Encounters with the Past through Melodrama: Ireland's Magdalene Laundries on Screen and the Question of 'Countervisuality'

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Abstract

This article analyses two Magdalene Laundry themed films: The Magdalene Sisters *(2002) and* Sinners *(2002). Both are examples of melodrama, which gives each film a definite structure and imposes certain formal and narrative restrictions.* The Magdalene Sisters *verges into the territory of the Gothic with its dark and excessive elements. In terms of representing Ireland's Magdalene Laundries onscreen, it is important to consider whether the use of melodramatic conventions can truly be successful in furthering the discourse around these issues and helping the nation to deal with its traumatic past in a way that is healing for survivors and avoids reoccurrence of these abuses. A presentation of history that can challenge the power of authority is what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls 'countervisuality'. This article evaluates the countervisual success of both films as valuable visual texts that give viewers an insight into these institutions and the abuses that happened within them. It assesses their ability to challenge the Irish State's wish to suppress knowledge about the Magdalene Laundries, particularly the State's own involvement. Magdalene survivors continue to seek recognition from the State for the abuses perpetrated against them, asserting their right to redress and striving to be acknowledged as survivors of wrongful institutional incarceration. Though there are countervisual moments to be witnessed in* The Magdalene Sisters *and* Sinners*, the mechanisms of melodrama dilute the intended message of both directors, impacting the potential for extended countervisuality.*

The Magdalene Laundries and the Need for 'Countervisuality'

Ireland remains haunted by the legacy of the Magdalene Laundries, also known as Magdalene asylums, primarily because the Irish State "seek[s] to bury this history in the present and thereby render survivors' truth unknown" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). The Irish State have tried to control the discourse around the laundries to avoid accountability and minimise the experiences of Magdalene survivors. The State, however, are responsible for the laundries because they were State-funded institutions (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 102). This article focuses on the Magdalene Laundries within the Republic of Ireland, while also acknowledging the existence of those institutions in Northern Ireland and recognises that the Magdalene Laundry phenomenon was "cross-border in nature" (Coen *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Specifically, this article examines the context of the Republic of Ireland and its relationship with the Catholic Church as part of a nation building process post-independence.

In his work on visual culture, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2009) discusses how governments or those in power deliberately authorise and legitimise certain versions of the past towards the creation of what he calls 'visuality'. Mirzoeff (2009, p. 5) asserts that 'visuality' is "that which

renders the processes of History visible to power". This means that those in power have the agency to construct their own historical and political narratives and therefore protect their own power. A presentation of history that has the ability to challenge authority is what Mirzoeff (2011) calls 'countervisuality'. Countervisuality is about claiming "the right to look" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 1) or seeking alternative truths to those endorsed by the powerful. In the context of the government-sanctioned visualities that obscure and deny full knowledge of the Magdalene abuses and the State's culpability, Magdalene survivors bear the burden of claiming "the right to look". Therefore, the onus is on them to seek recognition of their suffering by the State and society. Despite political platitudes, the Irish government avoids confronting this aspect of Irish history as it really was. Instead, it projects a selective version of history that protects its own power. In this version, the Church and society at large are held responsible for the laundries, while the involvement of the State is downplayed, even though the State funded and inspected these institutions (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 102). The State also wishes to designate the Magdalene Laundries to the past and for the Irish public to forget about them. As Mirzoeff (2011, p. 2) clarifies, "the autonomy claimed by the right to look is thus opposed by the authority of visuality", which leads to the concealment of the stories of institutional survivors to some extent.

Representation of the Magdalene Laundries through Melodrama

Cinema is the cultural operation for regimes of watching and the visual *par excellence*. Ruth Barton notes in relation to cinema that

> Irish history came to be widely understood as the locus for the depiction of trauma, not for the reasons of postcoloniality alone or the lengthy tradition of forced immigration, but because of the more recent revelations of abusive Church power. (Barton, 2019, p. 118)

In terms of representing Ireland's Magdalene Laundries through film, it is important to consider whether the genre of melodrama—which is the one most often deployed—can be successful in furthering the discourse around these issues, rather than merely perpetuating trauma, to help the country process its past in a way that is healing for survivors and avoids reoccurrence of these abuses. To further the discourse in this way, it is necessary to present a countervisual perspective on screen; specifically, one that does not subscribe to a State-sanctioned visuality where the full picture of these institutions is suppressed or diminished and where the blame is disproportionately placed on the Catholic Church without any acknowledgement of State responsibility. As case studies, two films from 2002 that centre on the Magdalene Laundries,

The Magdalene Sisters and *Sinners*, are considered here. These are valuable visual texts that give viewers an insight into these institutions and the abuses that occurred within them. The countervisual success of both films and therefore, their ability to challenge State-sanctioned visualities on the Magdalene Laundries are evaluated. Both films are set in the 1960s, a period during which the laundries were a thriving force in Ireland. Additionally, they are both examples of melodrama, which gives each film a very definite structure and imposes specific restrictions, as will be explored in detail. It is therefore essential to examine the notion of melodrama as a genre and investigate its ability to be countervisual as it deals with essential and unavoidable components of the State-affirmed national narrative. Before doing so, this article examines the origins of the laundries.

