

A Tale of Two Ghosts: autofiction, Film and the Spectral in Mark Cousins' *I Am Belfast*

	Auteur(s)	Tom HEDLEY
	Revue	<i>Imaginaires</i> (ISSN 1270-931X)
	Numéro	23 (2021) : « Ireland: Spectres and Chimeras »
	Directeur(s) du numéro	Sylvie MIKOWSKI, Marine GALINÉ & Françoise CANON-ROGER
	Pages	167-178
	DOI de l'article	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23.29
	DOI du numéro	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23
	Édition	ÉPURE - Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2021
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Chapter eleven

A Tale of Two Ghosts

Autofiction, Film and the Spectral in
Mark Cousins' *I Am Belfast*



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Abstract: Since Serge Doubrovsky coined the term *autofiction* in 1977, it has taken on a wide variety of meanings, and recent scholarship has framed autofiction as the inability of the reader to interpret a text within either a fictional or factual framework alone. Often this is expressed by an integration of the Spectral into the narrative, for the ghost inhabits the murky space between the ontological poles of fiction and referentiality. Despite this broader conception, scholarly discussion of autofiction has considered only literary sources, and it has not yet been associated with other forms, such as film. This paper takes autofiction as a point of departure and suggests that it provides a neat framework with which to analyse Mark Cousins' genre-blurring film of 2015 *I Am Belfast*, in which he attempts to tell the story of his home city, with particular focus on the presence of the Spectral as a means to articulate the traumatic history of Northern Ireland's capital city. Although a tale of one city, the film is a tale of two ghosts. Firstly, while Cousins is ever-present in a documentary-like voice-over, he communicates with a ghostly 10,000-year-old woman called "Belfast" who guides the viewer through the city and narrates its traumatic story, and secondly, the spectre of Belfast's ill-fated ocean liner, the Titanic, stalks the cinematography, as if the Titanic's tragic demise prefigured the political crisis. In short, this paper suggests that the interplay between the fictional and the real in the process of traumatic testimony, led by the inclusion of the spectral, renders *I Am Belfast* a fitting example of autofictional film.

Keywords: Autofiction, The Troubles, Narratology, Film, Documentary, Titanic, Walter Benjamin, Trauma.

ADDRESSING the supposedly irreconcilable opposition of fiction and non-fiction, Virginia Woolf asserts in her essay *The New Biography*: "Let it be fact one feels, or let it be fiction; the

imagination will not serve under two masters simultaneously.”¹ Fact and fiction, according to Woolf, do not exist on a loose spectrum, rather they are mutually exclusive states. How then can the blurring of these lines that came with the postmodernism or indeed the phenomenon of *autofiction* that emerged in French literature in the 1970s and remains in vogue to this day across many different languages and cultures be negotiated? When Serge Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” in 1977, he defined it rather imprecisely as the “fiction of strictly real events.”² Autofiction was thus understood as the insertion of the author into her or his text, leading to a hybrid form of autobiography and fiction. In an attempt to address the vagueness of this initial definition, more recent theoretical debates have called for a reorientation of the concept from a link to an extratextual being – the author in the real world – to an intratextual question of what Philippe Lejeune calls “reader pacts.”³ According to Lejeune, the terms *autobiography* and *novel* (and thus non-fiction and fiction) should be thought of as categories that the reader uses to interpret a certain text.⁴

On the back of Lejeune’s theory of reader-pacts, autofiction has since been redefined by theorists like Frank Zipfel to be the inability of the reader to interpret a text within either an autobiographical (and thus referential⁵) or fictional framework alone: neither pact can be adopted throughout.⁶ Instead the reader is pulled backwards and forwards between two very different modes, between the supposedly factual and the supposedly fictional. This new line of thinking rather ironically confirms Virginia Woolf’s statement to some extent: autofiction is not the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction, as would perhaps be expected, but rather the sharpening of these lines, the tension between them, the irritation of the reader who is – in Woolf’s terms – trying to serve two masters at one but ultimately cannot. Ambiguity on the side of the reader thus becomes a core aspect of autofiction, which is why, as some have pointed

1. Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, *Selected Essays*, D. Bradshaw (Ed.), New York, Oxford U.P., 2009, p. 100.
2. Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils*, Paris, Galilée, 1977. Hywel Dix discusses the shortcomings of this definition “on a stylistic basis”, noting how it leaves no real distinction between autofiction, a stylised autobiography and an autobiographical novel. Hywel Dix (Ed.), *Autofiction in English: Palgrave Studies in Life-Writing*, Cham, Springer, 2018, p. 3.
3. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography: Volume 52 of Theory and History of Literature*, ed. P. Eakin, trans. K. Leary, Portland, Minnesota U.P., 1989, p. 13.
4. Developing Michel Foucault’s discussion of authorship and proper names in his 1969 essay “What is an Author”, Lejeune determines that an “autobiographical pact” is achieved when the name of the narrator-protagonist is the same as that of the “author-function”, the name on the title page, and a “fictional pact” is achieved when these names diverge. The reader, having settled upon either pact, reads the text accordingly. Lejeune acknowledges, however, the “indeterminate” state between these pacts, where one could situate autofiction. *Ibid.*, p. 16f.
5. Lejeune discusses how the “autobiographical pact” is a subcategory of the “referential pact”, which more broadly defines non-fictional writing. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
6. Zipfel bases the “Ambiguität” (ambiguity) of autofictional texts on the reader’s experience of being pulled “Hin und Her” (from pillar to post) between two opposing pacts. Frank Zipfel, “Autofiktion”, *Grenzen der Literatur: Zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen*, S. Winko, F. Jannidis, G. Lauer (Eds.), Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 2009, p. 306.

out, autofictional texts often intersect with the discourse around trauma and memory.⁷

The following question, however, naturally arises: what does this ambiguity look like? Of course, there are many texts that juxtapose referenced, archival materials into the narrative, hindering the reader from settling on a clearly fictional pact.⁸ As Zipfel points out, the integration of fictional elements into otherwise referential texts is a regular feature of autofiction, and the Spectral, as he argues, can fulfil this role well.⁹ “The modern ghost,” as US-American narratologist Elana Gomel describes, “is a figure of doubt. Unmoored from its foundations in religion, disowned by science, the ghost exists on the borderlands between knowledge and belief.”¹⁰ For Zipfel, it is a clear indication of fictionality that would undermine any attempt to interpret a work solely within a referential pact, causing the reader to oscillate between the ontological poles of fiction and non-fiction.¹¹

To this day, autofiction has only ever been discussed with reference to textual materials. Yet these theoretical developments and thematic links allow for the connection of autofiction to a medium with which it has not yet been associated, namely film. Indeed, film does have its own version of referential or autobiographical storytelling in the form of the documentary. The conflict between the literary forms of autobiography and novel could theoretically be replicated by a conflict between the documentary and the fictional film. In this vein, this paper will propose that Mark Cousins' genre-blurring film of 2016 *I Am Belfast*, in which he attempts to tell the story of his home city, is a fitting example of this phenomenon. While very little scholarship on *I Am Belfast* exists, it has been described as a strange, essayistic work that befits neither fiction nor documentary.¹² In light of the above theoretical discussion, this paper suggests that the more recent theoretical conception of autofiction provides an expedient framework with which to analyse this film, and that the presence of the Spectral as a means to articulate the traumatic history of Northern Ireland's capital is key to this determination.

While *I Am Belfast* is a tale of one city, it is a tale of two ghosts. Firstly, while Cousins is only present in a voice-over, lending an autobiographical,

7. Dix, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

8. One could consider W.G. Sebald's integration of black and white photographs, diagrams and maps into his narratives in *Die Ausgewanderten* (1992), *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1998) and *Austerlitz* (2001).

9. FZipfel, *op. cit.*, p. 304f.

10. Elana Gomel, *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 63.

11. Zipfel, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

12. Seán Crosson, “Re-imagining an Irish City: *I Am Belfast* (Mark Cousins, 2016)”, *Estudios Irlandeses*, 12, 2017 (doi:10.24162/EI2017-7365), p. 263.



Fig. 1: 'Belfast' personified as a woman (*I Am Belfast*, Dir. Mark Cousins, Northern Ireland, Canderblinks Film & Music and Hopscotch Films, 2016, 00:08:42)

documentary tone to the film,¹³ he communicates with an on-screen, ghostly 10,000-year-old woman who predominantly narrates the film (Fig. 1). There is, however, another ghost that haunts the Troubled city in *I Am Belfast*: “that sunken ship, which holds us all captive from the ocean floor,” as Belfast novelist Jan Carson puts it in *The Fire Starters*.¹⁴ The ship in question is, of course, Belfast’s fabled ocean liner, the Titanic. In this paper, these manifestations will be discussed separately, but the second – the ghostly representation of the Titanic – will form the larger part of the analysis.

