Introduction: the price of peace

Boredom is not simple.

(Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text)¹

To approach Titanic Belfast – one of Northern Ireland’s largest visitor attractions – is to behold something of a spectacle. An angulated structure, situated in the slipways where the Titanic was born, this building is at once ‘a beacon’ for Northern Ireland’s post-conflict regeneration and an architecture in search of ‘global-landmark status’.² Emerging from concrete, the building’s four corners push out to replicate, from above, the White Star logo of Titanic’s owners and, from below, a series of rising hulls. Sized at 14,000 square metres and reaching a height of 126 feet, Titanic Belfast dominates the skyline; it is twice the size of Belfast City Hall. Inside, a series of glass escalators, each in excess of twenty metres, rise up through a jagged central void to reach a set of interconnected galleries that tell ‘the Titanic story’.³ Here visitors encounter ‘not a museum, but an experience’, a narrative of Belfast as a seamless site for industry: ‘one of the greatest workshops the world has ever known’.⁴ The British Empire, the Unionist Government, and Loyalist protectionism were all integral to this industrial image – Catholics, of course, were expelled from the shipyards in 1886, 1893 and 1912 – and yet Titanic Belfast chooses not to remember such a divisive past.⁵ Rather than acknowledging this site’s sectarian history, Titanic Belfast offers the glamour of an ever-changing veneer. Cased in three thousand silver anodised sheets, the structure shimmers with a variety of visual effects, creating impressions that veer, we are told, from ‘breaking waves and eroded pack ice to cut diamond and crystal shards’.⁶ Enticing its visitors with the promise of spectacular delight and charging a substantial entrance fee, Titanic Belfast might also be viewed as a monument to what Nigel Thrift has termed capitalism’s ‘technology of allure’: the process by which aesthetics have become ‘a key means of generating economic value’.⁷ Certainly, as Brian Kelly has suggested, the building displays a deep-held ‘faith in the market’s ability to transcend the city’s sectarian past’.⁸

It is at this intersection between capitalism and sectarianism that an affective condition begins to emerge, which I term a politics of boredom. This is not
exactly the boredom of Marc Augé’s famous ‘non-places’ (non-lieux) – there is, after all, a distinct appeal to the architecture of Titanic Belfast – but rather a boredom created by the cultural and historical amnesia this architecture produces. The process is by no means simple, but for all its complexity such boredom can be metaphorically described, in Lars Svendsen’s words, as a ‘meaning withdrawal’. In the case of Titanic Belfast, such ‘meaning withdrawal’ is particularly profound. Here, not only are Northern Ireland’s sectarian realities disguised by capitalism’s technologies of allure but, in its attractive veneer, Titanic Belfast also ensures those forgotten historical divisions will struggle to return. The politics of boredom stems from this double movement: the withdrawal of meaning on the one hand, and the apparent inability to restore it on the other. The combined effect is to create an almost irrecoverable absence and, beholden to this process, visitors to the site are left increasingly ignorant of the divisive meanings it once signified. In this uncomfortable sense, the politics of boredom is an experience of disempowerment to which we are all vulnerable.

Boredom has not always been viewed in such broad terms. In nineteenth-century Europe, for example, boredom was held to be a privileged condition. In this period it was, as Elizabeth Goodstein has argued, a ‘characteristic that functioned both to distinguish the rising classes from the masses and to establish the propriety of their social and material successes’. With the onset of modernity, however, boredom mutated. No longer an ‘elitist discourse of subjective disaffection’, it gradually became what Goodstein has termed a ‘truly universal’, even ‘democratic’ condition. To politicise boredom, however, is to shift her argument. As Geoff Waite explains, ‘because politics is always about economics (yes, sure, it is about other things too) … the politics of boredom is also about political economy’. Waite is surely correct in this judgement but, as I will demonstrate in this book, the politicisation of boredom necessarily entails a more complex rendering of the political itself. Nevertheless Waite’s insistence that we should focus on political economy when politicising boredom does suggest a productive point of departure. That is, if we are to understand the politics of boredom, we must also understand its relationship to ideas of governance, economics and, most importantly, conceptions of capital. Where Goodstein saw boredom transformed by modernity, I will argue that boredom is politicised by capitalism – a shift that is given added potency if we take seriously Fredric Jameson’s wry assertion that capitalism is modernity’s ‘only satisfactory semantic meaning’.

However, to examine boredom’s politicisation against the backdrop of the social and political violence endemic in Northern Ireland is also to witness the more protracted reverberations of this transformation. Set against the atavisms of ethnic–national division, boredom’s relationship with political economy
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comes to hinge crucially upon the containment of disorder and the management of disruption. Empowered by the language of capitalist modernisation, boredom works upon Northern Ireland’s divided landscape and reconfigures its ongoing social schisms. This is by no means a new phenomenon: the politics of boredom are as present in the years that predated the Troubles as they are in those that have marked the putative cessation of that conflict. Yet, by exposing the persistence of this process, I seek not only to recalibrate our understanding of Northern Irish history but also to remove boredom further from its recurrent diagnosis as what Saikat Majumdar has called the ‘mark of a singular consciousness’. Where philosophical discourse (from Pascal to Kant, Heidegger to Kierkegaard) has constructed boredom as a personal affliction to be internally digested, I argue that boredom is a collective condition externally imposed. Boredom is, then, to use Majumdar’s terms, ‘an affective consequence of exclusion and disempowerment’. In Northern Ireland this did not begin with an entity like Titanic Belfast or, indeed, with the Peace Process of which that building is a putative symbol. None the less, as I will demonstrate, Northern Ireland’s post-conflictual condition has put into sharp focus boredom’s politicisation, in ways that reverberate far beyond this context. It is a period that demands an urgent investigation.

Today, it is difficult to miss Belfast’s new commercial skin; the city is ‘quartered’ around this architecture, its signs and maps orientated towards their new designs. Certainly, this entrepreneurial flair caught the eye of Barack Obama during the 2013 G8 summit, held for the first time in Northern Ireland. Stopping to address a youthful audience at the city’s Waterfront Hall, the American president celebrated what he perceived to be the construction of ‘a thoroughly modern Northern Ireland’. The North’s ‘courageous’ path towards ‘a permanent peace’ had generated, he argued, tangible ‘social and economic benefits’ and this was a blessing, not just for Northern Ireland but for the entirety of ‘today’s hyper-connected world’. In many ways Obama was recycling the official message which had greeted the 1994 ceasefires, what Britain’s then Prime Minister, John Major, had called the ‘virtuous circle’ in which peace would give ‘rise to prosperity’, while prosperity would, in turn, ‘consolidate and entrench that peace’. Nineteen years later, Obama heralded the tangible signs of this circular logic. ‘Belfast is a different city’, he asserted. ‘Visitors come from all over to see an exhibit at the MAC, a play at the Lyric, a concert here at Waterfront Hall.’

