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Seán Hillen, conspiracy, and the ends of Irish Art

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ABSTRACT

Seán Hillen is Ireland’s most important photomontage artist and acutely aware of how aesthetic forms interact with public discourse. To understand the latter, this article first examines Hillen and Desmond Fitzgerald’s memorial for the Omagh Bombing, which aimed for community reconciliation, but whose reception absorbed the interpretative crisis produced by the bungled police investigation and surrounding conspiracy theories. Hillen’s photomontages, on the contrary, intently expose such interpretative crises. Having learned from Berlin Dada, Hillen’s early photomontages investigate the contradictions of Irish identity that state. After Omagh, Hillen turns explicitly to US conspiracy theory. He transports conspiracy’s subversion of state propaganda to interrogate post-recessionary Irish austerity and to ask whether British complicity in extrajudicial violence has been sufficiently exposed. Yet conspiracy is another false reconciliation, easily appropriated by illiberal politics, and central to authoritarian scapegoating and disregard. This doubled response, attraction to an aesthetic of suspicion and wariness that such technique has been politically appropriated, maps to a discussion of the aesthetic strategies of the writers Hillen’s collages invoke: W.B Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett.

No-one really escapes from the massacre, of course – the only way you can do that is by falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what’s before your eyes.

—Ciaran Carson, review of Seamus Heaney’s North.

1. Reconciliation and truth

In August 1998, an IRA splinter group opposed to the Good Friday Agreement detonated a car bomb in Omagh whose explosion injured two hundred and claimed the lives of twenty-nine.¹ This was the worst single atrocity of the Troubles. It left a wake of devastating grief. It also left an aftermath of anger at police and intelligence services for failing to prevent the bombing and for subsequently mishandling the investigation. In 2001, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, Nuala O’Loan, issued a report into the Omagh police investigation in which she exorciated the Royal Ulster Constabulary for failures of leadership and a lack of urgency.² Warnings about the bombing were available beforehand and not properly handled. More, O’Loan discovered that Special Branch of the RUC
withheld 78% of evidence from the investigators. Other dizzying revelations came out. In 2006, it was widely reported that “The British security service, MI5, withheld vital anti-terrorism intelligence just months before the Omagh bombing.”\textsuperscript{3} Flabbergasted family members of the victims accused MI5 of either “criminal negligence” or “assisting a terrorist murder plot.”\textsuperscript{4} Later, what criminal judgement emerged was overturned because law enforcement tampered with evidence and perjured themselves.

Conspiracy theories, prone to reading malfeasance as masterstroke and relieving distress by rerouting blame, caught fire: perhaps the UK government allowed the bombing to happen rather than merely failed to prevent it? Such embers of mistrust drew oxygen from legitimate inquiries into earlier, unrelated bombings which published their findings in the same period. The Barron inquiry of 2003 and Cassel report of 2006, for instance, found credible evidence that the loyalist terrorists who carried out a spate of killings in the 1970s, including the Monaghan and Dublin bombings, “may have had assistance from members of the security forces”\textsuperscript{5} and had in their ranks members of the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary.\textsuperscript{6} Whether these were rogue actors or whether they indicate a higher, state-level conspiracy is publicly unknown: but “evidence suggests collusion.”\textsuperscript{7} Many organisations, including the Irish government as late as 2017, pressed the British government to allow an international judge to access and review all of the evidence, to little avail.\textsuperscript{8}

The city of Omagh, yearning for ways forward, wanted an art memorial in 2008 to mark the bomb site and to connect the street to the memorial garden built hundreds of yards away. Perhaps art could give some solace or shape to grief. The co-design of photocollage artist Seán Hillen and landscape architect Desmond Fitzgerald was selected from among the international submissions. Formally, their design is rooted in communal reconciliation. Hillen and Fitzgerald envisioned a glass memorial on the street where the blast occurred. But that street is sunk in sunless gloom, so they planned a large motorised mirror programmed to track the sun. It would feed light to thirty-one mirrors mounted on poles in the memorial garden, one mirror for each person killed in the explosion, as well as one each for the unborn twins of a pregnant woman.\textsuperscript{9} Those rectangles of sunlight aim towards the street. The combined beam bounces off another mounted mirror shooting the light into a rectangular glass tower where it radiates a deeply etched crystal heart. Animating the dead with tracked sunlight is ancient grieving, as old as the passage tomb in New Grange. The glass monument itself is a standing stone, an imposing menhir on Market Street that pays homage to those pagan megaliths found all over Ireland, Scotland, and England (see Figure 1)\textsuperscript{10}. Could such an aesthetic model, drawn from a shared history, pre-sectarian and pre-Christian, reconcile a divided and grieving populace?

Not quite, it turned out. Immediately, the memorial met petty troubles, city council squabbles over where to allow the reflecting mirror: the effect of the light dimmed. Moreover, many families boycotted the memorial occasion and monument unveiling, disappointed that a plaque was not placed on the standing glass to name the perpetrators of the atrocity. An inscription should have been straight-forward: the Real IRA accepted responsibility for the explosion that destroyed Protestants and Catholics alike. Yet with this plaque standing already in the memorial garden, the menhir went without it. This need to keep assigning blame has an understandable connection to grief. It also symptomatises a wider crisis of interpretation opened by surfacing conspiracies and prosecutorial failures. We might put it this way: reconciliation first requires a public
Figure 1. “Omagh Bomb Memorial” by landscape architect Desmond Fitzgerald and artist Seán Hillen.
reckoning with the truth. The effectiveness of an art memorial that aims to unify and heal in the aftermath of shattering violence first requires shared confidence that official narratives of what happened can be trusted. But the bungled investigation of the Omagh bombing revealed that not to be the case, and the memorial absorbed the interpretative crisis. State complicity into earlier civilian murders and the grievous dereliction of failing to act appropriately on advance warnings; the trauma unleashed by terrorist maiming and killing of civilians and the simple human insistence that those who murdered a member of one’s family be publicly named: a memorial aiming at community reconciliation cannot alone suture these wounds.

