

JOYCE STUDIES IN ITALY

13

**WHY READ JOYCE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY?**

Edited by
FRANCA RUGGIERI AND ENRICO TERRINONI

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e-mail: info@edizioniq.it

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STRICK'S *ULYSSES* AND WAR:
WHY WE READ JOYCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

“Why read Joyce in the 21st century?” The panel on Joyce and Film at the Rome 2011 Birthday Conference was an attempt to respond to the conference theme question by calling attention to Joyce’s works that were produced in another medium: film. The 2009 Trieste conference on Joyce and Cinema, and the subsequent publication of John McCourt’s (2010) edited volume of conference papers, *Roll Away the Reel World. James Joyce and Cinema* has called Joyce, his works, and his interest in cinema into the proverbial spotlight. Most readers have seen Joseph Strick’s 1967 film of *Ulysses*, I imagine, and not only that, but that many have read the McCourt volume as well as Margot Norris’s (2004) book on the film. In both of these texts, writers address Strick’s surprising decision to set his film in the contemporary Dublin of the 1960s. In this essay, I explore the appropriateness of Strick’s decision, and cast his film, surprisingly, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War.

Margot Norris explains Strick’s decision to contemporize the film: “While the budgetary constraints dictated the film’s conventional length of 132 minutes, the decision to set the film in 1960s Dublin rather than at the turn of the century was both a pragmatic and an artistic one” (2004, 21). She quotes Strick from his 1966 interview with Stephen Watts: “That one day in 1904 which Joyce so voluminously describes could not be recreated in modern Dublin even on an epic budget, so there was no question of making a period picture” (2004, 21). Strick insisted that the decision to update the time of the novel in the film was not specifically financial, and he explained to Norris in an e-mail that he was interested in the idea “that if Joyce had taken a liberty with over 2,000 years, [he] could take the same liberty with 60” (Norris 2004, 21). She writes:

Although Joyce wrote the novel during the years which saw Ireland fighting for its independence from Britain, Joyce set *Ulysses* in 1904, at a time when the scandal and ensuing death of Parnell had made the prospect of a Free State unlikely and unpromising in the future. In contrast, Joseph Strick set the film of *Ulysses* ... in the contemporary decade in which it was filmed: the 1960s, when Ireland was already a republic, albeit divided. (2004, 72)

Strick's choice is an interesting creative decision, and while several scholars and reviewers have discussed the movie in terms of 1960s Ireland, no one to my knowledge has discussed Strick's relationship with 1960s America or investigated that decade's effect on his work filming Joyce's 1922 novel.

No other decade in the twentieth century has acquired the mythological status or the polemic reputation of the 1960s. It was a decade marked internationally by political strife, split by Generation Gaps, and divided by trenchant pro- or antiwar positions. It was an era of timeless and universal upheaval, an era synonymous with the Vietnam War, the Peace Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and bureaucratic intransigence; consciousness raising, counterculture rebellion, sexual liberation, and psychedelia; nonviolence, direct action, urban disorder, and widespread college and university campus activism. 1960s America inspired Panthers as well as Pranksters, sit-ins as well as stand offs, demonstrations to end the war and violence intended to "bring the war home." It produced the Chicago Eight as well as the Oakland Seven, and gave rise to demagogues as different as chalk and cheese.

As the tumultuous decade drew to a close, the nation still reeled from the dynamic social, cultural, and political events of the 1960s. In fact, scholars now generally refer to the period as the "long 1960s," dating the era from 1960 to 1974, and it is a period that cultural anthropologist Marshal Sahlins (1999) has called "the longest decade of the twentieth century." As such, the 1960s has been examined internationally from several angles, discussed in a variety of viewpoints, critiqued not only for its complexities but also for its contradictions, and represented as much for its glories, triumphs, and failures, as its quirkiness, generosity, and activism.

After watching Joseph Strick's BBC documentary, *The Hecklers* (1966), a film about heckling in the British general election of that year, I was taken by how much cinematic attention Strick paid to youth and protest culture in that documentary. The film examines early examples of the counterculture emerging in Britain—longhaired students, hippies, and young upstarts brandishing slogans such as "Anarchy. Don't Vote!" It also documents the

widening generation gap, and at times evinces the disgust Old Britain had with Young Britain. For example, one heckled speaker asks the longhaired youth whether he is a little boy or a little girl. The audience laughs. His film ends with panelists singing “God Save the Queen” while their audience violently sways backwards and forwards. Camera cuts show clips of audience members punching one another and reviews various hecklers featured in the film. It ends with a close-up on the angry mob. Adam Curtis (2010) argued recently in his BBC blog “Do People Heckle?” that Strick’s film “documented the beginning of the rise of individualism and the modern retreat from politics.” Indeed it did.