Belfast has indeed changed, but an underlying set of disjunctions still subdents these observations. While the city’s new landmarks are familiar from a host of glossy commercials, they nevertheless exist, as Colin Coulter has noted,
‘beyond the financial resources and cultural compasses of many less affluent residents of the city’. Central Belfast may have been reimagined as a ‘place ready to party’, yet what, we might ask, of the oft-cited fact that, since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the number of peace walls separating predominantly Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods has risen by a third? What, to invoke Richard Kirkland’s insightful analysis, of the ‘traumatised but insistent voices, memories, and spaces around the margins of the process, which refuse to be forgotten and which continue to demand reparation’? What, moreover, of Northern Ireland’s dependency upon new modes of capitalist domination, in which its obdurate political schisms are occluded so as to remain perpetually unaddressed? Economic development can doubtless be a source for optimism, but, as Mari Fitzduff observed in the wake of the initial ceasefires, ‘if it’s not done carefully it can, in fact, create conflict in itself’.

Several issues are knotted here. For one thing, a problem of periodisation is introduced into the genealogies of the Troubles and the Peace Process if the politics of boredom is taken as a theme. As this book will illustrate, the Peace Process is – in many ways – the realisation of a far longer search for a capitalist solution to the unhappinesses of the North. Daniel Jewesbury describes how, ‘since 1998, the new Northern Ireland has been undergoing something like the “shock” capitalism foisted on the former communist states’. But, despite its current reverberations, this sudden influx of capital is a process that cannot be confined to the post-conflict moment. Partly due to the persistence of ethnic-national division, and partly due to a prolonged dependency upon the British state, there have been numerous attempts to standardise and rationalise the Northern Irish economy. Indeed, since the postwar period the North has become a site of such ‘unproductive labour’ that its subvention by the British state has made it, arguably, ‘the most socialist region in the United Kingdom’. However, the offering of this subsistence is a policy that must be carefully understood. Though it may have allowed the North’s economic inefficiencies to persist, this was by no means its intention. In such contexts we must, as Louis Althusser has instructed, take heed not of capitalism’s desire for production but rather of its need for reproduction. The incursion of capital may have proved unproductive, but its ambition – first and foremost – was (and still is) to create the conditions for capitalism’s continuance, to perpetuate its ideological inevitability.

Understood in these terms, it becomes necessary to rethink the narrative of the Troubles. While most historical assessments tend to delineate a neat timeline for the conflict (the birth of civil rights to the long war, the Peace Process to the post-Troubles period), my focus on the political economy demands an attention to the continuities within this schema. Rather than perpetuate a self-enclosed historiography, I propose to identify and examine convergences within the
putatively discrete phases of Northern Ireland’s postwar history. An immediate and obvious starting point is to view the post-conflict insistence on a consociational model of governance not as a new narrative of peace making but as the latest evolution in a longer capitalist response to the conflict. The consociational model was developed by Arend Lijphart in 1968, but it was held to be inimical to Northern Ireland until championed by political scientists during the Peace Process, and then implemented in the Good Friday Agreement itself. Crucial to this change was the work of John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, who modified Lijphart’s ideas as a means of foreclosing the ‘overwhelmingly unfavourable’ conditions for power-sharing in the North. Foundational to Lijphart’s work is, of course, a desire to ‘avoid violence’ but, as McGarry and O’Leary note, there is also an economic incentive behind this mode of government. Specifically, as Lijphart expounds it, consociationalism forges an explicit link between ‘macro-economic management (such as economic growth and the control of inflation and unemployment) and the control of violence’. 

Understood in these terms, the distinct shift to peace is actually a continuation of earlier economic strategies, which range from Roy Mason’s insistence that job creation would deal ‘a hammer blow to the IRA’ to Terence O’Neill’s infamous pronouncement that ‘if you give Roman Catholics a good job and a good house, they will live like Protestants’. The sectarian assumptions that underpin these policies are, as this book will demonstrate, not without their own complexities. Despite this, Northern Ireland’s conflation of consociationalism and capitalism continues apace. Just as Lijphart argues that the Dutch origins of power-sharing are rooted in ‘Holland’s long tradition as a merchant nation’, so the visitor to Northern Ireland’s post-Troubles shipyards can follow a Maritime Trail that locates the ‘beginnings of modern Belfast’ in the seventeenth-century: a period when ‘Scotsmen dominated the city’s shipbuilding industry’ even if the colonial conditions that made it possible are muted in the signage itself.

To apprehend this longer narrative of modernisation is not to document the failed construction of a productive economy. Instead it is to focus upon certain ‘moments of capitalism’ in Northern Ireland’s postwar cultural history. These moments may be staged, as in the vision for a new modern city, Craigavon, discussed in Chapter 1. Or they may be a spontaneous reaction to the entrenched conditions of the Troubles, as with sectarianism’s spatial replication of the capitalist spectacle examined in Chapter 3. Yet, despite the variety of their manifestations, all these moments involve a forced intersection between capitalism and sectarianism. As such the argument of this book is, on one side, that capitalism’s need for reproduction serves to standardise Northern Irish society and, on the other, that Northern Ireland’s residual ethnic–national divisions have subverted and complicated these ambitions. Mediated by a language of rationalisation
and hostility, the charged interface that characterises this politics of boredom has produced a series of enervating architectures often inhabited by precarious people who have little to gain from such a speculative combat. Capital might claim to have won this contest—a fact that the contours of the Peace Process have made all too apparent—but the concept of capital has not emerged unscathed. Across Northern Ireland’s postwar modernity, the conflictual disharmony of ethnic–national division has proved inimical to what Guy Debord has poetically called capitalism’s ‘motionless monotony’, and it is through this incompatibility that capitalism has been both animated and disrupted.36

In the field of Irish studies, critics such as Joe Cleary, Mary Daly and David Lloyd have all helped to delineate this contradictory condition by viewing modernity through the prism of Irish culture.37 Much of this work has been invigorated by what Lloyd perceives to be Ireland’s ability to provide a ‘postcolonial critique of modernity’. That is to say, Ireland’s capacity to offer a ‘form of unevenness that calls into question the historicist narrative that understands modernity as the progress from the backward to the advanced, from the pre-modern to the modern’.38 Additional work by Birte Heidemann, Colin Graham, Aaron Kelly and Richard Kirkland has tried to emphasise the convergences between the often isolated fields of cultural production, the political economy and everyday life in the context of Northern Ireland.39 The significance of these interventions stems from the way in which they probe the assumed ameliorations of the Peace Process’s modernising imperatives, exposing its inner instabilities and the disenfranchisement this can breed.

