

## RELIGION AND IRISH CINEMA: A CASE STUDY

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### Overview

In classics like *The Quiet Man* and *Ryan's Daughter* representations of the clergy and religion in Irish cinema has to some extent reflected perceptions of the church in the wider Irish society. These representations were certainly favourable, validating the great reverence in which the people then held their church. An apparent anti-Catholic agenda was given voice more recently, which was precipitated by the numerous church scandals of the 1990s. However, it still took a long time for representations of institutional violence by the clergy to be documented as exemplified recently in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and *Song for a Raggy Boy* (2003). This paper will concentrate on close narrative readings of these films to illustrate how cinematic representations of Catholic authority figures involved in such abuse can be read as endorsing an anti-clerical and broadly secular humanist discourse. I suggest however, that these provocative texts nonetheless remain foregrounded within religious discourses and the traumatic evocation expressed in these narratives is necessary for the therapeutic process of healing within Irish society.

### **The Irish media and Spiritual Liberation**

The underlying assumption behind much media coverage of Church run institutional abuse is that the Catholic Church is totally responsible for what happened to the victims, since the State handed over this responsibility to the church in the 1920s. However, less recognition was given to the notion that the State remains primarily culpable, having with the consent of the people, sub-contracted the church to provide various services, while failing to satisfactorily supervise or inspect this open contract. Consequently, it could be argued that scapegoating the Church, helps deflect ultimate media attention away from State responsibility and national culpability. I would suggest that Irish cinema has now finally started to address this issue of national guilt.

Of course even criticism of the church in Ireland is still a relatively new phenomenon. Traditionally, until the 1980s, the media avoided generally reporting on many religious horror stories and taboos simply because they were 'regarded by news executives as so extraordinarily hazardous (from a legal point of view) as to preclude detailed investigation' (Horgan, 2003: 236). Furthermore, there were also major cultural considerations, with editors and journalists reluctant to challenge the prevailing religious orthodoxy. Clearly, this has changed since the 1990s and the rationale for what some describe as a severe form of 'bloodletting' and 'priest bashing' has been linked to 'a subliminal sense of guilt that the signposts of the 1970s had been ignored or forgotten' (Horgan, 2003: 236).<sup>1</sup>

Although traditionally silent when confronted with controversial social problems, the Irish public began to 'speak out' from the 1960s onwards and particularly in the 1990s with a new openness, most evident in a range of media generated controversies, focusing attention on the suffering of children and other marginalized citizens. Many considered

the election of Mary Robinson to be a watershed in this transformation, for the new President symbolized a hunger for change and an attendant renegotiation of Irish identity. In her inaugural address she invoked an open and pluralist notion of national identity, claiming that the Ireland she would represent 'is a New Ireland, open, tolerant, inclusive'. Furthermore, she sought to promote 'the telling of stories' (Smith, 2001/2).

Media exposure of religious scandals certainly fit into this pattern of a contemporary confessional culture. In the current Irish climate the 'storytelling' and the various tribunals looking into hidden areas of society, religious scandals certainly fit into this confessional pattern. Applying Paul Ricoeur's definition of justice, Irish society must apologise to the survivors of Ireland's church run industrial and reformatory schools. Various public tribunals together with fictional recreations of such horrors assist in this therapeutic process of healing.<sup>2</sup> One might even suggest the possibility of spiritual liberation through narrating these stories of injustice perpetrated by agents of the church's 'fundamentalist' ideology.<sup>3</sup> I would argue that this can be characterised as a form of trauma<sup>4</sup> that recognizes the need to recoup the past and relive the awful experiences before they can be exorcised and this helps to explain the success of the films discussed in this paper.

### **Overview of Irish Priests on Film – 1950 - 1970**

Until the 1980s, representations of the catholic priest in Irish film were generally quite benevolent. The priest is, of course the mediator between God and the individual, but in traditional genre cinema he is also a social mediator, a figure of authority who will ensure that the physical and ebullient Irish can be regulated and brought under some kind of social control'. (McLoone 2000: 49) Father Peter Lonergan, the local parish priest and narrator of *The Quiet Man* is highlighted at the start when he somewhat ironically signals on the voice-over; 'here comes myself – that's me, the tall, saintly looking man.' Meeting the returned emigrant Sean Thornton (John Wayne) for the first time, the priest perfectly traces his ancestry, a preoccupation of many in rural Ireland and confirms the historical lineage of a closely-knit community.

Furthermore, Lonergan affirms his spiritual dominance by inviting the returned emigrant to morning mass, with no worries he might be a lapsed catholic or 'worse'! Incidentally, the parish priest is ably assisted by his young curate, Father Paul (James O'Hara); to enable him to carry out his various hobbies like fishing, as befits a pastoral idyll alongside ex-boxer, Protestant parson, Rev. Cyril 'Snuffy' Playfair (Arthur Shields) and his wife Elizabeth (Eileen Crow) clearly coded as upper-middle class. The Protestant cleric finds it difficult to keep up appearances with such small numbers in his congregation, as evidenced when their spiritual leader comes to visit. In this romantic fantasy, unlike fictions emanating from the 'Troubled' north of Ireland, all sides of the apparently benevolent religious divide are supported by the wider community, as witnessed in a final scene, when the Catholics dress up as Protestants<sup>5</sup> to help their minority religious brethren, led by Father Lonergan.

