

Remembering, Resisting, Reclaiming:

**An Exploration of the Relationship Between Counter-Memory, Visual
Representation and Ireland's Magdalene Laundries**

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the relationship between counter-memory, visual representations and Ireland's Magdalene laundries. Through the exploration of three chosen visual works: Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* (1992), Steve Humphrie's *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) and Alison Lowry's *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* (2019), this thesis will explore the different representations of the Magdalene women and experiences, analyse the way in which each individual way engages with memory and assess if the chosen works can be considered to be sites of counter-memory which challenge the hegemonic historical narrative in which the Magdalene women have been rendered largely invisible and voiceless. The Magdalene asylums operated in Ireland from the late 18th century, with the first institution opening in Dublin in 1767 (Smith, 2007, p.25). Originally set up by religious orders with the intention to house and reform sex workers who were perceived to be "fallen" women, these asylums changed function following the turn of the 20th century. These institutions became a place where women who were deemed to be morally impure and corrupt were coercively confined, forced to rigorous and harsh free labor while being subjected to a myriad of abuses. It is estimated that between 10,000 to 30,000 thousand women passed through these institutions during their years of operation. And yet, the history of these women is seldom known. The experiences and stories of the Magdalene women have been expunged from Irish history and confined to the peripheries, shrouded in secrecy and shame. This research aims to contribute to the small, yet significant, body of work which exists about the Magdalen women, by providing further visibility about their existence and experiences and exploring how they can be included in the Irish collective memory.

SECTION 1

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to explore if, and how, visual representations of Ireland's Magdalene laundries can be considered as counter-memories to the existing hegemonic historical narrative, in which the history of the Magdalene laundries and the experiences of the Magdalene women have been rendered largely invisible. This exploration has been prompted by an interest in the frequent erasure of women's history from many national historiographies, and in particular, by the persistence of Irish society to ensure that the history of the Magdalene women remain shrouded in secrecy and silence. This thesis also sets out to answer a number of sub questions such as: "Why is it important to remember?", "How are we currently remembering and forgetting the Magdalene history?", and "How do visual cultural representations engage with memory so that we can remember?". In order to answer these questions, it is imperative to first understand how the existence of the Magdalene institutions came into being and what their function was within Irish society.

The legacy of the suffocating control which the Catholic church had within Ireland is a spectre which haunts the country to this day (Fischer, 2016, p.822). Following the decolonisation of Ireland in the 1920's, the Irish State and Catholic Church joined forces to reshape Irish national identity in a way that was distinctly different from Britain. These institutions centred their notions of "Irishness" around a Catholic and Gaelic ethos (Marsden, 2005, p.95). The reshaping of social policy and society in general followed with a particular focus on women and sexuality (Titley, 2006, p. 2). An obsession with sexual morality gripped the country as the aim to be a pure and Catholic nation burrowed into the minds of many. It is now widely argued that repression of the female body became one of the cornerstones of the Irish social ethos as a result of the decolonisation process (Herr, 1990, p.5). Any behavioural deviance which could jeopardise the virtuous and principled Catholic nation must be quickly dealt with: removed from view, hidden away and made invisible. As a result of this nationwide moral panic, the Irish State and catholic Church began to weave an "architecture of containment" (Smith, 2007, p.15), which has also been referred to as the Irish "carceral archipelago" (Holme, 2017, p.155). This archipelago included a range of interlinked

institutions which included mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries, industrial schools, psychiatric asylums and adoption agencies (Smith, 2007, p.15). Individuals within these institutions were confined there based on a plethora of reasons, including but not limited to: pregnancy outside of marriage, illegitimacy, poverty, sexual deviancy, being a victim of sexual abuse, orphanage, abandonment and mental illness (Smith, 2007, p.16). Individuals who were “guilty” of such acts contradicted the emerging national narrative and so, were not welcomed in Irish society. Although each institution included in the architecture of confinement merits its own research, the focus of this thesis is solely on the Magdalene laundries.

The Magdalene asylums operated in Ireland from the late 18th century, with the first institution opening in Dublin in 1767 (Smith, 2007, p.25). Originally set up by religious orders with the intention to house and reform sex workers, Magdalene asylums were a common feature of the Victorian era and functioned quite commonly across much of Western Europe and North America. Even though conditions in these asylums were punitive, they still had a somewhat altruistic element to them. Although there was nothing inherently Irish about these asylums for “fallen” women, it is widely acknowledged that the evolution of these asylums into a carceral and punitive function, alongside the mere longevity of the operations of such institutions is solely unique to Ireland (Smith, 2007, p.26). The years of particular focus for this research are from 1922, when Ireland gained its independence, to 1996, the year that the last laundry closed in Dublin. In these years, it is estimated that between 10,000 to 30,000 women and girls were incarcerated in the Magdalene laundries. Upon entering these institutions, it was common practice to have your name forcibly changed to that of a biblical name and your possessions stripped. Women were given shapeless, coarse brown uniforms and were subjected to having their hair forcibly cut and for those who resisted, they often had their head sheared as a form of retribution (JFM Research, 2015). It is widely acknowledged that women in these institutions experienced a myriad of abuse, including “arbitrary detention, forced servitude and labor, psychological, physical and sexual abuse, denial of education to children, or many other forms of abuse” (O’Rourke & Smith, 2013, p.4). However, the truth and the extent to which women suffered in these institutions is an issue that is stifled by lack of access to archival files and source material. Both the Irish government and religious orders involved in the running of the Magdalene Laundries have prohibited access to such resources but even with access to these resources, the information regarding reason for internment, cause of death and burial records were poorly kept or not kept at all in some institutions and so, it is

impossible to collect complete data (Yeager & Cullteon, 2016, p.134). As a consequence of the lack of official documents, there exists in Ireland a distorted narrative about the laundries.

The case of the Irish Magdalene women is an example which illustrates how a marginalised group within society can be removed from the collective narrative and subjected to historical erasure, a process also known as collective amnesia (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1103) However, the frameworks of memory are fluid and subject to change and collective memories can be more likened to reconstructions rather than recollections (Riceour as quoted in Rousseau, 2016, p.304). Therefore, it is possible that memories can be reshaped and changed. They can be brought from the margins and integrated into mainstream memory. I will argue throughout this thesis that the creation of counter-memories is one such way in which hegemonic memory can be challenged.

Indeed, it has been suggested that considering the unavailability of official documents and sources, the memory of the Magdalene laundries exists solely at the level of storytelling and cultural representations (Smith, 2007, p.82) (Rousseau, 2016, p.301) (Antosik Parsons, 2009, p.7). Furthermore, in his book “Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment”, Smith argues that visual representations of the laundries, more so than any other form of representation, has made the biggest impact on Ireland's memory landscape (Smith, 2007, p.118). It is with the consideration of this argument that I have chosen visual cultural representations of the Magdalene laundries to be the objects of research for this thesis.

In order to explore the possibility in which visual representations can act as counter-memories to collective amnesia, three visual works have been chosen based on their portrayal of the Magdalene laundries and the response they have elicited from Irish society. The visual representations which will be explored and analysed throughout this thesis includes Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992), Steve Humphries documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) and Alison Lowry's art installation *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* (2019). I have chosen to analyse Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* as it is considered to be the first ever visual representation of the Magdalene laundries and is often accredited as the source which created the imagery and tropes related to the Magdalene laundries and which inspired the production of later documentaries. Between 1993 and 1999, four film documentaries aired on international television stations, of the four, I have chosen to explore Humphrie's *Sex in a Cold Climate*. This particular documentary was the one which elicited the most public outrage and response

with it making its way onto radio stations and into newspaper headlines (Smith, 2007, p. 115). Finally, the work of artist Alison Lowry titled, *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* will be included as part of the analysis chapter in order to draw a contemporary comparison between the visual representations which have been produced twenty-seven and twenty-one years apart, respectively.

