Peter Mullan’s award-winning film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) tells the stories of four young Irish women incarcerated in a Magdalen asylum.¹ The film purports to take place in a convent on the outskirts of Dublin between 1964 and 1968. Most Magdalen “penitents,” like the characters Margaret and Patricia in the film, were institutionalized for that peculiarly Irish sin, perceived sexual immorality—some were single mothers, some the victims of incest and rape, and some were considered prostitutes (Smith 2004, 208). Other women and young girls were deemed too simple for their own good or too attractive for society’s liking, such as the screen characters Crispina and Bernadette, and were hastily hidden away, supposedly to safeguard their moral purity. With no official sentence, and thus no mandated release, some of these women lived and died behind the Magdalen’s walls. In the vast majority of cases there was no judge and no jury. Throughout the last two hundred years, thousands of Irish women ostensibly purged their sins by washing society’s dirty laundry: they achieved spiritual renewal through backbreaking labor, endless prayer, and the complete effacement of individual identity.² Ireland’s last Magdalen laundry, as these institutions came to be known, closed its doors in 1996 (Culliton 1996).

In late August 2003, almost one year after Mullan’s film premiered at

---

¹ Quotations in the text not otherwise attributed are transcribed from the film. “Magdalen” and “Magdalene” are alternate spellings, but whereas historians have privileged the former, recent cultural representations tend to use the latter. This may, in part, reflect a recent resurgence of interest in the biblical figure Mary Magdalene.

² The film’s conclusion cites the figure of thirty thousand women entering these institutions over the last two centuries. This number is now routinely referenced in documentaries (*Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate* 1998) and by journalists (Gordon 2003) and historians (Ferriter 2004, 538). In fact, there are no records documenting the women entering Ireland’s Magdalen institutions after 1900.
the Venice Film Festival and within weeks of its release in the United States, the *Irish Times* revealed disturbing details regarding the exhumation, cremation, and reburial of 155 Irish women who had lived and died at the High Park Magdalen asylum operated by the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity in Dublin (Humphreys 2003). Buried between 1858 and 1984 and interred anonymously, these women were denied a proper burial and final resting place. The religious order sought and received the required state license to exhume the bodies in 1993. However, the license listed only 133 sets of remains. Death certificates, legally required in Ireland, were missing in some fifty-eight cases (Rafferty 2003). It was not until 2003, ten years later, that Irish society learned about the twenty-two bodies for which the nuns could not account. Although such irregularities should have led to an immediate police investigation, Ireland in the early 1990s, on the cusp of an economic and cultural transformation popularly termed the Celtic Tiger, had little interest in digging up old ghosts. Instead, the state provided the Sisters with a hastily reissued exhumation license, and all the bodies were cremated and reinterred anonymously at Dublin’s Glasnevin cemetery. Cremation, of course, destroys all trace of historical evidence, and thus no one will ever know with certainty exactly who is buried at the Glasnevin plot (Rafferty 2003). The history of Ireland’s Magdalen asylums is, then, incomplete, and the still-emerging facts are even more disturbing than the fiction of Mullan’s film.

**Part I**

Ongoing debates within Irish cultural studies are reconsidering how the project of national identity formation in the decades following political independence mobilized the heteropatriarchal family and the Catholic Church’s ideal of sexual morality in ways that were particularly oppressive for Irish women (Backus 1999; McAvoy 1999). Breda Gray and Louise Ryan suggest that, in their desire to “create a new imagined community within the boundaries of the twenty-six-county state,” church and state fashioned a seamlessly homogenous society that closed off internal challenges and contradictions even as they represented society as pure and untainted by external corruption (Gray and Ryan 1998, 126–27). These partners in hegemonic social control colluded to construct an identity for Irish women solely in domestic terms—“women were mothers, women were wives” (Valiulis 1995, 169). Kathryn Conrad identifies the consequences of this strategic alliance: “The effects are most obviously felt by those who do not fit the model and are excluded, silenced, or punished; but all, even those who seem empowered within the system, are held hostage by it,
trapped within the family cell” (2003, 3–4). Contemporary cinema in particular has helped to recover the elided stories of exclusion and punishment from this period in Ireland’s past, and, as Luke Gibbons suggests, “one of the reasons Irish films have looked back more in anger than nostalgia is that for those sections of society whose story has not yet been told, the past is still not over” (2005, 215; see also Gibbons 2002, 95–96).

The Magdalene Sisters joins recent films that represent Irish life in the postindependence era emphasizing the repressive aspects of the Irish condition, the stifling eradication of individuality in the face of an indomitable church and state politics, and the relentless but often arbitrary cruelty that enforced social conformity (e.g., The Field 1990; The Butcher Boy 1997; Angela’s Ashes 1999). In representing the “dark old days” of the post-1950 period, Mullan’s film performs what Ruth Barton identifies as Irish cinema’s “public function” of enabling viewers to work through the legacy of history in its more traumatic formulations (Barton 2004, 130–33, 131). Joe Cleary similarly interprets “the obsessive return to these decades” (2000, 108) as an intimation of a traumatic history. However, Cleary insists that this turn to the past simultaneously acts as a “negative validation of the present” (2000, 107) that signifies the attainments of Irish modernization in both the economic and wider sociopolitical spheres. Imaging the past as stagnant and repressive affirms, therefore, the new social formation of 1990s Irish society (Cleary 2004, 231). In this sense, cultural representations of Ireland’s enervating past permit present-day detachment from and complacency about the nation’s history—responses Cleary argues are tantamount to experiencing “a lucky escape ‘from all that’” (2000, 108). It is precisely this sense of “lucky escape” and, more specifically, the implication of an inherent separation between past and present, between the dark old days and Celtic Tiger Ireland, that I want to examine when considering The Magdalene Sisters.