In *Ryan's Daughter*, Father Collins (Trevor Howard) has probably the most significant role as a priest in all Irish cinema.<sup>6</sup> As well as fulfilling his normal religious duties, he functions as a social worker, 'a voice of reason' (Gibbons in Rockett et al. 1988: 176) protecting his 'village idiot' ward, Michael (John Mills) and holding the peace with the local herd-like and libidinous populace who lack gainful employment to keep them occupied. On the side, he also performs the role of marriage councillor to Rosie (Sarah Miles), who quickly becomes unhappy in her sexual union to the local widower schoolteacher, played by Robert Mitchum. Later in the film, we even witness Father Collin's strident Republican beliefs as he marches the locals to help nationalist activists recover an illicit arms shipment from the sea. Incidentally, Father Collin's mature embodiment of priesthood as both mediator and leader is contrasted with many other representations of priests in the Irish canon, like in *The Field*.<sup>7</sup>

An exception to the general portrayal of a benevolent clergy in Irish cinema in this period is the cult documentary *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (1968), which was made by Irish born journalist Peter Lennon. Writing a series of articles for *The Guardian* newspaper while working in Paris, Lennon caused great controversy in Ireland for his severe criticism of the Irish establishment, including the Catholic church. Recounting the revolutionary period of 1916 and the struggle for independence, Lennon in a polemical voice-over, affirmed that the country had remained locked into a backward church controlled Republic, which did not follow through on the heroic struggle of the revolutionary's vision of the past.

To dramatize his thesis the director interviews among others, catholic priests so as to expose their pernicious influence on society. Lennon got permission to film one well-known 'singing (or swinging) Priest,' Father Michael Cleary. This priest later caused scandal for fathering a child of his own, by allegedly seducing his 17 year old 'orphan' housekeeper, who was already a victim of child abuse. Cleary's banter and insights on camera remain overtly pointed and hypocritical, especially when he talks about how the church was not against sex per se, but wanted it celebrated in an appropriate way and not abused outside of the sacrament of marriage. In an ironic twist for modern day audiences, Cleary also extolled the virtues of celibacy for the priesthood. Meanwhile, brainwashed schoolboys in a Christian Brother's school spout their received religious beliefs for the camera, which appears somewhat anachronistic for most contemporary audiences.

### ***The Butcher Boy***

Contemporary Irish cinema provides some important examples for this paper's analysis of representations of religion which reflect social and political transformations. Neil Jordan's acclaimed masterpiece from the novel of the same name by Patrick McCabe has become a critical success with much academic analysis given over to the film adaptation. The story focuses on Francie Brady (Eamonn Owens), a boy who we soon suspect is a paranoid schizophrenic, living in an extremely dysfunctional family. Martin McLoone in his definitive reading regards Francie as the 'abused child of history' who remains a thoroughly Irish creation, which can be read both in a revisionist and anti-revisionist way, while exposing the dead hand of 'Catholic conformity' (McLoone, 2000: 222). The story

oscillates between mystical nostalgia for an Irish rural past and a futuristic vision of American mass culture and is framed against the geopolitics of the Cold War and the pervasive fear of nuclear catastrophe. Francie takes his cue from the media, which in itself offers a critique of the various moral panics of the time, especially with the impact of mass media and religious ritual on morality and cultural identity.

Francie's personal vision of the Virgin Mary, played by the controversial iconic Irish singer Sinead O'Connor, serves to question conventional religious worship, while at the same time, exploring its psychic potency. Some critics have even pointed out how the image of the Virgin Mary, playing a harp outside Francie's model Irish cottage, represents an attack on Eamon de Valera, the political leader and architect of the 1937 constitution. De Valera was a strong believer in maintaining close ties between Irish politics and Catholicism and promulgated the idealised patriarchal notion of a 'comely Irish maiden' needing protection from the vagaries of sexual promiscuity and modernity generally.<sup>8</sup>

Before the Marian apparitions begin we hear Francie having imaginary conversations with Jesus in a casual manner, who in turn surprisingly appears a bit intimidated by Francie in these conversations. Then, after hearing the Mission priest's sermon about how the Blessed Virgin appeared to three small children, his imagination is fired by such a utopic possibility.<sup>9</sup> The resultant almost comic apparitions serve to question and send up conventional religious worship.

In the reformatory where the boy is sent, Francie appears well able to handle the 'performative abuse' by the smiling and erstwhile benevolent mission priest Father Sullivan (Milo O'Shea), who is besotted by his stories of apparitions.<sup>10</sup> Father Sullivan is inevitably caught in an act of self-abuse,<sup>11</sup> while encouraging Francie to wear a girl's bonnet. The head of the institution, Father Bubbles (Brendan Gleeson) has no option to avoid scandal, but to dispatch the offending priest away for some recuperation, while ensuring Francie also leaves as soon as possible. The foul mouthed comic gardener (Tom Hickey)<sup>12</sup> acting as confidant to the boy, tells him that the so-called missionary 'savages' should have boiled the priest when they had a chance. Such anti-clerical sentiments echo outbursts also evident in *The Field* and the Bull McCabe's garrulous assertion regarding priests not dying like ordinary peasants during the famine. Comic non-verbal communication like the gardener's 'two fingers' to his religious overseer, signal the often-contradictory Irish attitudes towards the Church, ranging from reverential respect to the normally well-hidden but sometimes vicious animosity towards priestly authority and superior class position. This dichotomy is most overtly expressed in readings of the filmic recreations of major institutional traumas in *Magdalene Sisters* and *Song for a Raggy Boy* to follow and embodied through the agency of various religious communities.

If, as Paul Ricoeur cogently suggests fiction 'gives eyes to the horrified narrator' alongside 'eyes to see and to weep' (Kearney & Dooley, 1999: 7), then Francie embodies the anger engendered by abuses and failures in the institutional care system. Like many of the victims represented in the Irish films discussed in this paper, he personifies the need of survivors to liberate themselves from that anger and their past. Through Francie's

progression from school, to asylum, to prison, McCabe's interrogates society's imprisonment of those it deems socially aberrant and historically reflects how the Church controlled many of these institutions. The novel and film discussed in this paper echoes Michel Foucault's argument that asylums in particular, and institutions of confinement in general, attempt to ensure 'an ethical continuity between the world of madness and the world of reason by practicing a social segregation that would guarantee bourgeois morality the universality of fact and permit it to be imposed as a law upon all forms of insanity' (See Rabinow 1984: 150).

