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**‘The Rest is Silence’: Psychogeography, Soundscape and Nostalgia in
*Silence***

KEYWORDS

psychogeography
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ABSTRACT

Guy Debord defines the term psychogeography as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’ (Debord 1955: 23). Similar to the belief of psychogeographers that the geography of an environment has a psychological effect on the human mind, proponents of acoustic ecology such as R. Murray Schafer hold that humans are affected by the sound of the environment in which they find themselves. Further to this, they examine the extent to which soundscapes can be shaped by human behaviour.

Recently a body of Irish films has emerged that directly engages with the Irish soundscape and landscape on a *psychogeographical* level. Rather than using landscape as a physical space for the locus of action, these representations of the Irish landscape allow for an engagement with the aesthetic effects of the geographical landscape as a reflection of the psychological states of the protagonists. Bearing this in mind, this article examines how *Silence* (Collins 2012) arguably demonstrates the most overt and conscious incursion into this area to date. It specifically interrogates how the filmic representation of the psychogeography and soundscape of the Irish rural landscape can serve to express emotion, alienation and nostalgia, thus confronting both the Irish landscape and the weight of its associated history.

When the inexpressible had to be expressed, Shakespeare laid down his pen and called for music. And if the music should also fail? Well, there was always silence to fall back on. For always, always and everywhere, the rest is silence.

Aldous Huxley

Documenting the pilgrimage of Eoghan, an expatriate Irish sound recordist from his adopted home of Berlin to his childhood home of Donegal as he endeavours to acoustically preserve the sonic signatures of disappearing Irish acoustic environments, Pat Collins' 2012 film, *Silence*, appropriates Aldous Huxley's notion of silence marking the boundary of the expressible. Recently a body of Irish films has emerged that directly engages with the Irish soundscape and landscape on a *psychogeographical* level. Rather than using landscape as a physical space for the locus of action, these representations of the Irish landscape allow for an engagement with the aesthetic effects of the geographical landscape as a reflection of the psychological states of the protagonists. *Silence*, arguably demonstrates the most overt and conscious incursion thus far into this area. It specifically interrogates how the filmic representation of the psychogeography and soundscape of the Irish rural landscape can serve to express emotion, alienation and nostalgia, thus confronting both the Irish landscape and the weight of its associated history.

Similar to the belief of psychogeographers that the geography of an environment has a psychological effect on the human mind, proponents of acoustic ecology such as R. Murray Schafer hold that humans are affected by the sound of the environment in which they find themselves. Further to this, they examine the extent to which soundscapes could be shaped by human behaviour. Using the dense sonic textures of the psychogeographical Irish landscape to reflect the physical and psychological effects of Eoghan's journey, *Silence* presents an auditory matrix that creates a history woven from discontinuous fragmentary moments, which serves to stimulate arresting Proustian ruminations on Ireland's cultural past and future.

Given the complex relationship that landscape has enjoyed with Irish cinema, particularly in films such as *The Field* (Sheridan 1990) and *Man of Aran* (Flaherty 1934), it is, perhaps, surprising that it has taken so long for a film such as *Silence* to deal not only with its visual impression but also its acoustic properties. Landscape has traditionally carried symbolic significance within an Irish psyche that has contended

with extended occupation by a colonial power, displacement following a series of 'plantations' and mass extended emigration due to a lack of indigenous employment opportunities and famine. Further to this, Kitchin, O'Callaghan, Boyle et al. (2012), assert that Irish nationalists placed particular importance on land and property ownership in their quest for national autonomy. This was reinforced by housing policies of successive Irish governments following secession from the United Kingdom that emphasised policies directed towards home ownership rather than social housing (Kitchin et al. 2012). The possession of the Irish land, whether legally, legitimately or psychologically, became entrenched within the consciousness of Irish society

In 'Invention, Memory, and Place', Edward Said writes that 'national identity always involves narratives - of the nation's past, its founding fathers and documents, seminal events, and so on. But these narratives are never undisputed or merely a matter of the neutral recital of facts' (2000: 177). Further to this, he points out that geography as a socially constructed concept can invest a geographical destination with particular mythological significance and power through the creation of collective memory and narrative. Said uses the example of Jerusalem's mythological status replete with the weight of its symbolic associations as overpowering the reality of day-to-day life in the city (Said 2000: 180). Likewise, landscape, particularly the romantic undulating topography of the West of Ireland, came to be mythically bound up with notions of Irish identity and nationhood; its mythic and symbolic status superseding its existential reality.