We have no official history for the Magdalen asylum in twentieth-century Ireland. Indeed, as historians Maria Luddy (1995) and Frances Finnegan (2001) suggest, the official record of the laundries will never be complete until the religious orders make their archival records available. Moreover, this historical vacuum largely explains why Ireland’s Magdalen laundries exist in the public mind at the level of story (survivor testimony and cultural representation) rather than history (archival records and documentation). This essay offers a constructive reading of The Magdalene Sisters’ relationship

3 Literary representations include Burke Brogan (1994) and Conlon-McKenna (1999). Previous visual representations include Washing Away the Stain (1993) and Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate (1998).
to that history in order to explore more fully the nature of this cultural representation. At precisely the moment when the High Park exhumations, cremations, and reburials haunt society as unfinished business from the nation’s past and are repeatedly ignored, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of Mullan’s film for the history it represents and to recognize the film’s possible effect as precisely leading to action on behalf of the victims and survivors of these institutions. This essay reframes *The Magdalene Sisters* so that the fullness of its critique comes into focus, and in the process it seeks to open up the possibility of a response to the film that is oriented toward social change.

Media coverage of *The Magdalene Sisters* initially focused on its receipt of the Golden Lion award at the Venice International Film Festival and the ensuing condemnation—“an angry and rancorous provocation” (Agnew 2002, 1)—of Mullan’s film by the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*. Reviewers repeatedly posed the same questions. For what crimes were these women imprisoned? How could such incarceration occur in a modern society? What sort of communal or societal redress would the film provoke (Gordon 2003; O’Toole 2003)? The film’s American release, moreover, coincided with an ongoing two-year media frenzy that pursued revelations of clerical child sexual abuse across every Catholic diocese in the United States (Reese 2004). In Ireland, the church’s moral authority was already compromised by a series of ongoing clerical sex and child abuse scandals (McGarry 2002a). These international scandals thus became the interpretive prism through which audiences viewed and understood Mullan’s film.

The Irish religious orders’ refusal to apologize for the treatment meted out to women in their care, like their withholding of historical records, encouraged this dominant response whereby the church bore the brunt of national and international opprobrium. This response, in turn, promulgated a critical reading that muted the film’s equally significant domestic critiques of postindependent Ireland’s hegemonic social control, specifically a patriarchal church-state politics, and of contemporary Irish society’s ambivalent response to survivors of that earlier political formation. In the film’s critical reception the church existed as the convenient scapegoat, while its previous partners in hegemony—state and familial institutions—evaded all intimations of culpability. In fact, Mullan’s critique extends far beyond the sins of the church to expose the complicity of political and social forms of repression. The first section of this essay reconfigures the film’s broader critique by examining the on-screen representation of the family, patriarchal society, the state, and community. In doing so, the argument challenges the limited nature of the initial critical
response and underscores how it leaves the film open and vulnerable to reappropriation by the forces of cultural containment, specifically the state and contemporary Irish society. In exploring Mullan’s wider critique, the latter part of this essay reveals how the film might serve the need for social action on behalf of the survivors of Ireland’s Magdalen institutions.

Given its critical success, *The Magdalene Sisters* did shine the international spotlight on the plight of Ireland’s Magdalen women. By telling this story through the popular medium of film, Mullan offsets the long historical silence that allowed these institutions to maintain their secrecy and invisibility. It is important to note that Mullan not only directed the film but also wrote his own screenplay. In both roles he was confronted with the difficulty of navigating between the requirements of a popular cultural form with a commercial goal of successful entertainment and a commitment to the historical evidence, what little existed, that authenticated his version of the story. This negotiation between commercial genre and source material necessarily required some fictionalization of historical fact. *The Magdalene Sisters* nonetheless is largely inspired by survivor testimony, specifically four women who bore witness to their incarceration in Ireland’s Magdalen institutions as part of the earlier television documentary, *Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998). Mullan not only fictionalizes aspects of their testimony, he also conflates their experiences at different institutions, in different eras, and invents a meeting of the four women at the same laundry in 1964. In addition, Mullan’s version of Ireland’s past is partially inspired by a series of preexisting cultural artifacts, for example, a folk ballad, a historical photograph, and archival footage from inside a Magdalen institution. In restaging these historical artifacts, the film exposes the open secret of the laundries. In both instances—survivor testimony and cultural artifact—the film confronts viewers with evidence that always existed. Mullan’s representation insists that viewers now acknowledge what heretofore they had chosen to ignore but, invariably, already knew.

Part II of this essay evaluates the film’s hybrid nature—faithful to history and ethics and yet driven by the desire for wide popular circulation—and suggests how genre helps explain, to some extent, the narrow scope of the film’s reception by many viewers. Fintan O’Toole argues that the recognizable cinematic tropes of Mullan’s Hollywood-style prison film—

---

4 Mullan relied heavily on this documentary directed by Steve Humphries, literally transcribing survivor testimony from the documentary and transferring it onto his characters in the film (Crowdus 2003). This use of oral history to construct a story that is largely unverifiable may prove particularly difficult for historians. See Walker 1997; Liddington 2002.
“unjust incarceration, sadistic cruelty, heroic endurance, and eventual escape” (2003, 6)—lessen the pain and simultaneously deaden the critique. Popular form, in this sense, limits the film’s originality even as it makes the film more entertaining to watch. Nowhere is this collision of form and content more problematic than in the film’s treatment of the nuns. Sister Bridget in particular functions as the easily identifiable villain of the piece, reduced to playing the role of prison warden at this particular Irish gulag. This essay concludes by evaluating how the genre’s conventions, specifically the use of stereotype, melodrama, and simplification, have limited the film’s critical reception to the singular focus on blaming Catholic nuns. These popularizing strategies detract from the more significant and complex aspects of Mullan’s film, for example, its interrogation of the church’s exploitative capitalist motivations in operating these laundry institutions. In this broader context I analyze the discourse of religious vocations in a still decolonizing Ireland to underscore how the nuns on the screen, like the Magdalen penitents they imprison, are also the products of their society, a society defined by a hegemonic social control. I do so not to absolve the responsibility of the religious orders that operated the laundries but rather to underscore the necessity for Irish society—family members, communities, state, and church—to own the Magdalen scandal and to support calls for redress, reform, and reparation for victims and survivors.

