated with linear clarity and a precision of contour. Soft, grey tones contrast with the deep black and burnished spots of gleaming white. The focus is on the figure against a sparse backdrop of indeterminate gestural swirls and marks. The figure is thereby released from a specific social setting and the constraints of time and space. Just as Tallman registers the 'amalgam' in *Finn MacCool* as a unitary concept, there are echoes here of the ideal underlying the particular. There is also a sense of the tensions between depictions of republican heroism and devotional imagery; between what Crow identifies as a tension between modernity and the archaic.

Such visual rhetoric certainly casts a different light on an understanding of *Finn MacCool*. While the image of the hunger striker can still be connected to Joyce's description of the citizen, it is also possible to find the visual attributes releasing the figure from Joyce's critical context. In other words, two conflicting descriptions of Irish-republican dissent coexist in the work and thus confronts the viewer in all its antagonism, contradictions and ambivalence.

It is perhaps not surprising that the introduction of such potent material into the context of political conflict in Northern Ireland in the 1980s drew the wrath of some critics. The hunger strikes were, after all, a crucial turning point in Sinn Féin's political fortunes and subsequent development. Brian McAvera, for example, took offence to the work on the grounds that it played straight into the hands of Sinn Féin:

As Hamilton himself noted, people were scared of the Citizen in Joyce, but in Hamilton's Citizen/*Finn MacCool*, he is presented as a heroic

icon, a Christ in the tradition of Zurbaran who is associated by name with one of the central Irish myths, that of Finn MacCool. It's the Romance of Old Ireland, brought up to date, exactly as Sinn Féin would wish.³¹

Hamilton's image is seen to have lost touch with its Joycean roots and so amounts to little more than propaganda. McAvera's reaction is one of anxiety when considering how the image might perform in a local cultural context. This anxiousness turns on the lack of ambivalence in a reading of the work. McAvera conjures up the spectre of an unquestioning philistine before the work as a means to account for the failure of *Finn MacCool*:

Is it likely that an image of a hunger-striker (identified with the Provos), which in a strongly catholic country explicitly recalls Christ, would be seen as ambivalent?³²

McAvera's fears preclude a more considered engagement with the image. McAvera recognises Hamilton's figure as a composite of an ancient mythic hero, citizen and McCartney. It might be presumed that McAvera is also aware of the critique of militant nationalism Joyce embodied in his character of the citizen. In addition, McAvera was considering the work in the presence of Hamilton's other works based on *Ulysses* when reviewing the show in the Orchard Gallery. While each of these points highlights the centrality of the character of the citizen in the reading of *Finn MacCool*, McAvera cuts the image loose from its Joycean anchor thereby foreclosing the possibility of viewing an updated version of Joyce's citizen, in all its complexity.

McAvera's censorious tone towards Hamilton's image finds its parallel in the rationale underpinning the broadcasting ban on representatives of republican and loyalist groups imposed by the British government in 1988. Then Home Secretary Douglas Hurd's consideration of sound, vision and the written word when announcing the ban is illuminating in this respect:

The terrorists themselves draw support and sustenance from access to radio and television – from addressing their views more directly to the population at large than is possible through the press.³³

There is a shared awareness of the disruptive potential of visual media in the face of prolonged efforts to deny legitimacy to unsanctioned political violence, the hunger strikes and, by extension, Sinn Féin. The logic is that the bridge between the (supposedly) immediate and unreflective potential of various media and a susceptible public must be policed by enlightened authority (whether this occurs through an outright ban or through the medium of art criticism). It is the benevolent nature of such authority that is highly questionable. The point here is not to agree or disagree with

McAvera's politics but to recognise how a heavily politicised stance limits an engagement with Hamilton's image.

It follows that there are two forms of closure imposed on Hamilton's work. On the one hand, there is Tallman's account. She appears reluctant to consider the wider cultural and political ramifications of the image and instead focuses on the analogous technical procedures of Joyce and Hamilton. In so doing, Tallman reveals useful similarities between the two approaches. Her comparison of Joyce's use of multiple viewpoints and Hamilton's interest in plural characteristics of his imagery, or her acknowledgement of their shared 'desire to seize the heroic in the quotidian' are valuable insights into the understanding of the relations between Joyce and Hamilton.³⁴ Yet, her account never extends to ask of the *irregularity* of Hamilton's imagery – of why the work asserts a form of grandeur in the context of the hunger strikes and in the face of Joyce's characterisation of the citizen. Instead, her gaze draws to light the technical procedures underlying dramatic effect.