Joseph Strick introduces his film in a two-minute prologue, where he explains his personal attraction to the heckling phenomenon:

Heckling is something that the people in Britain can well be proud of... and frightened of. It’s an extremely democratic confrontation between audience and speaker, no matter who it is... This is unknown in other countries. I’ve never, in an American political medium, heard a heckler who wasn’t immediately evicted... It’s a very personal film. I guess it’s really about the way I see life. I’m sure another director would have made a completely different film about the same institution. This, then, is the way I see it: *The Hecklers*. (1966)

As I watched *The Hecklers*, I recalled scenes from several American documentaries on the 1960s—Academy award winning films like *Berkeley in the ‘60s* (Kitchell 1990) or Academy award nominated films like *The Weather Underground* (Green and Siegel 2002), for example. These American documentaries showed the same kinds of young people dragged out of meetings for their heckling, beaten with batons, ripped out of their seats, or pushed around by authoritarians to silence and punish them. Noticing the congruence and similarities between Strick’s film and other 1960s documentaries, I began to wonder whether any of Strick’s personal views—what he called “the way I see life”—could be traced in his 1967 film, *Ulysses*. And even though he argued about his *Ulysses* that he couldn’t afford to make a “period picture,” I want to suggest that he very much did.

Joseph Strick was a product of the 1960s as much as James Joyce was a product of turn of the century Dublin, and they were less than ten years apart in age when they began work on their *Ulysses*. Throughout his career, Strick would remain focused on issues of war, freedom of speech, and sexual expression; and the films he would create before and after his 1967 *Ulysses* tell the story of a creative mind focused not so much on “filming the

unfilmable”—a catchphrase that made it into several obituaries published after his death in 2010—but a creative mind bent on the very same issues we associate with Joyce’s *Ulysses*: national identity, civil rights, youth culture, and the rejection of political and cultural hegemony. In fact, after *Ulysses*, Strick was intending to direct Carson McCuller’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in Selma, Alabama, site of the “Bloody Sunday” melee just one year earlier when at the Edmund Pettus Bridge civil rights demonstrators advocating for black voting rights were violently attacked by white police. Due to “script disagreements,” Strick was dropped from the production in the fall of 1967.

I contacted Strick’s daughter Betsy to ask about her father’s views on the Vietnam War, which loomed so largely and was a strong contributor to 1960s protest culture. She told me in a 2011 e-mail she checked with her brothers and they remember it as she did: “He [her father] was very focused on *Ulysses* and that’s what he often talked about. However, my father was opposed to the Vietnam War from the outset. As time and the war went on, he sought to express his views about the war through later movies.” In fact, he did, and he won an Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his documentary, *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1970), a film that explored the 1968 massacre of hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers from Charlie Company’s 11th Brigade.

As Strick was filming *Ulysses* there were several antiwar demonstrations staged in Dublin and regularly scheduled public meetings on the Vietnam War. One such meeting took place on 26 July 1966 at the Mansion House and featured Conor Cruise O’Brien and Con Lehane. According to the *Irish Times*, nearly five hundred attended, and a resolution was passed that likened American involvement in the war to “Black and Tannery.” Many Irish drew historic parallels between Vietnam and Ireland’s struggles, and at this meeting, Maher noted that:

Mr. Con Lehane ... compared Vietnam to Ireland in its struggle for independence. ‘The Vietnamese people were an ethnic entity before the Mayflower sailed. They were an old and highly civilized people 1,000 years ago, when they withstood invasion from the Chinese. They were many times defeated, and never conquered.’ The chairman, Mr. Peadar O’Donnell, opened the meeting by saying that ‘Vietnam was now in the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle, a proud position Ireland occupied for a brief period.’ He added, ‘Oppressed countries should not have to bear the agony of a long and drawn-out war in their own land.’ (Maher 1966, 13)

In addition to these meetings, Ireland's youth were active in forming parades and demonstrations. An *Irish Times* article titled "Students parade at US Embassy" (Maher 1966, 13) reported that hundreds of students marched on the American Embassy at Ballsbridge bearing banners that read, "Every Sunday is Napalm Sunday" and "Uncle Sam's Black and Tans get out of Vietnam." At this particular march, the students clashed with pro-war students who bore banners in support of the US effort in Vietnam. "America go Bra," their banners read. As one side chanted "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids have you killed today," the other side responded with "Hey, hey, Ho Chi Min, how many kids have you done in?"