*The Butcher Boy's* denouement exposes the failure of the nation's institutional responses to Francie Brady. McCabe depicts social and religious conformity; the yardstick for participation in Ireland's national project, for what it has become - a traumatic legacy that needs to be expunged. These films show the consequences of the 'State's dependence on institutions (particularly religious) to dispose of 'problem children'.

### ***The Magdalene Sisters***

*The Magdalene Sisters* is a horrific true story of the incarceration of over 30,000 women who were disowned by their families because some were pregnant outside of marriage. Irish society regarded them as 'fallen women' and they were dispatched into the charge of the nuns, who in turn used their labour as penitence to run a number of commercial laundries throughout the country until the late 1960s. The ethos of such institutions was that hard work would help the inmates repent for alleged sins. Surprisingly, for such a major dramatic story, it took the passion of Peter Mullan using a disused Benedictine convent in Dumfries, Scotland to bring it to the big screen following a similarly themed television dramatisation in *The Sinners*.<sup>13</sup>

Critics claim that the film version resulted in the romanticisation of crucial elements of the real story and the creation of stock stereotypes of the nuns with a conventional 'Hollywood ending' where the two girls escape their entrapment and flee to freedom. Indeed, Fintan O'Toole's review in *The Observer* speaks to how; 'the conventions of a familiar genre dull the pain a little'. (2003: 6) My own reading seeks to unpack the richness and complexity of the representation and the evocation of the trauma of such an institution as it successfully veers between exploding myth-making and allegory.

This composite story of three girls, generically framed as a prison movie in the tradition of *One flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) insured its wider appeal to mass audiences rather than simply an earnest localised social realist problem-film.<sup>14</sup> Like all engaging historical stories, events have been fictionalised and the dramatics heightened to create a powerful emotional effect on the audience. To uncover how the film 'works' in narrative terms, it is necessary to textually analyse this sequence in some detail. The film begins with a pre-sequel using a caption anchoring the time period to 1964, with the sentimental singing of a ballad and close-up of an ornate Irish historical design covering a top quadrangle of an Irish hand drum or bodhran. With great delicacy, the percussive instrument is played with precision while accompanying the singing. The camera tilts up to reveal a priest (Sean Mackin), signalled by his collar,

performing the piece. This is probably one of the most powerful individualizing openings to an Irish film that foregrounds the agency of a priest.

The priest sings 'Green grow the lily oh'<sup>15</sup> with earnest expression on his unusually roughly shaven face, as beads of sweat form and he becomes even more passionate in his delivery. The audience looks on in total awe and silence as the priest now jams with another bodhran player and reaches a musical climax. Only then is it acceptable for the 'couple' listening to leave what we now know is a home wedding celebration and are introduced to the first protagonist Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff).

Up in a back room, she asks Kevin what he wants to show her. We quickly discover he has only one thing on his mind. (Later Sister Bridget affirms all men [including priests] have to be helped with their animal vices.) You're my cousin, she retorts in shock, behave yourself - what would your father say? (Not that much it appears, as we later discover.) Margaret firmly says 'no' and struggles with her adversary, while the camera leave this rape scene to go back downstairs to the 'craic' and the ceili, which is in full swing.

Afterwards, Kevin arrives down for a swig of his drink, as if nothing had happened. Meanwhile Margaret tells another female, while the camera remains somewhat distanced from the proceedings, surveying the scene, but unable to aurally eavesdrop, due to the noise of the music. Margaret's friend goes over to inform one of the men [and elders]. In turn they tell each other in hushed silence and all 'discuss' with Kevin. Can we presume the rapist defends himself, claiming 'she was asking for it'? The men huddle together (again conspiratorially) and framed in isolation call on the priest, who becomes transformed from a vessel of musical pleasure and spectacle to an arbitrator and judge, reminiscent of the classic opening sequence in *The Godfather* (1971). He is whispered to and brought in behind the timber partition. All the while the joyful Irish music continues and Margaret watches on passively, while her fate is being sealed. She is never questioned directly and her voice remains unheard.

A quick cut to early morning when Margaret is woken up by her father and told to come down stairs. Her brother sleeping with another sibling in the next bed asks what is happening. The boy becomes a surrogate witness for our wonder and later disgust and proceeds to look out through the skylight window to observe Margaret being ushered into a car with Father Doyle from the wedding. One wonders, why Margaret [like all the girls] is so easily lead away. Is she colluding in her victimization or does she simply want to escape the clutches of her rapacious cousin? It will take four years for her brother to 'grow up' and save her, which is almost emblematic of Irish society generally, having turned a blind eye to the unbelievable injustice of it all. To finally escape her imprisonment, she needs a man and the signature of a priest. Patriarchy and church supremacy is affirmed in spite of all.

Next, we are introduced to Bernadette at Saint Attracta's Orphanage, who has a healthy eye for the boys and is well able for their banter. When the authorities running the orphanage note this, it is decided to move her to the laundry in a bid to temper her

curiosity. Finally, we are introduced to Rose, who has just had a baby. A priest working for an adoption agency informs her in a matter-of-fact way that a child born out of wedlock is a ‘bastard’ and convinces the mother to sign away her child, a decision she immediately regrets.