On the other hand, there is McAvera's account. His critique centres on the notion that the work is a naive performance within the charged field of (Irish) cultural politics. It is deemed naive because any intended ambiguity vanishes before the spectre of unquestioning consumption of the image by republican devotees.³⁵ Rather than turning upon the latter form of engagement in an effort to reclaim critical reflection as the valued form of engagement with contemporary art, McAvera turns on the image claiming it to have 'little relevance to Joyce at all'.³⁶ At root, McAvera recoils from *Finn MacCool* as it recognises what was, in effect, a struggle for political legitimacy and is haunted by an uncritical acceptance of the image by a public at large.

Against these forms of closure, *Finn MacCool* displays a distinct ambivalence in that a reading of the work can shift between seemingly incompatible levels. It can shift from considering the aesthetic play with Joycean technique in the execution of the image to examining the work's performance in relation to republican visual rhetoric. It can shift from understanding the impact of Joyce's citizen in the final image to recognising the dynamic between iconophilia and iconoclasm in its reception. These complex interconnections within the image and within the context in which it performs prevent any simple resolution. Its allure appears to be a matter of this ambivalence that arises from the play with aesthetic structures and their connections with Joyce's citizen, republican hunger strikes and a mythology of Irish recalcitrance.

It is the nature of this playfulness that should fall under scrutiny. As with many of his projects, the work began when Hamilton was struck by an

image that stood out from the everyday flow of television news reports, adverts and programmes. Imagery from a TV documentary on Irish republican prison protests was seen to be 'shocking' for its potency. Writing of this experience, Hamilton noted:

What we had heard of the blanket protest, mainly through the propaganda agencies of Sinn Féin, could not prepare us for the startling photographic documentation on TV.³⁷

Hamilton's 'renewed consideration' of Joyce's citizen used a photo image from the documentary as the base upon which to revise the Finn MacCool/citizen lineage. This allowed Hamilton to play with, explore and emulate the visual resources underlying the heroic tradition of (Irish) republican dissent. In so doing, the work can be seen to oscillate between a condemnation of violent protest (secured by updating Joyce's citizen and reinforced further by Hamilton's written commentary) and an admiration of the visual codes of republican dissent (apparent by emulating these codes). Such a position can be described as one of sceptical veneration. It venerates in that where Joyce opposes militant nationalism through the figure of the citizen, Hamilton would seem to be in awe of an unrefined vitality found in the image of the hunger striker. Yet scepticism is retained in that such awe exists under the auspices of Joyce's critique. The work *appears* to withhold from prevailing doctrines since two opposing positions can be experienced simultaneously in one image.

Such a reading is consistent with Foster's consideration of Hamilton's work as an 'ironism of affirmation' and Highmore's observation that Hamilton's 'political allegiances and critiques' rarely 'find a referential form'. More importantly in this context, it affirms the points made by Tallman and Eagleton in that the suspension of definite meaning draws attention to the 'techniques of dramatization' and so holds out against that 'insidious "naturalization" of the world'.

However, the work can be seen to do this only within certain performative limits. The work is sparked by the media spectacle of political dissent. Hamilton encounters what he sees as a rich, albeit suppressed, tradition of political opposition to the British state. It appears as a return of the repressed; a surprise illumination of a blind spot haunting the liberal imagination of an English subject. To mimic this rhetoric through the working process is to temper the initial shock and to draw it into an understanding. It is an understanding where political dissent is clarified in terms of recalcitrant Irishness – from the myth of Finn MacCool to Joyce's citizen to the figure of the IRA hunger striker. The unitary figure stands through history; at once antagonistic and aggressive, dignified and grandiose. In this sense, the

