The Pope, the Park and the City: Dublin, 1979.

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Introduction

On the morning of 29th September 1979 Pope John Paul II flew on an Aer Lingus 747 jet, St Patrick, from Rome to Dublin for a three-day pilgrimage across Ireland. Before departing the Pope spoke of the country’s ‘profound links’ with the Catholic Church. Stretching back to late antiquity, these had been continuously renewed across the centuries such that by 1979 approximately 93% of the Republic of Ireland’s population professed to be Catholic and much of its self-image had become bound up with the faith. The Pope was visiting the island during ‘The Troubles’, a period of extreme sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Although he stressed that his was a pastoral rather than a political visit, he told journalists travelling with him that peace in Ireland was his ‘constant prayer’. This, the first visit of a Pope to the country, was to begin with a Mass in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. At 9.45 am, as the plane swung in over Dublin, one of the journalists recorded that ‘the Pope was given a spectacular view of the crowd gathering in the […] Park’. He also spotted that this vast crowd ‘contrasted with the almost deserted streets of the city centre’.

When the Pope descended from the St Patrick at 10.00 am bells rang out throughout the city and ships in the port sounded a foghorn salute. Those still walking to the Park at that point were passing through an increasingly empty but lavishly decorated Dublin; religious statues, pictures, shrines and altars were mounted around the city alongside busts of the Pope; pavements and houses were painted in the papal
colours and festooned with yellow and white bunting, banners and flags.iii As 200,000 latecomers took up their places on the fringes of a crowd that would ultimately measure a mile by a mile, the Pope’s cavalcade brought him from the airport to the Papal Nunciature along streets strewn with flowers. At 11.35 am he was flown by helicopter to the Park and led into a vesting chamber furnished with Mies van der Rohe furniture, borrowed for the day from modernist buildings around the city.iv The chamber was buried within a grass mound surmounted by a 35m high steel cross. When the Pope was ready at 12.05 pm, he ascended to an altar at the summit of the mound and was greeted by a crowd of over one and a quarter million. As a nun who had been walking since dawn to attend the event remarked, ‘it was a day which made children of us all’.v

This essay explores the socio-spatial complexities, connectivities and contradictions of the two cities created in Dublin on the 29th September 1979 and seen together from the Papal plane: the Mass, temporarily drawing into the Phoenix Park the largest crowd in Irish history; and the vacated city around the park, its equally temporary emptiness at once both ‘ecstatic’ and ‘threatening’.vi Drawing from precedents in the 1920 and 1930s – in the first decades of the new Irish State – the visit of Pope John-Paul was a multi-faceted spectacle which deployed a variety of creative and spatial practices in the form of architecture, mass-media and the orchestration of crowds to define, in a particular moment a particular religious ideology which sought to connect the city, the population and the State. At the centre of this was the modernist architecture of Ireland’s biggest practice Scott Tallon Walker who had been tasked with realising the forms and organisation of the events in the park within a few short weeks.
This had precipitated a reconciliation of iconic form within the temporal constraints in such a way as to both define and project order, consensus, and fidelity to Catholic tradition within a modernised society, both within and beyond the spectacle. The filling up of the park left behind a city whose stated emptiness seemed to affirm these intentions but whose resultant and temporary iconographic state gradually became a means of rebuttal and refutation as a site for further narratives: a space of occasional violent disorder and dissent, occupied by religious and sexual minorities, and acted out within existing, nondescript urban fabric. Both cities are fictive and held in tension with one another. Accordingly, the created narratives located in and realised through the empty city investigated here through their depiction in a short story (‘A Bit of Business’ by William Trevor), a play (Sea Urchins by Aodhan Madden), and a film (The Last Bus Home by Johnny Gogan) imply a dialectical counterpoint to that imagined in the park. Read together in their revelation of other messy complexities, these fictional spaces and spatial fictions seem to define both a past and future for the island. They situate, as is argued here, the architectures of the papal visit as the fulcrum of a nation whose secularisation, like its previous religiosity was, as it is today, at once contradictory and incomplete.

The Spectacle of mass in the Phoenix Park

In July 1979, Ronald Tallon of the eminent Irish architectural practice Scott Tallon Walker was asked to coordinate the spatial organization of a Mass in the city’s Phoenix Park. The design had to resolve the ceremonial and spiritual requirements of a religious gathering on a vast scale as well as the bodily functions of the worshippers.
The site was an un-serviced part of the park called The Fifteen Acres and all the spatial and technological planning and execution – car-parking, toilets, catering, robing/disrobing, security, sound, circulation, disabled access and the logistics of Communion – had to be completed within a mere eight weeks.

