

## “Pushing Yourself into Existence”: Language, Trauma, Framing in Pat Collins’s *Silence* (2012)

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### Abstract

The article considers Pat Collins’s feature length debut *Silence* (2012) as a film concerned with responses to trauma. Opening with a definition of epistemology and film-imaging as framing, the article then focuses these concerns around language or language-use. A parallel is then drawn between the thematising of “silence” around the journey of the protagonist (Eoghan) in *Silence* and “silence” as thematised in the final proposition of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1922). This parallel is used to explore an obligation, perceived as coming to prominence in the course of Eoghan’s journey, to resist the desire to frame the experience of trauma; resistance defined by an ethics of “silence.” The article’s middle section develops this discussion of ethics to explore the “window” as a visual motif in *Silence* (considered pertinent to reading the ethical), arguing that this motif gives the perceived obligation to remain silent (in the case of Eoghan’s journey home in the film), to resist framing, a crucially aesthetic context. The final section addresses these issues in the wider sense of the film as an allegory on Ireland; concerned with accepting the limitations of language regarding the traumatic or the experience of trauma.

Key words: framing, Ireland, language, trauma, knowledge

The small meadow shimmered in the starlight, and her promises grew more extravagant as she drifted into the lucid thin air of waking dreaming, her flirting more obvious—then she’d awake, alert to some step in the woods, some brief bloom of light in the sky, back and forth for a while between Brock fantasies and the silent darkened silver images all around her, before settling down for a sleep [. . .]. Prairie awoke to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spirit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home. (Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland*)

Don’t you hear the horrible screaming all around us, the screaming that men usually call silence? (Hören Sie nicht das entsetzliche Schreien ringsum, das man gewöhnlich die Stille heißt?). (Georg Büchner, *Lenz*)

Two Irish feature films released in 2012 can be considered responses to the trauma of the Irish economic collapse, albeit addressing trauma in an indirect capacity. Lenny Abrahamson’s *What Richard Did* (2012), an Waldron, Dara. 2014. ““Pushing Yourself into Existence’: Language, Trauma, Framing in Pat Collins’s *Silence* (2012)” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 13(2):202-221.

urban drama, is inspired by the social realism of Belgian filmmakers, the Dardenne Brothers, and based loosely on the Anabel nightclub crime, which took place in Dublin in 2000. The crime in question concerned the accidental murder of a Dublin schoolboy by his peers following a nightclub brawl. Pat Collins's *Silence*, on the other hand, set largely among the wild expanses of the Irish West Coast, concerns an exiled worker—in the vein of diasporic texts such as Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985)—returning home; a return complicated by a lack of information as to why he originally fled.<sup>1</sup> An estranged emigrant, Eoghan, living in Berlin, is tasked with returning home for temporary work. His return, however, takes a different route to earlier exile narratives, in that, in the process of returning he is reacquainted with a country he appears to have, initially, lost interest in. The reason for Eoghan's exile in Berlin is never revealed as such.

While both films are concerned with trauma, or dealing with it, lack of any clear indication as to who is responsible, is presented—in both films—through a young male's difficulty in speaking about the crisis he bears witness to. In both films, one based in an urban setting, another in a rural, the crisis experienced by the lead protagonist lends itself to being read as an allegory on the Irish experience, most specifically the traumatic impact of the recession. In the case of *What Richard Did*, a well-adjusted popular teenager, Richard, is faced with an insurmountable trauma, the response to which becomes the mainstay of the film. The smooth functioning of bourgeois society is interrupted, a shockwave emanating from a criminal act of traumatic proportions. In the case of *Silence*, an exile travels back to Ireland, while remaining wearily quiet about why he left. An abiding sense of loss permeates the discussions when travelling. In what follows, I read Eoghan's journey, like Richard's, ethically *and* allegorically. Taking allegory to mean a kind of parable or fable, *Silence* can be contextualised around the recent recession in Ireland, assessed around the ramifications of the economic collapse. That Eoghan returns, in the course of his journey, to a place associated with trauma and remains silent about this has ethical as well