Following this introduction and back-story to our three main protagonists, the camera films a corridor, reminiscent of a prison or old-fashioned madhouse, as the three new recruits are brought up to the deliciously evil Head-Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan). Meanwhile, outside in the corridor their boxes of civi-clothes are taken away, confirming that their old identities are about to end – a well-worn convention of prison dramas. While inside her office Sister Bridget talks at them about salvation. This heady rhetorical religiosity is contrasted with the more dominant and excessive visual business of her counting money, presenting a clear and didactic exposition of the overall hypocrisy of the institution and all it stands for. Their religious governor pontificates on the need for penance of the flesh and how they must learn to offer up their souls to God, to redeem themselves. Catholic teaching is clearly signalled as being abused in the narrative, articulating a pathologising of ‘legitimate’ Christian teaching for crass capitalistic ends. The story is not however interested in unpacking the repressed characteristics of these nuns, like in the classic pre Vatican II *Nun’s Story* (1959). Instead it didactically explores how such religious authorities actively conspire in abusing the weakest, most vulnerable in society for sins/crimes they are supposed to have committed. For a contemporary post-religious audience, such a story can most easily be appreciated as a prison drama, with the only way out for the inmates being some form of rejection, escape or total conformity, by becoming one of them.

At the end of the scene we are treated to an extreme close-up of several bundles of paper money, the fruit of inmates’ unpaid labour being put in a domestic tin box for ‘safe keeping’. The [wicked witch of the West!] Sister Bridget forcefully pontificates, that only she decides when it’s time for them to leave and caustically predicts it may be a long time. Because of space restrictions it is impossible to read the whole film in detail. Instead, I will extract clusters of scenes, which highlight important aspects of the narrative with religious significance for this paper.

[Sexual favours]

The delivery van driver and his young helper encapsulate the attitude of the outside world to the inhabitants of the Laundry. The young apprentice is informed that they’re all prostitutes inside, which of course only intrigues the young male even more. He later offers a shilling to Bernadette for oral sex, for which she slaps him hard, affirming how she’s a ‘good girl’. We hear again and again ‘all men are sinners and open to temptation’ while all expressions of female sexuality appear totally sublimated. Paradoxically priests and nuns are frequently valorised as pure and almost de-sexed human beings.

Later Bernadette is caught showing her well-developed private parts to the Laundry boy to encourage him to bring the key to the back door for her escape.<sup>16</sup> Smoking hard, presumably to restrain his ardour, he looks transfixed, somewhat reminiscent of the myth of the Sirens. She breaks his gaze and comically quips that **it** is not a chimney! Enforced

nudity and female sexuality is so demeaned and objectified, as demonstrated later when two nuns have all the inmates strip off to 'compare sizes' like in a perverse beauty parade.<sup>17</sup> Games include deciding who has the biggest/smallest bum, breasts, and 'bush'. Crispina, the insider who becomes another major character in the film, is affected the most and breaks down with the shame of it all.

But the Laundry boy is unable to assist Bernadette's escape in the end. While he does come back as requested, he speaks of a brother doing six years in prison for stealing apples from the nuns and rightly worries what would happen to him. The consequences of attempted escape include the indignity of her hair being cut off, alongside a horrific extreme close-up of her bloodied eye, with the head nun framed inside the pupil looking out, intoning; 'only when you accept your penance will you find salvation'. The forces of authority in the form of the head-nun must continuously brainwash the inmates' fragile inner selves.

#### [Outside Games]

The majority of scenes in the film reinforce a claustrophobic enclosed environment; hence it is more than refreshing when inmates are brought out into the fresh air for various games and to release pent-up frustrations. Father Fitzroy takes amateur photographs and 8mm moving film.<sup>18</sup> The nuns are instructed by the cameraman priest to 'act naturally' while strangely becoming coy and coquettish on film, creating more false and insincere happy representations. This evocation of a priest as witness to the pleasures of games is however counterpointed by his later abusing Crispina, who has been seen performing oral sex. This transgression is witnessed by Margaret<sup>19</sup> who decides to avenge such actions. All forms of sexual activity in this narrative are coded as deviant, but only the women in the end are punished.

The Corpus Christi procession remains the highlight of the outdoor sequences with the girls in their white mantillas covering their hair and framed by bunting across the streets, as pipers lead the parade through the local town. The priest and two rows of police then sandwich the inmates as the sacrament of the mass is begun in an open field. Soon however Margaret's scheme succeeds, when the priest in a frenzy of itching cannot maintain the solemnity of the celebration. The scene strangely recalls and counterpoints the more controlled frenzy of the opening sequence with Father Doyle getting into his musical delivery. Starting to unceremoniously disrobe and display numerous red blotches all over his body, the priest runs naked through the field displaying his, by all accounts, sagging ugly body. The image doubly registers as a subversive taboo<sup>20</sup> that breaks with long established conventions of well-heeled and manicured clerics in their androgynous flowing costumes and finery.<sup>21</sup>

Everyone in the congregation is transfixed surveying his nakedness; presumably both horrified and mortified. One suspects the current trauma of the Catholic church in Ireland requires such absurd comic relief which is reminiscent of Bakhtin's recuperative theory of the carnivalesque and the puncturing of their benevolent aura, which is necessary to help satiate the pain caused. Soon Crispina also begins scratching, targeted by the same ailment and thereby directly connected with the shame of the priest, embodying a later



day *Scarlet Letter* parable, calling to mind Hawthorne's classic.<sup>22</sup> She pleads for help from Sister Bridget, which is not forthcoming. Consequently, she theatrically shouts 27 times, with a growing mantra-like level of intensity; 'You're not a man of God'. Finally the emotion of the scene runs its course.<sup>23</sup>

Following various other incidents that befall the girls, they eventually escape except for Crispina. Bernadette confidently affirms how they can't touch us now, but later facing two nuns under a bus-shelter, outside the prison walls of the Laundry, one almost expects her to break under the latent institutional pressure. But thankfully she self-consciously opens out her magnificent mane of hair, asserting her newfound female independence and selfhood.

National culpability is verified through the final piece of text affirming how the institution was finally closed with over 30,000 girls incarcerated in such places. Sombre piano music haunts the closing mood of the film as the audience is confronted with a long static list of names that cannot be distinguished, highlighting the numerous other real stories still untold by this narrative. This memorial nonetheless authenticates the fictional story presented on film, a trope that is also replicated in *Song for A Raggy Boy*.