2. Photomontage and conspiracy

The tension between the work of aesthetics and official narratives is an enduring theme in all of Hillen’s work. I begin with this specific example of how aesthetic reconciliation fails when matched against a background where official narratives, still resisting full transparency, remain untrusted even after a hard-earned peace. I do so because it is the aim of avant-garde photocollage, where Seán Hillen is more practiced, to weaponise this effect in reverse. Exaggeration of vying identities, juxtaposition of idealised self-conceptions against images that rudely contradict them: these are the shock tactics of photocollage which aim to provoke and undermine state narratives that obscure uncomfortable contradictions. Hillen did not learn this negatively from his experience with the Omagh memorial. His early photocollage work, The “Troubles” Series (1983–1993) as well as Hillen’s collages Irelantis (1993–2005), already demonstrates this artistic understanding. It is a lesson he has drawn from photocollage’s earliest origins in Berlin Dada which itself developed from the deployment of doctored postcards that satirised WWI propaganda. In this article I’ll address an example from each of Hillen’s early series to show how he engages these techniques, first, to sharply contest idealised conceptions of British identity in light of Northern Irish militarisation and police surveillance, repression and protest; and, second, in the case of Irelantis, to confront the Celtic-Tiger’s embrace of international capitalism with what transactional identity discards or cannot account for: cultic aesthetic value, religious awe, and natural and manmade catastrophe.

Hillen’s later photocollage series made from 2007–2017 do not refer to Omagh, but they do learn from those events. Integrating the logics of conspiracy, in particular popular US theories about 9/11, Hillen’s later work renews photocollage’s capacity to shock us into recognising interpretative crises. The series, Searching for Evidence (2007–9) implants into John Hinde’s quaint Irish postcards both normally detonated buildings and buildings felled in the terror attacks of 9/11. WHAT’S WRONG? With The Consolations of Genius (2010–2017) explicitly foregrounds 9/11 conspiracies with scenarios of sexualised women and famous male Irish writers such as Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett.

Conspiracy is an unsettling topic. But I’ll argue here that Hillen is drawn to 9/11 conspiracy theories because conspiracy theory shares with photocollage an ability to divert the emotional power of political propaganda that employs the genre of melodrama. Elizabeth Anker argues that official US messaging after 9/11 employed melodrama to cast the terrorist attacks in stark good and evil moral terms. Melodramatic propaganda elicited identification not only with US civilians killed but with “the very exercise of state power.” It cultivated “felt legitimacy” for the authorisation “of war, surveillance, occupation, the
truncation of civil liberties, the criminalization of dissent, the militarization of domestic politics.” Conspiracy, I argue, persisted as a principal discourse that emerged to block the state appropriation of moral feeling to advocate war, instead attacking the legitimacy of the state itself. This sceptical function is what Hillen’s work condenses into an Irish scene. Among peaceful Irish settings, Hillen inserts outlandish evidence of false flag operations and buildings destroyed by terrorist attacks. Photocollage’s implausible juxtapositions defuse the emotional grip of melodrama. US conspiracy is freed into analogy of suspicion. Different questions arise in this context: should conspiracy be deployed to interpret Irish experience in these years, politically, given the incomplete inquiries into British state collusion with 1970s terrorism in Northern Ireland; economically, given the unpopular austerity that followed Ireland’s property collapse in 2006? More, Hillen’s work asks analytical questions about whether conspiracy thinking is inevitable when civic agency is blunted by political opacity and economic autonomy diffused by international finance.

Yet conspiracy theory functions not simply as resistance from those below the law. Conspiracy is also ginned up by those who aim to remain above the law, to channel blame, profit from grievance. How easily the underdog’s expression of impotence is championed as an anti-government ideology of freedom that expands illiberal power. Conspiracy packs traditions of vulgar provocation, opportunistic associations, and logics that disregard the empirical truth of people’s lives and deaths. Conspiracy theory confounds the melodramatic narratives of those in authority, that is, but conspiracy itself is another mode of melodrama that recreates false reconciliations by fostering an inward desire for identity while simultaneously regulating blame outwardly. By bringing conspiracy deeply into his work, Hillen participates in some of these aspects immanently. Formally, conspiracy theory and photomontage share basic sceptical operations: both employ provocative juxtaposition to resist normalising ways of reconciling contradiction. Both doctor photographs to make another truth more visible, shocking, and funny. Like crude conspiracy theories, Hillen’s later photomontages arguably devolve into cut-and-paste jobs, a formal failure that is also performative and self-aware. In doing so, Hillen asks hard questions about the viability of his medium, even as he explores and parodies the consequence of appropriation.

This performative failure maps onto a double tradition found in the Irish writers the collages figure: W.B. Yeats, on one side, seduced by the conceit that the visionary artist perceives a secret order to history, a compulsion that attracts Yeats to the aesthetic power of conspiracy and attendant anti-democratic politics. And on the other side, we find Joyce and Beckett: wary of authoritarianism and of the cult of literary insight; wary too of the drive to identify and scapegoat; and both willing to performatively dismantle an artistic medium because its aesthetic resources have been co-opted by those power. Hillen’s later work is caught between these compulsions, between the allure that artistic works expose secret truth and the need to bring art to an end because the promise of insight has been thoroughly and irreversibly co-opted. In the end, Hillen’s work leaves one thing clear: there is a widespread legitimacy crisis in contemporary political and economic culture. And it is unclear what forms of art can survive it.