Foundations of the Magdalene Laundries and Contemporary State Response

The history of Ireland's Magdalene institutions stretches back to 1767. These institutions changed drastically in nature between the time of their conception and the twentieth century (Smith, 2007, p. 25). They began as Christian (both Catholic and Protestant) places of shelter and refuge run by laywomen to teach and help "fallen women" rather than places to imprison them or hide them away (Smith, 2007, p. 25). The British Victorian idealisation of women had a strong influence on Ireland and so Magdalene asylums became part of what was deemed a "rescue movement" happening throughout the British Empire (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). James M. Smith (2007, p. 25) states that although these institutions were "founded with a philanthropic mission," they became, "by the close of the nineteenth century, more carceral than rehabilitative in nature". This paralleled the Catholic Church's growing power and influence in Ireland, as from the 1830s onwards, "congregations of female religious began assuming control of Catholic Magdalen asylums" (Smith, 2007, p. 25). As Claire McGettrick *et al.* articulate, by the time that Ireland achieved independence in the early 1920s, the then predominantly Catholic-run asylums

> were already in place to perform their part in the purity project of nation-building. Their work was to contain the perilous bodies of those considered to be the most disrespectable: economically vulnerable girls and women. (McGettrick, *et al.*, 2021, p. 3)

These women, who were judged to be sexually deviant or at risk of such behaviour, were removed and confined to protect Ireland's reputation as a newly independent Catholic country with a strict moral code. According to Leanne McCormick and Seán O'Connell (2021, p. 34), a significant number of women from the Free State and later Republic were transferred to Northern Irish Catholic institutions, proving that the institutionalisation of women was

happening all over the island. As was the case in the Irish Free State, in Northern Ireland in the same period, there were both Catholic and Protestant run Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. The latter were specifically for unmarried pregnant women, while Magdalene Laundries were places of punishment for all women "deemed incorrigible" and seen to step outside of the strict and conservative boarders of Ireland's Catholic ideology (Coen *et al.*, 2023, pp. 2–3). South of the border, the vast majority of these institutions were Catholic run (McCormick *et al.*, 2021, p. 21). When committed to the Magdalene asylums, women were forced into a system of hard labour and prayer. Though often physically abused, the aim of their punishment was mainly psychological; they were forced to internalise what was deemed to be their guilt and shame and to rationalise their own incarceration.

The imprisonment of Magdalene women also deterred 'free' women from defying the traditional Catholic patriarchal system, keeping them under the control of their husbands or fathers under threat of being sent to a Magdalene Laundry themselves. The Irish Free State decided that "Ireland would be triumphantly Catholic above all else" to set itself apart from Britain (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 9). Newly Independent Ireland was made up of a heavily conservative State and the Catholic Church, which had increased in influence since before the Great Famine (1845–1852). By the time of Irish Independence, the Catholic Church had made itself indispensable to the governing powers and as Smith informs us:

> the governing burden of the British colonial administration was lightened as it increasingly ceded responsibility to the Catholic Church for areas of social welfare including education, health care, and institutional provision. (Smith, 2007, p. 24)

Ireland's Catholic identity was ardently felt and deeply ingrained. It was believed to have been an essential factor in the fight for Irish Independence and as such it became integral to the formation of the Irish Free State (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, pp. 9–10). The burden of a Catholic identity in relation to reproduction and sexual morality was placed disproportionately on Irish women post-independence. Irish women were solely responsible for enduring the shame and punishment resulting from inappropriate sexual conduct, whereas Irish men faced no penalty for sexually deviant behaviour.

Magdalene survivors received a State apology from Taoiseach Enda Kenny in 2013 and a limited redress scheme was introduced shortly after—following years of pressure. The redress scheme is legally considered to be a gift to survivors rather than an obligation. It includes a waiver that effectively forfeits legal rights to further challenge the State regarding the laundries. This scheme communicates that the State has "no legal obligations towards the

women and committed no wrongdoing" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 129). Members of government still deny the State's involvement in the laundries in an effort to supress

> the kind of knowledge that challenges the status quo of those who govern and the bases of respectability and control of knowledge on which they assume and enact their superior power. (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 5)

The Irish State facilitated the laundries by subsidising, by sending women and girls to them and by ensuring they stayed there (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, pp. 91, 102). McGettrick *et al.* (2021, p. 3) assert that Church and State are steadfast in remaining intentionally ignorant of their role in the Magdalene abuses and their responsibility in providing adequate compensation for survivors. This prevents survivors from gaining the justice and healing that they need (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 5). The Irish government's deliberate ignorance and evasion has been labelled a policy of "deny 'til they die'" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 54). 'The Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries' (2013) has been labelled "an exemplary document of how governing classes exert power through strategies of ignorance" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 114). In this report, there is continuous "miscounting, misapprehending, equivocation and mis-defining" along with "ignoring correspondence and reports" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 114) including survivor witness statements. The report also seeks to diminish the abuse suffered by Magdalene women, especially in comparison to other institutional abuse, such as that in the reformatory schools (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 18). The United Nations does not accept that the report was a result of "an independent and thorough investigation as required by international law" (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 84). By minimising the experiences of Magdalene survivors, the Irish government encourages the Irish public to move on and forget. The State-sanctioned narrative on the laundries has not changed; in his speech to welcome Pope Francis, who visited Ireland in 2018, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar implored the Pope to 'listen to the victims' of Church-related abuse in Ireland, the Taoiseach did not acknowledge any State responsibility when he said there was 'much to be done to bring about justice and truth and healing for victims and survivors' (McGettrick *et al.*, 2021, p. 191).