These points are important because they highlight capitalism’s less tangible manifestations and the hidden channels by which they percolate society. Yet these accounts have also remained consciously contemporary, sticking to the post-conflict moment without taking their findings back in time. My aim is to expand their arguments by foregrounding not only the unwritten violence that shadows capitalism’s intersection with ethnic–national division but, in doing so, also to investigate the persistence of that intersection across the Troubles timeline. For this reason, I also depart from Conor McCabe’s insistence on Northern Ireland’s ‘double transition’: its movement from conflict to peace and its shift from a ‘social economy’ to one built around ‘the financialisation of everyday life’.40 While I would agree with McCabe’s discussion of ‘the social fissures that such a transition brings to bear’, I contest his sense of the ‘transition’ itself. Rather than a complete change, I see the Peace Process as harbouring moments of continuity: less a movement ‘towards peace and neoliberalism’ and more a continuation of conflict and capitalism by another means.41

I interrogate the ways in which capitalism is parasitic upon the existence of ethnic–national hostilities throughout this book. In so doing, I examine how this
continual violence is manifested at the level of the individual: creating a citizen-ship constantly coerced into manageable, depersonalised territories from which little can emerge but an exhausting sense of deletion and ennui. Traditionally, Marxist writing has argued that capitalism’s exacerbation of ethnic–national hostilities is its final destination: the point at which ‘the Irish people might be kept asunder and robbed whilst so sundered and divided’, as James Connolly has memorably written. Running against this, however, I argue that, in heightening sectarianism’s divisive rhetoric, capitalism also incubates a highly localised sense of ‘communalism’ that is antithetical to its aims. In the ruins this creates, I ultimately suggest, it is possible to trace the rhythms of a different way of being – an alternative mode of living that helps render the ‘progress’ of capitalist development both contingent and conditional.

A lot happened to Northern Ireland in 1994. Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries called permanent ceasefires, ending decades of armed conflict. Cross-party negotiations commenced, initiating the North’s ongoing narrative of consociationalism. John Major addressed Belfast’s Institute of Directors, declaring that ‘peace of itself will give a massive boost to the Northern Irish economy’. All these events congealed to position Northern Ireland as a stable political entity, ready to do business with the world. Alongside these shifts, the geopolitical landscape underwent its own, distinct convulsions. The 1990s saw an end to the Cold War and the dawning of a new world economy – one in which fresh, frenetic waves of capital were channelled towards ‘hitherto untapped markets’. Indeed, 1994 was the Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board’s ‘best year for inward investment’. In this year alone a total of thirteen projects were expected to provide 2,300 jobs, while the promise of future international development was strengthened following the New York City Comptroller’s pledge to spend $100 million in the North during the next twelve months. Buoyed by the momentum of free-flowing capital and confident of the economic correlates of peace, Major ushered in an era of ‘new money’ which was, he claimed, ‘specifically designed to underpin reconciliation’.

From Major to Clinton, Blair to Obama, there has been a diehard – even messianic – belief that peace and prosperity are mutually reinforcing. ‘There is a well of economic goodwill and potential inward investment out there just waiting for the right opportunity’, proclaimed Blair when visiting Belfast in 1998. ‘Let us turn that prospect into a reality.’ In response to these external prerogatives, the devolved Northern Irish Assembly has constructed a policy framework that seeks to reiterate and realise these ambitions, with the construction of Titanic Belfast as perhaps the clearest manifestation of this imperative. In its final form, however, it is also a lucid example of the inequalities peace dividends
can breed. Costed at over £100 million, Titanic Belfast is ‘the most expensive tourist attraction in Europe’ and yet, despite the commitment of substantial public funds, it has failed to generate the already lowly ‘social responsibility goals’ tasked by Stormont. For Brian Kelly, this misuse of public money crystallises an inevitable consequence of the desire to remake Northern Ireland in a neoliberal mould: namely, that ‘the stark social inequalities that fuelled the “Troubles” remain deeply entrenched’.48 Such setbacks notwithstanding, the mantra of peace and prosperity remains firmly in place. ‘What the world saw this summer’, declared David Cameron in the aftermath of the 2013 G8, was ‘a new Northern Ireland strengthening the foundations for peace, stability and prosperity’.49

The link between capitalist modernity and ideas of progress is so often evoked that it is almost axiomatic. But such rhetoric is also buoyed by the now seemingly intractable commitment to what political scientists call the ‘liberal peace’. As Roger Mac Ginty defines it, this now dominant form of peace making ‘reflects the ideological and practical interests of leading states in the global north, leading international organisations, and the international financial institutions’.50 Through the last category we can glean an understanding as to why such peace making is justified by a neoliberal agenda which, in Roland Paris’s phrase, views ‘market-orientated economics as a remedy for civil conflict’.51 While the insistence on marketisation as a prerequisite for peace has been duly criticised, it is still a foundational element of recent, spirited defences for liberal interventionism in divided societies. ‘Most of those who have criticised the economic dimensions of liberal peacebuilding’, argues Paris, ‘have not rejected the idea of economic liberalisation itself’.52

The inability to jettison the problematic notion of a liberal peace warrants further scrutiny. For David Chandler it highlights the propensity for critics to be ‘drawn into a framework in which their critical intentions may be blunted’.53 This is because these critiques are articulated within a framework established by the liberal peace. Consequently any attempt to overturn that model is, in Chandler’s phrase, likely to be ‘assimilated into the policy discourse of how policy might be reformed and legitimated’.54 In other words, unless the challenge to liberal peace making is situated outside the parameters of that project, it is likely to reform (rather than resist) the liberalising agenda. Alongside this, the concept of ‘liberalism’ is also adept at assimilating its antagonists because it has become, through overuse and analytical abuse, a term ‘increasingly emptied of theoretical or empirical content’. As Chandler puts it, liberalism ‘appears to be used promiscuously to explain a broad range of often contradictory policy perspective and practices’.55 It is partly for this reason that Northern Ireland and the politics of boredom insists upon an analytical framework formed around
capitalism itself. As the chapters proceed, I identify peculiarly capitalist modes of conflict resolution to bypass the contradictory agendas an engagement with liberalism could bring.