CHAPTER 1

How Do We Remember? Exploring Collective Memory and Counter-Memory

This chapter will explore the concept of collective memory, its functions and its components as formulated by Halbwach and Assmann. By theoretically deconstructing the notion of collective memory, I will highlight how it functions in the dissemination of memory and knowledge and how it relates to identity. I will then explore the concept of counter-memory and its ability to actively challenge the hegemonic narratives of collective memory. Finally, I will offer an explanation of how cultural representation functions within collective memory and how it can act as a form of resistance to the dominating narrative which silences the history of the Magdalene laundries.

1.1 Collective Memory

The theoretical concept of collective memory is central to this thesis and indeed, to understanding the veil of silence and invisibility which shrouds the Magdalene laundries. Due to the lack of correctly kept records and the lack of accessibility to the records that do exist, there exists a difficulty in piecing together the entire story of what occurred behind the walls of the Magdalene Laundries. The lack of access to crucial information has repeatedly resulted in memory lapses, both at a governmental level and at a public level (Rousseau, 2016, p.304) and has perpetuated a narrative of silence which has been crafted by Irish society. In order to explore how to reshape and counter the collective memory which excludes the Magdalene women, we must first understand how collective memory is formed and structured in the first place.

The term collective memory, which is often also referred to as “social” and “cultural” memory is an umbrella term, used across a number of academic disciplines, which encompasses a range on mnemonic products and practices and seeks to understand the relationship between memory and social-cultural contexts (Erl, 2008, p.3). The contemporary use of the term “collective memory” stems from the influential sociologist Maurice Halbwach’s and his work “*Social Frameworks of Memory*” which was published in 1925. Halbwach’s concept of collective memory is framed as much in the present as it is in the past and is considered fluid rather than static (Olick, 2008, p.151). It is concerned with how minds work

together within a society and how their operations are shaped by social structures and arrangements. Halbwach states that “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwach as referenced in Olick, 2008, p.152). Collective memory asserts that even the most individual of memories have been shaped by social organisation and that it is impossible for a person to remember in any coherent way that is outside of their group context. Olick explains that “all individual remembering, that is, takes place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues (2008, p.156).

Collective memory is not a *thing*, instead, it is an encompassing umbrella which refers to mnemonic products and practices (Olick, 2008, p.152). Mnemonic products (which are also cultural representations) includes such things as books, movies, photographs, paintings, statues, stories and folklore while mnemonic practices refer to acknowledgment, representation, recall, celebration, denial, excuse and more. Mnemonic practices are constantly occurring in a multiplicity of ways through a multiplicity of mnemonic products, the two are inevitably intertwined with products being necessary to facilitate practices and practices being necessary to facilitate meaning. Considering this so, cultural representations gain a new kind of significance when placed in the context of memory (Rousseau, 2008, p.304) and by acknowledging such devices as valid representations they possess the possibility act as counter-memories which could re-mould the existing collective memory

The term *collective memory* simultaneously emphasises the relationship between memory and socio-cultural contexts and envelopes a range of sociological mnemonic products and productions including media, practices and structures including monuments, historiography, variations of cultural knowledge, art and myths (Erll, 2008, p.390). The collective memory of a nation normally reflects the accepted historiography of that country. However, considering the patriarchal power dynamics which exist in the world, historiography is inherently androcentric and gendered and therefore, never objective (Melman, 1993, p.7). The selectivity of a country’s historiography therefore permeates its collective memory, which has a direct effect on what is remembered and on the identity formation of certain groups (Erll, 2008, p.4). Considering that collective memory is formed by dominant historical narratives and societal and cultural norms it seems inevitable then that anyone is deemed unfavourable within these norms, should be written out and intentionally forgotten about. (Jelin, 2003, p.29). Indeed, memory glorifies some while it completely silences others. The ability to claim and define the past, deciding what will be ingested into the national narrative and collective memory of a

society reflects the power of certain groups (Yeager & Culleton, 2016, p. 134). This argument is reinstated by Ailbhe Smyth in her paper “The Floozie in the Jacuzzi”, where she addresses sites of contestation and struggle while discussing Irish women’s invisibility within the Irish historical cannon: ‘Disremembered. Unremembered. No body, so to speak. No past to speak of. Unremembering our history of absence, sign of our existence’ (1989). The importance of collective memory lies in its ability to cohesively unite a group of people by shaping historical narratives that reinforce perceived identities while leaving others omitted and struggling to find a sense of identity and a place of belonging.

1.2 Counter-Memory

The concept ‘counter-memory’, developed by Foucault in his works “Language, Counter-Memory and Practice (1997), applies to the process of remembering within a socio-political climate. Counter-memory is inherently a form of resistance as it liberates subjugated bodies and knowledges from official discourses of history or ‘regimes of truth’ (Radzobe, 2019, p. 92). Access to knowledge of the past is tied up in various power relations and structures, it is rife with tensions and includes intentional omissions within official history. The Foucaultian concept of counter-memory resists precisely this. Counter-memory then are memories and histories which actively seeks to include those who have been omitted from hegemonic historical narratives, returning voices to those who have been made silent and rendered invisible (Medina, 2011, p. 13). Hegemonic histories work to create and maintain a shared sense of unity and identity so that dominant political bodies can remain. These imposed shared histories bring together a larger section of society by ostracising and silencing any alternative variations of historical experiences (Medina, 2011, p.14). In his work “*Performance as Counter-Memory: Latvian Theatre Makers’ Reflection on National History*, Radzobe remarks that “counter-memory highlights the reversed perspective of ‘bottom-up’, representing the process during which different groups and individuals try to influence the existing knowledge and struggle for a recognition of marginalized discourses of the past” (2019, p.94).

1.3 Representation and Resistance

Different artistic devices and media produce their own way of remembering. Erll argues that fictional media, such as theatre, film and literature harness the potential to shape the collective imagination of the past in a way that is truly fascinating. They generate and reshape images of the past which can be retained by entire generations and the different modes used to

represent the past has an effect on the type of memory that will be created and may also elicit different forms of collective remembering (Erll, 2008, p.396). But why are some cultural representations appropriated into collective memory more than others? Erll contends that in order for a form of media or artistic representation to be integrated into collective memory, they need to spark an opening up of dialogue and that the best way to do this is by being controversial. Erll states that “their memory-making effect lies not in the unity, coherence, and ideological unambiguousness of the images they convey, but instead in the fact that they serve as cues for the discussion of those images, thus centering a memory culture on certain medial representations and sets of questions connected with them” (2008, p.396). I contend that Erll’s reasoning alongside the immense gap in available historical documents, has placed cultural representations of the Magdalene Laundries in a particularly influential place where they hold the potential to reshape and reconstruct the cultural memory related to the Magdalene Laundries by acting as counter-memories which can produce new sites of memory through their use of imagination and fiction and as cues which spark public dialogue about the treatment of the Magdalene women during and after their wrongful incarceration. Both Burke Brogan’s *Eclipsed* and Humphries *Sex in a Cold Climate* are examples of visual cultural representations which have sparked national and international conversation by being bold and addressing the history of the Magdalene laundries in a way which would have been considered “controversial” at the time