One can surmise that it is unsurprising therefore, that representations of the Irish rural landscape hold such enduring cultural significance within Irish cinema, offering itself up as a utopian space or balm to the ills of society. Martin McLoone asserts that the iconography of landscape within Irish cinema became emblematic of Ireland's aspirations for nationhood, writing that Ireland's cinematic landscape 'perfectly encapsulates the way in which the West of Ireland now exists as kind of ideal regenerative environment for the trouble and worried kind of modernity' (McLoone 2008: 95). This is evident in John Ford's idealisation of the Irish landscape in *The Quiet Man* (1952), in which he positions the Irish landscape as an Elysium free from the corrupting influence of money prevalent in the US in the post-World War Two period. It is additionally palpable in Heinrich Böll's popular *Irishes Tagebuch/Irish Journal* (2011), his account of his time spent on Achill Island during the mid-1950s,

which serves to highlight his perceived shortcomings of Industrial civilisation in West Germany at that time.

Between 1993 and 2007, Ireland, a once peripheral outpost on the edge of Europe with little indigenous industry, underwent a dramatic social and economic transformation that led to its economy being popularly branded as the Celtic Tiger. Cultural critics such as David McWilliams have asserted that these ‘boom’ years also saw the emergent Irish middle class essentially come to disavow their Irishness and McLoone asserts that the ensuing wealth and prosperity was ‘to change the nature of Irish society irrevocably’ (McLoone 2008: 6). The sudden influx of money into the country led vast swathes of the Irish populace to invest much of their newfound wealth in property. This created a bubble that burst spectacularly in 2008, with many Irish citizens losing their homes and the Irish government being forced to seek a bailout from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). An age of austerity was ushered in and along with it a sense of nostalgia for a pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland that has been manifested in the landscape of Irish cinema.

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’ (2007: 7) and I suggest that the association of the metropolitan environment with the rupture of the property bubble in post-Celtic Tiger Austerity Ireland has led to a suspicion of the urban and a growing nostalgia for a mythological pastoral landscape. This nostalgia has been manifested in a body of Irish films emerging since the collapse such as *The Sea* (Brown 2013), *What Richard Did* (Abrahamson 2012), *Calvary* (Michael McDonagh 2014) and *Pilgrim Hill* (Barrett 2013) that demonstrate a nostalgia for the Irish rural landscape as a source of psychological regeneration or, as in the case of *Pilgrim Hill*, something to be fought for and protected.

Referring to nostalgia as an epidemic or disease, Boym claims that, ‘Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals’ (2007: 10). Tellingly when we first encounter Eoghan in *Silence*, he is living and working in Berlin and is reluctant to return to Ireland. He is however, haunted throughout the film by the recurring image and incorporeal sounds from what eventually transpires to be his childhood home. But nostalgia need not be entirely negative. A 2008 study concluded that nostalgia could potentially serve as a psychological restorative or coping strategy while also serving to restore an individual’s sense of social connection (Zhou et al. 2008: 1028). One could posit, that

in the wake of economic collapse, when so many Irish citizens became indentured to the banks and the IMF, there would be an attempt to seek out the utopian values that got lost along the way within the Irish landscape. As McLoone asserts, 'Now that Irish culture reflects the dominant values of secular, consumer capitalism, the deep-lying romantic promise of the landscape seems increasingly attractive (McLoone 2008: 94). Although McLoone was referring to films such as *Into the West* (Newell 1992) and *The Field* (Sheridan 1990), which were produced just as the Celtic Tiger economy was entering full flow, his contention is all the more pertinent in the existential vacuum currently pulling on the Irish psyche.