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<sup>1</sup> Orla Yadin's and Sylvie Bringas's eleven-minute animated documentary *Silence* (1998) shares not only a title but the thematic concerns of Collins's feature-length film. Yadin's and Bringas's film deals with the self-imposed silence of a Holocaust survivor; the film is an exploration of the child's response to trauma

as allegorical merit. There is, I argue, an obligation, a demand for Eoghan, to resist framing trauma (in language) which, perceived allegorically, can be considered an ethical and cathartic way of confronting the Irish “trauma” of recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of a journey to significant sites, landmarks and long shots of the landscape, the composition of which evoke the landscapes of Casper David Friederich and Irish painter Paul Henry, position Eoghan in a diminished yet—at the same time—overwrought state. The sheer immensity of the land is an intimation of the (immense) trauma associated with it. Wide-angle shots of landmarks contrast interiors of cars and houses, distinguished by an imposing window frame. A signature shot of Eoghan moving across the landscape in his car is of a figure “immobilised” (I return to this later) against the backdrop of a window in close-up, the framed interior emphasised by the lines bordering the window. Windows (cast as the frame within the frame) are prominent “frames,” giving a visual form to the narrative concern with picturing, and certain validity to the contention that framing—framing the past as knowledge—is a central prerogative of Eoghan’s. The narrative, in one sense at least, concerns Eoghan seeking a picture, from which his past can be framed as a coherent narrative. Each encounter along his work route seems to impel him towards a past trauma.

This article approaches *Silence* through a register of framing considered double. Framing, in the first instance, is considered a method for harnessing the past in discourse. Epistemically, the past is filtered as an object of knowledge, the framed object a reductio of past experience. To frame is to harness knowledge from cognitive recall. “Enframing,” as outlined by Martin Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1954), helps conceptualise the reductive power of framing. As Heidegger states, “nature reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information” (Heidegger 1993: 328). For Heidegger, the very idea of

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<sup>2</sup> David McWilliams has consistently addressed the trauma of recession Ireland. Ireland is said to have experienced an “anxiety recession” based on the shock of deep economic turmoil. “In an anxiety recession,” McWilliams notes, “people want to pay down their debts because they have been traumatised by too much debt” (McWilliams 2012). Trauma has a material trace in ghost housing estates dominant on the Irish landscape, crucially underling the distinction between “house,” a symbol of trauma, and “home,” a symbol of belonging.

ordering “nature” (considered as experience) is just one method, one particular way of procuring—as a port of call—knowledge. To enframe is to build systems of knowledge using such methods. While, for Heidegger, enframing is scientific, it operates as a blockage to “original revealing and hence to experiencing the call of a more primal truth” (Heidegger 1993: 329). For Heidegger, the enframing impulse has the unsavoury effect of smothering, or concealing, truth in this primordial form.

With the primordial the considered concern, there is an argument to be made, a central aim of this article, that (en)framing, as expressed in the form and content of *Silence*, works against an obligation—expressed through the journey undertaken by protagonist Eoghan—or at least, one alluded to, to resist doing just that (framing as language).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the enframing impulse confronts an opposing one, revealed as a primordial feature of Eoghan’s journey. To (en)frame is one way of thinking through framing, perhaps scientifically, another way of which can found in the discourse of film theory. For Sergei Eisenstein, to frame involves “cutting out a piece of reality by means of the lens” (Eisenstein 1929: 148). In the piecing together of shots, film “frames” an exterior real. Multiple shots frame the real, fuelling the perception that film is more advanced in accessing reality than earlier art forms. Although this is not a contended point in what follows, it is suggested that framing—framing in language or framing (reality) as image—when both involve knowledge claims, is problematised around trauma and its representation in *Silence*. This problematisation concerns an act of knowledge formation called “framing.” A claim like “the problem is home” is an example. Or indeed, “the film is about Ireland.” These are not necessarily false claims. However, the act of framing is purported by them. To frame can be perceived as an epistemological (which includes visual) act.

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger develops the discussion of enframing around the issue of what he calls destining. “When destining reigns in the mode of enframing,” he notes, “it is the supreme danger. The danger attests itself to us in two ways. As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of standing-reserve, then he comes to the brink of a precipitous fall” (Heidegger 1993: 332). One could read the journey of *Silence* as a journey, not destined but reactive, working against the large masses of standing-reserve (houses) that have come to define Celtic Tiger Ireland.

From a film theoretical perspective, a distinction can be made between framing, considered as a process of knowledge formation and showing. To show, simply to show, involves no subsidiary knowledge claim. However, in so far as it concerns “reality,” certain strands of “reality” which are not necessarily framed as knowledge, can, nonetheless, be shown in film: to frame a considered method for expunging knowledge relating to what is shown (generally relating to the film in its narrative form). Taking the distinction between framing and showing as intact (or for the purpose of argument at least), a further line of investigation in the following article will be concerned with the window as motif (the frame). The window, as “shown” in the final sequence, has a reflexive use, in that it problematises the epistemology of framing.