The only features left on the site today correspond to the position of the Pope and the altar during the ceremony – the raised grassy mound and the white cross made from steel I-sections welded together. The mound – described by the architect as a *dais* – was the focal point of the event and contained a steel and canvas *baldacchino* covering the Pope’s seat and altar as well as similar canopies to shelter other dignitaries. Immediately behind was a straight row of sixty masts bearing banners in the Vatican colours. Images from the occasion show the *dais* as a classical *stereobate* with continuous rows of steps on all four sides. These steps have the appearance of the solidity of stone but in reality they were fashioned in timber and covered with grey carpet ‘to look like an elegant, low, granite, ziggurat’. Meanwhile, the congregation was seated in corrals made from timber thinnings from Irish State forests; for hospitality, marquees were reused from a North Sea oil exhibition; and the toilets were rudimentary timber constructions with plastic sheeting for doors.\textsuperscript{vii}

The arrangements made for the Pope’s visit at Phoenix Park perhaps represent the purest definition of ephemeral festival architecture, an architecture which came into being to articulate a single, momentary event and then was immediately dismantled. One aspect of the Pope’s visit was about hard logistics and the organization and control of flows and the management of time – the estimated rate of people per metre entering through the park gates: eighty per minute (meaning the congregation would
take three hours to assemble); the length, speed and duration of the Pope’s exit as he weaved through the crowd in the Pope-mobile: ‘3.295 miles at five miles an hour … forty seven minutes’, and so on. Against these temporal calculations the architecture was also, simultaneously, about denying the contingent and, for the duration of the spectacle at least, conveying a sense of stasis, of timelessness.

Both the tactics and atmosphere designed for the Pope’s visit in 1979 had been rehearsed on two previous occasions in Dublin in the years following Irish independence: the celebrations surrounding the centenary of Catholic Emancipation (1929) and those of the Eucharistic Congress (1932). Both occasions saw temporary structures erected and vast crowds assembled on the same site in the Phoenix Park as used in the Pope’s visit. Organised by General Eoin O’Duffy, the chief of police and future leader of the Irish-Fascist Blueshirts, contemporary diagrams describe a spatial discipline imposed upon the site, reminiscent of a hierarchically organised army, arranged into phalanxes and orientated towards a single, privileged focal point.

**Appropriations: Tradition and Temporary and Ephemeral Modernity**

John Donat described the layout for the Pope’s visit in 1979 not as a barracks or an army camp but rather as a small American gridded city. If this was a temporary holy city in the park, then the events of the Eucharistic Congress were described as having transformed the whole of Dublin momentarily into a vast cathedral. In fact, the similarities between the interventions of the two events in the park are striking. Their symmetrical hierarchies and axes, ordered congregations, raised *daises* with *baldachins* speak of the continuing traditions of the church not only in the forty-seven years between the two occasions but also further backwards, into
immemorial. At the Eucharistic Congress an architecture of triumphant classicism sought to emphasize this, albeit in timber and other lightweight materials disguised as stone. For the Pope’s visit – with the exception of the carpeted steps – the architecture is more candid about expressing its modernity (welded I-beams, mass-produced oil-rig surpluses, etc.) perhaps reflecting the state of a nation that was no longer new and vulnerable. And yet one fundamental difference remains between the Pope’s visit and the two previous celebrations: neither Emancipation Week nor the Eucharistic Congress confined their most significant rituals to the park.

And while for the latter the city was festooned with many temporary installations and embellishments ranging from search-lights to Celtic round towers, the most profound aspect of the two occasions was arguably one of spatial practice. In both 1929 and 1932, the vast congregations assembled at the Fifteen Acres exited the park in formation through the triumphal arch and marched, twelve abreast, along both sets of quays of the River Liffey in a peripatetic procession which penetrated the heart of the city. For the Eucharistic Congress, an altar was set up on O’Connell Street Bridge and this formed the focal point for the million or so citizens who lined the quays and filled up the adjacent streets: Westmoreland Street, D’Olier Street and O’Connell Street. Disciplined and ordered, it was the temporary, spectacular appropriation of a city by a church consisting only of its congregation, the reclamation of a series of theatrical spaces whose origins lie in a Protestant Anglo-Irish agenda. By 1979, however, despite the devotions in the park and a motorcade with Pope John Paul weaving its way into the city’s heartlands, the compulsion to re-inscribe an Irish Catholic identity on city centre space, so critical to the new Irish State decades before,
was no longer acute. Dublin was a city for whom mass, religious spectacle and indeed, the idea of any metanarrative was no longer unproblematic.