3. Formal Ruptures: The “Troubles” series and Irelantis

Though Hillen has been influenced by later uses of montage – Monty Python’s Flying Circus, say, or the anti-war photomontage tradition that persists with Hillen’s contemporaries Peter
Kennard and Cat Phillipps\textsuperscript{12} – his early work extends the earliest techniques of avant-garde photomontage, which arose during World War I. Most know John Heartfield because he popularised photomontage to satirise Nazism in *AIZ* magazine. In fact Helmut Hertzfeld, as Heartfield was called before he changed his name, weaponised photomontage much earlier as a protest against the “hurrah kitsch” of WWI propaganda.\textsuperscript{13} It is not a coincidence that WWI is widely recognised as the period when governments started to practice “systematic lying”, modes of “deceit and manipulation [that developed] into governmental functions” in the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s, as Sheldon Wolin points out.\textsuperscript{14} During WWI, state-sanctioned postcards already employed photomontage: idealised juxtapositions of “happy warriors” at the warfront and tender scenes of homefront wives and children enduring shared sacrifice. Hertzfeld and George Grosz copied the format for their own collage postcards so they could slip them through the censors. Unlike state postcards, their clippings exploited “formal ruptures” that communicated instead the disjunction between “a country’s general understanding of its war and the soldier’s traumatic experience of it”, between advertising clippings of bourgeois comforts available at home and reminders of the endless deaths of soldiers.\textsuperscript{15} These cards do not survive. But Heartfield credited them with inaugurating avant-garde photomontage techniques that became integral to Berlin Dada, which employed montage to simulate the “physical and psychical symptoms of shock,” to express returning soldiers’ trauma.\textsuperscript{16} Later Heartfield turned his skills as *monteur* to satirise Nazism.

*Troubles* resuscitates this lost avant-garde postcard tradition and reworks formal ruptures to question the legitimacy of state violence. Hillen takes the colour postcards of London tourist sites – Trafalgar square, St. Paul’s, Whitehall among them – and foregrounds placid state architecture with his own black-and-white photographs from 1970s Northern Ireland stone throwers and military barricades, prison tower and police vans.\textsuperscript{17} In Northern Ireland, photomontage’s disjunctions were living effect: normal life yielded to military checkpoint, blue sky to army helicopter, protest to petrol bomb. Hillen transports such scenes to tourist London. (Periodic IRA bombings in London in the 70s and 80s made literal that violent disjunction as well.) Hillen visually connects the capital’s sites of symbolic power to violence unleashed when their legitimacy is contested in the periphery. Civil unrest, what Žižek would call “subjective violence,” appears before the unruffled edifices of economic and political power to make visible objective or “systemic violence”: the “often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems.”\textsuperscript{18}

Though the works adhere to perspective, the visual space is boxed (the sides run from 8 to 14 inches) and packed with ironic juxtapositions. Utopia is invoked – “Four Ideas for a New Town” – but claustrophobia is dystopic. In narrow Newry and Belfast streets cartoon cowboys have shot a native American man (“The Executioners”) and the crime duo from the 1977–1983 British TV programme *The Professionals* have their guns drawn (“The Professionals” 2–5). Popular culture’s stereotypes of the wild west or TV investigators who bend the law to include extra-judicial killing are pop-comical. Yet glued into black and white photographs of familiar streets they ask whether these are real logics of the state. Shoot-to-kill was a policy that British security forces were long suspected of pursuing instead of arrest for suspected IRA members, for instance; the Stalker inquiry to investigate the practice was never made public. Hillen’s work asks whether this is just the stuff of TV culture or real life too. The undecidability of conspiracy theory – not its verification – already indexes civic mistrust to state opacity and militarised policing.
A lesser artist might have used photomontage’s disjunctions to elaborate conflict between Northern Irish Catholic and Protestant communities. Hillen’s photographs, even of practices that become sectarian flashpoints, are instead compassionate and surprising. Protestant 12th of July paraders, annually celebrating the consolidation of Protestant power in victory at the Battle of the Boyne, lie relaxed in pinstriped suits on the grass and two women marching laugh joyously. Ordinary Irish families tramp to a mass rock for outdoor service across from London’s Battersea reach. Instead, the vying identities in Troubles collide where surveillance meets surveilled, aimer the target, as if pointing a weapon by itself enables the simplifications of identification, you and us, us and them. These fissures in identity are not for the artist to resolve, even when they are ironically contained within traditional perspective that derives from the postcards. On the contrary, Hillen suggests that one essentialised identity produces another. In “St. Christopher Appears in London, (Security Forces Investigate . . .)”, the bridge to Westminster is blocked by security forces, a reminder that political access is controlled (see Figure 2). Down right of the bridge, however, a mass-card St. Christopher with Christ child on his shoulder fords the Thames, eluding the patrol. Catholic kitsch counters London postcard kitsch, which itself depicts architectural kitsch, Pugin’s neogothic parliament. Other collages seek other exaggerations for witty relief: in some, the artist himself appears in the facemask of a Soviet cosmonaut, Newry Gagarin, floating above the streets, crossing the Irish border, or taking a stratospheric view of Dublin.

As with Dada, there is also trauma. One of Andreas Vesalius’s skinned medieval bodies looks on before a bombed-out bus (“Meeting the Dead, #2”). Another’s of Vesalius’s figures, skin stripped to ribbons, looks back at a police observation van (“Northern Sunsets, #1”, see Figure 2. “St. Christopher Appears in London, (Security Forces Investigate . . .)"
Figure 3). The saturated colours of postcard sunset abruptly contrast a black and white photo of a Tangi into which a policeman climbs. The wet road doubles as a strand. Postcard Irish tourism ironises the dominant mode of sightseeing in Northern Ireland: police surveillance. Here, identification begins as a function of policing, not community identity, hailing through the camera. Trauma is produced formally as well, not because photographs show what is “before your eyes,” as Ciaran Carson prefers it to Seamus Heaney’s mythmaking in this article’s epigraph. Rather, Hillen’s montages, the mishmash of materials, share with traumatic accounts the understanding that “its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency” indicates its truth. Dada taught this lesson long before Žižek reminds us of it again. But a satanic inversion of this insight pertains to certain conspiracy theories as well, which maintain a relationship to traumatic violence. Though often inaccurate and untrue, coloured by repression and projection, conspiracy manages hard-to-accept contradictions to ideologies. It also expresses the psychic difficulty of processing atrocity or accepting when atrocity is made politically meaningful.

