

**Ghost Developments on Film:**  
**An experimental ethnographic exploration of**  
**place and space in post -Celtic Tiger Ireland**

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## ***Abstract***



Figure 1 Speculation (Patrick Baxter)

How can film and social research be used to interrogate the relationship between a marginalized place and its vacant spaces - what I refer to as Ghost Developments? This research project investigated aspects of the post-Celtic Tiger Ireland newly built environment through the production of an experimental ethnographic documentary film and an accompanying scholarly text. In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, the Republic of Ireland experienced one of the most dramatic property market collapses in recorded history, resulting large swathes of vacant and/or unfinished housing and commercial property throughout the country. My hometown and county Longford was one of the places that suffered disproportionately as a site of what became known as 'ghost estates' - unfinished housing estates, though it should be noted there remained a paucity of social or artistic research into vacant commercial property. In my research I have expanded on the popular term 'ghost estate' to arrive at 'ghost developments' as a new conceptualization within ruin studies that seeks to explore the aesthetic, artistic, historical, relational, material and experiential qualities of a range of ruined spaces in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, and furthermore what they can tell us about the social dynamics of place. I use the 'ghost development' conceptualization as a social and filmic device that not only questions how vacant space has been represented in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, but furthermore to propose the idea that through these spaces we can begin to think of the categories of urban/rural/suburban not solely as spatial delineations but as sets of social practices which are negotiated differently depending on social setting or location. My film *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell* employs a number of different styles, film modes and techniques to narratively tease out the spaces between ethnographic film and the essay-film to create an artistic film that is subjective and intersubjective, stylized and socially contextualized. As an experimental ethnography, this project (text and film) is both artistic *and* social research.

# Acknowledgements

This research project has been an extraordinary personal, professional and artistic journey, and there are a number of individuals, organizations and institutes who have helped me greatly along the way, and who I would like to offer my dearest and most profound thanks. Firstly, I would like to thank and commend my academic director of studies at Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art & Design (MIRIAD), Dr Amanda Ravetz, for her committed guidance of this at times complex and arduous research project. Amanda's insights and direction were aided and supplemented by a superb supervisory team which consisted of Fionna Barber, Dr Tim Edensor and Jenny Holt. Each member of the supervisory team brought their own knowledge and expertise to the table allowing for an interdisciplinary approach to the research in which each area of investigation was balanced thanks to an always rigorous team and supervisory process. I am greatly indebted to all staff and students at MIRIAD, and would like to particularly thank Prof Jim Aulich and Dr Myna Trustram for supporting me with academic needs. This project was made possible through a studentship provided by Manchester School of Art through MIRIAD and I am hugely grateful for the space and freedom that this bursary allowed me to carry out my research and to film to a high standard. Here I would also like to acknowledge the help and support I received from the staff at the Digital Media Bar, particularly Ben Hudson and Leighton Moody for their time and patience considering many of the technical software issues we encountered in constructing such an ambitious film project.

The fieldwork and filming of this project in Longford was a life changing experience. I am forever indebted to many of the great people and organizations I worked with there - I acknowledge all these in the end credits of my film, however I would again like to thank Longford LGBT for providing me with such an outlet in my hometown. I am forever indebted to Prof Cian O'Callaghan, Paul Marsden, John Connell, Donal McAodh, Martin Morris and, of course, Shane Crossan for their support and insights into Longford and ghost developments. I would also like to thank Deirdre O'Bryne for taking on my project with such vigour and skill. Finally, I could not have an acknowledgements page without thanking my mother Betty Baxter for her patience not only throughout this project but throughout my life, and I can assure you that is no small task. This project is dedicated to my late father Jack Baxter and to my son Fionn Boyce Baxter.

\* Please view the film through Espace depository prior to the final section of chapter 4.

## Introduction

# Longford as Place, Ghost Developments as Space



Figure 2 Ruined Apart-Hotel at Carriglas Ghost Development (Patrick Baxter)

## Prologue

*5 km from Longford Town you encounter the crumbling manor walls of Carrigglas Demense, 'Dangerous Structure' and 'Private Property: No Trespassing' signs abound. There are several access points to the estate and development. On this day, I choose to venture in at a piece of collapsed wall on the West facing Allenagh Road parameter of the demesne. Access is unconvincingly barricaded by some 6ft fencing, negotiating past this security measure with heavy equipment is unproblematic. Wandering south away from the unfinished 'village' development on a path through the beech and ash tree woodlands, majestic in their autumn colours, I stumble upon a startling structure at the edge of a clearing in the woods. I had visited this site many times, how had I not noticed this building before? A two-storey shell without a roof on the upper floor, it resembled something one would see in coffee books brimful of photographs of World War II abandoned Soviet bunkers. Inside there are approximately 58 small rooms on either side of a 300 metres or so incrementally curving corridor. Various objects (bed frames, fire extinguishers, spirit levels, thick black rubber gloves) lay strewn haphazardly on the floor. They compete for space with shattered glass and ceramics scattered aggressively from the vandalized bathroom units sat in the left corners of these deceptively small otherwise unadorned rooms. Upstairs the recent heavy rains have filled the baths to the brim with rainwater, as if some absent presence had prepared themselves a soak and then been detracted by a pressing phone call or Facebook interaction. The sound of raindrops and rainwater tapping and flowing through the structures gives an unsettling sense of movement in a motionless place, the screech of a flight of crows overhead animate this otherwise lifeless space. Is this an apartment block? Surely not, the rooms are too small. If it is a hotel, then where is planned space for reception or a bar/lounge/restaurant? Mounting the camera on a tripod, positioning a sound recorder in key sonic spots, and looking through the lens does not extricate oneself from the unnerving qualities of the surroundings. This is very much a feature of the experience of Carrigglas estate and development, a sense of foreboding, and an unseen presence felt lurking through these incongruous edifices.*

*There is a local rumour that one hears from time to time that the once illustrious proprietor of the estate, Sir Thomas Langley LeFroy, murdered a young peasant stable boy caught in a petty act of larceny. Odd how after two centuries this rumour still persists as local legend, however it does add to the uncanny atmosphere one encounters; it's hard to shake the sense that the ghost of that young boy wanders here. For contained within the demesne walls are many of the spectres of Ireland's and Longford's troubled history - figures of renown and disrepute, struggles for land and liberation, all the discontinuities and continuities of Ireland's social, political and economic past. Carrigglas transcends its own physical geography too, trajectories linking it to key moments in history overseas. The estate was originally the grounds of the Bishop of Ardagh, and passed into the hands of Trinity College as a result of usurpation during the Penal Law era. It was acquired in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century by the Newcomens, a banking family, Sir Thomas Gleadowe-Newcomen lost his considerable fortune by heavily investing in pre-revolutionary France. A story goes that he gave his mistress a cheque to buy clothes, to which she added a number of zeros thus bankrupting him. He committed suicide in 1825, but not before he had commissioned the distinguished architect*

*James Gandon to design the estates' impressive double stable yard and imposing entrance gates. The lands were later rented again off Trinity College to Lefroy, who had been Newcomen's barrister. Of Huguenot descent, Lefroy quickly rose to become Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. He was once suitor to Jane Austen, and it is rumoured that the character Darcy in Pride & Prejudice is based on Lefroy. He dumped Austen because she had no money. The family established themselves in Tory politics in Longford in the guise of his heir Anthony Lefroy, and they were staunch defenders of the Protestant Ascendancy, and fierce opponents of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation movement. Lefroy had emerging architect Daniel Robertson design and build the manor house in the Gothic Revival style in 1835, two years later the estate was hit badly by the Oíche na Gaoithe Móire (the Night of the Big Wind). The estate remained in the Lefroy family name until 2005 when it was sold to Thomas Kearns Developments (Kearns is now deceased). With much fanfare, a large scale hotel, golf course, new housing and apartment village (totalling some 331 units), nursery, health spa development was announced in May 2006, the then Minister for Finance Brian Cowen turned the sod at a gala opening. In October 2007 the sub-contractors downed tools due to non-payment of wages and overheads, Thomas Kearns Developments went into liquidation, construction ceased and Carrigglas became a 'ghost estate'.*

*The temporal, material and social intersect in odd and revealing ways in this spectacular spectral space. The townhouses and apartments of the unfinished 'village' exhibit the brand names of huge construction concerns, Kingspan and Century Homes, as the seemingly inexhaustible winds, perhaps the last traces of the Oíche na Gaoithe Móire, cause the plastic roof sheeting to dance an incessant and eerie dance. Mounds of topsoil are heaped here and there in anticipation of the golf course that was to be designed by World No.3 golfer Retief Goosen, a mocking physical comment on hubris and economic folly. The lead roofing of the Manor building, having survived 180 years of storms, revolutions, social and economic changes, and indeed the proposed new development, was recently robbed by some illustrious thieves operating under the cover of darkness. The copper piping has been long since stripped from all the housing units. Most locals blame Travellers for this transgression, but it is equally as likely that it was reclaimed by sub-contractors who had failed to be reimbursed for the materials they had installed in the units. Since the mid-2000s many 'ghost estates' have ruptured the Irish Landscape, at one stage there were 123 in County Longford alone, however none resonate quite as profoundly or are as otherworldly as the Carrigglas 'ghost development'.*

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The above description of the Carrigglas Manor failed development just outside Longford Town feels like a good place to start my scholarly and artistic research into post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and the large scale phenomenon of vacant property that littered the landscape following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and resulting property collapse in Ireland. The many strange material, aesthetic, historical, representational, and affective qualities of the place, together with what Carrigglas says about Longford as a historic and social entity succinctly draws out the central question of this research project: how can film and social research be used to interrogate the relationship between a marginalized place and its vacant space - what I refer to as 'ghost developments'? Consequently, the aim of this research project is to combine artistic filmmaking with

ethnographic research to explore the sensory, affective and representational qualities of these spaces in relation to the social, historical and economic experiences of Longford as a place. To achieve this aim I utilized ethnographic fieldwork as a method conducted over a year long period in my hometown and county Longford. During this time in Longford I expanded upon the participant observation practice within ethnography, engaging a number of different arts, media and activist groups and individuals to build upon what Juris (2005) called 'militant ethnography' to inform a method I refer to as 'video/activist ethnography' participating in a number of key events and campaigns that were central to understanding the social dynamics of Longford as place, but which also allowed me to engage 'ghost developments' as spaces. Further to this, working with a number of key informants, I filmed a series of artistic interventions into 'ghost developments' which not only would go on to form important sequences in my finished film, but which also speak to the need for what Helguera (2011) terms 'socially engaged art' as a method that positions artistic practice within a social context necessary for exploring the various social, economic, political and experiential qualities of 'ghost developments' as spaces and places in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. This visual ethnographic material or footage, coupled social and political insights gained in the fieldwork experience then allowed me to create an artistic documentary film that combines elements of ethnographic film practice and the essay-film mode to explore the relationality of space, place and identity in Longford through 'ghost developments' as a narrative driver.

It is vital therefore at this early stage in the thesis that I define what I am referring to with 'ghost developments' - the opening piece of writing provides a useful resource for framing these spaces in relation to the various qualities of place and exigencies of crisis in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Following the GFC, Ireland experienced one of the worst property collapses in recorded history (Kirby 2010, Clarke & Hardiman 2012), resulting in large swathes of vacant and/or unfinished property throughout the country. Although vacant commercial property was and is highly evident, it was the unfinished housing estate, or 'ghost estates' that became the main discursive object of post-crisis narratives and that which entered the popular imagination. Despite many media representations that emphasised the ghostliness and ruinous aesthetics of these spaces, they were in most cases quite mundane and generic environments, and therefore it may seem strange that I have opened with Carrigglas as an example of the phenomenon. For Carrigglas is singular, and quite different in atmosphere, meaning, historical significance, experientially, materially, and socially, to the vast majority of 'ghost estates'. On the other hand, Carrigglas is an exemplary 'ghost development' - a new conceptualization of these spaces that positions them within the field of ruin studies, post-crisis analysis and urban studies. Whilst the 'ghost estate', a term that was first coined by economist and broadcaster David McWilliams (2006), was at the fore of public discourse on crisis post GFC in 2008, there has been a paucity of research or artistic intervention into the vast swathes of vacant commercial property that litter every town, city and rural area of Ireland. This is in some ways unsurprising given that the house, as symbol, is intimately connected to our need to dwell, or notions of family, security, shelter, social cohesion. However, extending the frame of analysis and artistic lens towards vacant commercial property in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, particularly when referring to a marginalized place such as Longford, can tell us a lot more about the unevenness of economic development in austerity era capitalist society, and the social significance and utility of space in what I see as a post urban/rural spatial divide paradigm.



Consequently, I have expanded on the popular term ‘ghost estate’ to arrive at ‘ghost developments’ to include: unfinished housing estates as defined and categorized by the DECLG<sup>1</sup> Unfinished Estates 2011 survey, housing estates that exhibit high rates of housing vacancy post-2008 but have not been categorized as unfinished housing estates, vacant commercial property built as result of overdevelopment during the Celtic Tiger years, and various buildings that remain in a state of ruination as a result of the economics and planning policies enacted over the years preceding the GFC. Disused warehouses and factories, light industrial units and abandoned hotels, shopping centre complexes that never saw the light of day, empty shop fronts and stripped retail units, unpeopled super-pubs and dormant entertainment venues, half-built infrastructures, boarded up council houses - these are all as much a fascination and preoccupation of my research as the classic ‘ghost estate’, they haunt the subject in different but equally illuminating ways as the vacant house. Consequently, for the purposes of distinction and clarity, when I use the term ‘ghost development’ in this text I am referring to the above list of structures that I am artistically and socially interrogating as part of my practice and research. Alternatively when I use the term ‘ghost estate’<sup>2</sup> I am not only referring to unfinished housing estates, but am furthermore alluding to a series of narratives, representations, analyses and associations tied up with those spaces, a theme that is explored in depth in chapter 2. In this regard the historic, social, affective and aesthetic attributes of Carrigglass allows me as a researcher and filmmaker to represent the ghost estate as symbolic space, and to explore its relationship to Longford as a place using the ghost development conceptualization as a social and filmic device.

It is this relationship between Longford as a place and ghost developments as spaces that has become the central theoretical and artistic concern of this research project. In the early, pre-fieldwork stages of my research, I had intended to look at ghost developments on a regional level focusing my attention on the Northwest and Midlands areas of Ireland. I would pay particular attention to counties Longford and Leitrim as they were the two counties that fell under the auspices of the Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme - an EU structural fund rolled out by the Irish Government from 1998 to 2005 that initially sought to develop what was thought to be an underdeveloped region through tax incentives to buy property. The scheme was soon exploited by developers, speculators and buy-to-let absentee landlords resulting in overdevelopment in the region, and following the property collapse in 2008, disproportionately high rates of housing vacancy - anywhere as high as 30% and 21% in Leitrim and Longford respectively according to the 2011 Census<sup>3</sup>. Early on in the fieldwork/production phase I had settled on Longford as my base; this made practical sense as Longford was my hometown, and although I had not lived there for 20 years, nor had I engaged with the place on anything other than a on superficial level during short visits, it still provided a degree of familiarity and ease of access to resources such as accommodation. I began to conduct archival research on the local print media resource *The Longford Leader* to grasp how the narrative of development and subsequent emergence of ghost estates played out in local media representations. Further to this, I began communicating with a local archivist and historian Martin Morris on Longford’s history, and he put me in touch with the local author John Connell who had just completed a novel on ghost estates in Longford. Research of the 2011 Census, coupled with

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<sup>1</sup> Previously the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, now called The Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government.

<sup>2</sup> I will from this point in the writing assert both terms as legitimate categories of social research and will therefore cease to use inverted commas when commenting on them.

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2011reports/census2011thisisirelandpart1/>

conversations with a slowly widening friendship network and day-to-day observation revealed a lot interesting facets about Longford as a place. At the fore of these conversations and observations was the perceived marginality of Longford on the national stage, and the fact that many Longfordians appeared to support this marginal representation by invariably referring to it as a 'shithole'. This became one of the central themes of this research project, namely how the negative image or perception of Longford is constantly reinforced by its social and economic marginality. The town and county had been hit disproportionately hard by the property collapse and intervening years of austerity. At that time (early 2015) a third of the high street business or retail units were closed, vacant and to-let, an empty shopping centre sat at the end of Main Street as an ominous reminder of economic folly, and there were many abandoned or half-built factories and light industrial units at the edge of town. Furthermore, the town experiences high levels of social deprivation, with some of the highest illiteracy, child poverty rates and crime rates in the country. That said, Longford town is one of the most ethnically diverse towns in Ireland, both in terms of migrant new communities and Travellers, though it should also be noted that poverty rates are disproportionately high among these groups<sup>4</sup>.

For these reasons and others which I will outline below, Longford presented itself a definite site of study - a place where I could interrogate a question of the relationship between a marginal place and the experience of vacant space, of ghost developments to which there was no shortage. I would engage visual ethnography as a method, immersing myself in my social setting and working with a select group of key social actors. I had a setting, but at the early stages of fieldwork/production few social actors. How would I interrogate the social meaning of these spaces if I did not have people to interact with them? My central problem is one common to many ethnographers at the outset of the research, that of what Agar in his eponymous text called 'the professional stranger' (1980), the ethnographer as outsider attempting to look into a society to construct knowledge of that social body. Notwithstanding having grown up in Longford, my lack of social engagement with the place over the previous 20 years meant that I did not have a strong network of people to work with and only a cursory understanding of the social dynamics of the place. At the fore of my mind was a concern for what type of ethnographic experience I felt was best suited to my research aims, and a re-evaluation of an early objective of a wide-based community engagement. Who were the community I wished to engage? Community is a notorious slippery social category within the social sciences. Is community bounded or negotiable, an open category or a fixed and closed one, is it inclusive or exclusive, is it organized through spatial or temporal criteria (Massey 1994)? Can a town the size of Longford (pop. 10110) be considered a community, or only certain social groups contained within such as migrant groups or social groups like sports clubs? My outsider status and desire to use artistic interventions into ghost developments as a device or motif in the film suggested to me that attempts at wider community engagement at this early stage was foolhardy. Instead, I would utilize a classic ethnographic fieldwork approach of engaging a number of key informants or interlocutors - as it transpired all of these informants would emerge from activist, artistic or media backgrounds.

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<sup>4</sup> See Longford County Board Poverty Profile (2009) [http://www.longfordcoco.ie/uploadedFiles/LongfordCoCo/Our\\_Departments/Community\\_Enterprise/Documents/Anti\\_Poverty\\_Strategy\\_and\\_Profile/AntiPovertyStrategy.pdf](http://www.longfordcoco.ie/uploadedFiles/LongfordCoCo/Our_Departments/Community_Enterprise/Documents/Anti_Poverty_Strategy_and_Profile/AntiPovertyStrategy.pdf). This is the last of such a report compiled by the Longford Council, however, given that the area has since experienced 7 years of crippling recession one could speculate that matters are unlikely to have improved.

The fieldwork and production stages of the project threw up new directions, insights and social concerns. Initially I had intended to look at the phenomenon of ghost developments from a regional perspective, however, upon engaging in the field with Longford as a place its relationship to ghost developments became grounded as a central research space. My fieldwork and production drew me into contact with a number of individuals, social groups and artistic initiatives such as Outtake Media Community Television, Cruthu Arts Festival, Longford LGBT and Longford Women's Link. A number of video projects and campaign initiatives were generated out of these encounters, and/or began to drive the research interests. Furthermore, many of these groups and individuals were actively using Longford's vacant spaces in furtherance of their artistic or community initiative projects (Outtake Media & Cruthu, for instance). Others like Longford LGBT were central to campaigns and initiatives such as the Marriage Equality referendum campaign that would have a profound impact on the social dynamics of Longford and the perception of it as a conservative, rural place. Therefore, a certain artistic, theoretical and social coherence began to emerge out of the research project that sought to investigate Longford and its ghost developments from aesthetic, socio-political, representational and experiential perspectives.

The narrowing of the research site to Longford, and the broadening of the social research interests required a fresh engagement with scholarly literature. New fields such as Queer theory, theories of place and space, urban studies, local history studies, and media studies began to illuminate the text and writing (and to a lesser extent the film). Hence, these new literatures required analysis and contextualization along with the material I had already reviewed. In some cases previous literature reviewed no longer seemed as relevant, while others broadened and needed fresh eyes, as in the case of ruins studies and ghost developments as a category of ruin. Methodologically it was vital to frame this new and ever expanding range of scholarly thought within key analytic conceptualizations. Consequently, the role of the researcher/artist in articulating and representing knowledge about place, space, and identity became key to my understanding of how I would carry out this artistic and social research project. The project from the outset was positioned as practice-led artistic research with film as my practice. However, at every stage in the research I was equally concerned with the social and political implications of ghost developments as a phenomenon that could tell us something about Ireland in a time of crisis. It was important that I not only treat ghost developments as aesthetic objects but also as meaningful spaces for people who lived and worked among them. Here there was a tension between my use of ethnographic fieldwork as a method and use of artistic documentary filmmaking as practice. Just as the artist is increasingly turning towards ethnography as practice or method (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 157), in the last decade the field of artistic research has slowly begun to position itself as a legitimate form of knowledge production and field of research. However, text based research still remains the dominant form of knowledge production within the academy, and despite considerable advances in the engagement between art and academia, artistic research is viewed with fear and suspicion by many mainstream scholars and by many institutions (Coessens et al 2009:18-21). Furthermore, for the artist the rigorous and rigid methodological criteria of a traditional social scientific research model can appear prescriptive and at odds with the iterative and generative process of creativity. It involves a process by which:

'The artist as researcher will have to find an equilibrium between context and discourse, between theory and practice, between personal expression and the

rigorous nature of research, and between operating on the margins of artistic practice and *appropriating the tools and criteria that already exist in science*' (my italics)

(ibid 2009: 73 -74)

The idea of appropriating the tools of social scientific, qualitative research is important in reflecting upon the production/fieldwork stage of this research project. My background is in visual anthropology with ethnographic film as a central method of previous scholarly work carried out. The audio/visual or image-making aspect of visual ethnography marks it out as distinct from more traditional text based anthropology, and indeed ethnography as a practice within other social sciences, particularly cultural geography. Consequently, this form of knowledge creation and representation has been treated with suspicion and/or lack of critical understanding within mainstream anthropology (Grimshaw 2001: 1-3, Ruby 2000:1-6). While visual ethnography was the central fieldwork method, I attempted to expand on that method by developing such practices as video/activist ethnography and socially engaged artistic interventions into spaces. Furthermore, the theoretical focus on place and space drew the project closer to cultural geography rather than visual anthropology. Most significantly it is the merging of ethnographic film with the essay-film mode, along with the use of stylistic devices (extra-diegetic music, visual effects, use of split-screen and projections, for instance) that most decisively breaks the project away from my previous practice within visual anthropology. In that sense, it is methodologically closer to what Catherine Russell called 'experimental ethnography'. Russell developed the idea of 'experimental ethnography' to elucidate a shift within both ethnographic film and the avant-garde, where both began or could be understood to borrow, mirror, and adapt practices from each other. Rather than viewing the former as a form of visual scientific enquiry and the latter as a cultural product, experimental ethnography allows us to understand both as social and cultural practices, as technologies for representation (Russell: 1999:23). For Russell '[e]xperimental ethnography is intended not as a new category of film practice but as a methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation' (ibid: xi). The text and film components of this research project are both distinct from each other in some ways, and significantly mirror and reflect each other in other ways. The social theories I explore in this thesis are also articulated in the film, however I aimed to create a sense of poetic, subjective and intersubjective exploration of Longford and ghost developments in *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell*. Hence, the use of expository talking heads, the conversational tone of the dual narration, and the use of affective image and sound design to create an experiential sense of place and space.

The scale of this film and social research project required a number of different methodological approaches and theoretical frames of analysis, and it is for this reason that each individual chapter will include self-contained discussions of methods applied and findings arrived at. However, all chapters fundamentally return to my research question of the relationship between Longford as a marginalized place and ghost developments as multifaceted and problematic sites of social, political and representational tension.

Chapter 1 is a selective reading of Longford's history from the origins of the town and county in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the appearance of ghost developments on its landscape. The chapter investigates the various reasons why Longford may have been underwritten in the annals of Irish history and attempts to unearth a nuanced and often contradictory narrative of Longford's social, economic and

representational development. It focuses on how land and space influenced shifts in power over the centuries in the county in order to contextualize both the perceived social dynamics of the place up to the Celtic Tiger era, and how ghost developments then began to play into a narrative of place constructed through local media.

Chapter 2 deals more explicitly with narrative construction around ghost developments. Utilizing the concept of the ghost estate as an 'empty signifier' in Callaghan et al 'Post-politics, crisis, and Ireland's 'ghost estates'" (2014), I look how these sites have been aestheticized in various art, media and cultural representations, and problematize ghost developments within the context of ruin studies. Finally in this chapter I explore the affective and experiential qualities of these spaces, and examine how an engagement of ethnographic participation of subjects and audio/visual devices can draw out what Klein (2010) called 'felt knowledge' about the relationship between place, space and the individual.

Chapter 3 is a dense and complex ethnographic and theoretical study of how to categorize Longford as a place, the changing social dynamics of post-Celtic Tiger Longford, and how ghost developments are utilized by groups and individuals to complicate our understanding of place and space. I employ Massey's essay 'A Global Sense of Place' (1994) that views place as a process rather than a thing, and something that is unfixed, contested and constantly being reshaped and remade by global interconnected flows and routes of capital, people and ideas. Concurrently, I unpack the spatial categories of urban, rural and suburban in relation to post-Celtic Tiger Longford and its ghost developments through an ethnographic study how of arts and social groups use, adapt and problematize ghost developments and social space in Longford. I argue that we should begin to think of the categories of urban/rural/suburban not only as spatial delineations but as sets of social practices which are negotiated differently depending on social setting or location.

The final chapter deals with my film *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell*. In this chapter, I contextualize my film within current documentary and film practice with particular reference to ethnographic film, observational cinema and the essay-film, and short discussions of key relevant films from those modes. Furthermore, employing a post-colonial frame of analysis, I look at some recent examples of Irish film representations of place and identity in a post-Celtic Tiger context. The conclusion of this chapter is a subjective, personal, and critical reading of *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell*. Here I not only discuss the aesthetics, process of making the film and narrative direction/decisions I made, I also elaborate on personal meaning within the narrative and images. It is for this reason that it is preferable that the reader watch the film in its entirety before reading this final section, as I do not wish to close down meaning for the viewer and wish the film to be as open and interpretive of an experience for my audience as possible.

The last point here is quite relevant not solely for understanding the personal subjective aspects of the film, but furthermore for this research project in its entirety. As stated previously in this introduction initially I did not intend to focus solely on ghost developments in relation to Longford. My fieldwork experience over 10 months living for the first time in two decades in my hometown, a place I had once despised and dismissed, brought me very emotionally close to the place and revealed an entirely different side to both myself and my home. Developments in my personal

narrative and my practice as artist and ethnographer were heavily shaped by the experience of rediscovering my home and confronting the many ghosts from my past that had led me to flee the place as an extremely troubled teenager. For me as a researcher, filmmaker and Longford man the ghost developments that many feel blighted Longford's landscape were not solely objects of scientific or aesthetic inquiry, they were evocative, sensuous and strangely beautiful spaces that tell a fascinating and nuanced story of Longford and the many great people that strive to make it more than just a marginalized place. It is my hope that this text and my film get across a sense of that strange and troubled story.

# Chapter 1

## *A Lesser Written History of Longford*



**Figure 3 The O'Farrells and Irish resistance to English Expansion circa 1300 (courtesy of Longford County Archives)**

The aim of my film and thesis to understand the social dynamics of Longford as a place through its relationship with ghost developments, and what these spaces can tell us about place and identity, requires historical contextualization in order to investigate how Longford and ghost developments are perceived and represented. The marginality of County Longford on the national stage is a reoccurring theme of this research project, and this is nowhere more true than in relation to historical studies of the place. Few counties receive less attention from historians, and despite the efforts of a number of local historians in the last few decades (Gearty et al 2010, Gillespie & Moran 1991, Morris et al 2010) there remains a paucity of resources for researchers investigating the county. Gillespie and Moran suggest that 'one reason for its neglect may be that the history of Longford lacks any central organizing event around which a narrative can be constructed' (1991:3) - for instance the large scale Plantations of Ulster in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the agrarian disturbances of the South East in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries or the intensity of guerrilla warfare in West Cork during the War of Independence from 1919 to 1921. Whilst scale is certainly a consideration here, it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that Longford at different stages and degrees was not an important theatre in all the aforementioned historical scenarios. Perhaps geography provides a more prudent lens through which to consider Longford's marginality: it's shifting position or claims on its regionality in the century's transition from native clan rule to colonization, stark topographic disparities between North and South Longford, population densities and economic development patterns that link it with characteristics of the three surrounding Provinces at different stages. Gillespie and Moran suggest 'its central location defies attempts to classify it as part of a wider region such as Ulster, Connaught or Leinster, and the complex interaction within Longford of forces characteristic of not one region but several adds to the confusion' (ibid:3).

I would like to suggest that an indistinct identity formation and articulation may contribute to a general lack of historical focus on the county, and a contemporary social and economic peripherality. It is not the Kingdom of Kerry, the rebel county of Cork, the heart of Ireland as claimed by Westmeath, the rich plains of Meath, the sunny South East of Wexford and Waterford, the garden of Ireland of Wicklow. These mostly spurious identities say more about Ireland's keen ability to market itself to tourists than any social topographical actualities, they are nonetheless central concepts through which place is imagined and reified through the county boundary system<sup>5</sup>. Through this brief incursion into Longford's history from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, I aim to develop a narrative that imagines why Longford does not have a strong, notional unified historical identity. I will argue that shifts in geographical imaginary, distinct divides between cultural and social identities within the county, political divisions and articulations, uneven economic development and an unclear urban/rural developmental divide have contributed to Longford's historical marginality. I am not attempting an exhaustive historical account; events, periods of social change, prominent figures, and socio-historical systems are selective. Rather I am attempting to construct a narrative of place that allows me to position Longford as vehicle that examines categories of the urban and rural, of economic development, and of notions of place identity through a historic lens. This narrative not only allows me to place Longford as a social and historical entity, but furthermore contributes to the construction of Longford as a character in the film. However, firstly I will provide a descriptive historic regional geography of Longford, an approach that I discuss in chapter 3 and one that differs significantly for the critical, artistic and ethnographic approaches most prominent in my research,

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<sup>5</sup> The county system was a post -Norman settlement importation of the Shire system of regional division in Britain, see Byrne, T, *Local Government in Britain*, (1994). For a history of how this system developed into the county system in post plantation Ireland see Richter, M, *Medieval Ireland* (2005).



but one that is necessary to provide the reader with an understanding of Longford as a socio-economic and historic character.

## Economics, Estates, Geographies and Demographics

The origins of Longford town and county can be traced back to the O'Farrell clan lordship of Annaly (the pre-colonial name for the area). Although exact dates are sketchy historians generally view the O'Farrell defeat of the O'Quinns and the subsequent construction of a settlement of earth works and wood structures on the North Bank of the river Camlin in 1255 as the origin of Longford. This settlement was the precursor of the O'Farrell castle built sometime later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and a Dominican Priory constructed in 1400 - both situated at the North bank of the Camlin where the now vacant National Assets Management Agency (NAMA)<sup>6</sup> shopping centre sits. The importance of this early townscape for the O'Farrells was primarily defensive, both in keeping the competing O'Connor clan of Connaught at bay and halting the Anglo-Norman expansion westward. For Gearty et al 'a useful way of understanding the history of [Longford] ...is to think of this as a frontier region between distinctive geographical, social, cultural and political spaces'. While Annaly was historically part of Connaught - and the claim on the territory by the O'Quinns and O'Connors pre-1255 would add weight to this geography - the granting of Annaly to Hugh Delacey by King Henry II in 1172 officially placed Annaly within the Kingdom of Meath, in Leinster. It was the effective defensiveness of the O'Farrells to Anglo-Norman settlement that placed Annaly beyond the Pale<sup>7</sup> (Gearty et al 2010: 1 -3).

Annaly effectively remained coterminous with the O'Farrell lordship until 1570 when they submitted to the crown. Whilst submitting to English law and customs they still held onto their territory. The settlement that had been built up around the North Bank of the Camlin at this stage did not have a central market function but rather was primarily religious and defensive in nature. It was not until after 1620 when Francis Aungier was granted O'Farrell territory, and the area was Shired to become County Longford, that a distinct urban settlement began to emerge on the South Bank of the Camlin (Gearty et al 2010:3, Nolan 2010: 457). This coincided with the waning power of the O'Farrell clan, split between the O'Farrell Boy wing of the family based in the North of the county, and the more Anglicized O'Farrell Bane based in the South. The 17<sup>th</sup> century furthermore saw the plantation of Longford, with large tracts of land granted to such aristocratic families as the Forbes, the Edgeworths, the Lanes, and later notorious figures such Lord Lorton and the King-Harmans who would be instrumental in the forming the landed estate system in the county (Kelly 2010: 179 -182). Nevertheless, according to Nolan, while 'the landed estate system [was] central in shaping the cultural landscape of both town and countryside' in the early years of colonialization in Ireland, many historical scholars 'constantly reiterated that Ireland was not characterised by large estates' in the manner that England was, and that 'Longford did not attract clusters of great estates' to the

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<sup>6</sup> A controversial and opaque statutory body set-up by the Fianna Fail led coalition government in 2009 to absorb the bad loans on national banks' balance sheets they had loaned to prominent speculators during the Celtic Tiger years. It functions like a Toxic or Bad Bank, has an enormous property portfolio, and is entirely funded by the taxpayer. For more on the workings of NAMA see: Byrne, M (2015) *Bad Banks: the urban implications of asset management companies*.

<sup>7</sup> Name given to Anglo-Norman territory seized in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> originating on the East coast, and a term still used pejoratively to describe the regions around Greater Dublin.

extent that the fertile grazing lands of counties Meath and Westmeath did (2010: 461). The modest scale of estate formation, the conflicts between the sectional interests of the divided O'Farrell clanship, and the early efforts of the Aungiers to construct a market town in Longford would have distinct effects on the emergence of an urban/rural divide in the county and its associated economic, political and social development.

The chief economic feature of the county in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries was the continued expansion and success of Longford as a market town, and the agricultural development divide between enclosed estate lands in the South where grazing livestock and grain economy was emerging<sup>8</sup>, and the more traditional tillage based sustenance base in the North of the county subsumed under an increasingly intolerant and volatile landlord tenant system. While the Aungier's chief speculative interests lay in Dublin, marriage ties with the Pakenhams, a family of distinct prestige in English courts, led to the construction of a military barracks, a market house, and the extension of the royal canal to Longford town in 1830 increased the town's importance as an urban centre in the county (Nolan 2010: 467 -468). However, the relative absenteeism of both these families, alongside the commercial needs of the large cavalry stationed in the town allowed for the 'emergence of a substantial Catholic urban middle class of shopkeepers, merchants and some professionals' (Gearty et al 2010:5) - a class identity which would have a huge influence of the political character of the county in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Elsewhere in the county from the late 1700s a small industrial base around linen and grain was evident, the construction and extensions of the royal canal into the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century aided these industries (Nolan 2010: 457), but furthermore would begin to add an architecturally adventurous infrastructure to the county's Southern and Western regions. The canal, which had at early stages of planning been intended to drive coal from Arigna in Co. Leitrim, was ultimately an economic failure as 'the topological constraints' proved insurmountable. Furthermore, declines in the linen trade in the region and the arrival of more efficient rail transport meant that many emerging small urban settlement around the canal embankments failed to be realized (Nolan 2010: 458).

The Famine from 1845-48 is of course a key event in the Irish historical imaginary, with the West of Ireland the central locus for Famine memorialization. Nevertheless, outside Connaught Longford was the county that appears to have suffered most substantially from the potato blight. As Nolan records the comparison between 1841 and 1851 Census reveals a 29% decline from a figure of 115,491 pre - famine years (2010:456-457). It is difficult to identify if death or emigration are the principal qualifier here, however the 'rise of emigration, coupled with the decline in the linen industry' is key to understanding the demographic and economic character of Longford in the years following the

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<sup>8</sup> See McCabe 2011: 13 -56 for a critical history of agricultural economy in Ireland from plantation to post - Independence. It is important to note that land enclosure distributed differently in some parts of the country. Take for instance the communal agricultural 'rundale' system. The NIRSA based sociologist Eoin Flaherty accounts for a significant degree of pre-Famine communalist, subsistence tillage farming based primarily in the peripheral regions of Northwest Ireland. Utilizing 'the interdisciplinary rubrics of resilience ecology and complexity theory', Flaherty's study accounts for the ecological constraints, local economic factors, and distinct typological and topological variations that separated regional agricultural process in pre-Famine Ireland (2013:1, 20). If it is unclear the degree to which the 'rundale' was a system of cultivation of great antiquity (ibid 2013:3), its very existence is evidence of the heterogeneity of Irish social reproduction. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the 'rundale' system extended to North Longford despite some cultural and topological similarities with the Northwest counties.

famine in relation to 'the agricultural economy, landlord-tenant relations and commercialization'. Furthermore, increased emigration 'led to farm consolidation' (Gillespie & Moran 1991: 8 -9), and if, as Nolan attests, the urban populations evidenced an 'unhealthy reliance of country towns on the welfare economy generated by the famine...[where] the state was now becoming the primary creator of urban infrastructure' (2010:457), the increasingly vital role of the welfare state was to have a positive outcome of the expansion of urban schooling system and the decline of illiteracy (Gillespie & Moran 1991:9). Here again there remained a sharp urban/rural divide: by 1911 the population of the county still remained overwhelmingly rural with only 17% living in urban settlements. Furthermore, the provision of commerce in Longford to the west with its not fully realized middle-class and the health of the grazing landed gentry to the south increased the marginalization of the North demonstrating that 'spatial inequalities in wealth and welfare persisted' in the county (Nolan 2010: 460).

