

‘Every word spoken in Irish is a bullet for Irish freedom’¹: *Kneecap* and the Politicisation of the Irish Language in Film



Figure 1. *The three members of Kneecap: Móglaí Bap, Mo Chara, and DJ Próvaí.*²

Kneecap was released in 2024 and directed by Rich Peppiatt, starring *Kneecap*'s, Móglaí Bap, Mo Chara, and DJ Próvaí. The film has become the first Irish language film to win the Sundance award and has played a crucial role in the visibility of the Irish language in film.³ *Kneecap* are an

¹ *Kneecap*, dir. by Rich Peppiatt (Ireland: Wildcard Distribution, 2024) [on streaming], 00:10:35.

² Kneecap, *Promotional image of band members*, [Photograph], *Kneecap Official Website*, <https://www.kneecap.ie/>

³ Screen Ireland, '*Kneecap Becomes First Irish Language Film to Win Sundance Film Festival Award*', Screen Ireland

Irish rap group from Belfast in the North of Ireland. *The Los Angeles Times* describes them as reminiscent of early Eminem with their ‘balance of anti-establishment lyrics, explosive delivery, graphic humour and unrelenting charm.’⁴ The film is a biopic that showcases the group's formation and features the group members portraying themselves. The film utilises the Irish language as a form of cultural and political resistance, noting ‘language has always been used as a form of resistance, although the language itself isn’t inherently political, the 800 years of suppression makes it so.’⁵ This essay will firstly, explore the history of the Irish language in film. This will showcase how the Irish language has been used as a tool of resistance and how it has been politicised in cinema. It will provide a textual analysis of *Kneecap* to investigate how the group uses the Irish language as an act of defiance and to preserve their cultural identity.

Sociologist Stuart Hall states that ‘representation embodies the notion that language, in its broadest sense, assists in the construction of meanings in the world and influences the way we look at or interpret this world’.⁶ This was complicated in Ireland for much of the 20th century as Ireland lacked indigenous filmmaking. Most Irish films are English or American made and showcase Ireland as ‘on the one hand, conceived as a simple, and generally blissful, rural idyll; on the other, as a primarily dark and strife-torn maelstrom’.⁷ In the films that were made, the Irish language had merely glimpses, such as a line or two in John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, an Irish

<https://www.screenireland.ie/news/kneecap-becomes-first-irish-language-film-to-win-sundance-film-festival-award>

⁴ *Kneecap Official Website* <https://www.kneecap.ie/>

⁵ Politics Joe, ‘KNEECAP on British colonialism, far-right riots and taking on the establishment’, *YouTube*, https://youtu.be/_V-YS0DbEHQ?si=ZrXlebJKY8vvDgw8

⁶ Stuart Hall, Julia Evans, and Sean Nixon (eds), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 2nd edn (London: Open University, 1997).

⁷ Kevin Rockett *et al.*, *Cinema and Ireland* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.3

American representation of Ireland rather than an indigenous production known for its vibrant, romanticised portrayal of Ireland.⁸

The Irish language in film: Beginning of the Irish language in cinema and how was it used?

This changed with Bob Quinn's 1978 film, *Poitín*, which was the first Irish language film, set out to challenge the audience's perception of Ireland. It was produced by Bob Quinn's production company Cinegaele, which aimed at indigenising Irish film.⁹ The film is a drama set in Connemara and depicts the story of 'two poteen agents who attempt to double-cross their boss, Michil.'¹⁰ The film was the first recipient of a film script grant from The Arts Council and Gael Linn¹¹ (a non-profit founded in 1953 focused on the promotion of the Irish language).¹² Quinn had previously made documentaries and experimental films but wanted to make one that reflected the reality and diversity of Irish life, especially in rural areas where English was not the dominant language. He also wanted to challenge the stereotypes and clichés that often portrayed Irish people as either 'romanticised rebels or oppressed victims.'¹³ The film was critically acclaimed within the film industry but was controversial to the general public, many disliked the showing of the Irish as 'vulgar, immoral and anti-Irish' and many disapproved of making a film in a language, not many people spoke.¹⁴ However, *Poitín* was a rarity, and the Irish language would be largely absent from mainstream cinema over the next 25 years.