Mirroring Boym, Said asserts that '...ours has become an era of a search for roots, of people trying to discover in the collective memory of their race, religion, community, and family a past that is entirely their own, secure from the ravages of history and a turbulent time' (2000: 177). Collins uses the conceit of a nostalgic journey through the Irish landscape to lend structure to his ambiguous, narratively episodic film. Wandering like Odysseus, in his quest to locate a place untouched by manmade sound, Eoghan encounters unnamed enigmatic figures who, like him, are trying to preserve an Ireland that is quickly disappearing. For example, he meets a woman on Inisbofin, a small island off the coast of Connemara, who ran away from boarding school on the mainland to return to her island existence with 'nature' and 'birdsong.' She preserves a past that no longer exists in the ramshackle patchwork museum that she has opened in a boat store formerly owned by her father, pinning ephemera and photographs of the changing island landscapes to the walls.

Images of hand drawn maps by notable cartographer and writer Tim Robinson, who was the subject of Collins' 2011 documentary, *Tim Robinson: Connemara*, punctuate the episodic changes of location and soundscape within the film. Although Eoghan's odyssey home and his conversations with the figures that he encounters seem to indicate a fond nostalgia for the past, Collin's intercutting of archival documentary footage is often bleak or brutal, suggesting the weight of the past that imbues the land of Ireland. We are subject to images of island families carrying their belongings to boats bound for the mainland, of a dog being taken out to sea and drowned. But by listening so intently to the sound emanating from the natural landscape, it as though Eoghan is attempting to commune with nature, in order to capture a past that no longer exists as the siren sound of landscape draws him ever further north. The intangible atmosphere of the film conjures up the dreamscape of an *aisling*, an Irish traditional

dream or vision poem in which Ireland is embodied as a woman who cries a lament for the Irish people. Eoghan is listening to Ireland lamenting her woes.

Although *Silence* appropriates many of the themes and subjects traditionally explored in Irish cinema, it has provenance in British travelogue films such as *Gallivant* (1997) by Andrew Kötting and Patrick Keiller's Robinson trilogy, *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), which also draw on the psychogeography of landscape to lend structure and meaning to their work. There has been a certain repurposing of meaning of psychogeography within the context of the moving image from the way in which the Situationists originally conceived the concept. The Situationist International, a Marxist left-leaning organisation consisting of artists and intellectuals, developed under the defacto leadership of Guy Debord in Paris during the 1950s. Primarily an urban movement, the group became concerned with the psychological effects of the geography of Paris and conceived a number of strategies related to the psychogeography of the city. The first, *détournement*, is a technique, which they adapted from the Lettrist International. It is generally taken to refer to the appropriation of an existing known artwork and its subsequent subversion to create a new meaning that is adverse to the original. The second strategy refers explicitly to a *dérive* or drift through the urban landscape. These subconscious drifts, guided by the flow of architecture and geography became the Situationists' principal technique for exploring the psychogeography of an area in their search for new and authentic experiences.

As Merlin Coverley points out, the recent revival of psychogeography is primarily literary rather than overtly polemical in focus (2010). Perhaps this reinvention or repurposing can be more associated with the urban London landscapes of writers J. G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Will Self and Keiller but it has taken on a unique guise when transposed to an Irish geographical context. Although films such as Lenny Abrahamson's *Adam and Paul* (2004) and Donal Forman's *Out of Here* (2013) involve drifts through the urban streets of Dublin, the topography of landscape beyond the Pale (an area of symbolic significance on the East Coast of Ireland consisting of Dublin and its commuter towns that became the stronghold of the British government during the Middle Ages) has, as I have iterated throughout this article, traditionally carried greater weight in Irish cinema, focusing on the behavioural impact of rural rather than urban space.