Post-Independence Ireland from 1922 until the 1960s Lemass government reforms were characterised by protectionism, mass emigration and social and economic stagnation (McLoone 2000: 26 -32, Gibbons 1996: 82 -96). Particularly under the long-running DeValera government from 1932, Ireland became inward looking rather than attempting to expand an industrial base (a difficult prospect given the lack of natural resources) or appeal to international industry. Agricultural produce remained Ireland's central economic lifeblood, with some small scale and sporadic industrial development (Gradá 1997, Giblin, Kennedy & McHugh 2013). Unusually Longford was one of the few county towns to go against that current. In 1938, the town attracted the Austrian Jewish Hirsch family to set up Hirsch Ribbons. This was 'established with machinery brought from Vienna, [it] was an important addition to employment in the region with some 60 employees, nearly 15% of them German speaking' (Dickel & Holfter 2015), and most primarily woman, uncommon in the workplace in that era. During the 1960s and into the 1970s, due not only to changes in national policy and Ireland joining the EEC in 1973, but also to the perseverance of "one of the great unsung heroes of Longford history" in the form of Chambers of Commerce founder Martin Timlan (Martin Morris personal interview 15/09/2015), Longford was at the forefront of attracting medium sized industry to the town and county. These included the German company Foundermans, and the American denim manufacturers Burlington built a large factory at Riverstown five miles from Longford town - a site that is now vacant and owned by NAMA. In fact the 1979 Census of Industrial Production 'showed 51 industrial establishments in County Longford employing over 1700 workers' (Gillespie & Moran 1991:200). Notwithstanding these outward looking developments and a degree of industrialization, emigration remained high in the county as a whole. The town began to take on an increasing importance as an urban centre to the detriment of other parts of the county in terms of economic activity and demographics (Nolan 2010:456), and moreover, the county as a whole remained socially and politically conservative in line with much of rural Ireland post 1932.

## Placing Longford's Historical Identity

'A place and people apart, at "the heart of the midlands", but never quite of the midlands. A middle child never quite sure where it fitted in "the real Ireland"'

Kathy Sheridan [2010:5]

Two themes that persist in discourse on Longford are the notion of some form of 'divide' existing in the county, and the perceived negative image of the county nationally. Both lead to a strange ambiguity about place and a sense of dislocation within the wider national body. I have already outlined how North and South county Longford exhibited spatial economic inequalities. However, despite the small size of the county, distinct historic cultural differences can be discerned. In relation to dialect, population and settlement patterns, it has been theorized that the people of North Longford may be descendents of 'Northern refugees displaced by the Ulster plantations' (Sheridan 2010: 3 -4), a migratory pattern that remains little researched (Nolan 2010: 458 -459). This theory adds considerable colour to the imaginary of Longford, again placing the county at an ambiguous cultural location in relation to the surrounding regions. As Sheridan comments the county 'always seems to fall between cultural stools, between the ceaseless migrations, the devastation of the famine, the amorphous location between the rich pasture lands of the east and the romanticised, stone walled, tourist-magnets of the west' (2010:5). The rich pasture lands that lay in the south of the county unsurprisingly attracted the majority of the Protestant population, with the poorer land and a more brutal landlord/tenant system accruing in the north, leading to considerable bad feeling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nolan 2010: 458 -460). The place of Longford town to the west of the county would increasingly act as a meeting point where these different subjectivities would interact. Furthermore, in framing Longford's place in the history of colonial Irish geo-politics, the strong military presence and its close proximity to the volatile west of Ireland added to the frontier motif Gearty et al observed (2010:7) - Longford as the edge of Empire.

Arthur Young, visiting Longford for his *Tour of Ireland* [1776], described it as 'a cheerless country' (cf Gillespie and Moran eds 1991:205), reinforcing for the contemporary reader the county's marginal place in history. Certainly such a comment does not chime with the imagined lyrical, romantic and poetic vision of Ireland invoked repeatedly in Gaelic literature and writing on Ireland. Longford does not have a Yeats to eulogize it in the manner county Sligo did. However, the place is not devoid of literary significance either. Most notable is Maria Edgeworth, the celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century novelist and pedagogue whose *Castle Rackrent* (1800) is thought to be first regional novel written in the English language. While the narrative of *Castle Rackrent* never explicitly mentions Longford as the stage for the action, Edgeworth has clearly absorbed the intersecting history of Gaelic clanship and the landed gentry in Longford, and placed that narrative into a morality tale on the perils of absenteeism, corruption, poor management of estate and the responsibilities of the gentry towards the peasantry. Drawing on the family records contained within the "The Black Book of Edgeworthstown" and knowledge of local history of the O'Farrells, Maria Edgeworth represents the landed family as Irish in origin and containing within elements of both the Edgeworths and O'Farrell geneological history. It is significant also that the Edgeworth estate, and consequently the site of the development of

Edgeworthstown, 'had once belonged to the Northern branch of the O'Farrells' (Butler cf Twomey ed 2015:140 -141). The Edgeworths, with particular reference to Richard Lovell and his daughter Maria, were an extraordinary family of international significance too vast to do any justice to in this thesis<sup>9</sup>, it is sufficient to point to visitors such as Sir Walter Scott to suggest that they put Edgeworthstown on the map. From a local perspective Maria Edgeworth practiced her belief in the necessity of schooling for all children by setting up the first school in Edgeworthstown. It is odd then that a family of such important figures in the foundation of built environment, literature and culture do not resonate strongly in the public consciousness in Longford. If one mentions Yeats in Sligo you receive instant recognition and perhaps an oral tour of the county, however if you, as I have on a number of occasions, bring up the literary and pioneering legacy of the Edgeworths you are as likely as not to receive blank expressions.

Another revered literary figure from Longford's past is Oliver Goldsmith. His presence is acknowledged more explicitly than Maria Edgeworth. For instance there is a annual summer school held in Ardagh South County Longford that bares his name, and which explores local culture and literature. His most celebrated poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) would be familiar to most Longford people, and has often been evoked to comment on mass emigration and the famine - indeed I have utilized it in my film as a comment on Longford's recent history of ghost developments. However, it is well established that the poem, based on Goldsmith's recollections of his travels, is a commentary and condemnation of rural de-population, land enclosure and the excessive wealth of the landed gentry in both England and Ireland (Bell 1944), and there is no evidence to suggest that Goldsmith was specifically referencing Longford in that critique (Sheridan 2010:5). However, the poem still resonates very strongly in Longford's consciousness, and its description of land and displacement is highly suggestive of the county's history (mass emigration, for instance) and if one is to follow MacCabe's critique (2011) which places the history of housing speculation in Ireland as an historic continuum of land enclosure from earlier centuries, the poem is of considerable contemporary significance. My decision to include an extract from the poem in my film is an attempt to draw parallels between processes of enclosure in both England and Ireland and the kind of social displacement that occur as a result of property speculation. Furthermore, my use of an English accent for its recital is a commentary on Goldsmith's Anglo-Irishness - despite being claimed by Longford he is unlikely to have had a Longford accent. This disconnection between the local historical figure and their setting persists in narratives of Longford's historical identity construction. For instance, one can look at Thomas Langley Lefroy - a figure of national and international significance as outlined in the opening passage of my introduction. Along with Lord Forbes and his descendents, the Lefroys were one of the few landed gentry families to have left a generational mark on Longford. They had a continued presence and were locally important because of their estates, furthermore the families continued to reside in the county until very recently (in the case of the Lefroy lineage at least). With that in mind it is surprising how little the memoirs of both Lord Forbes and Lefroy have to say about the county (Nolan 2014: 464). The neglect of the place is not solely a process of exclusion precipitated by the cultural elite and discourse shapers outside the county, it is a neglect that is also generated from within - this is a theme raised by Shane Crossan in the film.

If neglect is one of the principal features of Longford's perceived marginality, then the idea of negative representation of place also occupies an important discussion point among Longfordians.

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<sup>9</sup> See Butler, M (1975) *Maria Edgeworth: A literary Biography*

Depending on who you are speaking to both locally and nationally this will be expressed in relation to Longford's huge traveller population, the high levels of crime, the notion that it is a violent place, or an ugly place, or a socially conservative backward place. In 1984, for instance, the town of Granard in North Longford entered both the nation and international frame with the infamous and tragic case of Anne Lovett, a 14 year girl who died alone giving birth on a freezing January morning at a grotto of the Virgin Mary - a horrible irony in itself. The death of Anne caused a major media scandal and national public outcry - Granard locals and public figures incredulously denied that they were aware the girl was pregnant. Visiting the town soon after her death, the feminist writer Nell McCafferty (1984) encountered a community cloaked in denial and silence - 'Ask the family' was the regular reply she received to her inquiries. She furthermore observed a sexually infantilized, particularly male, population unable to make any reflective links between sexually objective images of women in the media and the sad fate of Anne Lovett. The presence of the Catholic Church looms ominously in the article, as of course it did in all matters relating to the body, sexuality, reproduction, and abuses of power at this era in post-Independence Irish history.

The relationship between the Church and Irish subjectivities around sex, power and the self is complex, shifting, amorphous. The Anne Lovett case reflected a nation in psychosexual crisis - Granard may have become the focus of questions around a closed and closeted society but it was certainly reflective of general attitudes in Ireland at the time. However, the incident has left considerable scars on the collective memory of Granard's people and still elicits a defensiveness on their part to this day. Longford people are often keen to counter the stigma of Longford that tragedies like the Anne Lovett case stimulate in Irish imaginings of the county. When asked to frame Longford in a positive context, Longfordians will cite the magnificence of the Cathedral in Longford town. The Cathedral burnt to the ground on Christmas morning 2009, the ruin that sat on the site was a source of much anxiety for the county's parishoners in the intervening years, until its 'glorious resurrection' and rededication last year made it a national religious site and media event of which said parishoners are fiercely proud. There is something worrying about the anguish people felt for the ruin of a building that represents for some a symbol of much pain, suffering, violence and abuse of power in post-independence Irish history. Such devotion to a symbol of Catholic power is at odds with newly articulating expressions of sexual, gender and political identities in Ireland - whether LGBT identity (see Chapter 3) or in the current campaign to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution that enshrines the equal rights of the unborn and in turn creates draconian abortion laws severely limiting a woman's reproductive choice. It is also ironic that this temporary ruin sat among an altogether different type of ruination, one that was the source of embarrassment rather than reverence. In 2009 and 2010 Longford had the dubious honour of being one the principal visiting points for the international media's tour of Ireland's post property collapse ghost estates. More negative representations of Longford by outsiders, people complained. However, how was this phenomenon represented internally, what were the processes locally that led to the appearance of ghost developments on Longford's landscape, and how do discourses of Longford self-reflect in local media? Through a review of the main local newspaper The Longford Leader I analyse these issues before framing Longford's recent social history within a historical context of place elaborated upon previously.

## The Celtic Tiger Years and Local Media

This narrative feeds into and illuminates the story of Longford's journey from Celtic Tiger overdevelopment to post-Celtic Tiger property collapse, during which time Longford became very heavily associated with ghost estates in the public imagination and through cultural representations. It was important for my research to get a grasp of this journey and draw a map in my head of how these processes had manifested themselves. To achieve this I initiated an archival review of the main local print media source, The Longford Leader. Clearly a precise time frame was required here (one could map the narrative of Longford's economic development in a manner that tells a story about ghost developments and their local significance by delving decades back into this source). I decided to begin my review in 1998, the year of the initial and tentative implementation of the European Structural funding that the Irish Government rolled out under the Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme - a policy that would have significant and dramatic consequences for development and the newly built environment in Longford. Through articles, reports, editorials, photographs, artist impressions of proposed developments, and the property section of the newspaper a clear narrative and timeline of boom to bust building and development was elaborated for me. Furthermore, I could indexically link this narrative to the places, spaces, ghost developments and developments visited during my site-based film shoots - an experience that added depth to my artistic and sensory experience of place and space. This archival method was then supplemented by semi-structured interviews to qualify the narrative I was uncovering - most relevant among these was an interview with Sheila O'Reilly, editor of The Longford Leader.

Early on in my review of the newspaper a narrative of Longford's continued marginal status was clearly articulated with articles such as 'Why is Longford Losing Out' (01/01/1999), 'Celtic Tiger By - Passes Longford' (26/03/1999) and 'County Longford still bottom of tourism list' (12/11/1999). This narrative of marginality is reinforced by a series of reports into factory closures, job losses throughout the county, the serious social disadvantage suffered in North Longford, and a number of reports that comment on a perceived economic urban/rural divide. An editorial from that year entitled 'Longford - The County the State Forgot' (08/10/1999, see Figure 4 below), states 'Truly the people of Longford are a forgotten tribe as far as allocating any benefits of the Celtic Tiger', proposing a notion that a state interventionist approach is required to counteract underdevelopment in the county. Interestingly, issues of the newspaper in the subsequent three years are dense with reports into newly proposed private housing and retail developments, and furthermore we witness the property section of the newspaper expand from one page in 1998/9 to up to 6 pages in 2003. Nevertheless, the narrative of marginality persists, with an article ('Another Bleak Year for Longford' 03/01/2003 - see Figure 5) at the beginning of that year that outlines the many business closures, government schemes that the county has been overlooked for, and how Longford had been slurred as the worst town in Ireland by a national newspaper. There is a strange dissonance accruing here; on the one hand, Longford appears to be still suffering economically and is not benefitting from the Celtic Tiger boom experienced in the rest of Ireland, on the other there are a seemingly unending series of retail and housing developments being proposed or coming into existence. At no point in these initial years does the newspaper question the sustainability of this scale of private development happening in an economically disadvantaged county.



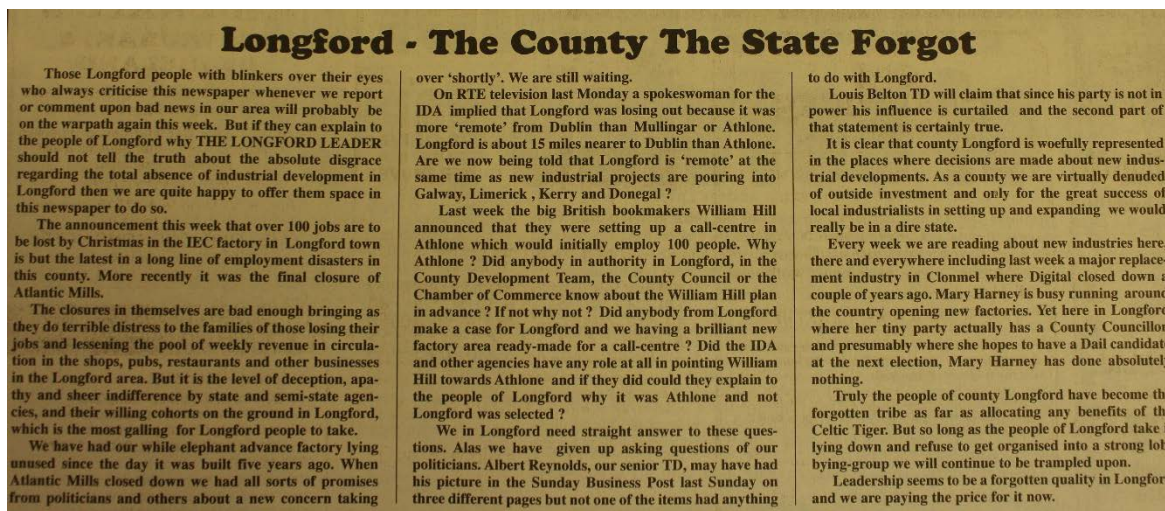


Figure 4 The Longford Leader 08/10/1999



Figure 5 The Longford Leader 03/01/2003

This strange disjuncture between what is a mostly uncritical representation of development persists in the following five years up to the GFC, during which time Longford could be said to be experiencing a building boom. Adjectives like 'exciting', 'ambitious', 'exclusive' and 'luxury' scream out of headlines announcing new housing, retail and hotel<sup>10</sup> developments, with the occasional article

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that none of these hotel developments were actually built. An informant who works in planning for local government (and who prefers not to be named) suggested that it was a common tactic of



sounding a cautionary note, such as ‘The Return of the Absentee Landlord’ (opinion piece 28/02/2003) that noted the increase in buy-to-let property speculation. Indeed there was a bitter irony to these articles as I read and returned to them, because they mapped not only a narrative of Longford’s Celtic Tiger development history, but also the sites that became the ghost developments that were forming part of my film. The most stark ghost development in Longford and my film, Carrigglas Manor development, was unsurprisingly the most lauded in the pages of The Longford Leader from the outset of its announcement. From 2004 to 2007 The Longford Leader covered news around the Carrigglas development in an uncritical manner, with the ubiquitous ‘ambitious’ and ‘exciting’ adjectives repeated as almost a mantra. It is clear from other reports that there were significant objections to the development from both An Taisce<sup>11</sup> and from some locals, however the environmental and social concerns, and the sustainability of a project of such a scale in a marginalized county with a poor tourist infrastructure is never treated with any scrutiny by the paper. The celebratory tone is best exemplified by a report on the grand opening of Carrigglas which stated that ‘All roads led to Carriglas last Monday’ for the turning of the sod and that ‘the great and the good from Longford’s political, legal and commercial sectors were there for the event’ attended by the Minister for Finance Brian Cowen and celebrity golfer Retief Goosen - see figure 6. The reportage of the development continues in a similar tone throughout the next year until the first ominous signs of Carrigglas’ future are signalled by a report declaring ‘Payment row at massive development’ (05/10/2007). The tone is considerably less celebratory, and it is also notable that it is one of the few articles that does not include Carrigglas in the headline. At this point Carrigglas drops off The Longford Leader’s radar altogether, but warning signs of economic trouble abound in the newspaper with a disconnect between reportage on new developments and articles that indicate the possible ill-health of Longford’s economy. For instance, a report in 2005 relays how there is ‘Planning sought for 9 shopping centres in Longford’ (28/02/2005), yet an article the following year outlines how local retail is suffering at the hands of rival towns - ‘Retailers losing €10m per annum to rival towns’ (09/05/2006) - whilst an editorial in the same edition fails to question the wisdom of basing the local economy on retail given people are spending elsewhere (‘Onus on Chamber of Commerce and Politicians to revive Longford as retail centre’).

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developers at the time to announce plans for a hotel as part of a private housing and apartments development as local authorities were less likely to object to a hotel due to the potential for jobs it offered and because of Longford’s poor tourism appeal.

<sup>11</sup> Now defunct statutory environment protection board



Figure 6 The Longford Leader 26/05/2006

Reviewing The Longford Leader throughout the height of the Celtic Tiger years makes for bitter reading as we can not only draw out a narrative of marginality and neglect suffered by Longford on the national stage, but furthermore it acts as microcosm of the Celtic Tiger's history of feverish neo-liberal policy implementation and ultimately destructive boom and bust economics. Sheila O'Reilly was deputy editor of The Longford Leader throughout much of the Celtic Tiger years and is quite forthright about the newspaper's role in Longford's development history:

'Nobody in the media asked the right questions at the time. There was a similar optimistic approach in other local media...essentially we became cheerleaders for the county, the notion of local lads made good by building these huge developments. You have to remember that at the time the houses were being built, there were building jobs in Longford, people didn't have to commute to Dublin to find work, and the money was great, it just kept pouring in...Also from a media perspective the advertising revenues were huge so nobody shouted stop soon enough and nobody asked the hard questions.'

(interview with Sheila O'Reilly 03/07/2015)

It would be unfair to be overly stringent in critique of The Longford Leader for coverage of development in an overlooked county given the general acquiescence of the national media in relation to property speculation and planning regulation during the Celtic Tiger years, an issue I will return to in the next chapter. Indeed the newspaper can be congratulated for at least sounding the occasion cautionary note, as in an editorial from 2005 entitled 'Is it time to ask new questions about the benefits of tax incentive schemes' (see Figure 7). The editorial comments on the increase in buy-to-let property sales in the county, pointing to how the Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme had been exploited by property developers and speculators. Interestingly, it comments on the number of vacant houses, apartments and sections of unfinished estates evident around the county, referring

to them as 'mini-ghost towns' (it should be noted that this is a full year before David McWilliams introduced the term ghost estate into the popular lexicon). My review of the Celtic Tiger years through local media was revealing in that one could identify not only resonances of Longford's historically marginal status but also begin to map its contemporary relationship with what would become ghost developments. In the next chapter I will provide a critical reading of narratives around ghost developments in terms of social discourse, cultural representations, scholarly categorization and experiential narrative construction.

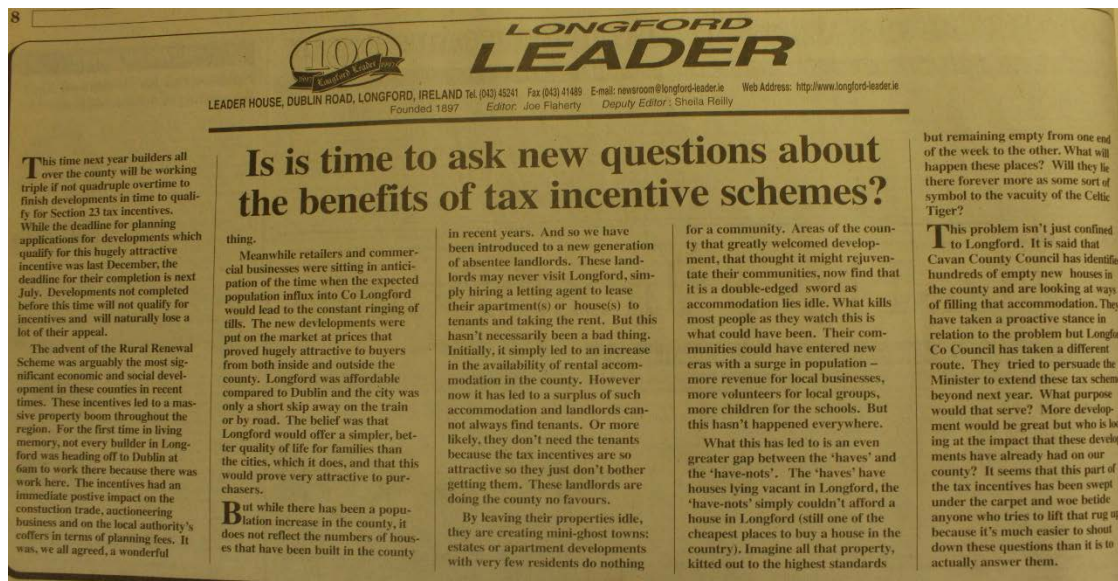


Figure 7 The Longford Leader Editorial 29/07/05

## Chapter 2

### *Living among Ghost Developments*



Figure 8 Carriglas Manor Unfinished Estate Unit (Patrick Baxter)

What can vacant property, both housing and commercial, tell us about how narratives of crisis were represented in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland? As newly-built vacant and/or derelict structures can ghost developments be considered ruins, and how useful is it as a conceptualization within ruin studies for exploring ghost developments as spaces? How can the material, affective and sensory qualities of ghost developments draw out memory and storytelling that give meaning to space? In this chapter, I will apply a methodological frame that merges textual analysis, ethnographic fieldwork with participants in Longford, and the use of filmed interventions and explorations of ghost developments to approach these questions. I will not in this chapter discuss the exigencies of the film but rather provide an outline of the collaborative engagements and/or artistic interventions into ghost developments to trigger memory and life stories as an artistic means of reflection that produces what Klein refers to as 'felt knowledge' (2010). Furthermore, I have adapted approaches and methods available in socially engaged art and action research in an attempt to draw out the relationship between space and personal narrative. For Helguera socially engaged art is 'by definition, dependent on the involvement of others besides the instigator of the artwork', therefore 'it is not a symbolic practice but rather a communicative action' (2011: 3, 8). The communicative action can be between artist and participants but it can also be a communication with space. Similarly within certain social research that looks into abandoned or ruined sites Edensor and DeSilvey advocate approaches that include 'multi-sensory ethnographies which pinpoint the diverse and changing qualities of particular sites, or forms of action research which prompt participating groups to devise temporary practices in derelict space' (2012: 479). If personal narrative is an important means of (co)-creation of knowledge, then it is first necessary to examine hegemonic and at times competing narratives of crisis in Ireland that galvanized around the ghost estate as a central signifier. Here through a review of texts, both literary and visual, and through semi-structured interviews, I draw on O'Callaghan et al's (2014) application of Zizek's notion of the 'empty signifier' to analysis how the ghost estate narrative influenced public policy and artistic representation of crisis in Ireland and the impact on the built environment. However, as I have stated in my introduction, I have expanded on the term ghost estate (principally associated with housing) to explore both theoretically and artistically other types of ruinous spaces which I refer to as ghost developments. It may be salient to begin this chapter by visiting such a space.

## **An Exemplary Ghost**

The large-scale development on the Athlone Road Western reaching the outskirts of Longford Town illustrates my definition of ghost developments remarkably succinctly. The development includes the notorious NAMA owned Gleann Riada unfinished housing estate, the Flancare business park (25% vacant), a series of independent factories, car showrooms and retail/leisure units (bowling alleys, kids adventure centre) that stretches a mile or so out the Athlone Road, the Mastertech light industrial units (60% vacant) that reach towards the railway line into the town's limits and acts as the main entry point to the Farneyhoogen cluster of housing estates (approximately 70% occupied). The earlier stages of this development were built on reclaimed flood lands, and sources in field have informed me that the developers contravened much of their planning permission in building these sites. This became tragically apparent in the case of Gleann Riada, which since the latter years of the Celtic Tiger era to present exhibited many of the worst physical and material aspects of unfinished housing estates - poor and incomplete sewerage connection, dangerous levels of carbon monoxide found in the houses, inadequate insulation, over 50% houses vacant due to the high level of buy-to-



lets sold on the estate, fly-tipping and problems with vermin, incomplete roads, paths and public lighting, some of the site remaining under-construction and unsecured, an apartment block at the front of the estate so poorly built that it could never be inhabited because it did not pass even the most basic health, safety and fire regulations<sup>12</sup>. Gleann Riada understandably received considerable media attention because of the human cost aspect to its ghost estate status.

However, if one wanders a few minutes east to the Mastertech development you will see something entirely different with less obvious human interest accruing but which is equally revealing of the social dynamics of ghost developments. These units were built for light industry and logistics, few today house such industries. We instead find Shannonside Radio, a discount supermarket, a Polish run ad hoc gym, a youth training and education service, and of particular interest for my research, Outtake Media community TV studio. What one also finds is large empty units, lots of them. Standing in the centre of a square of units at the Farneyhoogen end of the Mastertech development, in what is probably one of Longford's largest open spaces at 22000 sq. metres, one is struck by how the ambitious scale of the endeavour is entirely out of sync with the economics of Longford. Much of Longford's heavily industry closed doors in the 1980s, construction and retail in the form of shopping centres formed its central lifeblood in the following years, logistics and warehousing would make sense given Longford's geographically central location were it not for the fact that it had been bypassed for much investment infrastructure in favour of nearby Athlone and Mullingar in the two decades since the 1990s. Mastertech is a development out of scale with the reality of its location, its haunting qualities reflect the failure of decentralising a nation as an economy. Its units when occupied are stripped of their intended function and instead become ad hoc spaces of other types of fringe social activities, and while they may not be ruins the structures - shell-like, unilluminated during darkness, their fraying materiality - are an imposing and menacing presence for those you pass them daily on their way home to Farneyhoogen.



Figure 9 Vacant Unit at Mastertech Business Park (Patrick Baxter)

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<sup>12</sup> This building was once described as the worst building in Ireland. Watch its demolition here as a piece of tragi-comedy: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOZ\\_-pkf6NSQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOZ_-pkf6NSQ)

The small signs of life in Mastertech are deceptive and this deception is at its most pronounced at night-time when under the cloak of darkness other types of socialities are manifest. The area can be described, following Farley and Symmons Roberts (2013), as 'edgelands'. These much overlooked spaces are 'where urban and rural negotiate and renegotiate their borders', places where 'the smaller identity of things...have remained largely invisible to most of us', geographies and sites that are 'anything but' timeless, fixed as they are in specific social, spatial and economic contexts, but they are also environments that 'often contain decay and stasis, but could also be dynamic and deeply mysterious' (2013: 5-7). I sound record at night in a porous series of unfinished units in the developments, with only a flashlight to aid my passage; I clamber over discarded objects (pieces of old worn clothing) or the sound of broken glass or empty beer cans alerting me to the structure's alternative utility. Dogs bark, apparently some brave souls take their dogs for nightly strolls in this unnerving environment, and this sound is punctuated by the loud thump of a heavy cast iron fire escape door crashing shut in the wind on the upper tier of the building. Disconcerting as these sounds are, they are benign in comparison to the noise of a gang of approaching teenagers who utilize the easy access and sheltered space for youthful transgressions. These spaces function therefore in much the same way as what Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007) called 'ambivalent landscapes' of urban parks and post-industrial ruins in the city, spaces that are often prohibitive, unwelcoming, dark, disordered and replete with the suggestion of impending violence (evidenced by the presence of broken glass, graffiti, used drug paraphernalia, for instance).

The sense of ambivalence that these type of out-of-town, edgelands ghost developments elicit in a public render them easier, and perhaps more desirable, to ignore, and sites like Mastertech, despite exemplifying many of the problems of a neo-liberal model of development, therefore did not feature centrally in attempts to narrate crisis in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. This role was reserved for ghost estates or unfinished housing estates. However, in some sense, the unfinished housing estate in Ireland, particularly in rural parts of the country like Longford, could be described as edgelands. Whilst the concept of edgelands would not normally include housing estates, given their centrality to the fabric of daily life and social ordering, due to a laxation of planning restrictions, tax-incentivized speculation such as the Rural Renewal Scheme and poor government spatial policy, they often find themselves geographically at the edge of urban centres, distant from social resources and amenities. In this sense they are placed in very specific temporal context; pre-Celtic Tiger housing estates would have typically been built within the boundaries of urban centres. Structurally and spatially ghost estates are disordered. In some cases the first segment of housing may be completed and occupied, later segments may be vacant and/or unfinished, sections of road and paths may be incomplete and dangerous to negotiate, parts of the estates may be still construction sites, fenced off, hoarded up, perhaps, but still incongruous as a site of dwelling. Objects and materials, a discarded child's bike or a cement mixer will alert the observer to the sudden downing of tools of the worker or flight of the inhabitant. Whilst the houses are often mundane in features, the proliferation of the yellow two-storey semi-detached across the country, should speak to the ordered and contained, evidence of transgressive utility and the experience of haunted uncertainty much of these site elicit, points more to the disordered, ambivalent landscapes Jorgensen and Tylecote (2007) explore.

Whilst the ghost development, vacant commercial property certainly, could not be contained within a national narrative that excluded a critique of international capitalism, the ghost estate began to function as carrier of the narrative of Ireland's economic crisis, and although significantly less pronounced in the last few years, it is a means then by which to re-order them as spaces. As the

geographer Cian O'Callaghan pointed out: "because there's lots that isn't resolved around unfinished estates and the issue of ghost estates and in one sense what these crisis narratives have done is that they've packaged them away very cleanly, contained the crisis in the ghost estate and contained the particular narrative around the ghost estate and that's become a way in which we can forget about them again." (interview Cian O'Callaghan 15/09/2015). What were these narratives and how were they articulated? How do they conflict and compete for supremacy? What was the role of art, and how were these narratives represented in various discourses, texts and visual mediums? I will explore these questions in the following two sections before placing ghost developments within the wider context of ruin studies and aesthetics of ruination.

## The Ghost Estate Narrative

### Discourses of Crisis

Depending on where you are positioned, or aligned, how the ghost estate represents crisis in Ireland can elicit distinctly different narratives. For me O'Callaghan et al succinctly captured a linear reading of the crisis in the following statement:

'From 1993 to 2007 Ireland experienced a period of unprecedented economic growth. Presenting itself as a small open and liberalised economy with a low corporate tax rate, the country became a leading destination for footloose transnational capital. A period of export-led growth during the 1990s was followed in the 2000s by growth largely predicated on a debt-fuelled property bubble. From 2007 onwards, as the global financial system collapsed, so too did Ireland's economic miracle, leaving in its trail mass unemployment (peaking at 14.6%), large scale emigration (net emigration of over 122,000 since April 2009), a broken banking sector (the country's 6 principal banking institutions were, at least partially, nationalised), an indebted government (government debt standing at 117% of GDP) and public (1 in 8 households with a mortgage in arrears of 90 days or more), and a wrecked housing market (prices having dropped over 50% for houses and 60% for apartments) up to April 2013.'

(O'Callaghan et al 2014: 121)

While few would disagree with the specifics of much of this analysis, subtle nuances in the narrative of crisis and collapse have implications for how we view the economics of development at the time, and who is apportioned blame for its failure. One of the most celebrated accounts of the Irish Economic Crisis, *Ship of Fools* (2009) by journalist and cultural critic Fintan O'Toole, views the property crisis as symptomatic of a wider political malaise of greed, corruption and poor governance in Celtic Tiger era Ireland. In a chapter dealing with the property bubble, O'Toole lays much of the blame for the emergence of property vacancy on the cosy relationship between the Celtic Tiger era Fianna Fáil led government and property developers, the construction industry and the banking



sector (2009: 97 -124). This property bubble was accordingly facilitated by tax incentives and a lack of regulation within the planning regime of Ireland, meaning areas of Ireland such as Longford and Leitrim, subject as they were to tax-incentivized planning policies such as The Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme, suffered disproportionate overdevelopment (Kitchen et al 2010: 26). Or in O'Toole's words; 'public money was squandered on putting up empty shells in places where no one wanted to live' (2009:117).

Is this statement perhaps an oversimplification of a set of power relations accruing at the time in Ireland? Power relations that systematically motivated desire for the accumulation of property as a mechanism for powering the central engine of the Celtic Tiger economy - construction and property speculation? Commenting on the drive of the Irish householder, or individual, to "get on the property ladder" - an oft repeated phrase in the popular lexicon during the height of the property bubble - O'Toole noted that 'Ireland became a nation of speculators, betting on endless rises in house prices' (ibid:111). However, such a comment judiciously ignores the role of the media in sponsoring the notion that the housing sector was in good health, and through opinion pieces and property supplements, fostering a climate that encouraged the public to buy private housing. Media analyst Julian Mercille's structural deconstruction of the Irish media's attitudes to crisis and the subsequent process of austerity notes that many media outlets, particularly newspapers like *The Irish Times* - Fintan O'Toole's employers it should be noted - were dependent on advertising venues from real estate agents and other businesses heavily invested in property speculation. They were therefore disinclined to produce copy that criticized overdevelopment or cast negative aspersions over the health of the property market (Mercille 2013:3 -4). It is perhaps unsurprising then that nowhere in O'Toole's investigation is the media's complicity critiqued.

Kirby comments of the investigative journalist approach of O'Toole, that whilst it 'is very valid, it tends to blame the quality of the governors (both economic and political), rather than to examine the structures of power that might help explain why they acted as they did' (Kirby 2010:44). Kirby favours an International Political Economy approach that seeks to analyse the Irish Model of economic development in relation to macro processes of international governance, financial systems, and development structures. By 'drawing attention to the dominant role played by multinational investment in the Irish growth model, and the subservience of policy-makers to the needs of the multinational companies' (ibid: 54), Kirby develops an approach that widens the terms of reference in the debate on the Irish economic collapse, removing solely national factors. In doing so, he attempts to provide a framework by which further economic models may draw on global determinant factors rather than just national and local exigencies.

Kirby's paper is part of a growing post-crisis political economy literature that either directly analyses the cause and effect of Ireland's financial crisis, or uses the Irish Model as a paradigm for interrogating the validity of market-driven neo-liberal economics<sup>13</sup>. However, few of these pieces include spatial, planning, or local geographic factors in understanding the daily lived effects of crisis

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<sup>13</sup>See for instances: Lane, P (2011) *The Irish Crisis* IIS Discussion Paper No. 356, Clarke, B & Hardiman, N (2012) *Crisis in the Banking System* Geary Institute Working Paper 03 University College Dublin, Dieckmann, S & Plank, T (2011) *Default Risk of Advanced Economies: An Empirical Analysis of Credit Default Swaps during the Financial Crisis* University of Pennsylvania

on populations and communities. In contrast, by focusing their lens on the phenomenon of unfinished housing estates from a spatial analytic and critical geographic perspective, Kitchen et al (2012, 2010) - researchers who are attached to National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) - cite economic and social policies driven by neo-liberalism, poor planning regulations, and tax incentives for developers and speculators as some of the chief reasons for the rise of property vacancy in Ireland. Coupling spatial and quantitative data with a structural and qualitative approach, their papers attempt to not only critically assess the origins and causes of the crisis, but also to suggest frameworks for better systems of planning policy and governance<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the researchers at NIRSA are keen to highlight some of the negative social implications of unfinished housing estates; namely feelings of alienation, the breakdown of community and the poor distribution of public services in areas blighted by overdevelopment, health and safety issues, instances of 'anti-social'<sup>15</sup> behaviour (2010:34, 2012:10). An awareness of these issues distinguishes NIRSA's research from much of the top-down style economic commentary that dominates much public and academic discourse on crisis and property. Nonetheless, whilst the spatial and planning research coming out of NIRSA is vital for any scholarly enquiry into contemporaneous understanding of the place of property in Ireland's socio-economic system, it does lack a historical perspective on the foregrounding of private property as a central vehicle for economic development in Ireland.

MacCabe's *The Sins of the Father* (2011) outlines, through a linear investigation into public policy and political strategies around land, housing, industry and finance, how Ireland has, since colonization and subsequent enclosure of the land, been subject to a predatory, regressive and conservative economic framework. This framework has consistently benefited the ruling elite (property owners, big farming, speculators, developers, agents, and politicians) at the expense of citizens and the development of indigenous industries, a legacy that continued throughout the history of the State. MacCabe rigorously documents how successive generations of public and economic policies favour private accumulation at the expense of social housing, and how much of the public discourse (whether parliamentary or through the press) have consistently positioned private owner-occupancy as the sole legitimate form of dwelling and social relations in Ireland (2011:13 -56). *The Sins of the Father* therefore, is far more virulent in its critique of private accumulation and property ownership than the work emerging from NIRSA, which is perhaps constrained by the need to positively engage with the public institutions (planning boards and various government departments) charged with finding solutions to Ireland's economic and spatial woes. It is for this reason that I draw on MacCabe's critique to develop the ideological discussion between the two narrators in my film. This attempts to map historical continuity of inequality in Ireland onto conservative forces such as the Catholic Church and property speculators to question the pursuit of private property as the sole legitimate form of dwelling in Ireland and what this means for attempts to re-imagine ghost developments as spaces. These are issues that I will return to in the final two chapters.