⁸ Luke Gibbons, *The Quiet Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002)
<https://www.corkuniversitypress.com/9781859182871/the-quiet-man/>

⁹ Bob Quinn, *Cinegaele*, <https://cinegaele.ie/>

¹⁰ Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.97

¹¹ Seán Crosson, 'Irish Language Film Policy in Ireland', *Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy*, 10.2 (2024), p. 38-51

¹² Visit Galway, 'Poitín', *Visit Galway*,
<https://www.visitgalway.ie/explore/places-of-interest/film-and-tv/poitin/>

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

Things began to change in 1980 with the creation of the Irish Film Board. The initial board laid dormant until it was ultimately dissolved in 1987. After years of failed schemes, the government announced a series of measures to make filmmaking in Ireland a more secure profession and the board was reconstituted in 1993, and some hope was restored.¹⁵ With the introduction of the 2003 Official Language Act, which aimed to promote the use of the Irish language, The Irish Film Board drafted a scheme to improve the use of the language within the film industry. The draft was proposed in 2006 where it was then passed and they began integrating it in 2009.¹⁶ They wanted to provide services that could push the language to have a more prominent presence in the industry. They would aid in script development, short film schemes and production loans all focused on promoting the language. But it wasn't until the Cine 4 initiative that launched in 2017 that Irish language films gained traction.¹⁷ A TG4, Fís Éireann and Coimisiún na Meán partnership to develop films in the Irish language which led to the development of films like the Oscar-nominated *An Cailín Cuín* (*The Quiet Girl*) 2022.¹⁸

While efforts were made in the Republic to support the shaping of our narrative, this was more complicated in the North, as Ruth Barton discussed in *Irish National Cinema* 'by the almost complete absence of a local Northern Irish filmmaking tradition'¹⁹, particularly films made in the Irish language. It wouldn't be until 2022 that the Irish would be recognised as an official language in the North of Ireland through the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland)

¹⁵ Barton, p.3

¹⁶ Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board, *Scheme 2009–2012: Implementation of the Official Languages Act 2003* (Galway: Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board, 2009), <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.coimisineir.ie%2Fuserfiles%2Ffiles%2FIrishFilmBoard.doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

¹⁷ TG4, 'Cine4 Launched', *TG4*, <https://www.tg4.ie/en/information/press/press-releases/2017-2/03-05-17/>

¹⁸ Cine4, 'About Cine4', *Cine4*, <https://www.cine4.ie/about-cine4>

¹⁹ Barton, p

Act 2022, which also provided equal status to Ulster-Scots.²⁰ The same year, the first mainstream Irish-language film, *Doineann* 2022, was released, representing a new era for filmmaking in the North.²¹

As Ruth Barton has argued, it is essential to look to ‘indigenous Irish filmmaking practices’ to show alternative perspectives from the dominant narratives portrayed.²² Until *Kneecap*, there had been little to no media in ‘subversive’ or ‘mature’ content for people to engage with the Irish language.²³ Most Irish language films were confined to period pieces like *Arracht* 2019, and almost all are set in Gaeltacht regions (areas in Ireland where the Irish language is primarily spoken), like *Foscadh* 2021, areas where the language is historically tied. In contrast, *Kneecap* offers an alternative perspective on the Irish Language by showcasing it in an area where only 12 per cent of the population can speak it.²⁴ It emphasises using language as a political statement rather than merely reflecting the historical and geographic context, like the other films. Whilst the Irish language isn’t inherently political, in an Interview with SBS News, Kneecap explained that while their home, Belfast, is still under British occupation, the language will always be political.²⁵

²⁰ *The Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 and Compliance with the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages* (Northern Ireland Office, 2022), <https://nilq.qub.ac.uk/index.php/nilq/article/view/1047>.

