

Kneecap, the movie—funny, noisy and sympathetic

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Kneecap, the film of the Belfast rap band of the same name, released last year, is part comedy, part fictionalised music biopic, part contribution to Irish language rights and part investigation of the state of mind of a generation in the North of Ireland in the post Good Friday Agreement era. There is a lot going on all at once, much of it funny, exuberant, insightful, ridiculous and occasionally terrifying.

Directed and written by former journalist Rich Peppiat, and overseen by the three band members, Liam Óg Ó Hannaidd, Naoise Ó Cairealláin and JJ Ó Dochartaigh, themselves, the film has been nominated for and won numerous international awards. Most recently, Peppiat won a British Academy Film Award for his debut directing efforts. In style, and some of the scenes, the film bears comparison with Danny Boyle's 1996 film *Trainspotting*, although it is immeasurably healthier in outlook.

From the opening, where an outdoor baptism for Naoise Ó Cairealláin, aka Mógláí Bap, is interrupted by a swooping Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) helicopter, the British occupation and centuries of domination of Ireland is a sinister omnipresence. The baptism was at a mass rock—an isolated rural boulder which served as an altar during the 17th and 18th century bans on Catholicism.

Some events in the film never happened but the helicopter intrusion, a few years before the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which inaugurated power sharing between the Irish republicans of Sinn Féin and pro-British unionists for the purpose of attracting investment, apparently took place. The RUC thought that the baptism was an Irish Republican Army (IRA) training operation.

Around two decades later, Liam Óg Ó Hannaidd, aka band member Mo Chara, is arrested by the renamed, but still hostile, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), supposedly after an all-night, drug-fueled West Belfast

rave. Ó Hannaidd refuses to speak English, demanding instead an Irish translator. In the film, the translator becomes the band's third member JJ Ó Dochartaigh, aka DJ Próvaí. The two converse in Irish and tell the PSNI whatever is needed to let him go. DJ Próvaí rescues Mo Chara's notebook of Irish language rap lyrics, and a sheet of LSD, from the police and the rest is history.

Ó Hannaidd was in fact arrested in 2022, long after the band was formed, for spray painting "Cearta" (Rights) before a demonstration in support of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.

The ancient language of Irish has been marginalised in Ireland for hundreds of years, its suppression bound up with the island's ever-deeper subordination and integration into Great Britain. A 1737 Act of Justice banned Irish from legal uses. A century later, children were legally beaten for speaking Irish. Later in the 19th century, the fight for language rights emerged as part of the protracted and tragic Irish national struggle. Its still marginalised character testifies to the weakness of the Irish capitalist class and the national and democratic tasks it is entirely unable to complete.

For decades, despite being taught in the Republic of Ireland, with the insular aim of the "gaelicisation of Irish society", Irish became increasingly confined to impoverished rural areas such as Connemara and Donegal. English, the language of the former coloniser, but which the entire population spoke, was, and is, universal. Today, while around 40 percent of the population in the South claim to be able to speak some Irish, only 71,000 speak it daily. In the North, around 13,000 speak Irish daily.

During the "Troubles" however, interest in the Irish language revived, directly in response to the self-sacrifice of republican prisoners during the 1981 hunger strikes for Special Category Status. IRA officer and political prisoner Bobby Sands famously wrote poems and

entertained his comrades in Irish. His death, one of 10 hunger strikers who starved to death, shocked the world and 100,000 attended his funeral.

It also revived interest in the Irish language, an issue taken up thereafter by Sinn Féin, then the IRA's political wing, as part of their shift away from "armed struggle" towards electoralism and seeking integration into the structures of capitalist rule. The GFA defined Irish as "part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland" and required its signatories to "resolute action to promote the language".

Subsequently, while the authorities have generally dragged their feet, Irish language speaking areas, Gaeltacht, have developed, with community support in Belfast and Derry. The Irish Language Act became law December 6, 2022 but the clause banning its use in the Northern Ireland courts was only repealed last month.

Kneecap present themselves unashamedly as defenders of both the Irish language and republicanism. But the film makes clear their attitude is more complex.

Post the GFA, a generation of young people has grown up, in both Catholic and Protestant communities in the North, where the promised "peace and prosperity" of the new Northern Ireland has not emerged. Instead, they daily confront peace walls, sectarian division, brutal policing, "inter-generational trauma" and—above all—a political situation in which Sinn Féin, for decades the premier representative of Irish republicanism, now functions as ruling partners in imposing capitalist austerity with the far right and pro-British Democratic Unionist Party.

The republican sentiments of the band are not pro-Sinn Féin at any rate. The band name refers to the vicious police role that both dissident republican and loyalist paramilitaries have long taken upon themselves—terrorising working-class youth to finance their own activities. By dominating the local drugs trade in communities which the police struggle to control, they function as state auxiliaries. "Do you want it in your chest, or your knees, or your head?" the band complain in their H.O.O.D anthem.

In the film, the republican dissidents issuing the threats are violent unprincipled idiots, rightly viewed with the same contempt as the PSNI and the entire "Brit" military/intelligence apparatus.

There is a tense but more respectful attitude to an earlier generation of IRA members, Bobby Sands' generation perhaps, embodied in the character of Ó Cairealláin's film father Arlo, played by Michael Fassbender. Arlo is an aging IRA volunteer with a record of active service

and car bombing.

One scene has a younger Arlo telling young Naoise and childhood friend Liam, in the film and likely in real life, that "every word spoken in Irish is a bullet for Irish freedom". Naoise's real father was an Irish language and cultural activist, Gearóid Ó Cairealláin, who died last year. Arlo also asks the children to watch a Western movie from the standpoint of the native Americans.

Unlike his contemporaries in real-life Northern Ireland, where a substantial layer of former urban guerrillas became leading political figures, Arlo is still on the run from the PSNI. He has faked his own death - an "operation" in which nobody still believes.

The family dynamics around Arlo are moving. Arlo's wife Dolores cannot grieve for him since he is alive but never present. Dolores never leaves her home. Older Arlo and adult Naoise meet occasionally but don't get along. One theme of the movie is Arlo coming in from the cold and Dolores finding a reason to get out of the house.

The band are not afraid to speak out. November last year, they won a discrimination case brought against the British government against then Business Secretary Kemi Badenoch who blocked an arts grant of £14,250 to the band. Badenoch's decision was considered "unlawful".

At the time, the band issued a statement denouncing ongoing British rule in the North. They also made an important appeal to both sides of the sectarian division, pointing to the shared experiences: "the working classes on both sides of the community deserve better; deserve funding, deserve appropriate mental health services, deserve to celebrate music and art and deserve the freedom to express our culture."

Kneecap have also, repeatedly, opposed the Gaza genocide and denounced far-right attacks on migrants across Ireland.

Their music might not be for everyone, but their articulation of the experiences of a generation of youth, their appeal across sectarian divisions and aspiration for something better strikes a deeply sympathetic chord.



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