Hillen’s next series Irelantis (1994–2005) moves beyond violence’s legitimacy to examine the paradoxes of identity as Ireland embraces an economy based on international capitalism. Hillen starts with John Hinde’s 1950 and 60s postcards that celebrate Ireland’s natural beauty and quaint red-haired children and cuts in modern banking centres, ancient sites from civilisations long collapsed, or natural disasters that portend economic downturn and planetary calamity. These doctored postcards suggest that marketing authentic Irish identity already encodes the logic of its obliteration. But the insight cuts as humour since the supposed authentic Irishry of the postcards is carefully staged and edited in the original cards. Certainly, economic progress is shadowed by ruin, a grim portent for Celtic Tiger optimism: volcanos and sand dunes encroach and shopping districts fall into disrepair. As
with the Omagh memorial, some collages celebrate pre-capitalist powers: semi-domed by oversized moon, earth, or sun, whole photomontages reassure like a church’s sacral niche. In “The Island of New Grange” the white stoned circular tomb reflects a giant swirling whirlpool, a stilling aesthetic experience that rebuffs linear progress with older recurrent spatialised and natural modes (see Figure 4). In this way, Hillen’s work continually uses avant-garde juxtaposition to undermine how identity becomes essentialised through the state, while nevertheless remaining compelled by aesthetic modes of reconciliation that provide alternatives.

4. What’s Wrong with conspiracy theory and Searching for Evidence?

Hillen’s photocollages hereafter are drawn to explicit conspiracy theories because they rebuff strategies by which state propaganda legitimates itself. It helps if we first acknowledge the trouble with conspiracy thinking. Frederic Jameson has named conspiracy theorising the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.” Whether it be to buttress failing epistemologies and ideologies or to restore wounded subjectivity, conspiracy theory often rejects that bad things happen on account of incompetence, miscommunication, and coincidence; it rejects as well the systematic effects of individual actions. Instead, conspiracy thinking mourns agency. It yearns to allocate blame. To Theodor Adorno, who influences Jameson’s thinking, conspiracy theorising is intimately connected to the scapegoating and racism he found intolerable in modern democracies. Adorno explores how the enlightenment command to be autonomous, a law unto oneself, in a world governed by forces beyond one’s control

\[ \text{drives the inward desire for identity ... as well as its outward expansion: the impulse to assign a name to some subjectivity, some entity or group of people, who lurking in the margins of the infernal system, are secretly directing it, controlling it, taking advantage of it.} \]

There must be illuminati rigging the game; or when one works hard yet fails to advance, that disconnection owes to potent groups, paradoxically, that one well-knows are vulnerable: Muslim or Jewish, Black or immigrant. Conspiracy helps those who embrace neoliberal doctrines of economic self-sufficiency but cannot reconcile them with empirical evidence of widespread inequality and their own feelings of fungibility. Even Americans who otherwise support democratic values take recourse in such satisfying revenge narratives that bolster their identity while inverting their ideals. One need only think of the Trump administration’s policy of separating young immigrant children from their parents.

What’s more, popular conspiracy theories are prone to insidious confirmation bias that read counter-fact as denial or complicity. According to US conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, for example, the parents whose children were gunned down in the mass-shooting at Sandy-Hook are “crisis actors” in a “false flag” operation intended to restrict gun rights. The need for such narratives reveals the psychic difficulty for many people in accepting contradiction, in reconciling their advocacy for the right to bear military-grade arms with the consequence in the periodic slaughter of school children. Contradiction is resolved by allocating blame simplistically and with sadistic cruelty: those same parents consistently receive death threats and have pushed back legally. Legitimate queries into the sociology of gun violence transform into a parody of critical engagement, easily co-opted by an aggressive, rightwing agenda. “Conspire” comes from Latin “conspīrāre, agree, combine.” This psychic urge to
combine in agreement, to reconcile, while superficially consonant with basic premises of rationality and identity, in practice overrides the imperative to discovering truth, which depends on contradiction. Conspiracy theory holds to the physical proximity implied in the Latin etymology – *conspirare* literally means breathing together – and has no trouble putting grieving parents in the huddle. This critique of conspiracy has become more urgent.

Figure 4. “The Island of Newgrange, Co Meath, IRELAND”.
in the last decade as conspiracy theories, particularly in the US, have moved from populist resistance or radio entertainment into central messaging of right-wing governing, both normalising racist resentment and delegitimising and demonising opposition through feeling currents and falsehoods.

As we’ve seen, Northern Irish politics teaches that there are degraded logics other than late capital that make representation of reality difficult. We could put this biographically: Hillen’s documented openness to conspiracy likely owes to a suspicion of authority, hard-learned as a child in a militarised Newry. Hillen told me that, as a boy, he was violently threatened by a Republican youth group when he no longer wanted any part, and he knew a youth who later died assembling a bomb.24 Hillen’s own documentary photographs of this period, published as the book Melancholy Witness, include children shot with plastic bullets and the family members of children killed this way.25 Still visibly wounded when telling these stories, Hillen’s pain reminds us that his work objectively represents the fractured subjectivity that emerges when political power violates its own basis for governing, when there is a bewildering gap between daily reality and the familiar stories democracies tell of themselves, of equality, freedom, and justice. Much later, a friend of Hillen, Miriam Hyman, was murdered in the London bus explosion of 7 July 2005. That event too had a personal connection. Yet contending with violence is not simply a psychological challenge, but also a public and political one. How does one represent systemic bias in policing, for example: as structural conspiracy or as individual prejudice? How does one represent policy decisions that widen inequality and further burden the poor: as a disdain of nefarious elites or as the structural consequence of pursuing ideologies that exclude inequality from their calculus and divorce economic decisions from popular will? These questions about representation are also artistic questions. They are also questions about how art responds to political discourse that appropriates artistic genres.