'Countervisuality' and Cinema

Countervisuality allows the most vulnerable members of society a voice and a space to be recognised. Fintan O'Toole (2009) reminds us that often there is "much more power in being

forced to confront what you already know than in being amazed by the unexpected". This describes the power of the countervisual. The countervisual is not something that is completely unknown, rather it is something that people are encouraged to ignore or look away from. Mirzoeff (2011, p. 1) compares this concept to a situation in which a person walks by a crime scene and a police officer tells them to move on as there is nothing to see when, in fact, they know otherwise.

As previously outlined, Mirzoeff (2009, p. 15) explains that visual culture must "claim the right to look" which includes "the claim to a history that is not told from the point of view of the police". By this he means that people must look for truths that are not necessarily sanctioned by State or Repressive State Apparatuses, as Louis Althusser (1972) defines them, and that visual culture has a responsibility to enable this 'look'. Cinema is a looking machine: it looks at the viewer; it looks at how the viewer looks; and it shows the viewer its own looking and how to look at others. The camera is an instrument of looking that reveals this process, rendering it explicit. It attempts to emulate the way viewers look at and watch each other in real life. From the very beginnings of cinema, its codes and conventions have been set up around the act of watching or 'the look'. Cinema uses techniques such as zoom in order to focus the viewer's watching, point-of-view shots in order for the viewer to vicariously experience the watching of one on-screen character by another and camera angles to establish power dynamics between the watcher and the watched. Cinematic watching is also gendered, objectifying women and empowering men, which inspired Laura Mulvey (1975) to develop her theory on 'the male gaze'. Significantly, cinematic apparatuses observe power structures and so may usefully foreground the observing of visualities. They have the ability to uphold repressive or patriarchal visualities, particularly in mainstream cinema. They also have the converse ability to deconstruct visualities, presenting countervisualities which, in turn, give a voice to vulnerable members of society and minorities.

Features of Melodrama

Melodrama is a style of film that prioritises emotion over action (Durgnat, 1991, p. 137) and often features a sensationalised plot to produce this emotion. While melodrama is a subgenre of drama, the drama genre tends to align more with realism, attempting to represent stories truthfully or realistically in a way that is believable for audiences. Melodrama instead prioritises emotion and has been associated with certain negative ideas such as "excess", "exaggeration" and "escapism", which has meant that it has been held in low esteem by many critics (Landy, 1991, p. 16). These negative associations are due to the heavy emphasis on

emotion over other elements, such as character development. Actors often exaggerate their behaviour and emotions in melodrama or behave in contradictory ways. Another typical feature of melodrama is victimisation of female characters (Landy, 1991, p. 14). Women are central to melodrama and are typically subjected to a series of events that cause deep suffering, which results in much of the emotion produced. There is also usually an extreme contrast between right and wrong (Carroll, 1991, p. 189). This means that 'good' characters appear saintly while 'bad' characters seem despicably evil. An attachment to an antiquated past is also evident in melodrama. Consequently, it tends to find solutions to social problems in a way that does not challenge power structures stemming from that past (Williams, 1998, p. 75). Melodrama often treats the symptoms rather than the causes of social issues and so problems tend to be dealt with on a personal level and case-by-case basis without consideration of wider social and political issues. It is important to consider, then, whether the ample suffering witnessed in *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners*, which may just be experienced by the viewer as a common feature of melodrama, in fact re-enforces the suffering that took place in institutions like these. The following section explores the films in turn, beginning with *The Magdalene Sisters* and evaluating each film's potential towards countervisuality as melodramas.

The Magdalene Sisters

The Magdalene Sisters, directed by Scottish filmmaker Peter Mullan and released in 2002, is set in Ireland in 1964. The film follows the stories of Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff), Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone) and Rose (Dorothy Duffy) as they enter a Magdalene Laundry. Margaret is sent to the laundry after she is raped by her cousin at a wedding, Bernadette is committed to the laundry because she is seen flirting with local boys from her school yard and Rose is incarcerated after giving birth to an illegitimate baby. The film follows the journey of the three women until they leave the institution. The plot of the *Magdalene Sisters* is depicted primarily using elements of melodrama but at times ventures into the Gothic genre. The early wedding reception scene stands out as particularly melodramatic due to the absence of dialogue, with all meaning expressed through exaggerated looks and gestures. The excessive cruelty of the nuns in the Magdalene Laundries occasionally crosses into the realm of the Gothic, which shares characteristics with the genre of melodrama, as will be explored. The potential for countervisuality is maximised towards the end of the film when the Magdalene women watch the Hollywood melodrama *The Bells of St Mary's* (1945) on Christmas Day, which will be looked at in detail shortly. Although this scene suggests that countervisuality can occur within melodrama, it is not enough to sustain the rest of the film which is marred by codes and

conventions contrary to countervisuality such as exaggeration, excessiveness and escapism. Another factor that signals *The Magdalene Sisters* as an example of the melodrama genre is its high level of watchability, which is one of the key attributes of melodrama. The film's commercial success at the box office, earning "€975,441 in its first four weeks" (Barton, 2004, p. 108) supports this assertion. Barton argues that this stemmed from a