And yet, for all this fidelity to ancient Roman and Catholic traditions of the massed, ordered, victorious parades through cities in precisely pre-ordained and calibrated routes – both Emancipation Week and especially the Eucharistic Congress, simultaneously deployed and relied upon modern media technologies to cast their messages beyond the confines of their sites and indeed the boundaries of the city. Modernity and tradition were continually fused as ‘Midnight Masses’ were said in rotation in the city’s churches throughout the night and the short midsummer hours of darkness were illuminated by an array of lighting effects effected through high-powered searchlights and which included the Latin prayers of Adoramus, Laudamus and Glorificamus appearing in the sky in coloured lights before, ‘at the sound of a peal of bells from the Pro-Cathedral, signalling the Elevation of the Mass, [the] searchlights formed a cone of light over the entire city’. The Irish Times suggested that the nightly unification of Dublin in light was reiterated aurally in the daytime, as the combined voices of the devoted at the series of daily Masses in Phoenix Park created waves of sanctified sound which reverberated throughout the city, transforming it, if only momentarily, into a holy place.

‘The chanting of the choir in the Phoenix Park and the recitation of their prayers, relayed by the loud speakers, was taken up by the crowds until the roar of hundreds of thousands of voices echoed through the streets transforming the city of Dublin into a vast cathedral, the gently fluttering flags overhead like the banners of a triumphant army hung in other and less spacious cathedrals throughout the world.’
The *Capuchin Annual*, the organ of the Irish Capuchin Friars, reported on the ‘miraculous’ synergy which it suggested had pervaded all social classes but was especially present in the poorer areas whose occupants were amongst the most enthusiastic exponents of the spectacle:

‘It was this unanimity which prompted the dwellers in the poorest quarters of Dublin to compete with the City Corporation in the matter of display. It inspired them to draw over the squalor of their surroundings a delicate veil of greenery, streamers, nosegays, flags and coloured illuminations, beneath which the drab and commonplace disappeared. Dublin’s poorest proved they possessed an inventive fertility, a talent for artistic creation, that drew thousands around them all Congress Week.’

The negotiations between the tradition and technology in the temporary and physical realm of the urban spectacle was both expressed and paralleled within other forms of dissemination. The front pages of newspapers carried daily updates complete with a plethora of images depicting the event’s activities taking place in the park, ‘on Thursday there was a Mass for men, on Friday for women and on Saturday, nearly one hundred thousand children, ‘dressed in white shone against the backdrop of green’.

Other ephemera in the form of printed souvenirs and leaflets also abounded while moving images were captured and distributed in cinematic newsreels. But perhaps of greatest national and global significance were the developments within radio broadcast. For the Eucharistic Congress, the State took the opportunity of instigating a powerful new transmitter in the epicentre of the island at Moydrum near Athlone to help disseminate the celebrations to the world. While the stark modernity of this latticed steel tower was locally conspicuous in the otherwise rural landscape of
Westmeath, its real significance was perhaps best indicated within domestic
space internationally. The construction of the transmitter caused the name of Athlone
to be recorded on the dials of household radio sets – the recording of the Irish Roman
Catholic religious event placing the small midland town amongst a constellation
of other radio cities including, Ankara, Lisbon Moscow and Stuttgart, for
decades.\textsuperscript{xv} In its final word on the Eucharistic Congress, the \textit{Capuchin
Annual} described the event as ‘that great passage in Irish history shining across
political turmoil like a sudden shaft of light’.\textsuperscript{xvi}