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<sup>14</sup>See also: Kitchen et al (2010) *A Haunted Landscape: Housing and Ghost Estates in Post -Celtic Tiger Ireland* NIRSA Working Paper 59

<sup>15</sup>I prefer the term 'challenging behaviour' due to the asymmetric distribution of power and class relations implicit in the phrase 'anti-social'.

### Quantifying and Visualising Narratives

Mainstream media approaches to the ghost estates tended to frame the debate around these spaces in an overarching narrative that attempts to locate the vacant house in a convenient and coherent but simplistic framework, adorning this narrative with reoccurring and easily accessible visual motifs. For Luke Gibbons (2013), the stark images of empty shells of houses incongruously parked in the often 'sparse' rural landscape recalls a certain visual trope of 'Irishness' - Ireland as the Wild West, in this instance of international capital, that of a nation incapable of truly managing its own affairs rationally. This Wild West trope was evident in much of the photographic representations of Ireland's economic crash via the conduit of the ghost estate, perhaps most famously captured in Kim Haughton's iconic image of two wild horses facing down the lens on the unkempt grounds of an unfinished house in the 'West' of Ireland - I will return to this image in a moment. These kinds of images were reproduced and reprinted endlessly in the international print media - the implications were a representation of Ireland as a peripheral, Wild West economy. Nationally, much of the commentary from the government and other vested interests, including the print media who as previously mentioned had a definite stake in the housing market, was of the hue that 'we as a nation had lost the run of ourselves', 'that we all partied' in Brian Lenihan's<sup>16</sup> words, the vacant house and ghost estate represented post-colonial national shame. Using Zizek's post-political theory and the concept of the 'empty signifier' (a signifier emptied of any one particular meaning and consequently open to multiple, conflicting interpretations), O'Callaghan et al (2014) analyse the ghost estate as a vehicle for inscribing a neo-liberal narrative of excess as a means of containing the crisis within the ghost estate. The public would shoulder the blame for the crisis, the vacant house a symbol of the individuals' hubris and folly. This narrative of course ignores the role of international capital and the drive towards property speculation as the engine of a national economy in bringing about the crisis and the property collapse. Whilst there were other alternative socially progressive attempts to negotiate meaning through these spaces (unfinished housing estates as potential social housing for instance), it was the narrative of excess, though filtration in elite political discourse and the mainstream media, that gained ascendancy as the central narrative of Ireland's crisis.

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<sup>16</sup> Minister for Finance from 2008 -2010.

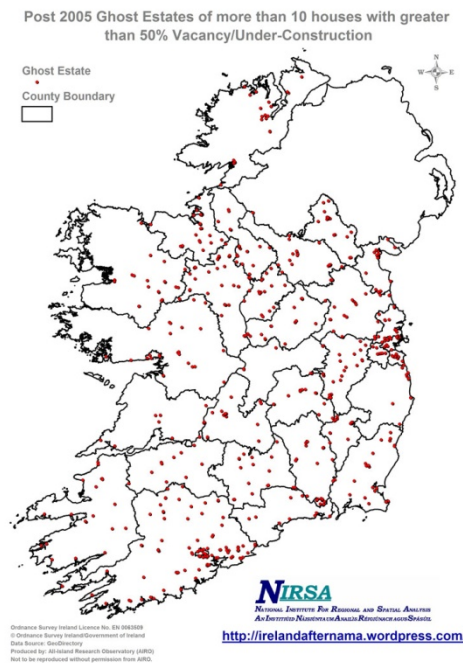


Figure 10 NIRSA Countrywide Map of Ghost Estates (courtesy of NIRSA)

As O’Callaghan et al point out at this time there was also a significant preoccupation with quantifying the levels of vacancy in the country, initially drawing on the spatial analytic and mapping work of NIRSA who were attempting to understand the extent of the phenomenon as a means of critiquing failures in policy and neo-liberal economics through quantitative research. However, this too became a site of contestation in the search for inscribing meaning on ghost estates by different agencies scrambling to put a figure on the phenomenon. If they could be quantified, the crisis could be contained: ‘[B]y insisting upon and “fixing” their geography, the ‘ghost estate’ map transformed their meaning into the articulation of a geographically uneven crisis’ (2014: 129). As an ‘empty signifier’ the ghost estate took on aesthetic, geographical and representational capacity in explaining crisis, however it was only part, albeit a significant part, of the physical manifestation of uneven development and the failures of the market in bringing about crisis. The 2011 Census & DECLG Unfinished Estates survey 2011 identified 2,846 ghost estates, or some 289, 451 vacant units, throughout the country, but did not enumerate vacant commercial property as part of those surveys. Similarly, vacant commercial property did not figure significantly in media representation and social discourse on post-Celtic Tiger property collapse. It is interesting to speculate why: perhaps housing gains more media and public traction because as ‘homes’ they are instinctively linked with the need to dwell, or perhaps because the house in the post-colonial Irish imaginary is associated with the desire for land and the various land wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. More likely a reason for this returns to the narrative of excess, that the ghost estate could be linked to the folly of the general public in desiring property as an investment opportunity without being sufficiently savvy of the capricious nature of the market. The empty house was more accessible as a symbol of crisis than the unopened shopping centre or the vacant light industrial unit in this regard, there was furthermore an aesthetic element to the representation of the ghost estate that captured the zeitgeist of crisis and which requires considerable scrutiny.

However before moving on to a review of how ghost developments and other aspects of the newly built environment have been represented artistically, it is vital to point to a significant shift in the economic and public policy around housing, property and the standing of ghost estates over the last eight years. The extensive media coverage, both national and international, of the various controversies around the poor conditions on many unfinished housing estates forced the Coalition Government's hand and into action. Consequently, the state provided structural funding in the form of the Site Resolution Programme, and the later The Special Resolution Programme, through which local authorities could draw down considerable monies to deal with the worst offending unfinished housing estates. The commitment with which the 26 county councils throughout the country have accessed and utilized this funding varies considerably, but Longford County Council did really taken the bull by the horns in this regard. In fact since late 2014, and coincidentally at the very time I began fieldwork and my production stage of the film in Longford, the local authorities there have been very active in first fencing off and boarding up unfinished and vacant houses, and later demolishing many of the sites. There are now only a handful of unfinished housing estates in Longford. After an initial period of intense focus on these spaces, followed by a strange silence about them, many see these 'resolutions' as progress. Given that Ireland is now in a period of economic recovery, who wants to be reminded of past mistakes manifest in such stark physical form?

There is a danger here, economically, socially and historically. It has to do with how a society actively forgets (Connerton 2009), and how the State and financial powers manage crisis and recovery in their own interests. Economic 'recovery' in Ireland has involved years of harsh, painful and socially destructive austerity that has deepened inequality, forced many of our brightest young people to emigrate, and created a homelessness crisis the like of which has not been seen since the foundation of the State. At the same time the National Asset Management Agency has been selling off large packages of its *publically owned* property portfolio at rock bottom market prices (one of the most extensive property portfolios held by a State, corporation or agency in the globe) to international investment companies, thus creating in Dublin a false housing shortage crisis and another round of large scale property speculation (Byrne 2015). If the Celtic Tiger era speculative practices reintroduced the infamous historical figure of the absentee landlord to the social landscape of rural Ireland, then the actions of NAMA have *introduced* the international absentee landlord into the cityscape. The knock on effect is a vastly inflated renting market meaning that many of Dublin's disadvantaged communities and low paid workers can no longer afford to live in the Capital, and other large urban centres. The government have tacitly proposed relocating people to rural areas like Longford at a time when the local authorities are busy demolishing much of the vacant housing stock (it is debatable as to how much of these poorly built structures would be inhabitable anyway after several years of dereliction). Furthermore, the upturn in spending, employment and Foreign Direct Investment has completely bypassed Longford - if we are in recovery it is of a very uneven nature. It's difficult to see how an economic policy based on kick-starting a construction boom centred around a speculative housing market, supplemented by tax revenue from high end IT workers employed by Tech companies who pay almost zero in corporation tax, can lead to sustainable economic solutions for country. Haven't we been here before? My research and film on Longford comes at this strange and frustrating period in Irish history, at the Centenary of the Easter Rising and early aspirations of a sovereign State, when the opportunity for imagining a different kind of society has been wasted and there is a seemingly intentional repetition of history afoot that is benefitting the few at the expense of the many. Many of these issues hover around the narrative of my film, and as a representation of Longford and crisis it makes a small gesture at both documenting

our recent history and perhaps suggesting how we can look at different, important routes to imagining an alternative Irish society.

### ***Art, Aesthetics and Ghost Spaces***



Figure 11 Photo by Kim Haughton

*'At one point in 2010 I was contacted by a French TV crew and they wanted to film ghost estates, and so like a lot of them they fly into Dublin and they want to get a ghost estate within a half hour's radius of the city. So I took them to visit some ghost estates outside Sandycove, some unfinished commercial developments. They ended up filming a bit and I was out with them in snow on a Sunday morning for ages, but they were very dissatisfied with the estates I was bringing them to y'know, but I said "these are the estates, this is what they look like" and they literally said "these aren't ghostly enough"'*

*(interview with Cian O'Callaghan 15/09/2015)*

#### Ghost Photography

O'Callaghan's story is quite revealing of the disjuncture that occurred between the materiality of the majority of ghost estates and the desire to aestheticize these spaces as haunted ruins as a means of dramatizing narratives of Ireland's economic crash, often stripping the spaces of their socio -

economic or local sited context in the process. Here we have the coupling of two distinct visual tropes - Ireland as the Wild West and as the mystical haunted ghostly landscape. Referring back to the iconic Kin Haughton photo, a very dramatic representation of the former, I note a quite interesting reference in Luke Gibbons' article (Gibbons 2013: 127 -128). The location of the house, referring to its reproduction in a 2010 New York Review of Books article on Fintan O'Toole's *Ship of Fools*, is sited as being in Co. Leitrim, geographically and socially the West of Ireland. It is not, the house is on the main Dublin to Sligo road just outside Newtownforbes, Co. Longford - administratively in Leinster and therefore East, though geographically Longford could be argued as much more frontier, as I outlined in the last chapter. I am not entirely sure if this oversight is intentional or a genuine mistake, however it's geographical misappropriation does add calibre to the Wild West trope in this instance. The house is also an unfinished single standing construction<sup>17</sup> rather than part of a ghost estate in the classic sense - though having visited the site many times and filmed there it does have a disordered and haunted quality similar to the ghost estate. It is also unusually an example of a good planning decision on behalf of the local authorities - the site belongs to a wealthy local professional, and the house had started construction without planning permission, being located on a very busy stretch of road the intended access points to this large mock Georgian house would have likely caused considerable traffic problems. This context is clearly too parochial, and more importantly, in tension with the narrative of ghost estates to have troubled copy editors, however such details can be important in interrogating how certain visual and textual representation narratives and motifs of crisis function as simplistic, easily accessible referents.

When approaching ghost estates from an artistic perspective, one is immediately hit by a fascinating aesthetic paradox. With the exception of a few visually striking examples such as Carrigglass Manor development, unfinished housing estates, or housing in general from the era, is remarkably unremarkable, notable by its uniform form, generic and repetitive - materially, architecturally and socially. We see the proliferation of the prosaic yellow house grouped together in suburban and rural areas up and down the country, one housing estate in Cork indistinguishable from that in Longford. However, this uniform and ordered appearance can often belie other disordered, sensual and affective qualities of the ghost development - evidence of transgressive utilities, crumbling materials, incongruous abandoned objects suggesting the recent evaporation of the construction worker, a shell of the normal attributes of house-holding that give the airless sense of life and work abruptly halted, ceased. These attributes were strong materials for artists exploring ghost estates in the early years of the crisis, but the ghost estate as empty signifier has begun to take on a new symbolic role on the Irish landscape: where once these buildings were porous and easily trespassed, the fences and hoardings have been hoisted up with remarkable proficiency. Increasingly the haunting materiality of these spaces is being replaced by their renovation through the refinancialization of the housing sector - the ghost estate is becoming in some instances the viable housing estate. And in some cases the spaces have been demolished altogether. Nevertheless, for a period the ghost estate was ripe for artistic exploitation.

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<sup>17</sup> The issue of single standing dwellings in rural Ireland is much contested in Irish political discourse with strong overtones of the acrimonious Urban/Rural divide dichotomy. However, the proliferation of single standing dwellings is extremely problematic in terms of spatial planning, environmental impacts, shifts in demographics and uneven economic development. For an excellent critique of these issues read Gavin Daly's analysis of single standing housing: <https://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/2013/10/26/counting-the-cost-of-rurban-ireland/>

The main visual medium for exploring ghost estates was photography. The aforementioned work of Kim Haughton received extensive reproduction in the print media globally, but as I have outlined the positioning of much of this work alongside articles that fostered the neo-liberal narrative of excess and Ireland's re-emergent social peripherality loaded these images with a heavy symbolic functions. For photographic aesthetics that detached from this symbolization/signifying one needs to consider Anthony Haughey's *Settlement*<sup>18</sup> project (2011). Shot in half-light between sunset and sunrise, the long exposures are a means by which the artist draws out the stark manner in which overdevelopment during the Celtic Tiger years ruptured the natural environment. The ghost estate in these images becomes a commentary on another type of excess, that which has a devastating environmental impact on the landscape. Haughey, in much the same way that Edensor (2005) does in his work on industrial ruins, decouples the sites in question from their geographical location - as in Edensor's work the effect of de-locating the spaces allows the artist to perform an overarching critique of neo-liberal development models that does not need then to draw on nostalgic attachments or narratives of place. Haughey does here reproduce the 'haunted landscape' notion that runs through much of ghost estates photography, and although the images in *Settlement* are highly aestheticized, Haughey has always sought to contextualize his work in a discourse that critiques Celtic Tiger and neo-liberal economics through collaborations with NIRSA<sup>19</sup> and with Mahoney Architects. One such project conceived of the half-built NAMA owned Anglo-Irish building on Dublin Docklands as a public park and civic social space<sup>20</sup>. These engagements of his work within a wider discourse on development and uses of space removes the images from the purely aesthetic and symbolic realm, and positions them towards a more socio-political representational expression.

### Ghost Estates in Literature

There is a growing canon of fictional literature that uses the ghost estate as character, set or setting. The most acclaimed example is Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012), a novel that employs the voices of 21 different characters, each represented by an eponymous chapter, to explore the effects on a small rural community of a local developer/construction company going bust and the impact this has on each character. This story of overdevelopment and bankruptcy is an allegory for Ireland's economic crash, the disappearance of the 'breakfast role man'<sup>21</sup>, a key symbolic figure of the Celtic Tiger years, leads to depression, emigration, murder, family breakdown, and of course the ghost estate. Whilst the ghost estate is here a background character, a device for exploring the tensions in post-Celtic Tiger social landscape, Ryan does in a number of chapters refer back to the actual space in a way that haunts the reader and alerts them to impending trauma, violence and social disarray. Similarly, in Tana French's crime novel *Broken Harbour* (2012) the ghost estate functions as a narrative backdrop to a plot revolving around violence, organized crime and a dysfunctional Irish society. The role of the ghost estate here becomes a vehicle for creating a sense of unease and tension for the reader, and the haunted character and ghostly materialities of the setting work to

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://anthonyhaughey.com/projects/settlement/>

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://anthonyhaughey.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Settlement-Source-Feb-2011.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> For more on this intriguing project see: <http://archiseek.com/2011/mahoney-architecture-promote-scheme-for-derelict-anglo-hq/>

<sup>21</sup> Builders and tradesmen who were known to buy breakfast rolls, large bread-rolls packed with eggs, sausages and who knows what else (I never ate one, they looked disgusting) on their way to work usually from small retailers and service stations. It is interesting to note the impact that the disappearance of the 'breakfast role man' had on rural retail trade. David McWilliams has written about this figure as a symbol of the intricacies of Ireland's crisis. See McWilliams (2008) *Breakfast role man needs a second chance* Irish Independent 22 October, Dublin Ireland



amplify a sense of menace imbued in the thriller genre French writes within - the ghost estate as genre trope. In both the examples mentioned above the location of the story is either fictionalized or not specified.

Perhaps the most fully realized representation of the phenomenon in Irish literature is *The Ghost Estate* (2015) by Longford born author John Connell. Although clearly influenced stylistically by Donal Ryan, Connell departs from Ryan's more allegorical approach to explicitly represent the ghost estate as a thorough embodiment of Irish colonial history and its recent economic woes. He also clearly locates the action in Co. Longford - the narrative is a fictionalized account of the Carrigglas development tale and that of Carrigglas' infamous proprietor Thomas Langley Lefroy. The narrative temporally shifts between first person accounts of LeFroy's (called Lefoyle in the book) troubled relationship with Longford's political and social landscape, and the story of a local electrician McQuaid who becomes embroiled in the precarious large scale development at Carrigglas (here called Birchview Estate). The novel is a skilful, tragic and often comical comment on the historical continuity of a place and the hubris that manifests in the social systems of the times - whether Protestant Ascendancy landlordism or property speculative, neo-liberal economics. Furthermore, the siting of the narrative in Longford allows the author to localize a mediation on the social life of the development and the estate as a space, as well as probing the landscape, orality and social nuisances of place, creating a complex relationship between the two.

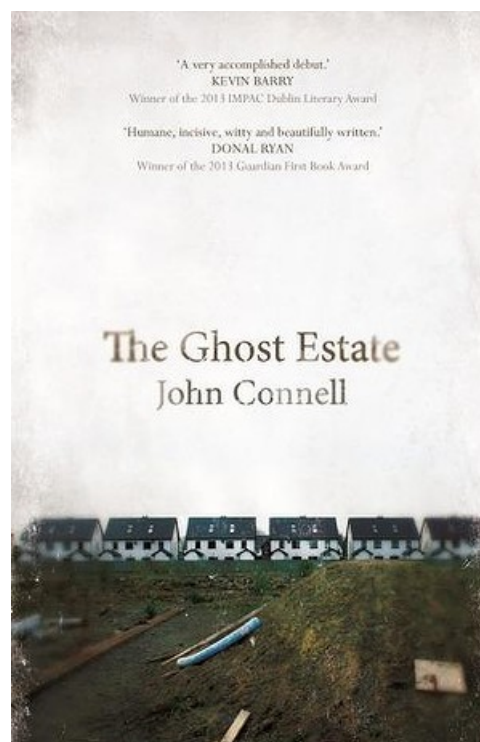


Figure 12 Cover of 'The Ghost Estate' by John Connell (courtesy of author)

### Film and the Built Environment in Ireland

Surprisingly film and TV have been slow to utilize the ghost development as a setting or narrative device. An example of a representation of ghost developments on screen can be garnered from the third season of the popular RTÉ<sup>22</sup> gangland drama *Love/Hate*. In one sequence, the main character is abruptly awakened in his luxury apartment, witnesses some uniformed Gardaí<sup>23</sup> amassing below in the courtyard in anticipation of his imminent arrest. Naturally this being heart-stopping, adrenal pumping crime drama of the type we are all familiar with, the character flees and is pursued by the Gardaí through a large vacant commercial development in an unnamed area in Dublin (the location is very likely Tallaght). The chase brings the audience on a hectic journey up permanent stalled escalators, along long empty corridors, bursts through large sheets of plastic covering, under indoors scaffoldings and among abruptly abandoned construction tools. We are not informed as to the intended function of the development - it could be apartment building, an office block, a retail centre, or indeed all of these. Later in the same season the criminal gang carries out a 'tiger' kidnapping and hold their victims hostage in an unfinished housing estates on the outskirts of Dublin. Again all the visual tropes of what popularly became known as ghost estates feature heavily in the *mise-en-scene* of the series' drive for narrative tension and heightened drama, however in both cases these filmic spaces are very much a backdrop for the action, the context for the existence of these spaces does not explicitly propel the sequences' narrative development. Instead, these ghost developments, iconic signifiers of the architecture of Celtic Tiger economics and speculative development, are reproduced as set and setting to elaborate a different story of Celtic Tiger Ireland, the criminal underbelly of Ireland's economic 'miracle'.

The celebrated Irish filmmaker Lenny Abrahamson has on a number of occasions subtly referenced Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger economics in his work, though the ghost development as a physical filmic space has remained off-screen. *Garage* (2007) provided some clue as to how this new visual landscape was accruing sometime before the GFC sealed the fate of the Irish built environment. On our journey with the simple minded Joesy, we hear casual reference to 'the new houses goin' up by the lake', 'how the town is changing a'sight' and that the road on which sits the eponymous garage will soon become very busy due to the amount new developments being built in town. This rampant development is, however only referenced; it remains outside the frame, instead the character of Joesy is used as a vehicle to comment on the lack of control the ordinary Irish person has over the changes in their built environment. Abrahamson shifts his lens towards the suburban Dublin Upper Middle classes in *What Richard Did* (2013), a tale of a young man from such a family who gets away with the murder of a schoolmate in South Dublin. In the final sequence of the film, the central protagonist is seen on a bus on the way to start university now freed of guilt of the incident and assured that he will not suffer reprimand for his crime - the camera cuts between the protagonist's self-confident facial expressions and images of salubrious South Dublin homes. Perhaps I am speculating here, but the sequence could be read as a satirical comment on how the South Dublin upper middle classes (the class that have given birth to the banking elite) has been so thoroughly admonished of any punitive reprimand for their ethnically questionable actions that many see as having brought about the crisis.

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<sup>22</sup> *Radio Telefís Éireann* - the Irish state broadcaster.

<sup>23</sup> *An Garda Síochána*, the Irish police force.

The essay filmmaker Pat Collins has on a number of occasions explored some of the social imaginaries of Ireland as a means to understanding Ireland's colonial history, the economic crisis, and the social impact of these. In *What we leave in our wake* (2010) Collins uses post-colonial theory to visually thread a line between the effects of colonialization on the Irish social body and the ruptures and discontinuities in the landscape caused by rampant overdevelopment. *Living in a Coded Land* (2014) is a poetic reading of societal 'codes' elaborated through a narrative of Ireland's history of colonisation, conflict, rural depopulation and emigration, the landed gentry and disparity of wealth and living conditions, and the underlying social economic conditions that created the Celtic Tiger and subsequent financial crisis. The film traces a trajectory of the emergence of a specific class from the Protestant Ascendancy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to post-modern, globalized Celtic Tiger Ireland. Whilst existing on the periphery of the protestant landed gentry as middlemen and aspiring gentry in their own right up until independence, Collin's film suggests that this class really came into their own as ranchers and cattle traders to Britain from the 1920s to the 1960s. Then noticing a shift in global economics, these people moved their attention away from livestock and towards finance (Conor MacCabe, who also appears in the film, qualifies this thesis). To augment his narrative, Collins films Ireland's lyrical rural expanse, visually contrasting it with bland Midlands' towns and the slick contours of gentrified and commercialized contemporary Dublin. The use of archive footage to present images of both rural and urban hardship (mainly emigration in the former, slum dwelling and rundown flat complexes in the latter) positions an essay on historic rupture, discontinuity, social injustice, and in the case of contemporary images of young people emigrating at Dublin Airport, a tragic repetition of the worst ills of the Irish historic experience. Overdevelopment and rural depopulation are referenced sonically in the quasi-fictional documentary *Silence* (2012). In it sound recordist Eoghan MacGiolla Bhríde returns to Ireland after a long exile with a commission to record sound free of man-made intrusion. One scene has MacGiolla Bhríde recording in the McGillikuddy Reeks mountains of West Cork, his environmental recording is disrupted by the sound of construction work at a nearby foundry new development. The scene is an interesting comment on how overdevelopment ruptures the sonic environment of the wilderness and how much of rural Ireland has been impacted by an economics that emphasises construction as a central lifeblood.

Perhaps one of the earliest and most extensive filmic interventions into ghost developments is *Wallets of Blood: Zombie Bankers Blues*<sup>24</sup> (2009), by radical activist filmmaker Eamon Crudden (here credited as aaronrip). This short film approaches the ghost estate at a time when access to these sites was considerably more porous than it is now, and therefore features a huge and diverse array of these spaces. The film very much aestheticizes ghost estates as haunted spaces, however the single-angle framing and montage gives the feel of surveillance, of the absent-presence watching through the space. It mixes images of vacant houses with scenes from George A Romero's zombie films, distorted radio transmissions discussing crisis and the voice of the 'auditor' - an alien presence sent to Ireland to oversee the liquidation of the Irish economy. In this sense, along with a minimalist Dublin techno soundtrack, the film merges the zombie film trope with documentation of ghost estates to produce a satirical rendering of the neo-liberal development model and speculative practice through haunted, failed spaces. Crudden's use of horror film aesthetics is of keen interest to me in my approach to representing ghost developments in Longford, however, I am cautious about a number of aspects of his mediation of ghost estates. There is something problematic about the de-

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<sup>24</sup> Watch the film here: <https://vimeo.com/4292136>

peopling of the spaces in question and their sole association with finance undermines some of the complex social and local exigencies that gave rise to these spaces. The horror film aesthetic is interestingly and effectively rendered, however the zombie movie (a most American of horror genres) feels a little tacked on and out of place in an Irish setting. That said, *Wallets of Blood: Zombie Bankers Blues* does provide some fascinating artistic ways in which to view ghost developments, and before speaking about some of my own aesthetic approaches to ghost developments, I want to conceptualise ghost developments within the canon of ruin studies and ruin fascination in order to interrogate the hauntological, temporal and aesthetic qualities of these spaces as the 'new ruins' of Ireland.

### ***The Aesthetics of Ruination***

'Ruins have a venerable place in the Irish landscape, the marks of its antiquity as a culture and the object of a more anxious discourse on history itself. Accordingly they retain an aesthetic and historical doubleness. Historically, they mark the successive waves of conquest, displacement, rebellion, and subjection that constitute Ireland's colonial history.'

(Lloyd 2004:266)

#### *The Scholarly Ruin*

As Lloyd's statement above indicates, the image of the ruin resonates deeply in the Irish psyche. Ruins suggest historic situatedness; however these 'new ruins' of Ireland differ from the ruins of antiquity Lloyd refers to not only because unfinished estates as ruins have never been occupied - they 'contain no traces of previous inhabitants' (Kitchen et al 2012:15) - but because they are the subject of a very new set of social relations that nonetheless perform a new type of displacement.

Ruin studies is emerging as a significant sub-discipline in its own right; Edensor and DeSilvey (2012) provided an exhaustive overview of current academic fascination with ruination, and by simply documenting the sheer volume of academic research and artistic engagement with a multitude of ruined sites globally, their article illuminates a major current within academic and social thought. One of the key texts that perhaps influenced this 'ruin turn' in academia is Tim Edensor's *Industrial Ruins* (2005). This germinal monograph provides an imaginative basis for how we might approach ruins as sites of experience, conviviality, socialization and memory. It is revealing that Edensor opens the book with an account of a youthful visit to a ruined mansion in Scotland. There is something deeply personal about how we engage with ruins as spaces, connected to our individual childhood recollections and, perhaps for some, to sub-cultural practices of urban life such as squatting and raves. Edensor is concerned to firstly analyse the structural causes of ruination, and then provide accounts for how they can potentially exhibit alternative functionality or become spaces for subaltern utility. Moreover, the text explores these spaces as experiences that 'highlight how the contingent, ineffable, unrepresentable, un-coded, sensual, heterogeneous possibilities of

contemporary cities are particularly evident in their industrial ruins' (2005:19). For Edensor an industrial ruin heightens the many ways in which the senses are engaged: the silence of the space coupled with the low rumbling of weather effected sound, the deterioration of materials to produce unusual shapes and visual contortions, the body coming in contact and being shaped by unpleasant matter or substances, the shock of odours one is unaccustomed to in normal daily life, the difficulties of walking through or gaining one's footing when manoeuvring dilapidated spaces (Edensor 2007: 220 -230). The ruin can be thought as a process of change and becoming rather than a fixed object. As such, it serves as a distinct counterpoint to the increasingly sensory controlled, commodified, and de-sensitized city - 'it is through the haptic senses that the urban ruin is apprehended in most stark contrast to the rest of the city' (ibid: 226).

There is a link between ruins and post-industrialism, and sites of ruination and ruined objects are very much a concern for anthropologist Kathleen Stewart in *The Space at the Side of the Road* (1996). Adapting Bakhtin's literary idea of 'chronotopes', Stewart's ethnography attempts to represent the time/space through which objects and sites experience ruination in the context of the Appalachian Mountain communities' mining boom-bust trajectory. Ruined objects and sites become for the ex-mining community, vessels through which the discontinuous time/space of uneven economic development is negotiated, and they furthermore become active agents in the performance and retelling of stories of times gone. For Stewart 'in the ruin that *remembers* (original italics), history and place, culture and nature converge in a tactile image that conveys not a picture - perfect re-enactment of "living pasts" but the allegorical re-presentation of remembered loss itself' (1996:90).

Stewart's interesting process of representing the speech and narratives of the Appalachians means that she avoids romanticizing the objects and spaces, they function instead as allegory through which temporal processes are understood. However, is there a potential danger of romanticism and nostalgia inherent in ruin studies more generally? Stoler, in an analysis of ruins as sites of imperial debris, as historical reminders of colonial power relations, and as physical evidence of 'the social ruination of peoples' lives' (2008:194), admonishes the 'pathos' and romanticization of colonial ruins by such noted anthropologists and ethnographers as Richard Price and Claude Levi -Strauss. Quoting Derek Wilcott's idea that 'decadence begins when civilization falls in love with its ruins' (ibid:207), Stoler's critique reminds us that ruins are not only fascinating spaces for the exploration of memory and conviviality, but are also the result of loss, suffering and the breakdown of social systems.

However, the ruin as a site of fascination for artists, writer and explorers has a long and varied precedence as Woodward elaborates in his exhaustive account of the aesthetics of ruination *In Ruins* (2002). For Woodward 'a ruin has two values. It has an objective value as an assemblage of brick and stone, and it has a subjective value as an inspiration to artists' (ibid: 69). His monograph is a temporal explorative journey through the ruins of Rome, the great European ruin tours of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries taken by figures such as Byron and Shelley, to the ruined abbeys of post-Reformation England, and the traumatized debris of Blitzed London during the second World War. He elaborates how the ruin in the artistic imagination has been used to represent notions of the Picturesque or the sublime, the madness of the Gothic in Edgar Allen Poe lived through the ruin in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the apocalyptic nightmare of ruined London in Gustave Dore's

nightmarish *The New Zealander*. The ruin reoccurs in many manifestations in the works of Henry James, Flaubert, Joseph Gandy, Edward Gibbons, W.G. Sebald, to name but a few of the writers, painters, architects for which the ruin represents a historical artistic continuity. Whilst 'in ruins movement is halted, and Time is suspended' (ibid: 36), the artist's fascination with ruination has witnessed the movement of many great figures on similar paths, tours and trajectories where although the ruin is fixed in place temporally, the expression of the ruin in the artistic imagination is renewed and repositioned for successive generations. This re-imagining of the ruin in new artistic and social contexts is equally as relevant today.

### *The Ruin as Aesthetic Object*

One cannot over-emphasise the level to which the ruin has in the last two decades again become the fascination of artists, explorers, commentators and producers of media in all their guises. The contemporary fascination with post-industrial ruins has spawned a new trend in photography - namely 'ruin photography' or what some pejoratively refer to as 'ruin porn'. This photographic literature - often reproduced in the form of the coffee table book - can vary in degrees of critical reflection on post-industry, and often speaks to different audiences, however as Strangleman (2013) notes they exhibit in aesthetic terms a distinct tension between a form of romanticization or 'smokestack nostalgia' and the notion of visual obituary for the industrial past: 'books which privilege the aesthetic over questions of social justice also have the potential to act in dual ways as both obituary and critique' (2013: 34). There is of course an urban subculture in the form of 'urban exploration' built around the clandestine exploration and documentation of ruins, the exemplary work of Bradley Garrett in documenting, aestheticizing and critiquing the politics of ruination through 'militant ethnography' within the community of 'Urban Explorers' provides valuable insights into the subculture and its setting<sup>25</sup>. The art world, much the source of ruin fascination in earlier periods, has seen a recent resurgence in art that uses the ruin in divergent ways - the 2013 *Ruin Lust*<sup>26</sup> exhibition at the Tate, with works by such contemporary artists as Tacita Dean and Rachel Whiteread, is a good example of this trend. The ruin has always featured heavily in film representations, particularly horror film, and similarly films such as David Roberts Mitchell's highly regarded *It Follows* (2014) efficiently uses the post-industrial ruins of Detroit to chilling effective. Detroit has of course become the background to numerous film representations of ruination, the subject of Julian Temple's fascinating but problematic documentary *Requiem for Detroit* (2009), and provides much of the material for 'ruin porn' in all its aesthetic forms.

However, recently there has been quite a backlash against ruin fascination and aestheticization. Paul Cleman's in his book *Punching Out* (2011) is highly critical of the outsider status of urban explorers, their fetishization of the decaying materiality of the industrial ruin, and feels that the kind of photography that accompanies this urban practice is voyeuristic as it creates for the young, white middle class urbane hipster a playground in the shell of what was the lifeblood of urban working class communities. Similarly, another Detroit local John Patrick Leary lambasts the invasion of his hometown by urban explorers and ruin photographers in a form of ruin tourism, and claims that this type of fetishization 'aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of

<sup>25</sup> For a collection of Garrett's artistic and scholarly work see: <http://www.bradleygarrett.com/>

<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/ruin-lust>

resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city'<sup>27</sup>. Tim Strangleman (2013) is more nuanced in his appraisal of ruin fascination, seeing it as a means by which people attach value to the industrial past and labour history through the dissemination of imagery and physical exploration of these spaces, as a form of mourning of past ways of life lost to changes in capitalist systems of organization<sup>28</sup>.

### Ireland's 'New Ruins'

The place of ruins is problematic in the context of romanticization of Irish image making. For instance, Gibbons (1987) draws a correlation between the persistence of the picturesque imaginings of the ruin in the Irish landscape, the act of romanticizing ruins as sites of continuity in political struggle for Irish republicans and cultural nationalists, and the ubiquity of ruins as sets and backdrops for Hollywood representation of Irish history. Whilst there is a conscious attempt by certain political and cultural actors to historically and temporally position ruins as a culturally symbolic vehicle for political struggle within Irish historiographies, Lloyd conversely notes that 'the failure to produce a common historical narrative is attributed to the persistence of violence and the consequent ruination of the state, rather than to the persistence of the historical in the present' (2004:268). Departing from Stewart's allegorical understanding of how the ruins represents time/history/narrative, Lloyd contends that 'the ruin is neither symbol nor allegory but the object of contestation over meanings, memories, histories, and the form in which meaning is presented' (ibid: 269). However, symbol and allegory are often the route through which meaning is presented, and the symbol or allegorical role of ruins differs little in this regard.

Lloyd's text uses the Irish based photography of Allan DeSouza, images of empty sites, derelict spaces, and abandoned objects in the borderlands areas of the Northwest of Ireland to think about how the absence of explicit signifiers of political struggle are highly suggestive of the constant presence of the threat of violence (in this case in the context of political violence in Northern Ireland and border regions). This notion of 'absent presences' is also taken up by Edensor in an article that uses photographs of sites of ruin in Manchester to imagine the ghosts of a certain type of working class social reproduction that is imprinted on the cityscape in spectral traces (2008:324-329). Indeed, it is difficult to think about ruins without somehow invoking notions of 'absent presences', the ghostly, the spectral. Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1991), a classic text that has influenced a growing body of writing on the spectral, no doubt sparked interest in 'spectrality' in academia<sup>29</sup>. Derrida's reading focuses attention on 'Marx's call for a materialism capable of engaging reality as "sensuous

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<sup>27</sup> For Leary's critique of what he terms 'Detroitism' see:  
[https://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary\\_1\\_15\\_11/](https://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/)

<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that any research that engages ruins in a direct, physical and embodied sense is a form of urban exploration. Throughout this research project I have explored ruins old and new, filmed and experienced them extensively, therefore my critique of ruin exploration is a concern for how these spaces are contextualized historically and in terms of human experience and narrative construction, which I will discuss presently.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: P. Buse and A. Stott, eds, (1999) *Ghosts: deconstruction, psychoanalysis, history* MacMillan, Basingstoke, A. Gordon (1997) *Ghostly matters* Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, Wolfreys, J (2004) *Writing London. Vol. 2, Materiality, memory, spectrality*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.



human activity''' (Peim 2005:67), as a means of breaking with dialectic materialist readings and seizing a new political, sensory understanding of time/history/narrative.

One author who decisively broke with materialist readings of history, in favour of explorations of time, space and historical trajectories in an ineffable, spectral and discontinuous manner, was the German writer WG Sebald. Sebald was haunted by the ruins of post-war Europe, evident in sentiments such as the following:

'At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.'

(Sebald 2001: 23-24)

John Wylie uses the term 'spectral geographies' to describe the way in which Sebald's writing 'reveals the shaping of place through haunting rather than dwelling, that dislocates past and present, memory and visibility, through forms of documentary experimentation' (2007:185). It is perhaps no accident then that in Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (1995), the author finds himself in the family home of the Anglo-Irish Fitzgerald family, and uses this occasion to explore the profound dislocation that those of Anglo-Irish ascendancy found themselves in a virulently nationalist post-independence setting. The passage describes the politicized processes during the early years of the new Irish state by which many of the grand homes and estates of the old Irish aristocratic ruling class were raised to the ground by over-zealous Republicans. The melancholia of the living ruin that is the Fitzgerald home, trapped in a state of self-imposed exile and endless repetition of meaningless tasks, is evidence not only of what Wylie called Sebald's 'sustained meditations upon relationships between place, memory and subjectivity' (2007:173), but further illuminates an alternative narrative of the experience of land, place, dwelling and property in the history of Irish cultural representation.