Considering the first of the two ghostly elements, it is necessary to highlight the connection between the spectral and anthropological place. “Ghosts,” as Gomel claims, “are always tied to a particular place,”¹⁵ which in the case of this film is pushed to the extreme, for the old woman, with whom the director talks, is quick to clarify her identity: “I am the landscape. When I say that I’m Belfast, I don’t just mean that I lived there, or feel that I’m the place. I am the place. I’m 10,000 years old. I’m from the time before.”¹⁶ The viewer is left to wonder: the time before what, exactly? The archaic understanding of linear time is beginning to unravel, and it seems that history may be layered here, like layers of earth and sediment, with Belfast (the person) much lower down, much older. Her identity claim alone is enough to eliminate the possibility of viewing the film through the referential lens alone: Belfast cannot be understood as a simple comparison with a city, rather she is the voice of the city because she

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13. One could investigate whether, in Lejeune’s terms, the listing of the director’s name, Mark Cousins, in the credits as a voice-over corresponds to the autobiographical pact in film version, like the name of the author on the title page of a text.
14. Jan Carson, *The Fire Starters*, Dublin, Penguin, 2019, p. 8.
15. Gomel, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
16. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:04:18 – 00:04:41.

is the city.¹⁷ Any attempt to assimilate the narrative situation into mere documentary necessarily fails: the viewer is pulled across into the more uncertain and unstable realm of fiction, for only fiction could accommodate such a dissonant collision of temporalities.

Following this, it is Belfast who appears on the screen and guides the viewer through the city, narrating its traumatic story – *her* story. The specific aspects of her testimony will be dealt with in more detail in the next section, but for now it is sufficient to state that this structure of narration remains for the entirety of the film, until Belfast somewhat unceremoniously disappears. As the director in his voiceover: “And with that she was gone. I looked for her, but I couldn’t find her. Maybe she ran out of stories”.¹⁸ The film from the beginning to end becomes nothing less than a ghost story not just about ghosts but told by one. The two voices represent both ontological poles here: the voice of the director Mark Cousins, which underscores the non-fiction documentary, and the voice of the 10,000-year-old Belfast personified, whose origins in time and space are very uncertain, and who functions as a clear signpost of fictionality.

How, then, does this affect the overarching question of autofiction? If trauma is always inaccessible to the referential language associated with non-fiction and documentary, a different approach is surely needed. In her assessment of Paul de Man’s theories of language, trauma theorist Cathy Caruth notes that phenomenal reference to the world in the case of trauma is more complicated and only attainable in the *crisis* of representation.¹⁹ Direct reference to the world means, paradoxically, the “production of a fiction”.²⁰ Historical truth is not accessed by referential language, but by a “truer” kind of reference that is grounded in fiction. Therefore, the ghostly Belfast is the “production of a fiction” that pulls the viewer away from a referential, documentary pact, but she is also, in an ironic twist, the vehicle for a higher referentiality in the crisis of representation. Access to a historical truth based on fictionalisation by means of the spectral is thus made possible.

17. The association of Ireland as a whole with the feminine is an established and contested trope. Here it is hard to overlook the 1912 poem “Mise Éire” (“I Am Ireland”) by the Irish revolutionary leader Pádraig Pearse, in which Ireland is personified as an elderly woman cast aside by her children, which has often been discussed in the context of Irish identity in post-Partition Northern Ireland. Laura McAtackney, *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2014, p. 68. The poem was rewritten by Eavan Boland in 1944 with the same title. In her version Ireland is again cast as a sorrowful elderly female, but Boland counters Pearse’s use of the female body as a nationalistic emblem with an Ireland rooted in the female experience of oppression and suffering. Stefanie John, “Contesting and Continuing the Romantic Lyric: Eavan Boland and Kathleen Jamie”, *Poetry Unlimited: New Perspectives on Poetry and Genre*, D. Kerler & T. Müller (Eds.), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, p. 36f.

18. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 01:21:15 – 01:21:24.

19. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore, John Hopkins U.P., 1996, p. 78.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 76.