That is, conspiracy theories, even when false, work in more complex ways than denying hard to accept realities or providing moral structure to allocate blame to evil individuals or governments. They can resist, for instance, official government political discourse that employs its own modes of melodrama to generate emotional support for unpopular demands. 9/11 provides a classic example worth exploring because that attack becomes a leitmotif of Hillen’s collages. Anker shows how the US government deployed melodramatic political discourse to elicit identification with and overcome opposition to military intervention abroad and surveillance at home. Political melodrama, she argues, is effective because it provides a citizenry revitalised emotional energy, “felt legitimacy” lost to unfreedom.26 She describes “unfreedom” as an outcome of the “late modern and neoliberal moment,” itself characterised by “mass political disenfranchisement, experiences of being overpowered by the agentless forces of globalization, increasing economic inequality and financial precarity … and decreasing agency for influencing collective governing decisions.”27 Melodrama, she argues, compensates for these structural losses of agency, by providing what Nietzsche calls an “orgy of feeling”. Intense melodramatic feeling works to transpose, “to alleviate daily experiences of contracted agency by displacing their confusing causes onto singular spectacles.”28

Anker identifies some counter-narratives to politicised melodrama, principally the genre of the “jeremiad”, the biblical lamentation of the just outcome on a degraded society she finds in both Noam Chomsky and televangelist Jerry Falwell. Anker overlooks, however, the main generic resistance to politicised melodrama: conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are
themselves modes of melodrama: they revitalise the emotion lost to “contracted agency”; they also gravitate to singular spectacles of atrocity. Like melodrama, conspiracy functions through feeling and style – analytical content is less important than what feels true. But unlike state melodrama which expertly channels emotion into “felt legitimation”, conspiracy deflates that process by opening wounds of mistrust. 9/11 conspiracy theories muddied the allocation of blame and gutted the state’s smooth appropriation of heroism by implying the government itself willingly sacrificed US citizens, either actively or by neglect to profiteer from attack. Such theories were enormously popular in the United States: A New York Times/ CBS News poll in 2006, for instance, found “53% of those questioned thought the Bush administration was hiding something. Another US poll found a third of those questioned thought government officials either assisted in the 9/11 attacks or allowed them to happen.” The theories initially had some basis. Because a third building collapsed (World Trade Tower #7) without a plane crashing into it, truthers, as those doubting the official accounts are known, speculated that the building’s collapse was a “controlled demolition.” Other conspiracy theories about these attacks developed on evidence that the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD of the US and Canadian militaries) testified and published “inaccurate, if not untruthful” accounts of the time when the FAA notified them that particular planes had been hijacked. NORAD’s proven error left many to conclude that the US government knew about the attacks beforehand and permitted or assisted them. Controlled demolition conspiracies about 9/11 were debunked by two structural engineering reports released by Purdue scientists. But the persistence of these theories even after being soundly disproven, demonstrates that they perform a deeper psychic function. Moreover, they operate politically to buffer the state’s gripping melodramatic manipulation. The Bush administration lied about weapons of mass destruction and linked Iraq to 9/11 to justify an unprovoked invasion. That war’s mission was further delegitimised by the US practice of torture, extraordinary rendition, and the staggering numbers of Iraqi civilian casualties. When conspiracy theorists claim that the government, to facilitate a long-desired war, permitted, fabricated, or initiated the terrorist attacks, they at least have the themes right: deceit and willingness to sacrifice civilians to achieve geopolitical aims. But modern empathy is apparently so attenuated, so regulated by identity, that moral disgust with civilian suffering, widespread torture, and unprovoked war can only be fully experienced by imagining US government’s real targets were its own civilians. Put differently, conspiracy theory, which publicly opposes official political melodrama, still retains melodrama’s moral structure. But without an external enemy to war against, the orgy of feeling bonds to scepticism, outrage, or powerlessness.

Hillen makes his photocollage series Searching for Evidence (2007–2009) when conspiracy still mostly operates as displaced resistance to government propaganda and military intervention. He makes this connection explicit. In A Squadron of Bradleys Intercepts Natives Carrying Home Evidence of Controlled Demolition in Sackville St., Dublin, Hillen lines up American military adventurism with British imperialism in Ireland. (Sackville Street was renamed O’Connell Street in 1924 after Irish independence.) The Irish natives before the US tanks gather with their baskets full of turf, the smoking ruins of evidence for conspiracy, fuel for the politically dispossessed. “Searching for evidence of controlled demolition” refers to World Trade Tower #7 in New York, and Hillen plonks a mixture of actually demolished buildings and those destroyed in the attacks on New York and Washington D.C. into dated Irish postcard spots. The jarring opposition between old-
fashioned tourist Ireland and blown up buildings expresses a representational crisis. US conspiracy is visually out of place in this Ireland, an imported genre. Hillen invokes “singular spectacles” around which Anker claims a melodramatic orgy of feeling can organise. But feeling is flummoxed by photomontage’s visual fragmentation. Photos of attacked US buildings map differently onto a Dublin experiencing economic depression and collapsed property valuations. In “No Evidence of a 757 at the Ha’penny Bridge, Dublin?”. Hillen replaces the Ormond Quay, an area that fell into disrepair after the recession, with the cratered façade of the Pentagon (see Figure 5). Conspiracy theory posits no plane flew into the Pentagon; Hillen takes our disbelief in this theory – of course there were perpetrators – to ask whether we should not then find agents of this other property collapse as well. That is, as Ireland’s economic boom busted, beginning a regime of austerity, how can art represent the unspectacular costs in daily life? More, as the government nationalised speculative banking debts, and, in 2012, socialised international bondholders’ risk, how can one represent what Anker calls “unfreedom”? Conspiracy is offered here as a mode of cognitive mapping that might at least organise resistance, even

Figure 5. “No Evidence of a 757 at the Ha’penny Bridge, Dublin?"
the photomontages do not quite believe it. In “Bank Leaflet Woman calls Alex Jones on finding Evidence of Controlled Demolition at O’Connell Bridge” the title suggests that Irish banks are connected to a conspiracy. But the woman on the phone lies back, relaxed and laughing. Conspiracy is entertainment: the style of truth without requiring analytical rigour, not belief but suspicion, conspiracy without identifiable conspirators.