The 'new ruins' of Ireland in the form of ghost development are a key artistic vehicle in my film, used to explore the relationship between space, place and identity in Longford. Ghost developments are to Ireland what the ruins of post-industry are to cities like Detroit, however as ruins they manifest in very different ways. These developments were built into ruination, in contradistinction to how ruins normally suggest processes of inhabitation or production, and later displacement and decay. A development such as Carrigglas Manor is revealing as it draws together dual narratives of Ireland's colonial past as ruin, and its recent Celtic Tiger history as an economic process that created ruination. As I have stated Carrigglas is singular as a representation of ghost developments, its affective and sensory qualities more pronounced than most of these spaces that are from casual observation quite 'mundane'. However, they too have sensuous and representational value to me as an artistic researcher and filmmaker, a value that is integral to my exploration of the social imaginary of Longford and which I will discuss presently.

## ***Ghost Developments as Sensual, Affective space***

*'The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace...the places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time'*

*Gaston Bachelard 'The Poetics of Space' (1994: 6)*

The house as physical space, as visual trope, as an imagined entity, as a nightmare, figures centrally in the horror film. It is the house as linked to dwelling, as a space of shelter and security, as intimately connected to childhood memory, imagination and reverie. It is all these qualities that render the house such a troubling place when intruded, when decaying, and when a ruin. Visual representations of ghost estates post-Celtic Tiger played significantly on a haunted aesthetic that indexically linked the ghost estate as narrative to insecurities in the national imaginary, and to post-colonial notions of 'Irishness'. Other more critical artistic works such as the long exposure photographs of Anthony Haughey (2013) render the ghost estate in a dreamlike quality, or indeed a nightmare quality. On visiting the Gleann Riada unfinished housing estate with former resident, Seamus Clarke, he spoke about how when he and his partner had purchased their first home they had been promised a regenerated community, a hotel that was about to begin construction just around the corner, this new modern structure fitted with ever comfort a new family could desire for the peace and security of Celtic Tiger Irish family life - in Seamus' words 'I guess I was sold a dream'. He describes how the dream, over the period of a long and protracted winter, began to take on the hue of a nightmare. The house was constantly cold, the public lighting and paths weren't finished so the estate was difficult to manoeuvre and inhospitable, gangs of outsiders would use the unfinished units for nightly transgressions, the sewerage was not properly connected and often overflowed creating a stench in the area. The sensual attributes of the place (reduced visibility and aggressive noises at night, repugnant odours, cold rooms, the wind whistling through unfinished units, a large and imposing vacant apartment block towering over the houses, uneven surfaces and abandoned materials) led Seamus to feel that he was living on a horror film set. Seamus removed his family from the estate just over a year after it became clear that the deterioration of the estate was escalating rather than being resolved. I accompany him on his first visit to the estate since he flew the place in 2008. The local authorities from 2011 onwards drew down over €10 million in central funding in the form of the Site Resolution Programme and the Special Resolution Programme as a means of bringing under control some of the worst manifestations of unfinished housing estates in the county - the media controversy that surrounded Gleann Riada made it an obvious target for early intervention. The council demolished the apartment block, boarded up or demolished many of

the vacant units, and completed the paths and public lighting. The local authorities also took control of some of the vacant units to use for social housing; this had then the unwelcome effect of further flight of some residents (most likely due to class-based prejudice towards those in need of social housing) creating new ruins.

We wander behind the back of a boarded up unit next door to Seamus' former residence. The back garden reveals a wild and unkempt space in contradistinction to the 'resolved' and cursorily manicured front of the house. Weeds and foliage consume the garden, a couch, a child's stroller and an old TV litter the space (obviously the result of fly-tipping). As one walks inwards the noise of broken glass crunching underfoot is the only sound that intrudes on the morning song of the birds overhead. Inside the unit is stripped of many the objects and fittings (radiators, fireplace, copper piping) that make up normative attributes of the household. Traces of life lived in this 'home' remain however; the vandalized bathrooms still contain used cans of shaving foam, the bedframes are stacked against the wall in the upstairs bedrooms, a carbon monoxide monitor on the ceiling of the sitting room indicating some of the structural problems with the buildings in the estate, a religious image from Lourdes hangs on the wall revealing something of the religious or spiritual values of the former residents. The strangest material encounter however is in the hallway at the front door - stacks of junk mail litter the hallway door, some from recently opened businesses, suggesting that despite its ruinous appearance and obvious long life as a vacant, the house is still functioning for some as a normative lived space. This is revealing of a kind of collective forgetting that is occurring in the social consciousness of Ireland's ghost developments. Is the ruined ghost estate unit still in essence a house, a dwelling? For as Heidegger elaborates: 'If we speak of the "essence of a house" and the "essence of a state" we do not mean a generic type; rather we mean the ways in which house and state hold sway, administer themselves, develop and decay - the way in which they "essence"' (1977:30). In his post-war exploration of the 'essence' of technology in *A Question Concerning Technology* (1977) Heidegger offers the potential for seeking out the house (property) and the state (a set of power relations and representations) as not external objects and systems, but as ideas and experiences that persist, shift and change form through time based on a given context. We can also see house and state as technologies, but for Heidegger technology is no mere means to an end created by externalized human skill and ingenuity, but instead it is a way of 'revealing' what is at the 'essence' of human activities in relation to our being-in-the-world (1977:11 -12). Heidegger's texts are notoriously impenetrable at points, but in the context of this project, it may be necessary to utilize his thinking in order to transcend seeing ghost developments as simply a manifestation of socio-political and economic conditionalities. Instead, we might begin to imagine them as spaces for sensory and experiential engagement, or indeed as dwellings stripped of that particular function.



Figure 13 Junk mail delivered to long vacant house (Patrick Baxter)

A concern for what it is to dwell is elaborated on by Tim Ingold (2000) as a realization of the embodied practices that effect our understanding of our environments (both natural and built). Ingold explores how processes such as mapping, seafaring and navigation, building and dwelling perspectives, are not solely the product of biological or psychological mechanisms within humans but are the combination of relational thinking, ecological embeddedness and psychological reflection. In thinking on what it is to build and dwell, Ingold notes that 'environments are never complete but are continually under construction'. Taking up Heidegger's term *Bauen*, Ingold infers that to build is also to dwell because the act of design and assemblage of materials cannot be disconnected from real human needs in a real environment (2000:172-188). However, there may be a problem in taking a phenomenological standpoint in relation to grasping the many attributes and processes involved in understanding the structures of ghost developments as 'living' spaces and private property as a social category. Vacant property in Ireland (or at least the source of its existence) is mediated through a series of economic, political and cultural factors. Hence, one cannot ignore advertising, market relations, political agencies, and image making that emphasised the aesthetics of home-ownership as a model of citizenship and good social practice (property supplements in newspapers and large commercial home shows, for example). Similarly, in approaching a film about these spaces, the aesthetics of ruination come to the fore as a key visual trope - whilst some of these spaces look from the outset dull and lifeless, their sensory attributes and the sense of ghostly presences may render these spaces as distinct art objects. As Grimshaw and Ravetz noted of the Ingoldian stance, a focus on skills and process is perhaps inadequate for questioning 'the nature of the representational object itself' (2009: 158).

It is interesting to position these ideas in relation to unfinished housing estates in Ireland as dwellings, as ruins, and as objects of artistic enquiry. I am thinking again of Heidegger's notion of 'revealing', and am drawn back to how ruination for Edensor allows us to see how 'the tricks that make a building a coherent ensemble are revealed, exposing the magic of construction'. Edensor

then follows this statement with a beautifully detailed and sensory description of this process that invokes a bodily image of the decaying structure - its façade as flesh, cables and piping as networks of veins, and eroding matter as 'clogged arteries' (Edensor 2005:109 -110). There is here an imagining of the ruined space as bodily and embodied. In a more classic example of a ruin, myself and local artist Lisa Hannify explored the derelict features of her former secondary school, smells, textures, and curiously abandoned objects provoked memory of the difficulties of growing up in a gender repressive, creatively stagnant, socially unequal rural Ireland in the 1990s. This ruin reveals through decay, exposure to the elements, and vandalism of the many structures (a series of prefabricated units, a then modern new building sat in front of two large and imposing Neo-Gothic edifices that formed the original grounds of the Convent) the skeletal components of newly built classrooms, the fiberglass bursting through the roofs like exposed tissue, unsealed fuse boxes and electric cables containing the veins of the buildings. The space is a deeply embodied environment for Lisa; her own emotional and physical gender development integrally linked to the ruin's physicality. As a means of expressing this psychological and physical relationship between place, space and Lisa's feminine artistic practice she decides to create permanent artworks on site using resin and her own menstrual blood, I film the event. This footage is an instance of an artistic intervention into a ghost development<sup>30</sup> where the presence of the camera provokes a spontaneous, embodied artistic act. Frustrated with the permanent piece, and aware of her presence in the camera frame, Lisa then douses the wall of the science room with her own menstrual blood in a physical and embodied, though temporary and ephemeral, act of protest against repression of femininity and artistic instinct. This is a socially engaged piece of art, it is a communicative action between the artist, the body and space, rather than a purely symbolic act (Helguera 2011: 7 -8).

I will go into more detail on the filmic aspects of this scenario in the final chapter, however for the moment I wish to reflect on how this artistic intervention, the exploration of meaningful space, and interaction with the camera (co)-creates 'felt knowledge'. As Klein (2010: 4 sic) states:

'In the experience the subjective perspective is constitutively included, because experience can not be delegated in the first order and only be negotiated intersubjectively in second order... Artistic experience is particularly dependent on and inseparable from the underlying undergoings. Artistic experience is an active, constructive and aesthetic process, in which mode and substance are fused inseparably.'

These shoots with Lisa involved a complex interaction between Lisa and myself as subjects, the camera, body and materials of the place as artistic objects, and a ghost development as a meaningful, sensory space which elicits memory and life story. McLaughlin draws on a life story methodology over a historical one as a means of uncovering 'how memory finds a narrative' (2006:

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<sup>30</sup> The convent ruin that these sequences were shot in fit into my definition of ghost development in that the closure of the School - although preceding the 2008 property collapse by a number of years - was heavily influenced by declining numbers due to changes in the social backgrounds of some of the students (reflecting the changing social demographics of Longford in the mid-2000s) and the value of the convent grounds as a potential development site.

123) and how a specific, meaningful location can help construct this narrative. However, this is not to say that these narratives are without trepidation as they are often connected to troubling or traumatic periods in the subject's life. For instance, another example of the troubling aspects of intervention into space occurred when filming with John Connell, author of *The Ghost Estate* (2015). We decided it would be an interesting collaboration to visit Carrigglas together and film John reciting a few chapters from his novel and then walk and talk about his experiences of the space. But during filming something unusual happened. Although very chipper in the early stages of the day, John became increasingly withdrawn as the filming continued. In conversation afterwards he described how for him Carrigglas is not only a symbol of Ireland or Longford's economic decline and the trauma that has involved for many Irish people, but he also associated Carrigglas heavily with his own deep depression suffered during the writing and researching of the book - in his own words through writing about Carrigglas he relived the recession on a daily basis.

I am very cautious about conceptualizing ghost development within the emergent scholarly current of trauma studies, due to its association in the Irish context to literary representations of post-coloniality<sup>31</sup> and more recently to conflict in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, there is an intellectual and embodied relationship between memory, trauma as an embedded site of memory reconstruction, and storytelling as route to uncovering and exploring this relationship in a sensitive, non-didactic manner. A great recent example of this methodology is evident in the work of the Prison Memory Archive<sup>32</sup>, and the recent intersubjective, collaborative storytelling documentary *We Were There* (2014, dir: Laura Aguiar and Cahal McLaughlin) in which the women involved in the male Maze prison during the Troubles revisit the now abandoned site provoking sensory memory, personal history, and emotional reflection. The notion of trauma has been raised a number of times by many people I engaged with in the field - that the ghost development manifests a traumatized landscape, or that the people of Longford (or for that matter Ireland) have been left traumatized by the devastating cycle of boom and bust economics. However, it is difficult to conceive of this as *Trauma* in the same sense that conflict or brutal political repression would provoke traumatized subjectivities - one has to be aware of the need for hyperbole in dramatizing even personal narratives of crisis. That said, I am fascinated by how memory, the senses and narrative construction interact in the examples from the field I have outlined. Following Doreen Massey's (1994) thinking on place as a process of interconnecting flows and routes of people, capital and ideas, I am keen to draw out a visual and textual narrative that employs the new ruins of the Celtic Tiger to tell us something about the social imaginary of one of Ireland's most forlorn and marginalized counties - Longford. In this chapter, I have contextualized ghost developments in terms of narrative - social, personal and scholarly. In the following chapter, I will detail my ethnographic fieldwork with a number of groups and individuals actively working to re-imagine Longford as a place, and describe how creative/artistic practices using ghost developments complicates a spatial categorization of Longford as a 'rural' place.

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<sup>31</sup> See for instances Van Boheemen-Saaf, C (1999) *Joyce, Derrida, Lucan, and the trauma of history: Reading, Narrative, and Post-Colonialism* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>32</sup> See: <http://prisonmemoryarchive.com/>



## Chapter 3

### *Place, Space & Identity: An ethnography of post-Celtic Tiger Longford.*



Figure 14 Deirdre O'Bryne & I filming at 'Yes Equality' rally Longford May 10th 2015 (courtesy of Paul Marsden)



In a recent post-2016 general election article for The Irish Independent, the journalist and Longford native John Greene writes a lament for the failing face of Longford as a social, economic and political entity. Entitled 'If the town goes, it will be gone for good ...'<sup>33</sup> the article recounts the many blows the town has suffered since the GFC, Ireland's recession and property collapse - the low level of new business ventures, a depressed high street, huge business rates paid to the local authorities that is strangling business, disadvantaged housing estates and boarded-up windows abound. He cites the failure of Longford to elect a TD<sup>34</sup> in the recent election as a particularly significant setback to Longford's developmental future. The quoted informant's comment that the town is 'dying on its feet' recalls an interview with local artist and social entrepreneur Shane Crossan on the topic of Longford's future in which Shane recounts meeting an older Longfordian, and when relating to the man details of a social initiative Shane was involved in, the older man states that Longford is a dying town. Shane reflected on the comment thus:

'It was definitely a putdown, but it was also the reflections of an older wiser man...But it got me thinking, 'what if Longford is a dying town?' What if it has outlived its function as a conurbation of public spaces that nobody shares anymore...and if it is dying there's no point handwringing and lamenting some glorious past that probably never existed'

(interview with Shane Crossan 19/06/2015)

The idea of the dying rural place permeates much current discourse of economic development in Ireland. Indeed, Longford has in many ways become a metonym for rural decline, conservatism and social ills. While Shane's reflections on the current viability of Longford emerge from a deeply embedded and socially involved concern for the future of a place he is actively attempting to improve (see below), John Greene's article smacks of lazy journalism. For while he is a Longford native, he has made no attempt to look beneath the mainstream articulation of the forlorn provincial town in order to investigate or imagine new social possibilities, articulations and uses of space that complicate this simplistic vision of rural place. Shane is perhaps correct in the observation that Longford may have outlived its function as a market town, however this does not mean that place in the globalized, digital and transcultural age does not re-imagine itself in complex and intriguing new categories of urban and rural practice.

In this chapter I will attempt to unpack the steadfastly held social scientific categories of urban and rural in relation to ghost developments, and forms of social reproduction and representation I was party to or researched during my fieldwork experience in Longford. The first section looks at a

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<sup>33</sup> See: <http://www.independent.ie/business/irish/if-the-town-goes-it-will-be-gone-for-good-34534963.html>

<sup>34</sup> *Teachta Dála*; an elected member of *Dáil Éireann*, the lower house of the *Oireachtas* (the Irish Parliament). It is the equivalent of the term "Member of Parliament" (MP) in the UK, though it should be noted that Ireland uses a proportional representation system rather than the 'first past the post' system used in the UK. Longford has never qualified as its own constituency due to low population and therefore is always conjoined with a neighbouring county to form the constituency. In the case of the 2016 election Longford was paired with Westmeath, and only candidates from Westmeath were ultimately elected.

selection of the scholarly theories of place, which I then apply to the developmental history of Longford and how the emergence of ghost developments spatially complicates categories of urban, suburban and rural as played out in post-Celtic Tiger Longford. I will elaborate on this argument by recounting my experiences of new forms of (urban?) social reproduction in Longford in the following section. I will firstly look at how a campaign for same-sex marriage equality principally organized around Longford LGBT group 'Queered' space in Longford, and how an LGBT arts night threw up problematics in applying urban Queer theory to rural environs. I will subsequently look at changes in social and ethnic demographics in Longford, and analyse what this can tell us about the interrelationship between uneven economic development and new spaces for identity construction. Finally, I will look at the very urban practice of pop-up spaces and temporary uses of vacant space to interrogate how these practices manifest when applied to rural social settings.

## **An Urban or a Rural Place?**

In her germinal ethnographic monograph *A Space at the Side of the Road* on an Appalachian ex mining community, Kathleen Stewart sets out the idea of the 'Other' America which performs a counter-narrative or 'back-talk' to the dominant mythologizing narrative of American cultural history. She proposes an approach that moves 'beyond the assumption that the local has its own epistemology instead to imagine culture as a process constituted in use and therefore likely to be tense, contradictory, dialectical, dialogic, texted, textured, both practical and imaginary, and filled with desire' (1996: 3). The social sciences have often struggled with the conceptualization of categories of local, national, and global, or rural, suburban and urban as rigidly distinct and/or opposed spaces of knowledge production and articulation (see below). In the last few decades these distinct categories have been both reinforced, and to a certain extent, collapsed in interesting ways. Through my fieldwork, filming and personal engagement with certain selected social groups in Longford (LGBT, women's groups, artists)<sup>35</sup> I began to observe how categories of place, or placing, such as the classic urban/rural divide, at times assert themselves, break-down or become nuanced in often barely perceptible ways, both through cultural practices and daily lived experience.

In the following section I will review a selection of scholarly literature that analyses 'place' as a scientific concept, a space through which people make meaning rather than as a notion that people take for granted (Cresswell 2004: 3-7). Through this literature, alongside recent geographical and qualitative research conducted in Ireland, I will argue that Longford as a 'place' both articulated as local, in conversation in the national, and shaped by international social and economic forces, confounds attempts to position it as 'place' fixed and bounded by geography, politics and culture. Furthermore, the existence of new communities, new identity articulations and changes in the built environment complicate defining the place as rural, suburban or urban. What does the ghost development represent in terms of space categorization - is it an urban, rural, suburban or peri - urban phenomenon? How is the notion of 'local' identity brought into question by changes in the

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<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that I have not attempted an ethnography of wider Longford society, and therefore have not carried out fieldwork with sports organizations or local political parties for instance. The social groups I have focused on are specific to my interests in the changing social dynamics of Longford and how certain groups interact with ghost developments.

ethnic and social demographics of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, and how are these changes expressed and communicated to give a 'new' sense of place?

### Thinking about Place.

Cresswell's study of social thought on place as a social and philosophical object of concern identifies three principal approaches that scholars broadly utilize in relation to place. Firstly, there is the 'descriptive' approach to place that looks at a specific places or the specifics of a place. This approach is commonly associated with regional geographers, but for the purposes of this research project, we can think of the 'descriptive' approach as extending to the regional or place-specific historical and social character of Longford (as utilized in the first section of chapter 1). The second approach Cresswell identifies is the 'social constructivist' model wherein the researcher or theorist sees place as representing a body of social processes, economic systems or sets of power relations. This body of literature is often, though not exclusively, associated with Marxist, feminist and post-colonial thinkers, and is less interested in the specifics of a place per se but rather what the specifics of a place can tell us about how our lives are shaped and constructed by wider social forces such as capitalism, colonialism or patriarchy. The final approach is a phenomenological approach that attempts to grasp the experience of humans in relation to the places they exist within, and favours the notion of being 'in-place' as a necessary pre-condition for the formation of society (2004: 51). While I will utilize aspects of the phenomenological approach to place, this research project chiefly exhibits a model that merges the descriptive with the social constructivist, but which furthermore proposes an artistic or filmic approach to place.

Traditional regional geographers would see place as something fixed and bounded, viewing place as a definite and defined object. Here place has a singular epistemological value, the topological or spatial characteristics of the area are paramount - place is not used to elaborate a discourse through which society performs and articulates itself. Conversely, theorist David Harvey is less interested in the specific physical attributes of place but rather how people construct society, politics and cultural identities through place. Harvey uses the example of radical and authoritarian political movements and how place is used to mobilize notions of political identity, and how in struggles for political power place becomes a powerful territorial marker of allegiances and ideology - 'all political, social and religious movements use place-building territorial strategies to achieve their goals' (Harvey 2009: 199).

Phenomenological approaches to place differ considerably and are more interested in the notion of being in-place, following Heidegger's thinking on the experience of being-in-the-world. For as Casey states 'whatever is true of time and space, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it' (1998: ix). Casey takes up Bachelard's interest in the house as a 'primal space' through which we frame much of our understanding of the outside world, comparing the house to the body in experiencing notions of place as inside or outside. Place in this instance is both a physical thing connected to structures and materials, and a psychological space connected to memory, images, the senses and psyche (ibid: 287 -296). For phenomenologists place 'cannot be reduced to the social, the natural, or the cultural. It is, rather, a phenomenon that brings these worlds together, and in part, produced them' (Cresswell 2004: 30). If place, as in the case of the family home, is primary but to an extent a social construction, then phenomenologists of place

accept that 'place...is a construction of humanity but a necessary one - one that human life is impossible to conceive of without' (ibid: 33). If we accept this proposition, then how are societal and cultural processes of identity formation informed by place?

One of the foremost thinkers on place is the feminist geographer Doreen Massey who uses the category to comment on uneven economic development and the gendering of place. As Cresswell comments, particularly in reference to her celebrated 'A Global Sense of Place' essay, Massey performs 'a new conceptualization of place as open and hybrid - a product of interconnecting flows - of routes rather than roots' (2004:13). Massey rejects the notion that globalization and its adherent notion of time-space compression renders specific places as a meaningless sites of knowledge, and she furthermore objects to the (usually Marxist) tendency to equate the study of locality as somehow inherently reactionary. As Massey asserts, the earlier debates on place through analysis of space and economy 'rob places in a certain measure of their individual specificity...Another effect was to assign virtually all causality to a somehow unlocatable level of the "Global"' (1994: 177). Place represents for Massey a site of 'intersecting social relations...tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes' (ibid: 120) - the interrelationship between a multinational corporation, a migrant community, and changes in the composition of the high street in a locality, for instance. Clearly, this has huge implications for place identity and how that is articulated; identity can no longer be seen as integrally fixed in a place, somehow primordial and unchanged, but rather 'identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple' (ibid:5).

An important, though highly problematic, addition to the discourse on place was anthropologist Marc Augé's idea of 'non-place' (1995). Augé builds on Relph's theme of 'placelessness' (Cresswell 2004:43) to argue that 'non-places' are the spaces of 'supermodernity' - the shopping mall, the business park, hotel chain, airport lounges. These are spaces through which the homogenization processes of consumer based neo-liberal capitalism and the penetration of economic globalization throughout the world reduces the specificity of place and replaces place with a series of instantly recognizable symbols, icons and structures that expand over and compress time-space. For Augé 'if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a 'non-place' (1995:77). Certainly the uniformity of some of these out-of-town retail and light industrial zones I found in Longford suggest the ahistorical, and in relation to identity they detach from the place names that provide them their homes in favour of the globalized, the branded, the homogeneity of consumer capitalism - that the 'consumer' begins to replace the 'citizen' in later capitalism. However, Augé conveniently ignores the fact that people work in or often set up trade in the spaces of 'supermodernity', and therefore must certainly experience them as very central 'places' in their lives.

To further tease out the problem with the notion of 'non-place' it is worth referring back to the large scale new development on the south-western flank of Longford Town that includes Gleann Riada unfinished housing estate, the Mastertech commercial ghost development and the long stretch of warehouses on the Athlone Road. Notwithstanding the high rates of vacancy in the area, the development was primarily conceived as an industrial and business park area, and therefore is built in a very generic manner with the intention of attracting multinational and franchise brands to the

area. It could be positioned therefore as 'non-place', a space of supermodernity devoid of the social and experiential attributes of place. However, if we look at how the structures of the area developed for multinational brands and logistics business have been used over the intervening years (a community TV studio, a Polish run gym for instance) it allows use see how the interconnecting flows of place, people and capital that Massey (1994) talked about is evident in the area. Furthermore, the place name has always had an intense articulation in the formation of Irish identities, local or national. The human geographer Patrick J O'Conner points out that there are 62205 townlands in Ireland<sup>36</sup>, an extraordinary tapestry and cacophony of names, places, narratives and identities quite incomparable to anywhere else in the world. The development I spoke of is bordered by the townlands of Ballyminion, Farrenyoogan and Cartronageeragh, and local people varyingly interchange the official name for the development (Mastertech/Flancare) with one of the above, citing the development in a distinct geographical, social and experiential capacity. The importance of place names renders the notion of non-place a difficult sell in Ireland, and notwithstanding the generic visual language of these spaces and their bow to consumer capitalism and 'supermodernity', could it be that the place names they sit upon and the vacancy that blights them offer a route to transform these structures into lived spaces concerned with history and formation of [new?] identities? As Augé concedes - 'Place and non-place are like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten' (Augé 1995: 79). It is therefore more appropriate to conceptualize the area as 'edgelands', a term first coined by environmentalist Marion Shoard but later explored quite eloquently by Farley and Symmons Roberts (2013: 5) - a place at the fringe of the urban and rural replete with contradictions, where the economics of globalization and local daily lived experience intersect, and where identity and social relations in Longford is ceaselessly rewritten.

For Harvey 'place...is like space and time, a social construct...*the only interesting question that can then be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed*' (Harvey 1996 cf Cresswell 2004: 29, my italics). This is a surprisingly narrow conception of place; surely there are a multitude of interesting questions that can be asked about place. How does the experience of a place influence place identity, and how does contested experience construct how place is then represented? For instance, as I have discovered from my film and research, there is a deep rupture between those with negative expressions of Longford and those who work tirelessly to improve the daily lived experience of people residing in this place. What of the historical, geographical, topographic, spatial and aesthetic attributes of place that again 'construct' how place is experienced and represented? In the next section I will deal with how the spatial and aesthetic attributes of ghost developments complicate how we categorize place as urban, rural or suburban. However, before dealing with that issue, I am reminded of Massey's notion that place is itself a *process* (1994: 155), a thing that is constantly being rewritten, re-imagined and reconstructed. In the time-space since I first conceived of this project, to my period of fieldwork and filming, until this point of editing the film and writing up, many of the social groups and ghost spaces I have researched in Longford have changed profoundly. A film and research project as process is fixed within a set timeframe with a definite conclusion, a place has no such fixed timeframe and conclusion.

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<sup>36</sup> See Pat Collin's documentary film 'What we leave in our Wake' (2010).

### *The Urban/Rural divide and ghost developments.*

The notion of the urban and rural as both places of different kinds of social reproduction and as spaces of competing power relations is at the fore of much discourse on economic and social development globally. Furthermore, the tension between the urban and the rural, and its expression through land and property, has been and continues to be a significant site of social contestation in the Irish body politic. Cultural representations of previous decades had projected Ireland's landscape as lushly green, sparse, windswept, picturesque, unspoilt, and above all, rural (Gibbons 1996, O'Brien 2004, McLoone 2000). In terms of Ireland's economy, agriculture until the 1960s predominated with the social class of large farming interests holding considerable political sway (McCabe 2011: 64 -68) - although the political purchase of this class has waned in the last few decades, the Irish Farmers Association still can be counted as a significant lobby in Irish political life. In relation to the economy, farming - primarily of the livestock export variety and kept alive chiefly through EU subsidies - is no longer a major player, however part of the farming classes' continuing influence is an appeal to a 'natural way of life', as if this livelihood is somewhat connected to some primordial 'Irishness'. However, as McCabe has demonstrated, the highly mechanized, low-labour intense, spatial consuming livestock agriculture model is historically a product of land enclosures from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards under a system of plantation landlordism (ibid: 58 -63). Furthermore, as Ward notes, 'the notion that the owners and occupiers of agricultural land are the guardians of flora and fauna has been shown to be an illusion' (1999: 190)<sup>37</sup>.

Conversely, the reified environs of the West of Ireland, connected with the social imaginary of the Gaelic, Celtic, rural nationhood, but stripped of a central agricultural function due to the poor quality of land, become locations where the social imaginary is performed for tourists. Augé would no doubt consider this indicative of 'non-place', a highly commodified consumption of landscape and environment. He comments on how a contemporary obsession with heritage, as a by-product of neo-liberal homogenization of space, is increasingly 'turning our towns into museums'. Similarly, the proliferation of motorways and the dependence on the car for transport, mean that the natural and historical landscape is abstracted from the individuals' experience (1995: 73 -74, 97). This scenario fails to deal with the multitude of towns in Ireland (and in other Western countries) such as Longford that remain at the fringe of 'supermodernity' in terms of development, and which are not located on the tourist map (Sheridan 2010:5). Appeals to heritage and to increased tourist infrastructure in marginal places are not in this case symptomatic of a hollowing out of place to be replaced by 'placelessness' or 'non-place' but rather could be viewed as a desire by those societies to redress uneven development.

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<sup>37</sup> In fact, if one is eager to explore the vagaries of wild flora and fauna in its most 'natural' contemporary setting, you would be better recommended to seek out those spaces at the fringes of the urban than take a trip to the countryside. For instance, Farley and Simmons describe how the many species of herbs, weeds, scrub and other plant-life, the infamous buddleia, knotgrass, ragwort, goatwillow and a myriad of other species which struggle in the countryside due to pesticides, flourish and colonize urban wastelands and edgelands (2011: 140 -141). Similarly, Edensor explores how ruins become sites of a 'diversifying urban ecology' where human and non-human life interact in an uncontrolled, fluid and non-mechanized manner, calling into question the 'interpretation of the urban and rural, or of the social and "natural" [revealing] the arbitrary divisions that create such binaries and their spatial mapping' (2004: 50).

Uneven development in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years pitched town against city: 'Dublin, as the only city in Ireland that could realistically compete for global investment, was the economic driver of the country' and thus it 'occupies a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis the rest of the country, in that employment has largely kept at pace with new development' (O'Callaghan & Lawton 2015: 78 -79). For many rural areas the prospect of employment during the 'boom' years was intrinsically tied up with housing construction - in Longford the extension of the Rural Renewal Scheme long into the 2000s had the effect of further linking employment opportunities to shortterm contracts on private speculative house building schemes. Speculative practices normally associated with the city, the so-called 'locational see-saw' (ibid: 72) where the land-value is tied up with zoning and re-zoning of land in anticipation of the future desirability<sup>38</sup>. However, where recent speculation and gentrification intersect and communicate in the city to produce 'new urbanism' positioned primarily around the potentials of the 'creative classes' in utilizing 'temporary uses of space' to reinvigorate the urban economy<sup>39</sup>, what was being offered in rural Ireland through speculative development was tapping into a distinctly *suburban* subjectivity.

In spatial form this suburban subjectivity mostly hoped for the fringes of the city, where access to consumption, amenity, social resources, and employment opportunities were obtained, but as prices rose sharply in the capital the commuter belt expanded with it. What is odd is that when locations like Longford began to appear reasonable as commuting hubs, the locations in which these 'suburbs' appeared were often, though not exclusively, at a considerable distance from the town, the 'urban' centre of the county. Silverstone correctly positions suburbia less as a place in and of itself, but more as a 'set of values...as a material environment, as a range of practices, and as a slew of images and ideas' (1997:3). Concurrently, the generic form, repetition, semi-detached, perfectly manicured lawns, green areas for children to play, smooth surfaces and retro-antique lamppost lighting were all features of the newly-built Celtic Tiger housing estate. What did it matter if it sat within the town's boundaries or was some 7 km out the road, as in the case of the now partially demolished Leitrim Cross development. For this is the perfect example of 'the attempt to marry town and country, and to create for middle classes middle cultures in middle spaces' (ibid: 4). A problem emerges here, these were not middle spaces, they were 'out of the way' spaces, with little access to amenities and social resources (other than access by the car). Ironically many of the potential homeowners for housing estate development homes far from the local urban administrative centre were the very contract construction workers and tradesmen who were building these spaces in the first place - hardly 'middle-class' in the traditional sense of the word, and perhaps attracted to the 'out of the way' location by some deeply held mistrust of the 'urban'.

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<sup>38</sup> McCabe had noted how this has been a common practice in Irish political-economy for decades (2011: 45-48), and O'Toole (2009) throughout his book on the follies of the Celtic Tiger years documented how corruption of public office in Ireland has its roots mostly in unethical re-zoning practices.

<sup>39</sup> See O'Callaghan & Lawton (2015) for how speculation and land value has played out in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in terms of temporary uses of space, and Till & MacArdle (2015) for more on the notion of the 'creative classes', gentrification and 'interim' space.





Figure 15 'Out of the way' housing (Patrick Baxter)

This is a construction of the ideal of suburban, but how have the categories of urban, rural and other spatial manifestations been constructed in social thought since the advent of industrialization? The enclosure of commons lands in Great Britain (and extensively in Ireland) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as a period of intensive urbanization, creating with it a rural consciousness perhaps most keenly manifested in resistance to enclosure and industrial economics (MacCabe 2011, Thompson 1991, Ward 2004). An early sociological intervention into the study of the urban and the rural was Ferdinand Tönnie's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* ('Community and Civil Society' 1887). In Tönnie's social dichotomy *Gemeinschaft* represents a kind of pre-modern, pastoral society where kinship and neighbourhood cohesion form the bedrock of society. Conversely, *Gesellschaft* is the space of politics, economics, individual endeavour, rationality, and by implication corruption and impurity. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century social discourse focused on the city as not only the economic and civil fulcrum of the emerging nation-state, but also a corrupt, polluting and/or socio-economically unequal and unjust entity. This is perhaps best exemplified by Fredrick Engels' almost sensoric description of *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845 [1993]) which positioned the diseased and polluted conditions of the working class in industrial cities like Manchester against sanitary and traditional forms of social organization in the countryside. The problem with Tönnie's strict social divide between urban and rural, town and country, then as now, is that aspects of both types of social reproduction exist in both spatial entities - there is politics and economics in rural space, just as there are kinship structures and neighbourhood cohesion in the city.

Nevertheless, the increasing importance of the city as a political and economic force in public life suggested that the rural necessitated description and categorization as its counter-space. The American sociologist Charles J. Galpin (1918) viewed the rural as an economic problem in an increasingly industrialized and business centred society. He 'identified the rural problem as restricted contact with people and ideas' and he proposed 'the integration of farmstead and business centre', believed that 'rural community was best defined as village trade centre with agricultural hinterland that it served' and thus 'developed the concept of "rurbanism" as opposed to "ruralism"' (Gilbert 1982: 611). New concepts of spatial organization would be required to imagine

the burgeoning suburban experience in post-WWII consumer economy that saw the mass exodus or white flight of the petty-bourgeoisie from the American city into the suburbs, and the mass construction of new towns by the post-war Labour government in Britain, for instance. The architectural critic Ian Nairn in his *Outrage: On the Disfigurement of Town and Countryside* (1955) coined the term 'subtopia' to express his horror at the drabness of the suburban architectural form, and the poor town planning that saw parts of Britain subsumed under generic, repetitive and banal buildings and infrastructure. The perception among the intelligentsia in the post-War years (particularly articulated in the 1960s) was that the rural represented repressive conservatism, the suburb drab conformity, but the city intrigue, and possible subversion. The psychogeographers and situationists (heavily influenced by Walter Benjamin's arcades writings) viewed walking in the city, *derivés* as Guy Debord called them, as a radical route to understanding the city as a means of resisting capitalism and consumerism. - These writers and thinkers still exert on enormous influence on alternative ways of life and practices of resistance to speculation in the city. Others like Jane Jacobs in her influence *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) were more interested in how progressive city planning could make the lives of those (particularly the underprivileged) city dwellers more liveable.

There remained the problem in social sciences of how to conceptualize divides between these spatial categories. For instance, Gilbert contended that sociology 'lacks a well delineated subject matter, and consequently, a coherent theory of "rurality"', suggests that 'direct, daily interaction with the natural environment - the labour of primary production - distinguishes the rural base', and that by looking at uneven development through the lens of rural labour production (agriculture, fisheries, forestry) we can begin to conceive of a rural spatial and cultural entity (1982: 613, 623-628). However, this conceptualization lacks the contemporary perspective of the narrowing of labour production in these areas, and the increased importance of tourism and heritage industries outside the city. Furthermore, changes in global economic and spatial organization wrought by globalization and de-industrialization has had a profound effect on attempts to delineate urban and rural space. New categories such as the peri-urban - interfaces which 'constitutes an "uneasy" environment usually characterized by either the loss of "rural" aspects...or the lack of "urban" attributes' (Allen 2003: 136), and 'edgelands' - a hinterland, exurban, consumption space usually only accessible by car - become undervalued poetic routes for understanding de-industrialized society in Farley and Symmons Robert's imagination (2011). Recently, following Henri Lefebvre's ideas on 'planetary urbanization', urban theorists such as Brenner and Schmid (2014, 2015) argue that the city is no longer a suitable analytic category for understanding global processes in an era 'characterised by various forms of "concentrated", "extended" and "differentiated" urbanisation. Urbanisation needs to be viewed as a planetary process entangled with and expressive of capitalist forms of growth, resource extraction and ecological destruction' (Rickards et al 2016:7). If the rural is essentially just an infrastructural extension or resource for city based planetary capitalist development, what is the point of persisting with categories of urban and rural if everything is urban? However, this radical proposal overlooks the historical symbiosis between city and country - the agricultural produce of the country has always feed the city, or from another perspective, could we not view British colonialism at its height as a process through which three quarters of the (mostly non-urban) globe directed its resources for the benefit of London (albeit reluctantly).