The epistemology of framing concerns ordering and systemising in language. To frame is to know something definitive about an object. But to know is a conduit of language. The limits of the world are, for certain philosophers of language, the limits of language. Yet, that experience can resist “expression” in language gives credence to the possibility, certainly within a phenomenological context, that not all experience can be “known.” Traumatic experience is often spoken of in this way. “Trauma,” Cathy Caruth notes, “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that it’s very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996: 4). In their seminal essay “Introjection–Incorporation: Mourning or Melancholia,” the pathological retort to fantasy, considered as a defense mechanism against trauma, is explored by Abraham and Torok. Trauma, they argue, is of “such nature to prohibit communication” (Abraham and Torok 1980: 7). The event is resistant to expression; its shock value escapes diction.

Taking the relationship between language, the frame and trauma as a point of departure, the ethical *response* to trauma as suggested by *Silence* can be considered, rather ironically, as silence. Silence, which Eoghan is trying to record in the film, is a silence instrumentalised as (en)framing. This is then opposed to a primordial silence considered epistemologically as a way of responding to trauma that is ethical. The pertinent emphasis given by Ludwig Wittgenstein to “silence” in the *Tractatus* (1922) finds certain resonance here. Wittgenstein ends his text with the proposition,

“whereof which we cannot speak, therefore we must remain silent” (Wittgenstein 2002). While certainly a teasing way to end a major philosophical work, a body of criticism has taken the proposition to be a tautology, a nonsensical end to an at times nonsensical text. Others, alternatively, have noted a dismissal of philosophy’s capacity to solve anything of note. Yet, while some are skeptical of the true worth of Wittgenstein’s claims in ethical terms, there are those who find in the proposition something of a definitively ethical nature. Staying silent on what must not be spoken of, is, for these critics, a distinctly ethical stance.

The obligation to remain silent is assumed—by these scholars—to mean something cannot be said; and this must be accepted as such. The *Tractatus*, on this reading, takes the form of a ladder, thrown away when the limitations of language are accepted. The ladder is a metaphor for language; throwing it away is a metaphor for an awakening to the limitations of language. For Lynette Reid, who has written extensively on Wittgenstein’s conclusive endnote, the upshot of the ladder theory lies in the assertion to “stop engaging in this activity of arguing” (Reid 1998: 106). This demand to stop arguing, for Reid, involves a subsidiary demand to accept insufficiencies of language. There is a lack in language in relation to certain experiential forms, a lack which must be accepted.

Returning to *Silence*, cast as a film which concerns language, or at least the relationship between silence, language and trauma, the concerted efforts made by Eoghan to record the “silence” of Ireland’s landmarks, which makes up a considerable portion of the narrative action, can be thought to shield, that is, mask, the purpose of the silence maintained around the (perceived) trauma in returning home. Eoghan’s efforts at recording silence—the journey of the film a long deliberation on silence—can be found to veil the significance of his speaking in his native tongue when he returns to Tory Island (an Irish-speaking island off Donegal, part of the Donegal [Gaeltacht](#)). By travelling to where his native language is spoken—in the film’s conclusion—and facing the trauma of having left, considerable weight is given to the relationship between silence, language and trauma. Indeed, the journey culminates on Tory, at a moment when the relationship between language and silence, discussed at various anchor points along the way, reaches critical mass. Crucially, Eoghan, as a native speaker, returns to where his native tongue is spoken. Yet his journey home, which requires speaking his native

language at intermittent intervals, can also be found to involve an acceptance of language *per se* in its limitations (as silence). This is analogous to Wittgenstein's text, when this acceptance is considered as an ethical variant.

The film opens with a sequence of images, abstract in that they have no context within the film prior to this, of a house situated in the Irish landscape. Collins then cuts to Eoghan discussing his return to Ireland (for work) with his partner on the streets of Berlin. The discussion, drowned out by city-noise, shifts to an apartment in evening time. No back-story is given concerning the problems of home. There is an implicit tension generated around the abstractions of a house and a broken window shown in close-up prior to these scenes. These abstractions emerge again at the film's end, now revealed as images of the place Eoghan finally returns to, having been spliced into the action at random moments throughout. A close-up of a framed picture swaying on a wall follows that of a curtain blowing through a broken windowpane. Lacking context in the main body of film, these are "disjunctive temporalities," as Adam Lowenstein puts it, which "exceed 'pastness' and infect the present" (Lowenstein 2012: 143). Like trauma, they "cut into" the present, only to reveal their content as Eoghan's family "home" at the end (a point when form and content align).