Much like Kötting and Keiller in their picaresque perambulations through the British landscape, Collins uses the journey as an extended metaphor in order to reveal something about or comment on the country and the people who live in it. In this respect *Silence* also owes a certain debt to the Situationists, setting up and presenting situations that allow us, the audience, to critically examine our day-to-day lives in order to recognise our desires. Eoghan is like an acoustic *flâneur* enjoying a *dérive* through the cinemascapes, his journey directed by the undulating geography of the film as he strives to encounter an authentic experience free from the noise of modern life. By focusing on the psychogeography and soundscape of the Irish rural scenery, Collins allows the landscape and sound to express Eoghan's emotion rather than resorting to dialogue or cinematic cliché for explication.

Collins' interweaving of environmental sounds, voice and music in *Silence* creates a connection between the past, present and future. The film is constantly foreshadowing the future through both the imagery and sound. For example, the opening montage begins with a shot of a close up of a reel-to-reel tape player emitting the sound of an unaccompanied female voice singing, layered with the sound of the wind bleeding in from outside. It cuts to an interior shot of a curtain wafting as wind blows through grass outside a broken windowpane, before cutting to a shot of a man silhouetted against the evening sky.

Throughout the film Collins plays with layers of authenticity. It blends strata of archival footage, maps, seemingly spontaneous natural conversations between characters and more traditionally conceived scenes of fiction in an audiovisual *découpage*. The film features people such as writer Michael Harding playing themselves or versions of themselves. The recurrent reel-to-reel archival recording of a female singing is that of the actor Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde's actual mother, Nellie Nic Giolla Bhríde, singing on the soundtrack. Photographer and poet Marie Coyne, who is interviewed by Eoghan in Inishbofin is the actual instigator of the *Inishbofin Heritage Museum*. Even though it appears that Eoghan (who lest we forget is attempting to capture the sonic signatures of the quietest places in Ireland, preserving them for future generations) is working within landscapes untainted by human intrusion, the sound reveals otherwise: the sound of a rock breaker interfering with his attempts to capture the pastoral soundscape of rural Cork, the roar of a motorbike on the narrow streets of Tory Island.

Although Eoghan is hired for his sound recording skill, he is ostensibly functioning in the role of acoustic ecologist. Practitioners of acoustic ecology seek to find solutions for an ecologically balanced soundscape that facilitates a harmonic relationship between the manmade and the natural acoustic environment. By recording and cataloguing soundscapes in order to preserve and document the changing landscape they examine the extent to which soundscapes can be shaped by human behaviour. Of all of our senses, sound, in particular has the capacity to stimulate our memories, activating associations between fragments of thoughts. The diffuse qualities of sound have the ability to envelop us. Although we hold the ability to block out sound, we do not possess the physical means to do so. Schafer points out that our ears are always open and regardless of the quality of our hearing we can still respond to the physical vibrations produced by sound (Schafer 1994: 11). Reflecting the fact that sound is particularly affective, filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti writes, 'Pictures are clear and specific, noises are vague ... that is why noise is so useful. It speaks directly to the emotions' (Cavalcanti 1985: 109). Sound can stimulate a feeling, a mood. It can give us the sense of a shared collective consciousness, a sense of connection to the landscape and each other. Its diffuse palimpsestic qualities allow for a mediation between dreaming and waking states, blurring boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, that Collins takes full advantage of in *Silence*.

Schafer proposes the idea of a keynote sound that permeates the acoustic environment, marking out its primary tonal character. Appropriated from western art music, the concept of the keynote in soundscape studies draws on the convention that musical compositions are composed to a musical key signature. Although compositions can modulate from this key, it creates a reference point for the listener. He writes,

Even though keynote sounds may not always be heard consciously, the fact that they are ubiquitously there suggests the possibility of a deep and pervasive influence on our behaviour and moods. The keynote sounds of a given place are important because they help to outline the character of men living among them. (Schafer 1994: 9)

Schafer further suggests that these keynote sounds 'are those which are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived (Schafer 1994: 273). This idea of a keynote sound of

a place, consciously or subconsciously affecting the psyche of the listener, finds a natural counterpart in psychogeography. *Silence* foregrounds its keynote sounds of the locations electroacoustically captured by Eoghan: the waves crashing against the coast in Connemara; the rush of the wind through the grass on the Burren; the rattling, repetitious call of the endangered corncrakes on Tory Island.