The family
Mullan’s camera knowingly challenges the patriarchal institution of the Irish family, implicating it as a responsible agent in the betrayal and mistreatment of the women represented on the screen. The film’s opening scene, in particular, enacts the cultural dynamic whereby middle-class respectability in rural Irish society permits the abandonment of a family member compromised by perceived sexual immorality. Loosely based on the testimony of Martha Cooney in Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate (1998), Margaret, one of the characters in The Magdalene Sisters, sees her extended family commit her to the Magdalen asylum for fear that she might bring scandal to the family name, either by giving birth to an illegitimate child after being raped by her cousin or, alternatively, by becoming the center of unwanted public scandal. That she is the victim of a crime is immaterial; her embodiment as the object of male sexual desire necessitates that she be rendered invisible, that she be punitively held responsible for the violent sexual aggression of another. Through its treatment of Margaret, The Magdalene Sisters poignantly depicts the cultural and religious contradictions propping up middle-class respectability.
Mullan’s critique is narrated through a tellingly acerbic mise-en-scène. Margaret’s rape occurs during a wedding banquet that brings together the extended family in celebration of the societal contract of sanctioned and sanctified physical union officiated by the local priest. The film opens with Father Doyle performing “The Well Below the Valley,” a ballad rarely performed in traditional or folk music circles because of its sinister incestuous overtones (O’Connor 1991, 81–85). The lyrics reveal that incest and infanticide were not unknown phenomena in Irish society and document that the incarceration of women was society’s prescribed response in such cases: the young girl in the song recounts six pregnancies, two each by her father, brother, and uncle, and she details how the six infants were buried to conceal their existence. When she asks the gentleman in the song to reveal her fate, his reply anticipates the punitive response meted out to Margaret and the other women deemed to have transgressed the Irish definition of sexual immorality—seven years “a-ringing the bell” and a further seven years “burning in hell.” The woman’s response in the ballad’s final line—“I’ll be seven years a-ringing the bell / But the lord above may save my soul / From burning in hell”—is equally telling; it encodes the trope of female deliverance, but deliverance available only to victims of male sexual violence who passively endure punishment and penance. The ballad signifies how Irish culture has absorbed the inevitability of incest and infanticide through such stories that offer no models for possible social action in response. Entertainment and tradition, in this instance, silence the risk of any such resistance. Mullan’s visual enactment, juxtaposing Margaret’s rape and the ballad’s lyrics, insistently jolts his audience beyond such passive acceptance by critically exposing it as a form of complicity.

If the priest’s performance of the ballad licenses male sexual violence, Mullan deploys Irish traditional music to reveal the family’s response to Margaret’s rape. When Kevin, and then Margaret, return downstairs after his assault, the céilí (traditional music celebration) is in full swing. Here the film provides viewers with two contradictory yet simultaneous narratives, one affected through sound and one through vision. As word of the sexual assault spreads among the male members of the family’s inner circle, the music renders dialogue inaudible. Simultaneously, the musical score invokes an illusion of communal harmony through the continuing dance and celebration. Concurrent with this fiction of social cohesion, the film directs the audience’s attention to a series of glances passing across the room. Now focused on the characters as viewers, the viewer, in turn, perceives how the characters respond to what they know has happened to Margaret.
In a telling reversal of the earlier ballad performance, Margaret rather than the priest now becomes the object of the community’s gaze and the subject of its enacted narrative. She whispers an account of the assault to a female cousin, who in turn tells Kevin’s and Margaret’s fathers. Kevin is confronted in turn by his father and Margaret’s father; the three men, joined by the priest, then convene behind closed doors. Kevin is removed from the scene of his crime. Margaret’s father and Father Doyle decide Margaret’s fate. Throughout this visual sequence, as the camera pans from face to face, the viewer is forced to confront the injustice enacted on the screen as we follow each character’s gaze to its object: the already marginalized Margaret (see fig. 1). No longer just the consumer of a cultural product (as the wedding guests consume the priest’s ballad), the viewer must now collaborate in it. As such, he or she becomes active in this representation—by filling in what is unheard but known.

In the scene just described, the seductive musical harmony is disrupted by the ballad’s lyrics as viewers begin to understand the parallels between the two plots of victimization. Traditional music’s communal harmony cannot contain the threatening dissonance at the very heart of the family—namely, the threat presented not only by a sexually deviant daughter but even more so by the potential for public awareness and scandal. In this sense, the film provocatively suggests that the sanctity of the family, not Margaret herself, has been violated. By deploying music both to subsume and ineffectively to heal the rupture, Mullan establishes his critique of middle-class Irish respectability; the traditional music silences Margaret until she disappears completely the following morning when the priest
transports her to the Magdalen laundry. Throughout her ordeal—the rape itself, and the subsequent determination of her fate—the cèili continues as the band, in a literal and figurative sense, plays on. Traditional music, customarily an agent of cultural memory, serves as an agent of cultural amnesia. Mullan, however, disrupts this effect by reactivating the music’s subversive potential, making us more aware of the ballad’s social context. These opening scenes make it clear that no woman entered a Magdalen laundry without the knowing, if passive, complicity of a family member, an employer, a neighbor, or a friend in her disappearance from the community.