Other antiwar organizations formed quickly. Two prominent Irish organizations were formed in Ireland to protest against the war in Vietnam—the Irish Voice on Vietnam (IVOV) and the Cork Vietnamese Freedom Association (CVFA). Many union figures from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) and other labor unions comprised the membership of these antiwar groups. They published their own magazines, flyers, and leaflets, and papered these all over Dublin. A few hundred people turned out to march against the war when either of these groups organized a demonstration. The CVFA even picketed the US warship *Courtney* in 1967, and led a branch of its membership to Tipperary to protest against the American ambassador, Raymond Guest. The Connolly Youth Movement was also quite significant in Dublin, as well, and they formed protest marches and collaborated with other antiwar groups. People's Democracy, which emerged late in 1968, was also involved in the anti-Vietnam movement, and the Irish Pacifist Movement was a significant force to be reckoned with, as well, as Strick was filming *Ulysses* in Dublin. Of course, these demonstrations attracted negative press at the time, and at least one of the CVFA marches in Dublin was reportedly booed by supporters of the Vietnam War who carried rosaries and waved American flags at protestors ("Irish Protests Against the Vietnam War"). Though fractious, these periodic demonstrations were successful in raising political consciousness and in garnering signatures on petitions to end the war. A petition carrying some 38,500 signatures was presented to the Irish government in 1968 appealing for peace in Vietnam—this only one year after the Irish Appeal for Peace in Vietnam was launched in Dublin in 1967.

Eamonn McCann, one of the original organizers of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), remembers his involvement in anti-Vietnam War protests in Ireland. In an interview with Margot Backus,

McCann said he had been involved in antiwar demonstrations in London, as well, and was active in the Vietnam solidarity campaign:

[T]here was always a sense that we were a part of that. Not only did we not look backwards--speaking for myself and the people immediately around me in that period--into Irish history, but we actually believed that we were leaving that behind. This seems terribly naive, looking back. Indeed, it was terribly naive! But my sense was that we'd consigned all that to the past. That our own nationalism, whatever progressive social role it ever had, had come to an end long ago, and this was now a new generation with new politics and so forth. Looking back on it, we seemed to be winning people to this point of view, but it actually was just the aggressive rhetoric that was associated with the youth movement and the student movement of the time. (Backus, 2001)

Another antiwar movement in Ireland, the Irish Voice on Vietnam (IVOV), led regular street marches to the United States embassy in Ballsbridge. "Even as early as 1962, opposition to the war provided a focus for political protest and cultural rebellion in Ireland and Britain, uniting (as it did in America) students, dissidents, activists, and cultural rebels into a single-issue campaign" ("Irish Protests Against the Vietnam War"). By 1965, after the US began bombing Vietnam and then introduced ground troops, protests sparked all over Ireland and the rest of the world, and in 1966 the Vietnam Solidarity campaign (VSC) was formed and aligned Irish antiwar demonstrators with their counterparts in Britain.

My point in bringing all of this up is to argue that war, the culture of war, and the antiwar movement must have affected the director, actors, the production crew, the extras, and so forth, who worked on Strick's *Ulysses*. If nothing else, they must have read daily newspapers that covered antiwar demonstrations. Perhaps direct actions even interfered with the filming, editing, and production of the film. Certainly on Tuesday, March 8th, 1966, the startling bombing of the 184-foot Nelson's Pillar on O'Connell Street affected Strick's filming timetable: he had to wait until the pillar was torn down and removed entirely before beginning production. Because budgetary constraints limited Strick's shooting in Dublin to three months, Margot Norris (2011, *pers. comm.*) suggested in an e-mail that the filming "must therefore have been done between April and September 1966. It was done in time for a nomination for the 1967 Academy Awards." An August 3rd article in the *Irish Times* reports that "the screen version of Joyce's novel [is] at present being made in Dublin," and suggests it "will take about three and

a half months to shoot altogether, and should be finished by the middle of October” (Linehan 1966, 8).