Schafer writes that 'hearing is a way of touching at a distance,' but more than that one could surmise that it is also a way of touching across time. In *Silence*, sound functions as way of negotiating temporalities. Through his use of asynchronous sound and his strategy of allowing sound to bleed across scenes Collins provides a way of moving between the past, present and future. His soundtrack has a schizophonic quality to it. The term *schizophonia*, coined by Schafer, refers 'to the split between an original sound and its electro acoustical transmission or reproduction' (Schafer 1994: 90). The word held negative connotations for Schafer, who used the term in relation to contemporary soundscapes, which he regarded as lacking distinctiveness and individuality (Schafer 1973: 16). Schafer's idea of schizophonia is therefore formulated from the idea that an existing soundscape can be replaced by one of representation. In this model the listener becomes consumed by the temporal and causal context of the recording to which they are listening and becomes disconnected with the environment where the listening is taking place. This causes the sound to become *acousmatic* or severed from its original source.

The soundtrack of *Silence* features a number of non-diegetic acoustimised voices that are never reunited with their corporeal form. During his night-time conversation with the writer Michael Harding at the home of Harding's mother, Eoghan talks about hearing funny things on the wind, voices like ghosts. Disembodied voices in *Silence*, carried on the wind, provide a link to the past, while also foreshadowing events in the future. Michel Chion proposes the idea of the acoustimised voice, to demonstrate the powers of omniscience that are bestowed upon the voice that is not shackled to a body. The acoustimised or disembodied voice seems to come from everywhere and therefore to have no clearly defined limits to its power. This gives it the power of seeing all, the power of omniscience, the omnipotence to act on the situation and the gift of ubiquity.

The sound is not always synchronised in *Silence* and the perspective is frequently spatially displaced. Many of the sounds in *Silence* are, in effect, what Chion refers to as *on-the-air sound* which 'are not subject to 'natural' mechanical laws of

sound propagation' (Chion qtd. in Jordan 2010: 28) thus allowing them certain freedoms within the film soundtrack. Unlike Schafer who looked on acoustimised sound negatively, Randolph Jordan argues that the *schizophonic* quality of on-the-air sound, can potentially have positive connotations when located within the film soundtrack, by promoting an awareness of technological mediation (Jordan 2010). At points we hear recordings emanating from electro-acoustic devices: the sound of an English voice (Tim Robinson), eloquently pondering whether the delays and attenuations from the sound of waves crashing along the coast is like listening to the sound of the past, a past dominated by all of the voices that were never afforded the opportunity for expression, voices that cancel each other out in the cacophony of the waves. We experience the touch of these acoustic ghosts through the vibrations they produce. This acoustimised voice, which is never reunited with its owner, is woven into the layers of the soundtrack, functioning like an omnipotent voice-of-god who reflects on the over-arching philosophical construct of the film while creating an acoustic bridge between singular temporal and spatial locations within the auditory plexus. Sound in *Silence* is therefore fundamental to the negotiation of temporal and spatial landscapes. This is reinforced by Barry Truax, who asserts,

A striking advantage of the electroacoustic medium, on the other hand, is the layering of what may be called different 'levels of remove' where the actual present, the recorded present of the running commentary, the reenacted and remembered past, as well as imagined events past or future, may co-exist with the listener moving fluidly between them (Truax 1996: 57).

Eoghan in his capacity as acoustic documentarian is a passive protagonist. He does not allow the sublime romanticism of the Irish landscape to overwhelm him. An ambiguous shadowy figure, frequently photographed in silhouette from behind, he is a lone figure. His name is uttered only once during the entire film. He strives to be an impartial observer, who is trying not to impose his presence on the landscape, visually or aurally. Yet, nonetheless he is an interloper, his very presence with his electronic equipment signifying the intrusion of modern world upon this natural environment. Eoghan finds it increasingly challenging to document an acoustically pure soundscape untouched by the encroachment of industrial noise. It is also difficult for him to escape