> public appetite for dramas highlighting the corrosive effects of Church hegemony in the past when filtered through individual hardship narratives. (Barton, 2004, p. 108)

While *The Magdalene Sisters* undoubtedly serves as an informative film, its countervisual and consequently socially transformative potential is diminished by the limitations of melodrama. Melodrama, which prioritises the eliciting of emotion over challenging the viewer's perspective, restricts the film's ability to enact significant change in the viewer's mindset.

One of the most emotionally charged scenes in *The Magdalene Sisters* occurs immediately after Margaret is raped. The scene also clearly establishes that women, as previously noted, were blamed for improper sexual behaviour, even when they were victims of sexual violence. Meanwhile, men faced no repercussions for their actions, even when they were perpetrators of sexual violence. The entire scene unfolds within a single room, which is reminiscent of melodrama's theatrical origins. Margaret, having just been sexually assaulted by her cousin Kevin (Seán McDonagh), returns to the wedding reception where the band is playing. The viewer witnesses an emotional Margaret telling her relative Theresa (Julie Austin) what has happened. Theresa angrily approaches Kevin and questions him about his behaviour. She then notifies his father (uncredited) who, instead of addressing his son, looks at Margaret. Subsequently, Theresa informs Margaret's father (Ian Hanmore) who also looks at Margaret, which causes her to bow her head in shame. Both men interrogate Kevin and Margaret's father calls the priest (Seán Mackin) from the stage, leading to a conversation between the four men in a separate room. Margaret's father can be seen pointing her out to the priest through a gap in the wall. After a few moments, Kevin is led out of the reception by his father. Margaret's father continues to talk to the priest in the doorway. Close-ups of a worried Margaret are interspersed with all these interactions as she becomes increasingly anxious. Shots of Margaret's mother (Deirdre Davis) also punctuate the scene as she begins to notice that something is wrong, but she remains still, and completely and deliberately separated from the proceedings. Shots of male hands playing musical instruments onstage are also intercut with the action. This manual imagery strongly implies male agency, blame and responsibility; that her fate is 'in the hands of men' so to speak. The scene ends with a tearful Margaret looking towards her father for support and receiving a scathing accusatory stare. As this occurs,

Margaret's attack is mouthed from person to person while traditional Irish music drowns out all other sound. This scene bears resemblance to silent cinema, where the narrative is conveyed to the viewer solely through looks and actions, with no audible dialogue, while the music sets the tone. Thomas Schatz (1991, p. 149) discusses how silent cinema uses particular techniques to "enhance the victims' virtuous suffering" such as "long camera takes" and "frequent close-ups of the anxious heroine". The scene features both of these while the diegetic music drowns out all dialogue. This adds to an overall 'excess' as well as the suffering of a female character, which are key features of melodrama, and which establish the scene as a melodramatic one. Excess within melodrama refers to a general over-expression of emotions and emotive actions, mainly through character.

Martin McLoone (2008, p. 123) argues that this scene is remarkably effective in highlighting the "hierarchy of male power" within 1960s Ireland. Though this observation holds true, it still feeds into the conservatism inherent in melodrama, which dictates that women should continuously and visibly suffer on screen. Margaret's suffering is highlighted by dramatic pointing, frequent shot/reverse shots between characters and a deliberate close-up focus on male hands. The concentration on male hands becomes a characteristic of melodrama which always strives "to force meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language," (Gledhill, 1987, p. 33). This is re-enforced by the apparent inadequacy of dialogue in a scene where language is drowned out by these same male hands playing their instruments. Male hands also serve to heighten Margaret's powerlessness in this scene. Within the space of victimhood, it is difficult to create any kind of countervisual perspective, as the viewer of melodrama is expected to encounter victims and feel sympathy. In this way, the victim becomes just another familiar convention of the genre, rather than a catalyst for the viewer to reflect on the laundries, or the identity-affirming ideologies that sustained them, in new and insightful ways.

Another central attribute of melodrama that prominently features in *The Magdalene Sisters*, and consequently undermines its potential for countervisuality, is extremism. The nuns in the film are caricatures in their villainy at times, allowing the viewer to be faced with two extremes of good and evil. This exaggerated portrayal further solidifies the placement of *The Magdalene Sisters* within the realm of melodrama. Marcia Landy (1991, p. 16) affirms this when she connects melodrama with 'excess' and 'exaggeration'. Gledhill proposes that in melodrama:

> innocence and villainy construct each other: while the villain is necessary to the production and revelation of innocence, innocence defines the boundaries of the forbidden which the villain breaks. (Gledhill, 1987, p. 21)

As the behaviour of the nuns becomes progressively more evil, the confined women appear increasingly innocent. This undercuts the film's ability to be countervisual as it reduces characters to stereotypes that cannot convey the complexity of the laundry experience for either the nuns or the Magdalene women.