**Patriarchal society**

*The Magdalene Sisters* indicts familial culpability as well as a wider patriarchal social politics. More specifically, it seeks to criticize the discourse of Irish masculinity for betraying women confined in the nation’s Magdalen laundries. Patriarchal power structures and gender inequality are played out through the representation of sexuality, morality, and capitalist labor exploitation. The film signals how Irish society, and in particular men, benefited from these institutions’ existence, and it underscores the societal inertia that adamantly refused to question their raison d’être (see, e.g., Dunne 2002–3). *The Magdalene Sisters* again confronts its audience with such collaboration through a series of searing turns in its narrative. In particular, these focus on the young laundry apprentice, Brendan, who together with his older colleague transports society’s soiled linen and picks up neatly packaged bundles of clean linen for redelivery to their owners. Brendan’s opening comment, “they’re all hookers and whores that work in here,” and his colleague’s response, “you don’t look at them, you don’t talk to them,” betrays Irish society’s justification for the imprisonment and isolation of the Magdalen’s population as women guilty of sexual deviancy. And, although he adopts the contemptuous attitude of the Irish male toward someone like Bernadette who “likes to give it up to the lads, likes to take the knickers off,” Brendan feels no moral constraint against offering her “two shillings if you suck my cock.” One irony, of course, is that money holds little currency in Bernadette’s world. Moreover, her virtual enslavement is emphasized, again ironically, by Brendan’s naïve assumption that the inmates receive payment for their labor. The only currency available to Bernadette, and thus the only means of persuading

---

5 On the cultural deference paid to figures of authority, see Maguire and Ó Cinnéide (2005, 635–36) and McGahern (2005).
Bernadette trades for her freedom with the only currency afforded her by Irish masculinity. *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002). Reproduced with permission from Element/Temple Films.

Brendan to help her escape, is her body. Already sexualized by Brendan as “hooker” and “whore,” she trades on the only resource afforded her by Irish masculinity (see fig. 2).

Brendan’s refusal to defy the nuns’ power in society raises the awareness of the gender inequality driving Mullan’s narrative. Whereas Bernadette is brutally punished by having her head shaved for her attempted escape, Brendan holds on to his job without penalty or punishment. Mullan’s attention to a series of male culprits in the film underscores how Irish discourses of sexual immorality elided male culpability while punitively revictimizing the female victims of society’s moral proscriptions. The Magdalen—both the institution and the appellation—marked the women as sexually deviant and thus denied them legal protections supposedly afforded to individual citizens of the state (see, e.g., O’Brien 1998, 186–89). Indeed, the film’s conclusion points to the mass-produced washing machine newly available in 1960s Ireland, rather than to any dramatic transformation in public or political opinion, as undermining these institutions.6

6 This conclusion is simplistic. Changing social conditions for women in 1970s Ireland also informed the laundries’ demise. For example, the state introduced the Unmarried Mothers Allowance in 1973, something Finola Kennedy suggests was like “stepping on to a new planet” (2001, 239). This latter provision helped to cultivate greater acceptance of single mothers.
The state

In addition to exposing social complicity in the Magdalen abuses, Mullan’s film also targets the long but as yet unwritten history of state and communal collusion in their operation. The film’s Corpus Christi procession scenes encapsulate state complicity, as members of An Garda Síochána (the nation’s police force) escort the Magdalen penitents through the public streets. This particular sequence replicates an archival photograph allegedly depicting Magdalens from the Gloucester Street asylum parading down Dublin’s Sean McDermott Street in the 1950s before community onlookers (see fig. 3). Mullan’s replication in his film of this archival

The provenance of this photograph remains uncertain, even though it has appeared in...
photograph functions as evidence against the claims that women voluntarily entered these institutions. If, as the state maintains, the Magdalen asylums were private religious institutions outside political control, why were the nation’s police used to enforce a form of imprisonment inconsistent with the judicial and constitutional rights afforded all Irish citizens?

The historical photograph represents a striking instance of Mullan’s search for historical accuracy; it again underscores how evidence of state involvement was always available in the cultural archive but remained largely ignored. The film’s Corpus Christi procession through the bunting-decorated streets of a small country town displays the open secret of the penitents’ very public humiliation. As they move along the procession route, the four protagonists’ enjoyment at escaping the convent walls turns to shame as their facial expressions acknowledge how their temporary visibility is little more than a spectacle signaling the nun’s spiritual service to the wider community. This public humiliation also serves as a warning to the female onlookers, whose avoidance of direct eye contact with the inmates betrays an awareness of the same fate awaiting any woman who transgresses society’s sexual mores.

The outdoor religious ceremony at the procession’s conclusion implodes the open secret previously enacted on the town’s streets. Here Mullan confronts audiences with their own inaction in the face of self-evident injustice, specifically Crispina’s sexual abuse at the hands of the parish priest, Father Fitzroy. Mullan once more adapts historical evidence to frame these scenes, conflating a historic film-loving priest with the testimony of at least two of the participants in Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate (O’Flynn 2004, 49–50). In the scene of Father Fitzroy’s unmasking, Mullan takes his fictional account one step further to show how taking action against such abuse also entails its own risks. Margaret both witnesses and takes action against Father Fitzroy; she instructs Crispina that Fitzroy “is not a man of God,” and she seeks Crispina’s revenge by laundering the priest’s clothes with a poisonous weed. Revenge seems assured when Father Fitzroy frantically disrobes and runs naked from the altar, exposing his tormented flesh. But even as the viewer, following Margaret’s lead, revels in the abuser’s public ridicule, the revenge backfires.

O’Kane (1996); Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate (1998); and Finnegan (2001, fig. 15). Sister Lucy Burton, the reverend mother of the Gloucester Street convent when it closed in 1996, provides some evidence of authenticity in stating that “trusted girls were allowed to work on the convent door, take in laundry from the public and join the Corpus Christi parades along Sean MacDermott Street” (O’Kane 1996, 2). In the absence of an authenticating provenance, historians in particular might question whether those depicted in the photograph are Magdalen women.
The poisonous sores on Crispina’s thighs also betray Father Fitzroy’s latest sexual assault. Standing isolated and alone, Crispina remains victimized even as she impugns her attacker by shouting, “You are not a man of God!” (see fig. 4).

The painstaking extension of this scene—Crispina repeats her accusation twenty-five times—emphasizes the contrasting silence and shocked paralysis of the other penitents, the nuns, police, and members of the local community. As the camera pans their dismayed faces, the interruption to the ritual of the mass by the priest’s self-exposure appears so unfathomable that the congregation can neither assimilate the disruption nor imagine any adequate response. Mullan’s camera again implicates the community for its willful blindness, suggesting that the witnesses to injustice existed but they stood impassively by, as paralyzed as the film’s congregation awaiting a reinstated order. In this scene, the ritual of the Catholic mass, with its scripted responses, like the communal social rituals around traditional music in the opening scene, cannot fully disguise the ideological hypocrisy of the state. Yet even this most scandalous interruption of the Eucharist brings no change; despite Father Fitzroy’s crime the church prevails. Crispina’s responsorial denunciation, “You are not a man of God,” cribbed from Margaret and inspired by Christina Mulcahy’s survivor testimony (in Witness 1998), stings the conscience of the contemporary Irish viewer because it remains unacknowledged on the screen.