An attention to the specifically capitalist dynamics of peace building has the added advantage of being more historically flexible than an engagement with liberalism would otherwise allow. As demonstrated by Mark Duffield’s landmark intervention in this field, the concept of the liberal peace is cognisant with shifts in global governance that erupted in the so-called ‘post-nuclear age’. While this has provided an important springboard for an understanding of how neoliberalism has come to undergird Northern Ireland since the ceasefires, it has also left the longer legacy of capitalism’s intersection with conflict relatively unexplored. Consequently, rather than being enamoured by the latest evolutions in economic theory, I advance a methodology that looks back to more canonical and more marginal theories of the political economy, in order to determine how a critique of capitalism’s engagement with ethnic–national division might already lie dormant within these texts. Thus I strive to displace the deeper logic of what we might term a ‘capitalist peace’ without getting waylaid by the latest policies and practices of the neoliberal age.

The idea that capitalism breeds peace is, then, hardly a new phenomenon. In 1848, John Stuart Mill’s Principles of Political Economy extolled the virtues of capitalism, casting it as a salutary force ‘which is rapidly rendering war obsolete’. Writing in a period beset with the ‘rapid increase of international trade’, Mill saw commerce as ‘the principal guarantee of peace in the world’. Commerce, he argued, had ‘taught nations to see with goodwill the wealth and prosperity of another’. Where imperialism had created conflict, globalism would instil harmony: creating a set of mutually sustaining relationships where once there had been bitterness and rivalry. In many ways, this is a familiar argument whose outlines can be found in the work of Norman Angell and Thomas Paine and, more recently, Thomas Friedman, Erik Gartzke and Patrick J. McDonald. But Mill suggested that these new commercial alliances could also be a source for ‘intellectual and moral’ development. Dwelling on ‘the present low state of human improvement’, Mill claimed that it was ‘hardly possible to overrate the value’ of using capitalism to place ‘human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves’.

With the advantage of hindsight, theories of peace are invariably scuppered by the recrudescence of war. Yet from our present vantage, Mill’s belief in the diversity of global capital is equally problematic. In attending to the propitious effects of capitalism, Mill, like many economists of his kind, overlooks the destructive consequences of this economic system. He writes that ‘international trade’ offers ‘great permanent security for ... the character of the human race’.
But, despite the singularity of his terminology (‘character’), he ignores the possibility that an increase in trade might also efface those ‘dissimilar’ sensibilities it is supposed to have secured. The automatic association of capital with a mutually beneficial exchange does not hold true, though the architects of the Northern Irish Peace Process have made a similar set of assumptions. Instead, as Debord makes clear, to unite diverse spaces under the auspices of capitalist production is to witness ‘an extensive and intensive process of banalisation’.

Debord is all too aware of the violence that lies beneath this banal exterior. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), he explains how capitalism’s ‘homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China’. Rather than enabling a mutual accommodation of difference, as Mill suggests, capitalism is a blunt instrument that seeks standardisation. Its ‘contact’ is neither welcoming nor warranted, while its consequences are decisive and destructive. In emphasising capitalism’s ‘heavy artillery’ Debord is raising the spectre of *The Communist Manifesto*, and through this intertextual reasoning he encourages us to contemplate the full extent of capitalism’s homogenising influence – to apprehend the true nature of what financial commentators still describe as capitalism’s ‘shock and awe’.

As Marx and Engels write:

> The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

Capitalism, in this sense, is what is left when differences have collapsed under the weight of threatened or actual violence. All that remains is a narcissistic image, devoid of its own brutality and enamoured with its apparent civility.

In divided, postcolonial societies such as Northern Ireland, imposing this singular capitalist image is a particularly painful process. Discussing the North’s troubled search for a ‘peace dividend’, Denis O’Hearn describes how ‘local political institutions and practices’ – ‘developed under settler colonialism and decolonization’ – are often resistant to the changes that new forms of capitalism represent. As he states, ‘entrenched state structures resist changes that could deliver a peace dividend to the communities that require it most, while their narrower concentration on old political relations (from a previous globalisation) impede their abilities to engage in new relations of globalisation’.

In Chapter 1 I discuss how the rigidities of capitalist planning are exposed by the legacies of settler colonialism, something I unearth in relation to the development of Northern Ireland’s first new city, Craigavon.
these residual oppositions – that is, the hostilities between Nationalist/Catholic (natives) and Unionist/Protestant (settlers) – the imposition of dominant modes of capitalism become more pugnacious and restrictive. As Seamus Deane observes, in order that economic development might ‘proceed’, ‘the two communities in the north’ are told they must ‘surrender’ their ‘archaic language of difference’. Of course, the irony of this proposition is that capitalism was, in its colonial form, entirely responsible for the very division it now presumes to efface. Capitalism’s insatiable march towards an ever increasing universality means that it is – in this postcolonial context – forced to face its own internal contradictions, or, as Marx has termed it, to encounter ‘barriers in its own nature’.

The narrative of capitalist modernity claims that the residues of ethnic–national difference are, in fact, ‘a symptom of underdevelopment’. Consequently, the ‘coercive violence’ that facilitates their removal becomes largely deflected; its aggressions are displaced by the discourse of development. Here we witness the erosive logic of the Debordian ‘spectacle’ in which the violence of banalisation is masked by the construction of new desires – an ever-changing veneer much like Titanic Belfast’s glittering skin. Faced with that which impedes improvement, attention is drawn away from the destructive nature of economic growth and placed, instead, upon the enervating symptoms that these new waves of capital claim to redress. Thus, when Deane comes to describe Northern Ireland’s ‘surrender’ to new laws of accumulation, he frames it not in terms of an assault but rather as the logical solution to the North’s own internal failings. As he writes, Northern Ireland is told ‘it must surrender the archaic language of difference … because it is irrational, improvident, insusceptible to civilization’.

The language of capitalist ‘improvement’ can, in other words, refract its own aggressions on to that antagonistic division it presumes to replace. However, as the chapters in this book will demonstrate, the unwritten outcome of this parasitical relationship is that the persistence of sectarian difference is never entirely foreclosed. Indeed, to do so would be to lose sight of those potential blockage points that give capitalism’s monotonous logic such unrestrained momentum. As Marx reminds us, ‘the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets ideally beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has really overcome it’.