Ghost developments, as a spatial category or architectural form, consistently throw up problems of how in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland we come to define terms like urban, rural, or suburban. How can a housing estate built in a field in North Longford be described as suburban if the nearest shopping centre is 20km away and accessible only by winding poorly maintained B roads? Likewise, as I have discussed above, out-of-town sites like the Mastertech business park development create considerable tension in categorizing space as socially or spatially urban, rural or suburban. The journalist Paul Baker somewhat misguidedly states about the great North American cultural import, the shopping mall, or centre in the Irish lexicon, that its realization means 'the suburbs are now the main source of social innovation'. According to this prophecy: 'the Mall is a magnet for development in the same way that cotton mills and docks once were' (1999:210). I need not elaborate too extensively on Longford Town Centre shopping centre development as a counterpoint. It was proposed in 2005 at a time when there were several other shopping centres trading in the town, it was financed through multiple development companies and subsidiaries but ultimately attributable to Bernard McNamara LTD, bête noir of the development speculator class pre-NAMA. The centre failed to find an anchor store (Marks and Spencer was mooted at one point, the less said about the class-based 'reality' of Longford at this point the better), and lay vacant, subsumed under an 'Opening Soon' banner for three years. It was only accessed by the public on one occasion for a Chamber of Commerce Expo in 2013 and remains vacant. If this is the kind of social innovation of which Baker speaks, then it is intriguingly experimental innovation. Baker could counter that that is Ireland (i.e. peripheral, parochial, inward looking, culturally static) and he is elaborating a British developmental model (ephemeral, postmodern, rational, efficient) - he simply has to visit a half-vacant convenience colossal in Walkden, North Manchester, as I have done, to understand the poverty of this vision.



Figure 16 Longford Town Centre ghost development (Patrick Baxter)

Despite the strange nuances that the newly-built environment throws up - small town scrublands, non -agricultural rural lands, ruins, unfinished housing estates, failed suburban commercial developments, edge of town business parks and non-operating logistics companies, the wildlife invasion of artificial man-made structures - the rural/urban dichotomy still persists in not only social and academic discourse, but in the way we as individuals, citizens, tend to categorize and experience

space. In this scenario, the urban - as the site and source of 'true innovation' - is always privileged. If we are to consider this in terms of what we see and how we are ordered by external forces, then the urban should take privilege, perhaps. Architectural form, city planning, measures that invite investment or exclude contaminating bodies (smooth surfaces vs aggressive architecture to exclude the homeless and youth subcultures for instance<sup>40</sup>) are at the fore of social commentary. For certain spatial commentators the urban is solely a struggle over physical form and systems of local government organization. Owen Hatherley's (2013) brilliantly sardonic journeys across the post-Blairite cityscapes of Britain consistently position the 'urban' as an architecture form that celebrates scale in relation to the individual, the joys of Brutalism and international styles of modernism. He castigates the lack of imagination of PPI funded Barrett Homes settlements, and the general *parochialism* of 21st century British town planning and architecture. One shudders to think what Hatherley's view of Longford and the surrounds of similar provincial towns would be - colloquial and banal no doubt, and in architectural terms he would be correct. However, one thing is glaringly absent from Hatherley's critique of British urbanism - people and the practices of social reproduction that make a place truly urban (or for that matter truly parochial and rural). It is not enough simply to look and see space as urban or rural based on structures, form and systems of spatial organization - it is vital that we look beneath these forms, structures and systems to see how people organize and communicate in ways that both reinforce and make redundant these categories. We should start to investigate terms such as 'urban' and 'rural' in the same way we now understand labels of 'working class' and 'middle class' as being at best an inaccurate alignment of individuals, families and communities connected to their political economy and/or means of social reproduction, or at worst being an illusion altogether.

## The Changing Social Dynamics of post-Celtic Tiger Longford

In his article on declining Longford, native journalist John Greene makes the following statement:

'It is the first time in the history of the State that Longford does not have a voice in the *Dáil*. Even the most cynical recognise that now, more than ever, the county needs to be heard and so the failure to elect a TD is a huge blow. But... the people of Longford have only themselves to blame, because even allowing for the lopsided nature of the constituency, there are still enough votes to return at least one TD'.

(Irish Independent 13/03/2016<sup>41</sup>)

Here the journalist conflates Longford's 'voice', its ability to articulate itself, with mechanics of parliamentary democracy. The article is an entirely reductive account of place as related to public participation. Greene would do well to have engaged with the Woman's Manifesto Group - a group that developed from Longford Women's Link, an NGO that provides service provision for women in

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<sup>40</sup> See Farrell, J (2001) *Tearing Down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy*.

<sup>41</sup> See: <http://www.independent.ie/business/irish/if-the-town-goes-it-will-be-gone-for-good-34534963.html>

Longford. The Women's Manifesto Group<sup>42</sup> began locally advocating for increased participation by women in public office, local government and parliamentary politics, and since its inception, it has developed into a national initiative with participation by women from all walks of life and cultural/ethnic backgrounds. At a Women's Manifesto public lecture and discussion event I filmed, the political geographer Brendan O'Keeffe pointed out that it is not only women that are marginalized in public life and representative politics in Ireland - in fact if you are not white, male, in your 50s or work as either a teacher, doctor, publican, estate agent or farmer, you are unlikely to be represented at all. This reduction of the political and social capacity of place to the strength and influence of its public representatives is a toxicity that infects rural Ireland particularly, and is a legacy of a more mono-cultural, inward-looking pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland. However, in the last 20 years due to changes in social demographics, immigration to Ireland, and the weakening stranglehold of the Catholic Church, a new more pluralist rural Ireland has emerged. Furthermore, despite the many destructive effects of the economic crash, the abundance of vacant space is beginning to open up possibilities for increased social/cultural participation and artistic expression. It is my contention that these newly articulated social, artistic and cultural expressions have profound implications for how we view the rural and urban in post-Celtic Tiger Longford, and following Massey (1994), contradict the notion of place as a fixed, static and bounded entity. In the following section I will account for changes in the social dynamics of Longford that suggest place as fluid, open and built on interconnecting sets of social relations (place as a process), beginning with an analysis of an extra-parliamentary political campaign and the people involved with it. However, prior to that I will account for the methodological approach I employed in the field.

### *Ethnography and Methodological Frame*

The central method of this research project was an engagement of visual ethnography and participant observation over a 10 month period spent living in my hometown and county Longford. As I stated in my introduction despite being a Longford native I had not lived there nor engaged with the place in over 20 years, and therefore did not have a strong network of informants to participate with. My first challenge was to find participants for my film and begin to understand the social dynamics of Longford if I was to be successful in interrogating my central question about the relationship between place and space. Fortunately, I discovered an old friend Shane Crossan had not only returned to live in Longford but also had set up a community television group called Outtake Media. Concurrently, changes in my personal life brought me into contact with Longford LGBT group through a small advert in the local newspaper. I began to regularly attend the group's Wednesday night meeting and social, fortuitously at a time when the campaign for marriage equality to be voted on in a forthcoming referendum was galvanizing. It was principally contact with Outtake Media and Longford LGBT that began to shape a method I call video/activist ethnography, a method related to or extracted from ethnographic film. The use of a slash in defining my terms here refers to how the method evolved in the field. Occasionally it was videography, occasionally it was activism without the use of a camera, or vice versa. However, it was always ethnography.

The development of this method occurred quite organically and initially unconsciously. For instance, I was aware that I had a skillset (videography) that was absent among the wider Longford LGBT

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<sup>42</sup> For the group's policy statement see:

<http://lcr.ie/lcrlorig/documents/Longford%20Women's%20Manifesto%20Group.pdf>

group, and also cognizant that the Secretary of Longford LGBT, the formidable Donal McAodh, was subtly manipulating me into applying my skillset for 'the cause'. He suggested that I bring a camera along for the St Patrick's Day parade, and Deirdre O' Byrne, transgendered and soon to be chief film collaborator, would bring along her zoom recorder to capture sound. The parade itself was quite an experience, and I would find it impossible to maintain a role as 'objective observer/videographer' as I was for the first time in my life marching down the streets of my hometown as an Out gay man. What had initially been merely an exercise in recording an event began to take on a different light. Deirdre recently completed a course in media production, and keen to get experience in videography, suggested we interview members of the group and those who travelled to join Longford LGBT on the day. This naturally implied doing something more with the material. Deirdre downloaded KDenline open-source video editing software, I drafted a paper-edit and showed Deirdre the basic tenants of video editing (she excelled at it immediately) and we produced a short video that both documented the day, and would form the basis of the first audio/visual component of the Yes Equality Longford (YEL) campaign<sup>43</sup>.

The central campaign tool for YEL was street and door-to-door canvassing of housing developments in Longford town and all the other small urban centres and villages. This action brought me into contact with some of the housing estates and other aspects of the built environment that would form the visual heart of my film. YEL was also the only Yes Equality group outside Dublin to produce our own campaign media in the form of two short campaign videos. The second of these videos was a planned and conscious piece of video activism constructed around the visit to Longford of the national Yes Equality tour bus that was touring chief urban centres in all 67 voting constituencies. The piece would document the event, attempt to capture the spirit of the campaign in Longford and raise awareness of the upcoming vote. This was achieved through a tightly structured visual format (use of talking head interviews, uplifting extra-diegetic music, playful scenes from the event, campaign information inserted into footage), and a working division of labour whereby I again formulated the narrative, Deirdre edited the footage according to the paper-edit I laid down, and we would meet for a number of hours a day to argue about certain pieces of audio or images and refine the footage into a smooth campaign piece<sup>44</sup>. Outside the campaign the use of video/activist ethnography and working closely with Deirdre had some unexpected organic outcomes. Deirdre decided to get more involved with the production of my film. I introduced her to Shane and Seamus at Outtake Media after they had seen the campaign video and were impressed with Deirdre's work. This in turn led to a further engagement with Outtake, alongside Longford Women's Link and the organizers of the Cruthu Arts Festival - all scenarios that expended my access in the field and would form central sequences in my film, or inform my text-based ethnography.

As I have stated video/activist ethnography is ethnography, however, it goes beyond a more classical anthropological positivist mode of participant observation that positions the ethnographer as a supposedly objective observer of culture and people. In the last 50 years, there has been a considerable and sustained attack on the post-Enlightenment, positivist notion of the search for 'objective' truths (Coessens et al 2009:15; Russell 1999:4-25). This in turn has broadened the lens for ethnographic inquiry, and it is worth noting that the many innovations in visual ethnography and Observational Cinema have influenced a move away from viewing the role of the researcher as an

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<sup>43</sup> Watch video here: <https://vimeo.com/124441173>

<sup>44</sup> Watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yzu4COXzZY>



objective observer, 'a professional stranger'. Nevertheless, within visual anthropology the notion of video activism is treated with suspicion, in that the filmmaker is actively attempting to manipulate environment, voice, subjectivities, contexts, and political perception in order to influence, benefit and/or bolster a given political and/or social campaign. This is certainly true of the above pieces of video. Juris and his method of activist centred research into anti-globalization movements in the 2000s called into question the agency of the researcher as an objective, sole constructor of knowledge, and instead championed more collaborative forms of (co)-creation of knowledge. According to Juris:

'Militant ethnography involves a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within rather than outside grassroots movements. Classic objectivist paradigms fail to grasp the concrete logic of activist practice, leading to accounts and models that are not only inadequate, but are of little use to activists themselves'.

(Juris 2007:1)

Furthermore, my role as a campaigner and video activist in my hometown on an issue of personal identity with importance to my life raises issues about the social embedded role of the researcher as practitioner engaging his/her skillset and agency for something that is both *outside* the research parameters, and starting to *shape* those very parameters. Juris goes on to assert: '[T]his tendency to position oneself at a distance and treat social life as an object to decode, rather than entering into the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction, hinders our ability to understand social practice' (ibid:2). Through my involvement with Longford LGBT, the Yes Equality campaign and the video activist work carried out with Deirdre, a wider scope of research, my agency as a researcher, and a deepening of my understanding of Longford as a social body was beginning to manifest. I can outline this process in three principle ways:

1. The campaign for Marriage Equality, and the successful outcome of that campaign, rested to a great extent on how certain marginal groups in Ireland were historically perceived (and therefore, oppressed) and how positive representations of that group (normalization through visibility, just creating empathy) sought to subvert historical misconceptions for the cause of social progress. To achieve this a sophisticated process engaging many diverse form of representation (civil, political, the personal, familial) and mediums of communication (mainstream media, social media, videography) came into play. Issues of perception, misconception, representation and agency manifest in a campaign for greater rights for a marginalized group mirrored back many of the issues facing an economically side-lined and socially dismissed place.
2. I was gaining a deeper insight into the social, spatial and economic dynamics of Longford town and county as a place. Walking housing estate after housing estate was an act of 'discovering' the built environment of Longford and viewing it through the lens of economic developmental processes which my archival research in The Longford Leader newspaper was already mapping in an abstract sense. Through a complex conversation between the social identities I was encountering or engaging with (new communities, Travellers, LGBT community, artistic identities) and the physical encounter with a myriad of expressions of the built environment



(housing estates in multiple forms, ghost developments in unexpected places, the physical uneven developmental geography of town vs county) I was beginning to question the rigid divide between the urban, suburban and rural as it played out in Longford.

3. The campaign and activities during this time brought me into contact with a wider public in Longford (public representatives, business figures, activists, artists, various well known personalities around the town). This in turn led to a greater awareness of the social practices of the place and those involved in social initiatives and/or community organizations. These encounters would lead to a number of new video projects, artistic interventions that would form part of my project, collaborations and event organizing. It was these ethnographic encounters that allowed me to most clearly interrogate the relationship between a select group of social actors in Longford and how ghost developments were used, interpreted and re-imagined as meaningful spaces. The remainder of this chapter outlines this process.

### *The Marriage Equality Referendum and the Queering of Rural Space*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015, 62.2% of the Irish electorate voted Yes in a referendum on same-sex marriage equality, extending the constitutional protection of civil marriage to all citizens of the Republic without distinction as to their sex or sexuality<sup>45</sup>. Referenda on social and civil matters (divorce, and the continuing divisive issue of Ireland's draconian abortion laws) are a common feature of the Republic's political landscape. Traditionally these referenda have evidenced a distinct urban/rural divide in the country - the urban social progressive vote vs the rural conservative articulation. County Longford is one of the rural regions notable by its social conservatism when voting in previous referenda. In 1995, the then Longford/Roscommon constituency recorded the third highest vote nationally against constitutional amendment to introduce legal divorce in Ireland. Even more worryingly County Longford voted overwhelmingly (a staggering 84.37%) in favour of the government's regressive, successfully carried Citizenship referendum in 2004 that sought to restrict citizenship rights to the migrant families of children born in the State.

The Yes Equality Longford (YEL) campaign got underway with a public meeting held in a local pub on April 1<sup>st</sup> with an impressive turnout of LGBT and straight LGBT ally potential campaigners. The campaign was organized centrally by the national Yes Equality campaign group - on a local level YEL would be active in advocating a Yes vote through traditional street and door-to-door canvas, engaging with the local mainstream media, and by social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Whatsapp. This was followed by the first door-to-door canvasses on May 1<sup>st</sup> by which groups of two canvassers would cover housing estates in all of county Longford's (small) urban centres - Longford

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<sup>45</sup> Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland - popularly referred to as the Marriage Equality Referendum. The exact wordings of the change to the constitution are as follows: 'Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex'.

town, Ballymahon, Granard, Edgeworthstown and Lanesboro. In the end, the count on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May revealed that Longford had returned a 50/50 result in the county (52% Yes in the constituency of Longford/Westmeath). While the result is noteworthy in that the county was predicted to return a sizeable No vote, the Yes Equality campaign can be viewed as a seismic development in the performance of newly articulated subjectivities in the setting of (hetero) normative rural social aesthetics of Longford.

The YEL campaign would have been inconceivable were it not for prior active existence of Longford LGBT (LLGBT). The group have been meeting and organizing since 2012, and have had remarkable success as an advocacy, social and support group since that time. LLGBT were the first group to march in a rural town's St Patrick's Day parade in the world, in fact to qualify this achievement no LGBT group up to that point had ever marched in the New York St Patrick's Day parade. They had organized a number of public events (LGBT themed exhibitions, a first anniversary party with over 50 people in attendance) and while not all these events were overwhelming successes they did raise awareness and visibility of an LGBT community in the county and region. As an advocacy group they had successfully lobbied the current Government to change the date of the 2015 Same-Sex Marriage referendum to a date that would be more suitable to young LGBT and LGBT ally students to get back to their constituencies to vote - for this they were mentioned in the *Dáil* records thus securing a place in Irish historical records. This was all achieved by a core organizing group that fluctuated between 5 to 10 people, with many more LGBT people dropping in and out of the group as their needs required.



Figure 17 Marriage Equality Campaign Bus in Longford (Deirdre O'Byrne)

What is significant about LLGBT is not only its established campaign history but how the presence of such a group negotiates the performance of subaltern subjectiv(ies) in an assumed hegemonic traditional rural environment, and by its active presence in such an environment organizing on assimilationist principles subverts many of the understandings of established Queer/LGBT/gay social models. In his classic historical study *Coming Out* (1990), Jeffrey Weeks accounts for the emergence of a distinct and previously unarticulated homosexual subjectivity and subculture that galvanized

around a network of underground social spaces in the ever-expanding urban metropolis of London. These spaces offered safe retreat from the increasing draconian legislation that sought to medicalize and criminalize sex between men, principally (female same-sex relations were not similarly scrutinized). In essence societal fear of non-normative sexual relations, new underground social space and a post-enlightenment obsession with scientific categorization of the mind and body created for the first time the homosexual subject - a subject that was widely viewed as impure, pathological and a danger to normative society. Similarly, Seidman (2002) demonstrates how in the United States post war fears of communist social contamination pushed many gay men into the closet, creating a subordinated and completely hidden sexual subjectivity where homosexual desire is either demonized in the vilest terms or erased from social discourse entirely. The emergence of the Gay Liberation movement post-Stonewall in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw for the first time in Western Europe and the US a visible, politically engaged homosexual subjectivity. The terms gay and lesbian became widely distributed as articulated sexual identities, and gay liberationist politics was vocally critical of patriarchal capitalist society (Weeks 1990: 185-206, Seidman 2002: 173-183).

The increasing 'out and proud' articulation of gay subjectivity, coupled with expanding social space and gay economy soon led to a less politicized and more commercialized out gay culture, alienating lesbian subjectivities, often aligned to feminist critical theory and praxis, in the process (Weeks 1990: 207 -230). Here gay culture as Western capitalist lifestyle practice as well as sexual subjectivity began to take on a series of cultural codes - economic influence (often referred to as the 'pink pound'), cultural representations (gay media, pornography), and spatial delineated social spaces (gay clubs, saunas, 'gay ghettos') which would soon be replicated on a global scale as the 'authentic' gay model (Altman 2001, Valentine and Skelton 2003: 849-850). Conversely, the onset of HIV/AIDS and the ineffectual state response to the crisis led in the late 1980s to a resurgence in gay rights activism (Weeks 1990: 231-248, Seidman 2002: 175-176, Bell & Valentine 1995: 142-143). In the 1990s a radical 'Queer' subjectivity began to emerge, influenced both by HIV/AIDS activism, but also by post-structuralist theory (as articulated by Judith Butler in her germinal 1990 monograph 'Gender Trouble' for instance) that broke with the binary gender oppositions at the core of heterosexual, patriarchal cultural reproduction, but also inherent to gay/lesbian sexual identity. Queer theory and praxis embraced non-binary sexual and gender identities (e.g. bisexual, transgender, and intersex) while proffering a critique of 'heteronormative' society (Richardson & Munro 2012: 16, Bell 1995: 143). The radical politics of Queer in the last decade or so have given way somewhat to what some term 'assimilationist' gay rights politics (Seidman 2002: 175-178). The increased visibility of gay people in the market and job place, yet without access to the same rights and protections of their straight counterparts, has given energy to gay advocacy groups and political struggles for equality that emphasis gay subjects as equal, rather than separate sexual citizens - most evident in campaigns for the legal extension of marriage to same-sex couples (Richardson & Munro 2012). A recent legacy of assimilationist politics adapting the language, if not practice, of Queer theory increased awareness of the need for unity among non-heteronormative subjectivities. Consequently, the use of the LGBT<sup>46</sup> umbrella as the most widely distributed term (though often contested grouping, see below) in post-Queer theory equality and advocacy movement, and has been largely adopted by the state, media and policy makers (ibid 16 -18).

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<sup>46</sup> More recently LGBTQ or LGBT+ are becoming the more widely used terms, however in this text I will use LGBT as that is the moniker of Longford's group.

Much Queer theory and urban studies of gay social reproduction emphasizes the city; the escape from restrictive, conservative, colloquial, patriarchal kinship models of the rural local, into the anonymous, heterogeneous, tolerant, and explorative urban. Furthermore, on a practical level the city offers more possibilities just in terms of population size (Valentine & Skelton 2003: 849-850, Kirkley & Forsyth 2001: 423, Bell & Valentine 1995: 113). There is a well-documented link between urban expansion post-industrial revolution and the development of a distinctly homosexual identity and underground culture (Weeks 1990, Chauncey 1995). Consequently there has been a tendency to conflate Queer or homosexual culture and/or identity with the urban. However, there is a small but growing literature that seeks to examine how Queer identities and homosexual lifestyles play out in rural environs. For instance, Bell and Valentine (1995) look at cultural representations of rural homosexual practices as played out against the then increasing tendency of Queer subcultures to relocate from the 'polluted' city in order to pursue 'purer' subaltern lifestyles in the countryside (mostly in the form of communes). Kirkley & Forsyth's research into gay male populations of the Connecticut River Valley area of Massachusetts identified a tendency by which 'a gay male culture has formed at relatively low densities indicating both the diversity of rural areas and the delinking of gay social networks from urban cores and the presence of self-conscious diversity in rural areas' (2001: 421). Gray's (2009) ethnography of rural LGBT advocacy campaign groups operating outside the metropole in the United States is an important addition to studies of non-urban LGBT identities and culture articulation - here the voice of LGBT youth is privileged. She demonstrates how the absence of an established LGBT infrastructure in small cities and towns in the mid-West has both created problems for organizing campaigns (the long distances to travel to meetings when LGBT youth do not always have access to transport), but has also allowed newly articulated LGBT subjectivities to express themselves outside the rigours of pre-determined and often hugely contested Queer urban cultural codes and language. The ethnography identifies the internet as an invaluable resource in education, identification and social reproduction for rural LGBT youth who do not have access to the social resources and LGBT service infrastructure of their urban counterparts.

The urban spatial politics of Queer culture throws up significant problematics for urban and Queer theorists alike. As Kitchen and Lysaght note 'so-called 'gay spaces' were, and often continue to be, contested sites, situated in a web of complex power geometries' where hetero-normative power structures are perceived to be weak (2002:7). Similarly, Valentine and Skelton (2003) point to how the spatially demarcated gay culture in the city paradoxically creates both security (a sense of belonging to a group, freedom to openly express one's sexuality) and dangers (alienation, substance abuse, instances of sex work, targeting of gay areas by gay bashers) for the Queer subject. The demarcation of distinct, separate Queer space presupposes the hegemony of heteronormativity in that the majority of space in the city is positioned as heterosexual where same-sex activity is at best marginally tolerated, at worst socially unacceptable. This creates for the Queer subject what Cresswell refers to as a sense being made to feel 'out of place' (2004: 13), hence the proliferation of gay ghettos as separate gay places. If as Kitchen and Lysaght argue '*all* space is queered and is only ever temporarily fixed as heterosexual' (2002:9 original italics), then how does this play out in a place like Longford with a small active LGBT community but with the absence of an LGBT infrastructure or delineated gay spaces?

These ideas have important implications for the strategies of the Yes Equality campaign nationally but for the purposes elaborating a rural LGBT perspective I will concentrate on my fieldwork experiences of involvement with the YEL campaign in Longford. Most significant is the tactic of door-

to-door canvassing in positioning the notion of 'Queering space'. Door-to-door canvassing is a familiar political tactic employed by potential political candidates during general elections, but often, though not always, used by opposing sides during referendum campaigns in Ireland. The decision by the central campaign to carry out such a strategy nationally, to be enacted by local Yes Equality groups, was met with no small degree of concern and trepidation among our campaign group. The group was made up of LGBT activists and straight allies numbering 40 people in total - of that 40 only one campaigner had previous experience of door-to-door canvassing. Furthermore, we would be entering what was implicitly the most heteronormative of all spaces - the housing estate - asking for the most part straight members of a conservative 'Catholic place' to extend acceptance of equality to gay and lesbian people. Fears of homophobic abuse at the doorstep were at the fore of our early preparations - we indeed discussed what we do in case of a violent assault. Thankfully instances of homophobia were limited, however, a number did occur and on one occasion the campaign group had to be pulled from a particularly disadvantaged estate in Longford town due to threats of violence. There are two notable facets to this campaign as played out in Longford (and likely evident in other rural areas also). Firstly, by bringing the campaign to the doorstep and personalizing gay and lesbian narratives to the wider heteronormative community, the YEL campaign essentially Queered the housing estate and created a new space for advancing the strategy of visibility central to LGBT rights assimilationist politics. Secondly, given a portion of the volunteers were straight allies, non-LGBT people for the first time in their lives experienced homophobic abuse, creating a powerful awareness of the social marginalization of the sexual dissident and a conversation around sexual citizenship.

Nationally the Yes Equality campaign mobilized LGBT, youth and straight people in a demonstration of politicized citizenship hitherto unseen in the Irish body politic. Furthermore, the combination of face-to-face interaction coupled with a sophisticated social media<sup>47</sup> and mainstream media engagement became an empowering tool of political and social citizenship. The power of the campaign was that it relied on personal gay and lesbian life narratives rather than the abstract legal and constitutional arguments that the No campaign proffered - it was for that reason the No campaigners did not canvas the public as they did not have a story to tell. Everybody has a brother, daughter, son, friend, neighbour, parent who is gay or lesbian, and by default they knew someone who had in their lifetime experienced social discrimination, homophobic abuse, alienation and marginalization in an previously intolerant, social conservative and Catholic indoctrinated Irish society (to qualify this homosexual acts were only decriminalized in 1994). By bringing this personal narrative into wider public discourse the Yes Equality campaign 'Queered' the nation - however, ironically this was achieved along broadly assimilationist lines. Early on, in discussion with the National Campaign group, YEL decided not to use Rainbow flags or explicitly 'gay' iconography in an attempt to not alienate straight voters - 'sameness' not 'difference' was privileged. Similarly, LLGBT has since its inception operated along assimilationist principles emphasizing the awareness of LGBT subjectivity through visibility. As Paul Marsden, chairman of LLGBT, states

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<sup>47</sup> YEL was at the forefront of using video and social media, alongside traditional media, as a campaign tool - in fact we were the only regional campaign group to produce our own media. For examples of these see the blog article I posted a few weeks prior to the vote: <https://statesofvacancy.wordpress.com/2015/05/04/notes-from-a-marginal-place/>

‘The success of LLGBT has always been down to personality (of those active in the group) and relationships that existed or were built with straight members of Longford society and with civic organizations. Our strengths come from being visible at events, interacting with other groups, building and maintaining friendship and good working relationships with the general public, including it must be said the Church. We want to show people that we are normal members of society, not strange alien people with weird practices and deviant lifestyles.’

(interview with Paul Marsden 08/08/2015)

The problem with this model is that it in some ways subsumes distinct gay or Queer expression under heteronormative social values. Given the outpouring of joy nationally following the Yes result, the successful introduction of the Gender Recognition Bill the same summer, and the emboldened lifestyle expression evident in Dublin, some of us felt it was necessary to develop a distinctly Queer space in Longford that would act as a catalyst for the entire region. Furthermore, a cursory glance at the gay dating app Grindr proved evidence that there is a sizeable gay population in the region who were not engaging with LGBT organizations. Local lesbians did not feel represented by the group. Transgendered engagement was high, however, issues consistently came to the fore that were gender, rather sexual identity related, and the space for engaging these issues was not always adequate. I began organizing meetings to develop a cultural event that would attempt to deal with these issues head-on along broadly liberationist lines. Immediately this objective was frustrated by the need to negotiate with the heteronormative social aesthetics of place, and by inherent ideological and identity differences manifest in the grouping. It was agreed early on that the night should be an arts event and disco that was open to the straight community. The moniker of Queer art was felt by some to be alienating. Attempts to label the event a gay arts night was met with fierce resistance from a transgendered member of group, and temporarily created such toxicity it almost derailed the event entirely. In order to appease the various factions/identities within the group I came up with the name Pride Arts Longford, and we collectively decided to promote the event as an LGBT arts night followed by an 80s disco. Some of the more risqué suggestions for performances and art pieces were vetoed as to not alienate or shock potential straight attendees on the night. A vigorous promotional campaign was initiated, using flyering, local media, social media, and Grindr, with the message that the event was open to all. In the end, the arts event was poorly attended despite the extensive promotional campaign - only the usual suspects from LGBT groups and the local arts scene turned up. None of those contacted directly on Grindr attended, though the disco following the arts event (in a venue that usually hosts a Friday club night) recorded three times the usual numbers according to the management.



Figure 18 Poster for Pride Arts Longford event (Deirdre O'Byrne)

The success, or lack thereof, of organizing and hosting the region's first LGBT arts event throws up some fascinating insights into the politics of Queer or LGBT identity expression as positioned against or negotiated with rural social aesthetics and heteronormative values. Firstly, as Richardson and Munro note, the LGBT umbrella is not always a harmonious union. Significant tensions exist, for instance, between the perceived dominance of gay male voices that are seen by lesbians to reinforce patriarchal values, the marginalization of and question over whether transgendered subjectivity fits within the union given that it is a gendered rather than sexual identity, and the persistent undermining of bisexuality as an 'authentic' Queer identity (2012: 16-18). Other theorists have been critical of the failure of assimilationist LGBT agenda to represent the diversity of Queer desires and practices. João Florêncio asserts that 'over the last few years, radical political and sexual agendas have been "cleaned" out in order to promote the figure of the "righteous gay" as the pathway towards morally-acceptable queer citizenship. In the past, queer politics used queer sex and sexuality to challenge the whole of society and its institutions. Today, the mainstream LGBT movement seems more concerned with assimilating into existing institutions such as marriage and the military, rather than challenging their existence'<sup>48</sup>. Secondly, the use of terms to describe the various sexual orientations, genders, political ideologies, and social identities of those involved in Queer culture (indeed as noted above that term has its detractors) is a hugely contested space. If, as Kitchen and Lysaght (citing Foucault), commented 'essentialised understanding of sexual identity failed to recognise that same-sex desire has had different cultural meanings at different times and in different places; that how we view and understand sexuality is historically and spatially contingent, changing over time and space' (2002: 4); then the language of sexual and gender identity as articulated in post-Catholic rural Ireland takes on a complicated hue. On the one hand, the success of the assimilationist model employed by LLGBT, and emboldened by the Yes Equality campaign and Gender Recognition Bill, gives increased visibility and confidence to LGBT subjectivities in a previously hostile rural setting. On the other, this articulation is constantly being tempered by, or negotiated with (some would claim undermined by) the prevailing heteronormative social aesthetics of place.

<sup>48</sup> See: <https://theconversation.com/chemsex-why-is-gay-sex-causing-straight-panic-56541>



The final concern involves the notion of 'the closet' as a personal space related to the idea of separate Queer space. Interrogating the value of the gay scene in urban environments, Valentine and Skelton point out that 'despite the range and richness of the academic literature on lesbian and gay urban spaces, relatively little attention has been paid to the actual role of the scene in the coming out process' (2003:850). The relationship between coming out as a process and access to a safe, enclosed and distinctly Queer scene has huge implications for 'closeted' Queer people living outside the city. The evidence from Grindr, and the lack of engagement by closeted gay men with LGBT events could suggest that a willingness to welcome in straight communities under the board umbrella of LGBT community may actually marginalize those individuals most in need of a safe space to express their sexual orientation. Seidman's (2002) analysis that gay and lesbian people, following the successes of assimilationist, liberationist and consumerist expressions of Queer, are now living 'beyond the closet' falls considerable short here - it is worth noting that Seidman's research is entirely urban. Indeed, a recent report by GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) into LGBT mental health issues demonstrates that instances of self-harm, drug abuse and suicidal tendencies are disproportionately high among LGBT youth - even more disproportionately among rural LGBT youth<sup>49</sup>.

As I have demonstrated, the identity expressions and cultural practices of LGBT/Queer communities must negotiate with heteronormative values, however it is equally salient to point out that the visibility of such aesthetics, practices and identities transforms what we understand to be the normative social aesthetics of place. The YEL campaign, LLGBT's involvement in cultural events like the St Patrick's Day parade, and the Pride Art Longford event 'Queered' place. Through my ethnography actively involving myself in LGBT events and campaigns I have worked with an incredibly diverse range of peoples and subjectivities. A gay former republican activist, an inter-ethnic Longfordian lesbian couple, a middle-aged London migrant couple, a Pakistani gay asylum seeker, a straight married woman, a host of straight and bi-sexual youths, lesbian artists, transgendered activists from Dublin and Atlanta Georgia, a devout Catholic BDSM practicing gay man, among others. This is a rich and pluralistic vision of provincial Ireland in a place pejoratively thought to be backward, parochial and mono-cultural, and shows the considerable journey that Longford has travelled in terms of sexual mores since the tragic Ann Lovett case just three decades ago. It is even more extraordinary that this diverse grouping of people interacted with the wider population in a very intimate space - the housing estate doorstep. The 'Queering' of Longford I have described, although fraught with tensions, recalls for me Massey's idea that 'identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple' (1994: 5). I will now turn my attention to how migration patterns, economic developments and changes in social demographics further complicates simplistic categorizations of rural social practice in Longford.

### *New Longfordians*

In an interview with Martin Morris, the county archivist and local historian, the topic of the Catholic Church and Irish population decline post-Famine elicited this intriguing statistic. In 1841, four years prior to the potato blight famine that devastated the Western seaboard counties of Ireland, over forty thousand people attended an event to mark the laying of the foundation stone of Longford

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<sup>49</sup> See: [http://www.glen.ie/attachments/The\\_LGBTIreland\\_Report\\_-\\_Key\\_Findings.pdf](http://www.glen.ie/attachments/The_LGBTIreland_Report_-_Key_Findings.pdf)

Cathedral. To put that figure into contemporary context, that is over a thousand more people than the current population of county Longford. Indeed, as Shane Crossan noted:

‘One of the biggest issues facing Longford is just the lack of people. Ireland was the only country in the Western world to consistently record a decline in population throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And of course the effect on a small, marginal place like Longford is more significant than Dublin. If Longford was in Holland it would probably have a population of upwards of one hundred thousand people. Could you imagine what that would look like?’

(interview with Shane Crossan 19/06/2015)

Rural de-population is currently a hugely topical and highly contested arena of scholarly debate and public discourse. The inward migrations towards urban centres from the industrial revolution onwards have reached a zenith in the age of neo-liberal market-driven economic policy, centralized government, immaterial serviced based capitalism, uneven development, de-industrialization, mass migration, multinational brand and franchise business, and globalized information technologies. The effect on market towns and rural areas that hitherto depended on small to medium local business, agricultural exports and/or one or more factory that produced material commodities for export has been seismic - and nowhere more so than in rural Ireland. Nevertheless, after decades of economic stagnation and mass emigration, the years of the Celtic Tiger witnessed the first significant population increase. This was largely due to returning emigres hoping to take advantage of Ireland’s booming (though hugely deregulated and unsustainable) economy, European youth seeking to exploit EU citizenship’s right to work in a workplace of plenty, non-EU professionals attracted by the country’s high wage regime, and migrants seeking asylum and refugee status in line with other Western European countries. These trends would mostly benefit Dublin; however, the first and the last form of migration would also notably affect demographics outside the Greater Dublin area.

To deal with these substantial changes in economic activity, inward migration and speculator-led development, the Irish Government in 2002 drafted the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) but has since then consistently failed to implement it (Daly and Kitchen 2012:160). Consequently, and particularly since the GFC and property crash in 2008, rural Ireland has been left with uneven industrial development centred on a few areas, overdevelopment and high rates of property vacancy in other areas, a devastated high street retail economy in many market towns offset against an increase in out-of-town commercial developments, and notable levels of rural de-population in many parts. In policy terms there has been an acknowledgement ‘that national development policy cannot be aspatial and that future population growth cannot occur everywhere’ (ibid: 161). Thus, large urban centres, industrial hubs and tourist gateways are prioritized over less productive or less attractive areas like Longford. Despite this, and given the high levels of property vacancy in Longford, population in the county in the five years between the last two census recorded a sharp population growth - the population of 39,000 in 2011 a 13.4 % increase on 2006, where the national average was 8.2%<sup>50</sup>. Although this statistic may initially strike one as odd, there are a number of key factors

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<sup>50</sup> See population classification 2011 Census here:

[http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011vol1andprofile1/Table\\_5.pdf](http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/census/documents/census2011vol1andprofile1/Table_5.pdf) . The 2016

that would drive population growth in Longford, and which positively influence a more pluralistic vision of place.

Firstly, property prices in Longford (perhaps due to the negative perceptions of the place) have even during the health of the Celtic Tiger been markedly below the national average. Furthermore, the high degree of overdevelopment of housing in Longford, particularly buy-to-lets, and the subsequent property collapse has resulted in large numbers of cheap, available homes - some of which has been bought up by the local authorities, the Health Service Executive (Ireland's dysfunctional version of the NHS), and incredibly, the Department of Justice (Justice, Equality and Law Reform to give its full title). Thus, the negative impact of vast and poorly regulated housing construction in Longford is somewhat counterbalanced by the relocation of people from urban backgrounds into Longford's social environment, bringing with them different experiences and attitudes. The post-Celtic Tiger picture of Longford is therefore distinctly more pluralist, diverse and nuanced than the national perception of the place would have many believe. A second, though more variable, factor would be the high level of Irish Traveller population in Longford - the second highest in the country, and a historical legacy of a particularly 'progressive' policy implementation by Longford County Council since the 1970s<sup>51</sup>.