Although Crispina is the most direct agent for Mullan’s critique, like Margaret in the film’s opening scene, she, not her attacker, is punished. Under cover of darkness, Sister Bridget arranges for Crispina’s transfer to
Mount Vernon’s hospital for the mentally insane. Knowing that the local community and the state’s police force have witnessed evidence of clerical sexual abuse and chosen to look the other way, Sister Bridget can guard against potential scandal with impunity. The vulnerable are simply hidden away. Ultimately, Mullan suggests that to question Irish society’s open secrets was to question the very basis on which the postindependent state came to be constructed.

Part II
*The Magdalene Sisters* establishes a much broader canvas of culpability than its popular critical reception has recognized, and, in the process, it challenges families, the public, and the state to acknowledge and provide redress for victims and survivors. For the film to achieve this broader impact, however, Mullan had to employ a form that would maximize circulation of his account of past injustice. Consequently, the film’s attempts at recuperating a historical record and representing survivor testimony frequently collide with the director’s mandate of orchestrating a relatively mainstream, commercially successful, feature-length film. Operating on a terrain where fiction and fact overlap, *The Magdalene Sisters* raises questions concerning its accuracy and authenticity. By privileging survivor testimony from *Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate* as the framing device for the script, Mullan’s film replicates the critical shortcoming of Steve Humphries’s earlier documentary, namely, the decision neither to solicit nor to incorporate the religious orders’ version of the Magdalen story. Significantly, 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.

Mullan’s film prejudices the screen portrait of the nuns. This bias was repeated in the critical response to the film: both present the nuns as the primary agents of abuse and, by implication, Irish nuns as singularly responsible for the historic abuse of women in the laundries. The remainder of this essay considers how the genre of popular film contributed to this partial critical understanding. The film’s dramatic machinery, specifically a reliance on the use of stereotypes, melodrama, and moral simplification, obscures and even undermines the complexity of Mullan’s broader social critique. This essay reinstates that complexity by exposing contemporary society’s willingness to scapegoat the Catholic Church for institutional abuses in the nation’s past. To counter this tendency, the essay will con-
textualize the film’s representation of religious vocations in postindependent Ireland in relation to the society from which they emerged.

**Villains**

*The Magdalene Sisters* reduces most of the nuns on the screen to mere stereotype. As the villains of the piece, it is enough that they appear stupid, avaricious, and sadistic in turn. At no time does the viewer sense these women’s personal feelings or motivations. The scene where Sister Clementine and Sister Jude humiliate the penitents by having them strip naked to judge various aspects of their physical anatomy owes much to Bridget Young’s account of her childhood experience as a resident of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd’s industrial school attached to their convent’s Limerick Magdalen. In Humphries’s documentary, Young suggests that nuns “liked” to look at young girls’ bodies during their weekly bath time (*Witness* 1998). The film incorporates this testimony into the representation of the adult Magdalen women and thereby conflates two different incarcerated populations in order to sensationalize its critique in terms of a speculative and sublimated lesbian sexuality. Whereas reviewers of the film seldom fail to foreground this scene, survivors who have seen the film cast doubt on its veracity (McGarry 2002b; Gibbons 2003). Mullan’s invention of this moment of melodrama jeopardizes the authenticity of other, fact-based, scenes in the film.

The portrayal of Sister Bridget, the convent’s tyrannical and heavy-handed mother superior, betrays the director’s ambivalent relation to the demands of history and entertainment. Representing Sister Bridget as irrational highlights her aberrant individuality, and through such a characterization Mullan enables a reading of her abuse as anomalous and therefore as unrepresentative.8 Such a characterization encourages contemporary audiences to evade a systemic critique of Magdalen institutions, one that makes evident the range of social, political, and cultural forces implicated in the abuse of the penitents. Sister Bridget’s melodramatic rhetoric as she forces the shorn and bloodied Bernadette to look in the mirror reduces the nun to an unconvincing mouthpiece of the hegemonic order she embodies: “Open your eyes girl . . . open them, I want you to see yourself as you really are, now that your vanity’s gone and your arrogance defeated, you’re free, free to choose between right and wrong,

8 By focusing on her aberrant individuality, Mullan enables the bad apple response to Sister Bridget. This response was widely promulgated in the wake of Louis Lentin’s dramadoocumentary *Dear Daughter* (1996).
good and evil, so now you can look at your soul, find that which is good and decent and offer it up to God, then and only then will you find salvation.” The camera emphasizes the spectacle of the nun’s violence; Sister Bridget’s image is captured precisely in the bruised and bloodied retina of Bernadette’s eye. Whereas this troubling scene—again based on survivor testimony (Witness 1998)—might provide the film’s emotional climax, its melodramatic oversimplification risks undermining the director’s goals.

Mullan’s film moves beyond such stereotyping in depicting the entanglements of the nuns’ enterprise with secularized capitalism, specifically the economic exploitation of their charges. As she compulsively counts rolls of banknotes and sifts through stacks of invoices, Sister Bridget is caught in a moment of political and economic transition: she successfully negotiates the change, for example, from biscuit tins to a metal safe to secure the laundry’s profits. Perched on top of Sister Bridget’s newly acquired safe sits a portrait of John F. Kennedy, who was welcomed triumphantly as the embodiment of modern Catholic accomplishment during his official state visit to Ireland in 1963. This talisman cements the connection between the laundry’s inevitable modernization and the ensuing disorientations attending the transition to a more secular and transnational social and economic order. Likewise, she arranges for Father Fitzroy to bless the laundry’s newly installed electric dryers in an effort to assimilate traditional and industrialized means of production. However, here the film encodes the demise of Sister Bridget’s power; the technology she celebrates will make redundant the very workers she exploits.