Furthermore, cultural expressions such as films, art installation and drama performances are powerful devices which embody the potential to raise awareness about unjust pasts as well as represent, through their forms, painful and violent histories. Forms of memory such as television and film often provide a platform for the expression of subjugated memories which have been removed from the national narrative (Lipsitz, 1990, p.50). While forms of memory, such as oral histories, come directly from lived experiences of the past, other forms of memory are mediated through cultural representations and technologies of memory (Conway, 2009, p. 403.). Regardless, both forms act as a vehicle of the past, allowing it to be passed on from one generation to another (Corcoran as referenced in Conway, 2009, p.403). Indeed, considering how throughout history, official historiography and memory have often been manipulated in favour of certain groups in society, there are certain situations in which cultural representations and artistic devices are absolutely imperative to understanding the existence and lived experiences of “Othered” groups. Feminist scholars have long been using alternative epistemologies to explore subjugated knowledges; the histories and existences of those whom

history and memory do not favour. Since “traditional” knowledge and history rarely reflects the existence and experiences of different marginalised groups, feminist activist and academics have turned to storytelling, artistic devices, and media to create and integrate their own historiographies and memories (Sangster,1991, p.5) In her paper “Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference”, Molly Mullin highlights that it is imperative to also consider other modes of feminist practice outside of the academic realm, such as artistic devices. Mullin states that “strategies for developing feminist historical consciousness must also include feminist representational practices, which will vary depending on the specific conditions under which feminist struggles must operate. Although it is not possible or desirable to attain permanent and universally shared meanings, values, or final representations of history, representation, definition, and meaning are still important sites of contest and struggle” (1991, p.47)

Collective memory is dependent on communication through media (Erll, 2008, p.389). From storytelling to more complicated media technologies such as documentaries, the internet and books, shared versions of the past are generated by “medial externalisation” (Assmann, 2008, p. 111.) which expand the landscape of remembrance. Erll argues that “cultural memory is constituted by a host of different media, operating within various symbolic systems: religious texts, historical painting, historiography, TV documentaries, monuments, and commemorative rituals” (2008, p.389). In order to understand how media and representations can be absorbed into cultural memory, I think it is helpful to consider Hall’s work on representation and cultural systems of meaning. According to Hall, cultural systems of meaning shape the organisation of our world through complicated processes of language and meaning (1997, p.3). Such meaning is produced when we express ourselves, either by appropriating, using or consuming cultural things or products. Considering this, we are constantly making meaning by interpreting reality through signifying practices and so, cultural meaning is also always fluid and changing (Hall, 1997, p.3). Since we are continuously and persistently developing new interpretations that reorganise and change social practices, media and artistic devices become sites for the development of new representations of memory (Rousseau, 2016, p.295). More importantly, the use of fiction and imagination which is used in such representations, does not distort the possibilities of these cultural representations being subsumed into cultural memory (Rousseau, 2016, p.296). This is incredibly important, especially with regards to cases such as the Magdalene Laundries where in light of historical documents, artistic devices play a huge role in what is known and what is remembered.

CHAPTER 2

How Are We Forgetting: The Magdalene Laundries and Collective Amnesia

In this chapter, I turn to discuss the concept of collective forgetting and explore the ways in which Ireland has actively expunged the history of the Magdalene laundries and the Magdalene women in recent years. By exploring two particular cases: the High Park exhumations and the on-going fight for an official public memorial, I will highlight the ways that, on top of having no official records or historiography of the Magdalene laundries, Irish society is perpetuating a culture of collective forgetting. The main point to be drawn from this discussion is that collective forgetting is an intentional and controlled action with far reaching implications and that the existence of counter-memories is imperative in order to challenge such implications.

Collective forgetting can be understood as “a silencing and mutating of the past” (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010, p. 1103) and is a phenomenon which has enveloped the history of the Magdalene laundries. In 1993, two mass graves were uncovered on the grounds of the High Park Laundry in Dublin which belonged to the religious order the *Sisters of Our Lady of Charity*. A total of 155 bodies were recovered. Of the 155 bodies exhumed, 58 of the deceased had no official death certificates and therefore, could not be identified. For the deceased who did have death certificates, many contained the religious names given to the women upon entering the asylums and therefore, they could also not be identified (JFM Research, 2015). Shockingly, before thoroughly conducted investigations into the causes of death could be carried out, the government hastily permitted an exhumation license to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and the bodies were cremated and reburied (JFM Research, 2015). The remains were buried in urns stacked on top of each other at the Glasnevin cemetery in Dublin (O’Kane, 1993, p.4). For those whose names and date of death could be found, they were written on the front of the urn but “on many of the urns, it simply read “Unknown” (O’Kane, 1993, p.4). The brief burial ceremony took place without notifying the families of the deceased or the general public (O’Kane, 1993, p.4), further perpetuating the secrecy and silence that surrounded the Magdalene women throughout their internment. The bodies of these women were incarcerated anonymously and buried anonymously (Smith, 2007, p.34), with no initial investigation into the cause of death (an investigation was later carried out in 2003 which resulted in the McAleese Report). In death, many of these women, much like the majority of their Magdalene sisters, were denied a tombstone which bared their identity. They were

rendered as invisible in death as they had been in life. This event emphasised for many, the extent to which these women were not to exist in the Irish collective memory.

In response to the High Park findings, an advocate group called *the Magdalene Memorial Committee* lobbied for three years to have a memorial plaque placed on a park bench in Dublin's iconic St. Stephen's Green in honour of the women who had been coercively confined in the Magdalene laundries. St. Stephen's Green is home to a plethora of monuments dedicated to Ireland's much loved and admired historical figures, including Constance Markievicz, James Joyce and W.B. Yeats to name but a few. In April 1996, the Magdalene Memorial Committee alongside Ireland's first female president, Mary Robinson, unveiled the Magdalene monument in St. Stephen's Green, presenting Ireland's first national memorial monument which acknowledged the Magdalene women (Smith, 2007, p.159). The plaque reads "*To the women who worked in the Magdalene laundry institutions and the children born to some members of those communities— reflect here upon their lives*" (JFM Research, 2015). The money to produce the plaque and the entire organisation of its production and the unveiling ceremony, came solely from the Magdalene Memorial Committee with no input (except for the public planning permission) from the state or church (Smith, 2007, p.159). Furthermore, the archbishop of Dublin was invited to give a statement regarding the Magdalene women to be read at the unveiling, but the archbishop declined. Even more shockingly, not one member of the entirety of the Irish Catholic clergy, including the religious orders such as the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity attended the unveiling ceremony (Smith, 2007, p.161).

Albeit a very impersonal memorial plaque, it is one of the very few, small, public monuments which acknowledges the existence of Magdalene women. In February 2013, following the findings of the McAleese Report, former Taoiseach Enda Kenny publicly apologised on behalf of the State, stating that: "I, as Taoiseach, on behalf of the State, the government and our citizens deeply regret and apologise unreservedly to all those women for the hurt that was done to them, and for any stigma they suffered, as a result of the time they spent in a Magdalene Laundry... I am also conscious that many of the women I met last week want to see a permanent memorial established to remind us all of this dark part of our history. I agree that this should be done and intend to engage directly with the representative groups and of as many of the women as possible to agree on the creation of an appropriate memorial to be financed by the Government separately from the funds that are being set aside for the direct assistance for the women." (The Journal, 2013). It is now 2019, and the promised permanent memorial is still awaited. The High Park exhumations and the situation regarding

public monuments, or lack thereof, are two examples which, for me, really displays both the effort and sheer adamance of both the state and church in the continuation of the suppression of the Magdalene women and their experiences, thereby perpetuating a state of cultural amnesia and denying them their place within Irish cultural memory. The phenomenon of collective amnesia which is currently happening in Ireland can be impeded by visual cultural representations of the Magdalene laundries. By visualising both what is present and what is absent, visual representations act as counter-memories which demand the inclusion of the Magdalene history into the hegemonic historical narrative.