Finally, population growth in Longford has undoubtedly been influenced by migration into Ireland and government policy in relation to asylum. In the early 2000s the Irish Government in an effort to avoid ethnic ghettos in Dublin, began a dispersal programme that saw a considerable (though not large by international standards) number of asylum seekers being relocated to rural towns where they were forced to exist under the controversial, and from this researcher's perspective inhumane, direct provision system (Fanning et al 2001). Some of these asylum seekers were eventually granted refugee status, and remained in towns like Longford to set up home, family and employment. Furthermore, if one is to accept the well-established sociological premise that migration patterns generally follow local kinship structures trans-nationalized and reproduced elsewhere, the presence of a very small number of Pakistani and Chinese traders in the region pre-Celtic Tiger has certainly resulted in a notable presence of both nationalities in the county. As a result Longford is one of the most ethnically diverse or multicultural towns in Ireland. Migrant Longfordians accounted for 14.1 per cent of the population of Longford compared with a national average figure of 12.0 per cent.

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Census is currently being conducted and should provide fascinating insights into the effect of nearly a decade of austerity on demographic changes in Ireland.

<sup>51</sup> For figures on Traveller populations see the above link. I have put the word 'progressive' in inverted commas to acknowledge the differing outlooks on whether the social housing of a nomadic people was in the end destructive to Travellers way of life. This research project has not dealt in any respect with Irish Travellers, despite this ethnic group being so integral to any understanding of Longford society and the perceptions of the place. As a researcher, ethnographer and filmmaker I feel it is vital all research and representation be generated at least partially from direct engagement with an individual/group/ethnicity under discussion, and that subsequent representation of findings allow for a degree of agency on the part of those being discussed. Given that Travellers are very weary of authority figures, government agency and the media - particularly if they are white Irish - it would have required months of building trust and a considerably degree of subterfuge in order to have adequately researched the subjectivities of Longford Travellers. Although I am aware that this is a glaring hole in the research, it is in my defense simply beyond the practical limitations of my time and resources, at this time. For a rigorous study of Irish Traveller culture and history see: Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity (McCann et al. 1994), and its contested relationship with the state see: Bhreatnach, AE (2003) *Becoming Conspicuous: Irish Travellers, Society and the State, 1922 - 70*

Polish (1,628 persons) were the largest group, followed by UK nationals (1,155 persons). Furthermore, 4,897 persons in the county spoke a language other than Irish or English at home, making Longford the third most multilingual county in Ireland<sup>52</sup>. A cursory walk around Longford will reveal Chinese and Nepalese owned restaurants, Polish supermarkets and Lithuanian food stores, Ghanaian hair stylists and Nigerian cab owners, Brazilian artists and Venezuelan craftspeople exhibiting at events, Pakistani auto repair stores etc.

However, I am not claiming that inter-cultural Longford is without tensions - tensions which emanate from hegemonic Western discourse of the Other perhaps unconsciously articulated by the normative social body in Longford. The late Doreen Massey was critical of what she viewed as the inherent ethno-centrism of 'time-space' compression theory:

'The sense of dislocation which some feel at the sight of a once well-known street now lined with a succession of cultural imports - the pizzeria, the kebab house, the branch of the middle-eastern bank - must have been felt for centuries, though from a different point of view, by colonized peoples all over the world as they watched the importation, maybe even used, the products of, first, European colonization, maybe British...later US, as they learned to eat wheat instead of rice or corn, to drink Coca Cola, just as today we try out enchiladas.'

(1994:147)

In the summer of 2015 the Mayor of Longford Gerry Warnock got himself in spot of bother with the national media for misguided comments upon the announcement of the reopening of a direct provision centre in Longford. Warnock's articulation of the idea that Longford, as an economically depressed and service provision distressed region that could not support more asylum seekers at this point was taken up by the national media as a racist comment and further evidence of the backward exclusionary character of Longford. The timing of his comments, and the very disingenuous response of the media in general during the European refugee crisis, speak to how global narratives both reflect and are in tension with local exigencies. It is worrying how the language of exclusion and Othering of the non-Western filter down so easily into local discourse and public attitudes, whilst the continued penetration of the local by homogenizing forces of capitalist globalization are seen as progress (global brand names such as Aldi and Tesco that help to empty-out the high street, conversely allowing space for migrant business to operate).

The media's response to Warnock's comments and the immediate assumption of innate racial prejudice in Longford does not reflect some of the very real innovative work that has been done over the last two decades in Longford to support 'new Irish'. I can point to the work carried out by Longford Women's Link from the late 1990s to welcome in and create specific service provision for migrant and asylum seeking women. Equally I can point to Longford Community Resources Ltd (LCRL) weekly inter-cultural coffee morning in Edgeworthstown. The town has a population of 1700 people, is home to a number of

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<sup>52</sup> See the 2011 CSO (Central Statistics Office) Census figures here:  
[http://census.cso.ie/sapmap2011/Results.aspx?Geog\\_Type=CTY&Geog\\_Code=09&CTY=09#T2\\_250](http://census.cso.ie/sapmap2011/Results.aspx?Geog_Type=CTY&Geog_Code=09&CTY=09#T2_250).

large industries (logistics and manufacturing), and has since the mid-2000s witnessed an intoxicating level of new housing developments - many of which became unfinished housing estates and record high degrees of vacancy. Subsequently, much of this property was bought up by various state bodies with the remit of social housing - however, it should be noted that prior to the property collapse a sizeable number of these units were bought by Punjabi Pakistani migrants. The ethnic and social composition of a housing estate such as Cloverwell is strikingly diverse - Pakistani, Eastern European, Travellers and internal migrants from Dublin account for the largest numbers living in the estate. Indeed, the local primary school, a school originally founded by Maria Edgeworth, records 19 different first languages spoken by its pupils. A number of years ago tensions between the Pakistani and Traveller sections of the population became quite toxic and began to escalate into violent confrontations. In response the community development worker Pete Masterson approached his employers LCRL with the concept of an inter-cultural coffee morning in the LCRL community house in Cloverwell:

‘At that time we noticed a degree of tension in the community, it was particularly noticeable at a children’s fun day when the Traveller children and Pakistani kids began throwing stones at each other and then of course the adults got involved and the whole thing spiralled for weeks and the cops couldn’t control the situation - indeed they didn’t have the trust of the people so they couldn’t. So to help calm things I suggested that we organize on Monday mornings here a space where people of different backgrounds, and cultures, and religions and what have you, meet over a coffee or tea and some cake and talk through their differences... out of this we started to develop courses and programmes, like skills and employment training, art classes, a community garden...So we work with various agencies around Longford to facilitate the community needs but the ideas and desires come from the people themselves not from the council or LCRL and any other body. The idea of the morning is about empowering people and allowing them to learn from each other through dialogue, open and frank conversation...there is no other social space in which they interact in this way’

(interview Pete Masterson 21/09/2015)

I had participated in the inter-cultural coffee morning for two months, and while ultimately I was unsuccessful in audio/visually capturing the space due to sensitivities of the participants, the experience of the two hours each Monday spent in such a linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse environment was intoxicating. It was not however always harmonious. While the Irish and Eastern European participants generally got on well, there was a huge degree of mutual suspicion between the Pakistani participants and the other communities. African-Irish peoples’ participation tended to be marginal, but as Pete pointed out this was more than likely down to the strength of that grouping’s Church-based organizations. The success of the morning, I feel, was down to not only Pete’s warm and affable character but how he was able to relate the experience of those participating to that of the historic Irish Diaspora. For the ‘newness’ of the Irish inter-cultural experience, the emerging racist discourse, along with innovative initiatives for dealing with inter-cultural tension, must be viewed in the context of Irish mass emigration and colonization by Britain. Therefore, discourses around the Other differ considerable from how they manifest in Britain. In his novel *The Ghost Estate* (2015) Longford author John Connell uses the character Kane, returned

emigrant and building contractor/property developer, to express the nuances (exploitation and empathy) of the Irish experience of Diaspora and relationship with immigrants:

‘The Polish had arrived with the boom, come like a wind indeed. The country had woken up to find new names and faces that spoke of towns and villages no one had ever heard of. They were good workers and in so many ways were what the Irish had once been, Kane thought. Strong-backed, fond of a drink and, yes, ignorant. They were in search of a better life in another land and yet dreamed only of returning home.

Jans, who spoke the best English, had been a teacher of sorts, but there was more money to be made lifting blocks than teaching children. He, like all the others, had made that Ryanair migration across Europe and somehow, somehow, ended up in Longford.

It still puzzled Kane, Longford was becoming multicultural, and was there not already enough trouble between the two native groups that lived here, not to mention the travellers? How were they ever to come to terms with foreigners when they had yet to come to terms with themselves?

But there was work to be done, and these men, these Poles, were ready to do it. They never complained, they never questioned, they simply shrugged and worked. They had become serfs in a way; a man’s success could be measured by how many Poles he had working for him...

They were not so different, not so very different at all, Kane thought. A picture of Poland instead of Ireland on the cheap bedroom walls and a set of rosary beads under each man’s pillow. Poverty had a way of repeating its motifs’.

(Connell 2015: 33 -34)

Ironically these Poles would provide cheap labour to construct many of the marginal, unfinished and ghost spaces that they themselves would ultimately inhabit post-Celtic Tiger. The canvasses we conducted as part of the YEL campaign revealed a high concentration of ‘new communities’ in housing estates with unfinished infrastructure and vacant units. One such series of housing developments forming a cluster of housing estates on the North bound outskirts of the town record from the canvas we conducted 50% vacancy, and of the 50% occupied houses over 90% were home to Eastern European people. Similarly, the congregations of the evangelical churches which adherents from the African-Irish community utilize, and the local Mosque, exist in the cheap industrial out-of-town spaces that the Celtic Tiger era provided. As I have previously recounted, the high level of retail vacancy in the town has opened the space for new migrant businesses. There is then a complex interrelationship between the many vagaries of overdevelopment and new migration patterns during the Celtic Tiger years that witness a new type of social reproduction in post-Celtic Tiger Longford. Certain theorists (Augé, Relph, Harvey) use the notion of time-space compression as an analytic tool for understanding how capital influences our experience of space and place - certainly mass migration is a by-product of capitalist development. However, as Massey states:

‘Time-space compression refers to movement and communication across space, to a geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this. The usual interpretation is that it results overwhelmingly from the actions of capital...But surely this is insufficient. Among the other things which clearly influence that experience, there are, for instance, “race” and gender.’

(Massey 1994: 147)

It is my belief that changes in the social dynamic wrought not only by Celtic Tiger era economics but further by changes in the social demographic and the activities of marginal social groups like Longford LGBT profoundly disrupt the commonly held perception of Longford as a rural, mono-cultural, backward and inward-looking place, and thus how it is experienced by those you live there or interact with the place. To further complicate an essentialized picture of Longford, I will now account for how various social actors, media groups and arts initiatives use ‘urban’ practices in an attempt to create a positive image of place, and reveal the role ghost developments play in these new initiatives.

### **Uses of Space: People and Practices.**

While the Celtic Tiger years of abundance, easy access to credit, and excess significantly altered the lifestyles of many in rural Ireland, it did not notably change the types of social practices around artistic expression and reproduction in a place like Longford. Increased incomes based largely around the construction and housing market sectors had a (what we now know to be an unsustainable) positive influence on consumption practices of Longford’s population. Therefore, alongside the ubiquitous new housing development, local media sources I have researched extensively during the years from 2001 to 2007 in particular report the frequent opening of new bars, restaurants, nightclubs, clothes stores, and multinational or franchise businesses. The social habits of the population at this time (again evident from the societies and events pages of the local newspaper *The Longford Leader*) does appear primarily to have remained consistent with previous generations where the main social functions gravitate around sporting organizations, established societies, political parties, Catholic or Church groups, and local parish groups. Typical events would include for example dinner-dance functions, ploughing championships, fair-days, Country and Western music concerts - all events that would be equally as prevalent in previous decades and are inherently associated with rural forms of social aesthetics.

Although the social aesthetic of Longford during the Celtic Tiger years remained largely unchanged in terms of social and cultural reproduction, the built environment, as I have documented throughout this research project, was radically transformed due to speculative overdevelopment resulting in an abundance of vacant spaces. This would prove to have some interesting outcomes for the reproduction of a ‘new’ kind of social aesthetics for Longford performed primarily through its vacant spaces, its ghost developments. There is of course a long acknowledged history of the relationship



between vacant spaces, speculator-led development and gentrification, and alternative artistic practices and lifestyles<sup>53</sup> - however this is a history of art, social aesthetics, property, and politics of *the city*. Therefore, much of the current scholarly research and activist discourse in Ireland around art use-value, alternative lifestyles, property speculation, and vacancy centres on Dublin. Since the property crash, a number of independent social spaces have flourished in Dublin. These spaces operate along horizontal organizational lines, and are premised as artistic and social spaces for the free exchange of knowledge, skills and creative ideas. The activist researchers Mick Byrne and Patrick Bresnihan (2015) call this process 'urban commoning', and through the use of 'militant research' have both researched and actively advocated and organized as part of this urban practice. The creation of independent social spaces in the context of a high rate of property vacancy can become a means of bolstering public participation in their surroundings and built environment, but it can furthermore become a form of social critique of the more destructive effects of private accumulation in post-crisis, full austerity Ireland

While in this scenario urban commoning is offered as a potential counter-power to developer-led urban planning and 'urban enclosure', Byrne and Bresnihan, along with others, have been critical of 'temporary uses' or pop-up spaces that house artistic and alternative social practices on interim, temporary basis while a private property lies idle. For instance, O'Callaghan and Lawton look at how Dublin City Council's policy of promoting 'temporary use' for artistic projects as part of regenerative programmes for Dublin City Centre areas that were most negatively impacted by the 2008 GFC and property collapse has built into it the inherent problem of the type of precarity that speculator-led development inevitable leads to. As O'Callaghan and Lawton note:

'policies promoting the temporary *use* of space do nothing to wrestle control away from financialised market mechanisms that privilege its *exchange* value... the current trend for the reuse of vacant space promotes temporary uses as a form of saviour, it very often ignores the wider dynamics that have served to produce vacancy in the first place. Furthermore, the policy model mobilises a selective reading of the multitude of temporary uses – focussing primarily on cultural projects and shying away both from more radical forms of intervention, and mundane or everyday uses – and co-opts their diverse aims into the service of an entrepreneurial or neoliberal vision of the city.'

(2015: 75 -76, original italics)

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<sup>53</sup> The transdisciplinary paradigms of Urban Studies, Social Movements Theory and Subcultural Studies have helped inform some of the themes of this research project. For a discussion of gentrification and neo-liberal urban planning see Smith, N (1996). Matthews, V (2010) expands on these ideas to outline the role of art in gentrifying urban space and assisting with regenerative planning policy. This issue is also critically engaged by Cameron, S & Coaffee, J (2005). For a discussion of the benefits of temporary use of vacant space in terms of positive urban planning see Bishop, P. and Williams, L. (2012). Any research into vacant space, artistic use value and the city will inevitably throw up Detroit as an urbanist trope - for an intriguing discussion of recent artistic and alternative uses of space in that city see Herscher, A (2012).

This analysis is particularly salient when considering the Granby Park project initiated by the Upstart Collective in 2013 wherein in a vacant piece of land in an historically deprived part of North Inner City Dublin was transformed for a month into an experimental community art public park<sup>54</sup>. The project, which was supported by Dublin City Council, was widely lauded as an innovative (though temporary) intervention into the post-property collapse cityscape where at that time up to 20% of the city's property and land remained unoccupied, recently abandoned or closed for business - an intervention furthermore that had the interests of community development and participation at its heart. However, Byrne and Bresnihan (2013) point to the lack of debate around the underlying political economy from which the vacant site results - namely that this temporary use masks the failure of a slated regeneration initiative mooted by the city council after years of neglecting the area. The developers McNamara/Castlethorn (the same developers responsible for Longford Town Centre ghost development) abandoned the Public Private Partnership commitment following the crisis in 2008, leaving the promised regeneration of the area and the local community high and dry. Here 'temporary use' can be viewed as a stop-gap while speculation on vacant land awaits the right market conditions, and allows the local authorities to sidestep long-term investment in the area in favour of 'temporary' solutions - this after decades of neglect suffered by the local community<sup>55</sup>. Indeed the relationship between certain disadvantaged areas, vacant sites and profit-led land uses has a historical precedent in this area of Dublin, as outlined by Kearns, which 'raise[s] questions about the conflict between private profit and social use, between exchange values and use values' (2015: 13).

Notwithstanding these critiques, can initiatives such as this have potential use value in regards to how we re-imagine the right to the city and alternative political discourse of place? Till and McArdle, who themselves participated in the project from a critical methodological perspective, privilege the term 'interim space' over 'temporary use' in that the latter implies that the cultural and artistic projects galvanizing around these interventions has no intrinsic value as it lays outside the market economy on one hand, and does not articulate a more traditional masculine, work-based leftist analysis on the other (2015: 47). From this perspective is there the potential for temporary artistic, cultural or community interventions into vacant space to be inherently critical (by the very fact of their temporal realization) of the market conditions that create speculative land or property vacancy in the first place<sup>56</sup>?

The experience of artistic, community or activist interventions in vacant space in Ireland has certain 'newness' to it. My memories of the Celtic Tiger years in Dublin involved in radical anti -

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<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.granbypark.com/>

<sup>55</sup> For a full history of the vacant site in question, and a critique of the Granby Park project's relation to urban planning and property speculation see: <https://provisionaluniversity.wordpress.com/2013/08/30/thoughts-on-granby-park/>.

<sup>56</sup> The *Last Breath* project is a particularly radical example of a critical art practice that directly engages property vacancy, artistic temporary use, and speculator-led development. Through this project artist and theorist Thomas Dekeyser invited artists and videographers to create temporary art pieces in buildings that are slated for demolition, he then invites a small public to trespass the building for an impromptu exhibition immediately prior to the demolition - the process is filmed and reproduced in short video documents. The project, through direct action, artistic intervention, and critical reflection, interrogates the temporary qualities of art, its relationship to memory, the shifting cityscape under processes of private accumulation, and the power of visual documentation and participation. See: Dekeyser, T & Garrett, B (2015)

authoritarian politics and alternative lifestyle was constantly punctuated by small, and usually unsuccessful, attempts to establish independent, non-commercial social spaces in the face of a speculator-led development, high rents, and an emphasis on mainstream commercial consumption in the city. The GFC, property collapse and intervening years of austerity have, at the very least despite the untold damage done to lives, opened up some new spaces for alternative social reproduction - and these spaces have extended beyond the city's borders. Early in my fieldwork research I became involved through my friend and chief informant Shane Crossan in a social initiative called Outtake Media, a community TV project. Outtake had with the aid of a small LEADER fund local government grant recently acquired a low cost, temporary lease on part of a vacant unit at Mastertech Business Park, the large-scale commercial development on the edge of town (see the previous chapter), and built in this unit a very DIY community TV studio. They were at that time completing a series of magazine-style TV programmes training students from four of the county's schools in the practices of small-scale television production. The stated aim of Outtake Media is to allow individuals and community groups to access cheap, accessible media in order to represent aspects of social life in their town and county. As Shane states:

“there is nothing new about the idea of community television, but is it something new for Longford...up until now the only way Longford has been represented locally is through print media and local radio, and in both cases these are professional, privately owned and mediated media where Longford is represented rather than given the opportunity to represent itself.”

(interview with Shane Crossan 19/06/2015)

It is significant that the emergence of Outtake Media is linked to Shane's previous involvement with Dublin Community TV (DCTV)<sup>57</sup>, a community television initiative that had a proven track record of extensive media training of disadvantaged youth and community, and support for activist media production and dissemination - in fact the studio equipment Outtake uses was bought at a very reasonable rate from DCTV. Since the 1960s community television, often referred to as public access television in North America, has facilitated access to and empowered marginalized groups shut out of mainstream media to articulate positive representations of a given groups cultural practices, political worldviews, specific campaign for social justice, social aesthetics or cultural reproduction. Given that television production is a very specialized skillset, that the equipment associated with television is costly and not easily accessible, and that the groupings most likely to utilize community television require sufficient active members and interested audience, the site of production of community television is normally urban. Notwithstanding the technical complexities and access to human resources, coupled with the challenges faced from advances in digital media, a community television initiative in a rural setting such as Outtake Media (the only one of its kind currently operational in the Republic outside Dublin) must navigate the problem of positioning a very urban aesthetic in a place that has no established history of such a practice. As Shane comments:

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<sup>57</sup> See <http://www.dctv.ie/>. For further discussion of the legacy of DCTV and the reasons for its untimely demise see: <http://www.rabble.ie/2013/11/12/so-what-happened-dctv-rabble-chats-to-the-co-ops-staff/>

‘Community television is about giving citizens access to a medium they don’t readily get access to...however there remains in a place like Longford the problem of getting people to participate in a form in which they have no frame of reference. If you want to set up a sports club you’ll likely have at some stage in your life been in a sports club so you’ll have some idea of how to go about it but with something as specialized and as technical as TV, even on this scale, you’re fighting a battle to convince people that it is a worthwhile venture for them to train up and be able to tell their story’.

(interview with Shane Crossan 19/06/2015)

The difficult ‘sell’ for community television is therefore a matter of engaging civic society and individuals in a social setting and aesthetic social reproduction that has hitherto been alien to rural Ireland. Outtake Media must therefore use this medium in negotiation with the prevailing social aesthetics of place by appealing to established and recognizable civic and social organizations, and produce media with them that is palatable to a local, perhaps more conservative audience in terms of visual aesthetics<sup>58</sup>. Interestingly, the aesthetics of space, namely the built environment that ghost developments inhabit, have both facilitated the existence of Outtake Media, and may also present significant challenges for ‘selling’ the concept to the wider civic population of Longford. In a previous chapter I have described in depth the aesthetic and physical environment of the Mastertech Business Park ghost development. Mastertech’s high rate of commercial vacancy provided Outtake the opportunity to rent the space without a fixed contract in the downstairs of a large empty showroom unit, and the group used this space to build a DIY studio. This has not been without problems. As Seamus Clarke, Outtake co-founder, states:

‘The availability of a cheap, empty, malleable unit here in Mastertech has allowed us to construct with relative ease and not too much expense a fully functioning TV studio, and so we are able to offer this service to the wider public at large...We were initially delighted with the space until we realized that the owner had leased the upstairs unit to a Polish gym. So you can imagine the noise from the music and weights bouncing on the floor when we’re trying to record footage that obviously needs to have clean sound. And because of the temporary nature of the lease it wouldn’t make sense to put in expensive sound proofing that wouldn’t ultimately work...the other major issue with the studio is funnily enough the location; although we are right at the edge of the town, the place itself [Mastertech] is mostly vacant, it’s a bit rundown, looks like a ghosttown, and is dark and intimidating at night.

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<sup>58</sup> I am referring to the consciously urban, subcultural and radical visual aesthetics employed in much of DCTV’s outputs. Indeed many of those involved with and employed by DCTV came from a background of urban subcultural practices and media production - many were attached to the activist video group Revolt Video Collective. See <http://revoltvideo.blogspot.ie/>. In contrast Outtake Media’s most successful ventures to date have been the *Banta Central* collaboration and training programme with four local secondary schools and they are currently working with the local authorities in Longford to document the 1916 Rising commemorative events taking place in the county. In both cases the emphasis is on community participation and documentation in a recognizable televisual style. See: <http://www.outtakemedia.com/>

People are usually very pleasantly surprised when they come into the studio, but up to that point you can see them thinking “Jaysus, where are they bringing me?””

(interview with Seamus Clarke 12/08/2015)

The availability of affordable (though) precarious space following Ireland’s property collapse out of which new forms social and community activities are emerging in Longford offers both a route through which ghost developments can be imagined as active social entities, and as means by which to interrogate tensions around the aesthetics and social reproduction of ghost developments. The location and situation Outtake Media finds itself tells us a lot about property speculation, planning regulation, uneven development, and the tensions between urban and rural in terms of social aesthetics. The poor quality of the building hinders the quality of media production, however, the initiative would not have been possible were it not for the property market collapse that poor planning regulations helped to bring about. Its peripheral location allows for its existence but aesthetically is a drawback when positioned against the prevailing social aesthetic and normative spaces for civic engagement in Longford - this ruinous location would likely be beneficial were Outtake aiming to engage urban, subcultural participation. As a temporary use of space, bounded within a prevailing social aesthetics of place, and acting within a localized context of representation and social reproduction, Outtake Media qualifies O’Callaghan and Lawton’s assertion that ‘[t]emporary uses have a widely differing set of institutional structures and actors involved in their implementation, different interpretations of ‘temporary’ and different political motivations’ (2015: 73).

Outtake is not the only representative arts initiative that utilizes vacant property in Longford; the Engage<sup>59</sup> arts group were gifted the vacant former department store property Providers in the centre of Longford town to host visual arts exhibitions since 2012. Likewise the Cruthu Arts Festival<sup>60</sup> uses vacant retail units in the town’s high streets to promote the work of local emerging artists through the use of pop-up galleries. The festival, funded partially through the Longford Arts Council and central LEADER funding, is part of a wider local authority tourism strategy that seeks to counter the negative media image of the town and county - a place that is acknowledged to have the lowest tourist visitors in the region and the poorest tourist industry infrastructure<sup>61</sup>. The rate of retail property vacancy in this instance facilitates the reproduction of local artistic expression - the three main high streets of the town housing in some cases experimental urban visual art is a considerable rupture with the normative social aesthetics of the place. The presence of street artists live painting murals on either side of the town’s market square over three days, observed by a constant stream of curious, engaged and at times bewildered local public, furthered this break with normative social aesthetics. In fact the artists included a blank canvas as part of a quad of canvasses on which local people were encouraged to paint or write on, which they did - an example of direct public participation in artistic expression. However, these artistic expressions were not without tension within the normative social, or rather business, practices of the place. The New York artist James Quinn (of Longford descent) had work on his mural held up for a day over a rather trivial insurance

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<sup>59</sup> See: <https://www.facebook.com/engagelongford1/>

<sup>60</sup> See: <http://cruthuartsfestival.com/>

<sup>61</sup> See Longford County Council Strategic Tourism Policy Report: Longford Tourism Strategy and Action Plan 2012 -2015 Bane Mullarkey, Galway

matter involving the use of scaffolding to paint a full scale mural on the back of the Market House building, a means by which the local business could extend more control over the festival and charge the organizers more money. While filming in a pop-up on Main Street with young local artists from the 'Artists Beware' collective, a local estate agent insisted that his company's 'To Let' sign be placed prominently in the front window, thus breaking with the aesthetic value of the space as a temporary gallery. If the artists did not like it and removed the sign, then they themselves would be removed from the premise. Here temporary use, while nominally facilitating artistic expression and bolstering the positive image of the town, becomes a means by which normative business and private capital accumulation practices are reinforced. Or as O'Callaghan and Lawton put it: 'temporary use allows for the local State to foster the transformation of the city in a manner that, while on the one hand seems 'edgy' and 'alternative', assists in a process of capitalist accumulation and 'business as usual' urban development' (2015: 75).

If as an artistic researcher interested in developing a project that sought to *generate* arts interventions in ghost developments as a means of provoking debate around the uses of space in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, then what I discovered in Longford were examples of active community arts interventions into ghost development *but* where a social critique of these spaces was not a primary reason for generating the intervention. While some Irish urban theorists (Byrne and Bresnihan 2013, O'Callaghan and Lawton 2015) have been critical of the implementation of temporary use policy in relation to creative economy, Till and McArdle are more nuanced in their appraisal of what they term 'the language of crisis':

'the language of crisis and recovery used by urban scholars and planners to describe urban processes have real impacts on policy and planning decisions. It can also suppress critical thinking and continue to reproduce uneven power relations. Negative concepts, such as 'crisis', are associated with terms such as 'temporary use' and 'vacancy', whereas positive terms such as 'recovery,' are associated with 'permanence' and 'development'. When associations are made between times and spaces (temporary/empty vs. permanent/full), and when cities are considered similar to firms, a particular spatial imaginary of the city is promoted. 'Seeing' landscapes as spaces of potential profit leads to a system of classifying sites and evaluating urban space as either 'good' or 'bad' according to a limited understanding of market-based development and the visual presence of buildings or certain kinds of activities – understandings that become exaggerated during a time of austerity through the rhetoric of 'crisis'. As a result, places that may have rich and complex histories become viewed as potential parcels of property for either temporary or permanent use, that is, as 'plots' that can be bought and sold, and zoned and rezoned'.

(2015: 45)

For most scholars these 'rich and complex histories' are distinctly urban in character. They emanate, are party to, and are fostered by an urban environment where radical activist political praxis, subcultural practices and marginal arts tendencies have sufficient space, scale and numbers to develop. This is not the case for an environment the size of Longford, where the numbers of artists,

activists, and other urban tendencies are, whilst not absent, significantly smaller in scale. Similarly, the milieu within which urban tendencies operate reproduces a social aesthetic (graffiti, practices around squatting, direct action based political activity, for instance) that is at odds with the prevailing social aesthetic of the everyday environment in a place such as Longford. I do not mean to imply that the individuals involved in Outtake, Cruthu and Engage are not aware of radical urban social aesthetics. In fact many of the practices of these groups are directly inspired by such practices (DIY media production, pop-up galleries, public street art), however in the case of a 'rural' environment the application of 'urban' practices requires a considerable degree of *negotiation* with more traditional forms of social aesthetics, social reproduction and, ultimately, forms of representation.

The sites of these practices, as with the spaces utilized by new communities I discussed in the previous section, are the ghost developments based mostly in the generic out-of-town business parks and light-industrial areas that Augè would describe as 'non-places' (1995). However, the very practices and ways of life, the alternative utility and new forms of social reproduction, very much 'place' these sites, and reveal for us the complex ways in which ghost developments interact with, or are a catalyst for a new social imaginary of place. For instance, Longford is home to a group of young African-Irish hip-hop artists and videographers who use both the built environment of Longford and an American musical style to communicate with audiences in Nigeria where their main following resides<sup>62</sup>. As Massey contends, too often place is conflated with the notion of 'community' as a fixed and bounded thing. She notes the duality of how 'on the one hand communities can exist without being in the same place' there is conversely very few 'instances of places housing single "communities" in the sense of coherent social groups', or even for that matter such a social groups having a 'single sense of place' (1994: 153). This chapter, and my research in a wider sense, has not attempted to interrogate changes in normative Longford social groups (church groups or sporting organizations for instance). However, it has been my aim to account for a focused selection of different types of communities (ethnic, artistic, communities of sexuality) that use or interact with

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<sup>62</sup> I have for quite some time now been attempting to organize and film a scenario with this group of young African-Irish hip-hop artists and music videographers from Longford. Although they have agreed to work with me, at the time of writing each shoot I have set up has been cancelled at the last minute. Superficially, this is of course down to the fact that they are teenagers, are unreliable and probably have better things to do on a Saturday than hang around a ghost development with a gay artist filmmaker researcher exploring the sensory and representational attributes of space - and who could blame them. However, on more implicit level there is the awareness that these skilled and internet savvy young men do not need me to visually mediate their representations, they are more than equipped to do it themselves. Furthermore, what is of interest to me - the existence of an African-Irish hip-hop scene in Longford, their adapting of gangsta rap visual tropes in the setting of the local built environment, what all this says about place and local hyphenated identity - perhaps is only of fleeting or marginal relevance to them. In a recent interview for a local schools project, one of these hip-hop artists Junior Evans when asked about the impact of his music and his relationship with Longford, states that he does not really identify with Longford other than as the place he lives, that when he finishes his education there he hopes to return to his family's native Nigeria where his music has a considerable following. It would of course be a very romantic notion to imagine a hip-hop style emanating from a marginal place like Longford to elaborate some sort of neo-post-colonial theory that correlates histories of the Irish dispossessed and the experience of the migrant post-colonial African subjectivity in that setting. That would be in this case a *mis-representation*. However, it is interesting to consider this: what is the significance of representations that are generated in Longford for an audience in Nigeria, what do they say about people living between places, and how we think about identity as fixed or fluid? For a very well-produced example of this emerging scene watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWp53v3Se3A>



the changing post-Celtic Tiger built environment in diverse and divergent ways (ways that are less evident among the aforementioned normative social groups) , and demonstrate how ghost developments are anything but 'non-place'. In doing so I aim to elaborate a subjective and intersubjective picture of Longford as a place and certain communities of practice that complicate our inherent understanding of what is urban and what is rural - not as solely spatial categories but furthermore as set of social practices that manifest differently in different places.



Figure 19 Street Art by Pawel Iljun and public participation (Patrick Baxter)

## ***Chapter 4***

### ***'A Place Where Ghosts Dwell'***

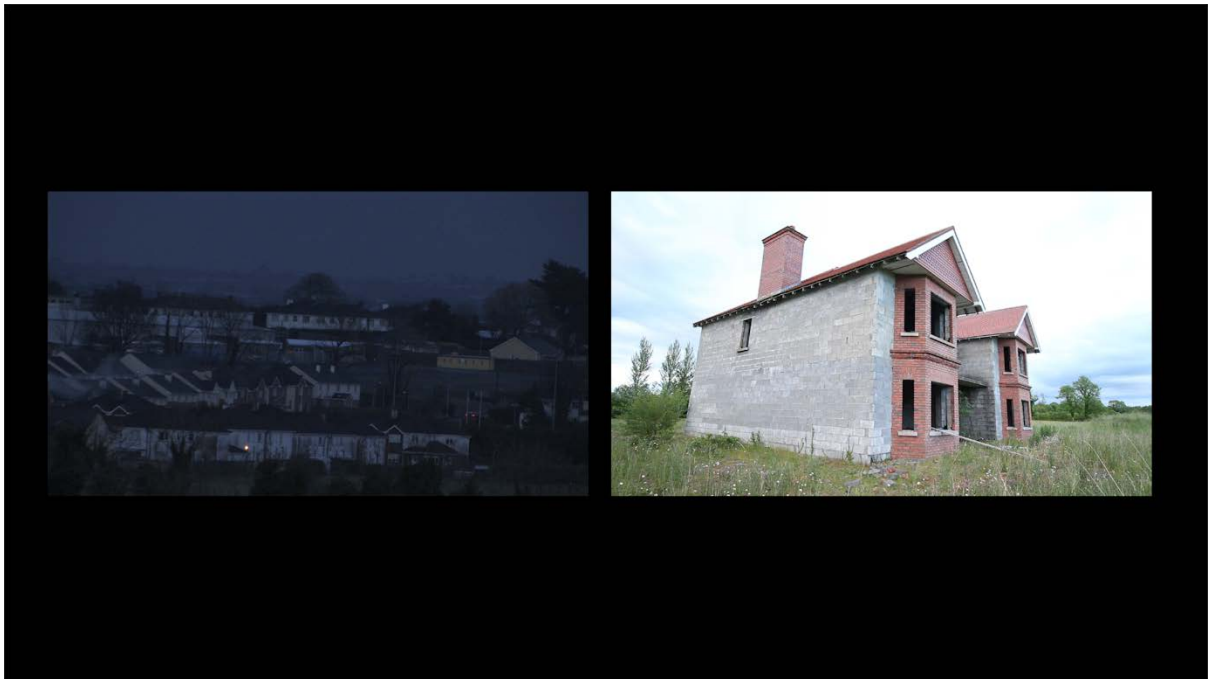


Figure 20 Screenshot Split-screen opening 'A Place Where Ghosts Dwell'

Documentary filmmaking is possibly one of the most ethically problematic art-forms given that you are usually representing real humans with histories, difficulties, desires, emotions, vulnerabilities and expectations. Particularly in the case of editing, there is of course potential for manipulation that may lead to misrepresentation. Similarly, ethnography has struggled in the last few decades with the notion of how to place the subject within the text, to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the creation of knowledge, and to allow for intersubjective articulation of agency of the researcher, subject and audience. In Irish critical theory, an awareness of narratives within the academy that favored hegemonic colonial power structures produced a powerful counter current in the form of post-colonial theory. These theories often interrogated familiar tropes of 'Irishness' in image-making to critique how the colonial subject was positioned with the text (image) to re-inforce or undermine power relations between 'colonizer' and (post) 'colonized'. In the years of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland experienced profound shifts in economic and social reproduction that were to have a distinct impact on articulations of Irish social identity and forms of representation. The digital age, economic and social globalization, and the effects of the GFC have transformed how the self, the individual, the community communicates itself back to the wider world, subverting or re-inforcing now global neo-liberal power structures and cultural reach. Into this complex, shifting and contradictory narrative I begin to make a film about a town, a people who struggle within it, a built environment seemingly out of control, attempting to place myself as an active subject within the film and research. While the previous chapters of this text drew out the central social concerns of this research project, in this last chapter I will begin to place my film in the context of my central research question about the relationship between a marginalized place and ghost developments as spaces.

Firstly, I will look at wider issues of representation in film and scholarship with reference to key texts and Irish film. Secondly, I will review two distinct models of documentary practice, ethnographic film and the essay-film, and examination how I have employed these contrasting models to form what Russell called 'experimental ethnography' (1999). Finally, the chapters will conclude with a reflection on my completed film - *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell* - as a route to drawing together the social concerns of this text and the process through which I constructed a subjective and intersubjective narrative that explores Longford as a perceived marginal place and its relationship with ghost developments as lived, meaningful spaces.

## **Film and Representing 'Irishness'**

### *Problems of Representation and the Irish Post-Colonial Context*

Post-colonial theory has since the 1980s become a significant current within Irish critical studies, chiefly through the Field Days Project. Initially set up as a theatre company in 1988, Field Day quickly emerged to encompass a grander political and critical project that set about challenging the myths of Irish culture and politics deeply embedded through a century of cultural nationalism, and two decades of bloody conflict in Northern Ireland. For instance, the post-colonial theorist Luke Gibbons' *Transformations in Irish Culture* (1996) had a seismic impact on Irish cultural studies, and in how the visual plays a role in the formations of Irish subjectivities. Gibbons contributed frequently to Field Day's catalogue, but his book *Transformations* remains a significant text within the school of Irish post-colonial thought because of the demystification it performs of certain cultural productions in Ireland. Covering a range of cultural subjects from television drama serials to the visual arts via

advertising, cinema and radical politics, Gibbons' fragmented historical enquiries break with codified linear readings of 'Irishness' that serve to reinforce dominant national narratives. Instead, Gibbons finds the cracks in Irish history through which subversion of established social norms emerge, and in some cases - such as in his readings of Irish television drama serials - the space for genuine innovation (1996:44 -69). In *Transformations* Modernism as an Irish experience collides with new forms of expression and representation, like the new experimental cinema of Bob Quinn, Pat Murphy and Joe Comerford, also covered rigorously by McLoone (2000:131-150). Interrogating or incorporating feminist, racial and identity discourses into their critiques, post-colonial theorist provided a new lens in which to explore tensions in Irish society.