When Pope John Paul II assumed the papacy on 16 October 1978 there was a
sense that the church was ‘lurching out of control’.\textsuperscript{xvii} In the early sixties a more
liberal Church had been proposed during the Second Vatican Council, a church ‘that
was a community of … people … in pilgrimage, engaging in dialogue, engaging with
the world’.\textsuperscript{xviii} But by the seventies even some prominent progressives such as the
Jesuit, Henri de Lubac, were wary of the diocesan Church that was emerging. He
blamed the Council for an arrogance amongst contemporary ‘theologians wishing to
impose their own thinking on the Church’, for ‘small pressure groups getting control
of the information media … to intimidate the bishops’ and for ‘an insidious
campaign against the papacy’.\textsuperscript{xix} Assuming control of a fractious Church, John Paul
used his background in theatre and his skill as a media performer to restore order
around himself.\textsuperscript{xv} According to the Vaticanologist, John Cornwell, he monopolised
the limelight and by doing so reduced, ‘within his Church all other authority, all other
holiness … all other … voices, images, talents, and virtues’.\textsuperscript{xxi} Under John Paul’s rule
‘the church came to resemble a perfect sovereign society which existed in an
imaginative universal space rather than a web of interrelated local, congregational spaces’. xxii

It was on his early journeys to places such as Ireland that he established himself as a celebrity – ‘John Paul, Superstar’ – at the centre of this sovereignty. xxiii The Mass in the Phoenix Park was planned as much for media audiences as for the crowd gathered in the 15 Acres; Ireland’s national broadcaster, RTÉ was involved in its planning from an early stage and facilitated its global transmission; its choreography drew on studies of footage of the masses the Pope had celebrated in his native Poland earlier that year. xxiv In the corralled city arrayed before the Pope on the 29th September, journalists and photographers were positioned directly in front of the altar, with VIPs sitting behind them. Having secured a press pass for the event, the renowned Irish writer Colm Toibín saw the Mass from this vantage point, analysing it as ‘pure drama’; ‘Fellini’s Roma mixed with an elaborate tableau from the Inca period’. xxv

**On the other side**

While travelling through Ireland the Pope constantly warned against consumerism and secularism, revealing the Church’s understanding that the faith of the population could no longer be taken for granted. During the 1950s, according to Louise Fuller, the Catholic Church had ‘exercised a type of cultural hegemony’ in the country. xxvi Remembering the decade, P. J. Brophy noted that ‘there were very few rival spectacles’ in Irish life and ‘hence devotions like Benediction satisfied people’s “modest longing for pageantry of some kind”’. xxvii As Ireland opened itself up to external capital and influence in the 1960s a process of secularisation began to rupture
this hegemony. A series of 1970s sociological surveys record Catholics shifting away from church doctrine, especially in teachings on sexuality.xxviii Collective rituals and practices previously typical of Irish Catholicism, such as large-scale processions marking Corpus Christi and the month of May were, by the 1970s, seen as ‘a thing of the past’. xxix However, the contradictions and inconsistencies of Irish Catholicism at the time are evident in the fact that the percentage of those attending church either weekly or more regularly was not in decline and the figures for those undertaking pilgrimages at Croagh Patrick actually increased over the decade.xxx

Except for Toibin and one or two other critical voices, media presentations of the event suggested that Ireland was experiencing a ‘religious revival’, perhaps a return to the devout 1950s. This was the prognosis of Declan Kiberd, one confirmed by the emptiness of the Dublin through which he cycled during the Mass, passing ‘less than a dozen people … including two famous, agnostic poets’. xxxi When six months later Fr. Peter Connolly prophesised that religion in Ireland would ‘disappear in the next two decades’, Kiberd used the acclamation of the Pope as evidence against this. He was tersely told that the ‘pope had been “sent for” because of a major decline in vocations after 1967 and because of the growing disobedience among many Catholics of the official teaching on contraception’. Connolly suggested that the ‘papal visit was not a case of the Church Triumphant’ but rather ‘the death-rattle of an Old Ireland’. xxxii

In *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino describes *Eutropia*, a cluster of cities only one of which is occupied at any time.xxxiii The others lie empty anticipating a cyclical appropriation that fundamentally alters the social and personal lives of its inhabitants
— to occupy means a new partner, new friends, new work, new gossip, new beliefs. In his essay ‘Amor Vacui: Photography and the empty city’, Steve Jacobs identifies a trope of depicting empty cities which persisted long after the technical difficulties of capturing people and movement had been resolved. Instead, he argues, depicting the urban landscape as ‘void’ assumed ‘symbolic, aesthetic and artistic purposes’.