The film also occasionally incorporates elements of the Gothic. In one particularly shocking scene, Sister Jude (Frances Healy) and Sister Clementine (Eithne McGuinness) humiliate a group of naked women, comparing their breast size and genital hair. Elizabeth Cullingford (2006, p. 16) notes that "Mullan's fact-based film participates in a long-established fictional genre constituted by melodramatic exaggeration: the sexualized anti-Catholic Gothic". Melodramatic exaggeration such as the kind this scene conveys indeed pushes this film into the territory of the Gothic. William Patrick Day (1985, p. 63) stresses that the Gothic primarily uses spectacle in order to express and instil fear in the viewer rather than through the use of characters or narrative. In the scene where the Magdalene women are forced to strip in front of two nuns for their amusement, it is the spectacle of this that is highlighted in the frame. The setting of a convent is also something that re-enforces the Gothic nature of this scene, as Jerrold E. Hogle (2002, p. 2) notes that a Gothic setting is often "an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space". Hogle argues that:

> the oppression and 'othering' of the female seen from her own point of view has been a principal Gothic subject. (Hogle 2002, p. 10)

The Magdalene women are continuously othered and oppressed within *The Magdalene Sister*s, particularly in scenes like this, which could reasonably be labelled as Gothic. Like melodrama, the Gothic genre features excess (Hogle, 2002, p. 1) and the victimisation of women; hence the styles of melodrama and the Gothic work well together as they share certain characteristics. Hogle (2002, p. 10) explains that the "confinement of woman by patriarchy" is a common theme of the Gothic. It is the spectacle of the nuns' excessive cruelty within an antiquated space of female punishment that pushes this film into Gothic territory. Within this Gothic context, it is very difficult to portray any kind of countervisual perspective that indicates the shared responsibility of Church, State and society for the existence of these institutions. Rather, it singularly emphasises a certain kind of evil that stems from the religious zealotism at the core of the official Irish national narrative. It directs all blame and responsibility onto the Church and the Church alone.

Another example of melodramatic exaggeration that pushes the film into the realms of the Gothic and which further limits its ability to be critical and countervisual happens after Bernadette's first attempted escape. Bernadette is pinned down by Sister Jude and Sister Clementine while Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan) cuts her hair as blood streams down her face. The viewer is presented with a close-up of Bernadette's bloodied eye with Sister Bridget's face reflected in her pupil. Cullingford (2006, p. 31) calls this "a striking moment of visual gothic" and reasons that Mullan's aesthetics and anger "lead him into melodramatic exaggeration". Here, again, we see that the spectacle of the scene and the exaggeration of Bernadette's bloodied eye within an antiquated space of patriarchal female confinement make this scene Gothic. Exaggeration, however, diminishes much of the complexity around the existence of the laundries. Gledhill (1987, p. 32) recognises that melodrama frequently stems from "an attachment to an outmoded past—to what seem simplistic Victorian personifications of Good and Evil, Innocence and Villainy". Good and evil are depicted in very simplistic terms within this film. Smith makes the important point that:

> the film fails to explore a crucial irony of this history–that it was abuse committed by one group of Irish women against another, in a society and during a time when women's agency was subject to a patriarchal church and state oppression. (Smith, 2007, p. 150)

This is a crucial consideration that cannot possibly be explored with simplistic personifications of good and evil. Smith speaks about the fact that entering the convent for many young women was their way of escaping:

> the precarious navigation of the nation's discourse of sexual morality, a morality offering marriage as the only acceptable vehicle for human sexuality and holding women responsible for all transgressions of societal proscriptions. (Smith, 2007, p. 157)

The nuns' motivations are not explored in *The Magdalene Sisters*. Mullan perhaps avoids this in order to focus on the plight of the Magdalene women and to emphasise their suffering as innocent victims. In underlining the women's innocence, Mullan exaggerates the nuns' depravity. However, the nuns were also subjected to a patriarchal system in which they lacked agency. Many women became nuns to escape the limited options available to them besides marriage and procreation. An attack solely on the Catholic Church cannot demonstrate the wider social dynamics and the collaboration between Church and State in running the laundries. As this version of events does not challenge the State-endorsed visuality—that the Church is exclusively responsible for the laundries—it cannot be countervisual.