Martin McLoone's post-nationalist review of Irish Cinema, whilst providing detailed readings of key Irish films, also places the cultural production of the cinematic image in its socio-political context. He identifies how early Irish film consistently threw up the following tropes: the uniqueness of Irish identity, an identity that was Catholic, essentially rural, a nation that was *Gaelic* in culture, and a nation of great, almost primordial antiquity. For McLoone these tropes of cultural nationalism held a strangle grip on any cultural expression for a number of decades (2000:11-32, see also O'Brien 2004). The land as a visual motif was central to the operating of these tropes; the urban did not sit easily with this paradigm, so was more often than not side-lined or ignored completely. Coupled with the cultural dominance of Hollywood over cinematic codes and conventions, and an unwillingness on the part of the State broadcaster RTÉ to represent an urban demographic, the landmass was reified as Mother Ireland (Kiberd 1995) and as rural. The urban was portrayed as either decaying, decadent or entirely absent and this paradigm remained virtually unchallenged until the arrival of the New Wave of Irish filmmaking in the 1970s.

Post-colonial theory is not without its critics. Pointing to Terry Eagleton's comments about the 'increasingly blunted' historical awareness of post-colonialism, Stoler argues that this school of thought is hampered by 'an over expansive sense of what we know about the different temporalities in which imperial forms endure' (2008: 192-193). In other words, the experience *of and persistence with* ascribed colonial ways of being or cultural expression, and the means to subvert or transcend these tropes, differ depending on the historical developments of a nation or peoples' postcoloniality. Ahmad (1996) has similarly criticized the ahistoricism of post-colonial theory, but he points to the uneven experience and distribution of capitalist practices in centre and periphery. Using a subaltern studies method, Lehner (2005) notes of post-colonial studies how 'the predominance of issues of identity...seems to justify the preoccupation with national paradigms. However, these...have proven the capacity to subsume such identity markers as class and gender'<sup>63</sup> (2005: 1).

Without denying the power of a post-colonial frame of analysis to open up new discourses around the construction of nation and cultural identity, there is perhaps an unhealthy tendency within some of these texts to draw too close an affinity with the experiences of the colonized and peripheral in other global settings. For instance, Gibbons opens *Transformations* with the statement 'Ireland is a

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<sup>63</sup>Oddly, Lehner, who elaborates a subaltern studies approach, references and by implication associates David Lloyds *Anomalous States* (1993) with this oversight in post-colonial theory, but fails to acknowledge Lloyds application of Indian Subaltern Studies to the case of 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century agrarian violence.

First World country, but with a Third World memory' (1996:1), and whilst he goes on to qualify the constructedness of the Irish experience in relation to hegemonic Anglo-American cultural imperialism, such sentiments create a ethno-centric reading of marginality and 'Otherness'. Are there not Third Worlds in the First World, and visa -versa? Similarly, when McLoone muses on whether Irish Cinema is a form of Third Cinema<sup>64</sup> (2000 117-130), he falls on the side of negation, this seems to me to be the wrong line of questioning. Third Cinema came out of a very distinct set of political and economic conditions of marginality of film practice in (principally) Latin America - the fledgling Irish film industry has always experienced heavy diffusion and penetration of established cinema conventions due to its proximity, and dependence on, North American and British Cinema.

Recent resurgence of film in Ireland<sup>65</sup>, both fiction and documentary, has seen issues of cultural identity (national, local, social), and tropes of 'Irishness' (Gaelic, rural, religion), come to the fore in a manner not witnessed since the New Irish Cinema of Bob Quinn and Pat Murphy in the 1970s. One filmmaker that particularly - and perhaps most successfully - grapples with the tensions in new identities of 'Irishness' is Lenny Abrahamson. His profound examination of the Celtic Tiger rural condition in *Garage* (2007) is most relevant here. The film follows the travails of a simple-minded and put upon garage attendant named Joesy. Joesy is an unwitting victim of changes in rural economics - his peaceful rural Midlands existence is cruelly disrupted by harsh business practices and speculative changes in his built environment over which he has no control. The spectre of ghost developments is referenced but is kept out of the frame - the housing and commercial developments that characters in the film speak about provide a haunting, unseen presence that dislodges the rural worldview of Joesy and the notion of simple country life. However, this too is an illusion, as the other characters in the film are portrayed as cruel, callous, manipulative, complex and self-interested. The rural is not celebrated as utopian or even idyllic; instead, the film 'captures a sense of clannishness, claustrophobia, and mutual dependence of rural life that had not been so successfully portrayed since Bob Quinn's...*Poitín*' (Gillespie 2009:37).

Ken Wardrop's 2009 *His & Hers*, an exploration of femininity and gender relations in the Midlands, introduces an innovative talking-head style narrative structure whereby a large number of females from the Midlands spanning generations from child to elderly are briefly and sequentially filmed at home talking about the men in their lives: daughters, wives and mothers telling stories about sons, husbands and fathers. The setting is almost exclusively the single standing countryside dwelling sat on a farm of land, with the occasional reference to the semi-detached suburban housing estate home, perhaps in an attempt to illustrate class distinction. There is no doubting the film's genuine affection for its subjects, the linear inter-generational interview device is indeed intriguing and deftly handled, and the film is lovingly crafted. Nevertheless, there is something distinctly regressive about

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<sup>64</sup>See Wayne, M (2001) *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*.

<sup>65</sup> Particularly in the last year, the Irish fiction film has had remarkable success on the international stage. However, something odd is happening in relation to stories of Ireland. Two of the most critically acclaimed films (*Room* and *Viva*) are set in North America and Cuba, respectively. *Lobster*, although filmed in Wicklow, is set in an undetermined dystopian future world. *Brooklyn*, as the name suggests is primarily set in that New York borough, and in the 1950s so that representations of Ireland are historic. Similarly, the uplifting *Sing Street* is set in the Dublin of the 1980s. Clearly, there are films such as *Glassland* that explore contemporary post-Celtic subjectivities, but these have had considerably less purchase with Irish and international audiences. It is interesting to speculate as to why one of the most seismic periods in recent Irish history is so underrepresented or is of such marginal appeal to audiences.

the representation of 'Irishness' the film articulates. A title at the beginning of the film states 'A film from the Irish Midlands'. However, it is a film from *one section* of the Irish Midlands. The interviewees are all white women, mostly from farming backgrounds, the stories they tell of their 'men' and the relationships described are all concerned with marriage, heteronormativity, rearing boys who will then grow up to meet a woman, get married, perhaps settle down on the farm, build a house, have children and then continue the cycle. It is an image of Ireland that reifies social continuity, the traditional 'rural' ways of life (i.e. livestock farming), heteronormative relationships, social conservatism, and the centrality of marriage as an institution. Would it not have been more interesting to have interviewed a woman from a new Irish community to see how these 'traditional' ways of life compare and contrast? Or the mother of a gay son to interrogate possible breaks with social continuity? Where are the urban families whose social structures of kinship exhibit more diverse and complex patrilineal lines of reproduction? In fact, why is the most important site of rural social interaction and reproduction, the town, entirely absent from the film? True this is a rural Midlands Ireland that I and many from that region are very familiar with, but it is not the only Midlands Ireland.

Conor Horgan's *The Queen of Ireland* (2015) offers a treatise on an entirely different set of Irish subjectivities. The documentary is a biographic account of the life of 'accidental activist' Rory O'Neill and his now internationally famous drag queen alter ego Panti Bliss. It opens in Dublin Castle on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2015 where Panti is greeted by a jubilant crowd there to hear the final results of the Marriage Equality referendum. The film details O'Neill's early life in a conservative rural West of Ireland town, his early involvement with the underground gay scene in Dublin in the 1980s (when homosexual acts were still a criminal offense in Ireland), through to his transformation into Panti Bliss in Japan and subsequent return to a more tolerant Dublin in the 1990s (decriminalisation was finally passed in 1994). Horgan uses the subjective accounts of O'Neill/Panti to tell a more universal story about homosexuality, homophobia, Queer culture and the underground in urban Dublin, the attitudes of rural Ireland to difference, and the eventual transformation of Ireland to the point of now being one of the most socially progressive countries in Europe in terms of gay rights (and gender recognition as the Gender Recognition Bill, thought to be one of the most progressive pieces of legislation on transgendered rights in the world, was also passed in the summer of 2015). In the climactic scene of the film O'Neill returns to his hometown in Mayo to perform as Panti in a sell-out show in a local marquee. He is accompanied by his parents in what is a heart-wrenching scene where he is greeted by an ecstatic and welcoming crowd. Formally *The Queen of Ireland* is not as innovative as *His & Hers*, however it is part of a growing body of work that attempts to explore 'Irishness' and Irish identity articulation through a subaltern lens that collapses many of the visual tropes of 'Irishness' back in on themselves.

As a documentary and artistic representation of ghost developments as an aspect of Irish life, and Longford as a provincial Irish town I was from the outset keen to circumnavigate the familiar tropes of 'Irishness' and rural Ireland. As author of the film, this would necessarily be the case as I do not identify as an individual with many of the familiar tropes and have as a political subject been actively opposed to the perceived social conformity and rigid repressive Catholicism of the rural Ireland I grew up in. In any case, the 'rural' Ireland I discovered in Longford is a very different place to how I (and many others) perceived it. In contradistinction to the historic representation of Ireland as windswept, rural, and socially conservative, my ethnographic fieldwork revealed many social groups, artists, LGBT activists and individuals whose social practices and worldviews contradicted rural

Ireland tropism. Furthermore, there was the presence of haunting, affective and troubling ghost developments which likely ruptured the cosy visual aesthetic of *His & Hers* (2009), for instance. A representation of place and space in this scenario required dislodging the realist aesthetic of documentary (Russell 1999) through the use of stylistic devices such a split-screen, time-lapse and projections.

*A Place Where Ghosts Dwell* is a representation of a place through the lens of its marginal spaces (ghost developments), and a film that uses different forms of representation as a means to explore issues of identity (sexual, social, gender, cultural). It is, nevertheless, a highly subjective representation of place, space and identity. This is signposted in the film early on through the use of reflexive devices, drawing attention to the mechanics of filmmaking as a route to alerting the viewer to that subjective position. What I am pronouncing here is: this is *not the* story of Longford and its ghost spaces; it is *a* story of Longford and its ghost spaces. Initial rough cuts of the film explicitly positioned myself as both subject and author of the film within the frame as a means of exploring my Queer subjectivity, a coming-out narrative, and my troubled, though increasingly nuanced relationship with Longford. From an aesthetic, ethical and narrative perspective I began to feel this this footage (premised around me performing a spoken-word piece about my experience with Grindr) weighted the narrative down, that it was a complex thread that obscured the more inter-subjective qualities of the film<sup>66</sup>. As filmmakers, we are used to mediating other peoples' experiences and worldviews through various cinematic conventions, tools, and motifs; mediating our own experiences in the act of creating film narrative can be an altogether more troubling task, although the tension within me of making this film in Longford suggested that I needed to somehow represent this experience. Instead of an explicitly personal reflexive narrative, I use images that have personal, almost secret meaning for me - I will elaborate on this in the final section. Furthermore, I was interested in playing with narrative tensions between the ethnographic emergent footage I had filmed and a more authored subjective reading of place and space. Hence, I began in post-production to employ some classic essayist devices such a narration and chapter title cards to explore this tensions. In the following section, I will look at ethnographic and essay-film models of filmmaking, and discuss visual and aesthetic means of capturing place and space.

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<sup>66</sup> Grindr is a notorious gay dating app. This footage, and the themes of rural Queer identity and the coming-out process, are tentatively forming part of project I hope to realize after finishing this one.



## A Space between Ethnographic Film and the Essay-film

As an artistic research project, filmmaking is the central means by which I am exploring my theoretical, methodological and social concerns. However, the processes of reflecting, and indeed self-reflection, generated by both writing this text and reviewing the various stages of editing the film with other critical eyes are constantly opening up new possibilities for constructing narrative, meaning and knowledge within this artistic research project. There remains an inherent difficulty in balancing the practice and academic aspects of an artistic research project, it helps to position ethnography as *practice*. It is a practice that involves writing, reflection, production, mastering a skillset, aesthetics, diplomacy, the ability to collaborate with others, and a degree of inner turmoil. Ethnography is an *experimental space*, and through this artistic research project I have explored the space between two modes of documentary film: the ethnographic film, and the essay-film. This tension directs me towards what Catherine Russell calls 'experimental ethnography' (1999) - a mode of inquiry that allows me as an ethnographer to contextualise my research within artistic practice. If experimental ethnography opens up such a space for an engagement of theory and the artistic, then it is worth exploring the ethnographic and experimental dynamics of both the essay-film and ethnographic/Observational Cinema to position my practice within these aesthetic contexts. Such an exploration would position the interpretive qualities of the research in a frame of analysis that also qualifies the authored, subjective and intersubjective readings of ghost developments as places, spaces, structures and vehicles for (co)-creating knowledge.

### The subjective film as documentary practice

The essay-film as a highly subjective, and at times, intersubjective style of filmmaking often displays a strong current of formal experimentation in the positioning of subject, narrator and narrative. For film theorist Laura Roscaroli (2009) an essay-film has a strong central enunciator in the filmmaker who proposes a guiding theory or argument through an open-ended dialogue with the spectator. Therefore, the essay-film is often, though not always, less concerned with the subjectivities of other individual social actors and the cultural, physical environments they exist within. In general terms, this is in contradistinction to how 'new ethnographic filmmakers carefully attended to the texture of lived experience' (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009: 7). Nevertheless, does there exist a space between the two modes of filmmaking where the 'lived experience' of subjects in the field and the subjectivity of place is positioned in conversation with the voice of the author of the film? I will tease out this question in relation to my film in the final section of this text, however before going on talk about ethnographic film (particularly its Observational variant), I will review the various methods of the essay-film with reference to a number of key films I feel are relevant to my practice.

It may be salient to begin this review with a celebrated, and for some controversial, Irish example of an essay-film. Bob Quinn's *Atlantean* (1981) is a playfully subversive three-part documentary on Irish identity, Quinn posits the theory that the Irish, particularly those from the Western Atlantic seaboard, are not in fact Celtic but that the origins of Irish culture is more closely related to that of

North African and early Coptic Egyptian<sup>67</sup> society. To bolster his argument Quinn travels to various locations, gathering evidence, speaking with academics and experts. The film's narrator refers to Quinn in the third person, and to his quest in highly speculative and gently mocking terms - to his 'frail argument', that he is 'an impertinent scholar', how this 'chaps' methods 'exasperates actual historians' or how he relays findings in a very 'unscientific way'. Common to the essay-film as a mode, these utterances allow the spectator to engage with the film as text in an open-ended, reflective and dialogical manner (Roscaroli 2009). This invites the viewer to question not only the validity of the filmmaker's theories and findings but the certainty with which historical narratives are accepted and reified, and in doing so one begins to question the entire apparatus of 'objective' scientific enquiry, mirroring Coessens et al's thinking on the 'cultural fiction' of scientific pursuits of objectivity (2009: 39-43). The approach that Quinn employs directly engages the subjectivity of the filmmaker in an act of coming to terms with the implications of dominant social and historical discourses of the era (Roscaroli 2009:108). Quinn's film pre-dated the Field Day project and the emergence of post-colonial writing of Luke Gibbons and David Lloyd; however, one can read in it the same provocative urge for alternative ways of seeing Irish history and identity. With the advent of one of the worst recessions in Irish history and a devastating property collapse there is perhaps renewed interest in questioning mainstream or dominant narratives of 'Irishness'. This is also evident in the recent essay-film by Pat Collins *Living in a Coded Land* (2014).

Collins' film guides the viewer through a narrative of the creation of a distinct Irish class of managers, financiers and moneymen from the Cromwellian conquests of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to independence and through to the recent economic crisis. Mixing interviews with experts, academics, writers and poets with archive footage and some extraordinarily evocative camerawork, this essay - film looks to history for the source of many of Ireland's current social and economic woes. He creates a tightly weaved tableaux of voices, images and archive footage that proffer a qualified, though clearly subjective reading of Irish historical and social development. The talking heads serve to qualify Collins' narrative, yet we are distanced from their own experience of land and history, as we do not see them engaging the environment they speak off. Similarly, distance from those that appear in the archive footage is maintained by their historicity. Collins furthermore keeps himself, or any reference to himself as the narrator of this story, entirely out of the frame creating a strange airlessness to his essay - it is as if the various commentators and the camera's eloquent jaunts through the environment and history embody the filmmaker's voice.

The presence/absence of the author, or the reliability of the enunciator, foregrounds Chris Marker's germinal essayist-travelogue-personal diary film *San Soleil* (1982). For Russell *San Soleil* 'is an exemplary instance of the meeting of the avant-garde with anthropology' (1999: 301). An unnamed protagonist travels Africa, Japan and Iceland filming peoples, rituals, technologies, militant protest, and the aftermath of revolution in Guinea-Bissau. He relates his thoughts on the frailty of memory and the capacity for film to capture historical and personal memory/reverie to a female narrator who reads his letters, forming the loose and free-flowing narrative basis for the film. 'Due to its decidedly self-reflexive nature and its meta-critical attitude' *San Soleil* exhibits those characteristics

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<sup>67</sup> Quinn's theories have not been generally accepted in Irish Studies or by the Royal Society of Antiquaries leading Quinn to suggest that there is racialism at the heart of the matter. See [www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/really-bob-have-we-all-got-a-touch-of-the-tar-in-us-26415869.html](http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/really-bob-have-we-all-got-a-touch-of-the-tar-in-us-26415869.html)

of the essay-films' interest in exploring 'the relationship between image and reality, between film and document, between audiovisual record and historical event' (Roscaroli 2009:64). In the case of *San Soleil* the relationship between image, text and reality is highly mediated. The female narration of letters, the use of video footage from Japanese video artists, the movement back and forth between places and time-zones create a disorientating spatial, textural and temporal epistemology.<sup>68</sup>

Among the most celebrated examples of the essay-film is Patrick Keiller's psychogeographic, erudite and semi-fictional portrait of *London* (1994). In the film, the unnamed narrator details his wanders through London with his friend and researcher Robinson throughout 1992. We never see Robinson or the narrator in the frame; instead the visual language of the film is constructed around a series of static images of various locations in London. Robinson is attempting to connect with and interrogate the very nature of what London is as a place by evoking the literary voices of Baudelaire or Rimbaud in a setting that witnesses a changing economic context for the city (the decline of industry and the rise of the City of London), what he sees as the moribund political culture of Tory Thatcherite policy, and the unsettling climate created by the IRA bombing campaign in the city that year. History and the present intersect in revealing ways, and despite the fixed-ness of camera position the film does very much feel like a stroll through the built environment of the city. *London* is perhaps exemplary of the highly authored approach of the essay-film: the only voice we hear is that of the filmmaker, through a fictitious narration device. This is Keiller's London, his conversation is with the city as a series of structures and spaces, and with London as a literary beast; within this narrative there is no space for the intersubjectivity of the London of Londoners, the lived experience of the city is absent.

Conversely, the essayist approach in *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell* does not obscure the intersubjective experience of Longford and ghost developments - the voices of my participants exhibit a high degree of counterpoint in order to undermine an overly authored essay in the mode of Collin's film. The cine-reflexive, archival and narrated aspects of the film are devices to both create distance from the subjective, authored essay of the piece, and in subtle ways, reinforce that essay. The above examples of essay-films differ from my use of the mode in a number of key regards. This relates mainly to the ethnographic elements of my film and a concern for the 'lived experience' of Longford and ghost developments. Like in *San Soleil* the use of narration in my film is 'autoethnographic' where the 'the I-you structure provides a discourse of veracity that is subjectively, rather than objectively, based' (Russell 1999: 311). However, this narration is consistently placed against the subjective voice of my participants and scenarios in which they interact with space and place, creating a complex juxtaposition of voices and subjectivities so that the film is both ethnographic and autoethnographic. Nevertheless, much of the ethnographic material is positioned around a series of artistic interventions into ghost developments and cine-reflexive sequences so that the 'lived experience' of space and place is far from the supposed 'objective' camera's eye in a traditional ethnographic film sense. If MacDougall is true in saying that

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<sup>68</sup> I use the term epistemology here less in reference to the philosophical study of knowledge (though *San Soleil* is certainly concerned with prescient philosophical and political thought of the time) but more how Marker's film creates a very unique cinematic knowledge through the clash of aesthetics, filmic styles and techniques, by merging the ethnographic with the subjective poetic voice, and through the interplay of text, language and image. In that sense, *San Soleil* is an exemplary experimental ethnography (Russell 1999), and a huge influence on my film *A Place Where Ghosts Dwell*.

‘the only subjectivity in film-viewing is that of the spectator, the only subjective voice that of the filmmaker’ (1998: 97), then we can view the notion of ethnographic objectivity in film as a fiction to begin with. In following section, I will comment further on this notion in relation to ethnographic film and Observational Cinema.

### *Ethnographic film and the Observational Mode*

Ethnography has made significant strides in the last few decades to dislodge the author as sole creator of knowledge within the text, to question the process by which knowledge is created, disseminated and absorbed, to evolve collaborative and intersubjective methods and approaches to allow for increased agency for subject and audience. However, visual anthropology and ethnographic film has its roots in the scientific positivist projects, and also emerges from a similar temporal setting as early cinema. In fact Grimshaw draws a direct line between the Lumière Brothers first cinema screening in 1895, those scenes of workers emerging from the factory for example, and the Torres Straits Expedition stewarded by Alfred Haddon in 1898, a project that marked ‘the symbolic birth of modern anthropology’ (2001:15). The advancements in technology heralded by the Lumières were taken up with gusto by early ethnographers in an attempt to use the visual to record, document, but mostly categorize the cultural Other as a means of finding universalist, positivist grounding for the advancing of ‘civilization’, Western society. Makinowski’s ground-breaking ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), and the British School of Social Anthropology in general, dislodged this urge towards socially deterministic categorization, along with that a suspicion of the visual and image-making crept into anthropological discourse (ibid: 3-8). Ironically, only two years later Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1924) arrived as one of the founding fathers of ethnographic film as a humanist project, foregrounding Nanook as the subject and protagonist of the film, but also establishing ethnographic film as a genuine cinematic form. As MacDougall states ‘ethnographic film is not simply an alternative technology for anthropology but has its own history as part of a larger cinema culture’ (1998:141). Nevertheless, ethnographic film and visual anthropology, as say exemplified by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s<sup>69</sup> *Balinese Character* (1942), remained for the subsequent decades primarily concerned with the educational, didactic value of the image. Visual anthropology was caught up at this time with the notion of ‘data salvage’, the need to document ‘disappearing’ cultures over a desire to give voice to the people of those cultures. Much ethnographic film from this period, evident in the films of Karl Heider or John Marshall exhibited a tendency towards a ‘voice of god’ style narration, where the voice of the subject is subsumed beneath the voice of the ethnographer/filmmaker. However, changes in technology and artistic turns within the wider film culture would soon manifest approaches that moved towards collaborative, and polyvocal articulation and aesthetics.

Whilst it goes without saying that film is a highly collaborative art-form from a technical and professional perspective, the notion of subjects of the film involvement in the production of image and meaning is a relatively new concept developed from the crisis of representation (Ruby1991: 52 - 53). However, one could perhaps trace collaborative films origins to the ethnographic films of Jean

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<sup>69</sup> It should be noted that Bateson and Mead disagreed profoundly on the function of ethnographic film, image making in the field and the role of art in anthropological research. See ‘Conversation with Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead’ Brand, S (1976) Co -Evolutionary Quarterly, June

Rouch and his development of the idea of 'shared anthropology' and 'participatory ethnography' (Russell 1999:13, Ruby 1991: 57). From the early 1950s, armed only with a non-synch sound 16mm spring-wound camera, Rouch made an impressive number of ethnographic documents often collaborating with local people and aspiring filmmakers in the Niger Delta. For instance, with *Jaguar* (1955) Rouch practically invented the genre of ethno-fiction, as it follows the journey of a young man Damouré Zika (a regular collaborator with Rouch) as he searches for work and enjoys his youth on Africa's Gold Coast. The film was filmed silently (this was the period of pre-synch sound cameras), with Zika adding dialogue and commentary on the events portrayed in the edit afterwards. This technique creates distance but in this case, it also allows Zika to stamp his editorial and authorial perspective on the narrative, in turn creating a collaborative and formally experimental filmic epistemology.

Rouch is also credited with pioneering collaborative techniques that were both stylistically, formally and narratively innovative. For example, take the various innovations in the *cinéma vérité*<sup>70</sup> classic *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer 1961 - co-directed with Edgar Morin). *Chronique...*, though in many ways authored by Rouch and Morin (evident from the theoretical and sociological concerns they pursue in the film, and the means by which they often 'direct' participants towards those concerns), employs a number of radical, inventive, and at the time groundbreaking collaborative techniques. Participants in the film discuss their lives with full knowledge of its filmic application, and participate in the recording of key scenes. One of the most fascinating techniques Rouch and Morin created was the process of screening-back: the protagonists of the film are seen watching how they have been represented on image at a filmed screening of the (near) final film, and comment on whether they like the footage or not (and many do not). This material forms the finale of the film. It is a formal experimentation in reflexive documentary, an antecedent to experimental ethnography (Russell 1999: 13).

A movement towards an experimental ethnographic paradigm has been considerably advanced by post-colonial, Queer and feminist voices in film and ethnography. For instance, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) is a highly innovative, critical, reflexive and experimental ethnographic intervention into the debate on ethnographic representation, the ethnographic gaze and the construction of the Other. Minh-ha uses the camera, ethnographic film approaches, and cinematic devices to turn the subject of ethnographic inquiry back on itself - instead of a cool, objective, distant deconstruction of a Senegalese community, the filmic representation of that community is used to deconstruct the inherent biases and power imbalances in Western academia and filmmaking of the Other. As Yang contends 'in style and content, this keenly self-aware documentary of Senegalese life challenges both our familiarity with the conventions and techniques of traditional ethnographic documentary as well as the underlying Western biases with which we view these foreign cultures' (1997: 1).

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<sup>70</sup>*Cinéma vérité* is here used as distinct from Direct Cinema, a form of documentary that shares much common cause with *cinéma vérité* but is more widely associated with North America, and usually refers to the works of Robert Drew, the Mayles Brothers, D.A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock - see Saunders, D (1997) *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties*.

Following in the wake of *cinéma vérité* and Direct Cinema movements of the 1960s, and the educational style of the early ethnographic films of Karl Heider or John Marshall, Observational Cinema stripped back the didactic imperative of the latter, whilst it challenged the narrative driven language of the former. Instead, Observational Cinema favoured a film language that ‘carefully attended to the texture of lived experience... [and] that presented experiential and interpretative possibilities rather than explanatory and definitive statements’ (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009: 6 -8). The practice was first developed by Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock who made a series of films in Vermont in the early to mid-1970s, and by David and Judith MacDougall working contemporaneously. Using hand-held cameras, avoiding extra-diegetic sound or music, maintaining long shots, editing according to what the filmed material suggested rather than some pre-conceived narrative imperative, Observational Cinema departed significantly from other documentary forms in its representation of the ‘real’. For Grimshaw and Ravetz, the power of Observational Cinema was manifest in a form of ‘withholding’, that the spectator was not guided by established cinematic conventions of dramatic tensions or narrative resolution, but instead Observational practice in film opened up ‘interpretative spaces’ for the spectator (ibid:54-55). In this sense, it is a more engaged, intuitive and active form of seeing, because the spectator is invited to observe and interpret rather than simply watch and understand. Consequently, Observational Cinema differs distinctly from the Direct Cinema movement in that that form of filmmaking exhibited a ‘continuing dependence ...on conventions of plot and character’ (ibid: 25). Furthermore, Observational Cinema’s relationship with its subjects is highly nuanced. Although the subjects do not participate in the filmmaking process in a traditional sense, neither are they passive objects of the camera’s gaze. Because the camera moves with and around the subject in the process of their daily actions or practices, it is as much the subjects that weaves the flow, content and narrative of the film as the filmmaker. Through filming and editing, a considered attention to ethics and knowledge creation, and through an awareness of the temporal and spatial coherence of the human as subject in his/her environment, Observational Cinema is uniquely placed to explore ‘the relational and imaginative dimensions of filmmaking’ (ibid: 135, 116).

Observational Cinema has been the subject of wide-ranging criticism within anthropology and film criticism. As Grimshaw and Ravetz commented, ‘anthropologists in general are rather uneasy with open interpretative spaces’. Some positioned Observational Cinema as an ‘unacknowledged, non-responsive, and unsituated presence of the filmmaker created conditions for voyeurism’, whilst for others Observational Cinema was ocular-centric and failed to engage the entire sensory reality of subject or environment (ibid: 54, 114-115). These criticisms aside, I am reminded of what the ethnographic editor, Dai Vaughan saliently observed ‘Film is about something whereas reality is not’ (cf MacDougall 2006: 3). Following Massey’s idea that place is a process rather than a thing, how does this relate to filmmaking as a process and practice? In the year that I had been editing my film frequent return trips to Longford revealed how the social groups, political contexts of the research, and spaces of ghost developments have changed sometimes in subtle, sometimes profound ways. As I stated in the previous chapter, film is a process but one that has a fixed time-frame and conclusion, whereas Longford as a place is a process that is constantly shifting, evolving and being remade - a film cannot truly represent that process or it would never have an ending. Before a final textual journey through the film, I would like to discuss briefly some ideas, influences, strategies and aesthetics for representing place and space.

### Representing Documentary Place

Although in many ways evident in the narrative of my film, Observational Cinema's 'typically plain and stylistically unadorned' (Henley 2004:110) character is at odds with the subjective representation of Longford, and furthermore 'Irishness', that I am aiming for with my film. I am consciously breaking with many of the tropes of 'Irishness' that weight down so many filmic representations of Ireland. Mostly absent are the windswept landscapes, instead I am representing the harsh, decaying materials of ghost developments, emphasizing the sensual and strangely beautiful attributes of these spaces. The 'rural' landscape is not reified, it is treated with a cold, critical eye, and everywhere aspects of the urban intrude upon any notion of the idyllic rural. The use of music in this sense is a means by which to imprint a subjective reading of place. I have often felt that film representations of Ireland are hampered by the use of traditional Irish music to evoke the Gaelic motherland, and unspoilt landscape and mystical inflected people - this sonic imaginary runs through not only Hollywood reproductions of Ireland but is persistent in many recent RTÉ reports on declining rural Ireland. The sounds of the harp and bohran are not what I hear when I listen to Longford. I hear the constant rumble of traffic, the screech of crows, harsh rough Midlands accents, strange incongruous sounds like the ice-cream van, the repeated noise of the demolition, the distant haunting sound of children playing - all played against images of vacant, decaying ghost developments. The collision, in Eisenstein's language<sup>71</sup>, of discordant sounds and images are a means to try uncover the aesthetic and sensory life of Longford as a place viewed through the lens of ghost developments and other aspects of the newly-built environment.

In a visual sense, the process of finding the aesthetic and sensory life of the location is reminiscent for me of how Tarkovsky shot 'The Zone' in his classic film *Stalker* (1979). In this film two characters are led through an eerie, uninhabited and prohibited area by a guide called 'the stalker' - the area holds the promise of all human unfulfilled desires but is filled with unseen and unknowable dangers and trepidations. Tarkovsky creates this atmosphere of the unknown and dread through long unbroken shots where the camera glides, hovers and lifts through the air before fixing on some innocuous but apparently perilous object or structure. The effect of the high camera angle and the slow pace of editing coupled with an intense focus on space, place and material creates a spatial awareness of the 'The Zone' as a location unusual for contemporary film, and we really come to understand 'The Zone' as not solely a location but as a character in its own right. This effect was also achieved to a considerable degree in the documentary film *Workingman's Death* (2005 dir: Michael Glawogger). The film consists of six self-titled chapters that deal in various ways with extremely hazardous working conditions in various parts of the world. In particular, I want to focus on the chapter that documents an open-air abattoir in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. In this segment the camera moves through one of the most harrowing scenes of casual slaughter and workman-like monetary exchange - we glide past burning tyres, billowing thick black smoke, animal's throats being slit, pools

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<sup>71</sup> See Eisenstein, S (2014). It is also interesting to note the parallels Eisenstein drew between film-editing as an art-form and the experience of architecture through movement, writing an essay that guided the reader/spectator on a 'path' through which the cinematic experience and perception of architecture space were drawn into close quarters. See Eisenstein, S (1989).

of blood, the disorientation sounds, voices and movements of traders and customers scurrying through the market's hellish environs. Through calm and smooth camerawork and seamless editing, the film creates for the spectator an intimate (perhaps for many too intimate) awareness of the sensory extremities and spatial discordance of the market as a place. My visual approach has also been influenced by a number of video/photo-art projects. For instance, I can point to Jane and Louise Wilson's film about Chernobyl *The Toxic Camera* (2012) and the accompanying photographic piece on Orfordness ruins *Blind Landing* (2013), both of which saw the artists immerse themselves in the haunting, austere yet infinitively odd multifarious materiality of the derelict spaces of the cold war and nuclear disaster.

My fieldwork/production of the film required intense physical engagement with the environment, built or otherwise. Here the methods within Observational Cinema become particular relevant. Because proponents of Observational Cinema normally engage in long periods of fieldwork in accordance with long established methods of ethnographic research (participant-observation), they are in a unique position to witness temporal or spatial changes in the environment and the embodied corporeality of those who live among said environment. For instance, in *The Bracewells* (2001) the years fieldwork and filming with the eponymous two generations of a Pennines farming family allowed observational filmmaker Amanda Ravetz to pursue her interest in ways of seeing and how observation plays a huge role in tacit knowledge, embodiment and gesture on the farm. It also offers the spectator a fascinating insight into the effects on the body and physical surroundings of seasonal change. Furthermore, the temporality of the region hugely effects the camera as a mechanism for observation as we hear intense blasts of wind on the soundtrack or harsh drops of rain on the lens. It is this experiential, embodied and affective knowledge that the Observational camera brought to this project that included an extensive period in a stated environment. Similarly, Gideon Koppel engages the landscape, seasons and temporal shifts in an aesthetic process of 'discovering', in a very personal manner, the Welsh valleys environment in his 'cine -poem' *Sleep Furiously* (2008). Using film rather than digital Koppel describes his approach to landscape, place and environment thus:

'These landscapes are static – the only, almost imperceptible, movement comes from drifting clouds, the ripple of water. The connection formed between the characters, the silence and stasis of their environment has a strong emotional charge... I had already recognised that this film was going to be 'discovered' in the making process, that it would emerge from my experience of landscape and people rather than investigating a predetermined topic'.

(Koppel 2007: 313 -314)

This research project and film from the outset did seek to investigate a predetermined topic: the phenomenon of ghost developments. However, as the process of research and filmmaking progressed I began to discover not only these strange spaces, but also the people, landscape, aesthetics, social practices of Longford as a place, and my personal relationship with it as an artist and Longford native. Film was the principal route through which this journey took place. It is timely therefore to take a short journey through that film in order to reflect upon how it was constructed narratively and represented aesthetically the social and theoretical concerns of this research project.



**Note to Viewers:** If you have not already done so, please watch '*A Place Where Ghosts Dwell*' at the Manchester Metropolitan University Espace depository now.

## Reading 'A Place Where Ghosts Dwell'

### Split-screen opening

We open on a split-screen montage of Longford town filmed in a broken pan and images of the diverse physical manifestations of ghost developments, cut with a visually distorted colour bar - a running visual motif in the film. My main influence here is Richard Fleischer's overlooked *The Boston Strangler* (1968). In that film the technique functions to give a sense of the interiority of the killer's mind and his unconscious actions (he is a chronic schizophrenic) and the exteriority of the spaces outside the act, the people that might pose dangerous intrusion, uncertainty. In this opening sequence, I am attempting to establish Longford as a psychologically embodied character, its mind's eye interacts with ghost developments as spaces which are troubling, foreboding, suggest uncertainty. It is a technique I used extensively in two early short films at the outset of the research project about space and place in Manchester<sup>72</sup>. Coupling this visual technique with experiments in discordant sound and use of instrumental music provided me with an aesthetic approach through which to establish space and structures (ghost developments in the case of this film) as distinct characters in the narrative, and to create a sense of unease and uncertainty. I wanted to give the viewer the sense of seeing and hearing from different perspectives which are somewhat disrupted (the use of colour bar and the shifting of images to opposite screens, for instance), almost to question the reliability of the film and its author.

### Cut To:

Shane Crossan is established as the first participant of the documentary in a manner than is reflexive, performative and meaningful to Shane as a social actor - it is the studio space for Outtake Media, and will form an extensive sequence in the film. Shane's voice guides us through the initial concept of the social imaginary of Longford and its socio-economic character - its social construction. He hints at how the place is perceived as marginal, images in this initial montage hint at how use of ghost developments and creative practices can help to re-imagine Longford as a place. This sequence directly links with images of (not) a ghost estate - it is the iconic unfinished house that Kim Haughton photographed (see chapter 2) which was incorrectly located as being in Leitrim. Shots from the outside of the house would have clearly identified it to those in the know as what I call the Haughton House, but I purposely drew back from identifying the space (as I do with all ghost developments in the film save Carriglas) as I did not want the film to fall into a sense of ghost estate iconography. I am eager that the spaces have a filmic life of their own unencumbered by aesthetic, social or visual baggage. The ghost development is a character, not a trope. Sounds of construction

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<sup>72</sup> *Death is the State* (2014) co-directed with poet and noise musician Shane Lawlor, and *Improv House* (2015) on which I collaborated with sound artist Simon Connor. Both films are available to watch here: <https://statesofvacancy.wordpress.com/filmvideo/>

equipment and children playing account for the absent-presence so stark in ghost developments, and do reoccur throughout to signal the eerie affective quality of these spaces.