SECTION 2

CHAPTER 3

A Fictional Truth: The Staging of the Magdalene Laundries in *Eclipsed* (1992)

This chapter will investigate the representation of the Magdalene laundries as depicted by Burke Brogan in her play *Eclipsed*. This chapter, and the next two to follow, will explore how and if such representations can be considered as counter-memories to the hegemonic historical narrative of the laundries. By challenging certain determined assumptions about the laundries, such as the argument that the Irish public have played no part in the running of the Magdalene institutions and that the Irish state and Catholic Church are predominantly to blame (Mercier, p. 31, 2013), highlighting the women's experiences of pain and abuse (O'Rourke, 2011, p.201) and subverting negative images about the Magdalene women (Smith, p.2007, p.15), the following chapters will investigate how these visual representations actively seek to include the history of the Magdalene women into the Irish collective memory and return voices and visibility to the Magdalene women and survivors.

Irish writers and playwrights have played a significant role in investigating the narrative re-telling and representation of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. The topic of the laundries is something that some of Ireland's most revered writers have addressed. From James Joyce to Patrick McCabe, the lives of the women incarcerated in these institutions and their experiences of pain and suffering have been imagined and represented by a number of authors. The effect of these imaginative works appearing and circulating within Irish society is incredibly significant as they work to deconstruct the hegemonic historiography which silenced them (Smith, p. 91,2007). In his book *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur argues that fictional narratives and imagination plays a critical role in addressing past abuses and ignored histories. He argues that the function of such fiction is to "depict by making visible" (p. 347, 1988). Considering Ricoeur's argument and that "fiction gives eyes to the horrified narrator. Eyes to see and to weep" (Ricoeur, p.347, 1988), then the works of fiction produced about the laundries play a vital role in breaking the silence and invisibility around the Magdalene Institutions and alter the Irish landscape of remembrance in doing so. One such work which has been especially successful providing visibility and espousing the secrecy and stigma surrounding the Magdalene Laundries is Patricia Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992).

Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* (1992) was the first visual representation of the Magdalene Laundries which pioneered the depiction of the lives of the Magdalene women,

their experiences of trauma, loss and exploitation at a corporeal level. The play was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival and is considered to be immensely significant within the existing canon of work produced about the Magdalene Laundries. *Eclipsed* is often considered as *the* representation of the laundries that is responsible for the tropes and imagery which have since been used in other retellings and representations of the laundries (Smith, p.91, 2007). Burke Brogan's play is particularly significant because although the play was presented to audiences as a work of fiction, the production received international attention and acclaim and it illustrated, by means of its public acceptance, that fictional representations about the Magdalene institutions could be used as a way to recall memories of past trauma and abuse, raise public awareness both inside and outside of Ireland and act as a counter-memory to hegemonic collective memory in which the history of the Magdalene women are invisible (Rousseau, p. 311). The play follows Rosa who, in the present, is searching for her mother Brigit, who after Rosa's birth, was forced to join the "Penitent women in Saint Paul's Laundry, Killamacha" (1.1.5). Rosa's search for her mother manifests on stage as a collision of past and present where the audience witness flashbacks to Brigit's time in the laundry. It is during these flashbacks that we meet Brigit, Nellie-Nora, Mandy, Juliet and Cathy: the play's five "penitent" women. We also meet the brutal Mother Victoria and the doubting sister-in-training, Sister Virginia.

In her paper "Bodily Remembrances: The Performance of Memory in Recent Works by Amanda Coogan", Antosik Parsons argues, that certain artistic approaches engage memory to disrupt dominant historical narratives in order to weaken or reshape their cultural significance and to expose underlying societal prejudice and inequalities (2009, p. 7). The performance of *Eclipsed* is one such artistic approach which is capable of undermining existing negative beliefs about the Magdalene women and which can act as a counter-memory. Engaging with memory on a corporeal level interacts with audiences in a certain way that makes them complicit in what it is that they are watching. Kapushevskaja-Drakulevska further develops this argument in her text "Theatre as a Figure and a Place of Cultural Memory", when she asserts that especially in the context of contemporary *theatre of violence*, performance becomes a "syncretic space" (2013, p. 36) in which its function is not to only engage memory or memorise what is being performed, but that the "theatre of negative reality, on the basis of the actualised collective and cultural memory, intends to actualise the issue of ethics" (2013, p. 36), thereby preventing the further perpetration of the violence which is being performed on stage and which the audience, through visual participation, are complicit in. Burke Brogan's

Eclipsed works in a similar way in that by inviting the audience in to witness the lives of these women and the context which is responsible for their imprisonment, the audience is faced with an ethical question of what to do with knowledge that they have gained from the performance. *Eclipsed* is “damning portrait” (Pine, 2011, p.170) of Ireland’s dark history and it claims that there is a responsibility to remember the Magdalene women correctly and to take action to ensure that they are. Burke Brogan’s play challenges different aspects of the dominant historical narrative about the Magdalene Laundries. Firstly, she explores the collusion of Irish society in the incarceration and abuse of the Magdalene women. Then she rejects the negative image that the women inside these institutions were unscrupulous and evil women while also exploring the agency of the women in their determination to survive. Finally, Burke Brogan explores the effects that abuse and institutionalisation had on the Magdalene women.

3.1 Alluding to Collusion

Within Ireland, it was widely believed for a long time that the Catholic church were solely to blame for the arbitrary confinement and abuse of women in the Magdalene laundries (Mercier, p. 31, 2013). The point of blame was so fixated on the Catholic church, to the extent that in 2009, the Minister for Education and Science, Mr. Bat O’Keeffe “refused to apologise for state complicity in the Magdalene Institutions and establish a redress scheme” (Mercier, p. 31, 2013), believing that this was a problem solely for the Catholic church. In 2013, the state officially admitted to the role it played in maintaining and contributing to the Magdalene laundries and offered an official apology. However, the reality that Irish society at large were complicit in the running and maintaining of the Magdalene laundries is still a bitter pill for many to swallow. Burke Brogan’s play is significant in this way as it highlights the role that family, friends and neighbours played in the maintaining of the laundries, in a way that is inescapable. The audience are blatantly confronted with society’s collusion with the running of the laundries in Act 1 Scene 1 when Rosa reads aloud from the ledger which contains the records of the women who were admitted into Saint Paul’s Laundry:

Rosa: Dempsey, Mary Kate— a boy, James. Signed in by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dempsey. O’Donnell, Betty Ann— a girl, Agnes. Signed in by her parents. McNamara, Cathy—

Voice of Cathy: Twin girls, Michele and Emily. Signed in—

Rosa: Langan, Nellie-Nora— (*Rosa turns to Nellie-Nora as Nellie-Nora exits.*)

Rosa: Nellie-Nora?

Woman's Voice: A stillborn boy. Signed in by her employer, Mr. Persse. —

Rosa: Mannion, Julia—

Voice of Juliet: A girl, Juliet. Signed in—

Rosa: Prenderville, Mandy—

Voice of Mandy: A boy, premature, stillborn.

Rosa: Murphy, Brigit—

Brigit's Voice: A girl, Rosa.

(Searches and finds baby-photograph in chocolate box.)