In WHAT’S WRONG? With The Consolutions of Genius (2010–2017) these suspicions become more fully acute and paranoid. This series of photomontages, which forgoes humour for modes of bewilderment and shock, combines images from the September attacks with photos of 20th-century male Irish writers, pinup erotica, captured British soldiers in Iraq, female movie stars, and daytime infomercials. In WHAT’S WRONG? There’s no longer the consoling circular religious niches or western diagonals of earlier collages. The form is rudimentary and increasingly crude. Instead, the photomontages are layered in triplicate: background with terrorist incident marked with evidence of conspiracy; middle ground with nude or female celebrity; and foreground with photograph of Irish male writer. These collages have plenty of Pop Art’s obvious signatures: the pinup, the film star, and the readymade. But all of those conventions slide into conspiracy. Brendan Behan stands before the black and white cinema marquee of a classic Richard Hamilton. Yet the marquee advertises a “9/11 WORKING GROUP PRESENTS JUSTICE THROUGH TRUTH” ("WHAT’S WRONG #15"). Andy Warhol’s Death and Disaster series is invoked in plane crashed in the field behind Patrick Kavanagh (“WHAT’S WRONG #6”), but Hillen’s is the controlled impact plane crash, a government test for aviation safety. Whereas Pop Art’s found objects tend to deauthorise creation, flatten both perspective and modern subjectivity, the modernist creator appears here in opposition to such flattening. The key question for conspiracy – whether there is an author and agent or whether the outcome represents structural, systemic effect – is refigured visually as the choice between modernist authorship and postmodern art that wonders whether there is an author in this picture.

The title, WHAT’S WRONG? Comes from a classic children’s game where children point out something peculiar in a picture. Hillen’s photomontages point out, literally with red arrows, the oddities of terrorist attacks in New York or in the London bus bombing of 2005. In one also appear framed photographs from the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. Literary tradition saturates the works. We see themes common to English dystopian writing: in George Orwell’s 1984, the state fabricates enemy attacks on its own citizens to maintain social hierarchy, in Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World the sexual liberation of “pneumatic” women is given (conservatively, Adorno would say) as a superficial distraction from the operation of political power. In “WHAT’S WRONG? #22” two naked identical twins stand in the middle ground before an aerial view of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, destroyed. It is as if Nietzsche’s “orgy of feeling” is analytically separated from the violent spectacle in the form of literal nudes. Orwell and Huxley give humanist genius as squat and ineffective resistance. Winston Smith wakes from a dream with Shakespeare on his lips. In Hillen the writers are Irish: Joyce and Beckett, Yeats and Behan, Kavanagh and Shaw. Their value here is also uncertain. Is Yeats brought before us as visionary prophet or as preposterous pundit on CNN News with a sideline in selling food mixers? (“WHAT’S WRONG? #16”). Is Yeats invoked as a reminder of aesthetic power that explains real political conspiracy or is Yeats invoked because his own conspiratorial aesthetic ought to be critiqued? The political aesthetic of these writers is neither uniform nor self-consistent.
The Irish “genius” is put in an ambivalent position, then: in one he is truth’s visionary; in another, artistic celebrity merely a path to accruing sexual access. According to Hillen, the second part of his title derives from what Honoré de Balzac, as recalled by Anthony Cronin, called: “the chief consolation of genius,’ the company and conversation of beautiful women.” Cronin’s biography of Dublin writers depicts an Irish literary scene of male braggadocio, poets tallying the “women for pleasure, women for use” as Cronin, with the gossip’s complicity, remembers Kavanagh. Hillen exaggerates this biographical banality, participating in the misogyny, exaggerating and exposing it. Paddy Kavanagh throws potatoes into a basket, flanked by catwalk models in colour; Samuel Beckett in black and white sits cross-legged atop a bed of five dovetailed naked women whom he ignores; James Joyce and Sylvia Beach open letters after the scandal of Ulysses; Angelina Jolie in vivid colour sitting provocatively on the desk they work at (“WHAT’S WRONG? #8”). Beach herself is one of the sophisticated women without whom Joyce’s masterwork might not have been published whole. We know many others. Elizabeth Yeats ran Cuala Press, later Esther Ryan and Marie Gill, the press that often published Yeats’s work first. But in a modern gloss, “company” is reduced to sexualised film celebrity and bondage pornography, a reminder of casual misogyny in Irish literary circles as well as the exorbitant cost Hollywood historically exacts to grant women agency. Hillen’s earlier photomontages present the artist as above politics, a cosmonaut; here some of the Irish writers – Joyce and Beckett – ignore the sexualised distraction. Others attend directly to it: Bernard Shaw, naked himself (one of his own nude self-portraits), photographs Charlize Theron in lingerie, and five male-only Irish writers, among them Flann O’Brien and Kavanagh, stand behind a woman bound naked to a bed, appraising her, laughing, chatting. The conspirator reminds us: the sordid behaviour of the great agents behind the scenes is unseemly. The response is there too. Conspiracy theory is like biographical gossip: it concludes with intentional fallacy, which limits interpretations of artworks. Hillen validates conspiracy theory yet simultaneously exposes and mocks its limits.

5. Failure and Irish genius

I began this essay by reflecting that the Omagh memorial arguably failed as a public memorial, at least initially, because by offering aesthetic reconciliation amid an atmosphere where mistrust for state policing muddied the allocation of blame on a clear moral plane, reconciliation inevitably appeared insufficient or ideological. Hillen’s photocollages explore this interpretative crisis at a tangent. They eschew reconciliation formally with their shocking juxtapositions. They invoke conspiratorial counternarratives to free spectacle from state appropriation as political melodrama. They redirect that critique to modes of political and economic unfreedom in an Ireland internationalised. Yet as conspiracy theory moves over the last two decades from popular scepticism of governmental manipulation to a central mode of illiberal governing, Hillen’s own project, much like the Omagh memorial, encounters another interpretative crisis that causes it to flounder against a changing history. Are Hillen’s collages aware that conspiracy theorising can be appropriated by those in authority to advance anti-democratic and authoritarian impulses? To put this topically, Trump hones outrage and powerlessness into a political force, empowering conspiracy’s self-identification with economic and political victimhood. He encourages the outward expansion of identity with racism and xenophobia.
Eschewing US military adventurism, he has no need of “felt legitimization” for the state. Troublingly illiberal, these strategies were viable only because conspiracy exploded as a defence against melodramatic propaganda. What happens, then, when art’s imaginative resources are adopted by those in power, when its provocations lead not to insight but paranoia, when its question becomes the leading question, when its fiction is no longer the artist’s prerogative but the mode du jour of political discourse?