Although the melodramatic nature of *The Magdalene Sisters* limits its ability to be countervisual, one scene that does possess countervisual potential is when the nuns organise a film viewing on Christmas Day. The film, chosen by the archbishop, is *The Bells of St Mary's*

starring Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman as a mother superior. The whole institutional community has gathered for the occasion and Sister Bridget announces her secret love for "the films". Through the framed screening of *The Bells of St Mary's*, the viewer is shown the idealisation of Catholicism juxtaposed with the grim reality. Smith (2007, p. 156) affirms that Mullan's placing of the two reverend mothers side by side "exposes the seductive sentimentality that works through popular media to buttress the nuns' absolute power". The framed diegetic watching of the classic Hollywood film presents us with a Church-sanctioned visuality that is simultaneously deconstructed through the eyes of the Magdalene women. This act of countervisual watching is privileged in this scene and demonstrates the disillusionment experienced by the Magdalene women. It is an interesting, almost carnivalesque space where the women have the opportunity to watch the nuns for once and evade their gaze. Normally, the Magdalene women are subjected to a "compulsory visibility" which "assures the hold of power that is exercised over them" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 187). As Ingrid Bergman, framed in close-up, tearfully prays for help on screen, Margaret, Rose and Bernadette watch disbelievingly as Sister Bridget's eyes fill with tears. The use of a Hollywood melodrama in this scene that idealises the Church and the convent also acts as a critique of the melodrama genre itself. Ironically, the melodramatic film moves Sister Bridget to tears when the real-life suffering of the women under her care fails to elicit emotion. This communicates the superficiality of feelings stirred up by melodrama. The scene therefore achieves countervisuality once more in how it reveals the limitations and shallow nature of melodrama and briefly breaks the spell. Smith (2007, p. 155) remarks that, in the scene, Margaret, Bernadette and Rose's reaction to the film shows Mullan's audience "the need to resist the seductive powers of popular cultural representation and its distortion of complex social realities". Though countervisuality is achieved in this scene, it is not achieved throughout the film. Consequently, there is a distortion of complex social realities in the rest of Mullan's film due to the restrictions and conventions of melodrama.

Sinners

Also released in 2002, *Sinners* by Irish director Aisling Walsh, is set in Ireland in 1963. *Sinners* follows Anne-Marie (Anne-Marie Duff) as her aunt commits her to a Magdalene Laundry because she has become pregnant out of wedlock. Anne-Marie eventually gives birth and after her child is taken from her, she agrees to marry a local man in order to be released from the laundry. Narratively, and in many ways formally, *Sinners* is very similar to *The Magdalene Sisters*. The structure of melodrama rigidly shapes the narratives in both films, and they even

have similarities in casting, with Anne-Marie Duff playing a woman confined to a Magdalene Laundry in both films. Anne-Marie is compelled to marry a stranger in order to escape the laundry, proving the tendency of melodrama to solve problems in a way that does not challenge existing power structures. Anne-Marie's friend Kitty (Bronagh Gallagher) behaves in contradictory ways in order to fulfil the role of the melodramatic victim, which the genre dictates. Lastly, the repeated framing of women looking out of windows also embodies an element of melodrama, where significance is assigned to objects beyond the limits of language. This attribute also hinders the potential for countervisuality. One of the key ways in which *Sinners* differs from *The Magdalene Sisters* is in its use of pop songs, which feature diegetically throughout the film. This provides a contrast between the nature of 1960s culture and the laundry space, which conveys a backwardness and portrays a sense that the Magdalene women have been forgotten and left behind. It is the radio that sets up one of the few countervisual moments of the film. However, despite the clever use of the radio, the film is limited by the generic conventions of melodrama which nullify much of its countervisual potential.

As melodrama deals with social problems that exist within a specific society, there are always particular contributing political and ideological factors. However, melodrama does not deal with these issues as this would go against the conservative nature of the genre, as already mentioned. Linda Williams claims that one

> of the key features of melodrama is its compulsion to reconcile the irreconcilable–that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return. (Williams, 1998, p. 75)

She clarifies that this resistance does not address the real problems; it only addresses the effects of those problems (Williams, 1998, p. 76). After an attempted escape, Anne-Marie hides in the house of a widower called Frank (John Kavanagh). Though he initially informs the police of her whereabouts, he later visits her at the institution. He explains that he thought she might have been a "lunatic" as he knows about "you Maggies". This conveys the pervasive societal view about the women locked away in Magdalene Laundries. Anne-Marie asks Frank to help her convince her brother Eammon (Michael Colgan) to take her home. He returns to tell her that Eammon will not be coming to sign her out and instead offers to marry her. He prefaces this by saying "I know people will think I'm mad taking on a Maggie," again betraying his prejudice towards Magdalene women. He is motivated more by his own loneliness and attraction to Anne-Marie than any sense of duty or kindness. Anne-Marie agrees to marry Frank but insists that they have a non-sexual relationship. Frank initially disagrees arguing, "You'd

be my wife, it'd be your duty". Again, the audience is reminded that Frank is a conservative man living within a conservative Catholic country propped up by misogynist ideologies and visualities. Anne-Marie does not relent, and Frank finally agrees. A sham marriage to a virtual stranger is the only solution to Anne-Marie's internment. An Irish woman can only gain respectability within the confines of marriage or the convent, the reasons for which melodrama does not challenge. Gledhill (1987, p. 38) acknowledges that melodrama "addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible". Although the character of Anne-Marie points out the underlying misogyny in the process of punishing only women and never men, Anne-Marie's liberation does not free the other Magdalene women or end the system of female incarceration and restriction. Similarly, in *The Magdalene Sisters*, Margaret's release and Bernadette and Rose's escape does not free the other penitents. If melodrama is only able to find solutions within an existing power structure and without challenging the authority of that power structure, it cannot be countervisual. Countervisuality involves looking beyond the ideologies endorsed by the ruling powers towards an alternative way of living or seeing. Marriage is a way of solving Anne-Marie's problem of confinement without challenging the authorities and visualities that caused Anne-Marie to be incarcerated and again demonstrates the limitations of melodrama and its repeated failure to be countervisual.