Rosa: *(puzzled)* Brigit Murphy— a girl, Rosa? —My Mother!— Penitent? (1.1.5)

We learn that girls such as Mary Kate Dempsey and Bett Ann O'Donnell were signed into Saint Paul's by their own parents, while Nellie-Nora was signed in by her employer, Mr. Persse. We later discover that Brigit was admitted to the laundry by her own brother, hours before his own wedding ceremony (2.6.76). It is made evident that the belief that these women were considered disgraceful and in need of punishment was widely accepted throughout society, to the extent that parents willingly signed their daughters into laundries, such as Saint Paul's, knowing that they may never be released. Furthermore, Rosa's puzzlement at the word "penitent" in the ledger which was used to describe her mother, reflects the confusion of the modern-day audience. While these women have been confined in 1963 because they were considered a threat to society, it is difficult for contemporary audiences to grasp the concept of such a threat. The character of Rosa largely embodies today's Irish society in trying to understand what warranted the incarceration of these women.

The active role of Irish society in upholding the Magdalene institutions is again highlighted with Cathy's attempted escape which the audience learns about in Act 1 Scene 3. Cathy enters the laundry rubbing her head (an indication that she has been beaten) and in tears. Upon disclosing her tale of escape, she explains that "a laundry van passed, turned around and came at me" (1.3.88-89). Cathy's story highlights how people in the community also took it upon themselves to make sure that the women in the laundries stayed there, believing that that's where they belonged. Burke Brogan's emphasis on the complicity of Irish society in the detainment and running of the Magdalene laundries challenges the dominant narrative that it was first and foremost the Catholic Church's failure and then secondly, the state's failure.

Eclipsed emphasises that all aspects of Irish society were complicit in the letting down of the Magdalene women. This reality is further highlighted through the situations in which the women inside Saint Paul's became pregnant and unmarried mothers. We discover that Nellie-Nora was raped by her employer, Mr. Persse. Mandy was abandoned after she told Richard, the baby's father, that she was pregnant, and Brigit was admitted to Saint Paul's laundry before she could tell John-Joe of the existence of their baby (Rosa). By exploring the women's situations, Burke Brogan further points to the fact that the women in the laundry were not criminal, shameful or morally corrupt, but the men and the family members who participated in their coercive confinement were.

3.2 Against the Hegemonic Catholic Narrative

Eclipsed depicts a fictional reality which challenges the traditionally dominant representations of the Magdalene women in Irish culture. These women, whom society had accused of being criminals due to their perceived transgressive female sexuality (Antosik Parsons, 2009, p.10) or who were incarcerated due to being "mentally unstable" or "difficult" and therefore undeserving of their freedom and undeserving to participate in Irish society (Smith, 2007, p.18) are liberated from this stereotype in Burke Brogan's play. During Ireland's post-independent identity formation years, unmarried mothers presented themselves as the observable manifestations of moral depravity which the Irish government and State wanted desperately to hide (Fischer, 2016, p.832). In order to further their agenda of moral superiority and purity, society rendered unmarried mothers invisible, perpetuating the narrative that they were sexual transgressors who inherently embodied shame and immorality (Fischer, p. 834, 2016). However, the characters that we meet onstage appear as willing and capable mothers. Brigit, Mandy and Cathy all pine to see their children again and dream of mothering them, which Cathy articulates as she laments "am I ever going to be a mother to them?" (1.3.120). Nellie-Nora confides in Rosa, regarding her mother Brigit "She always wanted to find you, Rosa! It broke her heart giving you up like that. You can be certain she tried! You can be certain she spent the rest of her life lookin' for you! (2.6.77). Burke Brogan depicts mothers who were loving and desperately yearned for their children and the chance to be a parent to them. We see more examples of love and care from the women as we watch them care for each other in the community of friendship and support that they have weaved together. *Eclipsed* highlights communal friendship among the Magdalene women, which not only challenges the notion that

they were incapable of providing care and support but also demonstrates their will to resist the enforced vow of silence which was heavily used in the laundries and which would have pushed them into further isolation (Smith, 2007, p.20). On Cathy's birthday, the women rally together to gift Cathy with whatever little they had:

Nellie-Nora: It's only a small Holy Medal, Cathy! Wear it around your neck!

Cathy: Thanks, Nellie-Nora! I'll always wear it!

Brigit: A present for you, Cathy! A few love-hearts!

Cathy: Oh, Brigit, thanks!

(Cathy opens paper-bag, takes out a sweet and reads "Forever and ever." Mandy moves towards Cathy)

Mandy: Happy birthday, Cathy! I made it myself! It's a pink lacy hanky! (1.3.127-132).

While hegemonic narratives about the Magdalen women insinuate that their incarceration was in the best interests of the community and for themselves and that they could not be trusted to be mothers, Burke Brogan counters that negative image by representing mothers who desperately wanted to be there for their children, and women who bonded together in times of unimaginable hardship to provide support, help and care for one another. While it was widely believed that institutions, such as the Magdalene laundries, were institutions of support and rehabilitation for women, *Eclipsed* explores how instead, these institutions had devastating long term effects on the women who went through them.

3.3 Representing the Effects of Institutionalisation

The character of Nellie-Nora embodies the women who have become so institutionalised that they do not know how to function outside of the laundry. When the audience first meets Nellie-Nora, in the present, as she is guiding Rosa through Saint Paul's laundry, she is described in the stage directions as having a "dragging slipper-walk". Through Nellie-Nora's corporeal movement, she communicates to the audience that she is marked, physically, from years in the laundry. Smith argues that the character of Nellie-Nora "personifies the communities of former women still resident in convents throughout Ireland whose institutionalised lives leaves them incapable of returning to the outside world (2007, p. 94). Nellie-Nora is the eldest of the women but is presented as being child-like and naïve. We see this in the pride she takes in washing and starching the linens and in how takes care to

ensure that they are done correctly. When reporting back to the Sister about the Bishop's clothes she states, "I washed them by hand, Sister!", "I starched them myself, Sister!" and "I ironed them too, Sister!" (1.3. 100-108). We also see it in the how she absolutely believes the nuns, "But he's a Prince of the Church... Mother Victoria told me! (1.3.50) Nellie-Nora displays the eagerness of a child and represents how women in the laundry were infantilised as a result of the duration of their institutionalisation. We see the extent of Nellie-Nora's institutionalisation in how she stays at Saint Paul's, even though the laundry is closed, and she is allowed to leave, she explains to Rosa "I-I don't go out much". The character of Nellie-Nora represents the effects that institutionalisation had on the Magdalene women and her story is true of what happened to a lot of women who had been confined in the laundries for a significant amount of time. When the last of the Magdalene laundries, the Sean Mac Dermott Street laundry, closed in 1996, the *Irish Times* reported that 40 women were still residing there under the *care* of the Convent of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, the eldest of whom was 79. The article stated that the women will remain living in the convent with the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity after the laundry officially closes (Culliton, 1996).

3.4 Conclusion

Burke Brogan's play *Eclipsed* reshapes the Irish collective memory surrounding the Magdalene women by offering counter-memories which are formed through performance and corporeal engagement with memory. By articulating memory through the characters on stage and bringing their stories to life, Burke Brogan challenges the negative hegemonic historiography of the Magdalene laundries. By presenting the story of *Eclipsed* through the medium of performance, not only does Burke Brogan provide a stage of visibility for the Magdalene women and their experiences, but she confronts the audience and makes them complicit in the continuing mistreatment of these women. Smith argues that "the theatrical value of *Eclipsed* lies precisely in its attempt to initiate critical dialogue with the past. In looking for answers to explain historical injustices against women, the plot stages in starkly realistic terms the intimate relationship between past and present, demanding that the audience acknowledge the laundries' real-life victims... the play calls on the audience to acknowledge its collusion in facilitating their incarceration" (2007, p. 94). *Eclipsed* not only actively contributes to the inclusion the Magdalene women into Irish collective memory, but it creates counter-memories which decriminalises the women and counteracts the narrative of shame and silence while highlighting the devastating effects that being confined in the Magdalene laundries had on them.