It is never clear whether these images are markers of what haunts Eoghan because of an associated trauma, or the expression of a trauma interrupting the film's syntax. In the former sense, as mental images, they recall the repetitious-mental images experienced by victims of trauma, images which, lacking cognitive status, jarr with language. Simply put, their content resists framing. "The event," James Dawes notes, "overwhelms the act of experiencing [. . .] because the event thereby permanently escapes understanding." He adds, "if trauma is in this sense not simply cognition resistant but noncognitive, then there are serious costs to putting trauma into words" (Dawes 2013: 29-30). "Trauma," Grant H. Kester claims, "is defined [. . .] by the continual reenactment, repetition, or reiteration of the traumatic event in the consciousness of the subject" (Kester 2011: 183). Images return *ad nauseum* due to a subject's difficulty processing image content in language. These trauma images also interrupt the filmic syntax. It is only when their indexical content materialises and is shown as the home associated with trauma that the film ends. Moreover, the final shot,

Eoghan moving from the window to the centre of the room having returned “home,” is undertaken in silence the constitutive basis of which is an (perceived) ethic *not* to frame (to frame to find a definitive meaning for experience in language).

The journey, before reaching this endpoint, unfolds with an almost gravitational pull to where Eoghan’s native language is spoken on his return to Ireland. This pull is marked by incidents which draw him, almost as if by some unconscious force, towards home. One of the most significant of these incidents takes place on the West Coast. The incident in question begins with an undisclosed “other,” with the novelist Michael Harding playing himself, although he is never referred to as Harding, walking towards the camera in long shot; while Eoghan sets up his recording equipment. The stranger inquires what Eoghan is doing, only to be told “recording areas that are away from manmade sound.” “Sure *you’re* here,” the stranger replies. Without dwelling on the ironic comedy of this reply, the next scene takes place in a car, making it clear that Eoghan has been invited home. The conversation hinges on the possibility of experiencing pure silence. The shot of a skyline is then followed by a cut to a dining room of an old house; where the discussion continues over dinner. Eoghan is asked if he has sisters and brothers. He is visibly uncomfortable when stating he is an only child, inferring possible reasons for his exile. Recognising this, his host changes the subject.

The host (as “other”) deliberates on a “silence” which cannot be understood as lack, as the tension around the discussion of Eoghan and his family and the trauma it invariably evokes now subsides. Eoghan then agrees to sing, after which he talks about the value of song to rooting people in place. This moment underlines—to the extent that it is almost an epiphany—the importance of “home.” “When you push yourself into existence, it’s like the first note of a song. It comes out of silence. And your last breath will be followed by silence,” the host notes, adding the words, “but in that time you can only be where you’re rooted, where you belong. And to where you go home.” From this point the significance of “place” in the sense of belonging is greater; as the “being”—associated with the lure of “home”—harmonises with “becoming.” The scene anchoring the film is momentous; the change from resisting the lure of home to accepting it now takes on a revelatory tone.



Eoghan's failure to reveal something about the return to Ireland is nonetheless poignant. An existential quality is given to belonging, in that "you can only be where you belong," yet it is never made clear whether Eoghan at this point shares this view. He has "been" to different locations on a map, an exercise in solitude. The encounter with *this* other, who forms a bond with Eoghan, seems in one sense revelatory, in part due to the sudden "constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together a particular locus" (Massey 1994: 154). It involves the "particular locus" of home. In another sense, it seems to remind Eoghan of the trauma he is destined to confront. The discussion concludes with the camera turning to the homely kitchen space. A kettle boils; morning arrives. Eoghan's silence on the ruminations concerning home are now more telling, more affective than a robust response, with the kitchen and boiling tea signifiers of a "home" he maintains an uncomfortable relation with. A shot of a window (and I will return to the significance of recurring window images) ends the sequence, framing a garden with a child's swing made from an old tyre. Here are traces of family life but information about Eoghan's past remains steeped in silence.