Due to a specific melodramatic structure, in which intense emotion is prioritised over character development and plot, characters often behave in a way that is contrary to what has already been established. They do this to bring about potent moments of emotional expression, which in turn cause an emotional response in the audience. Mulvey observes that

> melodramatic characters act out of contradiction, achieving actual confrontation to varying degrees and gradually facing impossible resolutions and probable defeats. (Mulvey, 1987, p. 77)

For instance, Kitty hopes that she can convince Patrick (Gary Lydon)—a policeman who attends the laundry regularly—to marry her so that she can keep her daughter and free herself from the laundry. She also hopes that he will let Anne-Marie live with them too. This is hopelessly naïve, especially as Patrick presents as a fickle character whose mother and sister rely on him financially. It is also out of character for Kitty, who has been a source of reason and wisdom for Anne-Marie up to this point. When Patrick informs the nuns of his affair with Kitty, she is beaten and her daughter is taken from her. Shortly after, she commits suicide, which is the culmination of a series of intense moments of victimisation. In relation to Kitty's story, we can see that the formal mechanisms of melodrama largely guide her actions and limit her behaviour. Mary Ann Doane (1987, p. 296) admits that "the woman's film", melodrama,

is not at all "radical or revolutionary. It functions quite precisely to immobilise". For countervisuality to occur, melodrama needs be radical and revolutionary. Though Anne-Marie begins to fight the system by refusing to work, this does not free her from the institution. Melodrama as a mechanism can only bring about her liberation through her concession to the Catholic ideological apparatus of marriage. Thomas Elsaesser reflects that the

> persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms. (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 47)

Witnessing innocent women being abused physically and verbally forces the audience to feel sympathy for them as previously pointed out in relation to *The Magdalene Sisters* but it does not necessarily make them aware of the socio-political causes for the laundries. As Elsaesser (1987, p. 47) claims, the persistence of melodrama "has encouraged increasingly escapist forms of mass-entertainment". Escapist forms of cinema cannot conjure up countervisual perspectives that challenge power structures and State-endorsed ideologies because the viewer must be conscious of the political points that the film is making while they are watching and they therefore cannot 'switch off'.

Furthermore, the use of space and boundaries in melodrama is deliberate and gendered; melodrama tends to place women in the domestic positions they are tied to in larger society. This normalises the confinement of women to the home and limits female characters' agency beyond the realms of the home. In melodrama, signification is attached to space in the same way as it is attached to objects to convey emotion and meaning beyond what words can express. Doane observes that the

> deployment of space in the 'woman's film' is motivated rather directly by a fairly strict mapping of gender-differentiated societal spaces onto the films — the woman's place is in the home. (Doane 1987, p. 285)

Though the female characters in both *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners* are not in a traditional home, they are in a space where they must carry out the same work and that they are forbidden to leave. The Magdalene Laundry is the space into which these women have, due to their perceived transgressions, been displaced beyond the site of the home. The tendency of melodrama to re-enforce women's role in the home is problematic when dealing with narratives concerning the confinement of Irish women as punishment for transgressing the boundaries of the domestic. Doane reflects that within melodrama.

> images of women looking through windows or waiting at windows abound. The window has special import in terms of the social and symbolic positioning of the woman — the window is the interface between inside and outside, the feminine space of the family and

> reproduction and the masculine space of production. It facilitates a communication by means of the look between the two sexually differentiated spaces. (Doane, 1987, p. 288)

For example, in *The Magdalene Sisters* we witness Margaret's mother looking sorrowfully out of the window as Margaret is driven away to the laundry. She is immobilised within the space of the home due to her position in Irish society. Margaret's father, in contrast, escorts Margaret to the car, occupying the masculine outdoor space of agency. Windows as markers of boundaries and the act of looking through them takes on extra significance in *Sinners*, as each time a child is taken away from its mother, she watches powerlessly from a high window overlooking the driveway. The feminine space of the inside becomes barren as each child is taken from its mother to be with a new, wealthier mother in a traditional home space. Shots of mothers watching their babies leave them are used to punctuate the narrative of this film, marking the first, second and third acts. The first of these occurs when Anne-Marie arrives in the laundry, and she sees a young woman crying at the window. This scene is used to foreshadow the moment when Anne-Marie will be forced to part with her own child. It also initiates an emotional expectation on the part of the viewer from this point onwards. The second act is marked by Brída (Elaine Symons) watching from the window as her child is taken away. The emotional stakes are raised here as Brída is a much more prominent character than the woman from the first act in whom the audience have invested more emotional interest. Anne-Marie has also given birth by this time, and she has reluctantly connected with her child. The audience knows that her separation from her son is now imminent. Brída refuses to get upset and insists she is happy for her daughter to be spoiled by her wealthy adoptive parents. As she watches out the window, she is perhaps envious of her daughter's freedom. She turns on the radio and dances alone to "Don't Let the Sun Catch you Crying" (1964) by Gerry and the Pacemakers. The song suggests a forced moving on emotionally from this event by Brída and, more importantly, by the audience. This demonstrates the manipulative nature of melodrama that not only tells the viewer how to feel but also the pace at which they should move forward. In the third act, Anne-Marie's baby is taken after she has escaped, been recaptured by the police and brutally punished by the nuns which represents the height of her emotional crisis. Tears stream down her bruised face as she holds up her hand to the window. As the three act structure dictates, her story is resolved shortly after when she marries Frank and leaves the laundry. These painful moments, within the structure of melodrama, are just another narrative device. *Sinners* cannot sustain countervisuality beyond brief moments as it strictly adheres to the conventions of melodrama, which serve to generate an emotional response rather than challenge audience perceptions.