### ***Song for a Raggy Boy***

*Song for A Raggy Boy* similarly exposes the underbelly of Church-State relations in the late 1930s and exposes the cruelty endured by young boys in a Christian Brothers institution. Adapted from Patrick Galvin's autobiography, the film feeds into what could be described as the current anti-clerical fixation in Irish cinema fuelled by an almost never ending series of clerical scandals. In an era when corporal punishment was the norm in most Irish schools, the film documents the extreme violence inflicted upon young boys who were unfortunate enough to have been incarcerated in so-called 'industrial schools' run by religious brothers and priests until the 1970s.<sup>24</sup>

Early in the film we are introduced to William Franklin (Aidan Quinn) who has lost the love of his life while fighting for the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. This is revealed through flashbacks of atrocities and also (over) signalled by his psychological need for solitude and physical resignation. The opening montage clearly references the Spanish war as a black recruit is picked out and asked to kiss a statue of the Virgin Mary to test his religious beliefs. Refusing to acquiesce, he is summarily executed. A cleric standing nearby as a woman is executed reinforces this point. This preamble somewhat crudely foreshadows the great personal price that will be paid by our young hero for his 'beliefs' through the juxtaposing of the Spanish Civil War<sup>25</sup> with another form of tyranny and oppression of the innocent, perpetrated by the Catholic Church in Ireland. The story transfers to Ireland and the prophetic year 1939 is marked as the camera witnesses boys cleaning an open yard with hard labour, reminiscent of what the unfortunate girls had to do in *Magdalene Sisters*. Told to put more elbow grease into it, the boys are treated like in an army boot camp, as they parade 'left, right' following a marching band. Later, cleaning duty boys are questioned by Brother John [the arch protagonist] 'what is cleanliness' – next to Godliness, comes the catechism-by-rote reply, signalling a pedagogical practice that can induce general religious brainwashing.

The only job Franklin can get in the rural Ireland of the time, is teaching English to poor and troubled children in a boy's Reformatory. The audience is introduced to this institution through his utopian and justice-hungry eyes. Somewhat reminiscent of Peter Weir's *Dead Poet's Society* (1989) and other films that foreground the positive role of teachers, Franklin tries to spark his charges to find their well buried unique voice through literature - in this case Spanish love poetry. Furthermore, he helps develop and demonstrate their group skills by crafting a wooden crib for the local Church for Christmas.

The storyline constructs strong, if overly black and white character conflicts, encapsulated by the evil disciplinary Brother John (Iain Glen) as Dean of Discipline who has been appointed by the Bishop. Consequently he has to be accepted by the otherwise benevolent director of the institution Father Damian (Alan Devlin – who incidentally has played a priest in many Irish films, including *The Bishop's Story*).<sup>26</sup> Brother John stalks the children and expounds on the need to treat them as animals - 'since that is what they are'!

As in the textual analysis of *Magdalene Sisters*, what follows is an examination of clusters of related sequences and story lines. At the start, Franklin meets his students and of course the brightest of them all, Liam Mercier (John Travers) is somewhat precocious but well able to read, unlike the majority of the inmates. Franklin tells his extremely 'normal' students (certainly not as Brother John's characterises them), that your reason for being here is no concern of mine; 'I just want you to learn'.

[Religious Dogma and Iconic Representation]

A strange garish almost graffiti-like piece of religious iconography dominates the back of the classroom wall and is first seen framed behind Brother John - almost like an allegorical spectre - yet never commented on in the film. The mural presents a crude representation of a red Sacred Heart motif with thorns and a green/yellow surround. This excessive signifier almost equates with the subconscious religious trauma which dares not mention its name.

The head, Father Damian at one stage wonders out loud to his Dean of Discipline, how the Irish Catholic Church has survived at all, as a consequence of the severe authoritarian mode used to keep the laity down. But Brother John responds that strict authority is an essential bulwark to stave off social anarchy. This un-fleshed out exchange suggests two contrasting modalities of Church control. Later, the Head tells Franklin how he has been trying for years to promote (progressive) changes, but the Bishop - whose voice seldom needs to be heard, except as endorsement or admonition - decides strategy alongside the choice of personnel during his rare visits to the institution. This also suggests how, in a Church dominated State, the forces for liberal modernisation were suppressed by the systematically conservative and authoritarian hierarchy.

A more conventional life-size wooden cross - a well used signifier of heroic sacrifice - is codified through a physical piece of timber sculpture and positioned in nature, while the

children lovingly manicure the surrounding grass. However, the film uses a non-religious symbol of oppression, namely a low wall, to frame the abiding dichotomy between extreme religious control, authority and belief as opposed to more libertarian humanitarian values. The low wall divides the younger and older children in the open yard with two red lines on either side that cannot be crossed and this becomes an empty symbol of irrational religious fundamentalism. When eventually dismantled, like the Berlin Wall, it affords the prospect of a fresh start for all. One could argue however, such crude iconography - at a dramatic level at least - is far too crass and overly sentimental.

[Child Power]

Christmas morning witnesses two recently incarcerated brothers on either side of the fence embracing. Having survived for so long in such an institution, they deserve to mark the occasion. But this expression of true agape in the wrong place is paradoxically the ultimate taboo for the irrational, rule-bound institutional protector; where logic and reason, much less any notion of human justice, is irrelevant. Consequently the boys have to be punished and made an example for the rest. As the two screaming boys are severely flogged, our young hero Liam Mercier takes responsibility and tells all the boys not to recognise the Brother's authority, turning away in unison from witnessing the punishment. Such passive resistance is the ultimate assertion of group rebellion. This is how Brother John gets his 'kicks' - literally from beating young and defenceless children. His pathology is later personified and contrasted with the equally pernicious pathology of paedophilia displayed by Brother Mac, who initially appears cast as a generally benevolent teacher. But the two 'bad apples' end up supporting each other, in their perversely misguided goal of saving the Church from outside corruption. When all the time it is an evil cancer inside, which is destroying the moral fabric of Irish Catholicism.