Matthew Ostrow finds in the concluding proposition of the *Tractatus* emphasis on doing a statement he regards as fundamentally ethical. For Ostrow, "Wittgenstein's statement finds its real fulfillment not in what we say but in what we do" (Ostrow 2002: 14). In the sequence following the encounter with the undesignated host, Eoghan is alone in the landscape, with the emphasis now shifting from the subtlety of his conversation to the base physicality of what he is doing. Because the reasons for visiting the places he visits are lacking, the journey to these places takes on a spiritual as much as physical demeanour (a *must* not to be spoken of). This physical "doing" accords with a silence of Wittgensteinian proportions. Eoghan hypothetically assumes the "my" in Ostrow's analysis:

The activity of philosophizing (serves) as an indication that my will is at odds with reality, that I am failing to accept fully the course of my experience. It will be taken as a sign that something has gone awry in my way of living. And that is to say that to "go on" with the task of the *Tractatus* is ultimately just to acknowledge the "must" in the text's final remark—"whereof one cannot speak, thereof one *must* remain silent" (*TPL* 71)—as the mark not of logical necessity, but of ethical obligation. (Ostrow 2002: 133)

In deciding to visit the county where his native tongue is spoken, a sense of ethical obligation is brought to bear on Eoghan's subsequent decision to return to the derelict house perceivably his home, bearing witness to the source of trauma, or at least the home associated with it. He arrives in the Gaeltacht (where his house is), and in the sequences which herald his decision to return to Tory, speaks fluently in Irish. These are sequences crucial to the film's narrative trajectory in the sense that the journey back consists of generating an awareness of silence as a means of accepting language *in* its limitations (a silence in language). Eoghan must rediscover the language that links him with "home" while at the same time accepting that this language is limited in accounting for the impact of trauma. His encounters on the way are significant in serving as premonitions of this. In the final sequence, Eoghan travels from Inishbofin—an island like Tory—to Donegal, as the camera settles on a young man conversing with Eoghan in Irish. That the dialogue concerns the burden of leaving home, adds significance to what materialises after. The boy could just as easily be a younger version of Eoghan, planning his future, speaking of a need to escape the "home" Eoghan is about to rediscover. The fact that Eoghan converses in Irish is also significant. He has entered Tory, the Gaeltacht island he has not visited in fifteen years:

A shot of Eoghan boarding the Tory island ferry is followed by a set of stunning superimpositions: an image, archival in origin, of a fisherman winding in a net, superimposed on a monumental wave crashing upon the shore. A voice-over recalls the songs sung by fishermen from one boat to the next, as they travel across the waves. The second is an image of a lighthouse superimposed on a map, used to signify the protagonist's impending arrival on Tory. These images hint at Eoghan's decision to travel to the island, before a cut to him conversing with an older islander (having walked inland from the pier) indicates his arrival. In the sequence which follows, Eoghan sets out to rediscover the island's beauty. The camera then cuts to him walking along a cliff-edge, the corncrake's call the only discernible sound, drowning out the man-made noise in the surrounding vicinity. A medium shot, concealing the danger of Eoghan's position, cuts to long: He is now a dot on the landscape, making the scale of rock on which he stands immense in comparison. The roar of the sea is heard as he begins his retreat. A medium shot of Eoghan returning to the village, signifying the end of an excursion, follows a diminished profile—his silhouette—standing on a sea stack.

In these sequences the idea of “silence,” conceptualised by Eoghan earlier in the film as sound free of man-made intrusion, materialises as a kind of obtuse supplement to language. This is silence as sound, devoid of cultural significance, but also silence indicative of what Eoghan *must* not speak about ethically. That is, when to speak is to frame, to reduce the experiences associated with the past to an object of knowledge. Silence resonates in the first sense in shots of the landscape. These are complemented, in the second sense, by a cut from Eoghan walking towards the village at half-light, to a reverse shot of a derelict “house,” situated in a sparsely populated rural area in full light. Blurred “frames”—windows, doorways—come into focus as the nooks and crannies of the house are perused on entering. Eoghan then opens a cupboard, inspects peeling paint, before gazing out through the broken glass of the sitting room window. He then recalls muttering voices. This “collective” mutter, resistant to the framing of language, does not make “sense.” As if in lieu of this, Eoghan moves upstairs, where a broken window and picture frame externalise the broken mutter of the voices.

Eoghan then appears at a window (which we will discuss later), surrounded by a gradually darkening room. A ruin, advanced in its decay, is set in the field over which the window looks. Sandy Denny’s “It’ll Take a Long Time” plays as the screen begins to blacken, as a non-diegetic accompaniment to the final scene. The significance of Denny’s epic should not be lost. For the line about fishermen “who will never know, if there’s a reason, each of them must go, to join the cruel flow” finds an echo in the cruel flow Eoghan confronts at “home.” Perhaps the lyrics express the ethical recognition for Eoghan that certain memories remain excluded from discourse, and the need to accept this. To speak about a trauma is to look for sense, to give a reason. The cruel flow is the fifteen years of absence, voices that will not relent; and the journey a bearing witness to the material—and not so material—traces of this absence.