Countervisual potential in *Sinners* is evident early in the film when the women, under the surveillance of a nun, are sewing and knitting in the evening room. In this scene countervisuality is achieved using sound as it communicates with the image. Mirzoeff's notion of visuality and countervisuality does not just concern the purely visual. He clarifies that vision in terms of visuality is more akin to the definition of vision that encompasses imagination and creative power. Mirzoeff (2009, p. 3) states that "vision is never singular but involves all the senses and modes of psychology". Sound is an essential cinematic tool that guides the viewer's gaze and the way they understand the meaning of the images presented to us. In this scene, one woman cries as she watches her child being taken away by their new parents against her will. On the radio, a commentator describes events as President Eamon de Valera (1882–1975) is being blessed in a special mass. The woman's weeping is so loud that it obscures the sound of the radio and a nun walks over and increases the volume, callously drowning out the woman's tears. The nun leaves the room and Brída changes the station so that "Walking Back to Happiness" by Helen Shapiro (1962) plays. Brída begins dancing with Angela (Ruth Bradley). The coupling of a mother's anguish at being separated from her baby and the Catholic blessing of Eamon de Valera is highly significant. In the diegetic pairing of sounds, Walsh implicates de Valera in this woman's suffering. De Valera bears a lot of responsibility for the incarceration of Irish women and the dispossession of their children. Cullingford affirms that it was

> de Valera's 1937 constitution, which accorded the Catholic Church a 'special position' within the Irish State, enshrined the heterosexual family as the national norm, and defined women solely as mothers 'within the home'. (Cullingford, 2006, p. 24)

Women who stepped outside of their defined space were deemed a threat to the government sanctioned ideologies and visualities and were consequently separated from the rest of society. A key part of this scene is when Brída interrupts de Valera's blessing in favour of the pop song "Walking Back to Happiness". This is where the countervisual potential of the scene comes to the fore. Switching the station in this way is a rejection of Eamon de Valera by these women and the Catholic visualities that he upheld and enforced, which were scaffolded by the laundries. Moreover, it is a rejection of the relationship between Irish Church and State and their authorised visualities. The lyrics "walking back to happiness" indicate a metaphorical change in direction or vision, a way back to happiness and an escape from the misery of religious oppression by turning away from Church and State visualities. Walsh implicates the State in the Magdalene Laundries and directly names Eamon de Valera as a key conspirator. This is a much stronger indictment of the State than achieved by Mullan in *The Magdalene Sisters*.

Conclusion

Ultimately, melodrama is too restrictive as a genre to successfully achieve countervisuality. While a progressive director's aim may be to highlight a certain social inequality, the formal fundamentals of melodrama impose limitations on the material that make the resulting film quite conservative and unable to truly further the discourse or challenge viewers ways of seeing. *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners* reproduce patterns of domination and exploitation in relation to the Magdalene Laundries and as such they cannot sustain countervisuality. Cinema that is conservative in form cannot be socially transformative and awaken resistance as its formal mechanisms reproduce reactionary patterns of containment. Though melodrama has allowed women a valuable place in cinema, it is still a highly limiting genre that often becomes contradictory in its objectives. Mainstream melodrama is a repressive apparatus in itself, and so, when melodrama as a genre is employed, with all the best intentions, to construct narratives within institutional settings such as the Magdalene Laundries, it tends to formally reinforce the oppression of these places. *The Magdalene Sisters* and *Sinners* cannot meaningfully further the discourse around the laundries towards helping the nation deal with its traumatic past as both films suggest—especially with their reasonably happy endings—that there is nothing more to reflect on. Neither film suggests the existence of any lasting trauma (either on a national level or for the survivors) and instead the viewer is left with a sense of closure and the belief that these tragic events belong to the past. These films do not put any kind of pressure on the contemporary Irish State to fulfil its moral obligation to the Magdalene women. Instead, they uphold State-sanctioned visualities that the laundries are a thing of the past to be blamed predominantly on the Church with no bearing on the present day. The reality is that the survivors of the Magdalene institutions and the charities working on their behalf continue to fight for proper and just treatment by the State in terms of their human rights and recognition as survivors of abuse at the hands of the Irish State and Church combined.

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