²¹ TG4, 'Doineann', TG4, <https://www.tg4.ie/en/player/categories/drama-tv-shows/?series=Doineann&genre=Drama>

²² Barton, p.7

²³ Eoin O'Donnell, 'The Unlikely Rise of Irish-Language Cinema', *Little White Lies*, <https://lwlies.com/articles/the-unlikely-rise-of-irish-language-cinema/#:~:text=Whilst%20glimpses%20of%20the%20language,spoken%20in%20Irish%20were%20released>.

²⁴ Merike Darmody and Tania Daly, *Attitudes towards the Irish Language on the Island of Ireland* (Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), 2015), https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BKMNEXT294_Vol%201%20%281%29.pdf

²⁵ SBS News, 'How Irish rappers Kneecap are revitalising language through hip-hop', *YouTube*, 27 March 2025, https://youtu.be/cj1ck_FsuzY?si=ywUI0PrzqW9AtBTZ

The politicisation of the Irish language in film: A textual analysis of *Kneecap*

Although not a ‘Troubles’ film, *Kneecap* explores a post-Troubles generation from a Republican perspective. Ironically, despite the film's message, its director is British and received much of its funding from British sources. The film was co-funded by both British and Irish companies, with funding provided by Northern Ireland Screen, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, Fís Éireann / Screen Ireland, the BFI (awarding National Lottery funding), Coimisiún na Meán and TG4.²⁶

The Troubles refers to a time period in the 1960s when Northern Ireland was marked by a political divide between those who felt it should remain a part of the United Kingdom (Loyalists/Unionists) and those who felt it should be joined with Ireland (Nationalists/Republicans).²⁷ The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 marked the end of the era, granting political recognition to both parties and ending the large-scale violence.²⁸

Kneecap call themselves the ‘Good Friday agreement babies’, and unlike their parent's generation, they haven’t had the ‘personal trauma’ of The Troubles and get to see it from a different lens.²⁹ Although they no longer have British soldiers on the streets, they still have to

²⁶ Screen Ireland, 'IFTA has announced *Kneecap* as Ireland's entry for Oscars® 2025 - International Feature Film', *Screen Ireland*, 2 August 2024, <https://www.screenireland.ie/news/ifta-has-announced-kneecap-as-irelands-entry-for-oscars-2025-international-feature-film>

²⁷ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966-1995 and the Search for Peace* (London: Hutchinson, 1995)

²⁸ The National Archives, 'The Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement', *The National Archives*, https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/the_bgfa.pdf

²⁹ K. Chang, ‘*Kneecap: A Biopic About the Origins of Irish Hip-Hop Took Sundance by Surprise*’, *NPR*, 3 August 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/03/nx-s1-4963406/kneecap-a-biopic-about-the-origins-of-irish-hip-hop-took-sundance-by-surprise>

deal with the aftermath of The Troubles.³⁰ They harbour unresolved trauma and are caught in a cycle due to a lack of resources, and many turn to drugs, which is a key theme seen in the film.³¹ With this, they feel they can take a different approach to speaking about The Troubles, which relies on humour. Director Rich Peppiatt, in an interview with Directors Notes, discussed that they do this because of the importance of humour in opening up dialogue and as a way for people to discuss harsher topics more lightly. *Kneecap* works on two levels; the name is a nod to what Belfast's most famous for, kneecapping, a paramilitary punishment heavily associated with the IRA as well; in Irish, 'ní cheapaim' translates to 'I don't think'.³² Irony and satire are at the core of the group and central themes in the film. The film is set in 2019 against the backdrop of the Irish Language Act Movement in Belfast, where people came together to march for official recognition of the Irish language. During a march, group member Mogali Bap was spray painting 'cearta', which means 'rights' in English, on a bus. This incident was said to inspire the group and their first song, 'C.E.A.R.T.A'. From then on, they started releasing tongue-in-cheek politically charged music.