visual attributes of dissent are pictured as an essentialist image of Irishness. It is nineteenth-century Celticism updated: the poetic aggressor with a melancholic spiritual purity in its relations with death. But this is a working process governed by playfulness. It is one affording the pleasure of emulating a recalcitrant form of political dissent without having to buy into its ideological project. The pictorial surface becomes an arena for sanctioned transgression. It is a surface for fears and desires to coalesce. It is also a surface where the prohibited and the taboo can be entertained without commitment. Just as Luke Gibbons has characterised the outsider in nineteenth-century literature as one treating the west of Ireland as a site permitting the release of wild passions (an experience fraught with fear and apprehension), Hamilton can also be seen to find a foreboding allure in his encounter with political conflict in Northern Ireland.³⁸ A pleasure in confronting danger can be found in each case.

Such an interest in a pristine, mythical image replicates a primitivist impulse that has characterised much European art of the twentieth century. It has been well noted how the Celtic periphery has functioned historically as an imaginative site of need and desire for the visiting subject. It is also well documented how American advertising held an exotic fascination for Hamilton and his contemporaries in post-war Britain. Robbins, for example, had made much of Hamilton's audacious step to carry this excluded other of fine-art culture across its threshold. Hamilton continues to explore the boundaries and exclusions of late-modernist culture in *Finn MacCool*. In so doing, Irish recalcitrance becomes a form of otherness tied intimately to the question of modernity and its exclusions. It lies in the realm of the archaic. As such, *Finn MacCool* retains a discursive consistency, one where Irishness under the shadow of political violence is once again mythologised.

It follows that Hamilton's playfulness not so much destabilises prevailing discourse as shimmies with it. It neither renews wholly these standard modes of addressing Irish cultural politics nor does it stage their crisis by making its mythical foundations problematic. What is apparent is a self-conscious awareness of the pleasures afforded by the process of working through potent thematic material. There is a pleasure in exploring and playing with the language of grand rhetoric that would appear to fall in line with Morphet's description of Hamilton's 'intense curiosity' directed 'towards the provoking of questions'. Yet the work can also be seen to reproduce a sense of Irishness in connection with political violence in terms of a primitive totality and a foreboding allure. In other words, Hamilton produces an updated vision of Irish recalcitrance suited to the self-reflexive strategies of modern art practice. The idea that this should be seen in terms of a radical practice should be treated with caution. It is perhaps more accurate to view

the work as affording the pleasure of working with potent political material without the weight of engagement. It is a pleasure with measured caution. If it is a radical art, it is one with insurance cover.

But it is still a work that unnerved the critics responding to the work in the late 1980s. Accounts have either concentrated on a formal reading and have therefore overlooked the work as an engagement with contemporary cultural politics, or have dispelled the work out of hand as naive propaganda playing into the hands of Sinn Féin strategists. In the case of the former response, the insistent demand that value, when engaging with the visual, lies in the recognition of how convention generates effect is problematic in the sense that it is to temper the volatility of the image as a form of praxis. Hamilton's work might provoke questions but art criticism proves evasive by not taking them on. Nevertheless, Hamilton's work can still be marketed as a critical practice on an international stage. In the case of McAvera's response, his argument is that Hamilton's naivety lay in replicating rather than discrediting the potency of the found image. It lay in being fascinated by the spectacle of political dissent and recognising historical forms and visual precedents that underpin the television image. Hamilton encounters a mythology of Irish political violence in contemporary circumstance that has been used to discredit the rationale underpinning such action (barbaric, beyond history) and has also been used as a resource to spur such action (heroic, resilient). Hamilton sets this up with all its tensions. In short, one senses that Hamilton's crime lay in his refusal to toe the line at a time when considerable resources were given over to preventing Sinn Féin's political advance. To consider this, and to have considered the evasive forms of criticism the work has attracted, is to raise the grander question as to how the liberal imagination might begin to address its own legacies of cultural domination in local circumstance and to ask of the adequacy of art critical practices to such a task. This is made all the more difficult if one accepts the idea of an official culture of forgetting and recognises that a visual culture speeding on to new ground might well be part of that forgetting. Perhaps it is now the task of art history to undertake this endeavour.