For those marketing Titanic Belfast, the condition of the city’s shipyards was a source of much excitement. ‘That area of the city has obviously declined since its industrial use’, noted Belfast City Councillor Gerry Copeland. ‘But now we have almost a blank canvas and an opportunity to create a new future.’ Capital often seeks a smooth surface by which to perpetuate its self-image,
yet in Copeland’s use of ‘almost’ he discloses the obstacles that can also energise such a venture. Rubbing against the economically deprived and religiously divided enclaves of East Belfast, the Titanic Quarter seeks ‘to diversify the city’s employment’ while still serving ‘the city as a whole’. What is striking about the literature promoting this development is its ability to manipulate the rhetoric of urban inclusivity, transplanting it (in a matter of sentences) from being a ‘place where the city’s residents and guests could freely mingle’ to a domain for a new financial elite; a ‘town square for the local neighbourhood of offices, hotels and apartment blocks’. Denying the actual history of the shipyards, its communities and their often divisive traditions, Titanic Belfast has helped to create something of a ‘twin speed city’: an urban landscape in which the ‘image of a normalised, “post-conflict city”’ fails to extend to areas ‘increasingly stratified in terms of ethnonational segregation’.

In many ways this schism between centre and periphery is replicated in the consociational framework of the Good Friday Agreement itself. As a mode of government, consociationalism presupposes that a lack of political consensus can be resolved only through an exclusory system of power-sharing. In Northern Ireland this consists of sundering the political landscape in ‘two’ (the watchword of the Agreement) and then institutionalising and harmonising that division via the Northern Irish Assembly itself. As the Agreement states, Assembly members must designate themselves as either ‘nationalist’, ‘unionist’ or ‘other’ and, when voting on ‘key decisions’, there must be ‘parallel consent’ or ‘weighted majority’ from Nationalist and Unionist members. Constructed on these terms, the Agreement reproduces a system where sectarian division is an overdetermined problem. As Adrian Little has written, ‘it over-simplifies the wide range of conflicts that politicians need to deal with by suggesting that the division is the only major schism that needs to be addressed’. In this sense, the Agreement has instituted a depleted form of politics which has proved increasingly difficult to redress. Chapter 2 explores the apathy that supports this politics, taking account of the ways in which – to use Chris Gilligan’s phrase – a politics that seeks ‘to circumvent confrontation, actually ends up rendering people impotent’.

For Aaron Kelly this structure of feeling can be taken a stage further and located in the rhetoric of global capital. Building upon Jameson’s belief that capitalism has invented ‘remarkable new languages’ to camouflage its deeper exploitative mechanics, Kelly sees the Peace Process as deploying ‘a new multicultural discourse of equality and reconciliation’ to obscure the fact that it represents, instead, ‘the more novel realignment of that society with the economic and political realities of globalisation’. Where the Agreement promotes a form of ‘regionalised micropolitical enfranchisement’, Kelly perceives ‘an increased interdependence of economic micro-units’. Where the Peace Process offers ‘a
new ethical dispensation’, Kelly identifies ‘an ideology whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe’. The remorseless nature of this positioning reveals the breadth and fluency of capitalism’s expanding vocabulary, but it also reveals its own inherent lack of substance: its status as a false wall or virtual window display. As Kelly writes passionately,

the state-sponsored aspects of the Peace Process – extending British ‘Third Way’ capitalism westwards and the Celtic Tiger northwards through the promotion of private finance and the exclusion of the poor from public life – aim at establishing a wishy-washy and market-driven postmodern pluralism that actually serves to mask the real socioeconomic divides in our city that threaten ultimately to remove power from the people completely.

Pursuing a similar point, Slavoj Žižek suggests that one consequence of pluralist discourse is not ‘the hybrid coexistence of diverse cultural life-worlds’, but ‘the massive presence of capitalism as universal world system’. Rather than an accommodation of difference, Žižek suggests that it would be more accurate to think of the language of collectivism as a ‘phantasmatic screen’ behind which ‘unprecedented homogenization’ manages to persist.

In a likeminded fashion, to step inside Titanic Belfast is to embark upon a journey split between a set of unique and uniform experiences. Entering via a revolving door, visitors are greeted first by a central auditorium that plays on ‘the geometric confusion of a working shipyard’. ‘From the outset’, states James Alexander, the exhibition’s chief designer, ‘the intention was to use the authenticity of place and strength of personal stories to underpin the interactive approach’. Starting with two galleries that take us from industrial Belfast to the shipyards themselves, black and white snapshots from the Welch, Hogg and W.A. Green collections communicate the atmospherics of an expanding economy. These photographs produce a nuanced portrait of the city, but the potential for personal engagement is muted by silhouetted caricatures projected across their surface. ‘Titanic Belfast tries to make its own pastiche of Edwardiana the centre of attention’, writes Pauline Hadaway. As we move towards the Titanic itself, an aerial ‘shipyard ride’ takes us round a partial reconstruction of the ship’s bow. We twist amidst ‘the steam, smoke and smells’ of industry while ‘strategically embedded’ holograms counterfeit a generic image of a workforce united in their task. There are queues to see this stand-out feature, yet once on-board there is a pressing sense that we are witnessing commodity fetishisation in reverse. Secured within a six-seater cart, we feel the heat of Titanic’s labour, but we learn very little about those who actually made the ship float.

Belfast’s shipyards are the premise for this exhibition, yet beyond the third gallery they all but disappear. In their place, an ever-more digitised version
of the ship comes into view. We watch ‘candy-coated vignettes’ describing life in each cabin class; we see computer graphics of the mid-Atlantic; in one heightened moment a 3-D cave displays the reality of the ship’s interiors: a seamless movement from the Captain’s bridge to the conspicuously clean steam of the ship’s engine room. We actively imbibe these simulations, but we are constantly reminded not to film or photograph what is on display. Anxious about its own repeatability in spaces beyond its purview, the world’s largest Titanic attraction begins to offer its own version of Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition. Where Kierkegaard’s experience of the same performance at Berlin’s Königstädter provided the variegation of theatre and not the uniformity he craved, conversely visitors to Titanic Belfast encounter the reproducibility of a computer-generated fantasy far more than the authenticity they are sold. ‘Some of it was ok’, recounts one internet review, ‘but it became a bit samey samey after about half an hour’. The contradictions that underlie these affective energies are all the more significant because, in their double movement, they gesture towards the politics of boredom that has come to dominate the North. Titanic Belfast markets itself around its ‘emotional connections’ with the birthplace of that ship, but once inside the exhibition a set of diminished and depersonalised experiences begin to persist.