Mullan’s film implies, therefore, that a progressive and industrialized Irish society is unavoidable, even as it resists equating modernization with emancipation. Capitalist exploitation, like other forms of patriarchal social control, extends across and thereby connects the past and the present that Sister Bridget struggles to integrate. When confronted with the choice between the key to Bernadette’s and Patricia’s freedom or the key to the safe containing the laundry’s profits, Sister Bridget’s avarice wins out over her function as agent of the nation’s hegemonic social control. Her authority and vocation mask capitalist exploitation in the guise of progress and piety. In the process, The Magdalene Sisters indict contemporary Irish society: in differentiating progress from liberation, the film reenacts the challenges embodied by the October 1996 announcement from the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity that they were closing Dublin’s last Magdalen

---

9 There is very little precise evidence detailing the finances of the Magdalen laundries in the twentieth century (Harold 2003).
laundry because it was no longer commercially viable (Culliton 1996; O’Kane 1996). Coming in the midst of Celtic Tiger Ireland’s newfound economic and cultural confidence, the revelation that a community of forty women still worked in the laundry anticipated what the film seems at pains to point out, namely, the state’s uneven development in the past and in the present (Gibbons 2002, 96).

**Vocations**

Mullan’s film is vulnerable to the pressures of popular representation that simplifies and thus naturalizes the cultural past represented on the screen. Genre, in this sense, runs the risk of shoring up the status quo—duplicating in the film’s entertainment value the conservative effects of other popular forms such as the traditional music used in the early wedding scene. Just as the film’s opening scene subverts the family’s use of such music, Mullan similarly complicates the representation of the nuns so as to redeploy a more dissident reading latent in the film’s critique. I argue, in fact, that *The Magdalene Sisters* contributes to a broader understanding of Ireland’s women religious in their specific cultural context and does so without condoning the abuse committed by individual members or excusing the hierarchy and religious superiors who concealed that abuse. This rereading draws on the implied gap between the rhetoric of religious vocation and the reality of religious life in the screen convent. But exposing this gap is not the film’s only goal. Mullan also challenges the viewer to acknowledge and explain such a discrepancy; again, as with the music, the audience must work to decipher this more complex terrain and thus become active in the representation. The film challenges viewers to discover the parallel between the discourse of religious vocations in postindependent Ireland and the nation’s hegemonic forces of social control, such as family, patriarchal society, and state, that defined women primarily by their service in the home—service in the domestic home, of course, but also service in the religious home.¹⁰ Extending the possibilities of Mullan’s cultural representation in this manner disrupts contemporary society’s ability to scapegoat the church for past institutional abuse and thereby evade its own complicity in this aspect of the nation’s history.

¹⁰ Article 41.2.1 of Ireland’s constitution states, “In particular, the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” The subsequent clause, 41.2.2, adds, “The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”; *Bunreacht na hÉireann/Constitution of Ireland* (Dublin: Stationery Office/Brunswick Press Limited, 1997), 166–68.
Figure 5 The seductive sentimentality that works through popular media to buttress the nun’s absolute power. *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002). Reproduced with permission from Element/Temple Films.

The film offers one pivotal sequence through which to dramatize the corruption of the nuns’ religious vocation. Sister Bridget’s only moment of self-deprecating humor, the solitary occasion when we see this nun as a human being rather than as a villain, comes on Christmas Day when, through the good graces of the visiting archbishop and philanthropic businessman Mr. Lannigan, the penitents are permitted to watch a film (see fig. 5). As it turns out, the choice of film—Leo McCarey’s classic Hollywood treatment of America’s Catholic Church, *The Bells of St. Mary’s* (1945), starring Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman in the title roles of Father O’Malley and Sister Benedict—proves more troubling than the archbishop realizes (Donnelly 2000, 276–80).

The incorporation of the 1945 film self-consciously embodies the dangers inherent in popular representations of cultural pasts. The American film centers on the fate of a young teenage girl, Patsy Gallagher, who is not all that different from the young women in Mullan’s film. Like the Magdalen institution, St. Mary’s convent in McCarey’s film props up the respectable character of the Gallagher family against attacks from middle-class social prejudices.11 Offering a series of intercut scenes and voice-overs juxtaposing the American film and his own, Mullan also cuts in shots of the audience, revealing a precise seating arrangement that reflects the

---

11 Because she is a prostitute, Patsy’s mother places her daughter in the care of nuns. Patsy feigns a religious vocation as a retreat from secular uncertainties. Ultimately, she purposely fails her exams so as to ensure that she will not graduate to high school. The film’s major conflict ensues between the liberal Father O’Malley and the more rigid Sister Benedict on the importance of educational standards for Catholic institutions.
hierarchies of the Irish convent community. The visiting dignitaries, the community of nuns, and the more compliant and institutionalized Magdalen women face the screen. Meanwhile the three remaining protagonists, Margaret, Patricia, and Bernadette, sit on the periphery of the main audience, gaining a sidelong view of both the projection screen and the larger community (see fig. 5). In effect, these three women become an audience within the audience, and in turn they guide the viewer toward Mullan’s critique. As the larger community greets the opening credits of The Bells of St. Mary’s with enthusiasm and applause, Margaret, Rose, and Bernadette’s tentative reaction tellingly signals the contradiction about to be enacted. Their response, in turn, models for Mullan’s audience the need to resist the seductive powers of popular cultural representation and its distortion of complex social realities.