Some of the Irish artists in these photomontages performed failure as a way to expose oppressive political power. Such failure is a central feature of the Irish modernism of Joyce and Beckett, for instance, whose writings explore failure and self-consciously fail to reveal the subject’s dispossession. By bringing photomontage to its formal limits in political paranoia, Hillen’s work objectively operates in this tradition. The Irish literary tradition also provides an alternative political aesthetic, one I’ll briefly represent here as Yeatsian, even though Yeats in total is more nuanced. It is conservative, seduced by the salve of conspiratorial blame, the agency of (male) visionary authors who understand and prophesy historical pattern. At its kernel such thinking is also anti-democratic and leads to scapegoating, even an urge to eradicate. Yeats welcomed World War II to keep in check the “gangrel stocks” that overran older civilisations, for instance. Hillen invokes both traditions, validating the visionary artist yet performing aesthetic failure.

Deep into artistic forms Beckett ingrains the tools and technologies of political power. He does so to show what happens when the artist’s resources are co-opted by those in power. Winnie in Happy Days says her lines under the compulsion of “[b]lazing light”; in Play a spot compels others to speak as if a police interrogator; torture finally emerges as the joint metaphor of theatre and the writer’s corpus itself, as if theatre is responsible for Show Trial, as if other works are responsible for propaganda and coercion: “give him the works until he confesses.” Beckett drags the dramatic play and the novel to their end. He puts their back to the wall because he knows that the aspirations of the artist – pronounce words that create new worlds – those aspirations were achieved by political leaders in Beckett’s lifetime, leaders whose aesthetic visions and verbal injunctions resulted in the murder of millions. Narrators deconstruct language out of a fear that language makes things happen. Hillen’s crude display of conspiracy theory in photocollages arguably operates in the same tradition, performing the political appropriation of conspiracy, to suggest that photocollage’s artistic power has become weaponised politically. Beckett certainly knows this unsettling power. In his apocalyptic Endgame, Beckett has Clov look out on the playhouse and see “multitudes … in transports.” The confused audience briefly imagines individuals in cattle cars, before the line continues, “transports … of joy.” Calamitous history hastily invoked as quickly disappears into aesthetic rapture, the wealthy man’s cognitive mapping. Real-world political calamity collides with the artwork supposedly insulated from it, and another crisis appears: not the nihilistic joke that art cannot quite pick up the human spirit after genocide. Rather, that even when people are put in transports, most of us will be found passive, sitting in our seats, looking on. Perhaps Hillen, that is, has learned from Beckett before him that all art forms must be brought to their last end, must be pitted against grave historical and political calamity. In this view, Hillen’s art-conspiracy is modern art flattened to its last shape. Imitable, near advertising, and political piecemeal, Hillen’s work nevertheless peels us to the nerves to reveal modern media’s empty seduction and lazy consent. To Ezra Pound’s modernist edict Hillen responds: “make it news!”
Yet in other instances Hillen’s work is closer to Yeats, especially Yeats’s temptation to cast himself as the visionary, oracular poet who sources democracy’s failures in myths of original violence. “Leda and the Swan” makes a good example because Hillen visually reworks that poem. Traditionally Leda’s encounter with Zeus was depicted as dalliance; Yeats renews it as a violent omen of failed democratic politics. “I wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor of a political review asked me for a poem. I thought ‘After the individualistic, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularised by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries.’ Then I thought, ‘Nothing is now possible but some movement, or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation.’” A sudden blow begins the poem, powerfully, immediately disorienting the reader with the violent assault before we have time to understand what is happening. The poem, remember, condenses Troy’s rape into Leda’s rape, broken walls of a city and a girl’s violated body. The violence is cultural as well. With brutal and insightful suspicion, Yeats asks, long before feminist critiques found dissection in the Renaissance blazon, whether the form for unrequited love, for wooed reluctance, makes a welcome of indifference. Yeats elevates these suspicions to a crystalline force so tense that the sonnet, after long centuries, finally gives up another outcome of unrequited love: objectification, loosening thighs, rape. Perhaps culture does not mitigate violence, refine and erase it, but merely aestheticises violence and covers it up. Yeats pitches the reader forcefully between these alternatives, until strangely he lets fall the contradiction for the conspirator’s concluding concern: “Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” Does stunned Leda know, as artist Yeats and god Zeus know, the portentous unfolding of future calamity? From brute rape to insider’s knowledge, from the depiction of a helpless girl swept into apathetic, cataclysmic, world-historical violence to musing about epistemological compensation in what the poem prophetically glimpses, the sacking of Troy or the end of democracy itself: “the individualistic demagogic movement.”

Hillen is drawn to this version of the artist as well: where Yeats is oracular, Hillen wittily plants oracles and older pre-capitalist visual logics in urban Dublin; where Yeats interrogates the logics of the sonnet so deeply its formal meaning inverts, Hillen returns photocollage to its avant-garde roots where shocking formal ruptures undermine dominant melodramatic narratives in political culture. Where Yeats devalues certain lives as “stock” and “Leda” turns from violence to the question of insight, Hillen checks political melodrama by visually entertaining theories that allege controlled explosions brought buildings down, not the planes onto which living individuals boarded and upon which they died. Both privilege the artist as seer of secret order that explains the degradations of democracy in the present. And yet, there are important differences. In “WHAT’S WRONG #3” Yeats himself appears as a reluctant Zeus (see Figure 6). He stands between the legs of a prostrate and gown-loosed Angelina Jolie, orange fireball and disaster middle-distanced behind. Jolie is on a grey suede divan that doubles as stone altar. A standing Yeats, fully-clothed in black-and-white, pressed behind, cast as cataclysmic lover, who puts on Zeus’s knowledge with his power. The “burning roof and towers” are literalised as the Pentagon, as in other photocollages it is the infamous attacks on the Twin Towers and the resulting smoke of war. Yeats’s apocalyptic prescience is confirmed in history’s outcome. Yet, in Hillen’s version, Leda is willing and the great artist doesn’t seem wholly into it. Stolid faced and serious, Yeats looks away from Jolie, down left. Hillen’s changes create an ironic distance from Yeats’s view of the omnipotent artist with secret knowledge. On this level conspiracy is rejected too, to
the extent that the conspiratorial view of the artist figures merely as an affair of celebrity and sexual access. Finally, Yeats’s envisions a “violent annunciation” that foretells the birth of a new political order. Hillen is more interested in everyday, systemic violence that keeps a political order going, often through the appropriation of spectacular violence. Both produce conspiracy to meditate on those who lose in the establishment of new orders or who are victimised by political systems. But conspiracy also produces its own oversights: denying evidence that challenges one’s ideology and providing solace for the wounded by consolidating their identity as good and moral and projecting evil outward, often sadistically. This makes it susceptible to enlistment into other modes of demagogy that are not individualistic but authoritarian. Hillen’s fractured staging peels bare the cultural dynamics of conspiracy and his increasingly crude forms suggest that he is aware of this dead end. We may not like it, but this is the art we deserve.

