

## The Impossible Conversation\*

### A Response to Jonathan Cummins' *When I Leave These Landings*

I start with the assumption that I am responsible for the meanings that I make. And yet this misses something. Meaning is not a private affair. It emerges and is contested in the space between – between people, between viewer(s) and artwork, between reader(s) and text. The meanings that emerge may be continuous, discontinuous or irreconcilable, and the contest is not necessarily amenable to rational solution. 'Conversation' thus proposes a way to think about how meaning is made, about my place within that process, and how I enact my responsibility in shaping the meanings that are made and the actions they unfold. An encounter with Jonathan Cummins' film installation, *When I Leave These Landings* – which addresses the impact of extreme ideological conviction on self, family and society – reveals how difficult it can be to meet the challenge of engaging in conversation. The work engages with four anti-agreement political prisoners in the Republic of Ireland during their time in prison, for a period of time after their release and when they go home, and eventually extends to the partners of the men.

The challenge is to arrive at my decisions through conversation with others; a conversation that engages those affected by the decision, those with an interest in the decision. Crucially, no one should be excluded from the conversation and everything should be open to question.

Conversation requires that we respect each other as equals within the conversation, and that we reverse perspective and judge from the point of view of the other. These requirements can be questioned from within the conversation but conversation ends if they are suspended.

Engaging in conversation is not about arriving at consensus, it is about: understanding the complexity of perspectives within the conversation, enacting our relationship such that to profoundly disagree does not make us enemies, searching for new horizons of possibility for self and other.

The actions of the organisation to which the men in *When I Leave These Landings* belong have inflicted enormous pain upon others. To act in this way is wrong. To imprison those who take part in such actions is, in my view, right.

In *When I Leave These Landings* the men do not argue for their politics or seek to justify the actions of their organisation. Nor do they apologise. They reflect, in a remarkably open way, upon the impact their ideological conviction has had on their families, on their relationship with their families and on their sense of self.

For those intimately affected and deeply traumatised by the actions of the organisation it must feel like an unpardonable transgression to converse with these men, to allow them a voice in public. It must. It is.

And yet, it is not. There is no way forward without conversation, even if at a given moment I am not able for such a conversation.

Thus the challenge posed by this work is manifold, it is: to bear being in conversation with someone with whom I disagree fundamentally; to allow the other his complex humanity and not reduce him to the unfathomably monstrous; to wonder how we might develop and sustain conversation at the level of society, an effective political discourse.

This text is heavily indebted to the writings of Seyla Benhabib, Chantal Mouffe and Wendy Brown. There are fundamental tensions between their perspectives, particularly in relation to the 'individual' and 'reason' as the ultimate point of reference and hope in Benhabib versus the importance of 'collective identity' and 'hegemony' (questions of power) in Mouffe and Brown. The principle and structure proposed for ethical conversation is taken from Benhabib, with some modification – in light of inevitable irreconcilability and a consequent refusal of a single or mono-logical truth – that reflects Mouffe's thinking on antagonism and agonism, and Brown's caution regarding the deployment of moral concepts to foreclose upon the political and questions of social justice.

## The Proposal Elaborated

How shall I act in the world? How can I enact an ethical relationship to others? I propose that the basic answer is: through conversation. The challenge is to arrive at my decisions through conversation with others. Good judgement requires engaging with those who will be affected by the decision, particularly with those whose interest in the decision does not coincide with mine. I do not find this an easy thing to do in relation to minor things, let alone in relation to things that really matter to me, to you, to her, to him, to us, to them.

How ought this conversation be conducted? Along lines suggested by Seyla Benhabib and others... Crucially, no one should be excluded from the conversation – no matter how radical the disagreement, how utterly different the perspectives brought. And nothing should be ‘out of the question’; even the pre-suppositions of the conversation (that there should be a conversation from which no one may be excluded and in which nothing is ‘out of the question’) can be questioned from *within* the conversation. The requirements of effective conversation are: respect each other as equals within the conversation; reverse perspective and judge from the point of view of the other. Even the very nature of these requirements, their meaning and validity, can be questioned from within the conversation, but they cannot be suspended. At a purely practical level, if they are suspended conversation ends. Yet, only a conversation that enacts these principles can create circumstances capable of confronting radically divergent points of view. At a substantial level, submitting these fundamental principles to debate acknowledges that their meaning and validity *is* open to contest while refusing to suspend them presses a claim for the value of a particular way of seeing the world, for a particular kind of civil society.

Good judgement, therefore, rests on a potential agreement with others, and seeks to arrive at a configuration that can win the agreement of others, even as I/we realise that some questions, many questions, will involve decisions that require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives. My interests simply may not coincide with your interests. Certainly, there is no configuration possible in which all interests can be reconciled and reason cannot overcome this. Engaging interested others in conversation means attending to the specificity of their experience and insights so as to be able to adopt and judge from within their perspective(s). The role of reason and argumentation within the conversation is to maximize our capacity to achieve understanding and a just decision. I endeavour to arrive at a way of describing the question and its context, framing possible responses, and reasoning in favour of a particular response that does justice to the complexity of interests at stake so as to persuade those most affected by this response that it is good enough. But many questions are ‘undecidable’ – there is no rational solution to the conflicting interests participating in the conversation and at stake in the decision. And yet we must decide, we must choose.