I am deliberately situating Strick’s *Ulysses* amid war, conflict, and antiwar activity because war, the culture of war, and its dissidents affected the original *Ulysses*—Homer’s work—and Joyce understood this. In fact he reminded Frank Budgen that Homer’s Ulysses was against war and that he “was a war dodger who tried to evade military service by simulating madness” (1972, 16). Importantly, Declan Kiberd also suggests in *Ulysses and Us* that “the whole of *Ulysses* might be taken as ... an extended hymn to the dignity of everyday living, when cast against the backdrop of world war,” and adds, “it is as if Joyce had anticipated Tom Stoppard’s little joke: ‘What did you do in the Great War, Mr. Joyce?’—‘I wrote *Ulysses*—what did you do?’” (2009, 288). In his 1975 *Travesties*, Stoppard alludes to one of the most famous recruiting posters of World War I, where a comfortable post-war father seated in an easy chair is asked by his children, “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?” It was a poster that was mass-produced to shame the British nation’s at-home fathers, husbands, and fathers-to-be into war service.

This poster is not alluded to in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but Mark Wollaeger has traced another World War I recruiting poster in Joyce’s work; it appears while Bloom is waiting at the Post Office to retrieve any letters sent to his alter-ego Henry Flower. Bloom gazes at a modern recruiting poster, one “with soldiers of all arms on display” (Joyce 1986, 59). Wollaeger notes:

Given that pictorial recruiting posters of the kind Bloom goes on to describe were not produced before World War I, Bloom’s poster is probably a Joycean invention [...but] known for his pedantic fidelity to the historically verifiable, here Joyce indulges in an anachronism that distinctly foregrounds the text’s complex historical layering, a layering that needs to be acknowledged by situating *Ulysses* more insistently in the period of its composition than is often the case. (1999)

In a subsequent revision to the Lotus-Eaters passage, Joyce expanded it, and has Bloom “reviewing again the soldiers on parade,” Wollaeger notes, and adds:

Here Joyce highlights the moment of reading in which an Irish subject internalizes, restages, and revises the ideological messages that were formulated during the war by the British government and obligingly designed and

disseminated by Irish advertising agencies, including, as it happens, the agency for which Bloom once worked, Hely's. (1999)

Complicit in their own recruitment into the war and guilty of shaming the civilian population into joining the war effort, Irish production and dissemination of British World War I posters and ephemera conspired to popularize the war by reproducing romanticized and sentimental propaganda.

Joyce wrote *Ulysses* during the First World War and suffered as one might the chaos into which it hurtled civilians, cities, and countries. John McCourt notes that although Trieste was “plunged into chaos” in 1915 at the announcement of Italy's entry into the First World War, “extraordinarily, none of [Joyce's] letters contains any reference to the events going on around him in Trieste or in Europe. It is as if he was too absorbed with *Ulysses* to notice” (McCourt 2000, 245). Maura Elise Hametz also notes in her *Making Trieste Italian, 1918-1959*, that

In 1915, on the entry of Italy into the First World War, pro-Austrian elements, aided by Austrian police, destroyed several cafes in the city in protest against their hospitality to irredentist intellectuals. The Caffé San Marco, perhaps the most noted among them, re-emerged in 1919. (2005, 147)

After the predictable news arrived on 23 May that Italy had joined the war effort, a series of consequential events followed, McCourt explains:

The Lieutenancy of Trieste ordered the closing of the borders and within a couple of hours anti-Italian demonstrations had already broken out at various hot-points around the city. Pro-Austrian mobs roamed the city attacking irredentists and key irredentist symbols. The irredentist clubs and gyms were destroyed, their caffes, such as the Caffé San Marco, the Milano, the Fabris and the Stella Polare, were ransacked and vandalized, the statue of Verdi demolished, and the offices of *Il Piccolo* destroyed by arsonists. The rioters were, in the main, aided and abetted by the Austrian police.

Despite the tensions and tumult around him, Joyce forged ahead with his work... (2000, 246)

So, here we have Joyce writing *Ulysses* during the First World War without acknowledging the war or the riots, protests, and destruction around him—of course he couldn't in a novel set in 1904—but he appears nonplussed and focused on *Ulysses* even though one of his favorite cafés in

Trieste had been destroyed, the Caffé San Marco where he regularly met Italo Svevo. Joseph Strick, too, appears nonplussed as he worked to film *Ulysses* during the year that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising; and during the tumultuous Vietnam War amid heavy antiwar demonstrations in Dublin, he, too, remained (as his daughter notes) “focused on *Ulysses*,” and like Joyce, “too absorbed with *Ulysses* to notice.” If we contextualize yet another version of *Ulysses*, Sean Walsh’s 2004 *Bloom*, Walsh’s movie was also filmed during some of the largest antiwar demonstrations in history. In 2003, as Walsh was wrapping up the filming and moving into post-production at The Farm Recording Studio in Dublin on Upper Mount Street near Merrion Square and close to nearby Stephen’s Green, more than 100,000 antiwar protestors marched in January and again in February to voice popular opposition to the war in Iraq. These were part of a large global protest against the war and were international in scope. In Dublin, on January 18 and February 15, more than five times the expected crowd showed up to march from Parnell Square to the Department of Foreign Affairs at Stephen’s Green, and on to Dame Street for a rally with speakers and popular musicians. In Rome, a crowd estimated near three million gathered in St. John Lateran square, and the event is now recorded in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest antiwar rally in history. On that same day, protestors gathered in nearly six hundred cities in a coordinated global effort to express moral outrage against the US invasion of Iraq. This included 1.3 million protestors in Barcelona, 1.5 in Madrid, and between 750,000 and two million protestors in London. Back in Dublin, the march disrupted traffic for more than four hours. All this as another artist was “absorbed with *Ulysses*.”