CHAPTER 4

Face to Face: Survivor Testimonies and Archival Footage in *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998)

This next chapter will focus on the visual representation of the Magdalene laundries as mediated through documentary film. According to Smith, “documentary film, more than any other genre of cultural representation, facilitated the historical retrieval of Ireland’s Magdalene laundries from the nation’s chosen forgetfulness” (2007, p.118). Between 1993 and 1999, four documentaries were made and aired on international television stations around the world, disclosing the harrowing tales of a handful of Magdalene laundry survivors. These documentaries were the first to delve into the existence of the laundries and Ireland’s dark history, yet interestingly, none of the four documentaries were produced by Irish organisations, nor were they aired on Irish television (Smith, 2007, p.118). The documentaries, *Washing Away the Stain* (1993), *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998), *Les Blanchisseuses de Magdalen* (1998) and *The Magdalene Laundries* (1999) were produced by British, French and American stations, respectively. These documentary films consisted of the entire body of knowledge which was available to the public and indeed, their content summed up what society knew about the Magdalene institutions. Their representations of the Magdalene laundries combated the still continuing historical void regarding the laundries and the survivors. These documentaries were the first to record survivor testimonies, as a handful of women came forward to tell their stories.

The documentary which will be the primary focus of my analysis is *Sex in a Cold Climate* was directed by Steve Humphries and aired in 1998. Although each documentary mentioned above warrants its own analysis, I have chosen *Sex in a Cold Climate* as it perceived as being the documentary which provoked the most response from the public, making its way into newspaper headlines and radio channels (Smith, 2007, p. 115). The documentary itself is a montage of survivor testimonies and black and white photographs and video footage with a narrative voice over. Similar to Burke Brogan’s *Eclipsed*, *Sex in a Cold Climate* conflates the past and present on screen to emphasise to the viewers that what is being shown and discussed on screen, is not an event of a distant past, but an event which still exists in the present through the ongoing neglect and silencing of many survivors. The presence of visual oral histories and photographs within the documentary plays a significant role in creating a counter-memory and reshaping the collective memory surrounding the Magdalene women and the laundries. Like in *Eclipsed*, *Sex in a Cold Climate* also reinforces the fact that the community was complicit in

the coercive confinement of the Magdalene women. The documentary largely focuses on the treatment of the women during their time in these institutions and their experiences of violence. It works to deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of the Magdalene women being immoral and dangerous and also challenges the image of them being agentless victims. In *Sex in a Cold Climate*, the survivors testify to the collusion of their communities and society at large in their confinement. The documentary includes four survivors: Brigid Young, Martha Cooney, Catherine Mulcahy and Phyllis Valentine. However, Young is the only survivor in the documentary who was not confined in a Magdalene laundry, she was raised in an orphanage that was adjoined to one. Young offers valuable insight in her testimony about how the Magdalene women were portrayed to the younger children and also talks about her own experience of abuse which was as rife in the laundries as it was in the children's orphanage.

4.1 Reasons for Admission: From Family Shame to Continuing Institutionalisation

Each woman tells of how they ended up being confined and institutionalised. Cooney was admitted to the High Park laundry in Dublin after being “indecently assaulted” (11:43) by her cousin when she was 14 years old and upon telling a cousin, “they got rid of [her] very quickly” (12:00). Valentine grew up in an orphanage and was sent directly from the orphanage to a laundry in Galway. Her story highlights the “preventative” entrance into the laundries, where women were admitted “for their own protection”. Her story also shows that the different institutions (mother and baby homes, reformatory and industrial schools, orphanages) which were all run by the religious orders were interconnected. Regarding the reason for her confinement, Valentine was told “you're as pretty as a picture...the nuns sent you here because they were afraid you would fall away” (18:30). Valentine explains that “falling away meant you'd get pregnant .. I was sent to the Magdalene laundry for that reason only” (18:37). Mulcahy became pregnant outside of marriage and was sent to a mother and baby home where she remained until she had given birth to her son. Upon returning from the mother and baby home, without her son who was being forcibly kept from her, her family refused to accept her back into the house. She recalls the conversation with her father:

“And he said to me “What do you think you want?” And I said, “I want to come home.” “You're not coming into this house! You're not coming into this house. You've disgraced us! You're not right in the head. You can't be right in your head and bring a child into this world, and you deserve punishment.”” (9:37).

Both Mulcahy and Cooney are examples of the two most common reasons why women were sent to the Magdalene laundries: being an unmarried mother and being a victim of sexual abuse. Both women highlight the prominent roles that their families played in their confinement. Mulcahy's testimony provides insight into how society viewed women who had children outside of marriage. From the conversation she recalls with her father, we can tell that such women were considered shameful, a disgrace and likened to being mentally ill. Cooney's experience also faces us with the reality of living in, not only a dominantly Catholic country but an extremely patriarchal one. Her family were unsure about the truth behind her experience of sexual abuse and instead of questioning the male cousin and exposing him to the consequences, it was deemed more favourable to hide Cooney and her perceived shame. Conney comments "The biggest sin in Ireland, well apart from having a baby in them days without being married, was to talk, you never let the neighbours know..there's no talk.. there's no scandal" (12:20). This statement provides insight into why women's families were actively complicit in their confinement and tellingly, a large part of it was to maintain their reputation and good status within in the community.

4.2 The Magdalene Experience: A Myriad of Abuse

Each of the testimonies given throughout the documentary offer a unique understanding of what life in these institutions was like. The women individually recall their experiences of incredibly harsh work conditions and experiences of emotional and physical abuse which overlap between survivors and in doing so, present an alternative history that isn't present in the official archives. Cooney recalls that "we had no recreation, just working, prayer, silence and atoning for sins" (20:50) and that "special friendships wasn't allowed" (21:45). Mulcahy also recalls that "we worked all the time and the work was very hard" (15:49). The women also disclose their varying memories of abuse. Valentine recalls seeing girls being "punched, slapped" (24:43) and describes how "the nuns had this black leather belt that was tied around their waist and hung quite to the ground and they would wrap it up around their hand and really hit you hard with it, they were very vicious some of the nuns, very, very vicious" (25:01). Mulcahy also relays how "the nuns would say "your life isn't worth living now, you've fell from grace and your respectability is gone"" (37:26). The most distraught recollections come from Young and Mulcahy who recall experiences of sexual abuse. Mulcahy talks about a time when she went to her weekly confession with the local priest: "And he said "Well come 'round this side and sit here and tell me about it", and he was all exposed, and I couldn't believe it .. I was told to be quiet and keep my mouth shut .. he denied it straight away.. and I said I wouldn't

go to confession or to church anymore .. so the next thing was they cut all my hair off” (33:35). Mulcahy’s experience of sexual misconduct is a familiar experience among Magdalene survivors and the repercussion of having her hair sheared as a form of retribution is also an experience shared by many. Young also discloses her experience of sexual abuse in the orphanage where a priest sexually assaulted her and continued to do so “another three times after that” (35:48). The information about how the Magdalene women were treated, spoken to and perceived is incredibly valuable as it is information which cannot be found in empirical documents and historiography. In this way, the documentary genre promotes living discourse which creates counter-memories, becomes part of the story and enters the collective memory (Smith, 2007, p.130).