Michael Kremer’s critique of the *Tractatus* can help shed light on the specifically ethical concerns around this ending to the film:

My interpretation of the ethical point of the *Tractatus* turns on the “irresolute” character of the ineffability reading. The central idea of the ineffability reading, that there are truths which are “shown” but cannot be said, involves an unstable combination of two notions: the notion of a truth, something with the structure of a proposition, and the notion of an insight which is beyond expressing in propositions.

Ineffability readers sometimes recognize the incoherence of this idea, but nonetheless do not hesitate to saddle the *Tractatus* with it—after all, they say, the book was later recognized by Wittgenstein as defective. Resolute readers, on the other hand, see this idea as a temptation which the *Tractatus* presents to its readers, only to show them in the end its incoherence. Resolute readers, therefore, must look elsewhere for the difficulties that Wittgenstein eventually came to see in his early work. (Kremer 2007: 146)

Kremer's interpretative stance, as resolute, is not the main concern here, nor is the viability of his reading. However, his assertion that the shown does not "assume the structure of a proposition," when the proposition is considered to frame "reality" (addressed by Kremer in its "incoherence"), is helpful when considering the meaning of this end. The film ends with the once trauma image being revealed as an image of the home Eoghan has now returned to, while Eoghan is shown approaching the window, first seen in this trauma image. He gazes out from the window before he moves away, and the window moves off screen. The window can be seen as "a fragment from a constantly flowing and evolving reality" (Elsasser and Hagener 2010: 16). Thus, retreating from the window—the same window of which is a central motif in the (trauma) image—imbibes, symbolically, Eoghan's need not to, or that he must not, frame the "reality" to which he now bears witness (the shown). What he experiences as "real" need not "assume the structure of a proposition," hence, he remains silent. The window frame moves out of the cinematic frame, as the ethical and allegorical reach a meaningful epiphany.

### *The Realist Fallacy*

That place called home is never an unmediated experience. (Doreen Massey)

André Bazin's writings, most specifically the essays "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," and "The Myth of Total Cinema," both written during the early years of Italian neo-realism, have been instrumental in shaping the relationship between cinema and the realist movement after the War. Bazin identifies a defining teleology, from the first excursions in perspective, to the advent of French painterly realism (on to cinema). In his essay, he underlines the fact that the early inventors of cinema "saw the cinema as a total and complete representation of reality [. . .] an

*integral realism*, a recreation of the world in its own image” (Bazin 2005: 20-21). For Bazin, photography is an “impassive” recorder of reality. Just as Stanley Cavell claims, “when a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut *out*” (Cavell 1979: 24), Bazin finds an unparalleled access to reality in the photographic medium.

Bazin finds realism—the teleological origin of which he identifies—in painterly perspective. For Stephen Heath, following Bazin, the “fixed centrality” of the film spectator, derives its positional fixity from the spectator of two-dimensional (pictorial) space. In “Narrative Space,” Heath maintains “fundamental (to the film experience) is the idea of a spectator at a window, an *aperta finestra* that gives a view on the world—framed, centred, harmonious (the *istoria*)” (Heath 1976: 78). “For Heath,” Friedberg puts it, “the frame of the camera reproduces the frame of Alberti’s metaphoric window, offering a view that is framed and centered” (Friedberg 2006: 78). Friedberg notes:

The cinematic moving image is produced by a series of “frames” travelling at a precise speed through an aperture of projected light. The film frame reminds us of Alberti’s axioms for perspectival representation. But while photographic perspective conforms to the conventions of depth of field and framing, and hence Bazin’s teleological viewpoint, “the cinematic movement of objects within the frame to its edges, and off-frame, suggests its radical contradiction.” (Friedberg 2006: 83)

The cinematic/photographic frame may have its origins in the Albertian window. Yet the positing of such origins is belied, at least in Friedberg’s view, by contradiction. Not only is equating the window with the materiality of the screen a problematic venture, so too is the conviction, when assumed, that photography is a less “mediated” form than others. In other words, it is not a given that the framing of reality which supposedly originates in perspectival painting reaches a nadir of perfection in the photographic image. It might be more appropriate to say that the photographic image has an ability to show without necessarily framing reality, the distinction being fundamentally epistemological.