Fig. 2: 'Belfast' and the salt hill (*I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:07:24)

Turning to the second ghostly element of this analysis, to the ocean liner that was built between 1909 and 1912 in Belfast's shipyard Harland & Wolff and sank on its maiden voyage to New York in April 1912 after colliding with an iceberg – a disaster that cost over 1500 lives. The first oblique reference to the Belfast's ill-fated ocean liner can be found at the beginning of the film, when Belfast and the director (again, only present as a voice behind the camera) “fall to earth”, as she puts it.²¹ They land in what initially looks like the icy terrain of the North Pole, and Belfast remarks somewhat flippantly: “Are we [...] on an ice-planet? This place could sink a ship.”²² The spectre of the Titanic becomes a rude intrusion here at the very beginning. As the camera zooms out, however, it becomes clear that this icescape is not ice at all, but a salt mound at the Shore Road Mill in the city itself (Fig. 2). The narrator continues: “Belfast is hiding behind this hill. A salt hill.”²³ Despite the reveal, the association of the salt hill with a deadly iceberg still lingers: The water on the ground creates an image that echoes that of an iceberg floating on the ocean, ready to sink a passing ship that fails to turn in time. The viewer is left to wonder, therefore, if Belfast is really hiding figuratively behind an iceberg – *the* iceberg – that sank the city's unsinkable ship in 1912. The film's very opening thus sets up a tension between the thing in itself, on one hand, and its representation on the other, with the ghostly associations of the Titanic at the epicentre. As the film progresses, this tension becomes all the more elaborate.

The opening half hour of the film showcases several historical sights of the city, such as the City Hall which was built on top of the old Linen Hall Library (a hotbed of radical political and intellectual thought that was almost closed down for its associations with Wolfe Tone in the 1798

21. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:05:06 – 00:05:07.

22. *Ibid.*, 00:06:11 – 00:06:21.

23. *Ibid.*, 00:07:00 – 00:07:05.

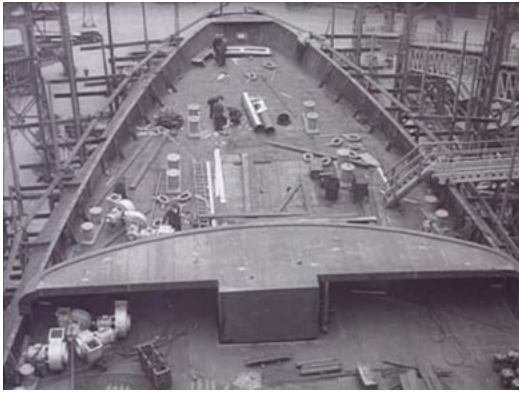


Fig. 3: Archival footage of Harland & Wolff's ship construction (*I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:31:46)

rebellion)²⁴ and the Belfast Cooperative Society (a social cooperative and credit union of local traders that was established in 1888).²⁵ These elements are not coincidental, for they represent historical instances of cooperation between Protestants and Catholics in the region: “we knew how to cooperate,” remarks Belfast lightly while describing the latter.²⁶ Following this, there is a five-minute montage of mostly black and white archival footage of the city, its people and daily life spanning the first five decades of the 20th century, followed by present-day footage of the cityscape from above. Several decades are of course notable by their absence: the 1960s to the 1990s, which demarcates the rough timeline of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.²⁷

They do not, however, stay absent. With an ominous tone Belfast remarks: “And time passed, and the earth turned in this centre and nowhere. And the rain came. And then shadows.”²⁸ As she finishes her sentence, the camera rests from a distance upon Harland & Wolff shipyard, the birthplace of the Titanic, and once again the spectre of the doomed ship emerges just as Belfast begins her testimony of the sectarian violence that engulfed the region in the 1960s:

And then like a tracking shot, the iceberg hit. We fought each other. Is now a good time to talk about it? Is ever a good time? [...] Did we judder to the Troubles? To our latest war that still troubles us. Or do we glide there, over decades or days, for good reasons and bad? We peered over the top of things and down into the depths. Salt and sweet; Nationalist and Unionist. The two sides in our war went wild.²⁹

The tension between the real and the representation has thus been made much more transparent: although Belfast does later address the violence more directly, the testimony is initially framed in the language of the Titanic's demise, as is shown above, while the viewer observes archival footage of construction at Harland & Wolff (**Fig. 3**).³⁰

24. John Tyrell, *Weather and Warfare: A Climatic History of the 1798 Rebellion*, Cork, Collins, 2001, p. 9.
25. Christopher Loughlin, *Labour and the Politics of Disloyalty in Belfast, 1921-1939*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 3.
26. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:27:32 – 00:27:35.
27. The Northern Irish conflict has, of course, been well documented. For a concise history of the period and its causes, see Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2003.
28. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 00:30:32 – 00:31:01.
29. *Ibid.*, 00:31:45 – 00:32:35.
30. While the integration of archival footage could entice the viewer towards a referential pact, in Lejeune's terms, the layered, metaphorical comparison between the Titanic's sinking