from other people. Eoghan is drawn into conversations with unnamed characters that he encounters on his travels, allowing them to not only reveal something about themselves and a lost heritage but something about himself as the film progresses. He becomes more talkative and forthcoming the further north he travels, particularly when conversing in Irish. He gradually stops listening to the mediated geophony of the soundscape through his headphones, gradually integrating himself holistically into the homeland to which he has returned.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Silence* is the manner in which it recontextualises the term ‘silence’, which came to have negative connotations. Typically we associate the term with death or non-existence. In *The Great Animal Orchestra*, Bernie Krause argues that ‘Almost no sentient creature can thrive in a completely silent environment. Silence implies sensory deprivation’ (Krause 2012: 215). Krause describes how, when on assignment at the Grand Canyon, he came across a natural anechoic chamber that was the quietest place that he had ever heard. Much like John Cage during his time in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University, he came to hear his bodily processes: his blood thumping through his veins, his nervous system whining (Krause 2012: 215) He found this so disorientating that he began to sing and talk to himself before eventually leaving due to being ‘driven insane by the lack of any acoustic cues.’ In *Silence* this idea is vocalised by the barman in Cork warning Eoghan early in his journey that ‘too much quiet would drive a fellow mad.’

Krause posits that perhaps, what we are seeking is in fact, ultimately not silence but tranquillity, writing that it ‘signifies something very different and is a fundamental condition healthy organisms need in order to feel physically and mental vigorous’ (Krause 2012: 216). Drawing on the work of Chris Watson he suggests that tranquillity ‘refers to a basic layer – an elemental acoustic foundation – upon which we can rest our mental processes’ (Krause 2012). This is echoed by Schafer who states, ‘Just as man requires time for sleep to refresh and renew his life energise, so too he requires quiet periods to regain mental and spiritual composure’ (Schafer 1994: 254). Michael Harding, conversing with Eoghan in the course of the film, supports this averring that, in the house of his (Harding’s) mother he can experience another type of silence, one not predicated on ‘the absence of airplanes or the wind’. This is potentially the basis of Eoghan’s increasing serenity as he journeys towards the acoustic foundation of his childhood, the silence of Collins’ film. As Eoghan wanders around Tory Island towards his childhood home he is no longer weighted down with recording equipment. No

longer does he require the mediation of the headphones to listen to the sounds that have haunted the film. He finally arrives at the house of his childhood, foreshadowed throughout the film. The recurring broken window framed by the remnants of a timeworn net curtain billowing in the wind is repeated. A silhouetted Eoghan enters into a scene, not actually silent, but filled with sounds of the past. His mother's voice, singing an Irish air, underpinned with the keynote sound of the wind, the voices of ghosts long departed.

Silence is a quiet elegiac film, affording the audience time to ruminate on our own relationship with the landscape. It opens up space for thinking. Although initially resistant to the idea of returning to Donegal, Eoghan, who for unexplained reasons has not returned home for fifteen years allows us, the audience, to experience a *détournement* and perceive the Irish landscape and its associated sounds anew. This is a unique film in its attempts to re-appropriate the Irish cultural landscape. Rather than using landscape as a physical space for the locus of action, Collins's representation of landscape allows him to move towards an engagement with the aesthetic effects of landscape on the psychological state of his protagonist. The psychogeography is reflecting Eoghan's psychological journey as he attempts to reconcile his mental and emotional journey home with his actual physical journey. It demonstrates a shifting dynamic in Irish cinema that has been carried forward in films such as *Pilgrim Hill* (Barrett 2013) and *The Sea* (Brown 2013). By withholding contextual and narrative information from us and refusing to provide the acoustimised voices and sounds with corporeal form, *Silence* does not allow for a contextualising of Irish history in the typical sense. To quote Tim Robinson, we are 'listening to the sound of the past, not really of history which has a definite sort of structures to it but all of the bits of past that don't get into history' (Tim Robinson, *Silence* 2012). Collins allows for ambiguity permitting us to make up our own minds. It is not an outright rejection of modernity, nor is it a lament for an Ireland of yore but perhaps it is significant that Eoghan, the exiled Irish son, finally finds silence, calm and authenticity on his arrival to his childhood home at the close of the film.

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