Mullan employs The Bells of St. Mary’s to realize and thereby evaluate the gap between the rhetoric of religious vocation, embodied with quasi-angelic presence by Sister Benedict (played by a luminous Ingrid Bergman), and the reality of religious life, embodied physically by Sister Bridget (played by a shrill Geraldine McEwan). In the first scene from McCarey’s film, Sister Benedict embraces a distraught Patsy Gallagher as she gently dissuades the young girl from entering religious life: “You don’t become a nun to run away from life, Patsy; it’s not because you’ve lost something, it’s because you’ve found something.” Here Mullan juxtaposes the fictional mother superior, who challenges Patsy toward a more mature interrogation of her stated vocation, with the Magdalen’s religious community, whose intent faces betray the contradiction between their professed vocation and the inhumane treatment meted out hourly to the women in their care. For the three protagonists, the Magdalen nuns personify the antithesis of this cinematic ideal. Looking directly at Sister Bridget, the faces of the three young women, angry, disillusioned, and skeptical in turn, register the corruption of the screen archetype. In the process, they underscore McCarey’s popular Hollywood representation as little more than an alienating fiction. At stake here is something more than an American representation of Catholic institutional benevolence annotating its corrupt Irish equivalent (Murray 2004). Rather, Mullan’s juxtaposition of the two reverend mothers exposes the seductive sentimentality that works through popular media to buttress the nuns’ absolute power. McCarey’s idealized nun, for all her difference from Mullan’s brutal Magdalen superior, reinforces the church’s unconditional authority in the Ireland on display. Popular culture, thus, is far from innocent entertainment.

Mullan’s use of the cinematic ideal exposes a core problem at the heart
of Irish religious vocations. Sister Benedict’s counsel to young Patsy Gallagher contradicts the dominant discourse of religious vocations. Vocations were popularly envisioned as quasi-spontaneous phenomena, what one commentator characterizes as a young woman feeling “a hand laid upon her head and hear[ing] an unearthly voice saying ‘Come follow me’” (O’Faolain 1996). In Mullan’s film, Sister Bridget personifies the impulsive vocation; in introducing McCarey’s film she recalls how she abandoned the desire to be “a cowboy” because “fortunately, God gave me the calling.” The divinely inspired calling can, as Mullan’s film makes abundantly clear, result in the perverse corruption of spirituality that Sister Bridget and the Magdalen institution have come to represent.

By interpolating The Bells of Saint Mary’s into his film, Mullan betrays the relationship between the discourse of religious vocations and postindependent Ireland’s nativist politics. As Yvonne McKenna argues with respect to women entering religious life at the time, “Catholicism became one of the most important ways of defining what it meant to be Irish” (2003, 299; see also McKenna 2006). The Magdalene Sisters undermines the discourse of religious vocations, and particularly its cultivation of female vocations, by exposing its role in the exploitation of religious women who served not only the church but also their families and the state (MacCurtain 1995, 1997). For much of the twentieth century, Catholic vocations were intricately connected with a family’s upward mobility and social aspirations. Having a priest, nun, or religious brother in the family conferred status and respectability on the home. Moreover, a vocation typically endeared a young woman to her parents by signifying the family’s social and religious conformity and prominence within parish life; it also provided opportunities for advancement to younger siblings (Magray 1998, 32–45, 74–86; McKenna 2003, 296). Entering the convent, moreover, enabled young women to avoid 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. In addition, it relieved young women of the burden of motherhood (the role ordained for them under the constitution), a burden they witnessed their own mothers struggling under (Clear 2000, 46–67). Becoming a nun seemed like a safe and

---

13 In 1901 there were more than eight thousand nuns in Ireland (Fahey 1987, 7). By 1970, this number had grown to 18,662 (Inglis 1998, 212). See also MacCurtain 1995; Cullingford 2006.
secure option when the alternatives for women were few—and fraught with potential dangers.

The cultivation of vocations also served society in general while bolstering the hierarchy’s control over much of the nation’s institutional infrastructure. As recent scholarship suggests, by the 1950s most of the great nineteenth-century religious orders, founded on a genuine sense of spiritual idealism, had been reduced to servicing a patriarchal church and state hierarchy by, for example, running schools and hospitals, and managing county homes, industrial and reformatory schools, and Magdalen asylums (MacCurtain 1995, 1997).¹⁴ The intense cultivation of Catholic vocations also signified the nativist aspirations of a newly independent nation. The first five decades after Irish independence in 1922 witnessed the emergence of what historians now refer to as Ireland’s spiritual empire: an ever-expanding network of Irish religious orders dedicated to establishing a worldwide network of Catholic missionaries (Hogan 1990; Murphy 2000; Kenny 2004, 112–22). The nation’s newly expanded spiritual empire relied exclusively on the cultivation of new vocations at home (Kenny 2000, 98–115).

As demonstrated in *The Magdalen Sisters*, religious life entailed its own risks. There were no guarantees that a newly professed nun would be sent overseas to work in Africa or Asia. Similarly, possessing the talents and intelligence that might suggest a teaching or a nursing role in no way guaranteed such a posting. More likely, a member of an Irish religious order would find herself caring for children in an industrial school, managing the kitchen at the local county home, or confined to work at the Magdalen asylum.¹⁵ By exposing the gap between the rhetoric and reality of religious vocations, Mullan critiques the nation’s patriarchal church and state politics. His film reveals how both communities of women—the “sinners” and the “saintly”—operate in relation to external national, societal, and familial forces. Enacting this broader cultural complicity, the film demands a more complex response than simply making the church a scapegoat for past institutional abuses.

¹⁴ Women possessed some choice in deciding which religious community to join. Caitríona Clear (1987) suggests that the religious orders engaged in institutional work often found it most difficult to gain new recruits.

¹⁵ Patricia Burke Brogan explains how as a “white novice” in the Mercy Order she was summarily ordered to substitute for a nun at Galway’s Magdalen laundry (2004, 161–62). See also Fuller 2002, 164.
Conclusion
Placed within the historical context I have outlined, *The Magdalene Sisters* powerfully illuminates contemporary Irish society’s obligation to the survivors of the nation’s Magdalen institutions. Mullan documents the culpability of the church, state, family, and community in maintaining the open secret of the laundries and the abuse of thousands of women confined therein. The film compels the discerning viewer to move beyond evasion and toward action on behalf of victims and survivors: action by way of acknowledging past injustices, action by way of effecting social change, and action by way of supporting calls for reform and reparations. Cultural representations of other institutional abuses, especially related to widespread physical and sexual abuse in the nation’s industrial and reformatory schools, point the way toward a productive outcome stemming from the recent accumulation of representations of Ireland’s Magdalen laundries.