Accordingly, the emptiness of Charles Marville’s evocations of the soon to be destroyed medieval fabric of 19th-century Paris seems to eulogize the loss of these spaces and their replacement by boulevards. Thomas Struther’s perspectival streetscape studies invoke other meanings, playing with expectations, articulating counter-intuitive moments of scenes full of the buildings and infrastructure necessary to sustain life and people while simultaneously testifying to their absence. The images are pregnant with the already acted or anticipated, posing the question of how the spaces which should be full became empty. The peculiarity of an empty city suggests the cause, mode and means of evacuation must be significant. In Danny Boyle’s film, *28 Days Later* (2002), for example, the absence of people in London is realised by a cataclysmic event, the release of a deadly virus. Calvino’s suggestion that urban emptiness is cyclical and habitual deliberately serves to heighten its uncanny properties through their subversion. Jacobs, meanwhile, aligns the trope of the vacant city to classical theatre and in particular the tragic scene described by Vitruvius and later depicted by Serlio. In this assemblage, of the urban motifs of classical architecture, fictions of significance and gravitas are announced and performed. Here, the stage is not merely backdrop but an active producer of meaning which delineates certain types of action while dismissing others.
In time, the emptiness of the Dublin outside the spectacle – so central to the projection of Catholic conformity within the Park and pregnant with the expectation of a resurgence in belief – provoked other types of fiction. These, in succeeding decades, used the empty city and suburbs around the Phoenix Park as a void into which narratives counter to the spectacle of ‘Catholic Ireland’ could be projected. Some of these narratives sought to re-assert ‘Varieties of Irishness’ that had existed prior to the Irish State, while others sought the gestation of new identities. Disputing the fictional unity of ‘Catholic Ireland’, a number of these narratives grew out of their authors’ sense of being ‘other’ within twentieth-century Ireland. In doing so, they answered Eavan Boland’s call, inspired by the Troubles, for her fellow Irish writers to search for and articulate their individual voices rather than fantasising about ‘cultural unity, in a country whose most precious contribution may be precisely its insight into the anguish of disunity’. The empty city – realised through a spectacle taking place ‘off-stage’ in the park – celebrated the realisation of an apparently consensual urban entity while simultaneously providing the site and means to its refutation.

William Trevor’s 1996 short story, ‘A Bit of Business’ follows two male youths, Mangan and Gallagher, taking advantage of the Guards’ [Irish Police] concentration on the Phoenix Park to conduct a crime spree through an empty Dublin. In a house in the affluent suburb of Rathgar they came across an elderly Protestant, Mr Livingston, who, minding his neighbours’ house while they attended the Mass, was watching the event on television. As John-Paul moves through the crowds in the Popemobile, Mangan and Gallagher bind the widower to a chair, blindfold and brutalise him, rob the house and scarper. But having seen them Livingston could potentially identify them; although they considered going back they couldn’t muster the bravery. After an
afternoon of drink and sex in a suburban seaside town, they returned to the city wondering ‘if the nerve to kill was something you acquired’. xxxvii

In Aodhan Madden’s 1988 play, *Sea Urchins*, Huey, a ‘twenty year old drop-out [who] hates himself and violently resists’ his homosexuality, murdered a man around the same time that Trevor’s criminals ‘stepped off the bus on the quays’ to mingle with Dubliners remembering the morning’s mass. xxxviii His victim was a closeted and married gay man, The Duke. Described as ‘a shadow’ by Huey, he does not speak during the play and is murdered by the end of Act One while cruising a suburban pier. xxxix Identified as ‘queer’, he is pushed to the ground and robbed of his wallet by Huey’s accomplices, before Huey then kicks him to death. xl In Act Two the gang re-group on the pier to celebrate the leniency of the sentences they received for the crime; their re-enactment of the trial and their reception by the crowds and media outside the court lays bare a ‘social sanction for anti-gay murder’. xli

Trevor saw ‘himself as belonging to a “withering” population of middle-class Protestants displaced by de Valera’s Ireland’, a nation that he thought ‘plumped for holiness’ when seeking ‘pillars on which to build itself’. xlii ‘A Bit of Business’ concentrates on a day when the eyes of this nation were transfixed on images of this holiness, and symbolic narratives could therefore play themselves out unimpeded in an empty capital. Bound and blindfolded, but forced to listen to media reports of a massive display of religiosity, the aging Livingston deftly represents a Protestant population that committed to remaining in Ireland throughout the twentieth century.
Madden wrote his play in response to a murder in Fairview Park on 10 September 1982 in which a homosexual man was beaten to death, but he too was compelled to set the play during the visit in ‘order to foreground the religious basis of homophobia in Ireland’. Homosexual himself, Madden saw during the Fairview Park trial, how Church, State, and media conspired to ‘[encourage] queer bashers’, creating a context in which the perpetrators were enabled to walk ‘free from the court, to join a noisy crowd of supporters … shouting “Queers out!”’. In the midst of this cacophony of homophobia, it is surely significant that The Duke in Madden’s play is a non-speaking role.