Encountering this delimited view of history, we should wonder why the emptiness of a fetishised object is allowed to displace a more dissident engagement with the past. Or, looked at another way, we should ask how this historical amnesia can be so consistently maintained. The consociational nature of the Peace Process has certainly helped to institute such an apathetic condition, divorcing – as it has – the signatories of the Agreement from the people they claim to represent. Yet there are also broader socio-economic forces at work. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue in Anti-Oedipus (1972), ‘the capitalist use of language is different in nature’, it ‘does not go by way of voice or writing; data processing does without them both’. Similarly, when Titanic Belfast does grant us access to the lives of those on board, it does so in the form of such raw data – what the exhibition guide calls ‘the statistics associated with the tragedy’. Hidden in the wings of the penultimate gallery, a series of interactive monitors contain Titanic’s passenger list: a spreadsheet of over two thousand names. When one is confronted with this overwhelming dataset, it is difficult to know how to proceed. We are told that our ability to organise the ‘list by survivors, gender, class, age, nationality etc.’ will enable us to ‘better understand the tragedy’. Yet faced with an avalanche of information, it is easy to scroll listlessly. Searching for connections, we reluctantly partake in this networking of society – computing the Titanic’s lost lives like the algorithms that augment investments for companies such as BlackRock. ‘It is the modern world
of power’, writes Adam Curtis in response to this atomised approach, ‘and it’s incredibly boring’.99

Despite its mundane appearance, this statistical rendering of entire populations has a profound effect upon social variegation. For Deleuze, this ‘numerical language of control’ means that ‘we no longer find ourselves dealing with a mass/individual pair’. Instead, these terms become equated and interchangeable, producing something close to that sense of anonymous individuality capitalism creates. In what Deleuze terms ‘societies of control’, discipline no longer operates exclusively through forms of enclosure (such as a school or prison).100 Instead it functions via a widespread and unimpeded circuit of regulation – a mode of control ‘achieved in part by collecting statistical information on the population’ .101 Developing his argument, Deleuze notes how this insistence on digitisation leads to the construction of ‘dividuals’: an impersonal identity compiled from ‘masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks”’.102 Reconceived in this manner, we lose all sense of that ‘I’ which constitutes our individuality. Instead we become a ‘digital “partial representation”’, a mechanical entity which can be, in Daniel Martinez’s phrase, ‘aggregated in seemingly endless ways’.103 In Chapter 4 I argue that Northern Ireland experienced such a shift following the introduction of internment in August 1971. Here new military technologies and homogeneous temporalities sought to automate entire segments of the North’s Catholic population – initiating ‘a new apparatus of biopolitical power’, the reverberations of which can still be felt today.104

The delimited experience generated by these digital matrices tells us something important about the experience of ennui. As Svendsen writes in A Philosophy of Boredom (2008), ‘information is ideally communicated as a binary code, while meaning is communicated more symbolically’.105 Understood in these terms, our digital experience of the Titanic tragedy is always likely to create something of a meaning deficit: a final ‘etc.’ that communicates the gulf between computer-generated fantasy on the one hand and the desire to derive a personal meaning on the other. It is through this deficit that the experience of boredom is at its most pronounced. The allure of the Titanic Experience means that this shortfall is often displaced, yet beneath the overwhelmingly positive reviews a handful of visitors are all too happy to communicate the meaninglessness they faced. ‘Very boring. Too many videos instead of real innovation’, writes one contributor to the TripAdvisor website.106 Another is harsher still, their grammar and syntax blunted by the vacuity of their experience: ‘i am not prepared to waste anymore of my time on this as i have already wasted 3 hours of my time which i will not get back, very poor very expensive very dissapointed [sic]’.107 As the frustrated terms of this account suggest, the experience of boredom is often a far from painless operation. Indeed, as Svendsen has argued, at its most
pronounced, boredom is the ‘discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied’. The tortuous experience that underpins the construction of boredom forms the background to all the chapters in this book. Despite the diversity of its manifestations, boredom’s degradation is as evident in Craigavon’s uneven urban development (discussed in Chapter 1) as it is in the sensory deprivations that typified internment (considered in Chapter 4). While adopting different forms, its excruciating corollaries are as apparent in the bourgeois apathy depicted in the poetry of Derek Mahon (analysed in Chapter 2), as they are in the oral testimony of the prisoners who resisted the H-Blocks’ disciplinary regime (examined in Chapter 5). As I discuss in Chapter 3, these constrictive logics are perhaps most powerful when spatially received. Here, boredom constrains whole environs, policing the experiences of all those who inhabit such hollow domains. In this way, I suggest, boredom becomes an entity that aims to manage disruption and contain disorder; it creates immovable barriers where once there were blurred boundaries; it builds robust structures to combat fluid forms.

It is a small step from the preclusion of instability to the construction of a (false) coherence necessary for capital accumulation. Not only does the Peace Process insist on structuring the complex contingencies of Northern society in terms of two narrowly defined communities but, in so doing, it also neglects the ‘shifting political priorities and dynamics’ these communities might contain. As Hadaway notes, by bestowing equal legitimacy upon ‘two diametrically opposed’ communities, the consociational framework has drained them both of meaning, ‘leaving only their outer shells intact’. Graham likens this process to a barrier. He argues that, by delimiting Northern Ireland along these lines, the Agreement ‘cordons off the people who constitute those communities, trapping them in arenas where they are no better understood, though they may exist more quietly and more peacefully’. The pacification that energises this process tells us something about the underlying logic of the Agreement – what Kelly describes as its ‘prior, economic subtext … scripted by Adam Smith’s famous “invisible hand”’. A more important point, however, is that this social segmentation operates at its most invisible, and most powerful, when imparting personal distress and individual discomfort. In a similar vein to Graham’s cordon, Charles Taylor writes of the ‘real damage’ that ‘a person or group of people can suffer’ when the society ‘around them mirror[s] back a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves’. This politics of ‘misrecognition’, Taylor argues, ‘can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’.113
In Northern Ireland the perils of this process are particularly relentless. Indeed, with the North’s economic future dependent upon such distortive reflections, there will be seemingly little respite from this ‘constrictive’, ‘demeaning’ and ‘contemptible’ image. The notion of any community has, of course, always depended upon an element of fiction, and this fiction can have its uses. It can, for example, create a sense of personal stability, particularly during a time of extreme social unrest. In the years preceding the Agreement, for instance, the North’s Cultural Traditions Group aspired to promote what its then director, Maurice Hayes, called ‘the importance of group identity as a means of self-fulfilment and … security to the individual’. Moreover, in the sphere of social science, Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd have insisted that a structural framework of ‘two communities’ is, in fact, ‘necessary to any analysis of the conflict’.115 Yet, for all these apparent benefits, this should not mean that group identities are hastily defined or broadly instituted as a fait accompli. Indeed, to do so is to create something close to what Stuart Hall has termed a ‘corporate multiculturalism’ – that is, a disciplinary mechanism which ‘seeks to “manage” minority cultural differences in the interests of the centre’.116 As this book will indicate, the imposition of capitalism has been perceived, at various stages, as marginalising both the Unionist and Nationalist communities. Consequently, by focusing on capitalism’s intersection with ethnic–national difference my aim is not to dismantle the idea of cultural or communal identities, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which those identities are more restless, in process, and, crucially, less amenable to the dictates of a capitalist state.