6. Coda

Hillen grounds the truth value of aesthetic experience in fragmentation, contradiction, and provocative failure that exposes interpretative crises that are political. With this
insight we might appreciate anew how the Omagh memorial was to work. Grief, it says, is more truthful when contradictory. Whatever about prehistoric Ireland, modern grief no longer believes sunlight will revive the dead. “Move him into the sun–/Gently its touch awoke him once,” as Wilfred Owen once put it in a war poem, aptly titled “Futility.” Integral to its beauty, the memorial expresses this failure and desire as the sun clouds and appears, reshattering the crystal heart with light. To grieve, then, is to know loss that cannot be fully redeemed, transfigured, or reconciled; grief reappears as a cloud that crosses the sun. In 2019, a grieving relative affixed his own plaque to the memorial to allocate blame to the Real IRA, without council permission. 48 Apparently, it is harder to rest with an aesthetic experience of grief’s contradictions when justice goes unresolved. More than perform grief’s dynamics, though, the memorial also shows that transparency is an incomplete project in Northern Ireland. The menhir champions transparency, after all, in the sturdy glass sheets that replace stone. But the memorial also suggests that transparency is incomplete, and can even be ideological. After all, in another light, the obelisk is as opaque as layers of bulletproof glass. And there is the final failure: since nobody arranged to maintain the motor for the heliostatic mirror, it stopped working, and the play of sunlight and shadow, the wisdom in this aesthetic contradiction, has been lost.

Notes

1. I thank Mary O’Donoghue, Seán Kennedy, Patrick Bixby, Keith Payne, and Neil Doshi, all of whom engaged with versions of this essay.
2. Police Ombudsman, “Statement by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland on her Investigation of matters relating to the Omagh Bomb on 15 August 1998,” https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/police/ombudsman/po121201omagh1.pdf, p. 3 According to this report, the RUC itself was anonymously and credibly forewarned by phone that Omagh would be attacked in an unspecified way on 15 of August 1998. The RUC officer who took the call shared this information with the Special Branch. But the Special Branch, against policy, failed to notify the sub-divisional commander of Omagh. RUC is the Royal Ulster Constabulary, now called the PSNI, the Police Service for Northern Ireland.
6. More evidence “indicates that superiors of violent extremist officers and agents, at least within the RUC, were aware of their sectarian crimes, yet failed to act to prevent, investigate or punish them.” Douglass Cassel, Susie Kemp, Piers Pigou, and Stephen Sawyer, Report on the Independent International Panel on Alleged Collusion in Sectarian Killings in Northern Ireland, 4.
    BreakingNews.ie, 17 May 2017, https://www.breakingnews.ie/ireland/charlie-flanagan-
10. My thanks to Seán Hillen for permission to reproduce all of the images in this essay.
11. Anker, Orgies of Feeling, 27, 19.
12. See https://www.kennardphillipps.com. Hillen told me he was influenced as well by Linder
    Sterling feminist punk-collages and Cath Tate’s anti-Thatcher postcards.
15. Zervigón, 41.
16. Doherty, “‘See! We Are All Neuraesthetics!’”, 90.
17. Hillen’s photographs have been published separately. Seán Hillen, Melancholy Witness: Images of the Troubles.
18. Žižek, Violence, 2.
19. Žižek, 4.
21. The summary here comes from Eric Oberle, who draws renewed attention to Adorno’s
    collaborative work on the large psychological study on the propensity of American populations
    towards fascism, published as The Authoritarian Personality. Oberle, Theodor Adorno and
    the Century of Negative Identity, 24.
22. Pat Eaton-Robb, “Newtown parents win lawsuit against authors of book ‘Nobody Died at
    /ct-nw-sandy-hook-hoax-lawsuit-20190618-5dxn4sb6ezfhwf47qelt5t625q-story.html
25. Seán Hillen, Melancholy Witness, 100–103.
26. Anker, 27.
27. Anker, 15.
28. Anker, 16.
30. If they were actually notified at the earlier time they testified, (logs and actual recordings from
    the day show they were notified only later), the military would have had time to intercept the
    hijacked planes. Thomas Kean, Lee Hamilton, and Benjamin Rhodes, Without Precedent: The
    Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission, 260.
31. One in 2005, fully addressed how planes alone felled the two World Trade Towers; another in
    Collapse of World Trade Center Building 7, Federal Building and Fire Safety Investigation of
    the World Trade Center Disaster (NIST NCSTAR 1A),” The National Institute of Standards and
    15 June 2019.
    Told the U.N.” The Intercept, 6 February 2018. https://theintercept.com/2018/02/06/lie-after-
33. There is evidence that those exposed to conspiracy theories become disengaged from
    politics for this reason. Daniel Jolley and Karen M. Douglas, “The Social Consequences of
34. Monem, ed, Pop Art Book.
37. Huxley, Brave New World and Brave New World Revisited, 54.
38. Cronin, Dead as Doornails, 81.
40. Yeats, On the Boiler, 19.
42. Beckett, What Where, 313.
43. McNaughton, Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath.
44. Beckett, Endgame, 36.

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