A third work, Johnny Gogan's 1996 *The Last Bus Home*, also utilises the vacant city but the film's timescale is such that some of the changes that occurred in Ireland after the Papal visit can be registered. Starting on the day of the Mass, it depicts a teenager, Reena, remaining at home as her family departs for the Park. After watching footage of the Mass on television, she leaves the house to wander through a deserted Dublin suburb, eventually meeting Jessop, with whom she forms a punk-band. Tracking the band's progress, *The Last Bus Home* too records violence meted out to Ireland's sexual minorities but ends with a note of optimism about the country's future as the film's main protagonists re-unite on 30 June 1993, the day that homosexuality was decriminalised. Benefitting from hindsight, *The Last Bus Home* presents the Papal Mass as a strange event that marked a hinge point in Irish history. It is in this manner that the Mass has been portrayed in subsequent writing on the event; in 2000, for instance, Mary Kenny described it as both the ‘crowning glory to Ireland’s historical star status as a Catholic nation’ and ‘the beginning of the end of that entity known as Catholic Ireland’.
Conclusion

When understood as a manifestation of this moment of transition, the apparent binary between the filled, ordered space of spectacle in the Park on the one hand, seeking to reduce Ireland to a singular Catholic history, and the emptiness of the rest of Dublin on the other hand, pregnant with discordant possibilities and trajectories, becomes simplistic. The park and the city should instead be seen as intimately connected, sharing equally contradictory attributes. For instance, understood as an ‘opportunity … to show the world that the Irish are not a race hell bent on denominational suicide’, xlvi the ‘astounding organisation’ of Scott Tallon Walker’s event was a recurring theme in media accounts of the visit. xlvii But the order of their spectacle was not absolute: the disorder imagined in Trevor’s, Madden’s and Gogan’s work also existed in the glitches, oversights, frustrations and perceived inequalities within its space. Contrary to the precise calibration presupposed by the architect, everything ran behind time while resentment was felt by sections of the congregation about the distribution of opportunities to view the pontiff. xlviii

Meanwhile, the writers later projecting violence into Dublin’s quiet sunny streets as a response to the fantasies of cultural unity sustained by official images of order perhaps over-estimated both the stability of the spectacle in September 1979 and the receptivity of the Phoenix Park crowd to its message. The Mass was a spectacle designed for a late twentieth century audience. Architecturally, the language of modernism – in its mass-produced elements and industrial forms – becomes just another signifier in an assemblage of meanings unhinged from time to evoke
timelessness: cassocks and baldachini confronting Miesian detailing, a stereobate realised in carpet-covered scaffolding situated alongside marquees reused from an oil-rig exhibition, etc. The eternalness of the Pontiff is emphasised through the momentary and the modern, the hyper-mediatised and global as well as the ancient spatial practices surrounding the local assembling of the faithful. The press admires John Paul for his ability to embody the Church and to use the machinations of the modern world to present the Church as Ireland’s ‘last bulwark’ against that world. But rather than being solid, this bulwark periodically melted into air: for Maeve Binchy the flyover at the beginning of the day resembled ‘a classy advertisement’ for Aer Lingus; for Colm Boland, the crowd rising from a kneeled position brought ‘scenes from Hollywood epics […] to mind’; Olivia O’Leary, meanwhile, noted the ‘wandering’ ‘attentions’ and ‘fidgeting’ of the congregation. There were many devout believers in the Phoenix Park, but John Paul II’s mass was also absorbed by a ‘collectivity in a state of distraction’ as Walter Benjamin might have suggested: a state symptomatic of modernity. In addition, although they are few and far between, within the extensive press coverage of the visit dissenting voices can be found, including a socialist questioning of the Church’s focus on sexual morality and two mildly feminist critiques. These were part of a gradual unravelling of the grand narrative of the Eternal Church that gathered pace in subsequent years as it emerged that two telegenic priests, prominent in ceremonies during the Pope’s visit, had in fact fathered children. As Eugene O’Brien describes it, this unravelling of the Church’s singular grand narrative as exemplified through spectacles such as the Phoenix Park Mass allowed ‘the liberation of [multiple] smaller ones’.
A chimera of control, the complexity of the Pope’s visit springs from its oscillating positioning as simultaneously a vision of a church triumphant and an ecclesiastical death-rattle. The image of the empty city, duly depicted by journalists in the *St Patrick*, was central to the language of a consensual Ireland and the legitimation of the spectacle. Simultaneously, it is the site of alternative narratives which, in contrast to *The Visit*, were constructed over time. In appropriating the empty city for their project of imagining a future Ireland as a secular country, more tolerant of difference, Trevor and Madden did not approach it as a blank canvas or Kiberd’s agnostic void; instead they drew on Dublin’s history and geography. The dissipation of Catholicism in 1970s Ireland was patchy with some practices remaining popular, while others fell out of favour. The Catholicisation of the city from the 1920s on had been similarly uneven, tending towards the hegemonic but never attaining it. Some locations retained identities counter to the notion of Catholic Ireland, and it is these that Trevor and Madden utilised; Rathgar, the suburb in which Mr Livingston was beaten, was historically a Protestant enclave; while Dun Laoghaire pier, on which The Duke was murdered, was a ‘well known gay cruising ground’. If the order evident in the Park’s spectacle was one signifier of Ireland’s modernity, so too was the disorder and heterogeneity of the empty city. The Pope’s visit is a complex contradiction, a post-modern monolith whose existence provokes both pride and embarrassment; a moment of both triumph and vulnerability whose uninhabited but constructed spaces allowed the breaking of orthodox ident and a prescience in the recognition and ultimately the acceptance of others.