And we do. Conversation is not about an endless deferral of decision. The challenge of conversation is to arrive at a decision and enact that decision while remembering the fundamental contingency and undecidability of the question. Through conversation I endeavour to arrive at my decision with *care*, to enact my decision in light of the point of view of the other, and to treat the moment of decision as provisional – potentially subject to revision at some future moment as I return to the conversation to acquire and develop new understanding.

What is the point of 'conversation'? What is to be achieved? Engaging in conversation is not about arriving at a consensus; it does not assume that consensus is always possible, nor even that it is entirely desirable. It is about understanding and acting in the light of the complexity of perspectives within the conversation.

Conversation is about enacting our relationship such that to profoundly disagree does not make us enemies. If we start with the assumption of conflict, of perspectives, practices and interests that are irreconcilable, that distributions of power are at stake in any social arrangement, then we presume that sooner or later I will be pitted against you, 'we' will be pitted against 'them'. Conversation creates a structure whereby those most affected by the decision taken on the basis of the conversation may be persuaded that this is good enough *for now*, if only because we will return to the conversation where the question of the rightness of the judgement and decision remains open.

The articulation of profound disagreement without enmity is a challenge for me in how I engage with others, within and outside of 'my' community. And it is a challenge for us, as a community, in terms of forming practices and sustaining civic values that create and support the possibility of conversation; so that those with whom we disagree profoundly continue to be our partner(s) in conversation.

Moving from the enactment of conversation at the level of the individual, to its enactment at the level of social practice suggests and requires shaping our institutions such that they support and enshrine such practices. Again, within and beyond our institutions, engaging in conversation is not about arriving at a consensus, it is about creating the possibility of politics - transforming relations of power, and recognising and addressing questions of justice. Conversation opens unto the possibility of inventing new ways of being, seeing and saying; new horizons of possibility for self and other.

#### The Challenge Posed by *When I Leave These Landings*

The first challenge posed by *When I Leave These Landings* – to bear being in conversation with someone with whom I disagree fundamentally – is one that is signalled and invited rather than directly encountered. The five-film installation creates an environment in which we are invited to listen rather than to converse, and the films are not 'about' the ideological perspective served by the organisation to which the men belong. Nonetheless, the prospect of conversation with these men is raised, and their demeanour, thoughtful and emotionally honest, suggests that a real conversation might be possible. But such an encounter would not be without risk; is it possible to understand the perspective of another *and* still disagree fundamentally?

The obligation that conversation places upon me is that I respect my interlocutor as an equal and attend to the specific experience and point of view s/he brings so that I can understand and see from within that perspective. The difficulty I have in listening to those with whom I do not agree has much to do with a fear that I will lose myself if I allow their perspective, if I submit to their point of view. This is a legitimate anxiety. But, ultimately and crucially, conversation is not about empathy; what is required of us within conversation goes beyond empathy. Yes, empathy is required in order to risk moving beyond my own perspective and to be capable of

adopting and judging from within the point of view of the other. But, empathy is not enough. To simply identify with the other's perspective (abandoning that which conflicts with it, *my* perspective) does not transform the fundamental structure of opposition, it is to switch sides and no more.

Conversation is not about overcoming opposition – between you and me, between them and us – it is not about consensus. Conversation is about recognising and enacting opposition such that to profoundly disagree does not make us enemies. Assuming that identity is neither given nor fixed, that it emerges in relation to others – through my relationship with you, our relationship with them – the way in which I conceive of 'you' traces the contour of that which is 'I', and, as Chantal Mouffe suggests, 'we' always depends on the form of 'they' from which it is differentiated. Understanding your perspective, especially when I profoundly disagree, creates both 'you' and 'I' ('them' and 'us') in such a way that it is possible to remain open to one another without collapsing or denying differences in point of view and interest. Conversation seeks to transform the fundamental structure of opposition.

The immediate challenge posed by the work is that listening to the men's stories in the films makes it difficult to make sense of violent actions by reducing their perpetrators to unfathomable monsters. *When I Leave These Landings* creates the possibility of meeting the other in all his complex humanity. Without forfeiting my conviction that neither they nor I have the right to take the life of another, and without disputing the justness of a prison sentence for involvement in violence, engaging with the work compels me to acknowledge the men as thoughtful, vulnerable, even reasonable individuals. And, if I cannot dismiss the other as monstrous, if s/he is 'reasonable', then I am compelled to wonder about the reasons, about the nature of our conflict and what is at stake for whom in the alternative versions of the world that we advocate.

If the men are not beyond comprehension, then there are clearly questions to be asked, including: Why has it come to this? Why has conversation broken down? How is the possibility of conversation to be restored? And thus, the first challenge posed by the work is met again, this time addressed to us as a community and as a society. Can we bear being in conversation with those with whom we disagree fundamentally, with those whose perspective and interests are in conflict with our own? What needs to be done differently to sustain the possibility of conversation at the level of social institutions?

Encountered in Derry~Londonderry, *When I Leave These Landings* poses an implicit challenge to the two sovereign states on whose border it sits, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom: How have we constituted ourselves that we have not sustained an effective conversation regarding the imbrication of our respective identities?

Dr Siún Hanrahan

\* This text refers to the five-film installation *When I Leave These Landings (2004-2009)* which was exhibited at Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, 2009, and as part of a more extensive exhibition with related works – *Go Home (2010-2013)* and *Out the Road (2012-2013)* – with NCAD Gallery, Dublin, and Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane (April – June 2013) and with Void, Derry (November 2013 – January 2014) under the exhibition title *When I Leave These Landings*.