This rebellion provokes religious panic in Brother John who exclaims that 'the floodgates have been opened' by Franklin and others and how it is his duty to protect the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. John announces to his nemesis, the young boy Mercier that helping others is all very well but a price has to be paid. As in the Spanish Civil War, retribution must be extracted for all oppositional political and religious beliefs. Like the executed black soldier at the start of the film, Mercier *must* also suffer and become - almost an inverse of the Christian myth - a sacrificial lamb in the unhinged mind of the disciplinary Brother, for threatening Church authority. He is accused of being a hooligan and a thug and since he is a friend of Franklin, a God-hating Communist. However, in spite of his horrific torture, the young hero protects his teacher's image and good name, refusing to confess, hiding a personal war photograph of Franklin from his time in Spain, an image that would certainly prove his communist credentials. This difficult scene in many ways is allegorically reminiscent of the McCarthy era and the anti-Communist witch-hunt in America in the 1950s.

As, Brother John savagely beats the boy to death, he intones 'I will not tolerate lies' as he literally froths at the mouth. Finally, his own animal nature abates and he coolly wipes his lips with a pristine white hanky. As a character, Brother John has no redeeming features; which is dramatically required in Shakespearian and classical tragedies of all kinds.<sup>27</sup> Unlike *Magdalene Sisters* this drama remains at the level of didactic preaching.

Nevertheless, the shock and power of its anti-clerical representation of so-called 'Christian' Brothers remains powerful and evocative.

To relieve the injustice of it all, the inmates and Brothers symbolically take the [Berlin-type] wall down, with help from all the boys and the Brothers; becoming a testament to a changing and more tolerant ethos. But this utopic closure remains overly sentimental after what has gone before. Of course, the boys want Franklin to stay in spite of what has happened. As the young leaderless inmates' crowd round their teacher and the camera disengages, looking down on the happy scene, all is not forgotten. You cannot end a classic narrative on such a depressing note. In a piece of postscript – like in *Magdalene Sisters* - we are informed; that the institution stayed open until 1984. Delaney became a journalist, Franklin eventually died in World War 11 having re-joined the army, to continue the global fight against fascism. Meanwhile Brother Mac (the paedophile) goes to America and John 'escapes' to the Missions, where one assumes such sadistic violent impulses were even less conspicuous.<sup>28</sup>

[Concluding remarks]

From this detailed textual analysis of *Magdalene Sisters* and *Song for a Raggy Boy* we can see how representations of priests and other clergy in Irish film have moved a long way from the benevolent and ecumenical evocations dramatised in *The Quiet Man*. The clergy have been transformed from idealised and benevolent social mediators embodying a dominant religious ethos to more entrenched and didactic figures that have to maintain their power and influence at all cost. These apparently anti-clerical narratives display a pathological register far beyond erstwhile 'normative' religious power politics in Ireland or elsewhere.

Both *Magdalene Sisters* and *Song for a Raggy Boy* certainly conform to classic Hollywood narrative conventions, which foreground individual heroism and moral culpability as opposed to systemic corruption, personified by the individuated 'evil' Nuns, Priests and Christian Brothers. Foregrounding and dramatising various religious abuses and conflicts in an Irish context calls attention to a critical exploration of Christian values – especially with regards to female sexual purity and definitions of sin, alongside personal/individual agency as opposed to notions of communal justice. In the latter film this is worked out through the use of various iconic signifiers like the mural in the classroom and the 'Berlin wall', which help to simplistically expose their perversion by agents of the church. Surprisingly, while valorising *Madeline Sisters* as more opaque in the way it foregrounds the girls' experiences - we particularly remember Crispina's mantra haranguing the priest and the sight of his naked body exposing his evil deeds – paradoxically, there is much less explicit verbal contestation of belief and dogma, than in *Song for a Raggy Boy*, which nonetheless remains less dramatically successful.

Meanwhile, other current Irish films like *About Adam* (1999) and *When Brendan Met Trudy* (2000) portray a post-religious and post-national identity that successfully escapes from the traumatic and confessional stranglehold of Catholicism alongside other markers of identity, by essentially ignoring their influence. Should we however, as Ging (in Kirby et al. 2002) provocatively questions, deny the link between film and [religious] national

identity and accept that the culture industries are only mythmakers and creators of fantasies that have little to do with our lived existence. I would strongly contend that such fantasies often have everything to do with our everyday lived realities. If you correlate religion and myth - which many religious and cultural critics certainly do – such apparently outdated representational debates explored in this paper can speak directly to a changing cultural consciousness, be it local, national or even universal.

The traumatic trope of abuse explored in these films – albeit exaggerated for melodramatic effect – is finally evidenced by the elegiac speech at the close of *Song for a Raggy Boy* for a boy who was viciously murdered at the hand of a Christian Brother, while *Magdalene Sisters* is often more subtle in how the narrative fleshes out the psychological trauma and living experiences of inmates within such institutions. This is achieved through the effective use of generic strategies that speak to a new generation, while encapsulating for all, the trauma of such truly awful and shameful episodes in Ireland's past.