One might, however, pause here and ask: why is the construction of the ship foregrounded, rather than its disastrous sinking? Surely it is the nature of catastrophe that facilitates the comparison here. While this is, of course, the primary link, a more subtle comment on the Troubles can be teased out with the presence of Harland & Wolff. The shipyard remains to this day a symbol of systemic discrimination against the Catholic population by the Protestant ruling state since Irish partition in the 1920s, for although it was the largest employer in a very industrial city, Catholics were not permitted to work there. The Troubles, as is known and ought to be accepted, did not come out of nowhere, rather they represent a violent turn after decades of discrimination (in work, housing and political representation) against one religious/political group in Northern Ireland following the dismantling of Britain's colonial control in Ireland and the partition of the island into its two contested territories.

Many well-meaning attempts to represent Northern Ireland in fiction (especially those written from British Unionist perspectives) have a tendency to romanticise the period before the Troubles erupted in the late 1960s, and portray pre-Troubles Belfast as just another normal city, but this was not, of course, the case, and *I Am Belfast* seems to distance itself from this trend. Consider again Belfast's narration of the traumatic period. She questions whether Northern Ireland "judder[ed]" towards the conflict or glided there, like a ship over deceptively calm waters, over many decades, and she remarks that violence broke out "for good reasons and bad." Perhaps this is ultimately why the ghostly metaphor of the Titanic and the iceberg is so fitting: as with the Troubles, it is a mistake to ignore underlying factors and consequential decisions that led to the disaster. Belfast's ocean liner did not suddenly malfunction and slip under the waves; the iceberg was lying waiting in its path, accumulating mass over a long period of time, and there *were* warnings – ice warnings from nearby boats. Nevertheless, the Titanic advanced at full speed into a deadly catastrophe that could have been avoided. Things could have been different; it did *not* have to be this way.

Late in the film, it becomes clear, however, that the disaster of the Titanic is no mere substitution for the political conflict, and that the two are linked by the structure of memory and the writing of history. Looking at a mural depicting the Titanic and the shipyard alongside the famous Giant's Causeway on the Northern Irish coastline, Belfast remarks: "Can we flash back? When you're old that's how your mind works: something now reminds you of something then." The Titanic is thus used as a parameter with which to refer to the trauma of the Troubles by association, comparing one calamity to another. History becomes an accumulation of

and the Troubles complicates this, which chimes with the characterisation of autofiction as pulling the reader "from pillar to post" between two opposing pacts.

catastrophes: The spectre of the Titanic stalks the cinematography, and the film frames the more recent sectarian violence as just another disaster in the city's tragic history, almost as if the Titanic's demise prefigured the political crisis. This conception of history is by no means new: Walter Benjamin's collection of aphorisms "Theses on the Philosophy of History", written in his exile from Nazi Germany in the 1940s, can shed some light on the situation. In the ninth thesis of his text, Benjamin introduces the often cited (and often misunderstood) "Angel of History":

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. [...] This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³¹

The subject who tries to reconstruct history – "to make whole what has been smashed" – is thrown backwards, not by the weight of the mounting catastrophes themselves, but by "progress", which Benjamin defines in another of these theses as the grand narratives and discourses that rely upon "homogenous, empty time",³² i.e. a linear chain of events connected and bound by cause and effect. The referential practice of historiography, content with this causal chain of events, not only fails to access history, according to Benjamin, but rather *is* the barrier to historical truth itself. It seems, therefore, that the past and historical truth with it (not just past traumas) exist in an inaccessible void – in the rubble heap from which we are always thrown back by the strength of "homogenous, empty time".

Despite this, in his fifth thesis Benjamin offers a slightly more hopeful contrast, describing fleeting moments of historical truth that manifest themselves in the present: "The true image of history flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. [...] To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."³³ Zooming past us in the present is the true image of history – precisely that which is kept from

31. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, W. Benjamin & H. Arendt (Eds.), Boston/New York, Mariner, 2019, p. 201.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

us by the storm of progress. The only true access to history flashes up as an image in the moment of danger. As Judith Butler explains, these true images are spatial and temporal distortions that break away and escape the pile of debris just for a moment.³⁴ To be perceptible, they have to evade the homogenous, empty time of progress and emerge spatially in the present. They are, in short, like ghosts. The Troubles exist as part of the wreckage pile of history, in the void of trauma and beyond the remit of referential language and historiography (“progress”, in Benjaminian terms). The trauma of the Troubles cannot be accessed directly; a spectral parameter, namely the ghost of another, older trauma in the form of the doomed Titanic, is required. Flashing up in the present, in line with Benjamin’s insights, this ghostly mediator is that which provides access to the burdensome history of the region. Historical truth is momentarily unlocked by the spectral, by the ghosts of Belfast herself and of the Titanic. In a striking paradox, the referential depends precisely on its opposite: elements of fiction. This complicates even the understanding of Lejeune’s pacts but underscores once again the chaotic process of being pulled between the two ontological modes of fact and fiction – a process that is most characteristic of the phenomenon of autofiction.