Debates in realist discourse tend to hinge on considerations of photography as an end-point of the realist project. These debates also rest on the fact that reality—of which we speak—can be rendered without the same recourse to mediation, film as a fulfillment of the Albertian “window on the world” coda. Taking the cinema screen to equate with the window, as assumed within realist circles, the windows used in

*Silence* can appear as problematic reflexive motifs, dramatising the window view as a metaphor for peering into the real. That *Silence* has been received as a documentary would seem to support the film's "window on the world" coda;<sup>4</sup> and indeed its realism. In this sense, the film frames reality. Yet, considering the film as neither conventional documentary nor full fiction, the aesthetic use of the window assumes greater levels of import. It is interesting to note that Eoghan is played by a non-professional actor (and co-author of the screenplay for the film), Eoghan Mac Giolla Bhríde, who has lived in exile from Donegal. Eoghan, in an uncanny contradiction, plays Eoghan. The emphasis on the window, nonetheless, serves to reflexively dramatise the film's implicit claim to be a window on the world, with the world being Ireland, while generating further concerns around the issue of Eoghan framing this world.

By turning away from the window "frame" in this final sequence the reflexive concerns with the visuality of framing are all the more apparent: what are "we" looking at? What can be "seen"? What can be known? Eoghan peers outwards through the window, a mark of his impulse to frame, before moving away, suggesting, or at least implying, his decision not to frame, or that he must resist beholding, like the film itself, a frame for trauma (a microcosm of Ireland's trauma). For Eoghan travels back to Ireland, whether, consciously or not, in the hope that an understanding of how the country has impacted on him can be framed. However, the move away from the window now implies he has come to terms with the limitations of framing as language, when to frame is a repository for language. The window is used to reflect on framing, ending the film by suggesting the "reality" Eoghan peers at through this window—as if the picture he has of the past is no longer something to be beheld—and the desire to structure his reality as a proposition, has given way to an acceptance of language and its limitations. The end, associating the window frame with framing, aligns Eoghan's view with

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<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that quite a large proportion of critics received the film as a documentary, the implicit aim of which was to interrogate the realism of the documentary form. Mac Giolla Bhríde is a co-writer, making the film partially autobiographical. When the distinction between non-professional actors and documentary subjects is rendered mute, the film acquires a certain realism, while equally problematising the realist form.

the spectator's;<sup>5</sup> a gaze no longer directed at the window. The window, as a symbol of "reality," and the framing of language, now moves off screen, forming a symbolic correlation with the Albertian metaphoric window:

Alberti's metaphoric "window" was a framing device for the geometrics of his perspective formula. While it implied a fixed position for the viewer of single point perspective, it did not assume or imply that the "subject to be painted" should be the exact view of what one would see out an architectural window onto the natural world, as in a "window on the world." As a representational system, linear perspective was a technique for reproducing what was seen on the virtual plane of representation. But if the logic of perspective produced a representation of pictorial space with the effect of window-gazing, it also placed new restrictions on a viewer who was, as one writer will describe, "immobilized by the logic of the system." (Friedberg 2006: 35)

The capacity for the window, *qua* Friedberg, to immobilise the viewer, makes it a suitably fertile metaphor for the ending of *Silence*. For, rather than assume an experience of immobility, the effect of window-gazing—a practice in which Eoghan partakes in this scene, and at key moments in his journey—allows the experience of arriving home to take the form of acceptance at this moment. Eoghan is attuned, perhaps impelling the viewer to become similarly attuned (to Ireland and its problems), to accept that something about "reality" does not lend itself to being framed. Something about what Eoghan gazes at through the window escapes the aperture of the frame. It is no surprise that the images, defined as trauma images, find a context at this juncture, neutralising their earlier impact as "trauma." It is as if, with Eoghan *and* the film

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note the metaphoric use of the ruin in Iranian cinema, particularly as Collins has an expressed interest in the Iranian New Wave, and in particular the films of Abbas Kiarostami. He made a commissioned documentary *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living* (Collins 2004). Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa makes the point "a perfect example of metaphor of Kiarostami's cinema, also common in Persian poetry and the work of other Iranian filmmakers, is the use of ruins as an image of depression, an image that can be historical as well as personal—that evokes a collective memoir of destruction imperialistically and internally as well as a sense of despair and loss" (Saeed-Vafa 2003: 59). That Eoghan turns away from the window, through which he peered upon the ruin, supports the argument that the collective memory which materialises as a ruin cannot be framed, and he *must* stay silent.

making, the same point—the trauma depicted through these images, of Eoghan's home—can be accepted, without at the same time assuming the “structure of a proposition,” framed. The home aligned with trauma, does not lend itself to framing.