#### **Select Irish Filmography**

(which foreground representations of Irish clergy)

Odd Man Out dir. Carol Reed 1947

The Quiet Man dir. John Ford 1952

The Rocky Road to Dublin dir. Peter Lennon 1968

Ryan's Daughter dir. David Lean 1970

Our Boys dir. Cathal Black 1981

The Dead dir. John Huston 1987

Hush-A-Bye Baby dir. Margo Harkin 1989

The Field dir. Jim Sheridan 1990

The Playboys dir. Gilles MacKinnon 1992

The Bishop's Story dir. Bob Quinn 1993

Dancing at Lughnasa dir. Pat O'Connor 1998

The Butcher Boy dir. Neil Jordan 1998

The Magdalene Sisters dir. Peter Mullan 2002

Give Up Yer Auld Sins dir. Cathal Gaffney 2002

Song for a Raggy Boy dir. Aisling Walsh 2003

In America dir. Jim Sheridan 2004

Breakfast on Pluto dir. Neil Jordan 2006

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## Biography

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<sup>1</sup> A history lecturer in University College Dublin (UCD) once told us as students how Ireland was as much a 'people ridden Priesthood' than visa versa and how 'we get the Clerics we deserve'!

<sup>2</sup> A process, which in some ways, has parallels with the truth commission in South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Smyth and David Cairns suggest in a paper 'Divided Loyalties: Local Identities in a Global Economy' - 'the break with nationalist discourse has been swift and virtually uncontested, but the 'spiritual liberation' which Joyce hoped would replace the stifling confines of Catholic nationalism has proved elusive'. (in Peillon and Slater 2000: 226) Such assured assertions seem however at odds with recent decisions to reclaim the 'celebrations' of the 1916 Rising for example?

<sup>4</sup> As a psychological concept, trauma theory both redefines and challenges the use of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of texts, and as a critical interventionist strategy for a politics of the body. Against the emphasis on fantasy in orthodox Freudian theory (as well as in Screen theory), trauma theorists want to stress memory and history. They want to articulate a theory of the subject not around desire and its constitutive lack (the Freudian-Lacanian route), but around memory and its – politically enforced, patriarchally inflicted – gaps, absences and traceless traces. In its most general sense, this trauma theory is a theory of victimhood and a politics of blame, to which various ethnic, gender or sexual preference groups vie (sometimes with each other) for a place in the sun of righteous indignation (or lucrative litigation). P.194 *Screen* 42.2 Summer 2001 [special on Trauma theory]

<sup>5</sup> Almost emulating a postmodern karaoke trope of easy identity transformation designed to overcome any religious signifiers of difference.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, cineastes speak of an apparent gaff – while Father Collins wears a traditional black garment with white 'dog collar' – apparently in this period when the film was set, the law forbade a priest to dress in this way?

<sup>7</sup> In an attempt to redeem the awful crime that has been perpetrated by the main protagonist – The Bull McCabe – the local priest attempts to persuade the community of the Christian way. But the community refuse to betray the evil deed and the local priest aligned with the forces of 'perverse materialism' and the subversion of their authentic [pagan] identity, declares that such hunger for land will destroy their souls.

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Through your silence, he pontificates from the church pulpit you are supporting a murderer and pleads with his flock not to add hypocrisy to cowardice. In an unconventional fit of anger, the priest locks the gates of the church until justice is done, while screaming at everyone to get out. Observing the proceedings, the Bull brazenly affirms the natural injustice of it all and how ‘no Priest died during the Famine, only poor people like us’.

<sup>8</sup> Such institutions served the nation-state and its primary function was ‘to confine and render invisible segments of the population whose very existence threatened Ireland’s national imaginary, the vision of Ireland enshrined in de Valera’s 1937 constitution. (Smith, 2001: 1)

<sup>9</sup> ‘Although seeking to instil a sense of moral conformity, religious faith, and individual responsibility, the industrial school instead encourages Francie’s delusional tendencies.’ (Smith, 2001) Such ‘imaginative escapes’ however, are not an option for the represented victims of religious institutions discussed at length in this paper.

<sup>10</sup> Reminiscent of the sadist and paedophilic Christian Brothers who are finally sent to the missions in *Song for a Raggy Boy* or the troubled returned mission priest ‘who had gone native’ in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

<sup>11</sup> The local parish priest Father Dom (Neil Buggy) who assists the troubled family appears a benevolent old man who does not fully understand the children and their love of the fountain square. Totally unconsciously yet euphemistically the priest uses the term ‘hacking’ to describe their activity, in trying to chat with the boys at the fountain in the almost Italian-like town square. Most readers decode such a colloquial term as evoking masturbation, which incidentally describes the boys’ love of breaking the ice in their beloved fountain that they control.

<sup>12</sup> Hickey strangely reprises his outsider role, with a cameo as Bishop in *Breakfast on Pluto*, on observing all the gossiping women who are about to complain about one of his priests, confesses to another that sometimes he would rather be a bus conductor [or Gardiner].

<sup>13</sup> In 1999, only seven years after the publication of the novel, *The Butcher Boy*, Mary Rafferty’s three-part documentary, *States of Fear*, examining the history of Ireland’s residential child care practices, was aired on the national broadcasting network.

<sup>14</sup> All of the performances by the young actresses: Anne-Marie Duff, Dorothy Duffy, Nora-Jane Noone and Eileen Walsh, are very convincing and effective. Although the film ends on an upbeat note as the other two main protagonists hatch and carry out an escape plan, the postscript telling of their subsequent lives outside the institution is silently countered by the knowledge that most inmates were not so lucky. The film has been very successful at the box office, passing the one million mark at home and almost two million in the British market. [See Jonathan Murray’s reading of the intertextual reference to *The Bells of St Mary’s* (1945) and the ‘contrast between the beatific American fiction of Catholic Institutional charity and the horrific Irish experience’ in Rockett et al. 2004: 155].