When we think of war, the culture of war, and its counterpart the antiwar movement, these were strong presences during Homer’s work on *Ulysses*, during Joyce’s work on *Ulysses*, during Strick’s work on *Ulysses*, and during Walsh’s. All of these artists were working on versions of *Ulysses* amid a context of war and antiwar, in an atmosphere of “force, hatred, history, all that,” as Joyce would write in *Ulysses* (1986, 273). You can call this historical coincidence if you like, but I think of it more in the sense that the work acts as a social palliative during times of tremendous social upheaval, and it reminds us that human dignity can not only be restored, but it will also prevail. Strick seemed to indicate this in an interview in the documentary *A Portrait of Joe as a Young Director*, where he spoke about “equilibrium” and his work on *Ulysses* with special effects artist, Dennis Lowe:

We all live in the present but we also have a stream-of-consciousness [that is] reviewing the past at every moment and integrating the past with the present and satisfying ourselves of the equilibrium of our existence [...] and the equilibrium is between what we think the world is, what we want the world to be, what we feel we can do in the world, and what the world is doing to us. All those things are linked together in every moment of our existence. (2010)

This equilibrium, this journeying over and across decades, produced the very “period picture” Joseph Strick said he could not afford to film. The film alludes to the contexts of Joyce’s work yet it is undeniably a product of the 1960s and of the cultural and political climate in which it was made. Similarly, we can demonstrate that Joyce’s “equilibrium” certainly allowed him to integrate his own and Irish public opinion on the bitterly controversial Boer War (1899-1902) into *Ulysses*. Not only is Molly’s amorous Lieutenant Gardner killed in that war but several references to it, not least among these Bloom’s recollection of participating in a demonstration against it in Dublin, can be traced throughout the novel. Like many critics of the Boer War, the Irish were for the most part disgusted by Britain’s methods of barbarism and by their concentration camps. According to Denis Judd and Keith Surridge,

when the Boer War began, the British found themselves very much alone as public opinion around the world was virtually solid pro-Boer [...] During the war about 2,000 foreigners volunteered to fight for the Boers and were organised in several national units or placed within Boer commandos. (2002, 247)

Some three hundred Irish volunteers fought against Britain—so many that there were enough men to form two brigades led by an Irish-American former soldier, Colonel John Blake, and his Irish deputy, John MacBride, the same John MacBride who would later be executed for his participation in the Easter Rising.

Like Homer’s and like Joyce’s, politics in Strick’s *Ulysses* are not simple; and when the politics of *Ulysses* are transported to a different time, there can be danger; there can be consequences. Frank Budgen warned of this in his *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, originally published in 1934 and written during those terrifying years that saw the rise of Austrofascism and Hitler’s and Mussolini’s ascent to absolute power. He wrote, “Bloom’s politics are as little spectacular as are his good deeds, and yet I fear that they are

of the kind that in the days that are with us and near us lead to the dungeon and the firing squad” (1972, 284). Strick’s decision to set his film in 1960s Dublin invites questions about and comparisons between Joyce’s work and its particular relevance to 1960s culture and the culture of war. But Joyce was not drawn to Homer’s *Ulysses* because it was a war epic. In fact, he reminded Budgen, “the history of *Ulysses* did not come to an end when the Trojan War was over. It began just when the other Greek heroes went back to live the rest of their lives in peace” (1972, 17). “The rest of their lives in peace”—this is why we still read Joyce in the twenty-first century. If the story of the human race is the story of War, as Winston Churchill would assert in 1925, then Joyce presented us in 1922 with an alternate possibility, a way to live our lives in peace, with optimism and grace. Such is the uncreated conscience that Joyce creates for us all, and such is the unmistakable and perpetual draw of this work during war, social upheaval, and political turmoil.

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