That trauma must not be spoken of, rationalised (as expressed in Wittgenstein's final proposition), is felt in the phasing of the window off screen as Eoghan sits in silence. The visual emphasis given to the window, as frame, is reduced. The subtle use of sound, however, as an accompaniment, has a nonetheless crucial role in this sequence. Eoghan enters the home, with memory externalised as sound; a mutter of voices gradually replaced by song. Although he does not speak or talk about what he feels, the audience is privy to the sonic memories that pervade his consciousness. The Real, as coined by Jacques Lacan to account for the use of language in the aftermath of trauma, offers an interesting means for assessing how visual form echoes the concerns mediated in sound. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek explores the concept, as follows:

Here the distinction between reality and the Real can be brought into use: reality, as we have just seen, serves as the external boundary which enables us to totalize language, to make out of it a closed and coherent system, whereas the Real is its inherent limit, the unfathomable fold which prevents it from achieving identity with itself. Therein consists the fundamental paradox of the relation between the Symbolic and the Real: the bar which separates them is strictly *internal to the Symbolic*, since it prevents the Symbolic from becoming itself. (Žižek 2002: 112)

The “closed” and the “coherent” equate, metaphorically, with the enclosing Žižek associates with the frame. It is noteworthy the film ends with Eoghan moving through the space of the “home,” as a hum of mutter is recalled. It is a “strange” mutter in that it does not cohere as speech. It is also strange in that Eoghan recalls it before recalling the tradition of sean nós. Mutter subsides in a tradition of song Ó'Connain says is a “complex way of singing in Gaelic, confined mainly to some areas in the West and South of the country [. . .] one finds a very florid line in Connacht, contrasted with a less decorous one in the South, and by comparison, a stark simplicity in the Northern songs” (Ó'Connain 1978: 49). He notes “no aspect of Irish music can be understood without a deep appreciation of sean nós singing. It is the key which opens every lock” (Ó'Connain 1978: 71). It is significant that this tradition is recalled



as Eoghan moves around the derelict “home.” The mutter of the strange “unfathomable fold” is replaced by an unaccompanied solo voice.

The lyrics of the song go some way to framing the reality of an island, in this case Tory. This is in contrast to a mutter, conceptualised as the Real, resistant to the symbolic as discourse. Just as his project in returning to Ireland involves recording silence—conceptualised by Eoghan as framing the natural world—there is something “beyond” the frame, emphasised by this muttering, which bears on the experience. In this way, *Silence* is about navigating an island, where the frame, considered as the historical real, exists in a curious nexus with the trauma of the Real. Trauma, returned to by way of an unconscious pull, reveals itself in the muttering of the Real, recalled by Eoghan as he enters the home. As Žižek puts it “history itself is nothing but a succession of failed attempts to grasp, conceive, specify this strange kernel (the Real)” (Žižek 2002: 101).

A silhouette is all that is visible as the film ends, the spectator tasked with imagining Eoghan’s emotional reaction. Eoghan may well be overwrought. But that he maintains silence against the partially viewed window is important. For he *must* retreat from framing and stay silent, just like the spectator who finds resonance in his position on screen.

#### *Quiet Radicalism/A House is Not a Home*

It is language that tells us about the essence of a thing, as long as we respect language’s own essence. Martin Heidegger

Images of a house haunt the film until this scene, when, crucial to the allegorising process, they reveal themselves as images of home. The pacifying alignment of trauma with home evokes a similarly pacifying alignment in Eoghan and, crucially, a potentially similar one in the spectator. Because Eoghan’s journey mirrors the journey undertaken by these images in finding a context, house becomes home, in a kind of cathartic riposte to the Irish obsession with housing in recent years.

Catharsis is achieved ending the film this way. Anxiety displayed in the form, or more specifically in the interruptive “trauma” images, is eased when Eoghan is shown dwelling in the home that these images represent. The silence maintained by Eoghan, the fact that he does not talk about going home, and resists speaking about it in a capacity which

would seek to frame it, synchronises with the move away from the frame of the window. The gaze, an attempt to impose order, is rejected: the ruin is no longer in need of a frame. The trauma of the Irish landscape, symbolised by the ruin, resists being bound by the framing of language.

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