The Troubles in Northern Ireland – in Reality, Movies and other Genres of Art

No doubt, Ireland is paradise: Its natural beauty – with coasts, cliffs and green landscapes – is mind-blowing, its Celtic legacy is impressive, its cultural tradition with crowded pubs, tasty food, Gaelic sports, folk music and *cèilidh* dance is uniquely *good craic* – and the English spoken in (Northern) Ireland is unparalleled.

However, this paradise also has a very dark side: Since the 12th century, it had been the target of constant English / British attacks, which resulted in centuries of Irish suffering from English domination – and millions of Irish either dying or emigrating to the USA. Never surrendering, the Irish managed to become an independent country again in the middle of the 20th century, but with a high price to be paid: The north-eastern part of the island, *Northern Ireland*, kept belonging to the United Kingdom, with the capital of Belfast as its center.

People in Northern Ireland found it hard to remain peaceful, as the Irish population there wanted to be independent as well, whereas the British part of the society wanted to remain part of the UK. A civil war broke out in the Seventies, mainly in Belfast, going down in history as *The Troubles*, more than twenty years that were literally years of terror. Armies as well as paramilitary groups fought against each other, and many of their members, but even more innocent people lost their lives – more than 3,500, officially. In 1998, a feeble peace was made with the *Good Friday Agreement*, and a violent time came to an end, but the conflict has been going on up to this day in the minds and hearts of people, with a society that is highly divided, each party still wanting to be right.

The goal of this course was twofold: First, it aimed at looking at **Ireland in reality**, introducing the course participants to the island with all its facets, but mainly its history and the events of *The Troubles* as well as their aftermath up until today. This was the basis for the second goal of the course, which was to look at **how (mainly Irish) art has been dealing with this conflict in Northern Ireland.** The main focus was on **several fictional movies** that were watched and discussed. There was, for instance, *Bloody Sunday* (2002) about an incident that triggered *The Troubles* in 1972.

During *The Troubles*, the British Army established a most notorious prison outside Belfast, named *Long Kesh* or *H-Blocks* (due to its buildings shaped like the letter *H*), a detention center for hundreds of mostly Irish prisoners over the years. In 1981 and in order to protest against the desolate conditions and for their political status in prison, some of these inmates began a hunger strike, causing ten of them to die, amongst them their leader, Bobby Sands. Naturally, the Irish have been considering these hunger strikers heroes and martyrs. One movie was dedicated to them, *H3* (2001) – a narrative to blame the British and to justify the Irish cause.

Some movies, however, were meant to be hopeful stories of reconciliation in the Irish conflict, such as *Mickybo and Me* (2004), a movie about a friendship between two boys who try to overcome sectarian division. **Other genres of art** included writing (e. g. poetical texts by Bobby Sands), pictures (e. g. murals or wall paintings all over Belfast), and – last, but not least – music (e. g. by Christie Moore, a true Irish bard with a clear viewpoint during the conflict, but also U2 or the Cranberries).

Participants needed to be ready to **get acquainted with Ireland as a paradise and its dark side**, to face facts about **a violent conflict that has been going on up until this present day**, to **watch several movies and deal with other forms of art about *The Troubles*** – and to enjoy **a week full of (Irish and Ulster) English**. Also, **ideas** and **reading suggestions** for a **Matura paper** or a **Matura reading list** were provided. Much of the information was first-hand: The tutor of the course lived and worked in the Irish community of West Belfast from 2001 until 2002, has visited the city multiple times since then and has established contact with numerous musicians and politicians from (Northern) Ireland.