Sex in a Cold Climate also challenges the hegemonic narrative that the Magdalene were agentless beings who complied with the suffocating misogynistic regime in which they found themselves. Already showing resistance by participating in the documentary, the four survivors recall other events of resistance in which women escaped from the laundries, Mulcahy herself being one of the lucky ones to do so. Mulcahy tells of different occasions where she refused to submit to the harsh institutional rules and way of life. She speaks about the incident where she refused to work and demanded to see her child. When the nun threatened her, Mulcahy returned the threat: “You lift your hand to hit me and I’ll kill you. All I want is to see my child. That’s all I’m asking”. Mulcahy managed to escape the laundry a few months later. Both Mulcahy and Valentine refer to a number of acts of resistance that they either participated in or witnessed in the laundries. This image of the rebel Magdalene complicates the emerging narrative of the Magdalene women and restores the viewer’s ability to see these women as being strong and resistant and not only being passive victims (Smith, 2007, p. 127).

4.3 Conclusion

The combination of oral history with visual material is particularly efficient in creating counter-memories and reshaping collective memory. Being able to visually witness the survivors as they recount their time in the laundries and the effects it has had on them, allows the viewer to see the emotions related to such memories. Furthermore, we witness how the survivors construct meaning from these events and how this informs their sense of their current situation (Yeager & Culleton, 2016, p. 140). The use of archival images throughout *Sex in a Cold Climate* functions as ethnographic visual evidence which supports the testimonies of the women. Photographs shown clearly show laundries with all female workers, in their “horrible,

ugly, drab.. uniform” (14:41) and shortly cut hair since “they didn’t allow long hair” (15:06) (See figure 1). When a photograph is used to be a reference for a product of the past, it acts more as a prompt for remembering rather than as a memory itself (Ruchatz, 2008, p. 370). Looking at the photographs of the women working in the laundry encourages the viewer to remember the wider picture of how and why they got there. It calls into question the things that aren’t visible in the picture such as cultural norms and beliefs (Ruchatz, 2008, p.372). The significance of using archival images is that it allows the viewer to see what is certified to have been present, no longer is but can still be viewed as if it still was (Ruchatz, 2008, p. 370). Using photos of the Magdalene laundries, like this gives the viewer an acute awareness of it having been there. This awareness combined with the effect of watching the survivors on screen talking about their coercive confinement and experiences of maltreatment and abuse brings this awareness into the present in a way that makes the viewer understand that what they are viewing is not something which is simply in the past but is an event which is still having effects in the present. There is a delicate mingling of past and present and absence and presence which contributes to the rehsaping of collective memory. *Sex in a Cold Climate* and the devices that it uses contributes not only to the visibility of the Magdalene women and to the inclusion of them into collective memory, but it also provides an understanding that the effects of the Magdalene laundries exist very much in the present.

The personal experiences of the Magdalene women are traumatic and have had devastating effects on their lives. The role of visual representations such as *Sex in a Cold Climate* is therefore twofold: they at once provide a history which no historian can find in written document and they also provide a platform for survivors to “bring their traumatic experiences out from the shadows of historical silence and societal shame and onto the screen of the nation’s collective conscience. (Smith, 2007, p.118). The other role is that oral histories empowers survivors to take some control over the history and memory of the laundries (Yeager & Culleton, 2016, p. 140). By participating in such visual representations, survivors play a role in challenging the silence and hegemonic historiography which exists around the Magdalene laundries. The dissemination of such visual representations and oral histories “is an act of resistance against collective forgetting as humiliated silence” (Yeager & Culleton, 2016 p.140). Visual representations which represent the experiences of the women who were coercively confined in the Magdalene laundries are extremely important, because as well as providing visibility and counter-memories which contributes to their inclusion within Irish collective

memory, they also contribute to the survivors' ongoing process of healing and identity formation (Smith, 2007, p.188).

CHAPTER 5:

Twenty-Three Years Later: Contemporary Visual Representations in *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths*

This final chapter will investigate representations of the Magdalene laundries as imagined by Alison Lowry in her exhibition *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths*. Alison Lowry is a contemporary Irish artist who uses glass as her main artistic medium and who focuses on themes of domestic abuse and sexual violence. In May 2019, Alison Lowry's exhibition "*(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths*" opened to the public in Collins Barracks in Dublin. The exhibition is divided into four sections and addresses different silenced histories in contemporary Ireland. One of the four sections is dedicated to the Magdalene laundries. The exhibition is a mixture of Lowry's own art work, artefacts from closed down laundries, photographs and survivor testimonies. Lowry uses a combination of artistic imagination and survivor testimony to shape the pieces which are presented in the exhibition. The space itself is very dark and dimly lit and it is accompanied by an audio of religious chanting/prayer. Other than the audio track, the exhibition seems to demand a kind of silence in the room, which is sensed by the audience as they walk noiselessly around the exhibition resonates with the vow of silence which was expected of the Magdalene women. Art installations, such as *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* demonstrate how art can "re-present as well as represent, enact as well as speak for, an elided subject: Ireland's community of Magdalene women." (Smith, 2007, p. 171). Lowry explores the harsh treatment of the women in the laundries, the Catholic obsession with morality and purity and the commercial aspect of the laundries. Although the *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* exhibition is temporary and is not a visual representation which can be repeatedly viewed, Rousseau argues that "rather than limiting the knowledge of an event, the malleability of art, often fragile and ephemeral, is another way of stimulating memories, but also of anchoring them" (2016, p. 313).

5.1 A Representation of Purity

The piece entitled "His clothes became so white they shone. They were whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them (Mark 9:3) represents the "fiction of Irish cultural purity" (Antosik Parsons, 2009, p. 9). The piece is a remade Magdalene apron, dusted with a layer of glass shards, that is suspended in the air (see figure 2). In her interview with the National Museum of Ireland, Lowry says that "I wanted [the apron] to be bright and shiny and

reflect some light back and stay white. This idea of cleanliness being next to godliness, this idea of washing away the sin was very much a part of the laundry workers” (Lowry, 1:55, 2019). Lowry’s Magdalene apron reflects the memory of the Magdalene women being unclean and impure and the whiteness of the apron reinforces the obsession with moral purity and the women’s need to symbolically wash away their sins. The association of such purity with the white apron, reinforces Rousseau’s argument that “no work of art can therefore automatically be understood as a site of memory; each film, art installation, or sculpture needs to be historicized in order to gain symbolic and material signification within a given social context”. If you consider a white apron outside of the Magdalene context, an obsession with purity might not be your first symbolic association but when considered within the context of the Magdalene laundries, audiences are more likely to attribute the symbolic meaning of Catholic cleanliness and morality to it.