As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, the work of Ariella Azoulay is particularly enabling when it comes to contesting such perceived cultural rigidities. Her insistence that we must actively ‘watch’, rather than passively view, the ‘event’ of cultural production introduces ideas of temporal fluidity that are sympathetic to my arguments. Where she sees a continuity between the taking of the photograph and our subsequent encounter with that image, so I will assert that there is a continuity between specific phases of the Troubles and their ongoing intersection with ideas of capital. Azoulay also insists that, in her more fluid conception of photography, the meaning of each image is continually negotiated. As such, her work can also help to unfix the experience of boredom (those moments of uncontested or absent meaning) in ways that are germane to the critique of capital.117 After all, boredom does not only describe life under the capitalist spectacle, it also serves to separate those experiences which ‘come to us fully coded’ from those that depend upon our own, personal, contingencies.118 Here we might move away from the ‘total domination of the spectacle’ so as to, in Julian Jason Haladyn’s phrase, ‘go beyond the limitations of boredom’ itself.119 In other words, boredom can become what Walter Benjamin has memorably
called ‘the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience’. That is, boredom as a productive experience in which something new is born. Framed in this way, our engagement with the politics of boredom, our ability to make known its enervating effects, is to make room for something different: a means of ‘hatching’ an alternative to occupy its place.

There is, then, much to be gained from an act of cultural and historical retrieval that takes boredom as its point of departure. Indeed, as Haladyn argues, boredom can become ‘a key motivating factor in the social and political critique of capitalism’. Since the late 1990s, a more enabling conception of boredom has been advanced by critiques of the political economy. The French collective Tiqqun, for example, have advanced ideas of slowness, boredom and fatigue as a means of resisting the aggressive manoeuvres of what they term ‘cybernetic capitalism’. As they write in *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* (2001): ‘speed upholds institutions. Slowness cuts off flows.’ Yet for all the emphasis this places upon ennui as being ‘at the core … of struggles against capital’, there is an underlying condition that limits such potential. This is something Heidegger’s conception of boredom helps us to comprehend. Like so many philosophical engagements with the subject, Heidegger perceives boredom as an individual and internal condition – ‘the very opposite of a possible ground for politics’, as Peter Osborne writes in relation to Heidegger’s work. Despite this, however, Heidegger still discerns a utopian potential within the experience of boredom, one in which ‘the possibility of whatever is possible is precisely intensified’. The point here is that boredom does not possess an agency in and of itself. Rather boredom only contains the opportunity for ‘possibility’. Boredom can highlight the need for alterity, it can – in Heidegger’s phrase – ‘intensify’ the desire for change. But even in this more utopian guise, boredom simply does not have the energy to resist capital in the way Tiqqun describe.

As this reminds us, ‘boredom is not simple’. Its formation can provide an index of privation and malcontent, but its inert demeanour offers no solutions. It is an act of repression that can give way to moments of startling revelation – what Goodstein calls ‘the disaffection with the old that drives the search for change’ – but boredom is also an empty experience that claims not to warrant our attention. In Chapter 2 I explain how the poetry of Derek Mahon is particularly concerned with what he describes as this ‘presageless’ condition. Written from a Protestant perspective, Mahon’s work helpfully situates boredom’s dialectics within the broader traditions of Northern Ireland’s identity politics. This is not to endorse what Tom Nairn has memorably termed the ‘pseudo-Marxist theory of “anti-imperialist” struggle in Ireland’. As Nairn conceives it, this theory suggests that under the weight of capitalist oppression sectarian conflict could ‘be transmuted into war for socialism’. However, to
advance such an argument is to neglect the peculiar features of boredom itself – that is to say, boredom’s elusive ‘lack of quality’. It is boredom’s neutrality – its ‘presageless’ condition – that allows it to bypass what Mick Wilson calls the ‘tireless logic’ of an identity politics that views Northern Ireland as ‘racialised’ purely ‘in terms of Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Loyalist’. Boredom does not possess the energy to subvert these divisions, but it can work through them – giving us access to the alternatives these divisions might actually contain.

In this sense, *Northern Ireland and the politics of boredom* works against some of the foundational tenets of modernisation theory as it is figured in Irish studies, particularly in the work of Lloyd. While Lloyd has been invaluable in identifying Ireland’s ability to question the narrative of capitalist rationalisation, the source of that challenge is often rooted in a Nationalist dynamic. This is perhaps most evident in his figuration of the clachan as a recurrent example of an anti-capitalist sensibility. For Lloyd, this land-holding pattern is crucial not because of its geographical arrangement so much as for the Gaelic orality it engenders. It is this unmistakably Irish soundscape that is, he argues, pivotal in the ‘breaking down’ of a British modernity. Conversely, the moments of non-capitalism I identify are notable for their deracinated complexion – for their neutrality in the context of difference and for their ability to transcend strictures of division. In Chapter 1, for example, I document the construction of a boring geography that unsettles Unionist as much as Nationalist sensibilities. The anti-urbanism that hereby emerges is not tied to a particular ‘tribe’. Instead it is formed out of an almost inherent desire to resist the fixed capital that is coming to modernise the North. The structure of this book, which moves from a spatial to a temporal conception of boredom, is designed to unfold the possibilities of this more uncommitted mode of disruption. Acknowledging Northern Ireland’s inherently divided terrain, I shift into a timescape where these neutral moments of non-capitalism can be more carefully examined.

Understood in these terms, boredom is a critical tool that comes laden with a clear imperative: a need to identify the various means by which the possibility of alterity can be made explicit. It is for this reason that the following chapters are particularly concerned with boredom’s relationship to cultural production. After all, as Haladyn has suggested, because the creative capacities of art are pivotal in ‘challenging’ the collective will of the spectator, it is via aesthetics that we can best comprehend the more enabling perspectives offered by the experience of boredom. Advancing such an argument, Tom McDonough has suggested that there is ‘a great split between those who suffer boredom as a burden to be lifted and those who face boredom as itself an aesthetic experience with critical and transformative potential’. However, like boredom’s ‘critical’ potential, our ability to negotiate this ‘split’ must be managed with care. Too often a desire
to distinguish between the realms of so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ art has meant that the monotony of capital has been at best displaced, at worst ignored. During the twentieth-century ‘there has been considerable reluctance’, notes Haladyn, ‘to examine commercial objects and works of art through similar aesthetic theories’.133 Yet if art – and its cognates of literature, film and architecture – are to engage critically with life under the banality of capital, it must account for its own proximity to such procedures. Rather than perceiving art as inherently immune from the workings of the market, we must draw these spheres together through an understanding of cultural practice and capitalist monotony as engaged in a dialectical relationship of mutual aggression, confrontation or, as Jacque Rancière would term it, ‘critical dissensus’.134