Returning to the film’s conception of time and history, one could ask, however, why is it that the trauma of the Titanic breaks free in ghostly form? What is different about it from the Troubles? Why can it be spoken of? As the film progresses, the obvious answer is shown to be the correct one: time. Using what they call “that old B-Movie”, *Creature of the Black Lagoon*, as an illustration, the elderly Belfast remarks on how dark histories come to the surface over time: “God, it was gorgeous. It was like New York when it went. And then it sank. And we hardly spoke about it. Like a taboo. Like a war. And now it’s back, and we talk about it a lot. Things that are held down come up again.”³⁵ While the Titanic is actively discussed now (indeed a museum about it even forms the city’s best-known tourist destination), this was not always the case. The shame of it hung over the city for decades after the disaster: for the Protestant engineers and ship-builders it was a failure and for the Catholics a reminder of the work discrimination faced on a daily basis. In her voiceover, Belfast’s comparison between catastrophes is most telling – “Like a war” –, and the viewer is forced to relate the initial shame and silence surrounding the Titanic with the repressed, traumatised silence of the aftermath of the Troubles.

A lifetime later, the ghost of the Titanic has since resurfaced, and it can be talked about; the disaster, about the cruelty behind the fact that most of the deaths were of third-class passengers, how things could have

34. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, New York, Columbia U.P., 2012, p. 70.

35. *I Am Belfast*, *op. cit.*, 01:06:25 – 01:06:27.

been handled differently, and how one mechanical problem led to another can all be rendered in language. The same indeed holds for the pride in the ground-breaking feat of engineering, the world-class expertise of design and craftsmanship. Once again: “Things that are held down come up again.” Cousins adds here perhaps a slight nuance to the Benjaminian view of history: While time, homogenous and linear pushes the angel away, while more catastrophes are hurled onto pile of debris, maybe the ones lower down become dislodged first, and these are the ones that can flash up in the present. *I Am Belfast*, striking a hopeful note, thus suggests that things may change in time. At some point in the future conceivably it will be the spectral images of the Troubles that will rudely squeeze their way into the present, maybe to help explain another catastrophe that has dropped onto the sky-high pile of debris. Or, given the current post-Brexit political unease surrounding the Irish border and the ghosts of violence and trauma that are invoked when discussing it, one could ask if this is already beginning to happen. Nevertheless, while the Troubles remain in living memory for so many, ghostly images of the Titanic, as the film suggests, may have to suffice for now in the search for historical truth.

To conclude, with an undoubtedly postmodern resolve, Cousins exposes how inherently unstable the usual categories and terms, such as fiction, reference, trauma, memory, past and present, really are – much like the instability that is a cornerstone of auto-fictional writing. Amid the integration of the spectral into Mark Cousins’ ambiguous film (in the form of a 10,000-year-old woman called Belfast and of the fabled disaster of the Belfast-built Titanic), the viewer is unable to settle upon the clear referential pact that would be expected of the documentary genre. The spectral is juxtaposed alongside archival material and found footage, forcing the viewer to oscillate between fiction and non-fiction, caught in the irritation of – in Woolf’s terms – trying to “serve two masters at once”. Yet there is a deeper conflict between fact and fiction at play in *I Am Belfast*, and its consequences for autofiction are significant: the spectral is the very aspect that hinders the viewer from settling upon a referential, factual pact, that pulls the viewer towards a fictional pact, yet it is the key to recovering the “true image of history” before it slips away. We recover a reality of a “truer” kind than referentiality and non-fiction can access, and this reality is founded upon fictionalisation. Without a doubt, this conclusion is paradoxical, but surely, as Gérard Genette would point out, no more paradoxical than the concept at hand: autofiction itself.³⁶

36. Gérard Genette, *Fiktion und Diktion*, trans. H. Jatho, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1992, p. 87.

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