5.2 Hair Shearing Practices in the Magdalene Laundries

Another of Lowry’s pieces entitled “Instead of fragrance there will be stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-dressed hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding. Isaiah 3:24”, displays glass scissors hanging suspended over a pile of human hair (see appendix 3). This installment is referencing the punishment of hair cutting and shearing, which both Young and Mulcahy include in their testimonies in *Sex in a Cold Climate*. Lowry confirms in her interview that this piece intends "to illustrate the punishment used to try and keep the women in line (2019, 2.25). What is also interesting about this piece is that the title, which is in fact a biblical reference used in modern bibles, narrates the fate which met the Magdalene women upon entering the laundries. This piece serves as a counter-memory to the hegemonic narrative that Magdalene laundries were places of refuge. The use of glass as the material to make the scissors heightens the sensation of pain and hurt while the viewer is being made aware of abusive and degrading practices which occurred throughout many women’s time in the laundries. Smith argues that installations, such as Lowry’s contribute a specific kind of memory to the collective cannon. In their temporary and transitional nature, they echo the experiences of the Magdalene women who were sent between different laundries and other institutions. In this way, art installations offer a site of memory which official and fixed sites cannot (2007, p.171)

5.3 Conclusion

What is especially interesting about *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* is not just how the visual art installations engages with memory, but it exhibits what imagery of the Magdalene laundries has seeped into the discourse about them, twenty-three years after their official closure. Lowry's exhibition demonstrates "a will to remember" (Pierre Nora as quoted in Smith, 2007 p. 172). It contributes to the expanding canon of counter-memories, that both challenge the dominant historical narratives about the Magdalene laundry as well as prevent cultural amnesia. Compared to Brogan Burke's *Eclipsed* which was produced in 1992 and Humphries documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* which was produced in 1998, Lowry's visual representation of the Magdalene laundry can be considered an example of postmemory art. In her influential work "*The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*", Marianne Hirsch argues that postmemorial work strives to reactivate and reembody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. In these ways, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone" (Hirsch 2012,p. 633.) Although, I don't consider by any means the Magdalene laundries to be of distant past, there now exists in Ireland a generation of young people who have not existed at the same time as the laundry's operations. The importance of contemporary visual representations of the Magdalene women and the laundries lies in their ability to reach out to younger generations and to continue providing visibility for the women, their experiences and the on-going neglect that they are facing in terms of Irish collective memory.

Conclusion

Remembering is an incumbent process of human existence and directly influences how we perceive and identify ourselves and others around us (Erll, 2008, p.2). It helps us to understand our past and to construct a vision of the future (Young, 1994, p.9) However, the processes of remembering and of collective memory are entangled in a number of power battles in which the telling of a truly “objective” official history is almost always impossible. In Irish history, as is common with many other histories, it is often the experiences and stories of women that have been omitted from the dominant national narrative (Smyth, 1989, p.6). However, there is one particular group of Irish women with whom this historical erasure has been aggressively perpetuated and actively upheld. Ireland’s Magdalene women have been subjected to silence both during and after their coercive confinement. This forced silence has had far reaching implications for Magdalene survivors such as a difficulty to form a coherent sense of identity, a continuing sense of shame and a loss of faith in their country and communities. This thesis has argued that one such way to challenge the culture of invisibility that surrounds the Magdalene history and to return the voices of the Magdalene women is by the creation of counter-memories. Following Smith’s argument that visual cultural representations are by far the representations of the laundries which have had the most impact on Irish memory and social awareness (Smith, 2007, p. 118), I have analysed three different visual representations of the Magdalene laundries to explore whether their content and effect can support the argument that they are indeed sites of counter-memory. The works which I have explored throughout this thesis includes Burke Brogan’s play *Eclipsed* (1993), Steve Humphries’ documentary film *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998) and Alison Lowry’s visual art exhibition *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* (2019). This thesis explored how each work represented the Magdalene laundries in a way that challenged both collective forgetting and the stereotypically negative images associated with the women who were confined in the laundries. Considering the rejecting nature of these representations, in how they defy they hegemonic historical narrative, and the way which they engage with memory, namely through imagination and audience interaction, I contend that these visual representations can be considered as counter-memories to the dominant collective memory in Ireland which has expunged the Magdalene history from its narrative.

Both *Eclipsed* and *Sex in a Cold Climate* highlight the collaboration of Irish society in the maintaining of the Magdalene laundries. These two works emphasise the role of families, parents and even employers in forcing women into the Magdalene institutions. While a

significant amount of blame and responsibility is concentrated on the state and the Catholic church regarding the existence of the laundries and the horrors that faced women once they were inside, it is less readily accepted that the Irish public played as significant of a role in their incarceration. Through the characters of Nellie-Nora, Mandy and Brigit in *Eclipsed* to the survivor testimonies of Mulcahy and Cooney in *Sex in a Cold Climate*, it is made undeniably evident that none of these women would have ended up in the Magdalene laundries had it not been for their families' need to hide their shame and upkeep their good, moral reputations. The narratives represented throughout this research not only highlight the collusion of the public, state and church but also sheds light on the reasons for women's admission.

While the dominant narrative about the Magdalene women portrays them as being "fallen" and in need of "rehabilitation", the representations as portrayed in each of the analysed works depicts a different reality. We see that the majority of women have been confined because they have had a child outside of marriage or because they were the victim of sexual abuse. As portrayed by Lowry in her piece "*His clothes became so white they shone. They were whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them (Mark 9:3)*", we come to understand that Ireland's obsession with female purity and moral cleanliness was the deciding factor in who was deemed "criminal" and who was not. In all three pieces, we are offered representations of strong women, who have maintained their agency within the given circumstances and who have not committed any real crime.

Finally, the representations offered by *Eclipsed*, *Sex in a Cold Climate* and *(A)dressing Our Hidden Truths* all challenge the notion that the Magdalene notions were in anyway altruistic or beneficial to the women confined there. While the Irish government has insisted that no forms of torture or human right violations occurred within the laundries but that the women experienced "maltreatment" (O'Rourke, 2011, p.201), each visual representation discussed throughout this thesis explicitly explores the experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse which many Magdalene women faced, again presenting themselves as counter-memories to the hegemonic historical narrative.

The role of cultural visual representations, as discussed throughout this thesis, demonstrates their role in providing knowledge and experiences which cannot be found in any written documents. Furthermore, they provide a platform for survivors to "bring their traumatic experiences out from the shadows of historical silence and societal shame and .. into the nation's collective conscience. (Smith, 2007 p.118). The further significance of such

cultural representations is that they empower survivors to take some control over the history and memory of the laundries (Yeager & Culleton, 2016, p. 140). As well as providing visibility and being sites of counter-memories, which contributes to their inclusion within Irish collective memory, they also contribute to the survivors' ongoing process of healing and identity formation (Smith, 2007, p.188). The significance of this thesis then, lies within these lines. By continuing to conduct research, spark open dialogue and engage with the history of the Magdalene laundries, this thesis is contributing to the small canon of literature and knowledge which exists around this topic. All work produced which focuses on the history of the Magdalene women is actively contributing to challenging the collective amnesia which has engulfed this area of Irish history. However, more work is required. While completing this thesis, I relied heavily on James Smith's book "*Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*" (2007). This book consists of the only comprehensive body of work which analyses the different forms of remembering (memorials, representations, etc) related to the Magdalene laundries and while there is a larger body of work, primarily published by Maeve O'Rourke regarding the human rights and transitional justice aspect of the Magdalene history, a much smaller pool exists around the social and remembering aspect. Smith's book is now 12 years old and although the fight to counter Ireland's collective amnesia is ongoing, it seems that academic work is dwindling. I suggest that further research is required to ensure the assimilation of the Magdalene history into the Irish collective memory. Academic projects, such as the Waterford Memories Project (2015), which is an oral history project that visually records Magdalene survivors' experiences, is a good example of such possible research as it can be easily disseminated to younger generations.

To conclude, visual cultural representations of the Irish Magdalene laundries contain the possibility to shed light on this area of Ireland's silenced history. They contain the power to educate society about the socio-political context in which these women were incarcerated and why. They also embody the potential to act as counter-memories to the historical dominant narrative which render these women, their history and their experiences, invisible and encourage the Magdalene women to be active survivors instead of passive victims. However, visual cultural representations can also sensationalise and exploit this sensitive history. It is imperative that further work done on the topic of the Magdalene women is done in order to further empower these women and not for commercial or political gain.

Appendix

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



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