<sup>15</sup> The traditional ballad song is ‘The Well below the Valley’ which has explicit allegorical meanings for this story. (See Murray in Rockett et al. 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Bernadette pleads with the older inmate, who has just witnessed her expose herself to the laundry boy, not to squeal on her or she will be beaten badly and cautions how you can’t have that on your conscience. However, the old lady counters that she has to tell the authorities, since it will be good for your soul to suffer in this life, as this will bring rewards in the next. This perverse ideology of extreme puritan morality has been hardwired into the older inmates (and many older generational Irish) way of being. But the killer punch to counteract this form of perverse ethical equivocation has Bernadette counter-claiming that she would commit suicide if she were informed on and then end up in hell! Concluding with a knockout punch how this would then be on *her* conscience also?



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<sup>17</sup> Of all the sequences in the film, this one rings the least convincing with regards to the well known repressed sexuality often displayed by Catholic nuns.

<sup>18</sup> As Gaye Ortiz cogently asserts, ‘since the invention of motion pictures over one hundred years ago, the Church has recognised film as an instrument of catechesis, but she has also respected cinema’s power to enthral and inspire audiences.’ (in Mitchell & Marriage, 2003: 179).

See also Niamh McCole’s unpublished PhD thesis: ‘Seeing Sense: The Visual Culture of Provincial Ireland 1896-1906’ (2005) and her study of complex receptive patterns in early media shows, often initiated by local Priests who were the only persons who took an interest in photography and had the means of showing early film throughout the country. This almost intrinsic inclination to record is also demonstrated in *Song for a Raggy Boy* with the priest as amateur cameraman.

<sup>19</sup> Incidentally, Margaret becomes the moral centre of the film having been shocked that Bernadette would hide Crispina’s medal. But in the end, even she is unable to fight the system and when outed by her brother, cannot finally confront Sister Bridget with the injustice of it all. While sourcing green ivy leaves to carry out her plan, which unfortunately backfires later against her companion, the back-gate to the gardens are open and she has the chance to escape. But as she surveys the sublime vista of nature, which is not bounded or controlled, she somehow chooses to stay inside and serve out her time.

<sup>20</sup> As seen in numerous art-house anti-clerical films from the 1960s and later, like in Fellini’s Italian comedies.

<sup>21</sup> One could even hypothesize that such a scene subverts the more benevolent and surreal comic critique of clerics in the television cult series *Father Ted*, where priests are continuously used as pathetic but usually humane figures of fun. *Father Ted* encapsulates a flip side of understated attitudes to erstwhile authority-laden agents of Catholicism who are no longer treated with the reverence they hegemonically demanded?

<sup>22</sup> Henry James [note, his *Portrait of a Lady* regarded a re-reading of the classic] remembers the novel published in 1879, when he first read it and speaks of how it was ‘difficult to explain to a child the significance of poor Hester Prynne’s blood coloured A. [A polysemic signifier for whatever you want it to mean – Adultery, Art, Angel, lovers name Arthur, American, but always expressing early Puritan values and national shame of historical (and maybe also contemporary) American religious preoccupations]. See Emily Miller Budick ‘Hawthorne, Pearl and the Primal Sin of Culture’ in *Journal of American Studies* 39 (2005) 2. 167–185 Cambridge University Press. One could further hypothesize in a smaller Irish context, that Crispina in *Magdalene Sisters*; if she was to wear an allegorical sign like Hester’s A she might wear a C, which could signify: Christ, Crispina, Christian, Clergy, Church or even signifying the ultimate fear of female sexuality, Cunt?

While the notion of ‘scapegoating’ has been extensively studied; with René Girard in particular focusing on this phenomenon as the genesis of religion, while arguing that the ‘innocent victim’ remains the dominant figure for Christianity. He perceptively asserts that Religion ‘always scandalizes in periods of decomposition because the violence that had entered into its composition is revealed as such and loses its reconciliatory power. Human beings are soon moved to make religion itself into a new scapegoat, failing to realize once more that the violence is theirs. To expel religion is, loathed and abhorred as in the past when it was worshipped and adored (1978: 32).

<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur suggests opening ‘up the archive by retrieving traces which the dominant ideological forces attempt to suppress’ and thereby initiating ‘a critique of power’ that gives voice to those that were abused and intentionally excluded’ (Kearney and Dooley 1999). As witnessed in this surreal scene as Crispina name calls a priest, almost like a prayer with such repetition. The comic exposure of the naked priest and her ability to speak up and tell the truth is powerful and essentially therapeutic.

<sup>24</sup> As a child in school in the Irish midlands of the 1960s, I witnessed many beatings, more often perpetuated by lay teachers rather than religious ones but such systematic beatings were accepted, if not endorsed by the majority in Ireland at the time.

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<sup>25</sup> In Ireland a group known as the 'Irish Christian Front emerged to drum up support for the forces of General Franco in Spain. The Catholic Church held a Sunday collection in October at all masses throughout the country. The money, over £40,000 was spent to benefit the Franco side'. (Keogh, 1995: 127)

<sup>26</sup> In the opening sequence we see photographs of the Bishop in his seductive purple robes flanked by Christian Brothers and boys in white sutane outfits as they celebrate their religious confirmation, on becoming 'soldiers of Christ'. The Bishop affirms in very sparse dialogue that Brother John become Dean of Discipline [against the wishes, we later find of the Head]. 'Keep up the good work' the Bishop tells his new appointee before he leaves! To which Brother John responds; I won't let you down, confirming the institutional and systemic legitimating of his authoritarian methods of discipline.

<sup>27</sup> Even irredeemably historical evil characters like Hitler have to be constructed dramatically in terms of flawed characterisation like in *Downfall* (2005) - to help audiences understand their pernicious ideology and psychosis and to make the awful story.

<sup>28</sup> Reminiscent of *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998) [or the Mission priest in *The Butcher Boy*] - where the dancing sisters welcome their returning brother Jack (Michael Gambon) back from the Missions. He was a priest in Uganda for the previous 25 years he appears disorientated and has assimilated pagan rituals, appearing to have gone 'native' and alienated from his Catholic faith.