Black day in Derry

reviewed by Steve A. Vineberg in the November 6, 2002 issue

On January 30, 1972, the Civil Rights Association of Derry organized what was meant to be a peaceful march protesting the British violation of civil liberties in Northern Ireland. The protest was led by Parliament member Ivan Cooper, who wanted the march not only to express nationalist feelings but to prove to England that those sentiments could be expressed without bloodshed. (He was an admirer of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He was also a Protestant, though most of the marchers were Catholic.) This wasn't an easy stance: it challenged not only the contempt of the British military, for whom any demonstrating Catholic was a hooligan, but also the view of the IRA and its sympathizers that peaceful resistance was useless.

The results were disastrous. The army placed physical restrictions on the path of the march; Cooper attempted to comply, but some of the younger protesters forced their way down the forbidden route. The British responded with gunfire, claiming afterward (and without evidence) that they'd been fired on first. At the end of the day, 13 Irishmen lay dead--almost all of them 21 or younger--and 14 wounded.

That's the topic of Paul Greengrass's tense, skillful film *Bloody Sunday.* You can see the strong influence of Constantin Costa-Gavras's political thrillers on Greengrass, but he goes in for a starker documentary-realist style. Good as they were, the actors in *Z* and *State of Siege* were unmistakably actors; the cast members of *Bloody Sunday* almost always manage to seem like real people caught off guard in newsreels.

A desperate exchange early on between James Nesbitt (playing Cooper) and Kathy Kiera Clarke (as his girl friend, Frances, one of the organizers), whose relationship has suffered from his political preoccupation, is remarkable for its naturalism, and both Nicholas Farrell, who plays Brigadier MacLellan (the titular commander of British forces in Derry), and Gerald McSorley, as Derry's police chief, Lagan, convey conflicting emotions with impressive understatement.

Tim Pigott-Smith, as Major General Robert Ford, MacLellan's superior, is the only actorish presence, and his failure to submit to Greengrass's aesthetic may be as

much a function of the way his character is written--he's the villain of the piece--as of Pigott-Smith's showiness. (This is the kind of part he always gets cast in, and to be fair, he's generally far more flamboyant and inauthentic than he is here.)

Greengrass likes to shoot close in with a hand-held camera, and Clare Douglas's editing is jagged and abrupt; she cuts away before the dramatic arc of a scene is completed so as to reinforce the idea that we're watching footage caught on the fly by journalists. The combination takes some getting used to. For a while the effect is to keep us politically engaged but at a cool distance--just what Bertholt Brecht desired to pull off in his theatrical pieces. But once the hostilities erupt, the movie heats up emotionally, and you can see that Greengrass's decision to pull back in the first half pays off in the end. There were a few walkouts among the audience when I saw the film, but those who hung around to the end--the vast majority--staggered out of the theater in stunned silence.

The script (which Greengrass wrote himself) is serviceable. The basic structure is melodrama, efficiently masked by the style and the subtlety of the performances (just as in the Costa-Gavras pictures). Given the subject matter--the outrageous behavior of the British in Derry--it's hard to imagine how else Greengrass could have handled it. Movies about the British military presence in Northern Ireland are stuck with cardboard villains like Robert Ford; it's a measure of Greengrass's decency that he allows MacLellan some humanity, which comes out of the anguish he feels at having to discharge Ford's agenda, and is conveyed chiefly in the tensions in Farrell's face and body.

The figure of a teenage boy, Kevin McCorry (Allan Gildea), recently released from prison and trying to stay out of trouble, is another convention of melodrama. When we see him interacting with his girl friend and their baby, and with his concerned priest, we know that the movie is setting him up to be one of the casualties. Greengrass treats his loss with tremendous sensitivity, and it's heartrending. Here's an example of how his rigorously documentary-realist approach reaps emotional rewards: his refusal to milk McCorry's death gives us the freedom to respond to it more deeply.

In only his second feature film, Greengrass exhibits an arresting talent.