The film opens with a fictional recreation of the formation of the group. After being arrested, Mo Chara (Liam Óg) refuses to speak in English during questioning, poking fun at the British police and instead enacts his right to speak in Irish, showcasing it as an act of resistance. He is met with questions from the police, 'Why don't you just speak the Queen's English' with English being seen as the 'language of his home country,' This scene highlights the cultural and

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ VICE, 'Inside Belfast's Deadly Benzos Boom', Youtube <https://youtu.be/I5ENREX236U?si=GNIXDqhd8nFXaSoR>

³² K. Chang, 'Kneecap: A Biopic About the Origins of Irish Hip-Hop Took Sundance by Surprise'.

political divide that will be explored throughout the film between the two national identities and the position of the Irish language as been associated with one political side.³³

Even though the Irish language is available to everyone, it remains politically charged and heavily tied to Republicanism, which is shown throughout the film. When the Irish translator is called in by the detective, a school teacher and Gaeilgeoir, later to be fellow member, DJ Provaí, Mo Chara asks ‘What side of the table are you on’, highlighting the contradictory nature, a Gaeilgeoir (a person who speaks the Irish language) seemingly in alliance with ‘the other side’.³⁴

Kneecap are very clear in politicising language, and they openly frame their use of language as an act of resistance. Moglai Bap’s character is raised by a character who is heavily implied to be an ex-member of the IRA, Arló, played by Michael Fassbender. From when he was little, he was taught the Irish language under the motto ‘every word spoken in Irish is a bullet for Irish freedom’.³⁵ This explicitly showcases the film's portrayal of the Irish language as an act of defiance heavily intertwined with their political identity.

Mo Chara's relationship with Georgia follows a common trope in Northern Irish filmmaking: forbidden love, which Ruth Barton describes as ‘love across the divide’.³⁶ Georgia is portrayed as coming from a Unionist background, ‘Northern Ireland’, and is the niece of the leading detective, Ellis, whom we meet in the first scene. In comparison, Mo Chara comes from a Republican background, from the ‘North of Ireland’. They both heavily lean into these

³³ *Kneecap*, 0:08:47-0:09:07

³⁴ *Kneecap*, 0:14:51–0:15:00

³⁵ *Kneecap*, 00:10:35

³⁶ Barton, p. 165-166

stereotypes and become almost caricatures of themselves, which becomes a central dynamic in their relationship and a source of attraction for both. Whilst intimate, they throw cliché comments back and forth: ‘North of Ireland’, ‘Northern Ireland’, ‘North of Ireland’, ‘Northern Ireland’.³⁷ Mo Chara even goes as far as to say ‘Tiocfaidh ár lá’, which translates to ‘our day will come’, the slogan for Irish Republicanism and the IRA, referring to the day there is a united Ireland.³⁸ Their relationship is used as an example of the tensions in the North, but the fact they still interact shows that this is just a statement they lean into rather than any rigid structure.

Satire and irony are ingrained into *Kneecap* and their entire brand of political commentary, but are they trivialising the years of conflict? The film faces criticism as the group is seen as antagonising unionists and has become quite controversial in the North of Ireland.³⁹ The Troubles have been widely explored in Irish Cinema. While efforts were made to tell The Troubles from different angles, Ruth Barton would echo Brian McIlroy’s proposal that most films about The Troubles would reinforce stereotypes created by the English and Americans, favouring Republican storylines, with Alan Walker commenting that some films, even include Sinn Féin/IRA propaganda.⁴⁰

The tri-coloured balaclava has become synonymous with *Kneecap*’s image, referencing the republican parliamentary groups. In an article by the BBC, it is highlighted that *Kneecap*’s use of Trouble related imagery has offended some critics.⁴¹ The band makes use of ‘cartoon

³⁷ *Kneecap*, 0:36:22- 0:36:31

³⁸ *Kneecap*, 0:24:55

³⁹ Rich Peppiatt, 'Kneecap by Rich Peppiatt // Comedy Feature', *Directors Notes*, 28 November 2024, <https://directorsnotes.com/2024/11/28/rich-peppiatt-kneecap/>