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1 Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Since 1950, The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), p. 269 ‘Among the four and a half million people on this island there are few who are atheists or even agnostics’. ‘Pilgrims All’, *The Irish Times*, September 29 1979, p. 13.
The relationship between the Catholic Church in Ireland and modern architecture was sometimes contentious. For instance, all the premiated modern proposals in a 1954 competition were ignored in favour of a Byzantine design. However by 1979, a diverse range of modern churches had been built around the country, particularly in its new suburbs. A 1976 competition held by the Archdiocese of Dublin sought ideas about how churches could be built cheaply in these suburbs; attracting 193 entries, it informed a building programme that was underway when the Pope visited. See Richard Hurley, Irish Church Architecture in the Era of Vatican II (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2001).

Conor O’Clery, ‘A first glimpse of Ireland’, The Irish Times, 1 October 1979, p.10. The exact times of the Pope’s flight into Ireland were published to allow people to see his plane as it approached: 9.40 a.m. – seven miles east of Wicklow Head at 8000 feet; 9.42 a.m. – Greystones Co. Wicklow, at 9000 feet; [etc.]; Conor O’Clery, ‘Papal plane leaves at dawn’, The Irish Times, 29 September 1979, p.16.

David Norris, an Anglican gay activist, welcomed the Pope to Dublin, but complained about the catholicisation of the city during the visit, through for instance the ‘construction of extensions to public houses “in honour of Our Lady”’; he ended a letter to the Irish Times by calling for a city ‘that is fit not just for a few days for a Pope to visit, but fit for the rest of their days for Dublin’s citizens to live in’. ‘Letters to the Editor’, The Irish Times, 2 October 1979, p.13. An Irish Independent journalist, Ken Ryan, recorded differing attitudes towards the long-term impact of the Pope’s visit on the city. An old inhabitant of Sean MacDermott Street thought that it would revert to its normal existence, where as his younger neighbour saw the visit as ‘the dawn of a brand new day’. (Ken Ryan, ‘A brand new day dawns for Sean MacDermott Street’, Irish Independent, 29 September 1979.

The Bank of Ireland headquarters on Baggot Street by Scott Tallon Walker and Ronald Tallon’s house in Foxrock, Dublin, Scott Tallon Walker Archives, Phoenix Park, Job no. 7940, Box. No. F.0471/163114


Peter Hebblethwaite quoted in John Cornwell, p. 190.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Aodhan Madden, Fear and Loathing in Dublin (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2009)


Cornwell, p. 190.


Cornwell, p. 95.

Quoted in ibid., p. 60.

Karo Wotja, the future Pope John Paul II, was involved with amateur theatre groups in his home-town from the age of eight. As a student in Krakow he studied drama, joined a theatre group and took voice training.

Ibid., p. 94.

‘John Paul, Superstar’ was the moniker given to the Pope on the cover of Time on 15 October 1979.