In Northern Ireland the need for such an ‘agonistic recuperation of disagreement’ is particularly pressing.135 Here the sphere of cultural production has been increasingly nullified by the logic of capitalism as a conduit of peace. In the post-Agreement context this has meant that, as Graham writes, a ‘note of warning, at its most banal a “don’t rock the boat” threat, is central to the ways in which all forms of cultural expression now emerge’.136 Titanic Belfast’s occlusion of Northern Ireland’s sectarian history testifies to this condition. Here culture is viewed through a corporate lens – a marketing of a complex history that supresses persistent divisions on the one hand, and quietuses their continued inequalities on the other. In our current moment there is, then, a tangible sense in which cultural practice in and about Northern Ireland has become a vacuous enterprise: a creative act by which the dominant order can shroud and conceal the scars and wounds it continues to impart.

At issue in this book, then, is a desire to reinvigorate our understanding of Northern Irish culture. In this, I echo Declan Long’s belief that we should ‘stress a certain power of instability and indeterminacy in art’s appeals to politics and public representation’.137 More specifically, I prioritise cultural texts that are alive to the machinations of capital and conflict, and use this awareness to, in Azoulay’s phrase, ‘renegotiate’ the politics of boredom so prevalent in the North.138 By way of an illustration, Martin Parr’s image ‘Titanic Belfast’ – from the photographic series Welcome to Belfast (2016) (Plate 1) – sets Northern Ireland’s nascent tourist industry in dialogue with the politics of pacification that tries to keep the peace. Carrying the quotidian qualities of a holiday snap, Parr’s image is highly conscious of its own proximity to the commercial language of photography. Indeed, in his limp arrangement of faceless bodies, Parr is seemingly engaged with what Julian Stallabrass has termed ‘the frivolities and cool eccentricities’ of photography as mass media. For Stallabrass, it is this ‘frivolity’ that has denuded our ability to produce ‘images of extraordinary political and aesthetic concentration’.139 And yet there is something incredibly concentrated
in Parr’s composition. For all its informality, Parr’s photograph is squarely focused on the steel sign that ‘announces’, according to its designers, ‘Titanic Belfast to the world’.140 ‘Capitalism red in tooth and claw’ might be responsible for photography’s ever delimited ‘critical function’,141 but, in Parr’s displaced attention to the architectonics of Titanic Belfast, he also uses photography to scrutinise capitalism’s ‘technology of allure’.142

Much of Parr’s work is concerned with social interaction (key influences being Diane Arbus, Tony Ray Jones and Robert Frank). In this image, however, his attention to the built environment is also redolent of the New Topographics and its practitioners Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore.143 Chapter 3 discusses how this genre of landscape photography lends itself to the anti-capitalist potential in Northern Ireland’s sectarian space. At this point, though, it is worth highlighting how that movement’s insistence on the ‘prominence of the ordinary’ allows Parr to comprehend the erosive properties of Titanic Belfast as a structure.144 The seductive glamour of the building is evident in the trajectory of those figures that line the photo’s foreground; their bodies are bent towards the building’s shimmering façade. But the image’s compositional insistence on the steel Titanic logo also means that much of the allure is obscured, its glamour cropped and left, as it were, off screen. In this way, Parr suggests something of the emptiness that subtends Titanic Belfast as a spectacle – an absence carried not only by the hollowness of its sign but also by the backward portrait of its principal spectators. Like the identity politics of the Agreement and the fetishised labour on display inside this building, capitalism’s co-option of Northern Irish politics precludes the possibility of knowing what individuality might look like. What is the face of the global citizenry Titanic Belfast is designed to greet? On the basis of this image, it is a question that is difficult to answer.

Writing about capitalism’s influence on cultural production, the theorist Mark Fisher has suggested that capital tends to operate ‘like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture, but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’.145 In Fisher’s schema, it is not that cultural production fails to articulate alternatives to capitalism’s diminution of identity, rather that these alternatives remain consistently occluded – hidden behind a screen. To experience this impasse is to touch on the frustrations that motivate much of my writing in this book. One way forward, I will suggest, is to make visible the ‘barrier’ of capitalism’s construction and, in so doing, to apprehend those fleeting alternatives capitalism serves to shade. Parr’s photograph captures something of the complexity of this task. He acknowledges capitalism’s co-option of Northern Irish space, yet in recentring his image Parr simultaneously foregrounds the emptiness of that endeavour. In Fisher’s attempt to puncture late capitalism’s
pervasive assemblage, he also suggests that an attempt to reorientate our perspective might expose capital as an occlusive presence. For Fisher this operation is often at its most pronounced when examining disordered feelings, emotions and affects. ‘Affective disorders’, he contends, ‘are forms of captured discontent; this disaffection can and must be channelled outwards, directed towards its real cause, Capital’. Boredom, this book argues, is precisely such a disorder. Cultural practice, despite or perhaps because of its subservience to the capitalist spectacle, is an activity which contains the seeds for boredom’s politicisation.

Notes and references

6 Cattermole, *Building Titanic Belfast*, p. 49.
7 Nigel Thrift, ‘The Material Practices of Glamour’, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 1.1 (2008), 10. At the time of writing, the admission price for an adult to Titanic Belfast is £18.
8 Kelly, ‘Disaster Ahead?’, p. 56.


19 Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama’.


21 Obama, ‘Remarks by President Obama’.


24 David Lowe, ‘14 Years after Good Friday Agreement, Belfast is still divided’, *Sun*, 6 April 2012, p. 23.


37 See, for example, Joe Cleary, Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day Publications in association with University of Notre Dame, 2007); Mary Daly, Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957–1973 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and David Lloyd, Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity (Dublin: Field Day, 2008).
38 Lloyd, Irish Times, p. 3.
41 Ibid., p. 19.
46 Major, ‘Speech at the International Investment Forum’.
48 Kelly, ‘Disaster Ahead?’, pp. 44–45. Over two-thirds of the project was funded publicly and it failed to generate the tasked 25 apprenticeships and 15 jobs for Belfast’s long-term unemployed.
52 Ibid., 361.
54 Ibid., 144.
55 Ibid., 145.
59 Ibid., p. 594.
62 Ibid., p. 594.
64 Ibid., p. 114.
72 ‘Behind the glitter of spectacular distractions, a tendency toward banalization dominates modern society the world over’ (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 47).
73 Deane, *Strange Country*, p. 163.


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