⁴⁰ Barton, p.159

⁴¹ BBC News, 'Badenoch blames 'cowardly' Labour for Kneecap settlement', *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7n1gy94evo>

imagery of petrol bombs, balaclavas and barbed wire'.⁴² They use explicit anti-British language with lyrics like 'Tiocfaidh ár lá, get the Brits out lad!'⁴³ They consistently reinforce unapologetically Republican viewpoints. Arguably their most provocative statement yet is seen in the later half of the film, whilst on a drug-fueled bender, Gerry Adams, a former Sinn Féin member heavily associated with the leadership of the IRA, made a cameo in the film.⁴⁴ Gerry Adams is one of the 'most recognisable and controversial figures in Irish politics' and commonly seen as Ireland's 'foremost figure in republicanism'; although he has denied any involvement with the IRA, he is widely believed to have been.⁴⁵ Gerry Adams' appearance in the film is satirically seen as an almost God-like figure who aids them through their trip.⁴⁶ His appearance in the film further amplifies their political stance and intensifies the politicisation of the Irish language in the film.

Conclusion:

Films such as *An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl)* 2022 tell stories through the Irish language, whereas in *Kneecap*, the language is used more as a political statement.⁴⁷ Although the group recognise that the language itself isn't inherently political, the way they position the language alongside figures such as Gerry Adams and the use of IRA iconography and slogans reinforce the idea that the language is political.

⁴² Amy Reid, 'Northern Ireland politics: What's important for young republicans?', *BBC News*, 20 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-67308756>

⁴³ *Kneecap*, 'H.O.O.D', Genius, <https://genius.com/Kneecap-hood-lyrics>

⁴⁴ *Kneecap*, 0:48:10

⁴⁵ 'Gerry Adams: Profile of Sinn Féin leader', *BBC News*, 20 November 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-27238602>

⁴⁶ *Kneecap*, 0:48:16

⁴⁷ Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, 'An Cailín Ciúin / The Quiet Girl makes history as the first Irish-language feature film to be shortlisted for the Oscars®', *Screen Ireland*, 21 December 2022, <https://www.screenireland.ie/news/an-cailin-ciuin-the-quiet-girl-makes-history-as-the-first-irish-language-feature-film-to-be-shortlisted-for-the-oscars>

In an interview with Joe.ie, *Kneecap* highlighted the colonisers' tactic of wiping the language as a form of power and the effects this then has on the oppressed group, 'leaving them feeling their language is inferior and disconnecting them from their land and others.'⁴⁸ The group uses the language as a step towards challenging their historical suppression. They make use of irony and satire that is heavily associated as a way to cope with Gen Z (those born between 1997 and 2012).⁴⁹ Rashmi Jacob delves into the reasoning in 'Unveiling the Dark Humour and Self-Image of Generation Z in a Polymedia Context'. She explains 'by finding humour in dark and difficult situations, individuals can momentarily distance themselves from their pain or struggles. This sense of superiority provides a psychological boost and empowers individuals.'⁵⁰

Whilst the film is heavily political, it also reflects youth culture, such as the depiction of music, raves, drug use, relationships, mental health issues, etc. This, alongside the dark humour, makes the film relatable and has been well-received by critics. It was nominated for six British Academy of Film and Television Art (BAFTA) awards and won 'Outstanding Debut'. Ironically, it won a British Independent Film Award for Best British Independent Film. *Kneecap* follows in the footsteps of earlier Irish language films like *Poitín* by using the language to challenge dominant portrayals of Ireland. Although the language is explicitly politicised throughout the film, it has gone on to inspire people to learn the language at home and abroad.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Joe (@joedotie), 'Video Title', TikTok video, <https://www.tiktok.com/@joedotie/video/7410052061842148640>

⁴⁹Olivia Kuffel, 'Gen Z is ROTFL: Relying on Trauma for Laughs', *The Times-Delphic*, 10 October 2024, <https://timesdelphic.com/81985/features/gen-z-is-rotfl-relying-on-trauma-for-laughs/>

⁵⁰Rashmi Jacob, 'Unveiling the Dark Humour and Self-Image of Generation Z in a Polymedia Context', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 14.4 (August 2023), <https://www.the-criterion.com/archives/2023/august2023/10.pdf>

⁵¹ Auryn Cox, 'How Kneecap Turned the World to Irish', *The Irish Independent*, 23 January 2025, <https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/music/how-kneecap-turned-the-world-to-irish/a6424422.html>

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