Dublin, Scott Tallon Walker Archives, Phoenix Park, Job no. 7940, Box. No. F.0471/163114. Note was taken of how the Pope’s cadences accommodated the echo that inevitably accrued when speaking to crowds of a million plus.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 123.


Fuller, p. 226. 1979 for instance was the last year that the Archbishop of Cashel threw the ball in to start the All-Ireland Gaelic Football final (Fuller 2004, p. 10).

Ferriter, p. 646; Fuller, p. 226.

Quoted in Kevin Courtney, ‘1970s Ireland: Where would we be if Dana hadn’t won the Eurovision?’ The Irish Times, 27 October 2012. Vincent Browne was also convinced that the visit would ensure ‘a revival of religious fervour in Ireland’.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 123.


Fuller, p. 226. 1979 for instance was the last year that the Archbishop of Cashel threw the ball in to start the All-Ireland Gaelic Football final (Fuller 2004, p. 10).

Ferriter, p. 646; Fuller, p. 226.

Quoted in Kevin Courtney, ‘1970s Ireland: Where would we be if Dana hadn’t won the Eurovision?’ The Irish Times, 27 October 2012. Vincent Browne was also convinced that the visit would ensure ‘a revival of religious fervour in Ireland’.

Ibid.


Ibid., p. 108.

Ibid.

The phrase ‘Varieties of Irishness’ was twice used by the historian, R.F. Foster as a chapter title – in Modern Ireland: 1600-1972 (1988) and Paddy and Mr Punch (1993) – and was commonly to frame discussions about the idea of a culturally diverse Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ed Madden, ‘Queruing Ireland, In the Archives’, Irish University Review, 43.1 (2013), 184-221, p. 192; Trevor, p. 79.

Ibid., p. 195.

Ibid., p. 192.

Ibid., p. 190.


Madden, p. 189.

Madden, p. 189.

Patrick Callan, "When the Irish Church displayed confidence", Irish Independent, September 28 1979, p. 8. Callan noted that they 'had three years to prepare the 1932 Congress and did themselves proud. We have had only two months official notice of this papal visit and it looks as if the sentiments of 1932 will be eclipsed by the enthusiasm of 1979'.

Maeve Binchy, 'Dawn met by sea of faces', The Irish Times, October 1 1979, p. 11; Donal Foley noted the 'impeccable organisation', 'Day of faith and gaiety', The Irish Times, October 1 1979, p. 11; 'Who will say after these momentous days that we cannot organise?', 'Perfect Operation', Irish Independent, October 2 1979, p. 12; The title of the Irish Independent's editorial on September 28 1979 was 'All in Order', p. 10. They claimed it to be 'the most major feat of organisation in the history of the State'. 'The big event – and how to get there', Irish Independent, September 28 1979, p. 7.

There were complaints that the motorcade was not scheduled to pass in front of St Mary's Hospital in Phoenix Park, only minutes away and reports of jostling around the papal helicopter, etc. The Irish Times – arguably the least Catholic of the daily newspapers commented: 'The day was not without its organisational hitches. The Pope’s schedule fell behind almost as soon as he landed at Dublin Airport … By 2 pm at which time the drive about should have started, the time lag had stretched to an hour. The drive – about itself, was delayed when milling crowds brought the vehicle to a halt for some minutes, and some groups got no view of the Pope. Many people at the eastern and southern extremities of the crowd complained angrily that they had not even caught a glimpse of the Holy Father. …The corral system worked well while the Mass continued, but it was less than satisfactory once the drive about began. A great many people did not understand the system, and rushed from one corral to the next, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Pope. As a result, his progress was slow initially, and the drive-about did not reach some parts of the crowd' (The Irish Times, October 1 1979).

T.P. O'Mahony, 'Church’s time of vision', The Irish Press, 29 September 1979, p. 5. O'Mahony’s article is the most thoughtful analysis of the relationship between Ireland and the Pope in the press across the period of the visit. Within the Pope’s ‘winning’ theatre of ‘mysticism and mystery’, Toibin discerned a ‘hectoring’ display of ‘authority and power’ that broadcast John Paul as the successor to St Peter, the rock upon which the Church was built. However he thought that ‘[n]o one else saw it like this’. Colm Toibin, The Sign of the Cross, Travels in Catholic Europe (London: Picador, 2001), p. 8.

Olivia O'Leary, 'Soutane and fur battle it out', The Irish Times, 2 October 1979, p. 13.


O'Brien, p. 61.