Notes and References

- 1 Colin Graham, "Every Passer-by a Culprit?": Archive Fever, Photography and the Peace in Belfast', *Third Text*, 19: 5 (2005), p. 568.
- 2 Ibid., p. 579.
- 3 Ibid., p. 580.
- 4 Joyce uses the lower case 'c' when referring to the citizen throughout the chapter. Hamilton retains this convention. Hamilton's large-scale work, *The citizen* (1982–83) is the most obvious manifestation of this retention. This work is not considered within the

- scope of this essay. For those interested in an account of Hamilton's *The citizen*, see Gavin Murphy, "'Mad Raphaels in the Shit': The Work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Richard Hamilton Dealing with Irish Republican Protest" in Liam Kelly (ed.), *AICA Congress 1997: Art and Centres of Conflict – Outer and Inner Realities* (Belfast: International Association of Art Critics [Irish Section] in association with University of Ulster School of Art and Design, 2001), pp. 5–7.
- 5 William R. Kaizen, 'Richard Hamilton's Tabular Image', *October*, 94 (2000), p. 116.
 - 6 David Robbins, 'The Independent Group: Forerunners of Postmodernism?' in David Robbins (ed.), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), p. 241.
 - 7 Richard Morphet, 'Richard Hamilton: The Longer View' in *Richard Hamilton* (London: Tate Gallery, 1992), p. 24.
 - 8 David Mellor, 'The Pleasures and Sorrows of Modernity: Vision, Space and the Social Body in Richard Hamilton' in *Richard Hamilton*, p. 35.
 - 9 Ben Highmore, 'Richard Hamilton at the *Ideal Home Exhibition* of 1958: Gallery for a Collector of Brutalist and Tachiste Art', *Art History*, 30: 5 (2007), p. 734.
 - 10 Hal Foster, 'On the First Pop Age', *New Left Review*, 19 (2003), pp. 3–8.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
 - 12 Richard Hamilton, *Works in Progress* (Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1988), p. 10.
 - 13 Terry Eagleton, 'Introduction' in *Works in Progress*, p. 8.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 - 15 Richard Hamilton, 'Gandhian Response', *Art Monthly*, 126 (1989), p. 25.
 - 16 See Jeri Johnson, 'Explanatory Notes' in James Joyce, *Ulysses (The 1922 Text)*, edited with an introduction by Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 885.
 - 17 Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 303. Johnson has noted that the rumour of who had helped Stephens escape could be associated with any Fenian at the time.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 884.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 327, 310.
 - 21 See Jeri Johnson, 'Introduction' in Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. xxx.
 - 22 David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 84.
 - 23 Seamus Deane, 'Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea' in Field Day Theatre Company (ed.), *Ireland's Field Day* (Derry and London: Field Day Theatre Company and Hutchinson, 1985), p. 50.
 - 24 Deane, 'Heroic Styles' in *Ireland's Field Day*, p. 53.
 - 25 Susan Tallman, 'Richard Hamilton's *Ulysses*', *Arts Magazine*, 63: 1 (1988), p. 24.
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 *Ibid.*
 - 28 Eagleton, 'Introduction', p. 8.
 - 29 Stephen Coppel, 'Hamilton's Odyssey into *Ulysses*' in *Richard Hamilton: Imaging James Joyce's Ulysses 1948–98* (London: British Council, 2001), p. 4.
 - 30 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 258.
 - 31 Brian McAvera, 'Richard Hamilton, *Ulysses* and the Flaxman Factor', *Art Monthly*, 24 (1989), p. 20.
 - 32 *Ibid.*
 - 33 Quoted in Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie (eds.), *Northern Ireland; A Chronology of the Troubles 1968–1993* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993), p. 218.

34 Tallman, 'Richard Hamilton's *Ulysses*', p. 23.

35 Hamilton is quote by McAvera as claiming:

My intention was to produce an ambivalence rather than glorify the activities of the IRA which I abominate. This [hunger-striking] is a respectable mode of conduct for the IRA. It's dignified.

See McAvera, 'Richard Hamilton, *Ulysses* and the Flaxman Factor', 20.

36 Ibid., p. 19.

37 Richard Hamilton, *Rita Donagh: A Cellular Maze* (Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1983), no pagination.

38 See Gibbons' discussion of Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 204–7.