There is an ethical as well as aesthetic reason for not identifying most of the spaces in the film. Many unfinished housing estates were partially inhabited, and as I outlined in chapter 2 some of these estates attracted significant media attention. The journalistic approach to ghost estates had a sensationalist bent, which as interlocutors in the field have informed me left many of the residents feeling shamed, vulnerable and exposed. The spectator will also note that I do not name and identify the participants in film until the end credits. Here I am attempting to break significantly with the expository, journalistic approach to the ghost developments, evident in much of the mainstream media's coverage of the phenomenon, in favour of a more open, interpretive and poetic technique which allows the spectator the space to actively interpret and imagine the relationship between the spaces they engage with, their agency as an embedded social actor, and the essayist narrative arch of the film.

We are also introduced in this section of the film to the first overt essayist technique in the use of a title card to indicate film chapters, and most importantly, in the case of the dual narration. The notion here is of a narration that is a conversation, perhaps even a conversation between two sides of the same person. The male voice (my own) is petulant, idealistic, angry and agitated by what he encounters in post-Celtic Tiger Longford, and by memories of growing up in an oppressive place. On the other hand, the female voice is more clinical, rational and slightly though gently mocking of the male subject. Throughout the film the tone shifts incrementally towards reconciliation of ideas or understanding between the two narrators of the film's essay - that we need to re-imagine how we use space (ghost development) and live place (Longford as a new social entity with new sets of practices rather than the conception of it as intrinsically rural and conservative). The male narrator constantly uses the first person plural pronoun "we" as a means of making the spectator complicit in the film's essay, the female narrator conversely uses the pronoun "you" to alert the spectator to the fact that this is the filmmaker's subjective political worldview. However, the identities of the narrators are never explicitly stated which creates a sense of mystery around the authorial voice. For Russell the tension between the essay voice in film and ethnographic mode is fundamentally a question of the politics of representation, the notion of 'who speaks' and who is addressed in these modes. Referencing Marker's *San Soleil* (1982) she notes how in the essayist mode, even in the autoethnographic variant of Marker's film, '[T]he fundamental relationship (of identity) that is typically established in ethnography between filmmaker and spectator is destabilized and demystified' (1999: 311 -12).

The chapter headings help to guide the narrative relationship between ghost developments as spaces and the social dynamics of Longford as a place without recourse to exposition. Furthermore, the various participants and interviewees draw out these connections shifting the narrative subjective essayist tone into an intersubjective reading of place and space. Significantly, it is the ethnographic film material, built around a number of artistic interventions into ghost developments that give weight to the film's essay. The clash or tension between the subjective essay (which is somewhat drawn into question by the presence of a second narrator) and the intersubjective experience of the film's participants create a tonal dissonance in that the cinematic codes shift frequently from the ethnographic to the expository, or from the self-reflexive to the poetic. The author's voice is not privileged over the participants, or visa-versa, however the voice of the ghost development as an integral character in the narrative is equally pronounced. Artistic ethnographic encounters with ghost developments render them an increasing embodied, sensory and political

character- this clash of different kinds of voices articulating themselves through the use of different cinematic styles or codes significantly breaks with a realist aesthetic so central the traditional documentary imaginary of reality and representation. As Roscaroli states 'while being partial, as well as overtly personal, essayistic films both express biased opinions on reality, and are capable of significantly connecting with that reality, but in ways which are unpredictable and difficult to codify' (2009: 5).

***'Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn...'***

Throughout James' recital of an extract from Oliver Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* (1770) we are further introduced to a montage of images of what could be described as classic examples of ghost estates. They do not have character yet, but they do have form. It is this form that is also beginning to shape the camera's approach - slight tilts, pan and zooms, static shots that allow the environment to animate the spaces, unexpected signs of life (the man on a lawnmower entering the shot). The choice of James Dickenson, with his pronounced RP accent, to read Goldsmith will bother many, however lest we forget Goldsmith was Anglo-Irish alongside Longford's claim to him. As I have previously established (see chapter 1) *Deserted Village* was written about the enclosure of the English commons, and to a lesser degree Ireland. However, its tone and message has resonated in post-Independence Ireland at a number of different junctures (mass emigration for instance) and indeed has meaning and resonance to (post) Celtic Tiger Ireland. Naturally, the audience's awareness of the significance of using James' voice and accent rather than my own is dependent on their knowledge of Goldsmith and the poem, but it is my hope to create some debate, particularly in the UK, about the shared experience of displacement that histories of enclosure and land speculation cause.

***'they become to be spaces where people negotiate this idea of a collapsed vision of the future, an idea of the death of the Celtic Tiger dream'***

A number of different devices, tropes and themes are (re)established in this sequence; split-screen, the reflexivity of Cian's filming an expository engagement with ghost developments, the first instance of interviews being projected on the wall of a ghost development - an intervention into the experiential attributes of the space. The reflexive mode was first innovated by Dziga Vertov in his germinal classic *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) in which the processes of filmmaking, editing in particular, were laid bare for the audience - Vertov's interest in filming the lived experience of early Soviet era Moscow was supplementary to how that lived experience was represented, constructed and re-constructed through the camera's eye (*Kino-Eye* in Vertov's language). The film was exemplary of the meeting of documentary practice and avant-garde structuralist film: 'Vertov had generally been thought of as a documentary filmmaker and structural film as an avant-garde movement, but both Vertov and the structuralists use the cinematic apparatus to re-present reality in a cine-reflexive manner that has both aesthetic and political implications' (MacDonald 2015:17). In this instance the reflexivity and use of split-screen positions a social and political reading of the significance of ghost estates as a narrative signifier of crisis in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland - an issue I have contextualized in chapter 2. Just as Vertov used the apparatus of filmmaking as a reflexive means of re-presenting the daily lived political and social experience of post-Revolution Moscow, here I am attempting to use the split-screen technique, degraded video footage, and the cine -

reflexive act of filming the expert filming a ghost estate to draw out the underlining social and political attributes of ghost estates around which crisis narratives were constructed in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Cian's ghost estate narrative is cut with Seamus' story of the experience of living in a ghost estate. I am reminded of how McLaughlin (2006) uses location to draw out 'life-story' as a means of eliciting memory and experience of space that is not overburdened by recourse to historicity on the one hand, though is nonetheless not lacking in veracity. The juxtaposition of reflexivity and storytelling of direct experience creates a strange dissonance - it is both alienating and immersive, ghost developments are at once becoming a psychological character, and an artist object of inquiry. We then cut to an image of Cian's talking head projected onto the wall of a vacant light industrial unit - a reoccurring visual motif in the film. The idea of projecting images of my participant's talking head interviews onto a ghost development occurred to me as I was thinking of a means of visually mediating discourses on ghost developments and the experience of these spaces. As I began filming these projections, the wind began to blow ever so slightly causing a ripple effect on the sheet and image. The natural environment not only added a new texture to the image and action, but furthermore adds to the experience of these open, porous vacant units. The sonic and affective interaction between environmental features (particularly wind) and ghost developments was a reoccurring challenge and filmic insight in the material and experiential qualities of ghost developments. In a sense, the mediation of the image and space creates distance from discourse, and while it does not undermine the authority of the participant, it does attempt to undermine the authority of expository documentary in a reflexive and self-critical manner. As we watch Seamus scan the remains of his once back garden the sonic motifs of the ice cream, screaming children and construction equipment draw us back to the ghost development as an emergent character in the film. The effect I aim for with this clash of techniques is to represent the house as a space for daydreaming (a la Bachelard 1994) and a social and politically contested site that awakes one from dreaming.

### **Chapter: Longford, the shithole hypothesis**

The social imaginary of Longford, the notion of its conceptualization as a 'shithole', a marginal place, is prefigured and led by a sequence that uses archive footage<sup>73</sup>, a reverbed poem coupled with an image of a deserted road, a montage of images of place that have an unsettling quality to them. The images of Longford on a Saturday night have a sense of impending violence, the time-space

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<sup>73</sup> The footage was shot at the St Patrick's Day Parade in 1978 and therefore would have been the first parade I was alive for. Throughout researching this project, I was keen to see how Longford had been represented on film; however, this proved a less fruitful endeavour. The Irish Film Archive had nothing at all that visualized Longford as a moving image, the national broadcaster RTÉ were both unhelpful and extremely costly, and the Longford County Archive contained no audio-visual material of Longford's past whatsoever. If Longford is underrepresented in written history, then its visual past (save photographs available from the National Library) is virtually non-existent. Surprisingly, YouTube contains the most extensive audio-visual documentation of Longford's recent history, and while most of this material is of poor quality I did discover some captivating Hi 8 footage from the late 1970s - a purpose made piece from the 1978 St Patrick's Day parade has emerged as a reoccurring visual trope in my film. The importance of local archival research to framing my text and given a sense of time-space compression in the film has been invaluable as a research method. The paucity of archival footage of Longford is unfortunate, but it is interesting to think that the film I have made of Longford and its ghost developments circa 2015 will itself hopefully become a valuable archival resource for future researchers and filmmakers.

compression of time-lapse technique introduces us to deserted streets on a Sunday morning - the audio is a hangover of voices from the night before, coupled with the menacing presence of crows and a barefoot man. A highly authored, leading introduction to the place - with consciously dramatic and horror intoned music by 'Haxan Cloak'. This subjective iteration of Longford is followed by arguments of the interlocutors contrapuntally discussing the social imaginary of place - it's become the whipping boy for Ireland and why. Here I want to not only draw on Massey's notion of place as something that is unfixed and contested, but also to elaborate the repetitive cycles of boom and bust that Longford has suffered, most dramatically so as a result of the 2008 property collapse.

It was important for me as a researcher and filmmaker to represent the changing social dynamics of post-Celtic Tiger Longford which I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork experience. Central to this experience were Longford LGBT and the Yes Equality Longford campaign. My problem was that much of the footage I had shot using video activist/ethnography as a method was aesthetically at odds with other sequences in the film. The footage had been shot for campaign purposes, and although a lot of my interviews referred to both, the relationship between this aspect of my research and ghost developments as spaces, as characters in my film, was tentative at best. A video-reflexive sequence I edited worked in its own right, but seemed to be a thread that led the narrative of the film off in a different direction. Consequently, I decided it worked better to allude to the presence of newly articulated sexual identities in Longford by juxtaposing images of Longford LGBT at the 2015 St Patrick's Day parade with the archive footage of early days when political sensitivities around identity were clearly not as strong (note the 'blackface' in the parade). The split-screen is preceded by distorted footage of Longford Cathedral - the inference of struggles of different types of equality (sexual, gender, economic) is strongly manifest in the following chapters of the film.

### **Proclamation**

We cut to Donal reading the 1916 Proclamation of Independence outside a boarded up council house in a marginalized, rundown housing estate. This is explicitly a narrative comment on class politics in Ireland; the extra layer of meaning created between the filmmaker and Donal as a participant in the film is Donal's life history as a Republican activist, added further weight by Donal's current role as an LGBT activist engaged in a different struggle for equality. It was in the process of refining the film that the idea of breaking with a linear representation of Irish history occurred to me as an excellent device for developing an essay on the continuity of exploitation, oppression and economic subjugation in Ireland's historical imaginary. My aim is to draw the viewer (particularly those of a cultural or political nationalist persuasion) into identifying a continuity of inequalities and injustices primarily centred around the notion of land - in its contemporary manifestation, the dominance of private property as the *sole* legitimate form of dwelling and/or social reproduction in Ireland.

Later we see Farnagh council estate - what is not now privately owned was allowed to fall into a state of neglect and/or ruination during the Celtic Tiger era building boom through, as the narrator states, marginalization and active discrimination. The use of slow-motion and noise filters here is chosen to emphasize this sense of distant observation of an Other in our mist, the sink-estate dweller who we look down on in our pursuit of private, generic, individual, banal space - it's

interesting that council estates such as Farnagh failed to reach the gaze of the image-maker in his hunt for 'spectacular' ghost estates. The scene works in a similar way to those of the Senegalese community in *Reassemblage* (1982), to collapse the filmmaker's gaze back in on itself and question the act of representing, of creating film about a marginalized subject in the first place. In that sense, the scene challenges the traditional ethnographic film construct in relation to notions of representation and objective truth. As Russell states of classical ethnographic film practice '[t]he links to social science imply a commitment to objectivity, and the role of the film is principally to provide empirical evidence...The ideal ethnographic film is one in which social observation is presented as a form of cultural knowledge, but given the colonial context of the development of anthropology and its ethnographic branch, this "knowledge" is bound to the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and mastery implicit in colonial culture. The history of ethnographic film is thus a history of the production of Otherness' (1999: 10). The scene circumnavigates this ethnographic construction of Otherness through the political content of the narrators' discussion of space, power, property and inequality - the 'knowledge' this image and narration presents is authored, ideological and keenly aware of its own construction.

***'today we can hear the wind just rustling through these buildings and the rain drops falling and y'know they're like an elegy to nothing'***

The environmental, aesthetic and affective qualities of Carrigglas Manor failed development are quite haunting and otherworldly, and John's comment goes somewhere towards articulating the strange, uncanny atmosphere of the place. The elements begin to animate it. Wind was a constant intruder into my film shoots around ghost developments, I realized for the first time what a windy place Longford is. Controlling wind interference on my audio track proved problematic. One occasion where this worked quite effectively, despite expectations to the contrary, was the shoot with John Connell at Carrigglas on a snowy, windy winter's afternoon. Despite using a radio mic, the wind was so strong and the blizzards of snow so fierce that both mic and camera were heavily impacted. The other occasions I had filmed in Carrigglas, particularly around the unfinished apart-hotel, were under approximate weather conditions. These conditions added a distinct tone and atmosphere to the place and space - the sound of raindrops heavily dripping from exposed pipes in the ceiling, the wind rustling through the buildings lifting pieces of plastic sheeting with them, the baths filling up with rainwater, the screech of crows flying overhead. They suggest a sense of haunted movement in an unpeopled place, that environmental conditions and non-human animals were animating an otherwise lifeless space. In terms of camera and framing, I attempted to capture this sense of movement through both using slow camera tilts and zooms in some cases, and in other cases fixing the camera statically on a tripod to allow the space to animate itself. The effect I hope captures the strange, eerie and haunted beauty of Carrigglas Manor development.

Although there is a chapter break ('In Ruins'), the social and political concerns of the two chapters are indexically linked - inequality in Ireland was not solely the preserve of the British colonial administration, and indeed the Catholic Church benefitted greatly from the maintenance of a rigid social hierarchal system, both during colonial control and after it. Hence, there is a linkage of church, ruin, feminine subjectivity, the 1916 Proclamation of Independence, Longford as a political entity, and ghost developments. This linkage is achieved by the use of archive footage of Eamon deValera trooping some soldiers accompanied by some priests outside Longford cathedral in 1946. DeValera was a major figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century political history - he fought in the 1916 Rising, was responsible for a protracted economic war with Britain in the 1930s, and was the only European

leader to send condolences to the Nazis upon Hitler's suicide. Among his myriad achievements, deValera can be charged with the increasing entanglement of Church and State in post-1930s Ireland. The consequences of this entanglement are significant for Longford and many of the participants of my film. The Ann Lovett case looms large, and the social, sexual, gender and economic inequalities this Ireland gave rise to are most fittingly articulated by Lisa's correlation of repression of femininity in her schooling experience and continued social inequality in the school system. The return to the Proclamation and Longford's militant history is bitterly ironic.

I was also interested in what ghost developments, as ruins that exist as a consequence of uneven economic development, said about alternative narratives of 'Irishness' and identity. The scenes that foreground Lisa in the convent ruin could be thought of as a highly authored, subjective reading of rural Irish social reproduction. The sequential correlation of three pillars of Irish rural society (GAA<sup>74</sup> football, the farm, the Catholic Church) are emphasized by the slow-motion footage, the reverb on the soundtrack of bagpipe music and later the Catholic Bishops' sermon, the digital noise and shift in focus on the calf in the field, the sounds of distant unseen voices and movement of people in the church. All these visual and sonic devices index my alienation from these Irish institutions and experiences, offering a counter-narrative to the cosy Irish tropism writ large in *His & Hers* (2009). The sequence then opens out into an intersubjective exploration of space, place and memory; how this ruin triggers memories of repression of femininity and the suffocating dominance of Catholic social ideology. It was important to consider the feminizing of space generating out of the setting - urban exploration and ruin fascination are overwhelmingly masculine pursuits that consequently produce a very male aesthetic. My hope with this sequence, and later with the artistic intervention where Lisa violently douses the science room wall with her menstrual blood, is to position female subjectivity as an active agent in creating meaning around the experience of our built environment, ruined or otherwise.



Figure 21 Screenshot Lisa in 'A Place Where Ghosts Dwell'

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<sup>74</sup> The Gaelic Athletic Association.

### **Cut To: Interior, a ghost development**

As I have previously stated in the thesis many of sequences of the film were built around a method of socially engaged art (Helguera 2011). However, the realization of the artistic interactions and filmic representations varied between the controlled and the spontaneous. Some of the sequences in my film were undoubtedly influenced by Observational Cinema. The scenes with Lisa in the ruined convent have an openness, and flowing sense of unmediated interaction between Lisa, the space, the camera, and me as filmmaker - despite the obvious mediation that was manifest in the scenario. I was surprised to discover upon reviewing the raw footage from this shoot that I had filmed in continuous takes of up to 30 minutes, as if in a form of 'cine-trance', to use the Roachian epitaph (Ginsburg et al 2005). A more controlled, though participatory example are the sequences with Cian where his role as 'the expert' is counterbalanced by a cine-reflexive use of dual camera editing to draw attention to the nature of expert talking head exposition in a manner that does not undermine the very salient observations Cian makes about the use of vacant space.

While these sequences employ the participatory mode of filmmaking (Nichols 2010: 182-184) to artistically interact with subjects and space, other sequences such as the Outtake Media sequence borrow more heavily from approaches in Observational Cinema. Interestingly, in terms of writing about practice and process in editing, this was the most randomly assembled sequence in the film. The hours and Gigabytes of footage (my SLR and Canon DV tape camera, the studio's PZT cameras, the footage the students shoot, edited material from the latter two, footage Deirdre was shooting on her handycam) I had gathered from this shoot rendered even approaching it in the narrative a daunting task. However, when I began dragging footage onto the timeline the process became very fluid and unconscious, as almost in 'edit-trance'. I feel that this process galvanized itself around certain characters - Shane of course who is endlessly hilarious, insightful and watchable, but more so around Niall Brewster (Brew). Brew is a struggling actor by profession and I suppose has a natural charisma and ease with the camera. Any contemporary documentary about Ireland may, and perhaps should, get caught up in handwringing about how the GFC and Ireland's bail-out and property collapse has led to mass emigration and a draining of Ireland's vital youth. However, the ease with which Brew introduces this idea (not in an erudite, expository manner) in simple but humanistic terms adds I feel notable heart to the proceedings - it is not just a media training session, it is a means by which people creatively make sense of their surroundings. As a teenager I had no such capacity, I could not make sense out of my surroundings because it was hostile to me, so I pretended to be someone else - acted. What did make sense for me were the films of Truffaut, Argento, Loach, Polanski, Mike Leigh, Pasolini, and Altman. The first time I saw *The Long Goodbye* (1973) I was blown away by how a film could seem to really represent the spatial, sonic, temporal, and experiential feel of group conversations, events, and the places they occur. I was fascinated to see Altman creep into this sequence. But aesthetic and cinematic language is only a partial, if personal, aspect of the importance of this sequence. Altman is often considered to have a cold cynical eye towards his characters - I disagree, I think they manipulate circumstance and their environment in an intrinsically social way. My characters, participants, protagonists, are of intrinsic and ethical importance to me, their voices animate ghost developments as much as my image-construction does.



***'We saw, when the square cleared of artists and recording devices...'***

When Pawel Iljin paints that evocative mural in the sequence that 'documents' the Cruthu festival, I use a filter that suggests degraded film stock. I have filmed digitally, so why use such a filter? I grew up on film, as a stock and experience. It haunts me to a degree, just as I have with digital video attempted to create a haunting, though disrupted, experience of ghost developments. This sequence both in the narration and the interaction/intervention co-created with Lisa evokes a tension between the imaginary of the artist and the material accessibility of the art-form. Lisa finishes my somewhat stumbling question: 'It wasn't in your environment'. Art as a physical manifestation, a practical life-route, wasn't in our environment. The festival itself as an event that I actively participated in was a very positive experience: the narrators speak of a key, seismic instance that weekend. The most marginalized people in Ireland are Travellers, consequently young Traveller girls would certainly come significantly down the list in the social peaking order, even within their own communities. To see three young Traveller girls engage with art in the incisive and expressive manner that these three young people did enlivens the soul, made art important again for a moment. It seemed that only Deirdre and myself, carrying as we were bags of audio/visual equipment, were witness to this. Both of us looked at each other with the same thought - how long will it take us to set up and capture this? But nothing happened. Something instinctual, filmic indeed, occurred. There are some moments that cannot be captured, that should not be represented visually, in which the filmmaker has no right to intrude, or as Taylor put it 'there are situations in which a truly documentary eye would either violate or destroy the object it has set out to record' (in MacDougall 1998: 6). In this instance, the narration in my film not only functions to represent the unrepresentable, but is a means by which the nature of filmic representation and the limitations of image-making are themselves called into question.

The camera eye is not neutral, it of course has the potential to close off social action and interaction. In the age of the smartphone this is moot-point as so much social interaction is mediated through image-making, however it is a mediation through which people feel, rightly or otherwise, to have control over. Conversely the camera can be a catalyst for action, as in the case of how it provoked Lisa to enact a violent embodied protest against her surroundings as I have outlined previously. Central to this sequence is an attempt to re-imagine art beyond the Art world because it is my deeply held belief that attempts to engage art and intervene artistically in marginal places will in the long-term benefit the people of a place like Longford more profoundly than any short-term economic stimulus package or precarious Foreign Direct Investment could ever hope to. The complex interplay of styles and film modes in this sequence allow me to artistically explore the many potentials of documentary narrative form without being overly dependent on one strict film mode, for as Nichols contends 'modes do not constitute a genealogy of documentary film so much as a pool of resources available to all' (2010: 159). The essay mode is incapable of representing the complex relationship between myself as filmmaker, Lisa as subjective participant, and the camera as catalyst for action/interaction. My use of slow-motion, video filters and mediated projected interview is at odds with Observational Cinemas' stylistic unadorned approach, yet much of this sequence has an Observational feel (the process by which Lisa discusses and creates art) which is nonetheless ruptured by slow-motion and speeded-up footage. The sequence is posited as a meditation on the nature of Art, and the narration, juxtaposed with more observational and expository material (interviews with Cruthu participants, for instance), is the essayistic device through which my subjective worldview is represented.

### ***Chapter: A Requiem, Perhaps?***

The participants in my film in various and sometimes divergent ways express frustrations with the political and social experience of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland - that even after the worst property collapse in recorded history and the clearly failed objectives of market-driven economics, we continue as a politic body to persist with this paradigm. Longford as a place is yet again in its history a frontier - between speculative, capitalist practices on the one hand and attempts to negotiate the spaces left abandoned by these processes to re-imagine place on the other, between a homogenised articulation of Longford and one that includes and embraces many different identities, between a rural imaginary and a built environment and set of social practices that suggests anything but. The end sequence is stylized, the split-screen technique and reflexive use of the colour bar prominent. The interviews, the voices and subjectivities collide against each other, dipping at the tail end of statements and accompanied by images that for me evoke a sense of Longford as a site of trouble, tension. It could be levelled at me that this sequence does not give enough credence to the important sociological or political points the interviewees are making. However, a clear exposition of positions and worldview is not what I am trying to say here: rather, gleaned from years of researching, talking, filming, and thinking this subject, it's the carousel of thoughts, tones, ideas, critiques, and subjectivities that both assert themselves and become almost as if fading memories or overheard conversations. Here again the subjective and intersubjective, ethnographic and essayist qualities of the film collide, most vividly expressed by the two narrators voices beginning to collapse in on each other. As Russell commented of this auto-ethnographic tendency emerging in art-film as ethnographic inquiry 'auto-ethnography is a vehicle for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities' (1999:276).

This is not an abstract film, though abstract ideas flow through it. It is discursive, to a degree, but that discourse is always balanced by a poetic texture that yet does not attempt to be a cine-poem. As a filmmaker, I am not solely engaging a sense of artistic freedom that allows me to describe and inscribe culture and society according to my caprice - that is a classic conception of the artist, and as a practice now and then is inherently related to privilege and uneven distribution of power. Clearly my participants, friends (and I include some of the spaces that are ghost developments in that category) have not conceived of and edited this film; nevertheless their perception guides the narrative - to a point. It is a complex visual representation, an inter-textural (co)-creation of meaning and knowledge, and it reflects the wider methodological approach of this research project - as a piece of fieldwork practice, as a scholarly text, and as an artistic film.

### ***'Here we go again on the speculative merry-go-round'***

In the final scenes of the film, the dual narration draws out the central essay of the film. We witness static shots of a former ghost estate that have been re-financialized and is now currently on the market as prime private real estate. It is in an area 15 miles from Longford Town that records levels of unemployment twice the national average. The story of ghost developments as vehicles for understanding the economic and political failures that led to the property collapse, years of crippling austerity, mass unemployment and migration, and untold human misery are being redrawn, demolished, renovated and resold - 'a conscious act of forgetting'. This story of ghost developments, as I have elaborated in this text and eluded to in the film, is intimately connected to Ireland's history of colonization, enclosure, economic cycles of boom and bust, history of religious intolerance, social

and economic inequality, and ruination. In that sense, Longford as a place and its relationship to its many vacant spaces proves a fitting vehicle to explore Ireland's past and recent present - it acts as a microcosm of how Irish subjectivities around space and place have been represented and how we can attempt to re-imagine a new Irish society. Hence, the linkage of the renovated ghost space, the archive footage of Longford in 1978 with the Cathedral prominent in the background, and a classic visual example of a ruined mansion - all different icons of the various narratives of Irish history in relation land, property, and place. The tone of the essay is an explicit critique of the set of relations and social values that accrues around private property in Ireland being positioned as the sole legitimate form of dwelling. 'I think we should find our way home': to return to the idea of the house as home not as an investment, to begin to re-imagine our ruins and vacant developments as lived, embodied and sensory spaces full of potential for alternative forms of creative engagement and social reproduction. If we do not, and instead continue to bolster an economic system based on private speculation and rampant overdevelopment, wiping out ghost developments as inconvenient reminders of past folly, then I fear that we are simply setting ourselves up for the next economic collapse, the next cycle of ruination.



Figure 22 Screenshot Cycle of Ruination 'A Place Where Ghosts Dwell'

## Conclusion

### Fade Out in a Ghost Development



Figure 23 Carriglas Ghost Development (Huw Wahl)



I would like in this conclusion to briefly return to my central research question: how can film and social research be used to interrogate the relationship between Longford as a marginalized place and ghost developments as vacant, ruined though meaningful places? My conceptualization of ghost developments as both objects of scientific and artistic inquiry, and lived spaces through which meaning and knowledge is (co)-created, has allowed me to explore Longford as a place through a number of different frames of analysis. Firstly, there is the historical narrative of Longford so underwritten in the annals of Irish history. Here the ghost development becomes a means to reflect back on the various spatial, social and developmental shifts in Longford's historical imaginary. A selective historical narrative then allows me to elaborate on processes of uneven development that gave way to the ghost estate - the key signifier of the GFC and the subsequent property collapse in Ireland in 2008. The ghost estate became in post-Celtic Tiger political, social and representational discourse the vehicle through which narratives of crisis were constructed. The vacant house was therefore the central visual referent for how we understood crisis and collapse, but the vacant house alone was insufficient for interrogating the processes of uneven development that affected a marginal place like Longford so devastatingly in the years following the GFC. Instead, the housing estate and other vacant commercial properties allowed me a wider scope for understanding the relational, aesthetic, historical, representational, and experiential qualities of vacant space in Ireland. Ghost developments then were not solely drivers of the narrative of crisis in Ireland, they were a means by which as a social researcher and filmmaker I was able to connect these spaces to a story of how Longford is perceived and represented nationally and locally.

Much of my research and artistic engagement with ghost developments was framed around participation with a number of key individuals and social groups in Longford. Through an ethnographic fieldwork and socially engaged artistic interventions into ghost developments, I could draw out a picture of Longford that complicates our spatial understanding of it as 'rural'. The effects of ghost developments on Longford creates a structural and visual rupture in the landscape where architecturally and spatially it becomes difficult to position the built environment of the place as urban, rural, suburban, peri-urban, or something else entirely. Furthermore, the changing social dynamics of Longford Town in particular, with social or artistic groups such as Longford LGBT or Cruthu festival actively engaging social practices that would normally be considered 'urban', questions the categories of urban and rural as they accrue in post-Celtic Tiger Longford. To understand this I drew on Massey's thinking on place as a process (1994), and a theory that sees 'urban' and 'rural' as slippery and at times interchangeable categories - ghost developments and their relationship to Longford became the lens through which to draw together these theories of space, place and identity. The active use of ghost developments by these groups, or how Longford LGBT 'Queered' heteronormative space in Longford, became my route to proposing an argument that we should begin to think of the urban and rural as sets of social practices as well as spatial categorizations.

Longford as a place, as a process, is constantly changing, shifting, in-flux and ceaselessly rewritten. The process of researching, writing, filming, and editing Longford and its ghost developments in relation to this project is nearing a close. However, the changing social dynamics of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland as imagined through Longford, and the many intriguing individuals, social groups, creative initiatives and spaces I encountered there offer up new opportunities for social and artistic research. Although, many of the most notable ghost estates have disappeared from Longford's environs, many

of the key ghost developments I have accounted for in this project (Longford Town Centre shopping centre, Mastertech Business Park, Carrigglas Manor development, for example) remain. What is the future of these spaces, given that the so-called economic recovery has completely bypassed Longford? Is there future potential for their creative re-use or social re-imagining by arts, community or social activist groups that will further complicate Longford's spatial categorization as a 'rural' place? How can these spaces, and groups such as Longford LGBT, come to shift and challenge the social dynamics of Ireland? On this last point, my own artistic and personal development is heavily drawing me towards a film and text project that imagines the 'Queering' of 'rural' Ireland following the historic Marriage Equality result, and with an eye on the campaign to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution. Both movements speak nationally to a changing expression of 'Irishness', to a country inclusive of multiple subjectivities, identities and articulations, and in resistance to the traditional perception of Ireland as a backward, Catholic, socially conservative and repressive place. Longford, and perhaps its ghost developments, have a role to play in this new imagining of Ireland, and I as a Longford native, social researcher and artist, am keen to create work that explores, examines and represents these changes.

How I carry out these future research projects remains to be seen, but undoubtedly the approaches, methods, techniques, styles and practices I have engaged through this text and film as artistic research project will influence future work. Throughout this project I have sought to engage a number of different artistic and scholarly practices and approaches that have allowed me to arrive at my research findings, and at all points Russell's idea of 'experimental ethnography' guided a methodology that helped merge the artistic and social aims of my research. As an experimental ethnography, this project (text and film) is both artistic *and* social research.

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## Epilogue

*And deeply personal. The Longford Leader was a constant presence in the living room growing up, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors aside it seemed like a natural place to start my qualitative research in Longford. It made perfect methodological sense to begin somewhere in my archival review of Longford and its ghost developments, why not 1998 and the Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme? As I scanned the newspaper issue by issue, taking notes and photographs of tentatively intriguing headlines and notions, I happened upon November 6<sup>th</sup> issue of that year and the obituary of a young man who died aged 19. A young man who I had loved very deeply, who I had not told so, and who passed a year or so after I had fled that 'dreadful place' - that 'Shithole'. It was unrequited, I supposed that had hurt, as did the place that had made it impossible for me to tell him so. And I suppose in the draw and lore of the city I forgot him, or at least didn't feel anything when I heard he'd died back then. I forgot him (except in dreams) or forgot what he meant, much as I forgot any pleasant memories of childhood growing up in Longford, if there were indeed any. I remembered casual violence, prejudice, bullying, the Church - I remembered but was less willing to declare my own agency in acts of violence and intolerance. It was easier to dismiss and forget and move on to 'cooler', sub-cultural, transgressive space.*

*When I encountered his image I could not breathe and had to leave the building. I thought, 'is this what the rest of the year is going to be like?' Thankfully it was. The next week I discovered Longford LGBT and began the process of shaping a research project - and facing some ghosts. Although I have removed much of the explicitly personal Queer material from the film, as I watch it back much of the imaginary is deeply Queerly encoded, the spaces of furtive sexual engagement meaningful to me and unconsciously inscribed in the film. The stuff of a continuing research, artistic and personal concern: the Queering of 'rural' Ireland in a context where that rural no longer has the meaning or sets of associations it once had - where it becomes negotiated space rather visual trope. Much more to learn, the place is still coming into being. The joy that struck my heart when I returned this year after the 2016 Cruthu Arts Festival to see nine elaborate murals painted on previously harsh breeze-block walls and hoardings that signalled states of vacancy. A sense of pride I suppose, that my imagination of what my hometown can do and what it did intersected. Apparently, all locals love the murals and are very proud of them. On the bus to Dublin, Sligo or Westport or somewhere else worth visiting you pass through Longford and see vacant retail units, and branches of Boots and Tescos, and barb-wire and fencing, and works of art.*

*What you won't see much of is ghost estates - the veracity with which Longford County Council has 'took on' the worst exponents of this genre is to be commended. Wandering through the now totally 'resolved' Battery Court housing estate (it appears near the end of my film) I was struck by the notion that this is what people want - to buy property and live in a nice, clean, ordered space that is not a ruin. It is only artists, psychogeographers, urban explorers, teenager transgressors, and usually homeless addicts who are interested in the latter. But there is also a sense of a missed opportunity that these previously ruinous ghost spaces provided, given that their demolition, resolution, and re-financialization is solely driven by market forces. In a social context where a family a day is displaced, made homeless in Ireland, this scenario is unjustifiable. But in a less pointed sense, as symbols, as structures, as meaningful places, ghost developments have the potential to trigger memories, associations, life-stories and narratives that allows us to personally explore the social, economic and political character of the society we live in, and to not allow for the conscious repetition of history.*

*And yet repetition of history, or adaptations of it persistently seem to intrude on your work. Or maybe the work begins to uncover them - what seemed irrelevant before suddenly reveals itself. There is a quote from Hollis Frampton that goes like this: 'it's obvious that there are things that spectators can know about a work, any work, that the person that made it can never know' (cf MacDonald 2015: 15). I identify with that statement, and am glad of its simplistic, epistemological value. However, sometimes it's good to give an insight, one that adds meaning to an exercise though should not and cannot be signalled from the start of things. When I sought out ruined spaces one stark example sat on my doorstep. The ruin in the last shot is my father's family home, built circa 1887 in the Art Deco style of a south Dublin upper-class abode not commonly found in the Midlands. His family acquired it in 1922, the year of Independence and displacement of some Anglo-Irish gentry, an intriguing historical confluence. Big farmers, small gentry, and land auctioneers by family profession, he married a peasant girl - you can imagine how that went down. So issues of land, power, property speculation, social, sexual and gender inequality, access to aesthetics of space, were built into this exploration, I just never realized the source.*



Figure 24 Ethnography at Home (courtesy of Betty Baxter)



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## Filmography

*Atlantean* (1981) Dir: Bob Quinn

*Balinese Character* (1942) Dir: Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson

*The Boston Strangler* (1968) Dir: Richard Fleischer

*The Bracewells* (2001) Dir: Amanda Ravetz

*Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer 1961) Dir: Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin

*Death is the State* (2014) Dir: Patrick Baxter & Shane Lawlor

*Garage* (2007) Dir: Lenny Abrahamson

*His & Hers* (2009) Dir: Ken Wardrop

*Improv House* (2015) Dir: Patrick Baxter

*It Follows* (2014) David Roberts Mitchel

*Jaguar* (1955) Dir: Jean Rouch

*Living in a Coded Land* (2014) Dir: Pat Collins

*The Long Goodbye* (1973) Dir: Robert Altman

*London* (1994) Dir: Patrick Keiller

*Love/Hate: Season 3* (2012) TV series, various directors

*Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) Dir: Dziga Vertov

*Nanook of the North* (1924) Dir: Robert Flaherty

*Poitín* (1977) Dir: Bob Quinn

*The Queen of Ireland* (2015) Dir: Conor Horgan

*Reassemblage* (1982) Dir: Trinh T. Minh-ha

*Requiem for Detroit* (2009) Dir: Julian Temple

*San Soleil* (1982) Dir: Chris Marker

*Sleep Furiously* (2008) Dir: Gideon Koppel

*Silence* (2012) Dir: Pat Collins

*Stalker* (1979) Dir: Andrey Tarkovsky

*The Toxic Camera* (2012) Dir: Jane and Louise Wilson

*Wallets of Blood: Zombie Bankers Blues* (2009) Dir: Eamon Crudden (as Aaronrip)

*We Were There* (2014) Dir: Laura Aguiar & Cahal McLaughlin

*What Richard Did* (2013) Dir: Lenny Abrahamson

*What we leave in our wake* (2010) Dir: Pat Collins

*Workingman's Death* (2004) Dir: Michael Glowogger

## Useful Web Resources

Below are the principle web sources I habitually read, analysed, returned to and referenced, or are sites created by the author in furtherance of this research project and/or my background and development as a filmmaker and artistic researcher. All other web resources are footnoted in the main body of the text.

<https://castlesbuiltinsand.wordpress.com/> (now-defunct film collective blog with some early examples of artistic research into ghost developments)

<http://www.cso.ie/en/index.html> (The Republic of Ireland's Central Statistics Office website)

<https://irelandafternama.wordpress.com/> (commentary on and analysis of geographic, socio-political, and policy issues in Ireland)

<http://www.longfordcoco.ie/> (Longford County Council website)

<http://www.longfordleader.ie/> (principle local print media source)

<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/social-sciences-institute/about-us/history/nirsa-history>

(National Institute for Regional & Spatial Analysis)

<https://provisionaluniversity.wordpress.com/> (activist research blog on vacant space and the 'commons')

<https://statesofvacancy.wordpress.com/> (my research blog created for the early stages of this project)

<https://vimeo.com/user9628531> (my Vimeo platform with examples of other related audio/visual works)