Public pressure, largely mobilized directly as a result of television documentaries like *Dear Daughter* (1996) and *States of Fear* (1999), led Ireland’s Taoiseach, or prime minister, Bertie Ahern, to apologize for the childhood abuse that victims and survivors experienced while resident in state-funded residential institutions (“Speech by An Taoiseach” 1999; Smith 2001). Survivors of Ireland’s Magdalen laundries still await a similar apology and the validation of their victimization that comes with it. The Residential Institutions Redress Board, established by an act of legislation in light of revelations made public by *States of Fear*, provides reparations to the survivors of abuse in all state-licensed residential institutions. However, the redress board does not recognize Ireland’s Magdalen institutions, and no similar reparations vehicle is currently envisioned. Similarly, the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, again instigated by government statute, provides a forum for survivors of childhood abuse not only to give testimony and therefore bear witness to the past but also, when such evidence meets certain legal criteria, to pursue legal proceedings against perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse. Survivors of abuse in the nation’s Magdalen asylums are offered no such recourse.

Unlike the industrial and reformatory schools scandals and the revelations of child abuse and clerical pedophilia and of widespread corporate and political corruption over the past ten years, cultural representations

---

16 For more information on the Residential Institutions Redress Board, see http://www.rirb.ie.

17 For more information on the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, see http://www.childabusecommission.ie.
of the Magdalen laundries story have yet to initiate an equivalent response—apologies, commissions of inquiry, official commemorations, appropriate monuments and memorials, or calls for reparations. Contemporary Irish society, newly enthralled with commemorating historical events and ensuring accountability for past crimes, remains curiously desensitized toward this particular aspect of its recent past (O’Toole 1997; Kelleher 2002). The religious orders remain steadfast in refusing to apologize for abuses against the women once in their care.¹⁸ Moreover, the religious orders still refuse to provide access to their records, thereby perpetuating the suffering for survivors who seek official acknowledgment of their incarceration and for the children of former Magdalen women now seeking to establish their birth identity and family histories. Meanwhile, the state remains silent when confronted with appeals for admissions of culpability, referring such calls to the religious orders. Indeed, the state’s official discourse steadfastly designates the Magdalen asylums as charitable institutions outside the government’s control and/or responsibility. But the state utilized these institutions throughout the twentieth century to conceal a wide variety of sociosexual “problems.” It has long ignored the flagrant disregard for basic civil and constitutional rights: false imprisonment, the absence of due process, exploitative and dangerous work practices, the denial of educational and human developmental resources, as well as emotional, physical, and in some cases sexual abuse. Many families of former Magdalen women remain silent about their past abandonment of a daughter, a sister, a cousin, or an aunt, thereby refusing to acknowledge their role in supporting abusive conditions experienced within these institutions. Such manifestations of public resistance suggest, perhaps, why Mullan’s film failed to generate genuine social action.

And still, The Magdalene Sisters might yet help cultivate precisely such action. To date, the international public attention the film brought to Ireland’s Magdalen laundries continues to keep the story in the public consciousness. Despite its drawbacks, popular culture has an insidious way of entering the collective conscience. The Magdalene Sisters’ effectiveness in generating redress, reform, and reparation may not lie with this film alone but more likely with the whole complex of representa-

¹⁸ On May 5, 2004, Ireland’s Mercy Order offered the most complete apology yet for the abuse of children in its various residential institutions (industrial and reformatory schools). However, in what can only be considered a further compartmentalization of responsibility, the order chose not to include the abuse of women in its two Magdalen institutions as part of that apology (McGarry 2004; Raftery 2004). In August 2003, the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas did “sincerely apologize for any and all injustices that may have occurred” in the Magdalen laundries. See http://www.sistersofmercy.org/justice/magdalene_movie.html.
tions, including archival sources, testimonies, legal documents, and the range of plays, documentaries, art exhibits, poetry, and other cultural reenactments that preceded and followed in its wake. Mullan’s film alone cannot change public consciousness, but it can assist with the project. By imagining and narrativizing Ireland’s Magdalen laundries as forms of historic injustice, it supports the campaign to elicit a political and social response similar to the one afforded survivors of residential child-care institutions.

The film augments, in this sense, the advocacy work of the Magdalene Memorial Committee, which, since its formation in 1993, has sought to support survivors and family members while seeking redress for past abuses. Similarly, the film’s international success, in particular its success in the United States, assisted organizations such as Adoption Ireland that work tirelessly on behalf of children of former Magdalen who are now seeking information on their birth mothers and their family histories, in particular their medical history. A similarly encouraging development is the appearance of a relatively new Web-based listserv, Justice for Magdalenes. It too emerged in light of Mullan’s film and is actively working on a series of related initiatives, including fund-raising, increasing public awareness, and issuing press releases that respond to political and church inaction, as well as disseminating information to support research focusing on these institutions. These diverse initiatives, while fragile and perhaps vulnerable, evince the power of popular cultural representation to generate meaningful social responses.

At the root of this cause remains a population of Irish women whose fate was almost uniformly dark: some were discarded anonymously in unmarked graves; others, so traumatized by the experience of incarceration, remain dependent on religious orders for their daily existence; still others are unable to escape from the societal stigma attached to their past. It is for their sakes that Mullan’s film should be recognized as contributing to a collective movement forward toward real action.

Department of English and Irish Studies Program
Boston College

19 For more information on the Magdalene Memorial Committee, see http://www.magdalenelaundries.com.
20 For more information on Adoption Ireland, see http://www.adoptionireland.com.
21 For more information on Justice for Magdalens, see http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Justice_for_Magdalenes/. 
References


Women’s Status in Church, State and Society, ed. Mary O’Dowd and Sabine Wichert, 34–44. Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen’s University of Belfast.